

Emailed to us in September 2016 by Regina D. Mason
Solomon Plant, Wheel Maker of Stratford, CT
by Florence Feldman-Wood

Double-flyer spinning wheels were an early effort to increase the productivity of hand spinners at the end of the preindustrial era. Many examples have been found in a variety of styles, indicating many builders. In a few cases the wheels are signed. Double-flyer wheels with the initials S. P. were made by Solomon Plant of Stratford, CT. He kept a record of his accounts from April 1810 to June 1821, from age 69 to 80. This account book is in the collection of the Stratford Historical Society. Although it only covers the last decade of his life, it provides insights into how he worked, to whom he sold his wheels, and other work that he was doing, such as mending.

Solomon Plant Wheels

Photo: Solomon Plant wheels from the collection of the Stratford [CT] Historical Society

Solomon Plant was born May 1, 1741, in Branford, New Haven County, Connecticut, the son of James and Bathsheba (Page) Plant. He served in the old French War of 1759 and kept a diary of his adventures. He settled in Stratford in 1763. He married Sarah Bennett on November 16, 1769. She died on September 15, 1815. He married Mrs. Esther (Frost) Botsford on November 19, 1816. He died May 20, 1822 [Orcutt, p. 1271].

Solomon and Sarah had three daughters, one of whom died in infancy, and one son. The son, David Plant, went to Cheshire Academy and then to Yale College. He became a politician and served in the Connecticut House and Senate. He was also Lt. governor from 1823-1827 and served in the U.S. Congress from 1827-1829. His house still stands at the corner of Broad and Elm Streets in Stratford.

The examples of Solomon Plant's double-flyer wheels have a structure typical of a double-flyer wheel with the drive wheel below the flyers. The lower table rests on four legs. Four upright posts are set into the table with the front pair angled toward the spinner. A split upper table fits onto these posts. Two short posts in the center of the lower table hold the drive-wheel axle. On the back part of the upper table are two threaded screws. The mushroom caps come off and a turned rod rests between them. The maidens are set into the front top table. The spindle shaft rests between the maiden in the front and leather bearings attached to the turned rod in the back. The variations in this style of wheel are seen in the turnings on the posts, drive wheel spokes, and maidens.

The Stratford Historical Society has not only a double-flyer wheel by Solomon Plant but also one of his single-flyer wheels. The diameters of the drive wheels are different; the drive wheel on the double-flyer wheel is 2" smaller. This explains a page in the account book. It appears that Solomon worked in batches. Next to each date he notes - "glued 10 duple rims" or "glued 10 single rims." According to this list, between 1811 and 1816 he made almost three times as many double-wheel rims [170] as single-wheel rims [60].

In recording a sale, Solomon used the old English money system of pounds, shillings, and pence, even though U.S. dollars were already established. A "duple" wheel cost 1:4:0, a single wheel 0:18:0, and a great wheel

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0:12:0. Since a pound equaled 20 shillings, a "duble" wheel would cost 24 (20+4) shillings. That means it cost one third more than a single wheel and twice the price of a great wheel.

Besides wheels Solomon also made and sold "reals," quill wheels [bobbin-winder wheels], "whirls" and "pare of flyers." The latter were probably replacement parts for double-flyer wheels, his own or perhaps those made by others. Clearly this is an indication that these wheels were being used. In the mending category, he also lists "wiring flyers," which is further evidence that all kinds of spinning wheels were being heavily used.

In the period from 1810 to 1821 Solomon Plant recorded the sale of 271 spinning wheels. Of these, 160 or 59% were double wheels. He sold 77 double wheels to individuals between 1810 and 1821. Between 1810 and 1817, he sold 81 double wheels [or 54% of all the double wheels] to two merchants from Fairfield, CT, for resale. About once a year, usually in November, Jesup Wakeman and Walter Perry would buy a batch of four, six, or ten wheels. Both men had stores in the Southport section of Fairfield. Jesup Wakeman bought 33 wheels between 1810 and 1814. Although he became a prominent businessman in Fairfield, there are no records from his businesses.

Account books belonging to Walter Perry, now in the Fairfield Historical Society, indicate that in exchange for his credit for the wheels, Solomon Plant bought a wide variety of items such as cloth, handkerchiefs, brooms, tea, files, worsted binding, sugar, glue, cotton, iron, and rum. On November 17, 1815, Solomon Plant is credited for six wheels at a price of \$24. That would mean each wheel was valued at \$4. It is interesting to note that in Samuel Sanford's estate inventory in 1818 listed ten double wheels that were valued at \$40 or \$4 each. Perry's record books also show that he sold two "double" wheels, one in 1806 and 1810. It is impossible to know who made them. So far we have been unable to determine what happened to the 48 double-flyer wheels Perry bought from Solomon Plant between 1811 and 1817.

There seems to have been a demand for double-flyer spinning wheels, and many men producing them. In the case of Solomon Plant, we know that the wheels were also being sold to merchants for resale. What is hard to tell is how typical was Solomon Plant of spinning-wheel makers of that period? He sold an average of nineteen double-flyer wheels per year between 1810 and 1817. He was an elderly man at the time. Did he produce many more such wheels when he was younger? Or was he responding to a strong demand in the spinning-wheel market at that time? Were other spinning-wheel makers, like the Sanfords, Silas Barnum, and John Sturdevant, also building the same number of double-flyer wheels, and for how many years?

Our data only takes us as far as 1821. Did the use of these wheels, and demand for their production, continue beyond that? Probably not, since this is the period when spinning mills were being built throughout New England.