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## EC67-1181 19th Century American Furniture and Furnishings

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# 19th CENTURY American Furniture and Furnishings

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

# Nineteenth Century American Furniture & Furnishings

By Magdalene Pfister  
Extension Specialist, Home Furnishings

The history of furnishings in the nineteenth century has no clear-cut pattern, but many overlapping developments and changing fashions.

An industrial revolution was taking place in the United States. While men were pushing ahead in science and technology they looked backward to Greece, France and other parts of the world for inspiration in the decorative arts. The new rich went to Europe, bought or copied and adapted what they saw. The term eclectic is often used to describe the furnishings of this time.

As the nineteenth century progressed the machine became more important and man's craftsmanship less. At the beginning of the century most furniture was made by cabinet-makers or home craftsmen. By the middle of the century furniture was made by steam powered machines in factories.

There was much experimentation and the patent office was kept busy. By the end of the century massive grandeur was giving way to simpler lines, new processes and materials. The age of eclecticism gave way to the innovations of the twentieth century.

The Federal period (1790-1820 covered in E.C. 64-1179 American 18th Century Furniture) is followed by:

American Empire, 1820-1860

Victorian, 1840-1880

Late Nineteenth Century, 1879-1925

## AMERICAN EMPIRE - 1820 - 1860

### Architecture and Interiors

The young republic admired all things French and modified French Empire styles made for Napoleon.

Architecture -- Classical Greek style buildings with large columns.

Ceilings -- High, plain or with plaster carvings.

Walls -- Plaster, with dado and cornice.

Wall decoration -- Paint, silk textiles or wallpaper.

Floors -- Hardwood.

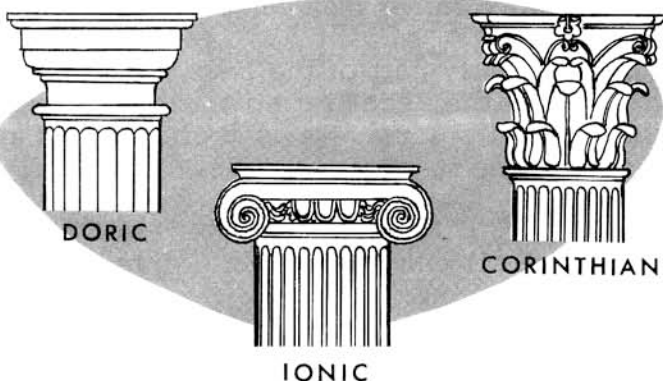
Coverings -- Hooked or Oriental rugs.

Window treatment -- Formal.

Window fabrics -- Velvets, sateen, damask with stars, stripes, squares, large scale patterns.

Lighting -- Side lights, brass and crystal chandeliers.

Fireplace -- Classic, Georgian.



Pictures -- Paintings, etchings, prints.

Accessories -- Clocks, cut glass vases, Wedgwood, candlesticks, ogee mirrors.

Colors -- Rich, dark, somewhat heavy - red, green, blue, dull brown, gold yellow, black.

Associated styles -- Federal, Duncan Phyfe.

Comment -- The young women of the day studied painting as well as literature and music. Many tried painting their own furniture, china and pictures. Stenciled and hand-painted furniture became a vogue.

## American Empire Furniture

General effect -- Masculine and heavy, less ornate than French Empire. The basis of Empire was Roman.

Lines -- Straight.

Proportions -- Medium to heavy.

Woods -- Mahogany, the preferred wood, symmetrically matched veneers of curly maple or rosewoods placed on pine used for elegance.

Ornamentation -- Carvings took the place of French brass and ormolu mounts.

Motifs -- Eagles, acanthus leaves, scrolls, pineapples, lyres, stars, horns of plenty.

Underbracing -- Moderate use.

Legs -- Splayed, straight, reeded, late in period scrolled legs.

Feet -- Continuation of leg, paw and claw, lion.

Chair backs -- Straight arms, lightly tilted back.

Chair seats -- Square.

Arms -- Slightly curved.

Upholstery -- Liberal use of damasks, brocades, velvets, in large scale patterns.

Hardware -- Round brass knobs or lion head with ring pulls, wooden knobs.

Finish -- Varnish highly polished. Late Empire deep red stain.



### Typical Empire Furniture

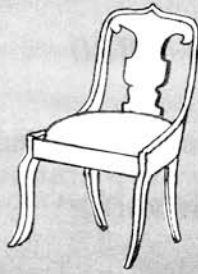
Sofas -- Empire sofas usually have roll-over arms and flaring legs, with elaborate carving of cornucopia, animal paws, wings or swans.

Late Empire sofas had heavy scroll veneer for decoration rather than carving.

In the early part of the century, Duncan Phyfe made the Recamier sofa with scrolled back, arms and legs. He used gilt stenciling instead of the metal used on the French type.

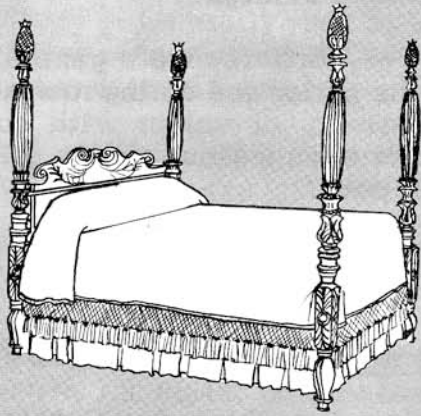
Caned settees were often painted black with gold stripes.





Chairs -- Chair backs were curved to fit the body. In the early part of the century, the painted and stenciled chair of Hitchcock was popular.

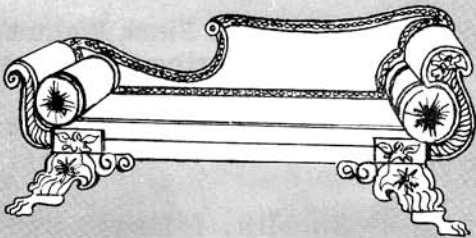
Chairs of the Directoire period (that time before Napoleon became Emperor) were characterized by continuous curves, from the top of the back through the seat frame and into the front legs and curved from the top of the back to the tips of the back legs. Duncan Phyfe used this in his finest work.



Late American Empire chairs were combinations of Directoire with the vase-shaped back of Queen Anne (the "fiddle back"). Late Empire chair back is perpendicular to the floor and is not continuous piece from back to seat.

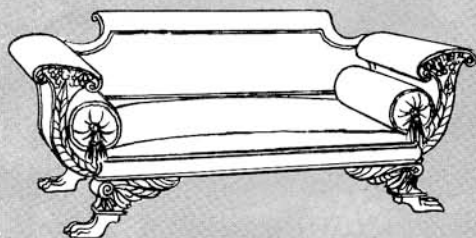
Beds -- The four-poster type with pineapple finial, the sleigh bed and gondola were characteristic beds.

Some beds were placed sideways against the wall. The headboard and footboard were the same height and a canopy or crown hung on the wall above.



Tables -- Were heavy with pineapple or lyre pedestals. Dining tables had drop leaves or leaves to be inserted supported by a massive plinth (base) or pedestal in the center with flaring legs ending in lion feet or scrolls.

Bureaus -- Often had the upper drawer overhang supported by corner posts. Late Empire bureaus have heavy scrolls.



Sideboards -- These and desks were other massive Empire pieces. Empire furniture had longer life in America than in France.



## VICTORIAN -- 1840 - 1880

### Architecture and Interiors

Conditions -- Industrial advancement, beginning of machine age, an era of sentimentality.

Architecture -- Liberal interpretations of Gothic, French Renaissance, Italianate, Tudor, Queen Anne Cottage, Eclectic, with towers, gables, bay windows, verandas, pagodas.

Ceilings -- Papered or paneled.

Window Fabrics -- Velours, velvets, tapestries, lace.

Walls -- Plaster.

Wall decorations -- Papered in large floral patterns in red and green ("cabbage roses") wallpaper, often flocked.

Floors -- Hardwood.

Floor coverings -- Carpet, Wilton, Ingrain, Brussels. Machine-made Axminster all-over carpeting had many more colors possible, strongly colored floral patterns, scatter rugs on parquet floors on last of period.

Window treatment -- Heavily draped, deeply swagged.

Lighting -- Kerosene developed in 1854 and in general usage 1875. Oil lamps with floral painted shades for parlor. Later, gas lights in cities.

Fireplaces -- Oak mantels with mirrors above.

Pictures -- Lithographs, prints, steel engraving, crayon portraits.

Mirrors -- Framed.

Accessories -- All kinds of bric-a-brac in whatnots, clocks, blackamoors, molded plastic hands, easels, hand painted vases, papier-maché candlesticks and trays, wax flowers under domed glass, John Rogers

statues, Currier and Ives prints. Much ornate glassware, cranberry glass sold cheaply, needle work.

Colors -- Deep dark colors. A favorite color scheme: Turkey red carpet, dark green walls, dark wood. Much gilding. New synthetic dyes faded (harsh in tone), rooms were closed to sunlight

Other -- Portieres were generally used between the parlor and dining rooms. These were of velvet, or velour with cords and tassels, or even walnut shells gilded and strung on cord.

### Victorian Furniture

General Effect -- Formal, somber.

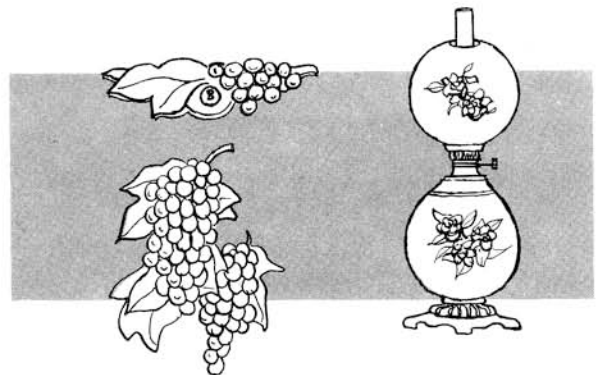
Lines -- Straight during Gothic period; curved lines adapted from French Louis XV, then return of straight lines.

Proportions -- Heavy, poorly proportioned.

Woods -- Often called Black Walnut Period; rosewood used, oak during late Victorian.

Ornamentation -- Heavily hand- or machine-carved.

Motifs -- Scrolls, foliage, pendants, bunches of grapes and fruit with leaves.



Under bracings -- Moderate use.

Legs -- Turned.

Feet -- Continuation of leg, ball and claw.

Chair backs -- Mostly curved.

Chair seats -- Varied, both round and square.

Arms -- Curved, placed low.

Upholstery -- Generally used on all seating pieces, tufted, insertion of coil metal spring led to all upholstered furniture.

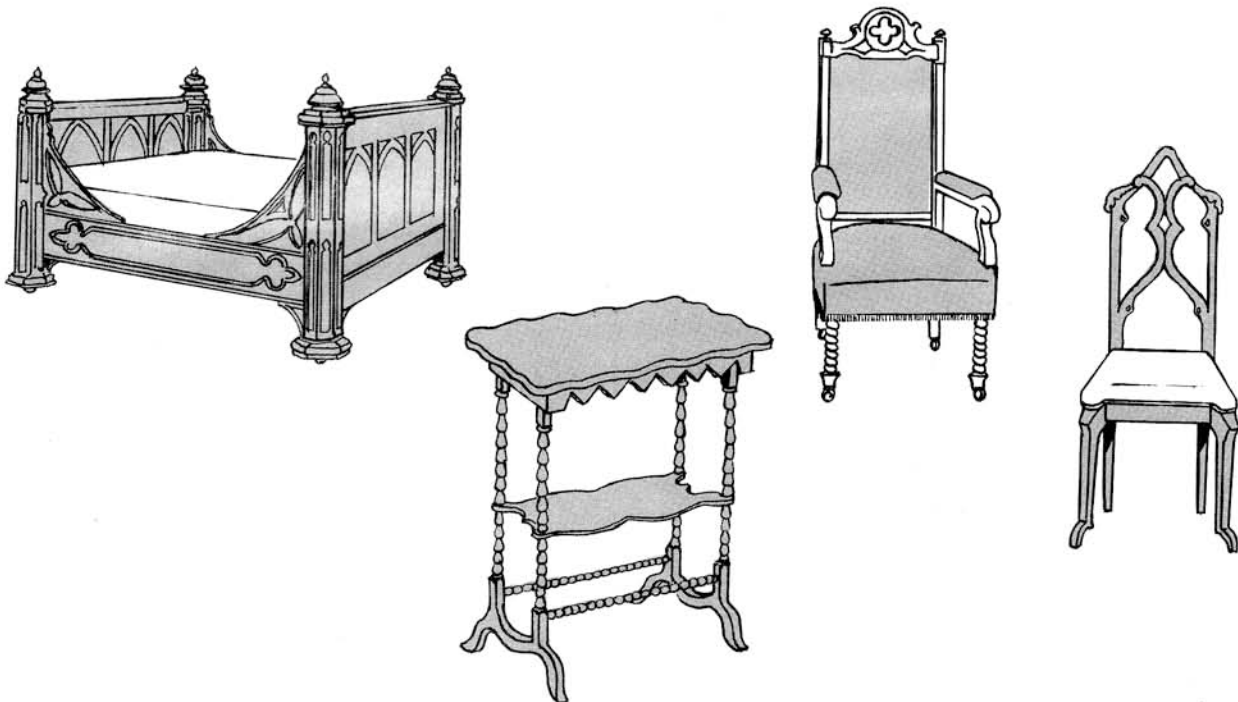
Upholstery fabrics -- Plush, hair cloth, tapestries, velours, needlework with fringes, braids, tassels for trim.

Comment -- Marble top on case pieces common. Furniture making in factories began in this country about the time of the Civil War. Machine-made furniture with straight, turned or hand-sawed legs, jigsaw furniture and a revival of straight line Gothic forms were produced. Papier-maché tables and chairs were fashionable during the first part of Victorian period.

## Victorian Gothic-- 1830-1850

This style coincided with the height of Gothic Revival architecture, and was widely used for city mansions, country homes, churches and other public buildings. The pointed arch is typical of this style. Many of the best examples of furniture were designed by architects to conform to their structures.

Side chairs predominate. It is not uncommon to find a combination of Gothic and spool-turned. The Gothic chair is often used for chancel and for presiding officer in lodge rooms.



## Victorian Rococo--1845-1870

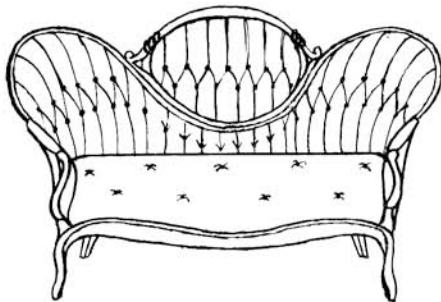
This style, considered most typical of the Victorian, is based on the graceful curves of Louis XV but lacked the graceful proportion.

John Belter made furniture with elaborate carving. The piercing and shaping of the frame was made possible by a laminating process (several layers of wood glued together for extra strength).

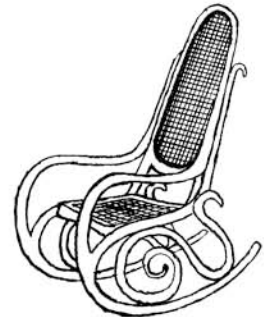
Chairs have oval or horseshoe-shaped backs. These are almost always upholstered. Some are button tufted. The seats are upholstered with a high crown. Arms, if used, are curved and low. Legs are shortened cabriole type.

In 1856 Thonet in Austria developed a bent wood chair which was made by steaming the wood and then bending it into a curved shape.

Peter Cooper made a spring rocking chair in 1860. This type was adaptable to factory production but factories copied styles of Belter for the wealthy.



BELTER CHAIR



BENTWOOD CHAIR

## Victorian Renaissance--1850-1870

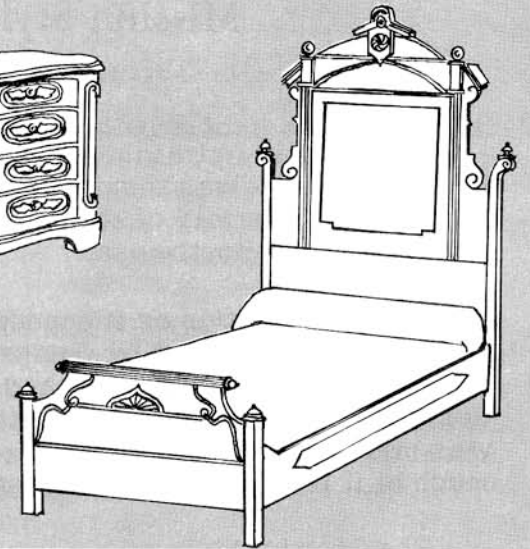
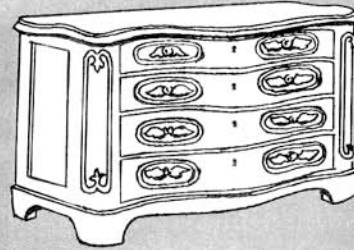
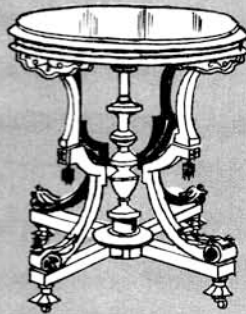
The structural and decorative features are based on those of Renaissance architecture. They include tall arched pediments, large carved cartouches, semi-circular arched panels, and cyma-curved or scrolled brackets.

Elaborate pieces were exhibited at the Crystal Palace in 1851 in London. American pieces were reduced in scale and of plainer ornamentation, largely for dining room, library and bedroom use.

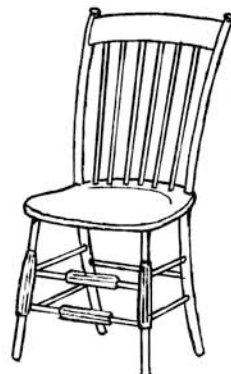
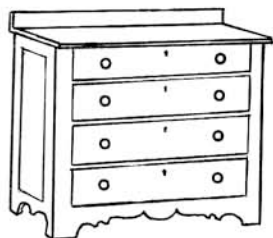
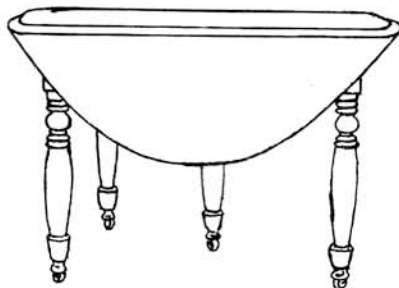
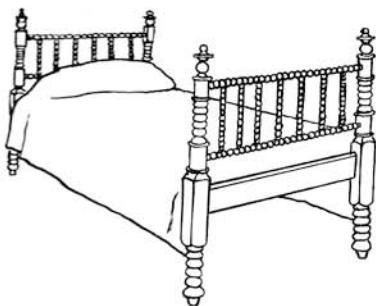
All case pieces rest on low bracket or block feet or have plinth bases. Parlor table is marble topped and supported by four tall scrolled brackets surrounding a baluster-turned shaft.

Curved details often flower and fruit motifs are applied. Matched sets of washstand, bureau and bed were made, the beds having high carved and paneled headboards.





## Cottage Furniture --1840-1880



Factory production of simple useful pieces of furniture was indirectly brought about by the editor of Godey's Lady Book. Beginning in 1849 each month line drawings appeared in the Cottage Furniture Department.

Manufacturers took the hint and made simple bedroom sets, either spool-turned such as the Jenny Lind bed or a simplification of Louis XV style. Tables and chairs were added. The table, of basic design, had simple turned legs. Chairs were turned type with spindle back and cane seat or wooden seated revisions of the Windsor loop back chair.

## LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY 1870-1925

### Architecture and Interiors

The bungalow style house was introduced late in the century. It usually had exposed beams in the living room, an overhanging roof and a wide front porch. Mission and Golden Oak were simple pieces of furniture planned for the bungalow.

Other furniture styles of this time were Eastlake-Jacobean, overstuffed pieces with Oriental influence and some Art Nouveau.

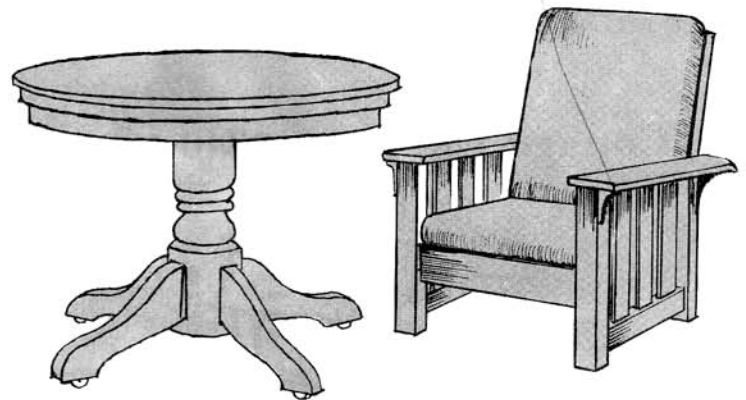
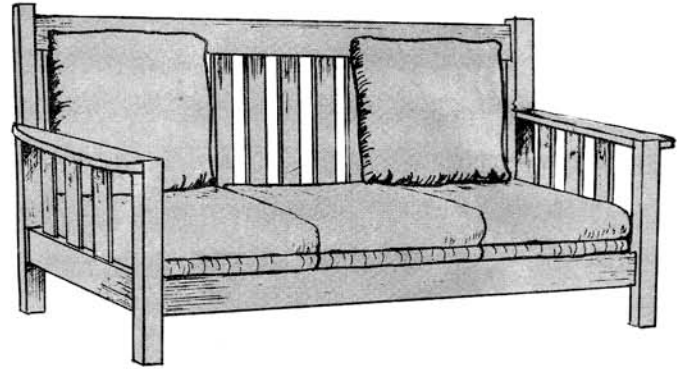
## Mission Style & Golden Oak Furniture--1890-1915

This sturdy, straight-lined furniture of oak stained dark was inspired in part by the design and materials of the Spanish mission furniture of the southwest.

The mission style as it appeared in eastern homes was developed by Gustave Stickley, a Syracuse, N.Y., craftsman and editor. His designs became a national craze. The style was made available by mail order catalogs and much of it is found in the midwest.

The Morris chair was a popular mission piece, named after English poet and handicraft teacher William Morris. These chairs have adjustable backs and upholstery pads which are easy to remove and clean.

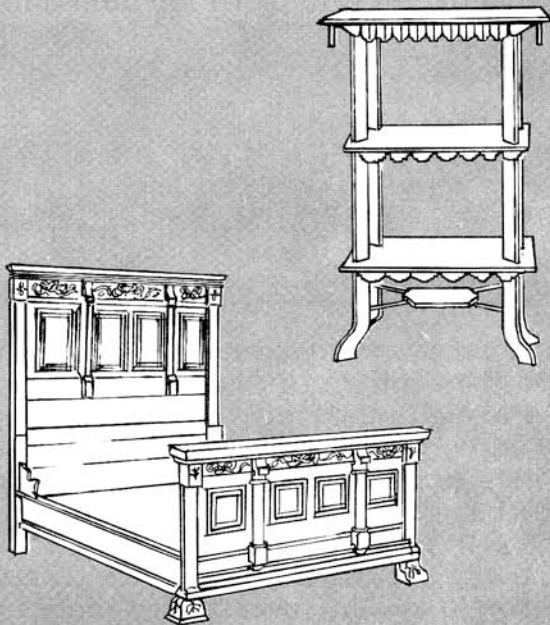
Golden Oak furniture was more refined than the mission style. The round oak table with a pedestal is a well-known example. Pressed back chairs were made by pressing a design with a metal die in imitation of carving.



GOLDEN OAK TABLE

MORRIS CHAIR

## Eastlake-Jacobean Furniture--1870-1895



Named for Charles Eastlake, an English architect who wrote books on furniture and "household taste." He argued for craftsmanship and revival of the Jacobean style.

This furniture was mass produced with straight lines and turned, rectangular paneled headboards and footboards with molded cornices for beds; case pieces mainly stile and rail construction. Decoration included reeded edges, fine incised lines, frame paneling and drawer fronts, low relief, machine carving of geometric motifs or simple scrolls and rosettes.



## Oriental Influence--1879-1880

Interest in Mohammedan art and the increased importance of Turkey in diplomatic affairs and the building of the Suez Canal contributed to the vogue for furniture which resembled the Turkish divan.

The frame of the furniture was completely concealed by overstuffed upholstery; seats were supported by coil springs; back and arms deeply padded, short baluster or vase-turned legs, castored and concealed by deep fringe; arms flaring or bolster shaped.

Sometimes a piece of this furniture was spoken of as "comfortable."

## Art Nouveau--1890-1910

This style developed in Europe as a protest against historical styles. It was based on naturalistic motifs such as branches of foliage and flowers, marked by curving and twisting lines. It was a short-lived style because it lacked adaptability to structural forms and materials. It did, however, prepare the ground for a free outlook of design.

Louis Tiffany developed an iridescent glass, fragile and delicate, designed as flower forms with thin stems and wide flaring tops.

## POSTSCRIPT

The nineteenth century is considered by many authorities as a time of poor design and bad taste. However, when some of the pieces of furniture are taken from the clutter of patterns and bric-a-brac, they possess a certain charm. The furnishings reflect the ambitious people who were climbing industrially and socially.

By popular definition an antique is an article one hundred or more years old. It is from the Victorian period that we have the "new antiques."