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## EC64-1179 American 18th Century Furniture

Magdalene Pfister

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

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E.C. 64-1179

*American  
18<sup>th</sup> Century  
Furniture*

EXTENSION SERVICE  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS  
AND U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE COOPERATING  
E. F. FROLIK, DEAN E. W. JANIKE, DIRECTOR

# American Eighteenth Century Furniture

By Magdalene Pfister  
Extension Home Furnishing Specialist

## INTRODUCTION

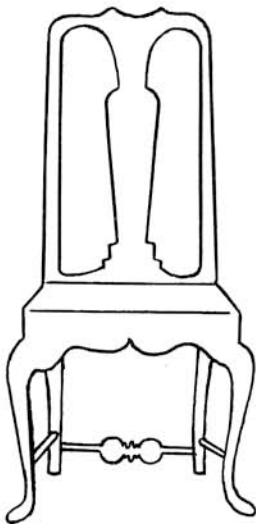
During early colonial days, only the most essential and simplest furniture was made. As the country changed from frontier to prosperous colonies, more furniture was imported. These pieces were copied but often with simpler ornamentation. Native woods as well as imported mahogany were used. Furniture made in this century, "the golden age of decorative arts," is still copied or adapted today.

The styles of England were brought over through books, by immigrants, and by the royal governors whose homes expressed culture and refinement as well as the importance of their position.

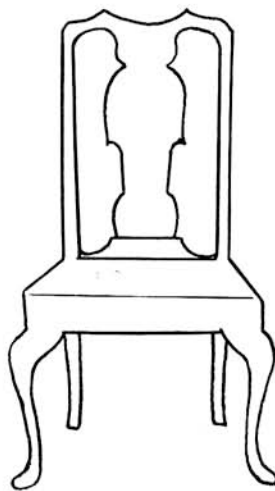
Cabinet makers came to the new world to seek their fortune. They had a working knowledge of English and French furniture designs but often modified those traditional ideas. An outstanding example is the Windsor chair.

Some cabinet makers adapted designs to new forms that were never made in England. A notable example is the highboy made by William Savery of Philadelphia. Chippendale never made a highboy but Savery's design was the adaptation of a style to a particular piece. Savery's highboy was popular and was copied by other American cabinet makers.

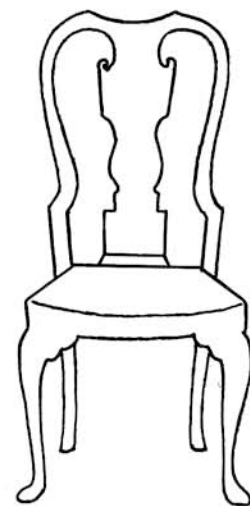
Furniture varied by regions. For example, the Queen Anne chair in New England was stiff and prim, in New York solid and squat, while in Pennsylvania it was more curved and graceful.



NEW ENGLAND



NEW YORK



PENNSYLVANIA

American furnishings of the 18th century are divided into two periods: Late Colonial or American Georgian (1720-1790) and American Federal (1790-1820).

Furniture of the earlier period had curved lines suggesting comfort and grace. Later, lines became straight. At the close of the Federal Period furniture was heavy and clumsy.

## LATE COLONIAL OR AMERICAN GEORGIAN

### Architected Interiors (1720-1790)

Architecture -- Cape Cod (New England); Dutch Colonial (Pennsylvania and New York); Georgian (Virginia and Southern Colonies). Ample scale with two spacious rooms on each side of a large central hallway from which a wide staircase led to similarly arranged second floor. Doorway was main feature.

Ceilings -- Plastered -- higher than previous styles.

Walls -- Plaster - panels. Columns, entablature and cornice from exterior design brought inside.

Wall Decorations -- Painted, papered. Scenes and all-over designs, Chinese paper imported.

Floors -- Hardwood.

Floor Coverings -- Hooked, braided and Oriental rugs.

Window Treatment -- Traverse curtains.

Window Fabrics -- Cretonne, chintz, Toile de Jouy, damask, brocade, scenic -- bird and floral designs in silk, cottons, and linens.

Lighting -- Wall sconces -- crystal chandeliers.

Fireplaces -- Brick, wood mantels, architectural.

Pictures -- Paintings, etchings, silhouettes.

Mirrors -- Girandoles, framed looking glasses.

Accessories -- Tall clocks, pewter pieces, Chinese art objects.

Colors -- Red, green, blue, yellow, more subdued than Early American.

### Furniture

Chairs -- Chairs became more varied in shape and more comfortable. Upholstery was often used. Wing chairs, known then as fireside or easy chairs, were popular in both Queen Anne and Chippendale styles. The wings kept off the drafts and if facing the fireplace, a person would be reasonably comfortable in winter. The sofa was a furniture form developed during this period.

### Tables

Customs and manners were changing rapidly in England and were adopted in a relatively short time in the colonies. Drinking of tea, chocolate and coffee and the playing of games of chance called for different kinds of tables.

Folding card tables had corners shaped for candle sticks.

The tea table was an important piece of furniture, usually with a rim around the top to protect the precious porcelain cups. The tilt top pie crust table is an example. The drop leaf table replaced the earlier gateleg table. Small candle stands were still used, but now were supported on a tripod base of cabriole design.

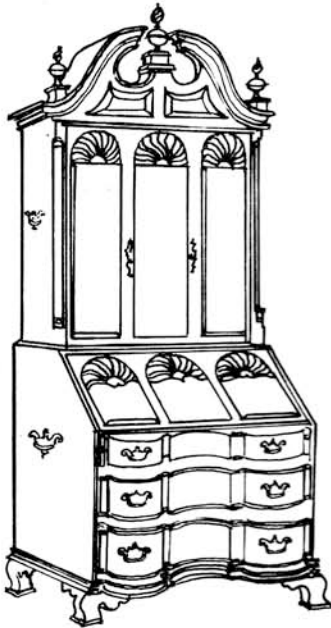
## 18th Century Beds

The bed became a striking feature of the bedroom with hangings from a frame or tester supported by postlike extensions of the legs.

Reeded posts and carved cabriole legs with claw and ball feet marked the disappearance of curtains. Low posts developed in America.

## Case Pieces

Case pieces were large, some seven or eight feet high. The plain chest disappeared. In its stead were the chest on chest, the highboy, the dressing table or low-boy and secretary. Desks were made with slant tops. Corner cupboards guarded porcelain and other proud possessions.



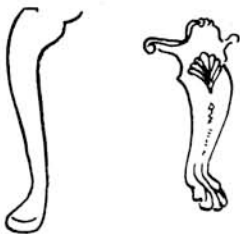
Secretary--John Goddard

Philadelphia cabinet makers produced pieces unmatched in beauty either here or in England. They were famous for their mahogany highboys, lowboys and other pieces of early Georgian and Chippendale styles. Many of their productions between 1742-1796 are considered among the finest examples of Colonial craftsmanship. William Savery, Benjamin Randolph and Thomas Tufft were among these excellent craftsmen.

In Newport, John Goddard and his relative, John Townsend, originated pieces with block front. This form consisted of a front section divided into three vertical panels, the two outside ones convex, the center one concave. A shell motif was placed on top of each panel. The bracket foot was used.

## **Queen Anne**

This style reached its height of popularity in America in 1720-1760. The furniture is characterized by the cyma curve (meaning wave form or double curve). Known also as the Holgarth line, it is apparent in the cabriole legs, chair backs and broken pediment.



Cabriole Legs



Shell Motif



Hardware

## Queen Anne.....Characteristics are:

Wood - mainly walnut, but others of curly maple.

Ornamentation - veneer, lacquer, simple carving.

Typical details - shell, flame, finial, fiddle splat, lacquer and gilt.

Underbracing - none, since improved construction made flat stretchers unnecessary.

Legs - cabriole, like a bent knee, "bandy" legs.

Feet - pad slipper, drake, hoof, bun, block.

Chair backs - fiddle back, solid centered, splat curved to fit the body.

Chair seats - broad, round at front, narrower at back.

Arms - curved and flared outward.

## Chippendale

This was the first style of furniture to bear the name of the designer rather than the ruler.

Thomas Chippendale, an English cabinet maker, published a book of his designs based on Louis XV in 1754. He created in three styles: French, Gothic and Chinese.

This style of furniture was well built and much of it remains today. Even in the most delicate fret work care was taken to secure strength. Instead of cutting a fret from a solid piece, three pieces of wood were glued together with the center piece running in the opposite direction of the other, a forerunner of plywood.



Chinese



Ball and claw



Acanthus Leaf



Hardware



Chinese Fret

Characteristics are:

Wood - mahogany

Ornamentation - rich carving, some lacquered, elaborately decorated pieces

Motifs - acanthus leaf, shell, ribbons, Chinese frets, Pagoda top, lattice work

Underbracing - limited use

Legs - cabriole, later straight, plain, fretted or bamboo

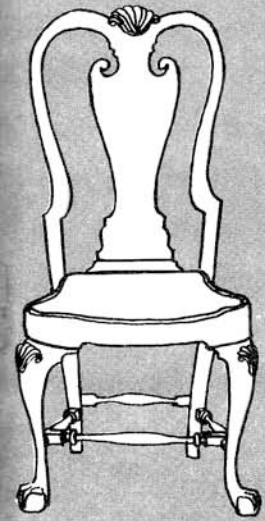
Feet - ball and claw, club, paw, scroll, bracket on some case pieces

Chair back - broader at top than bottom. "Flaring" shoulders - ox bow curved top rail, pierced slat, ladder, ribbon and lattice types

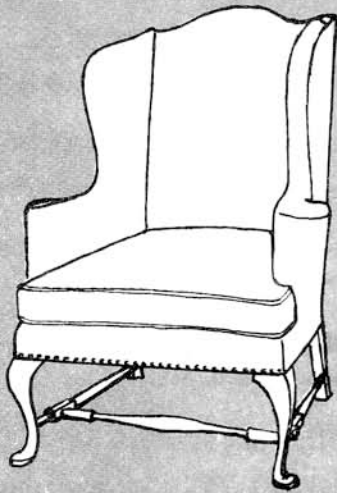
Chair seat - square, broad, tapering to back

Arms - curved, flare at ends

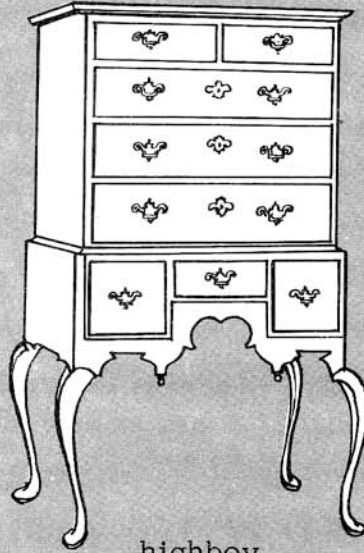
**TYPICAL PIECES :** Lowboy; secretary and.....



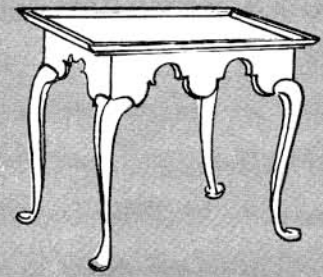
Side chair



wing chair



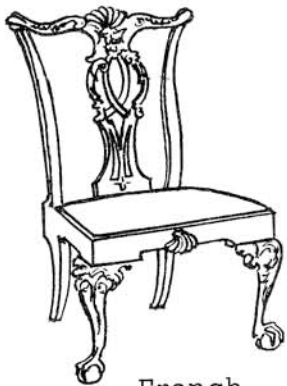
highboy



table

**TYPICAL PIECES :**

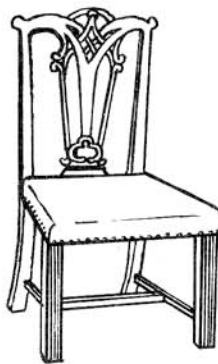
Side chairs -



French



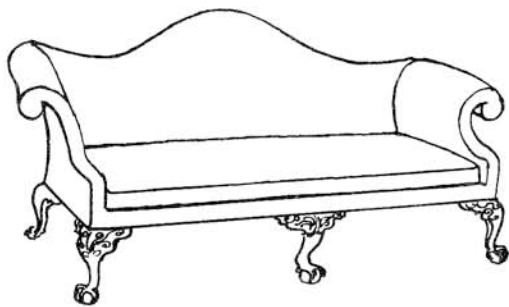
Chinese



Gothic



secretary



camel back sofa



Pie crust table

## FEDERAL PERIOD 1790-1820

A federation of states was organized under the Constitution. The people were proud of their new nation and displayed symbols of patriotism such as the eagle and stars. In their architecture, furniture and dress, they adapted the classical styles of Rome and Greece.

Washington, Franklin, Jefferson and Hamilton, not only statesmen, but also gentlemen with an understanding of the arts, had great influence in The Federal Period.

The character of the homes was much the same as during the colonial period. Outstanding architects of this time were McIntire of Salem, Bullfinch in Boston and Latrobe in Philadelphia.

### Architecture & Interiors

Architecture -- Colonial, Georgian, Classic.

Ceilings -- Plain or with plaster carvings.

Walls -- Plaster.

Wall Decorations -- Panels, painted or papered.

Floors -- Hardwood.

Floor Coverings -- Hooked rugs, Oriental.

Window Treatment -- Formal.

Window Fabrics -- Damasks, linens, chintz, brocades, velvets, Toile de Jouy.

Lighting -- Brass side fixtures.

Fireplaces -- Architectural treatment.

Pictures -- Paintings, prints.

Mirrors -- Girandoles, framed mirrors.

Accessories -- Candlesticks, clocks, Chinese porcelain.

Colors -- Red, blue, green, brown, yellow, but softer.

### Furniture

Furniture during this period had straighter lines and was smaller in scale.

The high chest went out of fashion. The secretary desk was replaced by lighter forms which gave way to heavy Empire versions at the end of the period.

The extension table and sideboard came into being during the last decade of the 18th century. The sideboard remains today as one of the most popular creations of the period. Large dining tables were made by adding semi-circular tables to a central drop leaf section with square ends.

Small folding side tables for cards and other accessories are among the most pleasing Early Federal designs. Small work tables and sewing tables were another development.

The tall four-poster bed was disappearing and the lower pineapple top and acanthus carved bed was becoming popular.

### Styles

**Hepplewhite** -- Hepplewhite was a London cabinet maker and designer who executed designs for the Adams brothers. He introduced satinwood and other exotic woods for inlay. Excavation of the ruins of Pompeii led to classical revival. Furniture styles became architectural.

Hepplewhite was also influenced by the Louis XVI French style, but despite these outside influences he developed a style of his own which was light and gracefully elegant. Chairs were not strong. Sideboards and chests are often copied today.

## Hepplewhite Characteristics are:

General effect - graceful elegant

Lines - curved and straight

Proportions - slender but sturdy

Woods - mahogany, satinwood, rosewood, tulip, birch, maple, sycamore

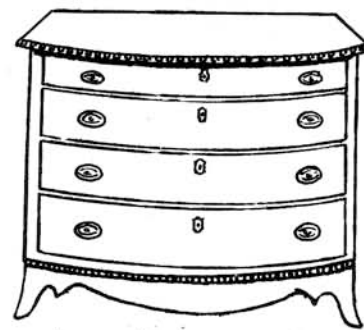
Ornamentation - carvings veneers, inlays

Motifs - Prince of Wales, plumes, wheat ears, honeysuckle, urns, palmettes, swags, husks, garlands

## TYPICAL PIECES :



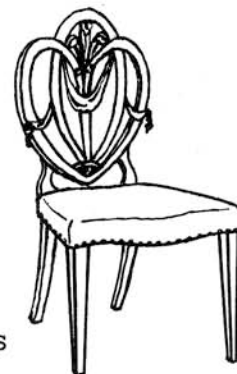
Shield back chair



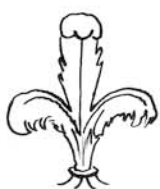
bow front chest



sideboards with serpentine fronts



Heart back chair



Plumes



Honeysuckle

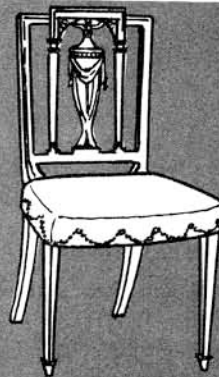


Urns

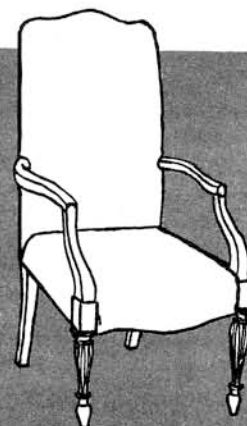


Hardware

**Sheraton** - Sheraton, another Englishman, was primarily a designer rather than a furniture maker. His imaginative designs were used by American craftsmen more than those of any other in this period. He created many dual pieces of furniture, roll top desks, and kidney shaped tables. His later designs followed the vogue of French Empire and lost some of its beauty.

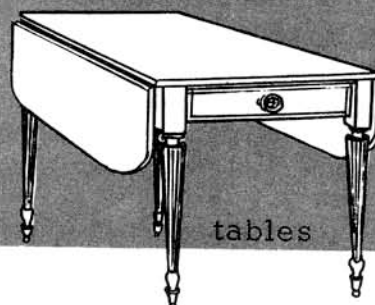


Chairs



Martha Washington chair

## TYPICAL PIECES : Sideboards and.....



tables

**Sheraton** Characteristics are:

General effect - refined, graceful

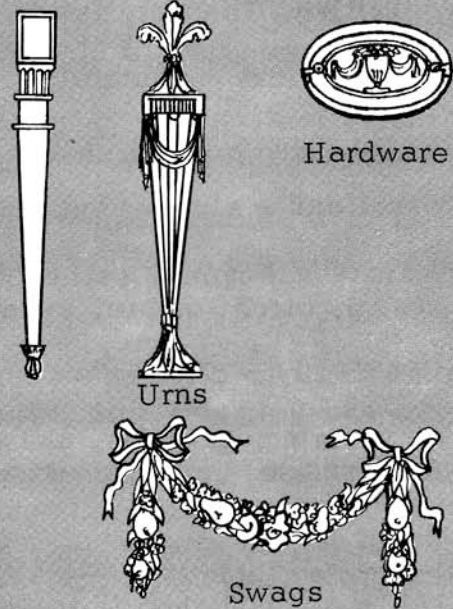
Lines - straight and curved

Proportions - slender

Woods - mahogany, satinwood, tulipwood, kingwood, rosewood, zebrawood

Ornamentation - carvings, veneers, inlays

Motifs - acanthus leaf, swags, urns, lyres, stars, cockle shell, latticework, oval inlays



**Duncan Phyfe** -- Duncan Phyfe came to America from Scotland as a young man in 1784. After learning the cabinet making trade he opened his own shop in New York. His finest work was produced during the years he followed the Sheraton designs.

Typical pieces are:

Lyre back chairs, cornucopia leg sofas, tables.

Characteristics are:

General effect - graceful

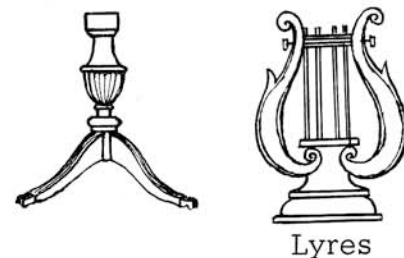
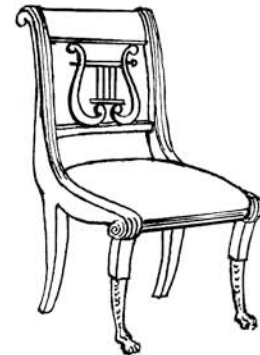
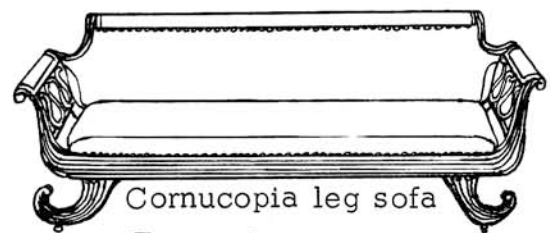
Lines - varied, and curved or straight

Proportions - slender

Woods - mahogany

Ornamentation - carvings, veneers, inlays

Motifs - swags, bunches of arrows, acanthus leaf, lyres, ovals, plumes



Shaker -- The Shakers were members of a communal religious sect in New York and other parts of the east. They produced some of the most honest furniture in the U.S. during the latter part of the 18th century. The furniture was simple, free from any decoration. Though sturdy, it was delicate in its proportions. The Shakers were excellent craftsmen who worked in pine and other native woods. The swivel chair and swivel stools are among their innovations.

Pennsylvania Dutch -- Families of German and Swiss origin settled in eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and southern New York state. They were misnamed "Dutch" for Deutsch.

They produced sturdy furniture of simple board construction from native woods gaily painted in symbolic patterns. Hearts, colorful birds, stars within circles and tulips were among the motifs commonly used. The bride's dowry chest was elaborately painted, with the name of the bride and wedding date prominent.

Rocking Chairs -- The rocking chair is an American innovation often credited to Benjamin Franklin. The first were made by adding rockers to regular chairs.

The Boston rocker was most popular and was made in quantity from 1820 to 1890. There is no evidence that this type was first made in Boston.

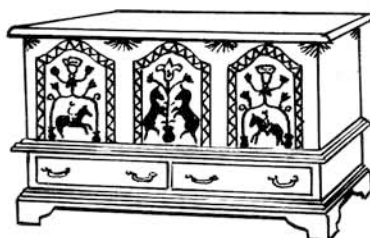
The early Boston rocker had a scroll in the center of the top rail, rolled arms and a round flat seat. Modern reproductions have a seat rolled up in back and down in front. The scrolled top rail gave way to a more simple one with two semi-circles cut from the lower edge to aid in mass production.

Martha Washington Chair -- A type of open arm chair with high upholstered back was based on the Sheraton style. The supports of the arm were raked in a curve. The legs were straight and plain; the back had a curved top rail.

Hitchcock Chairs -- Fancy chairs based on Sheraton Empire form were made in Connecticut by Samuel Hitchcock. They were made partly by hand and partly by machine and usually painted black. They were decorated with a gilt design of the horn of plenty, birds, leaves, flowers or fruit. The legs were turned, the seat was rush or cane, the top rail was widened and gently curved.



Shaker



Pennsylvania  
Dutch



Martha  
Washington



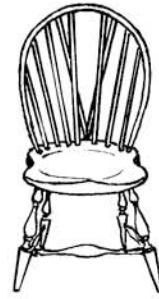
Hitchcock



Bow-Back Armchair



Comb-Back



Bow-Back

Windsor Chairs -- These chairs, sometimes called "stick chairs," became popular during the 18th century because they were sturdy, attractive, light weight and comfortable.

The English chair from which these developed was stiff in appearance with cabriole legs and pierced central splat. The American Windsor chairs had legs set in at an angle rather than at the corners. The seat was shaped for comfort. The back was the most distinctive feature with a great variety of shapes such as comb back, fan back and bow back.

Because several kinds of wood were used in the same piece, the chairs were generally painted.



Fan-Back



Low-Back Writing-Arm Chair



Double-Rail Back,  
Sheraton Type



ENGLISH WINDSOR CHAIRS  
Splats and cabriole legs