

The Reproduction of an
1803 Pennsylvania German
Dower Chest in
Honor of my Mother

Alan Kaylor Cline



I selected a German-American style dower chest as my first ambitious woodworking project – prior to this I had built a workbench, some outdoor furniture, and a number of drapery cornices. About dower chests, John G. Shea says:

Referred to by the Pennsylvania Dutch as *Ausschteier Kischt*, the dower chest has come to be known and loved as the most representative article of Pennsylvania Dutch furniture. According to Germanic custom, it was built specifically for a girl and was given to her when she reached the age of eight or ten. Her name and usually the date of presentation was painted on the chest when the gift was made. Into the chest went all the things the girl made, was given, or purchased in anticipation of her marriage. On her wedding day, her fully packed dower chest was proudly carried to the “wedding wagon” and was driven to her new home.

Many dower chests have survived and their variety of designs, dimensions and construction (not to mention the wide diversification of their painted decorations) would indicate that no craftsman copied the designs of another. However, he may have made duplicate copies of his own work.

It is possible to recognize regional patterns in the design of chests and thus to categorize them as having been made, or painted, in certain regions of the state by recognized craftsmen. Thus, the work of Christian Seizer, which first appeared in Lebanon County around the middle of the 18th century, has been widely recognized, and several of his chests are displayed in museums of Pennsylvania.

A single physical characteristic is the basis for distinguishing the different designs of all dower chests: some are drawerless, whereas others are made with bottom drawers.

The National Gallery of Art on their web site adds:

Dower chests were a necessary item for every Pennsylvania German girl preparing for marriage. They were used to store the linens, needlework, and household accessories that she collected over the years. Like other large pieces of furniture, dower chests were made by the village carpenter or by the farmer himself, but they were painted by an itinerant decorator. Usually three to four feet long, they were placed in the bedroom or parlor. Dower chests were decorated with traditional symbols: flowers, birds, hearts, scrolls, and geometrical designs.

In his book, Shea has photographs of sixteen dower chests and seven pages of instructions for building a reproduction of a 1784 chest from Berks County, Pennsylvania. That chest has a rudimentary, drawerless design. Since I was seeking something more ambitious I used as my model a chest in his book from the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Figure 1). This chest is also from Berks County. The museum description reads:

Chest over Drawers

Artist/maker unknown

American, Pennsylvania German, Neoclassical, 1803

Poplar, white pine, painted decoration; brass, iron

30 3/4 x 54 1/4 x 22 3/8 inches (78.1 x 137.8 x 56.8 cm)

Made in: Berks County, Pennsylvania, United States

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Arthur Sussel, 1945

Plank construction with dovetail joints. Lid has three open tenons through overhung edge molding at each end joined in rabbet at front and pegged. Interior till on left has molded edge on lid and bottom. Straight bracket feet braced with carved and fitted tapering diagonal pieces nailed to bottom board. Drawers have molded edges overlapping case, dovetails at four corners individually wedged with a fine cut of poplar. Wrought iron strap hinges on back with spiky tulip terminals inside on lid. Brass handles and escutcheon. Red orange ground faded to tan. Brown mottling or graining, and fans made with putty roll. Three front panels: two on lid have white ground with symmetrical flower design in black, red, yellow, and green.



Figure 1: Chest over Drawers, Artist/maker unknown, Berks County, Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Museum of Art: Gift of Arthur Sussel, 1945

Although Shea did not present plans for building this chest, he did offer measurements (Figure 2) and, although I had never cut a dovetail or made a drawer in my life, I decided I could work simply from the measurements.

It seemed common for dower chests to be constructed for inexpensive wood such as pine or poplar and then have the exteriors painted. The painting sometimes simulated more expensive wood. Always the painting included traditional German-American symbols such as hearts and flowers. Regarding this sort of ornamentation the National Gallery web site has this to say:

Pennsylvania German art is a distinctive folk style transplanted by European immigrants who settled in southeastern Pennsylvania. Characterized by the bold use of color and motifs that emphasize birds, flowers, and elaborate decoration, Pennsylvania German art was nurtured on the isolated farms where those settlers made their homes. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, immigrants from Switzerland, the Palatinate, and the Upper Rhine regions of Germany arrived in Pennsylvania. For the most part, they were peasants, small farmers, and artisans. The Pennsylvania Germans were industrious people; they cleared the heavily wooded lands and tilled the soil to establish a new life in America. Agriculture was the major industry,

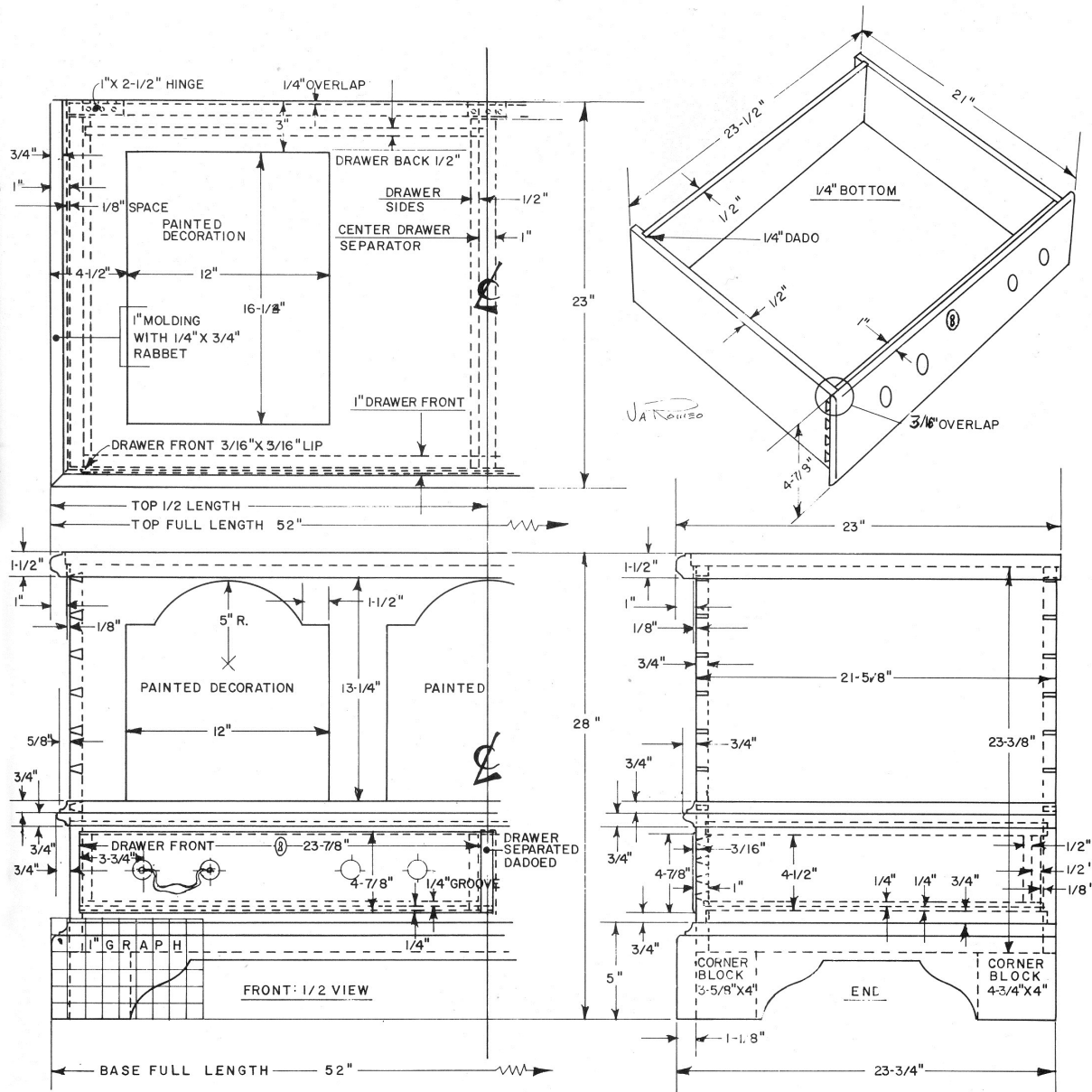


Figure 2: Shea's measurements of the 1803 Philadelphia Museum of Art dower chest

but as society became more firmly rooted, farmer-craftsmen turned some of their energies to producing and decorating the many articles of daily life. By isolating themselves from outside influences, the Pennsylvania Germans were not assimilated into the mainstream of American culture until this century. Thus, for over two hundred years, Pennsylvania German art flourished to become an important element of the American folk art tradition.

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In spite of the painted wood tradition, I choose to use higher quality wood and ornament the piece with carving, inlay, and a minor amount of painting. I choose Honduran mahogany although I intended to avoid the common deep red staining of mahogany in favor of a medium golden brown. The project thus began in February, 2005 with the purchase of seven rough boards. (I believe dower chests were originally made with six boards – in fact, they were examples of chests called “six-board chests” – but these must either have used larger boards or had no drawers.) As purchased, the boards had one finished edge – I rip cut the other edge and planed them to thickness. Except for two pieces on the sides and the two drawer fronts, all pieces required edge joints of two boards except the top that required three. I used biscuit joints – a bow to modern carpentry technique over the eighteenth century ones. Because of the size of the boards I had, the overall dimensions of my chest were reduced by several inches from those of the original. My chest became 27 1/4 3/4 inches high by 50 1/4 inches wide by 21 3/4 inches deep - the original is 30 3/4 inches high by 54 1/4 inches wide by 22 3/8 inches deep.

With the major pieces cut, I began the decoration. The outside of the cover has a leaf design rendered in German inlay (Figure 3). About this process Nick Engler says:

Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century country crafts-men simulated classical ivory inlays with sulphur. They cut decorative mortises and grooves, heated sulphur powder until it liquified, then poured the molten sulphur into the recesses. After the sulphur cooled, they sanded it flush with the wood surface. The result was a cream-colored inlay that looked a good deal like ivory.

Inside the leaf design is a pair interlocked rings of inlaid boxwood (Figure 4). I felt using a “double wedding ring” design was consistent with the tradition of the dower chest. The source of the boxwood was a bush planted by my grandfather at the cemetery in Mount Crawford, Virginia. That bush had been planted from a sprig from the family’s “champion boxwood” (having been named “The Largest Boxwood in Virginia” in the *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* newspaper feature in the late 1930s) at the home in Pleasant Valley, Virginia. The inside on the cover has a carving of a six-petaled flower with leaves (Figure 5).

The sides of the chest have a heart design rendered in German inlay (Figure 6).



Figure 3: Chest cover showing leaf design rendered in German inlay.



Figure 4: Detail of double wedding ring boxwood inlay.



Figure 5: Six-petaled flower and leaf design carving on inside of cover.