

THE KENNEDY ROCKER

Cultural Heritage Object Nomination

by Ross A. Holt



The Kennedy Rocker, developed by P & P Chair Company of Asheboro, became Randolph County's most iconic manufactured product. Discovered by a physician who was treating then-Senator John F. Kennedy for back pain, the oak rocking chair gained international renown when photographs of President Kennedy in the chair emerged from the White House. The presidential images brought both recognition and dramatically-increased sales to P & P. The family-owned company continued to produce the chair into the late 2000s. Following the death of owner W.C. Page Jr. in 2008, the company and its signature product were sold to Troutman Chair, which continues outsourced production of the rocker.

Today, Kennedy Rockers can be found in very many offices and private homes around the county, and can be observed (and used!) in the Asheboro/Randolph County Public Library's Children's Room.

The Kennedy Rocker

<http://www.thekennedyrocker.com/history.html>

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The History

In the trenches of France during World War I, W. C. Page Sr. and friend Arthur E. Presnell were brewing ideas of building chairs together. In August of 1926, they realized their plans and the whistle blew for the first time in their new factory. For twenty-two years they manufactured chairs together and then Mr. Page purchased Mr. Presnell's share.

The P. & P. Chair Company always based in home and family values did business using common sense, hard work and great materials. Their comfortable and handsome chair was a popular piece next to the American hearthside and business was good. And then an interesting chain of events led business from good to great... and beyond.

In 1953, Dr. Janet Travell from New York purchased what she called her "Carolina Rocker" for her office. Future events would press the company adopt this name and eventually stamped the trademarked "Carolina Rocker" on every chair.

A patient of Dr. Travell's was a young senator from Massachusetts, suffering from chronic back trouble. His comfort in the rocker coupled with her medical advice led to a deal being struck. She would acquire another rocker for him if he would use it for therapy. That Senator of course went on to become one of America's most remembered presidents. The rest, as they say, is history.

Photos of the President John F. Kennedy Jr. in his chair in the Oval Office began to appear. Response from the media and the public was astounding. The P. & P. phone rang constantly. Newspapers, individuals, retail stores, world leaders, politicians all wanted to know more or to buy a "Kennedy Rocker." CBS arrived and filmed a spot interview with W. C. Page Jr. that aired on the national evening news. LIFE Magazine sent a crew to shoot pictures, which appeared, along with a write up, in their publication of April 7, 1961. Other national publications: Time, Newsweek, and Popular Science featured the phenomenon. Mail came in from all over the world: songs, poems, pictures, praises and requests. P & P did not yield to temptations of mass production of the chair and opted to remain small and family run. Even so they managed to often make as many as 250 rockers a day.



President Kennedy, in his rocking chair, meets with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the Oval Office.

The Chair

The design, developed in the late 1920s, has a high cane back, cane seat and steam bent back posts that curve around the back. It is set low for comfortable elbow support and has wide armrests for perfect balance. Also, the arm rests are lower than similar rockers, allowing the sitter's arm to relax naturally at the sides of the body. The rocker seat and back offer firmness and natural spring through the use of tightly woven Malaysian rattan. Finally, the cane seat and back give firm, yet flexible support. Dr. Travell had commented in the past that she liked the rocker chair because of the bent back post, which makes the cane back fit the contour of a person's back. She also liked the Carolina Rocker because the armrests are not too high and the detachable seat gives more support. Also the height of the seat is such that it creates no undue pressure on the user's legs. The rocking motion is an aid to circulation and a reliever of tension.

So the "Carolina Rocker" also became known as the "Kennedy Rocker". Over time, JFK accumulated at least fourteen of the P. & P. chairs, one of which even resided on Air Force One. His original Oval Office rocker is on permanent display at the JFK Library & Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. Two others from the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis estate were auctioned receiving \$453,500 for one and \$442,500 for the other.

Having realized a dream and seeing it grow to an American icon, W. C. Page Sr. was certainly pleased. He had aspirations continue the tradition of offering the original style of the Kennedy Rocker to future generations. He was very active in his business until his passing in 1980 at the age of ninety-one. His son W. C. Page Jr. and his grandson W. C. Page III carried on the business



P & P Chair Company plant at 532 Sunset Avenue in Asheboro.

Today

W. C. Page Jr. began to entertain the idea of selling the family business, and with hopes to someone who could appreciate the significance of their chairs in quality and in history. He began talks with Troutman Chair Company. The two companies having so much in common that in February of 2009 the deal was done. Troutman Chair, like P. & P. Chair, is based in North Carolina, began in the early 1920's, is family owned and has built quite a business of manufacturing excellent rockers and chairs. Troutman Chair is very pleased to carry on the tradition of the "Kennedy Rocker" and now be associated with a chair that has received so much attention and kudos for comfort and therapeutic benefits.

The Kennedy Rocker: Miscellanea

The Kennedy Rocker anchored North Carolina's national advertising campaign in 1961. The slogan "rockers to rockets" highlighted the state's range of products – "such an old-fashioned item as the rocking-chair, as well as electronic parts which are vital in the production of the rockets which play a part in national defense." The rocker was displayed to more than 300,000 visitors and buyers at the North Carolina Trade Fair at the Coliseum and Merchandise Mart in Charlotte from October 12-21. At the National Governors' Conference in Hawaii, Gov. Terry Sanford presented a miniature version of the chair to each attendee. The miniature could be redeemed for the real thing.

"Kennedy Rocker on Display in NC Trade Fair Exhibit," The Courier-Tribune, July 20, 1961

President Kennedy purchased his rockers for \$35 each.

"Owners Death, hard times, lead to plant closing," The Courier Tribune, November 18, 2008

According to P & P Chair Company founder W.C. Page Sr. in 1961, the company had made only one change in the design of the chairs since production began in 1926: the addition of a dark antique finish for indoor use. Previously, all the rockers were given a natural light oak finish. Page said the change was inspired when Mrs. Kennedy had one of the President's chairs refinished to match White House décor.

"'Rocking' Frontier Opened by Chair Firm In Asheboro," Greensboro Daily News, March 25, 1961

The company got the word to provide a dark stain from President Kennedy via Governor Terry Sanford: "Tell those boys down in Asheboro to stain that chair and put some cushions on it." Sanford relayed the message and P & P complied.

"Kennedy Rocker Was Born In Asheboro Chair Factory," The Randolph Guide, November 11, 1964

P & P Chair Company had laid off many of its 50 workers due to a slowdown in business just as President Kennedy's use of the rocking chair was publicized. The company immediately recalled all its employees to meet the new demand for production of the chairs.

"'Rocking' Frontier Opened by Chair Firm In Asheboro," Greensboro Daily News, March 25, 1961

The day after Dr. Janet Travell noted publicly that the President's chairs were made in North Carolina, P & P received 50 letters of inquiry. The next day, the company received 500 letters.

"Kennedy Rocker Business Still Good," Greensboro Daily News, January 31, 1965

A chair was shipped to Pago Pago in American Samoa.

"Kennedy Rocker Was Born In Asheboro Chair Factory, The Randolph Guide, November 11, 1964

In the media frenzy over the chair, production manager W.S. (Tuck) Page was a mystery guest on the television game show "What's My Line," but his occupation was not discovered by the panel.

"P & P Chair: They rocked America," The Courier-Tribune, July 6, 1988

The original name of the chair was the "No. 1000 Jumbo Rocker."

Barron Mills, "P & P Chair to shut down plant," The Randolph Guide, December 17, 2008

Co-founder Arthur Presnell left P & P Chair Company in 1940 to pursue farming.

Barron Mills, "P & P Chair to shut down plant," The Randolph Guide, December 17, 2008

In 1988, W.C. Page Jr. reported that the company was producing more than 10,000 chairs each year. Notable owners included Billy Graham, Pope John Paul II, former Mexican President Adolfo Lopez Mateos, and former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt.

"Namesake chair still popular," Greensboro News & Record, November 22, 1988

Other famous owners have included Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Jimmy Carter; former Senator Barry Goldwater, Tom Brokaw and Oprah Winfrey.

"P & P Chair: They rocked America," The Courier-Tribune, July 6, 1988

A portrait of President Kennedy in his rocker, by William F. Draper, hangs in the National Portrait Gallery; view it here: <http://tinyurl.com/kenroc>.

Chair manufacturing was an important part of Asheboro's economy long before P & P Chair Company began operation. P & P founder W.C. Page was secretary-treasurer of the Piedmont Chair Co., founded in 1914. It had 35 workers making "double cane seat chairs." C. L. Cranford was president and general manager; E.H. Cranford was vice-president. The Courier newspaper on November 10, 1921, reported that the Randolph Chair Co. was the oldest chair company in the county (but didn't indicate when it started). It was founded by S.W. Laughlin and "began on the old Guilford Lumber lot." It was purchased by G.G. Hendricks after he retired as Clerk of Superior Court, and about 1909 C.C. Cranford bought it. The Asheboro Chair Co. was organized in 1904, with J.O. Redding as secretary-treasurer; this company made upholstered furniture. The Cranford Chair Company was organized in January 1921, beginning operations on a brick building on Church Street: "most of the output of this enterprise is sold at New York City."

By L. McKay Whatley, 2015