

Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

Furniture Provides Clues to Pennsylvania German Culture

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By Jay A. Graybeal

During the last century, several generations of scholars have worked towards creating methodologies for using objects in our interpretation of the past. Their work has been aided by the recent emphasis on the study of everyday life, women and ethnic groups by academic historians and by the development of the field of American historical archaeology. In my work as curator, I research how artifacts reveal important insights into aspects of daily life in the region. In some ways this can be seen most clearly through the ethnic traditions of the two primary cultural groups that settled this region.

Present day Carroll County was settled by two primary ethnic groups: Germans from southeast Pennsylvania and English from Tidewater Maryland. Settlement did not occur until the early eighteenth-century. Many settlers had been born or lived in the colonies before moving to this region. In addition to language, each cultural group brought distinct belief systems, social institutions and practices of religion, literature, politics, agriculture, architecture, art and the decorative arts adapted from their respective European traditions. Not surprisingly these cultural differences began to blur and change almost immediately due to friendly intermingling and from the demands of the rural environment.

A number of objects in the Historical Society's collection exhibit design characteristics or motifs favored by these two cultures. Easily recognizable are the brightly decorated Pennsylvania German baptismal certificates now known as *fraktur* or the Chippendale style case furniture derived from English sources.

Of all the decorative arts objects produced by the Pennsylvania Germans, none more typifies their social aspirations of success than does the tall clock. Invariably the most expensive household furnishing, a clock often represented more than five percent of a family's net worth. This is an enormous amount, considering that agrarian owners' lives were regulated by the natural rhythms of tending livestock and crops. Hence they had little need to break days into hours and minutes. This is clear evidence that clocks were far more than just timepieces.

Clockmaking was a complex trade involving several craftsmen. Generally the maker's name painted on the clock face is that of the craftsman who made or assembled the works. The case was ordered from a cabinetmaker. When purchasing a case, customers could select from a wide variety of decorative elements, including woods, moldings, veneers and inlays, depending on how much they wished to spend.

This joint construction practice was true of the several clockmakers known to have been working in this region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Examples in the Society's collection by Eli Bentley of Taneytown and George Long of Hanover, are representative of the types of clocks and cases available to local purchasers.

Tall clocks remained fashionable well into the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Their decline in popularity was due, in part, to the introduction of mass-produced and relatively inexpensive shelf clocks imported from Connecticut. An example in the collection made by William Gilbert & Company of

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Winstead is representative of the type of clock which nearly every household could afford by the 1830s. Clearly, its owner did not share the same values that earlier generations had placed on the tall clock.

One can see the blending of cultures in the decorative arts, particularly in furniture, which can be analyzed by design and construction techniques. Evidence of acculturation can be seen in a chest over drawers made in 1787 for Salome Lehman (1763-1855), shortly before her marriage to Jacob You (d. 1830). While making chests was an early tradition of Germanic culture, the form of a chest over drawers with brass hardware and bracket feet is of English origin.

The decorated chest was a distinctive form brought to Maryland by emigrating Pennsylvania Germans. Traditionally, a chest or kistch was made for a young woman as a place to store her dowry goods prior to her marriage. After her marriage, her chest remained a very personal piece of furniture used to store clothing or bed textiles in the kammer or bed chamber. By the time this chest was made the form had been superseded by the bureau in English furniture making. The chest form, however, remained very popular with Pennsylvania Germans well into the nineteenth century.

The cabinetmaker of the Lehman chest was of German descent and used construction techniques that identify his cultural heritage. The four walnut boards that form the sides of the chest are joined together with "dovetail" joints, a typical construction technique of the cabinetmaker. The joints on the Lehman chest are distinguished by the inclusion of a narrow wooden wedge driven into the center of the dovetail. This construction technique is distinctive Pennsylvania German and demonstrates that the cabinetmaker was trained in the Germanic woodworking tradition. This evidence tells us that the buyer of this chest, presumably Salome's father George (d. 1799), patronized a cultural kinsman.

The wrought iron hardware, which has been attributed to blacksmith David Barnhart, is also distinctively Pennsylvania German in design and decoration. Barnhart was a Frederick County blacksmith in the late 18th century. The strap hinges inside the lid have scrolled work and polished plaques containing engraved lettering, "DAVID BH" and "SALOME LM," and the date "1787." This greatly adds to the visual appeal of the chest. In fact, the cost of the hardware may have equaled that of the chest. Somewhat surprisingly, given the distance from the heart of the Pennsylvania German culture, the hardware on the Lehman chest is considered by Pennsylvania German scholars to be the most skillfully decorated example that survives on a chest of this type.

By the 1830s, acculturation was rapidly becoming predominant throughout Carroll County. A majority of objects can no longer be classified by their English or German origins but instead are American. Some aspects of the distinctive Pennsylvania German culture, however, were still in evidence in rural towns until the turn of the twentieth century. Two world wars in this century created anti-German sentiments and contributed to the abandonment of distinctively German ways. In more recent years suburbanization and mass media have led to an homogenized American society with little collective memory of the diverse contributions of cultural groups such as the Pennsylvania Germans.

No Photo Available

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Photo Captions:

This chest over drawers was made for Salome Lehman in 1787. This furniture form was favored by the Pennsylvania Germans who settled the northern portions of Carroll County.

This hinge is attributed to blacksmith David Barnhart who worked in Frederick County in the late 18th century. It is considered the most skillfully decorated example that survives on a chest of this type.