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EARLY AMERICAN FURNITURE and INTERIORS, 1620-1720

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Introduction

Settlers during the early history of our country were not Americans; they were English, Dutch, Scandinavian, French and Spanish.

The furniture they brought to this country was of the period and style of their homeland. Furniture made in the new land was copied from those pieces, or from what they remembered of the furniture left behind.

It is hard to determine a precise style as Early American, because of the many different nationalities who brought their own furniture styles to the colonies. Today Early American furniture is usually considered as that from the New England colonies, and the Dutch settlements of New York and Pennsylvania.

There is not much difference between English furniture of New England and that of the Dutch colonists. This is because the English colonists were copying the Jacobean and William and Mary styles, which in turn were influenced by the Dutch styles of Holland.

The earliest furniture made in this country was simple. Lack of shops, tools, materials and time resulted in utilitarian furniture with little decoration. Many of the colonists were skilled craftsmen, however, and soon were making furniture that compared favorably with that made in their homeland.

Most common pieces of furniture used were stools, benches, chairs, tables, chests, cupboards and beds.

Furniture Characteristics

General Effect—Simple.

Lines—Straight, almost severe.

Proportions—Heavy but not massive.

Woods—Pine, Maple, Cherry, Oak, Fruit woods,

Birch, Ash.

Ornamentation—Paneling, split balusters, flat carvings, turned decoration.

Motifs—Sunflower, scrolls, diamond shapes, circles, pine tree.

Legs—Straight, turned.

Underbracing—Low and heavy.

Feet—Block, bracket, bun.

Chair Backs—Straight, banister backs, solid backs.

Chair Seats—Square, some rush & splint seats.

Arms—Simple turning or flat, with a suggestion of a scroll at end.

Upholstery—Very little.

Upholstery Fabrics—Cretone, turkey work.

Hardware—Iron, H-hinges, wood drawer pulls.

Finish—Oil, wax, painted.

Modern Adaptation—Where simple, unadorned furnishings are desired. Most Early American furniture is reproduced without the use of Early American motifs.

Chairs

Chairs were not in common use—even in England. When there was one chair it was reserved for the head of the house or a guest. Before 1650 households had only one or two chairs. At meetings the chair was used by the person in charge—that's why today we still may have the presiding officer "take the chair." Seats of turned chairs were of rush or splint although a few had wooden seats. Early legs were rough hewn and square while later ones show turning and shaping.

A Short Form. A stool or a bench called a long form built on straight lines was used in place of chairs. The stools were copied in America from

English joiners, so they were also called "joint stools." The construction was most admirable in the days when glue was unheard of. Often loose cushions were used on stools.

B. *Carver Chair*. A turned chair named for Governor Carver. It had straight turned legs, the rear legs continuing upward to form back uprights between which were placed vertical and horizontal spindles. These chairs were strongly individual with fancy turnings.

C. *Brewster Chair*. A turned chair similar to the Carver but with greater number of spindles in the back and also spindles under arm and seat, or both places.

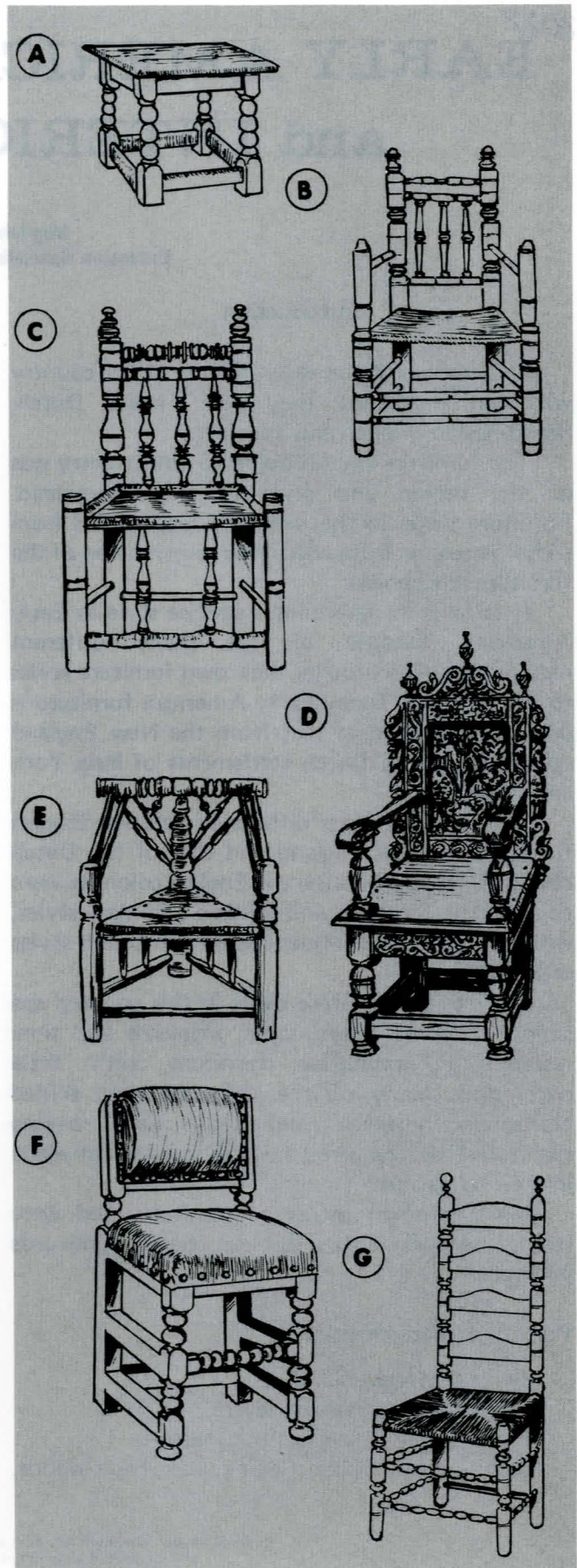
D. *Wainscot Chair*. Was throne-like in appearance. It was made of oak with panel work and board seat. Origin of word interesting - "wain" was the English word for wagon. In the 17th century there was not the specialized skill of cabinet making, so the joiner who did wainscotting also made furniture. This majestic seating piece was discontinued because of weight.

E. *Buffet Chair*. This was a turned chair with triangular seat brought to America by early settlers. "Buffet" comes from the English word meaning three-footed stool and has no connection with the French word meaning sideboard. Oliver Wendell Holmes described the chair:

"Funny old chair with seat like a wedge,
Sharp behind and broad front edge.
One of the oddest human things.
Turned all over with knobs and rings.
But heavy and wide and deep and grand.
Fit for the worthies of our land."

F. *Farthingale Chair*. This was also called a Cromwellian chair. It was an armless square-backed chair with upholstered seat and half back, made for ladies wearing the enormous skirts of the era. Upholstery material was either leather or turkey work, a homemade material which resembled Oriental rug weave and pile pattern made by drawing wool yarn through a coarsely woven fabric backing.

G. *Slat-Back Chair*. The ladder back chair has remained in use through the years. The first slat back chairs had square rather than round posts (the four uprights that make the back and legs) and splint seats. The rounded stretches and slats were shaped by a drawshave. The shape of the slat had many variations and regional characteristics. In New England the slats were usually straight on the lower edge while in Pennsylvania both upper and lower edges were curved.



H. *Cane Chair*. These elaborately carved walnut chairs with cane in back and seats were introduced to England by Charles II when he was restored to the English throne. The chair was evidently in use in America before 1680 when it appeared in inventories. The deep elaborate carvings were a reaction from the severity of the Cromwellian era. Most often the design is the Flemish scroll on backs, legs and stretchers. Early ones had Spanish foot. Also called Carolean or Restoration chair.

I. *Banister Back Chair*. It was a simplification of the cane chair. Banisters similar to those in a stairway were substituted for the cane. Also called baluster back. On these chairs the back posts were whole banisters but between them were half banisters. The half banisters were made by gluing two pieces of wood together with cloth or paper between. After turning the banister could easily be split. The flat side of the split banister was usually placed on the front of the chair. The crest of the cane chair was carried over with American craftsmen simplifying the designs. As time went on it became more and more simplified.

J. *Chair Table*. Colonists liked pieces of furniture with more than one use. A table became a chair when the hinged top was turned up to form the back.

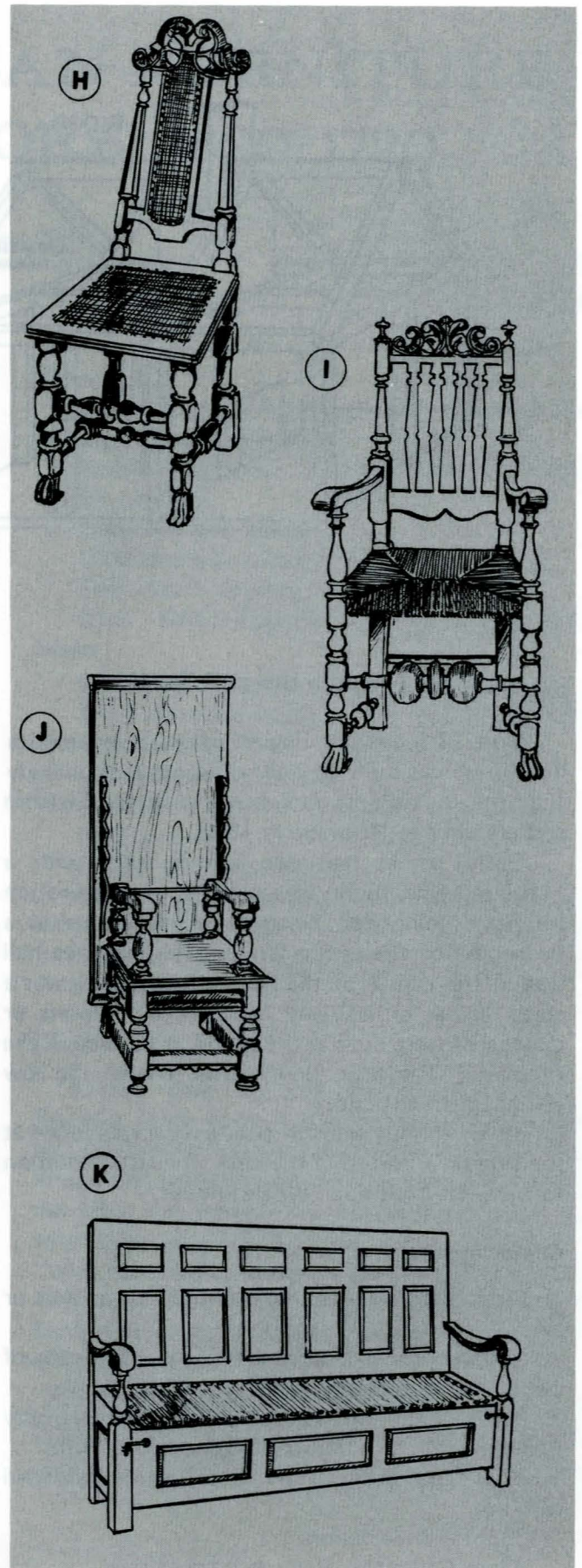
K. *Settle*. A wooden settee of the wainscot type with high back to keep out drafts which generally extended to the floor and had solid arms.

Chests

The chest was an essential piece of furniture for every household, serving both as seat and storage piece. Many of the first colonists had carved low chests of the English "Oak Period" or undecorated ones except for owner's initials, which served them as travelers' trunks. In England during the Gothic period a chest was called a "hutch." Chests made before 1660 were carved over the entire front surface, whereas later ones were decorated with split spindles and mouldings.

The chest varied as much as any piece of furniture in America. Connecticut was known for its original storage chests. As time passed drawers were added at the bottom to form the so-called blanket chest. The first record of a drawer in a chest was in 1655 and that of two drawers in 1670.

As soon as drawers became an integral part of the chest, this piece was adapted to different needs with variations in height, number of drawers, wood and decoration. Thus from a long box evolved



chests of drawers, dressing tables, cupboards, desks, lowboys and highboys.

L. *Hadley chest* from Connecticut, had only one drawer and was decorated with incised decoration of leaves, scrolls and initials of owner.

M. *Pennsylvania Dutch dower chest* was colorful and highly decorated with stencile designs on front panels.

N. *The Bible Box* usually did not have a lock. Boxes, smiliar to chests in construction and importance, were used to store books and papers. These had either flat or slant top. The slant top ones were the forerunners of desks.

O. *Court or Press cupboard* was a status symbol of the time. It was used for the storage of food and the display of prized silver and pottery.

P. *Chest on frame* was literally a chest on legs.

Q. *Hutch Cupboard* or Welsh Dresser is an adaptation of the early cupboard. In early England "hutch" meant a chest.

Tables

Tables of this period had turned legs. The tops, usually of pine, had wide overhangs. Stretches connected the legs. Because of limited space, most tables had drop leaves, designed with different means of supporting the hinged leaf such as gate legs, swinging arms, butterfly wings and pulls.

R. *Trestle Board*. Trestle tables were first called trestle boards. The narrowness could be explained by the custom of seating diners on one side of the table. The rail was conveniently placed to serve as a footrest so people could elevate their feet above the drafty floor.

S. *Sawbuck Table* was an X trestle table made of pine. The X support compensated for the lightness of the pine.

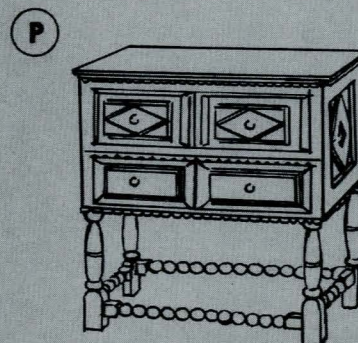
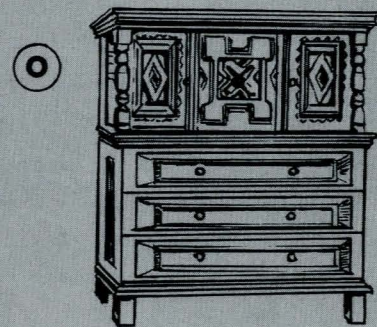
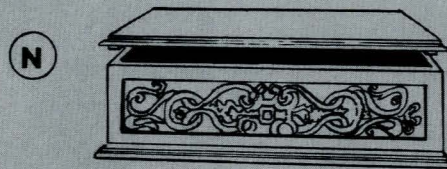
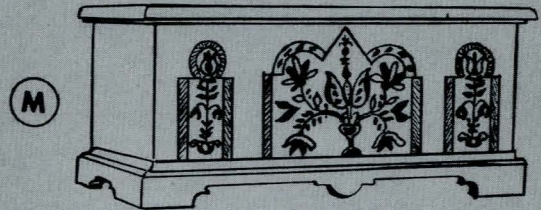
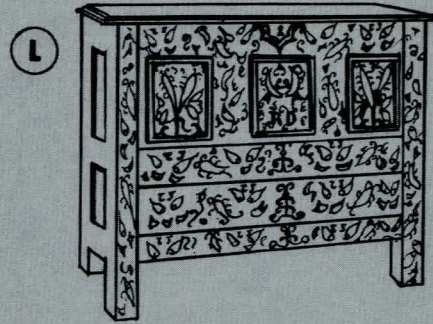
T. *Butterfly Table* was purely the product of America, originating in New England the last of the 17th century. Derived its name from the shape of the brackets that support drop leaves.

U. *Gateleg Table* appeared at the close of the seventeenth century.

V. *Tavern Table* was a small occasional table.

Beds

Early beds had low posts and very shallow headboards and were high enough so that the trundle bed could slide underneath. Rope was stretched across the frame to support the bedding and coverlet.

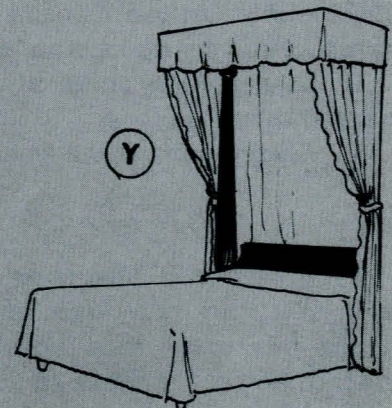
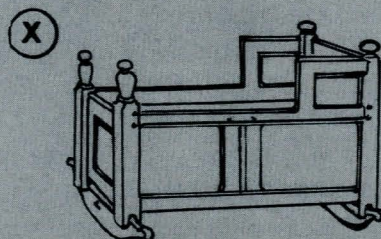
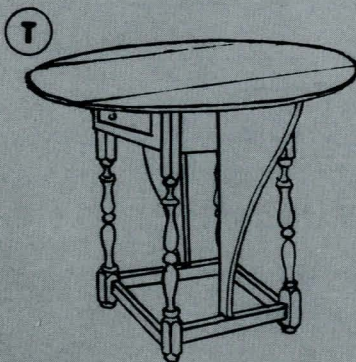
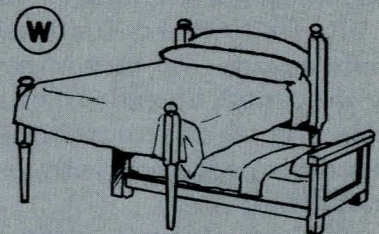
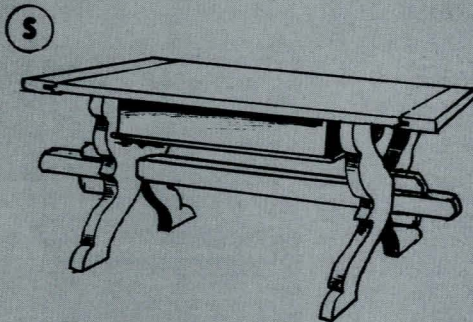
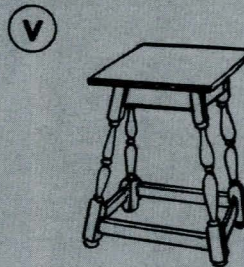
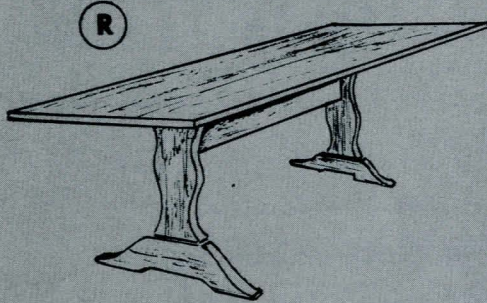
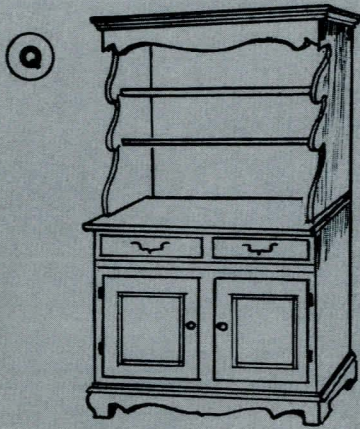


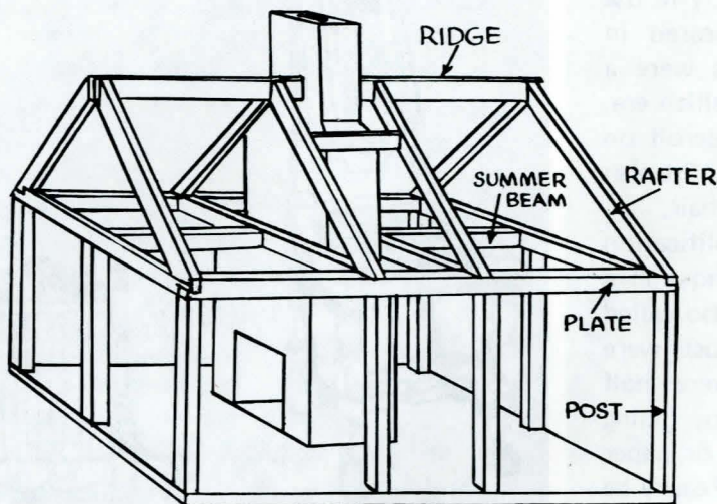
The high free standing bed was developed first in the warm climates of Spain and Italy. The early beds in the cold north European countries were built in the wall. High post beds with curtains are listed in American household inventories of the 17th century.

W. *Trundle Bed*. A child's bed which was stored beneath a larger bed in the daytime.

X. *Cradle*. A bed on rockers for a baby. It often had a high covered headboard to protect the child from drafts.

Y. *Press Bed*. A bed that could be turned up in the wall.





Early American Houses & Interiors

Most 17th century English colonists in America lived in homes built entirely of wood. It is unlikely that the log cabins were built until the Swedish settlers came to Delaware in 1638.

Early homes had two rooms, each with a fireplace. One room was used as a combination kitchen, dining and living room; the other as a bedroom for the entire family. The entrance hall was in the center of the house. Often there was a steep ladder or stairway to the attic. Closets or cupboards were built in the spaces at the side of the fireplaces. The attic floorboards formed the low ceiling of the first story.

As the family grew in size, a wing was added at the side or a lean-to at the back; the latter addition forming the "salt-box" type of house.

Characteristics

Architecture—Small houses built of planks or logs.

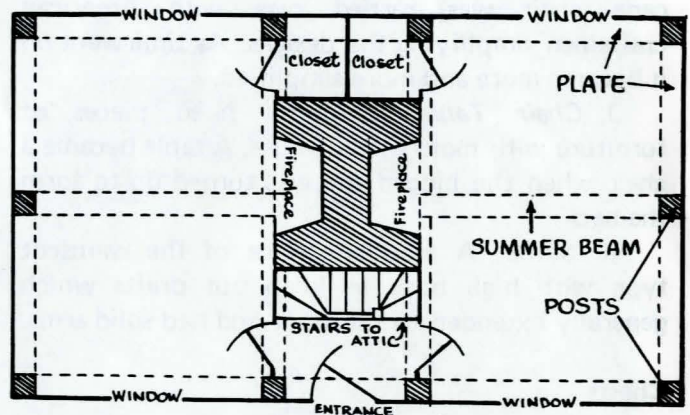
Ceilings—Low; a large beam in the center of ceiling, one end of which rested on the chimney.

Walls—Wide planks placed either vertically (palisade wall) or horizontally (clap-board wall).

Wall Decoration—None. Pine boards reddened with age.

Floors—Wide boards.

Floor Coverings—Rag and hooked rugs.



Windows—Small casement type. Glass, oiled paper or isinglass filled the panes, which were rectangular or diamond shape.

Window treatment—Simple, hung to sill.

Window fabrics—Cretannes - Chintz - Gingham - Fish nets - Painted linens.

Lighting—Sconces, candles, Betty lamps, rush light holders.

Fireplaces—Large brick.

Accessories—No pictures or mirrors. Bible boxes, cradles, spinning wheels, Pewter pieces.

Colors—Cranberry red, blue, olive green, russet brown and mustard yellow.

Associated Styles - Tudor, Early Jacobean, Cromwellian.

Comment—As settlements developed and conditions became somewhat more secure, greater attention was paid to detail, and more of the comforts of home were added.