

# PERIOD FURNITURE-BUT WHAT PERIOD?

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## Part 1

I started my journey into woodworking like many people do, between the years 1700 and 1900. These were innovative as an exercise to temporarily put aside the current crisis and stresses of everyday life, wanting to create something. Starting with toy chests for my children, to small boxes, end tables, and garden benches, my interests continued to grow. After 40 years of a manufacturing management career I joyfully retired to spend my days in the workshop.

During the years prior to and after becoming a full time participant of furniture making I made several dining tables in the Shaker Trestle and Colonial Farmers Kitchen styles; end tables with modern updates to Queen Anne and Mission styles, and English Garden benches that never go out of style. I never tried to focus on one particular style, but I never liked or thought about what is generally known as Period Furniture.

Recently I joined several of my woodworking colleagues to build a Federal Period Tilt Top Tea table. So I began my adventure into a Period Furniture piece. My interests were spiked when our group started discussing methods of producing the sliding dovetail joints for attaching the legs to the column, round versus square tenon to mate the top to the column, using hide glue versus PVA glue, and hammer versus vacuum veneering the top, none of which I had ever done or thought about doing. Needless to say I chose to make hand cut dovetails, a square tenon, use hide glue, and hammer veneering, because that's how they did it in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. But this article is not about the Tea Table, nor my journey into traditional methods of woodworking.

I wanted to know what was Period Furniture, or American Period Furniture. At a small meetings workshop in 2015, Bill Thomas in Rindge, NH, offering me a copy of Thomas Hamilton Ormsbee book *"Early American Furniture Makers-A Social and Biographical Study"*. Originally published in 1930, with a new edition printed in 1935. I read and have reread this book; thank you Bill. The book covers the history and methods of furniture making from the English Jacobean Period through American Joiners and Cabinetmakers of Nicholas Disbrowe thorough Chauncey Jerome, with a lot of famous and known Cabinetmakers in

methods to make furniture; and make money at it. They were producing the styles of furniture that the noblemen, bourgeoisie and new mercantile classes wanted in their time period.

Further readings; (see bibliography) have added to a better understanding and knowledge of furniture during earlier time periods. The definition found in Collins English Dictionary for Period Furniture is:

- *Furniture that was made during a particular period in time.*
- *Modern furniture that is made in imitation of original furniture from a particular period in time.*

Wikipedia has no references to other than specific periods of furniture styles. SAPFM(*Society of American Period Furniture Makers*) is likewise not specific on what period in history their focus is. Their mission statement is *"to create a forum for the understanding, education, and appreciation of American Period Furniture"*.

Our choice and selection of furniture is always based upon personal preferences that reflect the current values and geographic culture of where we live. The styles we choose are steeped in the fashions of the time period and very much dependent upon the economic, intellectual, and political events of the day.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be known as the IKEA Period! Thankfully; none of this furniture should last more than 5 to 10 years<sup>2</sup>.

In my readings to date the authors consistently refer to the style of the time period. They have created timelines for which these styles were in favor. The timeline graph (Appendix A) shows the major style categories in their most popular years. This was compiled through research in the volumes included in the bibliography.

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, Oscar P., *Four Centuries of American Furniture (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 1995)*, pg ix-xii

<sup>2</sup> Authors observation

Within most of these major style categories there existed individualistic artisans that created different variations that were considered avant-garde for the time. The most important of these will be covered in the style highlights. It must be noted that during the times of armed conflicts; Revolutionary, Civil, WWI & WWII, innovation and changes were curtailed. Additionally, major reference works have been written on each style. My intention in this article is to give the novice woodworker; this author included a general understanding of how we've gotten to where we are today.

We must remember that for the periods prior to the industrial revolution the historical furniture pieces we study today were made for the wealthiest homes and mansions they decorated. It is from the majority of these pieces preserved through time and housed in museum collections that we make copies today. Everyday furniture of the working classes and poor remained utilitarian **Country, Furniture of the Folk** or 'Staked' furniture.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century **Jacobean** period, craftsman producing furniture pieces were known as Joiners. The term derived from splitting logs with a froe and mallet to joining pieces resembling boards and planing them to final dimensions. With a few additional tools the stout stile and rail frame members with floating panel structure served the colonists well. Joinery was pinned mortise and tenon. For those who could afford it, extensive use of carvings embellished the pieces and may also have been decoratively painted.<sup>3</sup>



Excluding the turnings used for posts, chairs, and decorative parts **Jacobean** style was basic square and rectangular forms. The early furniture pieces were made primarily with Red Oak; White Oak was more desirable for English Ship building, and the craftsman preferred the Red Oak with less density for easier work ability. The most popular early

pieces were chests that were used for storage, seating, and tables. Later in the period the Dutch style Cupboard was made for the wealthiest.



The basic skills of the Joiners did not carryover with the introduction of the **William and Mary** style of fine furnishings that reintroduced dovetail joinery, used decorative veneers, and turnings.<sup>4</sup>

Dovetail joinery first appeared in Egypt during the reign of the Pharaohs. The use of metal saws provided a better method to convert logs to boards, and was a key feature in the development of the new style.



<sup>3</sup> Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, pg. 4

<sup>4</sup> Greene, Jeffery P., *American Furniture of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, (Newtown, CT.: Taunton Press), pg 12

The introduction of the Southern European Baroque style to 17<sup>th</sup> century English **William and Mary** furniture made these pieces more vertical and ornate with elaborate moldings,<sup>5</sup> dramatic turned legs with Ball shaped feet, and veneers. High chest of drawers on stands, slant front desks on top of chest of drawers, and increased table sizes and styles; the most notable being the drop leaf table with Rule joints were introduced. Chairs evolved from fairly flat and straight pieces to highly decorated with curved, slanted backs and upholstered seats.



As the American colonies grew and prospered, an upper class mercantile society developed. Aware of the latest styles in Europe they built and furnished their homes in the opulence of the period. The new European style of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century introduced a blend of the cyma curve and Chinese influence of simplicity of form and elegance; now known as **Queen Anne** style. The reversed S curves and restrained use of carving replaced the previous styles use of turned legs with stretchers and angular shapes, to the Cabriole leg.<sup>6</sup>



While the modern re-introduction of the cyma curve and the cabriole leg has been attributed to French Cabinetmaker Andre-Charles Boulee(1642-1732); it's roots can be traced back to classical Egyptian motifs with bulls' hoof feet and breaks in the curves to form a knee shape<sup>7</sup>. The shift to the cabriole leg was dramatic on tall cases, what we call *Highboys*. The slender curved legs increased the height and openness of the pieces. "The **Queen Anne** style balanced mass with space, making the size and shape of space between components as important as the design."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the cabriole leg; the most expensive pieces used the oriental ball and claw carved foot on the cabriole leg; bracket feet were used on chests of drawers, with lipped drawer fronts, bead moldings, and graduated sizes of drawers from top to bottom. The oriental influence can be found in the double cloud forms used decoratively. Another high style element influenced by oriental furniture was the use of Japanning, a gloss lacquer finish. It must be noted that the change to the Queen Anne style was enhanced with the use of improved workability of woods from the new world, walnut from America and mahogany from the West Indies.



One last note on the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, wheelwrights from Windsor Castle area re-introduced chairs made with turned spindles, bent branches, and curved seats, depicted in ancient Egyptian motifs.<sup>9</sup> American **Windsor chairs** first appeared in Philadelphia and rapidly spread through the colonies with style variations in each major population center.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg.17

<sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, pg. 36-37

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pg.38

<sup>8</sup> Greene, *American Furniture of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, pg. 33

<sup>9</sup> Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, P39 (There's those Egyptians again)



During the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian architecture increased the use of formal classical style for both the exterior and interior appearances. This carried over to furniture in modifications to the Queen Anne curves with slightly more angular design from oriental details. Beginning with an analysis of classical Greek and Roman forms and columns, **Thomas Chippendale**(1718-1779) followed these architectural details to be used in furniture.

Chippendale wasn't the first to publish furniture designs, but *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* in 1754 was the most well received and followed. "The *Director* was the first book of its kind to acknowledge the importance of furniture design as a field in itself."<sup>10</sup> The **Chippendale** style combined elements of the period French designs, Rococo ornamentation, with Oriental and Gothic influences.



**American Chippendale** designs were more restrained from their European heritage. The Colonists appreciated the simple geometric oriental shapes, and used less of the Rococo carved ornamentation and Gothic influences. Chippendale's *Director* admonished Cabinetmakers to study the classical forms and columns to develop their own designs. In the American Colonies, the stylized Ball and Claw became the carver's trademark, depending on their location in the four major cities. High chests were now wider, with higher arched pediments, bracketed by corkscrew flame and urn decoration. Cabriole legs were shortened and made stouter for the additional weight of the chest on chest design. Chests with curved fronts introduced the use of

"cockbeads" to surround drawers, and the height of elegance was the "Bombe" lower chest of drawers.



The same styling designs were used in expanded variety of tables for specific uses, from Tea, Dressing, Pedestal, Side, Card and the Pembroke Table. Seating used two variants with Cabriole legs and simpler oriental straight leg form. Chair slats ranged from the simple to the highly curved and carved Rococo style. Much is written about the styles and construction of chairs, there can be another research effort done just for seating in these periods. The end of the **Chippendale** popularity coincides with the American Revolution, as the wealthy English loyalist fled, and those supporting the Colonies were taxed to support the war effort.



In mid 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe a renewed interest in classical forms from architectural studies of ancient Greek and Roman motifs led to a **Neoclassical** evolution of style that became known in America as the **Federal** period. Robert Adams (1728-1792) an English architect introduced designs

<sup>10</sup> Greene, *American Furniture of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, pg.62

from Roman Murals that he described as all “delicacy, gaiety, grace, and beauty.”<sup>11</sup> For his furniture he introduced slender straight tapered legs with plinth feet; and small, simplified delicate moldings. Carvings changed from being a central focus to a supplemental ornament, and marquetry emerged as favored surface decoration.



Hepplewhite Table



There were three noted Cabinet-Makers during this time that the majority of the **Neoclassical/Federal** style furniture was designed. George Hepplewhite (1727-1786); Thomas Sheraton (1751-1806); and Thomas Shearer; and each published their works. Hepplewhite was a contemporary of Robert Adams, and produced work for him. After Hepplewhite's death his wife published 300 designs he produced in *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide* (1788). Sheraton published in four parts *The Cabinet-Makers and Upholsterer's Drawing Book* (1791-1794); and Shearer published *The Cabinet-Makers London Book of Prices, and Designs of Cabinet works.* (1788)

<sup>12</sup> The illustrations and details in these works provided practical drawings that could be reproduced by most skilled Cabinetmakers of the period. In America after the Revolution their designs became the new style and made regional style differences less obvious and subtler.



Hepplewhite's designs for elegant simplicity and clean geometric forms became the leading contribution to the new American **Federal** style.<sup>13</sup> Sheraton's work slightly modified and was more avant-garde than Hepplewhite designs; legs remained thin and tapered with no feet, curved aprons and fronts with centered inlays or veneers, and stringing and banded inlays for ornamentation were favored by the clients of the day. An important new furniture piece became the expandable dining table, utilizing three sections that could expand from 8 to 14 feet.

Sheraton Table

Shearer Chest of Drawers

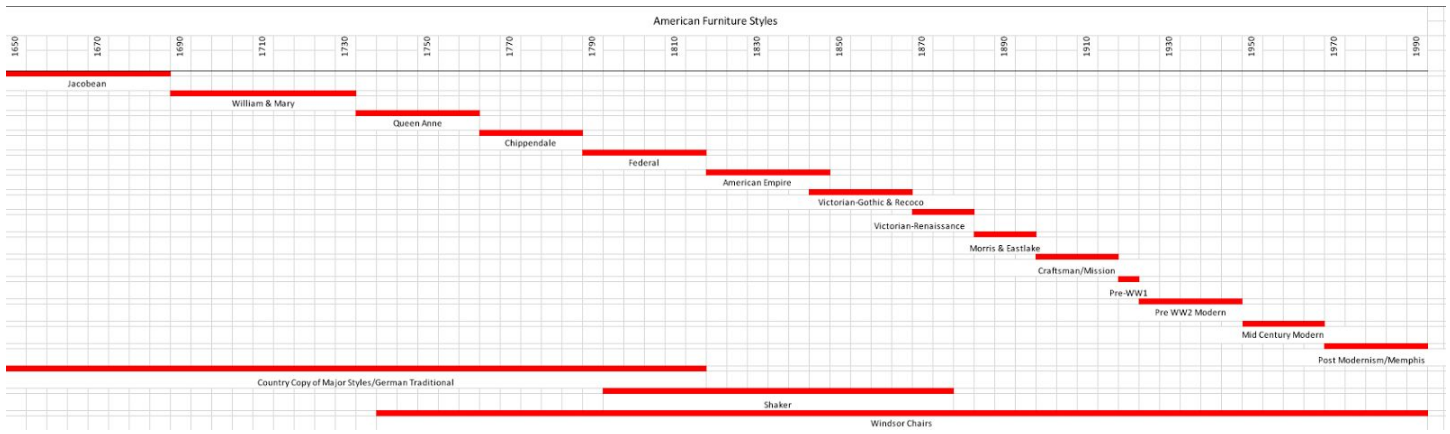
<sup>11</sup> Greene, *American Furniture of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, pg 81

<sup>12</sup> Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, pg 86

<sup>13</sup> Greene, *American Furniture of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, pg 82-84

The American Revolution changed the importance of our population centers. Salem, MA grew as alternative port to Boston, and Baltimore and Providence replaced Philadelphia and Newport respectively. By 1815 New York had surpassed all the other areas as the leader of commerce and fashion. Duncan Phyfe (1768-1854) from 1795 to 1847 on Fulton St., became the most fashionable and sought after Cabinetmaker in the city. It also brought an accelerated specialization in the furniture trades that signaled the end of the small single craftsman and apprentice shops. Master Craftsmen and shop owners chose the designs and supervised a number of Journeymen assembling the pieces made by contracted specialists to saw boards as needed, turn columns and spindles, do carvings, inlays, bandings, and upholstering.





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