

Central Desk

It seems likely that Edwards did not acquire his own study room and its chief piece of furniture, a desk, until after his 1726 remove to Northampton, Massachusetts, to begin his twenty-four-year pastorate, initially as a colleague of his grandfather Solomon Stoddard. Upon his marriage to Sarah Pierpont of New Haven, Connecticut, in the summer of 1727, town records indicate the couple was provided the wherewithal to purchase a fitting "Mansion house," or principal residence, on King Street.¹ The desk at the heart of that complex apparatus, now called "the Jonathan Edwards desk," was probably then acquired to fit out a study. It is a slant-lidded desk of the William and Mary type, constructed of dovetailed boards in New England between 1700 and 1730, and it has four drawers, two in-line over two graduated drawers.² Red maple wood is used on the sides of the desk, but the front is a more elegant American black walnut; the drawers have stamped brass cotter pin bail pulls, and the two long drawers also have central brass escutcheons. The drawers are flanked and separated by double half-round molding that continues onto the canted sides flanking the lid and around the sides and rear of the top. Below the lowest drawer, the desk has applied base molding above shoed reel-and-bun feet. This base molding originally continued on the sides of the desk, although it later had to be removed for Edwards's modifications.

When the slant lid is lowered upon its lopers, revealing the interior, a center section appears. Fitted with five pigeonholes with scalloped valances (the center one of greater width and depth) above three corresponding drawers in line, this center section is flanked by open, stepped compartments with scalloped partitions, and the front area of the desk interior houses a well covered by a sliding lid. A twentieth-century restoration has replaced much of the desk, including the brasses, slant lid, well cover, valances, projecting partitions and shelves of the open compartments, and the rear feet; however, the character and function of the desk have remained clear and unimpaired.³

¹ James Russell Trumbull, *History of Northampton Massachusetts from Its Settlement in 1654* (Northampton, Mass., 1902), 2: 47–48 (quotation, 2: 48), 45.

² The desk is in the collections of Jonathan Edwards College, Yale University, and is on display in the Master's House. Penelope Laurans, Master of Edwards College, kindly allowed the authors to photograph and measure the desk. Edwards called the desk his "scrutore," his rendering of *escritoire*. References by Edwards to manuscripts in his desk include one entitled "Original Sin," which appears at the end of "Miscellanies" no. 384: "See a loose paper in one of the shelves of the scrutore upon this subject" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, *The "Miscellanies,"* (Entry Nos. a–z, aa–zz, 1–500), ed. Thomas A. Schafer [New Haven, Conn., 1994], 452–53 [quotation, 13: 453]); in "Miscellanies" no. 606, on the subject "Regeneration Not Baptism," he simply writes, "See a paper laid up in one of the shelves of the scrutore" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18, *The "Miscellanies,"* (Entry Nos. 501–832), ed. Ava Chamberlain [New Haven, Conn., 2000], 143); and in the "Controversies" Notebook, in the section on "Regeneration" regarding infant annihilation, he notes, "See paper in my scrutore" (*Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, [WJEO], vol. 27, <http://edwards.yale.edu/research/browse>). For references to manuscripts in the drawers of the desk, see a "Blank Bible" entry on I Cor. 15:29: "See this text more fully spoken to, in answer to a question proposed to be answered before the Association, in one of my drawers" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 24, *The "Blank Bible,"* Part 1 and Part 2, ed. Stephen J. Stein [New Haven, Conn., 2006], 1062–63 [quotation, 24: 1063]); "Catalogue" no. [716]: "see Mr. Hopkins Letter to Capt. Hubbel of Jan. 13. 57 in my drawer" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 26, *Catalogues of Books*, ed. Peter J. Thuesen [New Haven, Conn., 2008], 316); "Efficacious Grace," bk. 3, inside back cover: "See two sheets concerning free will and efficacious grace in the drawer" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee [New Haven, Conn., 2003], 290).

³ An account of the desk's restoration in the twentieth century is in C[harles] N[agel] Jr., "The Jonathan Edwards Desk," *Bulletin of the Associates in Fine Arts at Yale University* 6, no. 2 (June 1934): 27–29. See also Gerald W. R. Ward, *American Case Furniture in the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), 329–30. We have consulted in-house reports from the Garvan Collection archives, mainly analyses of woods used

That Edwards would have found such an elegant desk—perhaps accompanied by a separate bookcase or chest of books and a comfortable chair—quite adequate to his needs at the beginning of his Northampton pastorate seems likely. His purchase of a desk at this time would have put him at the forefront of the stylistic trend, since desks did not begin to appear in inventories in the Connecticut River valley in any significant numbers until after the 1750s. The piece would have served not only as a work surface but also, as a statement of status.⁴

In such a setting he could study the Bible, spin out his thoughts in the “Miscellanies” papers, and prepare his sermons. The study was doubtless his first official private place, and the desk must have provided an impressive setting for pastoral interviews as well as a convenient theater of study for the twenty-four-year-old pastor.

in the desk, to supplement our own observations. Thanks to Katherine Chabla of the Yale Furniture Study for her assistance.

⁴ Kevin M. Sweeney, “Furniture and the Domestic Environment in Wethersfield, Connecticut, 1639–1800,” in *Material Life in America, 1600–1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston, 1988), 261–90, esp. 271, 284–85. Another symbol of status that Edwards purchased early in his ministry was a slave named Venus; see Kenneth P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards’s Defense of Slavery,” *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4 (2002): 23–59.