

Notes on The Wayside's red leather armchair

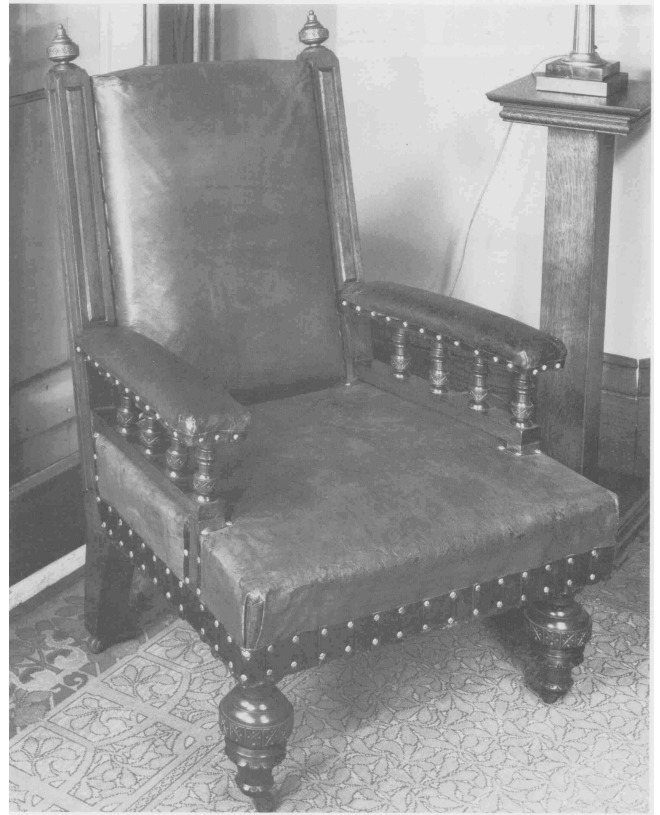
Prepared by Pamela J. Licht, January 2011

Did Nathaniel Hawthorne sit in this red leather armchair while reading to his children?¹

“Tradition” says that Nathaniel Hawthorne used this chair at The Wayside during 1851-1853 or 1860-1864. But historians believe that it is highly unlikely that the chair can be dated to before Hawthorne's death in 1864.²

It belongs later in the nineteenth century due to stylistic features such as the incised designs on the finials, arm supports and front legs as well as the chair's massive angular shape overall. The incised decorations were an integral part of the chair's design since they occur on flat drum-like portions of the turned finials, spindles and front legs.

Such incised designs were first illustrated by Charles L. Eastlake in his *Hints on Household Taste*, published in England in 1868, then in America in 1872.³ Eastlake also illustrated chairs with silhouettes reflecting Elizabethan and William Morris aesthetics similar to the leather armchair.



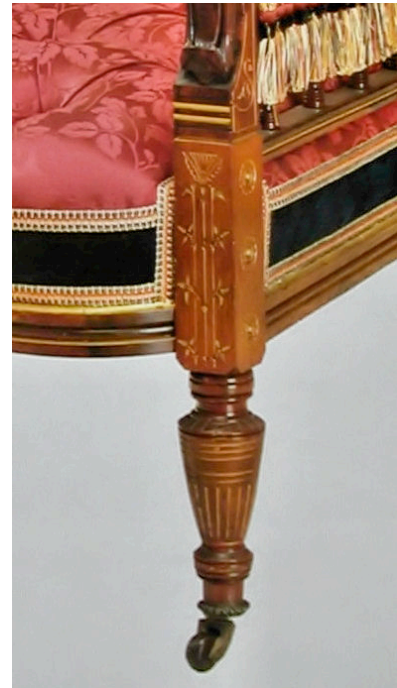
¹ “Morris chair that is supposed to have belonged to Hawthorne,” Doris Fanelli, *Historic Furnishing Plan, The Wayside* (NPS, 1983), Illustration 50, 373.

² I am indebted to furniture historian Oscar Fitzgerald who examined the chair at The Wayside, Oct. 25, 2010, sharing his insights with NPS staff and dating the chair most likely to not much before 1870.

³ Charles L. Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste* (New York: Dover publications, c1969).

In late nineteenth-century America, chairs with characteristics similar to those of The Wayside's armchair were manufactured by Herter Brothers of New York, a firm that produced the most up to date styles for some of the most elegant homes in the country.

About 1870 Herter Brothers designers began incorporating incised decoration into their high end Renaissance Revival furniture. Chairs such as the armchair illustrated below (ca.1874) with its gilded incised decoration have been described as traditional overstuffed furniture "tempered by the English design-reform movement."⁴



Library chairs with similar silhouettes and details are found in historic house museums such as Glenview, the John Bond Trevor Mansion in Yonkers, NY, built in 1876.⁵

In summary, when dating The Wayside's red leather armchair by its latest stylistic feature, the incised decoration which became one stamp of the Arts and Crafts Movement, we can conclude that it was made around 1870.

⁴ Parlor furniture from the James Goodwin residence, Hartford, CT, on display at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Katherine S. Howe, Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, Catherine Hoover Voorsanger, *Herter Brothers: Furniture and Interiors for a Gilded Age* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1994), 168-9.

⁵ Cover illustration, 1986 republication of the 1969 Dover edition of Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*.

Historical notes on provenance of red leather armchair (MIMA 2021)

In 1883, Daniel and Harriet S. Lothrop (1844-1924) purchased The Wayside from Nathaniel Hawthorne's daughter Rose Hawthorne Lathrop (Mrs. George Lathrop). In 1888 a photograph published by Frank Cousins' *Bee-Hive*, Salem, shows the red leather armchair in the Lothrop's sitting room.⁶ The chair is positioned near a fire screen painted by Rose Hawthorne Lathrop for the Lothrop's in 1884. The screen's frame echoes the red leather armchair in style, exhibiting the spindles and angular forms of the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement.



After purchasing The Wayside, Mr. and Mrs. Lothrop presented the house to the public as a historic literary home citing previous occupants Louisa May Alcott, Hawthorne, and, from 1883, Mrs. Lothrop herself, whose pen name was Margaret Sidney, author of *The Five Little Peppers*.

When Mrs. Lothrop's daughter (Margaret M. Lothrop, 1884-1970) gave the property to NPS in 1965 she stated that the armchair had been included in the furniture purchased by her parents from Rose Hawthorne Lathrop in 1883. This provenance is plausible since it was a massive piece like some others which conveyed with the house.

⁶ Fanelli 1983, Illustration 20, 312.

After Harriet Lothrop's death in 1924, Margaret Lothrop continued her mother's work in historical research, documentation, preservation and presentation of the property. There were frequent visitors to the house and in the 1930s, postcards circulated showing interior views of Hawthorne's Wayside.

A postcard with the caption "Hawthorne's Chair and Gables" shows the armchair in the bay window at the rear of the house.⁷ A pen and ink drawing of the same scene, captioned "Hawthorne's Armchair," is found in Margaret Lothrop's 1940 book, *The Wayside: Home of Authors*.⁸ In her book, she wrote of pleasant childhood quiet times, "curled up in Mr. Hawthorne's comfortable red leather armchair."⁹ Margaret Lothrop maintained that she had always been told that the chair belonged to Mr. Hawthorne.¹⁰

The singular piece of documentation cited by Margaret Lothrop in substantiating Nathaniel Hawthorne's use of the red leather armchair is Mrs. Hawthorne's entry in her diary when her husband was out of town on a trip in the fall of 1852. Sophia Hawthorne wrote that she had moved the "red chair," a little light stand, and a little statue into the "beloved study" after tacking down the carpet more securely.¹¹

When one considers the weight and awkwardness of the red leather armchair, it seems somewhat unlikely that it was the chair Sophia Hawthorne moved into the small study from the drawing room, taking it across the old stair hall, through the dining room and across the main stair hall with three small children underfoot, even with the help of a servant girl. There is no doubt that the Hawthornes owned Shaker style chairs painted red and Windsor chairs stained red that survive, well-worn, to this day, one of which could be the "red chair."

As for the armchair in which Nathaniel Hawthorne read, often aloud to his family, it is more likely to have been an ordinary Rococo Revival armchair upholstered in black horsehair. Two of these with white porcelain castors and probable Hawthorne provenance are now found in The Wayside's Piazza Room,¹² and stylistically they fit comfortably into pre-Civil War America.

⁷ MIMA 9599.

⁸ Margaret M. Lothrop, *The Wayside: Home of Authors* (New York: American Book Company, 1940), 105.

⁹ Lothrop 1940, 166.

¹⁰ Fanelli 1983, 119.

¹¹ Diary entry for Monday, August 30, 1852 from Sophia Hawthorne collection, Pierpont Morgan Library, transcribed by Margaret Lothrop in 1933. MIMA archives, MML research papers, Box 49, Folder #13.

¹² MIMA 2013, MIMA 2700.