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Exhibit recalls Manchester as furniture hub

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Like many New England towns, Manchester is deeply rooted in history.

With its narrow, winding streets and the historic architecture of its buildings downtown, it's easy to imagine the horses and buggies that used to drive through here and earlier generations of Manchester residents shopping and carrying out other business or trading.

What may not be as obvious is the fact that, at one time, Manchester was the home to multiple furniture manufacturers, and the industry thrived here from the late 18th century through the Civil War.

For those who enjoy local history, or anyone who can appreciate antique furniture, the Manchester Historical Society in the Trask House on Union Street has opened a new exhibit showcasing the handiwork of Manchester furniture builders.

From the furniture itself, to the history behind some well-known manufacturers, to the tools they used to produce furniture that has lasted for several centuries, the exhibit displays the town's rich furniture-building history while also showing that the furniture is still being made here.

John Huss, the historical society's curator, said a lot of the furniture in the exhibit — mostly chairs, small tables and a large cabinet — is on loan.

"A lot of that furniture was in Manchester houses," he said.

One of Manchester's most famous furniture makers was Dodge, Huss said, noting that the business thrived in Manchester from 1761 right through 1965.

Several of Dodge's original furniture plans and sketches are on display, and a few of the pieces in the exhibit are remakes of original Dodge designs.

"They specialized in making really beautiful reproductions of Colonial furniture," Huss said.

A large market for Manchester-made furniture was in the South, Huss said. The plantation houses of the rich had high ceilings, which could accommodate larger-scale pieces.

One of the featured items, a nearly ceiling-high cabinet made in the 19th century, was supposed to be shipped to a plantation owner in Louisiana, according to Huss. But, then, the Civil War shut down business dealings with the South, and the cabinet never made it, he said.

After the war, and with the nation reunited, Huss said furniture making began to thrive in other areas of the country, particularly the central U.S. With that, the industry faded in Manchester.

Huss said that before the Civil War, downtown Manchester streets were lined with 43 furniture manufacturers. After the war, there were only five or six left.

But furniture making hasn't left Manchester, despite the decline in the number of manufacturers.

Huss said Jim Bacsik, who used to work as a dentist in Manchester but now lives in Gloucester, makes traditional-looking furniture that showcases craftsmanship that cannot be mass produced as furniture often is now.

There's also Fred Rossi, owner of Rossi Custom Woodwork, in Manchester. Huss said Rossi makes more modern-looking pieces. However, they are inspired by traditional styles.

Two pieces, one from each modern manufacturer, are also on display at the museum.

For those interested in visiting the exhibit, the museum is open Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and from noon to 3 p.m. on Saturdays. The exhibit will be on display until Sept. 22, Huss said.

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