

The Banister Back Chair

by Judy Haynes

In our collection of antiques, we have a fine example of a banister back chair that was donated by the French family. It is from the era of 1710-1740. The exquisitely decorated chair was once in the Farr-McLaughlin families. This chair was restored in the late 1950's by Carl Rylander of Boylston, Massachusetts. It sits 45 inches tall from the floor to the top knob; with the rush seat at 14 ½ inches from the floor. It is constructed of oak and painted black in color with gold trim.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes the banister back chair in its exhibit as a dynamic example of the William and Mary style side chair; one that the early craftsmen have copied.¹ Straight oak was used for its sturdiness, and to make it more interesting, they added ornamentation, low-relief carving, applied moldings, decorative turnings, and paint. The craftsmen developed a style that created more slender and vertically oriented chairs, with tall backs and gracefully turned posts and legs. The height was made possible by “dovetailing in which the case sides and fronts are fastened with interlocking joints that resemble the shape of the tail of a dove.”²

Furniture making became an essential trade in the American colonies as immigrants often arrived with the most basic provisions only. As families grew in size and business owners became more successful, they would desire and need more attractive furnishings, such as fine chairs for sitting or to be part of the dining room ensemble.



Figure 1 Banister Back Chair
BHSM Collection
Photography by Carrie Crane

Some 200,000 years ago, man didn't spend much time sitting, and when they did it was likely bare ground, a rock, stump or log. It is thought that in about 3100 BC, we could find the earliest examples of seating as we recognize it. This would be in ancient Egypt, as an emperor sitting on an elevated throne, putting one 'above' the common people. In ancient Greece 532 BC bench style seating was available for the masses such as that seen in amphitheaters. The curule chair was reserved for the most important members of society, ca. 494 BC. With the rise of religion, the use of a bench style (or pews) spread; however away from church, the commoner often used only a simple stool.

Chairs were for the highest governmental dignitaries until the Renaissance period when chairs were widely reproduced in Renaissance, Italy by a cabinet maker named Guiseppe Gaetano Descalzi, who lived in the city of Chiavari. Descalzi was commissioned by Marquis Stefano Rivaroles to redesign a Parisian Empire-style chair using lighter, less expensive materials. “The invention of the Chiavari Chair in 1807, then marks the history of the modern chair.”³ A simple stool was still the most commonly used as a modern seat because the Chiavari chairs, while reproduced, could not be mass produced as easily as in the later industrial age. The Industrial Revolution (late 18th and early 19th centuries) would bring the chair into the mainstream allowing for quicker and less expensive items to be available.

¹ Vincent, Nicholas C. *American Furniture, 1620-1730: The Seventeenth-Century William and Mary Styles*, in Heilbrunn. *Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

² *Ibid.*

³ Google search “History of Chairs”

The chair has undergone many changes to suit modern needs and a chair that is ergonomically designed, coming out about 1968, for comfort, health and posture is commonly sold for the office today. Thomas Jefferson is largely credited to be the inventor of a swivel chair circa 1776 and in 1840 Charles Darwin, a “workaholic” added wheels to his chair so that he could move around more easily and quickly in order that he could check on his experiments.⁴

The word chair comes from “cathedra,” a combination of Latin words that mean ‘sit’ and ‘down.’ The word ‘cathedral’ got its name as it is the seat or Chair of the Bishop.

When trying to determine how the banister back chair received its ‘banister’ name, one might think it was the stair rail, known as a banister, that may have inspired it, but the vertical posts and attractive turnings and designs more closely resemble what often holds up the banister, the posts known as the ‘balustrade.’ It was pointed out, however, in the sources I reviewed that the two words are often mistakenly used as synonyms as if baluster and banister are one and the same. The baluster is the upright post that supports the banister rail. The vertical posts on the banister-back chair resemble balusters, and we might conclude it could have easily adopted that name, a baluster-backed chair.⁵

⁴ ChairInstitute.com/history-of-the-chair

⁵ Banister versus baluster, dictionary definitions found on the internet; parts named for stair banisters.

Boylston Historical Society & Museum Object Collection
Editor, Nancy Filgate, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Director
Photography, Carrie Crane, Boylston, Massachusetts