

Martin J. Donnelly Auctions, Avoca, New York

Business Goes On as Usual...Sort of... with the Right Tools

by Mark Sisco

Photos courtesy Martin J. Donnelly Auctions

Martin Donnelly must have been a great Boy Scout. When the COVID-19 crisis hit, he was very well prepared. Under ordinary circumstances, his Live Free or Die antique tool auction would have been held in Nashua, New Hampshire, on April 17 and 18. But in the face of the virus-induced quarantine, he readily moved the auction to his home base of Avoca, New York. Much of the format remained the same. No reserves, and everything sells. The Donnellys and their staff had everything wrapped, labeled, and ready to go out the door well before the auction date. But even in the absence of in-person bidders, the results were startling.

"We did like twenty-five percent better than we normally do at Nashua auctions," Donnelly related later. "With nothing else for anybody to do, [bidders] just about brought down our server.... We sold to 366 separate people, and we spent the whole night adding new names to the database, people we never heard of before.... People we've had for thirty years who have never looked at a computer, and they now have their wives calling us."

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Much of the auction came from the collection of Winsor "Bud" Steere (1928-2019) of North Kingstown, Rhode Island. "He was a principal collector for about sixty years," Donnelly related. "He would come to all of the early [Richard] Crane auctions, and he was always bidder number one."

Often there's a human story behind a simple mechanical tool. The name of inventor Elihu Dutcher (1802-1854/5) isn't often remembered in the same context as Thomas Edison or Alexander Graham Bell. But he did attain some local status in Pownal, Vermont, where he served as a Baptist pastor from about 1834 to 1837 and as a justice of the peace around 1842. That jibes with the catalog description of a metallic plow plane, which noted that Dutcher probably produced it in the mid-1840s, making it one of the earliest American plow planes. Dutcher learned the trade of a wagon maker, pursuing that occupation while ministering to his small congregations. Later he moved to North Bennington to continue his mechanical occupations, gaining his most notable success with his invention, in conjunction with his brother, of the "Dutcher temple," a device used to maintain the width of woven fabrics on a loom. Around 1854 he sold his business interests and moved to Waukesha, Wisconsin. But he died of cholera just a day or two after arriving at his new home. The plane had a \$1500/3000 estimate, and bidders appreciated the rare tool to the tune of \$2990 (including buyer's premium).

Although Cesar Chelor (d. 1784) is still considered the earliest known black toolmaker, there are other earlier American plane makers who have been documented to have signed their products. Chelor was enslaved by and an apprentice of plane maker Francis Nicholson (1683-1753) of Wrentham, Massachusetts. Nicholson freed Chelor in 1752, specifying in his will that "As to my Negro Man Cesar Chelor, considering his faithful Service, his tender Care & kind & Christian carriage, I do set him free to Act for himself in the world...." In addition to giving

This metallic plow plane patented by Elihu Dutcher in the mid-1840s sold for \$2990 (est. \$1500/3000).



This plow plane marked "CE. CHELOR / LIVING IN WRENTHAM" for plane maker Cesar Chelor finished at \$5290 (est. \$3000/6000).

Chelor his freedom, Nicholson left Chelor his workshop, tools, and supplies. Following his emancipation, Chelor was highly successful in the plane-making business. He purchased land and other property and raised nine children. His name stamped on a plow plane such as the one in this auction, which read "CE. CHELOR / LIVING IN WRENTHAM," with the peculiar distinction of the name stamps being upside down with relation to each other, was all it took to push the price well into four figures, and the plane closed at \$5290 (est. \$3000/6000).

I can do no better than to quote Martin Donnelly's florid, albeit lighthearted prose on a "Swiss Army" version of a butcher's saw, combining a saw, a butcher's knife, and a weighing scale in the handle. It was patented by John Baggs of Easton, Maryland, on April 29, 1873. Donnelly noted that it "combines all of those functions in a single tool in a manner that renders each of them essentially useless.... We imagine that the Nineteenth Century equivalent of the Federal Trade Commission removed these from the market after a ham dropped off the scale, causing some hapless butcher to impale himself with the business end of the knife. This tool encapsulates everything that is great about American invention and everything that makes antique tool collecting so interesting and, yes, entertaining." Amen to all that, and amen to the knife, which sold for \$690 (est. \$750/1500).

As of this writing, no one can predict when auctioneers will be able to conduct business as normal, and no one is quite certain what "normal" will look like when they do. For now, online auctions may or may not be the wave of the future, but they're clearly on the rising tide.

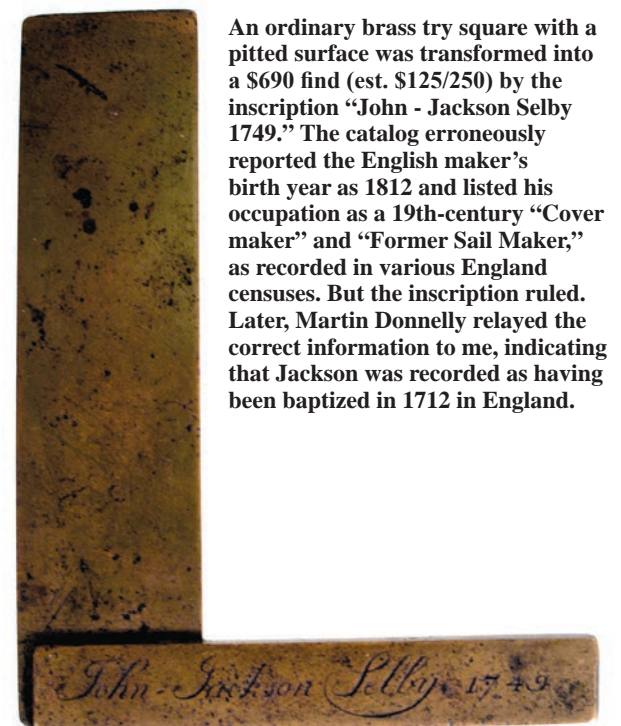
For more information visit (www.mjdtools.com) or call 1-800-869-0695.



Metallic transitional planes by the prolific Massachusetts inventor Leonard Bailey (1825-1905) were prized by his contemporary woodworkers for their durability and precision craftsmanship. They still are, as well as for their rarity. This one is a variation on the split-frame theme, as illustrated in Roger Smith's *Patented & Transitional Metallic Planes in America: 1827-1927*. It missed the \$10,000/20,000 target and sold for \$7590.



The catalog listed this plumb bob with the seldom-used superlative of "in brand new, unused condition." Made by the Heller & Brightly Company of Philadelphia, it was used for sighting in dark mine shafts. Heller & Brightly was a small craft workshop with only a few employees, each of whom was capable of producing an entire tool. They built only about 100 implements per year between 1870 and 1887, with production peaking in 1891 at 216 units. Stamped on the side "HELLER & BRIGHTLY / PHILAD.," the rare and pristine instrument fell at \$1380 (est. \$800/1600).



An ordinary brass try square with a pitted surface was transformed into a \$690 find (est. \$125/250) by the inscription "John - Jackson Selby 1749." The catalog erroneously reported the English maker's birth year as 1812 and listed his occupation as a 19th-century "Cover maker" and "Former Sail Maker," as recorded in various England censuses. But the inscription ruled. Later, Martin Donnelly relayed the correct information to me, indicating that Jackson was recorded as having been baptized in 1712 in England.



Here's just the thing that a well-appointed 19th-century English gentleman would need to safely wander the dark and dreary streets of London. It's a combination single-shot air rifle and walking cane, in its original velvet-lined fitted case. The case bears the label for Edward M. Reilly & Company of London, and the gun is labeled "Joseph Charles Reilly / 316 High Holborn, London." Edward apprenticed with Joseph beginning around 1835, and by 1847 he was featured in company advertisements as the outfit's gun expert. The gun went off for a slightly subpar \$1840 (est. \$2500/5000).



The catalog unabashedly trumpeted Flossie Greenleaf as "without question, the most successful female maker of hand tools of all time." She was born in 1882 in Littleton, New Hampshire, and upon the death of her father, William Greenleaf, in 1916 she continued his toolmaking business. She worked in Belmont, Massachusetts, from about 1922 to 1928 and later worked in a southern location. This log caliper is clearly marked "F. M. GREENLEAF / 62 OAK AVE. / BELMONT / MASS. / MAKER" and retains most of its original finish. It brought \$1035 (est. \$800/1600).

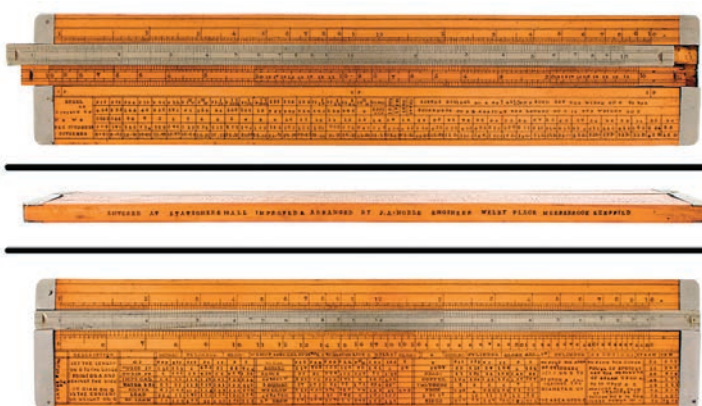
James Perry of Boston, Massachusetts, is now one of the earliest documented American plane makers, if not the earliest. He is known to have been in business at least as early as 1736. This sample of his work, a chair maker's plow plane in yellow birch, is clearly marked with his "I. PERRY" imprint, and it sold for \$1265 (est. \$750/1500).



This tinsmith's pan swage (sometimes called a creasing swage) has a short stop fence secured by a ram's-horn wing nut. Its purpose is to form a bead or groove in a piece of sheet metal. It also has a reversible hammer that can be removed and inverted by releasing another ram's-horn nut. With the imprint of Wilcox & Roys, a partnership formed in the township of Sawpit (now Port Chester), New York, it headed out for \$1035 (est. \$500/1000).



Here's a plane with a Cesar Chelor connection. Jethro Jones (b. 1733) was another black American plane maker and is believed to have worked with Chelor following the latter's emancipation. He is also known to have enlisted in the Continental Army in 1779 and to have fought in the American Revolution. This yellow birch plow plane, twice marked "I. JONES," easily cleared the \$800/1600 bar and finished at \$4255.



According to the catalog, James Noble, a professional engineer working in Meersbrook, Sheffield, England, is known to have produced slide rules between 1871 and the early 1880s. This one in German silver and boxwood has a thick body with numerous scales and is marked "ENTERED AT STATIONERS HALL IMPROVED & ARRANGED BY J. A. NOBLE ENGINEER WELBY PLACE MEERSBROOK SHEFFIELD." It sold for \$3795 (est. \$2000/4000).



Here's a wrench that might have gone unnoticed decades ago. It was patented by D. Cram of Liberty, Maine, on January 27, 1891. Its purpose is to loosen or tighten the axle nut on a buggy or wagon, with the lockdown nut and extended arms enabling the user to apply additional leverage to a stubborn connector. It had an \$800/1600 estimate, and somebody loosened up \$1265 for it.



A Number 44 Miller patent plow plane by the Stanley Rule & Level Company, produced under the Charles Miller patent of June 26, 1870, is generally considered to be the rarest of the Miller patent series. This one retains much of its original lacquer finish on the gunmetal body, and it commanded \$1840 (est. \$1000/2000).



A classic Pennsylvania goosewing ax, twice marked with an "H. STAHLER" imprint, finished at \$1495 (est. \$600/1200).



AUCTION

Nonadjustable block plane, No. B., by the Bailey Tool Company, Woonsocket, Rhode Island. The designation "BAILEY / TOOL / COMP" is cast into the sole of the plane, serving as a form of corrugation. As the catalog stated, no chips, no cracks, and no apologies for this one, and it sold over the \$800/1600 estimate for \$2185.



A New York ship's carpenter named P.A. Travers built this tool chest in the late 19th century in a variety of woods, including rosewood, sycamore, ash, boxwood, and others. He embellished it with raised icons and a sunburst inlay and painted his name on the front. He would have been proud of the \$1955 price, even though the estimate was \$3000/6000.



The days are long since gone when iron wrenches are nothing but heavy, valueless objects that lie gathering rust at the bottom of some mechanic's rusty, grease-stained toolbox. Around 1990 Donald Snyder published his volume evocatively titled *My First 1000 Wrenches*, and wrench collecting entered the world of tool collecting. Formerly unnoticed lumps of wood, iron, and steel became *objets d'art* and treasure hunter's quarries. The patent on this nut wrench was issued to Henry King of Springfield, Massachusetts, on October 25, 1832, and it was produced by Homer E. Foote & Company of Springfield, Massachusetts. It is among the first patents, if not the first, to be issued for an adjustable wrench. With a minor alteration to the lower jaw, it sold for \$3795 (est. \$2000/4000).



"Factory new condition" is a descriptor that applies well to this nickel-plated fireman's hatchet. Even the paper label from Collins & Co. of Hartford is intact. Clearly not a workman's tool but likely a presentation award, it sold for \$1437.50 (est. \$750/1500).

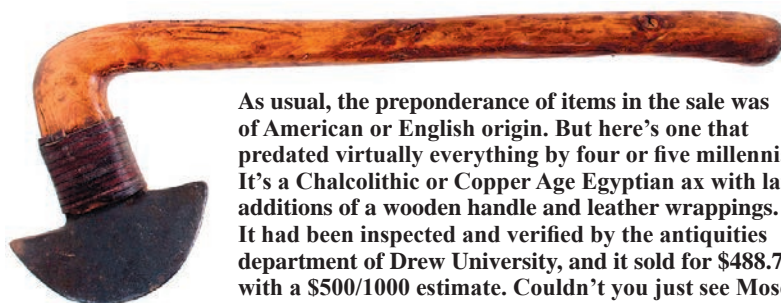
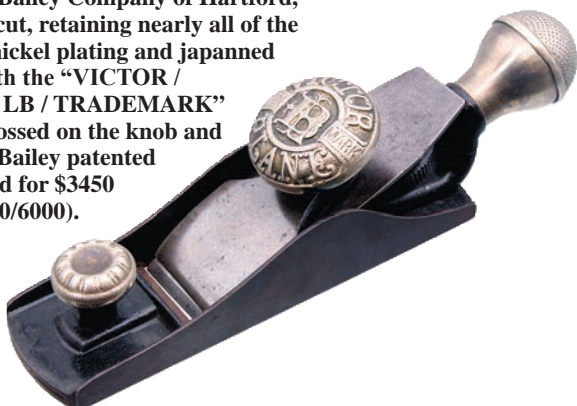


A starkly beautiful and dramatic bit brace by Sims, in ebony with brass furniture, brought a solid \$2415 (est. \$1000/2000). Apparently little is known about the maker beyond his name. Not shown, a rosewood infilled and brass-bound bit brace known as an "Ultimatum," by the better-known William Marples & Company of Sheffield, England, in all-original condition turned out to be worth \$2070 (est. \$500/1000).



Was there ever a more appropriate name for an intelligent, creative inventor of wooden planes with metal parts than Solon Rust? Rust held at least eight patents for various modifications of plane making. This applewood screw-arm plow plane was produced by Hermon Chapin's Union Factory under a patent issued jointly to Chapin and Rust on March 31, 1868. In virtually unused condition, with the Chapin imprint and the number 239½, it sold for \$1840 (est. \$1500/3000).

This rare block plane, No. 2½, by the Leonard Bailey Company of Hartford, Connecticut, retaining nearly all of the original nickel plating and japanned finish, with the "VICTOR / PLANE / LB / TRADEMARK" logo embossed on the knob and a proper Bailey patented blade, sold for \$3450 (est. \$3000/6000).



As usual, the preponderance of items in the sale was of American or English origin. But here's one that predated virtually everything by four or five millennia. It's a Chalcolithic or Copper Age Egyptian ax with later additions of a wooden handle and leather wrappings. It had been inspected and verified by the antiquities department of Drew University, and it sold for \$488.75 with a \$500/1000 estimate. Couldn't you just see Moses waving it in the air and rallying the children of Israel?

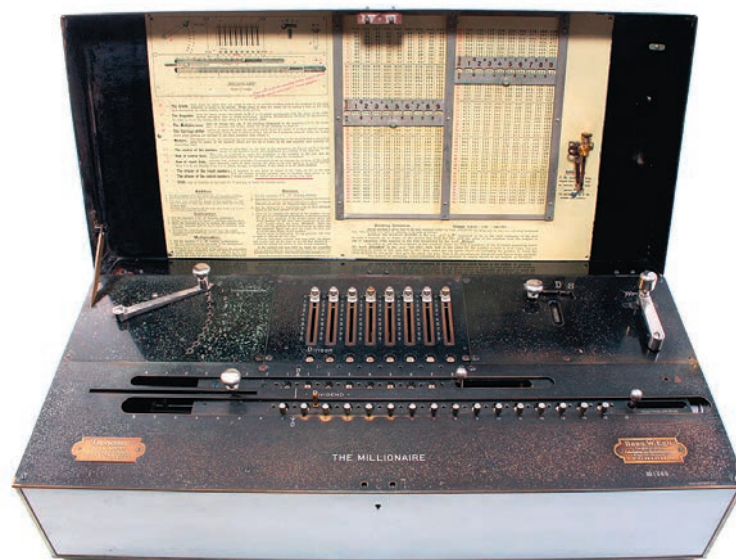


John Baggs combination butcher knife, saw, and weighing scale, combined into a single tool, sold for \$690 (est. \$750/1500).

This Nicholson plow plane in yellow birch is marked "I. NICHOLSON" for John Nicholson of Wrentham, Massachusetts, the son of plane maker Francis Nicholson. With an adjustable iron depth stop, it brought \$2645 (est. \$750/1500).



This mid-18th-century cabinetmaker's plow plane marked "I. SMITH," most likely indicating Jonathan Smith, a cabinetmaker from Groton, Connecticut, who died in 1776, sold for \$2185 (est. \$1500/3000).



This little machine known as the "Millionaire Calculator" is marked with its U.S. patent date of May 7, 1895, a time when genuine monetary millionaires were significantly rarer than today. It was marketed in America by W.A. Morschhauser, who sold about 4655 of them. It was the first commercially successful calculator able to perform a multiplication function with a single operation. Earlier machines, mostly simple adding machines, could do multiplication but required a multiple of repeat operations. Labeled with a brass tag showing the name of its inventor, Hans W. Egli of Switzerland, this machine cranked out a total of \$1437.50 (est. \$1250/2500).



A complete set of 12 Stanley No. 310 "Everlasting" chisels, most retaining nearly all of their Stanley decals and contained in their original Stanley leatherette roll carrier, landed for \$1955 (est. \$1500/3000).



Coming with this patented smoothing plane by T. Norris & Son, London, England, were its original box, two letters, and a receipt from 1936 when, according to the catalog, the Millers Falls Company of Greenfield, Massachusetts, was actively searching for new ideas to improve its own toolmaking and purchased this plane in order to study its unique features. The result was \$3162.50, topping the \$1250/2500 estimate.

