

KNIFE BOXES AND THEIR AMERICAN CABINETMAKERS

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Ashley, Nate, my parents, and Julie.

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I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have helped make this thesis possible. To Mom, Dad, Ashley, Nate, Jane, Tori, and Marine for listening to my endless talks about where my research was headed and encouraging me every step of the way. To my fellow graduate students who also supported me and let me know about every knife box they encountered through their own studies and travels. To all of the curators and museum professionals who took time out of their day to share their knowledge with me. Lastly to Oscar Fitzgerald, my advisor, thank you for your support, advice, and encouragement throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

KNIFE BOXES AND THEIR AMERICAN CABINETMAKERS

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This thesis describes the history, use, and making of knife boxes in the United States. It brings to light the contribution of American cabinetmakers to the creation of these objects. English versus American made knife boxes, their construction and design inspiration; the current debates surrounding knife boxes in scholarly works, and individual examples of American knife boxes are all discussed in this thesis. It encourages the study of this neglected area of study and promotes research into other areas of neglected decorative arts scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

Eighteenth and early nineteenth century knife boxes have not been a major focus of decorative arts scholarship and American-made knife boxes even less so. However, these items were important pieces of furniture with both functional and decorative purposes and were used with large popularity during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. They were made of costly materials, safeguarded expensive silverware, and were proudly displayed on the sideboard. This thesis will not only discuss the current state of scholarship of American-made knife boxes but also discuss their history and explain the contribution of American cabinetmakers, all of which has been largely marginalized within decorative arts scholarship. This thesis will create a more comprehensive understanding and timeline of the use and creation of knife boxes in the United States

When looking at major decorative arts scholarship, it is clear that knife boxes have been marginalized and at times blatantly left out. Unlike some furniture forms such as card tables, mirrors, Windsor chairs, etcetera, no books have been exclusively written about knife boxes.¹ Despite being popular objects during the federal period, knife boxes

are completely disregarded in Charles Montgomery's *American Furniture: The Federal Period*.² While discussing the importance of the ownership and display of silverware, Barbara Carson only discusses the sideboard, not knife boxes, in her book *Ambitious Appetites: Dining Behaviors and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington*.³ On some occasions, books focused on the history of silver do include information of knife boxes in relation to silverware such as *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table: 1500-2005* and *An Illustrated Dictionary of Silverware*.⁴ Further, other decorative arts scholarship often placed knife boxes in miscellaneous sections, tacked on at the end of sideboard discussions or grouped with other objects such as cellarets; or knife boxes are discussed on a regional basis, disregarding their presence throughout the United States.⁵

¹ Examples of books dedicated to specific furniture forms include: Nancy Goyne Evans, *Windsor-Chair Making in America: From Craft Shop to Consumer* (UPNE, 2006); Benjamin A. Hewitt, Patricia E. Kane, and Gerald W. R. Ward, *The Work of Many Hands: Card Tables in Federal America, 1790-1820*, First edition (Yale University Press, n.d.). Two articles by Gregor Norman-Wilcox, published in *Magazine Antiques*, entitled "Knife Cases Part 1 & 2" focus exclusively on knife boxes but having been written in 1934 is extremely outdated. His discussion on knife boxes is focused on their English origin and the fundamentals of knife box use. Only one American made knife box is mentioned, and only one American cabinetmaker, John Clark, is mentioned in the article to have made knife boxes. Several pages of Hornor's *Blue Book of Philadelphia Furniture* is dedicated to knife boxes, and is one of the most extensive discussions on the topic, however, without footnotes it is impossible to support his statements.

² Charles Montgomery, *American Furniture: The Federal Period 1788-1825* (New York: Viking, 1966). A must read for anyone interested in Federal furniture, this book does not discuss knife boxes. Although his book focuses on the furniture collection of Winterthur, which at the time did not have American-made knife boxes, it would have been possible to address knife boxes, at least as a form of furniture that was particularly popular during this time period. However, considering how vast the book is, it is understandable that there was simply not enough space to cover this particular topic.

³ Barbara G. Carson and Kym S. Rice, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington* (Washington D.C.: AIA Press, 1990). This book and Montgomery's book on Federal furniture are merely examples of this trend and are certainly not the only books not to discuss knife boxes.

⁴ Sarah D. Coffin et al., *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table 1500-2005* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, 2006), 45 and 85; Harold Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Silverware: 2373 Entries Relating to British and North American Wares, Decorative Techniques and Styles, and Leading Des* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 189.

Coupled with the fact that so many knife boxes were imported from England, American knife boxes have been largely dismissed within the discussion of American furniture.⁶

Although it is good that knife boxes have been included within decorative arts scholarship, the information is far from comprehensive. The lack of discussion of knife boxes made throughout the United States is therefore a needed area of study.

The scholarship that does discuss the history of knife boxes is often contradictory or not fully explained. For example, scholarship is unclear concerning if specialists were needed to make knife boxes in America. Information justifying one argument or the other is vague with no details on why knife boxes required a specialist or why American cabinetmakers did not possess the proper skills. The construction of knife boxes, the various forms of knife boxes, how the silverware was kept in the knife boxes, and how knife boxes in different collections connect to each other, are often not discussed so this thesis will address these concerns and provide more insight into these claims.

The goal of this thesis is not only to present a comprehensive study of American-made knife boxes and their use in the United States, but to specifically bring to light the contribution of American cabinetmakers in the making of knife boxes. By focusing on why knife boxes were used, who made them, and how they compare to English examples,

⁵ E. Milby Burton, *Charleston Furniture: 1700-1825* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1955); Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, *Southern Furniture 1680-1830* (Harry N. Abrams, 1997); William Macpherson Hornor, *Blue Book, Philadelphia Furniture: William Penn to George Washington, with Special Reference to the Philadelphia-Chippendale School* (PA: Hornor, 1935); Allison Boor et al., *Philadelphia Empire Furniture* (Pennsylvania West Chester: Boor Management LLC, 2006); Gregory R. Weidman, *Furniture in Maryland 1740-1940* (Maryland: Maryland Historical Society, 1984).

⁶ Walpole Society (U.S.), *The Arts & Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina ...: 1786-1800* (Topsfield, Mass.: The Walpole Society, 1933). *The Arts & Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina* lists newspaper advertisements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century which effectively demonstrates how many silversmiths and cabinetmakers were importing English knife boxes to be sold in the United States.

this study will elevate their status as important pieces of American decorative arts. To date, this study has found as many as twenty-four American cabinetmakers who made knife boxes all along the east coast, notably in the major style centers of the eighteenth century but also in more rural areas of Massachusetts, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Maine, Tennessee, and in cities such as Annapolis, Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Baltimore.⁷ Twenty-nine American-made knife boxes have been located and studied for this thesis and demonstrate the ingenuity of American cabinetmakers as well as the English tradition these objects embody.⁸ This study shows that the production of knife boxes is larger than previous thought. The silversmith industry, English dining practices and traditions, and the opportunity to compete with British trade prompted American cabinetmakers to construct these refined dining pieces. By studying and comparing American-made knife boxes side by side, one can see the variety of design of American-made knife boxes and the intricate details of these objects. Despite the prolific importation of these objects, studying their American counterparts reveals American cabinetmakers' full contribution to the craft. Knife boxes are also objects that bring together two types of decorative arts, silverware and furniture. This sort of connection and understanding should be encouraged more often within decorative arts scholarship.

⁷ Hornor's *Blue Book of Philadelphia Furniture*, references four additional Philadelphia cabinetmakers who made knife boxes who are not included in this study: David Evans, Thomas Tufft, Josiah Elfreth, Daniel Trotter, 261. He also suggests that there are more than these four but does not name them. These cabinetmakers were not included in this study as he does not give sources for his findings, and sources could not be found to back up his statements during this study.

⁸ I say twenty-nine knife boxes but I have counted sets of knife boxes (whether a set of two or three) as a singular knife box. Sets of knife boxes usually are very similar, if not the identical, in terms of construction and design. Attribution between American and English knife boxes is a fine line and very hard to establish. Numbers are based on current information that could change in the future. The goal of this thesis is not to determine whether knife boxes are American or not, but to rely on current scholarship.

CHAPTER ONE: KNIFE BOX HISTORY OVERVIEW

Knife boxes, or knife cases as they were also referred to in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, were owned by wealthy Americans and were often imported from England.⁹ They were used for the display and storage of silverware and were placed on the sideboard along with decanters and wine coolers.¹⁰ Despite the name, knife boxes had room for different types of silverware including spoons and forks and assisted in the elaborate elite dining of the era (Fig. 1).¹¹ This chapter will give an introduction to the basic forms of knife boxes, their history and use from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century in the United States.

⁹Weidman, *Furniture in Maryland 1740-1940*, 408; “Baltimore Ovoid Knife Box,” *Colonial Williamsburg Online Collections*, accessed November 28, 2013, <http://emuseum.history.org/view/objects/asitem/search@/1/title-desc?t:state=flow=48ead8d3-bc5e-42df-b4a5-45a52f48f497>; Helen Comstock, *American Furniture* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1966), 339; Nancy Goynes Evans, “The Written Evidence of Furniture Repairs and Alterations: How Original Is ‘All Original?’,” *Chipstone*, accessed November 21, 2013, <http://www.chipstone.org/publications/2008AF/Evans/EvansTextFile.html>; Elizabeth A. Fleming, “Stapls for Genteel Living: The Importation of London Household Furnishings into Charleston during the 1780s,” *Chipstone*, 1997, <http://www.chipstone.org/publications/1997AF/Fleming/Flemingindex97.html>; Lydia Barrett Blackmore, “Just Imported and to Be Sold: Methods of Acquisitions and Use of Knives, Forks, and Silver Spoons in Eighteenth-Century Virginia” (The College of William and Mary, 2010), 14, <https://digitalarchive.wm.edu/bitstream/handle/10288/1905/BlackmoreLydia2010.pdf?sequence=1>; E. Milby Burton, *Charleston Furniture 1700 - 1825* (READ BOOKS, 2008), 57.

¹⁰J. Michael Flanigan, “Knife Box,” in *American Furniture from the Kaufman Collection* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1986), 224; William Macpherson Honor, *Philadelphia Furniture* (Philadelphia: Highland House Publishers, 1977), 62; Edgar G. Miller, *American Antique Furniture*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966), 566.

¹¹Unknown American, *Knife Box*, Mahogany, circa 1800, Brooklyn Museum of Art, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/11632/Pair_of_Knife_Boxes/set/2130829fc4ac65ae70c9ba31950b91e7.



Figure 1. Pair of knife boxes. Unknown maker. American. ca. 1800. Mahogany and inlay. 14 ¼ x 8 ¼ x 7 ¾ (HxWxD) (inches). Bequest of Samuel E. Haslett. Creative Commons-BY. Brooklyn Museum Photograph. 20.925a-b.

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/11632/Pair_of_Knife_Boxes/set/2130829fc4ac65ae70c9ba31950b91e7

The term knife box versus knife case is used interchangeably today.¹² In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century both terms were used, however knife case was the more common term. Most of the references to knife cases or knife boxes are not always descriptive so it is hard to say if there was a difference. However, certain trends in use can be noted. For example, in the price books of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century only knife cases and knife trays are listed, not knife boxes.¹³ In Thomas Sheraton's 1803 *Cabinet Dictionary* knife vases and knife trays are referenced but do not have their own section dedicated to them and knife boxes are not referenced at all.¹⁴ Cabinetmakers, however, used both terms. In this study, with the exception of

¹² In this thesis the term “knife box” will be used for consistency, with the exception of discussions on shagreen cases, which are never called shagreen boxes.

¹³ Thomas Sheraton, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972), 89–90; George Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, 3rd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 8; Printed by T. & J. Swords, no 99 Pearl-Street, “The Journeymen Cabinet and Cabinetmakers' New York Book of Prices” (New York, 1796), 70–1, [http://www.evenfallstudios.com/woodworks_library/the_cabinet_makers_london_book_of_prices1803.pdf](http://firstsearch.oclc.org.mutex.gmu.edu/WebZ/FSPage?pagetype=return_frameset:sessionId=fsapp2-58232-hn6ffbia-912t5d:entitypagenum=6:0:entityframedurl=http%3A%2F%2Fopac.newsbank.com%2Fselect%2Fevans%2F30880:entityframedtitle=WorldCat:entityframedtimeout=20:entityopentitle=:entityopenauthor=:entityopenenumber=:; C. Barber, <i>The Cabinet-Makers London Book of Prices, and Designs of Cabinet-Work in Perspective, by the London Society of Cabinet-Makers - the_cabinet_makers_london_book_of_prices1803.pdf</i>, 3rd ed. (London, England, n.d.), 225, <a href=).

¹⁴ Thomas Sheraton, *The Cabinet Dictionary. To Which Is Added a Supplementary Treatise on Geometrical Lines, Perspective, and Painting in General*, 1803, 260.

cabinetmaker John Shaw's inventory, only one or the other term is used within one account.¹⁵ In household inventories the terms knife box and knife case are both used. For instance, in the probate inventories studied by Gunston Hall, both terms are used. However, all descriptions of shagreen knife cases used the word case, never box. Those made out of wood are called both case and box, therefore suggesting they were interchangeable. These two terms could be used in the same inventory as well. For example, in the household inventory of David Finlay of Fairfax County, Virginia, taken on December 16, 1794, two japanned knife boxes are listed as well as a "pair of mahogany cases."¹⁶ The use of the word case instead of box is also more prolific in household inventories.

Generally speaking, based on the Gunston Hall Probate Inventory study, knife cases are usually more expensive than knife boxes, which may have been due to size.¹⁷ For example, silverware, which varied in quantity and quality in different inventories, is often grouped with the price of the container. This makes it more difficult to determine if it is the container or the silverware which is raising the price. Since knife box and knife case are not defined separately in price books, which would offer a standard by which to judge the box or case without silverware content inside, it is hard to distinguish one from the other. Shagreen cases are always more costly because of the use of shagreen. The

¹⁵ William Voss Elder, Lu Bartlett, and Baltimore Museum of Art, *John Shaw, Cabinetmaker of Annapolis* (Baltimore.: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1983), 171.

¹⁶ Besides the materials used, and the fact that the mahogany case is listed to have silverware inside and the japanned knife boxes do not, there is nothing else distinguishing between the two. John Dunlap, Thomas Portor, and Jonah Thompson, "David Finlay Inventory," Inventory (Fairfax, Virginia, January 16, 1794), Gunston Hall Probate Inventory, http://www.gunstonhall.org/library/probate/probate_list.html.

¹⁷ "Gunston Hall's Probate Inventory Database -- Background," accessed March 30, 2011, <http://www.gunstonhall.org/library/probate/index.htm>.

terms box and case therefore, are interchangeable in inventories and although cases tend to be more expensive this may be due to size or the silverware contained within them.¹⁸



Figure 2. Three urn knife boxes. Maker unknown. Charleston, South Carolina. 1800-1820. Mahogany with satinwood, ebony, rosewood, and curly mahogany inlay. 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches and 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Mabel Brady Garvin Collection. Yale University Art Gallery. 1930.2089a-c <http://discover.odai.yale.edu/ydc/Record/1747665>

Two types of knife boxes are described in the English design books of Thomas Sheraton and George Hepplewhite. One with a box-like shape with sloping lid and bombe front, and an urn or vase form (Fig. 1-2).¹⁹ Although these were the standard forms for knife boxes, the work of American cabinetmakers will demonstrate that in addition to these two forms a variety of other forms of knife boxes were made as well. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, American-made knife boxes often came in unique forms: elliptical, flat rectangular box-shaped, and a fluted quasi-urn shape. In her 1815 letter describing the home of a Mr. Gibbs in Maryland, Harriott Pinckney Horry stated

¹⁸ Hornor suggests in *The Blue Book of Philadelphia Furniture*, 261 that knife boxes and knife cases have different definitions, however without sources listed, 261. He suggests that knife boxes were an “oblong tray with molded or scalloped sides and central partition’s” (referred to in this thesis as knife trays), and knife cases were more elaborate in their construction, namely with the sloping lid of urn form, 261.

¹⁹ Sheraton, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Drawing Book*, 89-90; Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Guide*, 38-39.

that he owned “square knife cases.”²⁰ They are not further described, which makes it impossible to completely visualize them, and they are not given an American or English attribution. Regardless of origin, square knife boxes would be a shape that has yet to have surviving examples. Depending on their size, they could hold a wide range of utensils. *The Cabinet Makers London Book of Prices* printed in 1793 stated that the standard knife box was large enough for three dozen knives, forks, or spoons and for an extra fee, could be adjusted to hold other kinds of utensils, such as carving knives if necessary.²¹

The interior of knife boxes generally adhered to a typical way of being configured and displayed. The spoons were kept turn upwards, whereas knives and forks had their handles displayed up.²² Knives and forks were also generally kept pointed down because of how sharp they were.²³ Knife boxes were also distinguished by having larger knife boxes for dinner utensils and a smaller one for desert utensils.²⁴ George Hepplewhite in his 1788 design book, *The Cabinetmaker and Upholsters Guide*, suggested that knife boxes should be placed on pedestals or on the sideboard, a piece of furniture that he considered necessary for any dining room.²⁵

²⁰ Harriott Pinckney Horry, “Harriott Pinckney Horry, 1815 Journal, 9 June 1815,” Text, *urn:isbn:978-0-81-393251-4*, (June 9, 1815), <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu.mutex.gmu.edu/PinckneyHorry/elp-details.xqy?letter=/PinckneyHorry/ELP1085.xml&q=knife%20case>.

²¹ Ronald L. Hurst and Jonathan Prown, *Southern Furniture 1680-1830: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 609.

²² Ralph Edwards, *The Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture: From the Middle Ages to the Late Georgian Period* (London: Country Life, 1969), 332.

²³ Jennifer Goldsborough, Questions about the relationship between Knife Boxes and Silverware., Email, August 26, 2014.

²⁴ Joseph Aronson, *The Encyclopedia of Furniture*, Third Edition (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), 279.

²⁵ Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, 8.

Knife boxes were usually made out of expensive materials such as mahogany or shagreen, often had intricate inlay, and could have silver hardware.²⁶ Early knife boxes were often made with a shagreen covering, a type of untanned leather often shark or fish skin (Fig. 3). The texture of the shagreen for knife boxes was created by pressing small seeds into skins which would leave an imprint.²⁷ Afterwards the skins would be shaved then soaked in water and finally dyed. Typically they were dyed black or green.²⁸ Later, these surfaces were polished.²⁹ Shagreen was used as an expensive decorative covering for various expensive and highly valued materials, usually imported, and often covered, in the case of furniture, the woods that would have been undesirable for display.³⁰



Figure 3. Knife boxes. Unknown maker. Europe. 1740-1770. Wood; Shagreen; Silver; fabric; Paper. 5.375 (H) , 2.687 (W) , 2 (D) inches. Gift of Henry Francis du Pont. Winterthur Collection. 1959.0996 A. <http://bit.ly/1o80fbF>

²⁶ Flanigan, “Knife Box,” 224.

²⁷ Mathieu Willemens, “Shagreen in Western Europe: Its Use and Manufacture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Apollo: The International Magazine of Arts*, 1997, 35.

²⁸ Edwards, *The Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture*, 467.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*; Mathieu Willemens, “Shagreen in Western Europe: Its Use and Manufacture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Apollo: The International Magazine of Arts*, 1997, 36–7; Comstock, *American Furniture* (NY: Bonanza Books, 1966), 339.

If you could afford it, the use of sharkskin was typical of carrying flatware.³¹ The earliest known example of this practice was in Holland, circa 1660. When the use of shagreen traveled to England and France in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, cutlery cases were also made of shagreen.³² Once larger quantities of shagreen were available, it seemed appropriate to continue using the same materials for silverware storage in the form of knife boxes. Shagreen was used to cover small desks, boxes and outer cases of valuable objects such as knife boxes, tea caddies, jewelry, and instrument cases.³³ For example, knife cases that used shagreen were often made entirely of secondary woods and then covered with shagreen.³⁴ Shagreen cases were also imported which would add to the expense.³⁵ Shagreen knife cases, like their wooden counterparts, would have been displayed as well.³⁶ If shagreen was too expensive, black paper, textured to look like shagreen, was sometimes used to create a similar, but cheaper, appearance.³⁷ However, by the late eighteenth century there is a shift from shagreen to the use of expensive wood, particularly mahogany, another material very much suitable to display luxury.

³¹ Coffin, Sara, Ellen Lupton, Darra Goldstein, Barbara Bloemick, Suzanne Von Drachenfels, Philippa Galinville, Caroline Young, Jennifer Goldsborough, *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table 1500-2005* (NY: Cooper Hewitt, 2006), 22.

³² England started to use shagreen in the middle of the seventeenth century and France started to use it in the 1730s, Willemens, "Shagreen in Western Europe: Its Use and Manufacture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 36–7.

³³ Edwards, *The Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture*, 467; Shayne Rivers and Nick Umney, *Conservation of Furniture* (Routledge, 2007), 739.

³⁴ Hurst and Prown, *Southern Furniture 1680-1830: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, 609.

³⁵ Comstock, *American Furniture*, 339.

³⁶ Willemens, "Shagreen in Western Europe: Its Use and Manufacture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 36.

³⁷ "Historic Deerfield English Knife Box," *Collections Database: Five College and Historic Deerfield Museum Consortium*, accessed October 21, 2014, http://museums.fivecolleges.edu/detail.php?museum=hd&t=objects&type=ext&f=&s=&record=0&name_title=cutlery%25&op-earliest_year=%3E%3D&op-latest_year=%3C%3D.

Evidence of shagreen used on knife cases exists during the eighteenth century and as late as 1788 in America. For example, one 1788 New York advertisement referred to knife boxes as “black [shagreen] table cases, with knives, forks and spoons.”³⁸ Although it is uncertain when or where they were made, “2 Chagreen [sic] knife Cases wt. 12 K: & F. in each” were listed in the 1759 inventory taken of Martha Custis’s estate before her marriage to George Washington.³⁹ An example of a cabinetmaker who made shagreen and mahogany knife boxes was John Clark in New York City in the late 1760s and early 1770s, and is currently the only American shagreen knife case maker located.⁴⁰ Although John Clark has been identified as a shagreen case maker in America, American examples of shagreen knife cases are rare, and this study did not locate any surviving examples.⁴¹

Increasingly throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, wood, either solid or as a veneer, was used for knife boxes and they were not covered with any other material. The majority of knife boxes in the United States were made of mahogany, or mahogany veneer, which was generally more expensive than using local woods, but examples of knife boxes, included those made out of cherry, maple, rosewood, satinwood, poplar, yellow pine, and other woods.⁴² One account book priced mahogany

³⁸ Comstock, *American Furniture*, 339.

³⁹ “III-A-2. Account of Items in the Estate Used by Martha Custis, 1759,” *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, Ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008., accessed November 25, 2013, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-02-06-02-0164-0007>.

⁴⁰ Mary-Alice Rogers, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 313.

⁴¹ Comstock, *American Furniture*, fig. 339.

⁴² A few examples: Unknown - Philadelphia, *Knife Urn*, Maple and Mahogany, 1800 1790, http://honoluluuseum.org/art/5378-urn-shaped-knife-casea_z; Johnson, *Pair of Federal Eagle-Inlaid Knife Boxes*; Unknown Maker most likely Philadelphia maker, *Knife Box, One of a Pair*; “Baltimore Ovoid Knife Box”; “Knife Box, One of a Pair.”

at least one-third more than the price of furniture made out of walnut.⁴³ Many knife boxes are made out of solid wood, but many had a veneered surface of mahogany while the bodies of the knife boxes were made out of secondary wood so that only the expensive material would be visible. Mahogany, introduced in America around 1720, was favored for its reflective quality, its pronounced grain pattern, and the modernity of the material in the eighteenth century.⁴⁴ Like the silverware inside, the mahogany knife boxes and sideboard would have been polished as well. The popularity of all wooden knife boxes would increase throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century.⁴⁵

Other materials were used in the creation of knife boxes as well. Cabinetmaker George Hepplewhite suggested in his design book that knife boxes could be made of copper or the wood could have been japanned or painted, although these types are rarer compared to knife boxes made out of wood or with shagreen veneer.⁴⁶ Other materials often enhanced the object. For example, some knife boxes were stained.⁴⁷ Other knife boxes were lined with fabric. This fabric is usually a baize plain weave which is “loosely woven wool with a napped or brushed finish.”⁴⁸ A knife box bought by the Galloway

⁴³ Martin Eli Weil, “A Cabinetmaker’s Price Book,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 13 (January 1, 1979): 187.

⁴⁴ Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 41.

⁴⁵ Burton, *Charleston Furniture 1700 - 1825*, 57.

⁴⁶ No japanned, copper, or painted American examples have been found during this study. Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Guide*, 8.

⁴⁷ “Willis Cowling (1788-1828) Richmond Cabinetmaker,” *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* XXVII, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 51–76; Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, “Cowling, Willis (ID # 7595)” (MESDA Craftsman Database), accessed August 15, 2014, <http://research.oldsalemonline.org/ProficioPublicSearch/ShowImageView.aspx?7548>.

⁴⁸ Lucy Trench, ed., “Plain Weave,” *Materials and Techniques in the Decorative Arts: An Illustrated Dictionary* (London: John Murray (Publishers) Ltd., 2000), 371; Goldsborough, Questions about the relationship between Knife Boxes and Silverware.

family of Maryland in 1768 had a crimson fabric lining, which was not uncommon.⁴⁹ Fabric was usually a deep red or green color. The fabric helped the wood, sometimes already roughly planed, not to splinter or break, which could possibly scratch or otherwise damage the silverware.⁵⁰ It may also have been used to protect the silver from tarnishing from the off gasses of the wood.⁵¹ Only the areas that would be seen, the very tops of the holes, and inside of the lid, were covered with fabric. However, English knife boxes, more so than American ones, show this trend. Sometimes the inside dividers were even covered in a red wash to mimic the outside shell of mahogany.⁵² Tin knife boxes are also listed in the probate inventories of Joseph Galloway of Maryland and Henry Barnes of Charles County, Maryland, in the eighteenth century. No examples of tin knife boxes have been located and therefore could not be studied for this thesis. Given their brief listing, information on where they were made is not provided.⁵³ Although American-made knife boxes could vary in materials and opulence, knife boxes generally were seen as valuable and expensive objects that displayed the wealth of the owner and were seen as appropriate storage areas for the expensive silverware.

⁴⁹ “Gunston Hall Room Use Study,” accessed March 24, 2011, http://www.gunstonhall.org/mansion/room_use_study/clues.html; Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Silverware*, 189.

⁵⁰ Goldsborough, Questions about the relationship between Knife Boxes and Silverware.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Tara Chicirda, Visit to Colonial Williamsburg, Visit, examination of artifacts, discussion with museum professional, August 1, 2014; Nick Vincent and Moira Gallagher, Visit to Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visit, examination of artifacts, discussion with museum professionals, August 8, 2014.

⁵³ “Joseph Galloway Inventory” (Anne Arundel, Maryland, January 1, 1753), Gunston Hall Probate Inventory, http://www.gunstonhall.org/library/probate/probate_list.html; “Henry Barnes Inventory” (Charles County, Maryland, June 18, 1797), Gunston Hall Probate Inventory, http://www.gunstonhall.org/library/probate/probate_list.html.

Knife box use can be traced back to the late seventeenth century in America and were used into the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ For example, the inventory of Bostonian Antipas Boyes, made in the 1660s, lists “in a case, silver spoone forke & knife, 1 pound.”⁵⁵ In 1671 the item “one case with spoone knife and fork, 7 s” is found in the inventory of Robert Patteshall who was also from Boston. These two examples, however, suggest small individual cases for utensils. No material or further description is mentioned so it is impossible to decipher if they resembled later knife boxes.⁵⁶ In 1692, two cases of knives and a dozen forks are inventoried at fourteen shilling in the estate of Jeremiah Fitch of Boston.⁵⁷ Even if Americans were using individual cases for silverware before 1690, the estate of Jeremiah Fitch demonstrates that at least by 1692 some Americans did have large knife boxes. It is impossible to confirm what earlier knife boxes looked like because no known American knife boxes from the seventeenth century survive. However, the inventories above also do not state the origin of these knife boxes, only where they were at the time of the inventory. Were they made in America or imported, or did immigrants bring them over from England? As far as this study has explored, the earliest reference to an American cabinetmaker making knife boxes is cabinetmaker John Head, one of the earliest, if not the earliest, American cabinetmaker to keep an account book as his account book is the earliest to survive. His records show he made knife boxes as early

⁵⁴ Aronson, *The Encyclopedia of Furniture*, 447; Attributed to David Sackriter, *Knife Box*, Mahogany and white pine, 1810, Philadelphia Museum of Art, [zotero://attachment/752/](https://www.pma.org/attachment/752/).

⁵⁵ Irving Whitall Lyon, *The Colonial Furniture of New England: A Study of the Domestic Furniture in Use in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), 225.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

1724.⁵⁸ However, the earliest surviving knife boxes are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection, dating as early as 1765 or as late as 1795 (Fig. 4).⁵⁹



Figure 4. Knife boxes. Lewis Fueter -Silversmith. Mid-Atlantic. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, white pine, tulip poplar. 1765–95. 14 5/8 x 8 3/4 x 8 7/8 (HxWxD) (Inches). Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1954. Metropolitan Museum of Art. 54.24.1, <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/4624>

Knife boxes gained more popularity in the eighteenth century because many Americans were experiencing an increase in comfort and wealth. In order to display this wealth, Americans participated in elaborate dining and showcased their expensive goods such as silverware and furniture.⁶⁰ To understand why knife boxes were so valued, it is important to understand the use and value of silverware and dining in the early United States. In the eighteenth century knife boxes and silverware were often bought at the

⁵⁸ Jay Stiefel, “Philadelphia Cabinetmaking and Commerce, 1718-1753: The Account Book of John Head, Joiner,” accessed March 8, 2014, <http://www.amphilsoc.org/bulletin/20011/head.htm>.

⁵⁹ “The Metropolitan Museum of Art - Knife Box,” accessed November 4, 2013, [http://metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-](http://metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/4626?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=South+America&what=Mahogany&who=Lewis+Fueter&pos=3)

[collections/4626?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=South+America&what=Mahogany&who=Lewis+Fueter&pos=3](http://metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/4626?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=South+America&what=Mahogany&who=Lewis+Fueter&pos=3).

⁶⁰ Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America*, 3; “Gunston Hall Room Use Study”; Jessica Kross, “Mansions, Men, Women, and the Creation of Multiple Publics in Eighteenth-Century British North America,” *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (December 21, 1999): 395–9, doi:10.1353/jsh.1999.0063; Blackmore, “Just Imported and to Be Sold: Methods of Acquisitions and Use of Knives, Forks, and Silver Spoons in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” 1; Coffin et al., *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table 1500-2005*, 52; Oscar Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture* (Iola, Wisconsin: Krause Publications, 1995), 102.

same time. By the federal period knife boxes were usually placed as pairs on a sideboard. Since knife boxes were used in pairs, the family could typically hold over one hundred pieces of silverware proudly encased in the dining room. Although not every knife box could hold this quantity, the impact these objects played in the dining ritual of early America was significant. Knife boxes allowed for easy transport, if necessary, because they were portable and many had handles on the sides.⁶¹ Having so much silverware was important because guests needed new silverware with each course at dinner.⁶² Owning silverware in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century was a status symbol as the majority of Americans were using bone or wood handles on the utensils. However, handles could be made out of silver, ivory, agate, tortoise shell, glass, japanned work, bone horn and wood which would elevate their status and monetary value.⁶³ The silverware George Washington ordered in the 1760s had Chinese porcelain handles.⁶⁴ If a family in the eighteenth century had silverware, they wanted to use and display it in the area that they were eating in. Important men of the eighteenth century, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, all supplied their homes with knife

⁶¹ Coffin et al., *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table 1500-2005*, 93. According to George Hepplewhite, in *The Cabinetmaker and Upholster's Guide*, also suggested that knife boxes could be used to hold water, which would constitute another practical use.

⁶² Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, "Knife Case," accessed April 5, 2013, <http://emuseum.mountvernon.org/code/emuseum.asp?style=browse¤trecord=1&page=search&profile=objects&searchdesc=knife%20case&quicksearch=knife%20case&sessionid=5BC1272A-18F7-4C5E-98F9-3388288B7BCD&action=quicksearch&style=single¤trecord=1>.

⁶³ Lyon, *The Colonial Furniture of New England*, 226.

⁶⁴ Blackmore, "Just Imported and to Be Sold: Methods of Acquisitions and Use of Knives, Forks, and Silver Spoons in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," 68; Stephen A. McLeod, ed., *Dining with the Washington's: Historic Recipes, Entertainment, and Hospitality from Mount Vernon* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina, 2011), 70. This vertical placement of silverware also made it easy to notice theft. Strump, Faye. *Lemoges Porcelain Boxes: A Complete Guide*. Krause Publications, 2011, 139.

boxes.⁶⁵ At his death, George Washington had eight knife boxes listed in his inventory.⁶⁶

In the *Gunston Hall Room Use Study*, conducted in 2002, the inventories of several Virginia plantation houses were studied and seventy percent of the homes had knife boxes, showing just how important they were.⁶⁷ Since the ability to entertain large numbers of guests was important, it is not surprising that knife boxes appear in large numbers in elite inventories.

Cutlery was clearly important to the elaborate dinners of the elites. It showed that they could afford silverware; that they had the ability to get the “best styles;” and that they could afford to participate in the “elaborate dining ritual” of the late eighteenth century.⁶⁸ An abundance of silverware owned was considered a status symbol and therefore desirable objects.⁶⁹ Knife boxes were often left open when guests visited to display the silverware’s handles which could be made out of precious materials as mentioned previously since, with the exception of spoons, silverware was stored handles up.⁷⁰ Besides allowing dining with cutlery to be possible, being able to entertain so

⁶⁵ Richard Washington, “Invoice from Richard Washington, 20 August 1757,” *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, August 20, 1757, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu.mutex.gmu.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=GEWN-search-2-1&expandNote=on#GEWN-02-04-02-0244-fn-0019-ptr>; Dolley Payne Todd Madison, “Inventory of Effects at Montpelier, 1 July 1836,” Text, *urn:isbn:978-0-8139-2291-1*, (July 1, 1836), <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu.mutex.gmu.edu/dmde/dolley-details.xqy?letter=/dmde/DPM3019.xml&q=knife%20case>; Damon Lee Fowler, ed., *Dining at Monticello: In Good Taste and Abundance* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., 2005), 74.

⁶⁶ Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, “Knife Case.”

⁶⁷ “Gunston Hall Room Use Study.”

⁶⁸ Blackmore, “Just Imported and to Be Sold: Methods of Acquisitions and Use of Knives, Forks, and Silver Spoons in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” 1.

⁶⁹ John Bedell, “Archaeology and Probate Inventories in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Life,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 2 (October 1, 2000): 223–45, doi:10.1162/002219500551532; “Gunston Hall Room Use Study.”

lavishly was seen as a way to show that a family belonged in the elite strata of society.⁷¹ Multi-course meals were a way of the elite distinguishing themselves from the poor.⁷² In 1839, Robert Roberts, a servant of Nathan Appleton and then Christopher Gore in Boston, published a book, most likely based on his own experiences, detailing how servants of a well-to-do family should take care of furniture. This included how to clean the furniture but also how to set up a sideboard and table, and he explained how dinner should be conducted.⁷³ He stated that there were several courses for one meal and each one needed the appropriate silverware, laid out by servants, which was dictated by what was being eaten.⁷⁴ For example, he stated when setting out your sideboard:

you must study neatness, convenience, and taste; as you just think that ladies and gentlemen that have splendid and costly articles, wish to have them seen and set out to the best advantage... to strike the eye of every person who enters the room, with pleasing sensation of elegance.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Blackmore, "Just Imported and to Be Sold: Methods of Acquisitions and Use of Knives, Forks, and Silver Spoons in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," 68; McLeod, *Dining with the Washingtons: Historic Recipes, Entertainment, and Hospitality from Mount Vernon*, 70; Edwards, *The Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture*, 332. This vertical placement of silverware also made it easy to notice theft. Strump, Faye. *Lemoges Porcelain Boxes: A Complete Guide*. Krause Publications, 2011, 139.

⁷¹ Susan Borchardt et al., "Gunston Hall Room Use Study - Food Service," 2002, http://www.gunstonhall.org/mansion/room_use_study/service.html.

⁷² Blackmore, "Just Imported and to Be Sold: Methods of Acquisitions and Use of Knives, Forks, and Silver Spoons in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," 39.

⁷³ Roberts Robert, *The House Servants Directory* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.mutex.gmu.edu/ehost/detail?sid=214a1eb8-b349-4831-9ceb-497dd8e42c20%40sessionmgr4001&vid=1&hid=4205&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZwhvc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=nlebk&AN=24517>.

⁷⁴ Roberts Robert, *The House Servants Directory* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.mutex.gmu.edu/ehost/detail?sid=214a1eb8-b349-4831-9ceb-497dd8e42c20%40sessionmgr4001&vid=1&hid=4205&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZwhvc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=nlebk&AN=24517>.

⁷⁵ Roberts Robert, *The House Servants Directory* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.mutex.gmu.edu/ehost/detail?sid=214a1eb8-b349-4831-9ceb-497dd8e42c20%40sessionmgr4001&vid=1&hid=4205&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZwhvc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=nlebk&AN=24517>.

When setting the table, Roberts discussed how to meticulously place the forks, knives and spoons to look orderly. He also gave the following advice: when clearing the table, silverware should not be cleared from the table when they were sitting on the plates as this could cause them to fall, accidentally hurting the person when removing the items from the table. If it did fall on the floor, it would become dirty, and consequentially displease the lady of the house demonstrating the amount of care and value the owners placed on their silverware.⁷⁶ Although Roberts does not discuss knife boxes, only knife trays, these ideas would have certainly applied when knife boxes were used.

Not all knife boxes were kept in dining areas of a home. Until the federal period, rooms were not usually set aside for dining exclusively. All rooms in the house had multiple purposes. The rise of the dining room corresponded to the rise of the use of sideboards and knife boxes.⁷⁷ However, there is evidence of knife boxes being use in rooms that were less typical for formal dining, such as the drawing room and entry hall. For example, the painting of *John Middleton with his Family in the Drawing Room*, circa 1795 by Philip Reinagle displayed a single slant top knife box, with the swelling bombe front, sitting on the pier table along with decanters and glasses (Fig. 5.)⁷⁸ This silver escutcheon, handle, and perhaps a silver foot are visible; however, the lid is shut. Its placement, directly on a table behind one of the daughter's heads, is impossible to miss.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁷ Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, 102.

⁷⁸ Charles Saumarez Smith, *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1993), 358–9. I would like to thank Colonial Williamsburg Curator Tara Chicarda for bringing this painting and publication to my attention.



Figure 5. *John Middleton with his Family in the Drawing Room, Detail*. Circa 1795. Philip Reinagle. *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England*, 358–9.

A scene in a drawing room painted in 1778 by Isaac Taylor also depicts a single open knife box (Fig. 6).⁷⁹ Taylor was a silversmith and even created a few plates for Chippendale's *Director*, so he was clearly aware of the importance of furnishings.⁸⁰ These paintings raise a few questions. How common was the practice of keeping knife boxes in the drawing room? Did the family normally keep their knife box in the drawing room or did they want to simply include the knife box in their family portrait so that everyone knew that they owned silverware? Was this a practice common in America as well as in England? Rooms were usually multifunctional in the eighteenth century so it is not surprising to see a knife box in an area they might entertain in. This painting demonstrates that knife boxes did not always appear in the dining room, even after the advent of dining rooms. Although an English interior, it is not far-fetched to believe that Americans may also have kept knife boxes in their drawing rooms or parlors as well.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 288.

⁸⁰ Ibid.



Figure 6 *A scene in a dining room, 1778*, Detail. Isaac Taylor. *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England*, 288.

The Dining room at Kedleston, painted in 1762 by Robert Adam, also has knife boxes (Fig. 7).⁸¹ On the sideboard are eight slant front knife boxes: four are front and center and two on each side facing in. The depiction of knife boxes is not prolific in art of the eighteenth century and therefore these provide interesting and rare examples.⁸² However, knife boxes in paintings and engravings suggest their overall importance and their use amongst the wealthy, and demonstrate that they were not always kept in the dining room. The inventory of George Read II's estate inventory in Delaware taken in the 1830s lists a box of silver in the entry.⁸³ Richard Chew's estate inventory taken in 1796 listed two knife boxes in the hall.⁸⁴ Knife boxes were in some capacity used in drawing rooms and entryways. Unfortunately, there are too few examples to conclusively state that knife boxes were often used in parlors and entryways or if they were used in the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸² Of course many paintings and engravings of the eighteenth century depict urns on tables, mantelpieces and sideboards but it is often impossible to tell if these are urn shaped knife boxes or ceramic urns.

⁸³ Michele Anstine, "Knife Boxes at the Read House," September 16, 2014.

⁸⁴ "Richard Chew Inventory" (Anne Arundel, Maryland, October 30, 1769), Gunston Hall Probate Inventory, http://www.gunstonhall.org/library/probate/probate_list.html.

same way as when used in the dining room, however the fact that knife boxes appear in parlors and entryways in these paintings suggest that it was at least fairly common.



Figure 7. *The Dining room at Kedleston*, detail. Painted in 1762 by Robert Adam, *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England*, page 218. ©National Trust Images/John Hammond.

In the late seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries knife boxes were important household objects of the American elite. Knife boxes were used to safeguard any silverware a person owned. They were also used to display a person's wealth and ability to dine and entertain guests lavishly. They were made in various forms with a variety of materials based on consumer demand. Knife boxes, however, did not stay in fashion for long, and their popularity would wane in the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike its companion, the sideboard, knife boxes would not be used heavily again. The nineteenth century was an era of new silver technology that allowed for a proliferation of new silverware types and forms for every aspect of dining: pickle forks, pickle knives, salt spoons, mustard spoons, platter spoon, fish knives, and many other types of specialized utensils.⁸⁵ In 1800, less than one percent would have been able to own even

⁸⁵ Noel D. Turner, *American Silver Flatware 1837-1910* (San Diego and London: A.S Barnes & Company, Inc. and the Tantivy Press, 1972), 176.

one silver spoon. However, more silverware would become available in the nineteenth century, not to just the elite, but to the middle class as well. This was due to finding silver deposits in the west, new technology also made the process easier, and there was a decline in cost of silver, allowing more people to own silverware.⁸⁶ Despite the decreased value of silverware, formal dining as well as having a complete service of silverware persisted. However, knife boxes did not remain the standard storage for silverware since there were too many pieces to fit into knife boxes of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁸⁷

Knife trays were also used and ultimately replaced knife boxes in the nineteenth century. Although these objects could have been used for display, as many were quite ornate and most made out of mahogany or walnut, they also assisted in gathering silverware off the dining room table after each course. Robert in his 1829 book, *The House Servants Directory*, discussed how knife trays were used specifically for gathering up the silverware after each course.⁸⁸ Although Roberts did not discuss their appearance, surviving examples demonstrate that knife trays could be made very elaborately as well.⁸⁹ Unlike the knife box, knife trays do not have individual dividers for each utensil. In Harriet and Catherine Beecher's 1869 *American Woman's Home*, only knife trays are mentioned showing their continued use in clearing the table.⁹⁰ While this study focuses

⁸⁶ Coffin et al., *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table 1500-2005*, 176–8.

⁸⁷ Turner, *American Silver Flatware 1837-1910*, 208.

⁸⁸ Robert, *The House Servants Directory*, 46.

⁸⁹ Several elaborate scrimshaw examples of knife trays at the New Bedford Whaling Museum survive today, however simpler ones were made as well.⁸⁹ The examples in the New Bedford Whaling Museum collection are made out of wood and inlaid with ivory and some were even lined with fabric.

on knife boxes, knife trays existed, and had a similar purpose as knife boxes and eventually replaced knife boxes. It was the silverware itself, not a box or tray, which took center stage in the mid to late nineteenth century.

Although popular during the early nineteenth century, knife boxes were barely used in the twentieth century because they would not have been suitable for the twentieth century dining room. The status of the dining room, silverware, and formal dining quickly declined, making the knife box an unlikely purchase for the twentieth century consumer. A major reason for this was that more informality was advocated in the twentieth century. Encouraging informality, Sidney More wrote in *Household Discoveries: An Encyclopedia of Practical Recipes and Processes*, published in 1909, that “guests will receive a far more pleasanter impression from the easy and graceful atmosphere imparted to a room by daily use, than from the stiff and formal restraints imposed by the old-fashioned parlor.”⁹¹ Although she specifically addresses a formal parlor, this viewpoint can be applied to dining rooms. Simple meals also became standard by the 1920s.⁹² In their 1950 *Guide to Easier Living*, Mary and Russel Wright proclaimed that the dining room was vanishing in the twentieth century and encouraged dining in the kitchen or a small eating area off of the kitchen area. Demonstrating how informal, dining became they suggested that entertaining should be conducted in the living room, which

⁹⁰ Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *American Woman's Home: Or, Principles of Domestic Science; Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, and Christian Homes*, ed. Nicole Tonkovich (Hartford, CT: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 36, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/6598>. Knife boxes made in the 1860s are not found, demonstrating how knife trays replaced knife boxes.

⁹¹ Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 211.

⁹² David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in The United States, 1920-1939 Decades of Promise and Pain* (Westport, CT and London: The Greenwood Press, 2002), 9.

would include an area to eat and different areas for studying and conversation.⁹³ Fewer staff were also required to assist in dining preparations, including setting the table or polishing all the silverware.⁹⁴ This also occurred out of necessity as there were fewer people to serve as servants since many were now working in factory jobs.⁹⁵ How twentieth century consumers were spending their wealth also changed. For example, many were spending a large amount of their income on other expenses such as heating, cars, plumbing, and electricity which meant they had less income for furnishings.⁹⁶ Even if a home still had a dining room, it was probably small, which would most likely discourage large entertaining and the practice of buying large quantities of decorative objects.⁹⁷ Clearly, such informal dining meant that the knife box was unnecessary. There was no need to display wealth in the same way as in the eighteenth century and most people would not have minded inexpensive utensils.

Even though the use of knife boxes was only popular for just over a hundred-year span these objects still deserve study.⁹⁸ They both protected silverware and allowed the silverware to be displayed. They demonstrated the wealth of the owner and allowed the owner to show their ability to participate in the elaborate dining rituals of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. A change in dining practices, consumption of silverware, interior design and storage, and the loss of domestic help in the twentieth century made the knife box less of a status symbol. With less value and less need for knife boxes, they

⁹³ Russel Wright and Mary Wright, *Guide to Easier Living* (Salt Lake City, Ut: Gibbs Smith, 2003), 31.

⁹⁴ Fiona Leslie, *Designs for 20th Century Interiors* (London: V&A Publications, 1977), 68.

⁹⁵ Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, 298.

⁹⁶ Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930*, 212–3.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁹⁸ Account books between 1724 and 1828 list knife boxes confirming their use in this period.

were consequentially used less. The history and use of knife boxes in the United States is just one aspect of this form to consider. Comparing American examples to English examples reveals the similarities and differences in the design tradition of these objects.

CHAPTER TWO: ENGLISH VS. AMERICAN

Today, American-made knife boxes, and ones attributed to American cabinetmakers, are rare compared to English knife boxes and it is hard to tell the differences between them. Indeed, in museum collections knife boxes are often labeled as “English or American” or state “maker unknown” without further attribution.⁹⁹ For both English and American knife boxes, mahogany was a desirable material which added further confusion on where knife boxes were made since mahogany was an imported wood to both England and America.¹⁰⁰ When used for knife boxes, the wood corresponded well with the shiny and reflective qualities of the silver it held and was commensurate with the status knife boxes implied. Therefore, mahogany was used often for knife boxes, but is not native to either America or Europe. Although this would seemingly make it harder to give an English or American attribution, mahogany was often used as a veneer; therefore secondary wood can sometimes help in attributing knife boxes to America if the wood is a native wood.¹⁰¹ The use of yellow pine, white pine,

⁹⁹ Examples of this can be found in most museums including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and others.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America*, 3. Mahogany was imported from the Caribbean to the American colonies by 1720.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 137; Burton, *Charleston Furniture 1700 - 1825*, 57.

cypress, and cherry, among others used in American furniture construction of knife boxes, particularly in certain regions, allows knife boxes to be identified as American.¹⁰²

Although some inventories often do not list the origin of knife boxes, and maker's labels or signatures are often not present, inventories and labels can sometimes help with affirming an American attribution. For example, most household inventories simply list "knife box" and do not specify origin, maker, or wood type. Typical is the inventory of Mary Bull made on January 20, 1770, that lists "3 mahogany boxes containing silver handled knives, forks, and spoons."¹⁰³ However, a few signed and labeled examples exist. For example, there are the signed pieces such as cabinetmakers David Sackriter's knife box and Edmund Johnson's knife boxes. Several knife boxes such as ones at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Maryland Historical Society, and Colonial Williamsburg have good records of provenances. That along with microanalysis of the wood which demonstrates uses of local wood, can document as American-made a knife box even without being labeled or documented in a different way.¹⁰⁴ Woods used, cabinetmaker labels, and provenance are all keys to attributing knife boxes to American cabinetmakers.

Without an American wood, provenance, or label, it is hard to tell English and American knife boxes apart. However, by comparing English and American examples certain trends that can be identified. For instance, English knife boxes often have more elaboration than American knife boxes. An example made by the silversmiths Peter and

¹⁰² Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, 157.

¹⁰³ Burton, *Charleston Furniture 1700 - 1825*, 12.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis Fueter, *American Knife Box*, Mahogany, Wood: mahogany veneer, white pine, tulip poplar, 1795 1765, Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/4626?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=South+America&what=Mahogany&who=Lewis+Fueter&pos=3>; "Baltimore Ovioid Knife Box"; Unknown, Baltimore, *Knife Box (one of a Pair)*, Mahogany, popular, white pine, 1810 1790, Maryland Historical Society.

Ann Bateman circa 1797 in England is considered unique because it is made entirely of silver and can hold 72 knives.¹⁰⁵ An English pair of enamel knife boxes with a white ground made in 1770 is also thought to be unique. George Hepplewhite states in his 1788 book, *Cabinetmaker and Upholsters Guide*, that knife boxes could even be made out of copper or painted, or japanned.¹⁰⁶ English examples of painted and japanned knife boxes exist. American examples using copper, silver, japanned decoration, or enamel have not been located.¹⁰⁷ It also seems to be a more common practice in England to engrave the owner's name or initials on knife boxes, as only three American examples found in this study had the owner's initials on them.¹⁰⁸ The use of textiles as a fabric lining and elaborate silver hardware are much more common in English examples than American examples as well.

English cabinetmakers made knife boxes that typically used silver mounts, escutcheons, and handles, more varieties of secondary woods than American examples, and sometimes unique materials such as silver, copper, and paint (Fig. 8-9). However, typically English knife boxes exhibited the sloping knife box form or the more common urn shape.¹⁰⁹ Only three of the American twenty-nine knife boxes surveyed in this study

¹⁰⁵ Clement Conger and Alexandra Rollins, *Treasures of State: Fine and Decorative Arts in the Diplomatic Reception Rooms of the U.S. Department of State* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1991), 304.

¹⁰⁶ Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ Edwards, *The Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture*, 333. An exception to this is an example in the Maryland Historical Society with the letter "R" on the lid and another one from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation that has the initials "EMA" on the hardware.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. An exception to this is an example in the Maryland Historical Society with the letter "R" on the lid and another one from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation that has the initials "EMA" on the hardware.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Not to say that there are not American examples that use multiple types of costly materials, it simply seems more common in English examples.

were urn shaped, while the rest were of some kind of box shape.¹¹⁰ Surviving examples of English knife boxes include those with veneers, and painted and inlaid designs. The use of shagreen seems to be a more English practice, as no American made knife boxes with shagreen coverings have been located. The use of shagreen was an English tradition. During the eighteenth century many craftsmen in London referred to themselves as shagreen casemakers.¹¹¹ For example, John Folgham, who worked in London, was a shagreen case maker. He made knife boxes which he displayed on his trade card but also made shaving and writing desks and sold green, ivory handled forks and knives.¹¹² No American example of shagreen knife cases survive; however, Americans did own shagreen knife cases, but these were most likely imported English knife boxes. Only one, John Clark, has been identified in the United States to have made shagreen knife cases.¹¹³



Figure 8 Knife Box. Unknown Maker. 1860-1870. Marquetry of holly, hardwood and other woods on a carcass of elm, oak, and mahogany. Unknown measurements. Victoria and Albert Museum. 352-1870. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O77560/knife-box-unknown/>

¹¹⁰ Further research may prove there are more urn shaped knife boxes made in America.

¹¹¹ Willemens, "Shagreen in Western Europe: Its Use and Manufacture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 38.

¹¹² Sir Ambrose Heal, *The London Furniture Makers* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972), 123.

¹¹³ Rogers, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 313.



Figure 9 Knife Box. Unknown, London England. 1775. Mahogany veneer with silver mounts. Unknown Measurements. Victoria and Albert Museum. W.65-1950
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O105015/knife-box-unknown/>

American and English knife box construction practices can be seen in *London Cabinet Book of Prices* and *The Journeymen Cabinet & Chairmakers' New-York Book of Prices*.¹¹⁴ The 1797 New York book of prices stated that a knife box “for three dozen of knives, forks or spoons, the front serpentine in the middle, and hollow ends, veneered” would cost £1.16.8.¹¹⁵ This listing is not unlike the *London Book of Prices* of 1803 as it stated that a knife box “for three dozen knives, forks, or spoons, all solid, the front serpentine in the middle, and a hollow on each side” for £.86 and then went on to list extra embellishments which would raise the cost.¹¹⁶ These extra embellishments included

¹¹⁴ Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *Three Centuries of American Furniture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 1982); Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley and Philadelphia Museum of Art, *The 1772 Philadelphia Furniture Price Book: A Facsimili* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006); Printed by T. & J. Swords, no 99 Pearl-Street, “The Journeymen Cabinet and Cabinetmakers’ New York Book of Prices” (New York, 1796),
[http://www.evenfallstudios.com/woodworks_library/the_cabinet_makers_london_book_of_prices1803.pdf](http://firstsearch.oclc.org.mutex.gmu.edu/WebZ/FSPage?pagetype=return_frameset:sessionid=fsapp2-58232-hn6ffb-912t5d:entitypagenum=6:0:entityframedurl=http%3A%2F%2Fopac.newsbank.com%2Fselect%2Fevans%2F30880:entityframedtitle=WorldCat:entityframedtimeout=20:entityopentitle=:entityopenauthor=:entityopennumber=:; C. Barber, The Cabinet-Makers London Book of Prices, and Designs of Cabinet-Work in Perspective, by the London Society of Cabinet-Makers - the_cabinet_makers_london_book_of_prices1803.pdf, 3rd ed. (London, England, n.d.),

<a href=).
¹¹⁵ Printed by T. & J. Swords, no 99 Pearl-Street, “The Journeymen Cabinet and Cabinetmakers’ New York Book of Prices,” 70–1.
¹¹⁶ Barber, *The Cabinet-Makers London Book of Prices, and Designs of Cabinet-Work in Perspective, by the London Society of Cabinet-Makers - the_cabinet_makers_london_book_of_prices1803.pdf*, 225.

a hinged top, beading around the box, space for a pair of carvers and a gravy spoon, plain pilasters or fluted pilasters, an astragal middle with or without ogee sides, banding, ogee brackets, veneering, and oiling and polishing. Both price books also discuss vase-shaped knife boxes.¹¹⁷ The amount of silverware that was able to be contained in the knife box, and the use of a serpentine front and hollow ends, is the same in both the price books.

Differences documented in *The London Cabinet Book of Prices* included offering a solid knife box whereas *The Journeymen Cabinet & Chairmakers' New-York Book of Prices* listed a price for only a veneered knife box. Comparing the New York price book and the London price book, suggests that not only were American cabinetmakers making knife boxes but at times offered more variety for their consumers. And at least according to the price book, American cabinetmakers in New York were using veneered and not solid wood.¹¹⁸ Although these books describe standard practices, there are examples of knife boxes that differ from the descriptions in the price book. For example, not all knife boxes can contain two dozen pieces of silverware. Household inventories and surviving examples show examples of knife boxes that can hold various amounts of silverware including knife boxes that can hold four dozen utensils or one dozen utensils.¹¹⁹

The 1803 *London Cabinet Book of Prices* also included knife trays. These were described as “square with a hole in the middle, a hand hole in ditto, or a brass handle let

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 227.

¹¹⁸ Several examples exist where the knife case is made out of solid wood, such as mahogany. Examples are cabinetmaker David Sackriter’s knife boxes, Figure 20.

¹¹⁹ “Gunston Hall’s Probate Inventory Database -- Background.” Such as the Inventories of Sarah Ball and Eleanor Addison.

on, the edge of the sides and bottom rounded.”¹²⁰ *The Cabinetmaker Philadelphia and London Price Book* of 1796 listed knife trays but no knife boxes. These knife trays were described as square with a “partition through the middle, a handle hole in ditto, or a brass handle let on, the edges of the sides and bottom are rounded.”¹²¹ Additions included beveling, scalloping on each side, more than one partition, rabbiting at the bottom, and oiling and polishing.¹²² *The New-York Revised Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet and Chair Work* of 1810, which was owned by Duncan Phyfe, also only listed knife trays. This knife tray was described as 15-inches long and 10-inches wide at the top, beveled sides and ends, a partition in the middle and a hand hole in ditto. It could also be made with a brass handle. Extras included scalloping on the rim on each side and rabbiting on the bottom.¹²³ Their extensive discussion in price books suggests the popularity of knife tray use in America. It also demonstrate the narrow window of time that knife boxes were popular by showing that while knife trays continue to be used, knife boxes do not.

Knife box drawings are only found in English design books such as Thomas Sheraton’s *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Drawing Book* published in 1793, George Hepplewhite’s *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Guide* published in 1788, and Robert Adam’s drawings of furniture for *Kedleston*. There are no published American furniture designs books before the 1840s and by this time knife boxes are

¹²⁰ Barber, *The Cabinet-Makers London Book of Prices, and Designs of Cabinet-Work in Perspective, by the London Society of Cabinet-Makers - the_cabinet_makers_london_book_of_prices1803.pdf*, 217.

¹²¹ William Sinclair, ed., *The Cabinet-Makers’ Philadelphia and London Book of Prices* (Philadelphia: Snowden & McCorkle, 1796), 108.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 108–9.

¹²³ *The New-York Revised Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet and Chair Work: June 1810* (New York: Printed by Southwick and Pelsue, 1810), 45.

starting to fall out of use and do not appear in published American design sources.¹²⁴ A look into English design books, however, does give an insight into the construction and use of knife boxes that American cabinetmakers were sometimes drawing their inspiration from.

Even though knife boxes were being used at the time, they are not discussed in Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet-maker's Director*, published in 1754. Knife boxes were being made at this time in both Europe and in America but are not include in Chippendale's *Directory*. However, many knife boxes do feature the serpentine and bombe swelling forms featured and popularized in the *Director*. It is possible knife boxes had not yet reached their height in popularity, or it is possible that Chippendale, like the later authors of design books, such as Thomas Sheraton, may have thought they were self-explanatory, and therefore, not even worth mentioning. If knife boxes were a specialty item as well, it makes sense for Chippendale to not include them, since his book was made specifically for cabinetmakers. He does list tea chests which are similar in size to knife boxes, demonstrating that he discussed small boxes. Although cabinetmakers were not directly pulling from Chippendale in terms of knife box construction some may have been borrowing general design ideas from the book such as the swelling serpentine front.

¹²⁴ John Hall, *John Hall and the Grecian Style in America: A Reprint of Three Pattern Books Published in Baltimore in 1840*, First Printing edition (New York, N.Y: Acanthus Press Llc, 1996); Oscar Fitzgerald, "Gothic and Rococo Revival Furniture" (Class Lecture, Ripley Center, Washington D.C., September 2, 2014); Printed by Endicott and Swett, *Joseph Meeks & Sons Broadside*, Hand-colored Lithograph, 1833, Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/339865>. Knife boxes do not appear in John Hall's *The Cabinetmaker's Assistant* nor do they appear in the Joseph Meeks and Sons broadside.

The 1762 drawing of *The Dining room at Kedleston* features eight slant front knife boxes depicted on the sideboard: four are front and center and two are on each side facing in (Fig. 7). Exceptionally white in color, considering the typical use of wood in their construction, they have gold colored, possibly gilded, escutcheons. This demonstrated that one could own several knife boxes and also demonstrated that knife boxes could be made of a very light color and contain gilded decoration. Interestingly, as well, is the circular appearance of the lids, which is not how knife box lids look when open. Typically, the lids mimic the rest of the shape of the knife box. This is probably an artistic license rather than how the knife boxes actually looked.

Thomas Sheraton in his work, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, lumped knife boxes together with lady's traveling boxes and began by stating that "little need be said respecting [knife boxes]."¹²⁵ However, he did go on to say:

It is only wanted to be observed that the corner pilasters of left hand case has small flutes of white holly or other coloured wood let in, and the middle pilasters have very narrow cross bands all round with panel japanned in small flowers.¹²⁶ The top is sometimes japanned, and sometimes has only an inlaid patera. The half columns of the right hand case are sometimes fluted out and sometimes the flutes are let in. The feet may be turned and twisted which will have a good effect. As these cases are not made in regular cabinet shops, it may be of service to mention where they are executed in the best taste, by one who makes it his main business. Ie. John Lane, n. 44 St. Martin's-le-grand, London.¹²⁷

Thomas Sheraton listed all of the different materials utilized in knife boxes.

Sheraton's design is seen in most English knife boxes but is not always used in American knife boxes. The inlaid patera is much more common in English examples than in

¹²⁵ Thomas Sheraton, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972), 89. Traveling boxes were not unlike knife boxes. They were meant for storage, had divided compartments, and had hinged tops.

¹²⁶ "left hand case" refers to his drawing, as in the knife box on the left. See Fig. 11.

¹²⁷ Sheraton, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, 89-90.

American ones. Sheraton illustrated two vase shaped knife boxes on a sideboard and two knife boxes with slant front tops, one with a concave front, and the other a convex front (Fig. 10-11).¹²⁸ When discussing the knife vases he stated that the “vase part is made to screw into” the pedestal it sits on so that they could “occasionally be taken off.”¹²⁹ Although Sheraton also described how to veneer a knife case in great detail, he stated that the same process could be used for “other purposes that might be of more importance than the cutting and veneering of a knife case.”



Figure 10 Drawing of a Sideboard from *The Cabinet-maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*. Thomas Sheraton. 1791. Plate 21.



Figure 11 Knife Box Drawing from *The Cabinet-maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*. By Thomas Sheraton. Plate 39.

¹²⁸ Ibid., fig. 39, 21.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 185.

Although Sheraton singles John Lane out as a knife box specialist, he was not the only person making knife boxes in London.¹³⁰ Knife boxes were not the sole trade for these other men either. For example, Francis Thompson in 1750 and Thomas Page in 1817, who both worked in London, made knife boxes among other pieces of furniture.¹³¹ Thompson was a turner and chair making while Page was described as a cabinetmaker, and John Folgham who worked between 1760 and 1813 also made knife cases of shagreen.¹³² Like American cabinetmakers, London cabinetmakers did not always just make knife boxes; they produced other wares, sometimes very unlike the construction of knife boxes. It appears that English knife box makers did make other furniture forms, and Sheraton's description of knife boxes being made by a specialist is a bit misleading. Of all these men who worked in London roughly around the same time in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it is possible John Lane was the only man making knife boxes in 1793. However, it is also possible that Sheraton could have simply been promoting the business of John Lane, rather than implying that knife boxes were being exclusively made only by specialists given the number of cabinetmakers, turners, and shagreen case makers working in London around the same time.

A contemporary of Sheraton, cabinetmaker George Hepplewhite discussed knife boxes in the 1788 *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*. Although Hepplewhite gives a little more detail in terms of what they are made out of and where they were used,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 100; Heal, *The London Furniture Makers*, 123, 183.

¹³¹ Heal, *The London Furniture Makers*, 183.

¹³² Ibid., 183, 123.

the two descriptions are not unlike, but Hepplewhite does seem to give a bit more information. In Hepplewhite's description of knife boxes he states:

The cases may be used to hold water for the use of the butler ...or may be used as knife cases in which case they are made of wood, carved, painted, or inlaid. Are much used in spacious dining rooms, where the latest described kinds of sideboards are chose, at each end of which they are placed.¹³³

Hepplewhite does say, in a similar vein as Sheraton, that "the universal utility of this piece of furniture renders a particular description not necessary" which indicated their commonplace use in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.¹³⁴ He is also the only one to describe the use of knife boxes holding water. He does go on with a bit more description than Sheraton, stating that knife boxes:

may be made of mahogany inlaid, or of satin, or other wood at pleasure... and may be placed at each end on the sideboards or on a pedestal; the knife &c. all into the body of the vase, the top of which is kept up by a small spring which is fixed to the stem which supports the top; may be made of copper, painted, and japanned.¹³⁵

Here, Hepplewhite describes the variety of materials that can be used and goes into more particular detail into how knife boxes were used than Sheraton does. In his book four urn knife boxes and three serpentine slant front knife boxes were illustrated (Fig. 12-13).¹³⁶ The feet in his knife box drawers were not as neat as the Sheraton examples. Hepplewhite's drawings of knife boxes also appear a bit heavier in form. The vase-shaped knife box plates of Hepplewhite demonstrate much more of a variety than Sheraton's knife vases. Four different kinds are displayed and one is even shown open,

¹³³ Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, 7.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, fig. 38, 39.

allowing the viewer to see how the lid can be opened, something Sheraton does not demonstrate. Despite visual differences however, both Sheraton and Hepplewhite were creating design sources, and were not expecting their designs to be followed exactly. Still, the variations in their drawings demonstrate how knife boxes could be designed with variations dependent on taste, materials available, and time necessary to create knife boxes.



Figure 12. Drawings of Urn knife boxes from *Cabinet Maker and Upholsterers Guide*. 1794 George Hepplewhite, plate 39

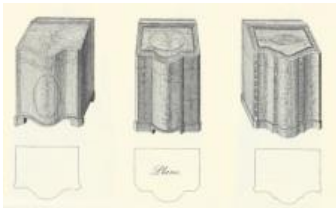


Figure 13 Drawings of Knife boxes from *Cabinetmaker and Upholsterers Guide*. 1794. George Hepplewhite, plate 38

The designs of Adam, Sheraton, Hepplewhite, and Chippendale were important inspirations for eighteenth century furniture. Although the description of knife boxes in these publications are incomplete, brief, or not even existent, they provide some insight

into the design of knife boxes. Their design books also reveal the functionality of knife boxes, what materials they were made out of, and how embedded they were within European culture. Although there are no comparisons to American design books some American cabinetmakers were influenced by these works and even owned them. For example, Philadelphia cabinetmaker Joseph Barry's label depicts a drawing selected from Thomas Sheraton's drawing book for the "sideboard with vase knife boxes" and is dated July 25, 1793, clearly borrowing from English models.¹³⁷ Barry and other Philadelphia cabinetmakers put a lot of effort into making pieces that closely imitated European examples so that furniture would coordinate appropriately.¹³⁸ Several of the drawings on Baltimore cabinetmaker William Camp's label, such as the knife boxes and the ladies' writing table, can be traced back to Thomas Sheraton's drawing book as well.¹³⁹ William Camp also owned copies of Hepplewhite's and Sheraton's books. The cabinetmakers John and Thomas Seymour also owned a copy of Sheraton's design book.¹⁴⁰ Much of their furniture also imitated the concave and convex forms depicted in the books by Sheraton and Hepplewhite. Maryland was particularly heavily influenced by English culture as it was settled almost entirely by English and Irish.¹⁴¹ In Baltimore, English prototypes were particularly popular even after the Revolution.¹⁴² While many Marylanders may have ordered knife boxes directly from England, many cabinetmakers

¹³⁷ Hornor, *Blue Book, Philadelphia Furniture*, 263.

¹³⁸ Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, "Philadelphia Furniture in the Empire Style," *Magazine Antiques* 171, no. 4 (April 2007): 94.

¹³⁹ Baltimore Museum of Art, *Baltimore Furniture: The Work of Baltimore and Annapolis Cabinetmakers from 1760-1810* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1947), 193.

¹⁴⁰ Morrison Heckscher, "English Furniture Pattern Books in Eighteenth Century America," *Chipstone*, 1994, 32, <http://www.chipstone.org/publications/1994AF/index1994Heckscher.html>.

¹⁴¹ Marilyn Johnson Bordes, "Baltimore Federal Furniture," *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, September 17, 1972.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

in Maryland made their own. The pervasive English tradition in Maryland therefore encouraged cabinetmakers to make knife boxes for clients who wanted to follow the latest English fashion. Although only four out of twenty-four of the known American knife box makers are known to have been influenced by English design books the design books themselves, and their description of knife boxes, are important to the understanding of the history of knife boxes.¹⁴³

The prominent English culture in America not only prompted the use and importation of knife boxes but also encouraged local craftsman to make them as well. This was because the majority of settlers in America came from Great Britain, including most cabinetmakers.¹⁴⁴ In addition to those born in America several cabinetmakers studied in this thesis who made knife boxes recently immigrated from Great Britain. For example, John Shaw of Annapolis and John Muir were both from Scotland.¹⁴⁵ John Seymour and Charles Christian learned their trade in England and likewise, Joseph B. Barry had originally learned his trade in Dublin and London.¹⁴⁶ Knife boxes also

¹⁴³ Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, "A New Suspect: Baltimore Cabinetmaker Edward Priestley," *Chipstone*, accessed November 4, 2013,

<http://www.chipstone.org/publications/2000AF/2000Kirtley/2000KirtleyIndex.html>; Elder, Bartlett, and Baltimore Museum of Art, *John Shaw, Cabinetmaker of Annapolis*, 30; Baltimore Museum of Art, *Baltimore Furniture: The Work of Baltimore and Annapolis Cabinetmakers from 1760-1810*, 193; Heckscher, "English Furniture Pattern Books in Eighteenth Century America"; Hornor, *Blue Book, Philadelphia Furniture*, 263.

¹⁴⁴ Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Knife boxes were used in Scotland. For example, Thomas Thompson, a merchant in Leith, bought a knife box and in 1807 Archibald Campbell, a merchant from Glasgow had a knife box. In the dining room of James Schaw, a writer and banker in Glasgow, an inventory taken in 1839 states that he had a mahogany knife box. Ethel Hall Bjerkoe, *The Cabinet-Makers of America: Their Lives and Works with Illustrations* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1957), 21; State House Office Of Interpretation, "Maryland's Old Senate Chamber: John Shaw and the State House, 1783," *Maryland's Old Senate Chamber*, July 17, 2012, <http://marylandstatehouse.blogspot.com/2012/07/john-shaw-and-state-house-1783.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Bjerkoe, *The Cabinet-Makers of America: Their Lives and Works with Illustrations*, 38; Donald L. Fennimore and Robert T. Trump, "Joseph B. Barry, Philadelphia Cabinetmaker. (furniture Designer)," *Magazine Antiques* 135, no. 5 (May 1989): 1213; "Founders Online: Charles Christian to Thomas

probably came to America via Britain. The dining room and dining habits of Americans were also often related to English customs. For example, while in New York City in the 1820s, James Fennimore Cooper remarked upon a sideboard which was “groaning with plate” held “knife and spoon boxes.”¹⁴⁷ He also noted that the:

dining-room is almost invariably one of the best in the house. The custom is certainly of English origin, and takes its rise in the habit of sitting an hour or two after the cloth is removed, picking nuts, drinking wine, chatting, yawning, and gazing about the apartment....

possibly at the open knife boxes.¹⁴⁸ Fashionable British goods were also favored just as much as, if not more than, American-made goods.¹⁴⁹ Despite favoring British goods, good were bought locally because many could not get or afford the English goods. Making locally, may have been cheaper as well, since importation could be costly and would take time.

The trade between Great Britain and the United States and cheaper labor costs in Great Britain affected American production of knife boxes. Knife boxes were labor intensive and could be made in England where labor was cheaper. This in turn encouraged Americans to import these objects. Some colonists probably preferred to buy from England because of the trading system between England and America. For instance, in Virginia planters grew tobacco for export and in return they would receive credit or

Jefferson, 10 March 1812,” accessed June 20, 2014, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-04-02-0436>.

¹⁴⁷ “Sotheby’s The Bill Blass Collection” (Sotheby’s, October 21, 2003), <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.pdf.N07928.html/f/343/N07928-343.pdf>.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Blackmore, “Just Imported and to Be Sold: Methods of Acquisitions and Use of Knives, Forks, and Silver Spoons in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” 1.

English goods, not cash.¹⁵⁰ This system therefore encouraged the purchase of British manufactured goods rather than locally made objects. The fact that knife boxes were small made it easy to import them as well.¹⁵¹ America did not always have an abundance of fashionable materials such as ivory for the handles. These were luxury items and not many could afford them. This meant that the best silverware was coming from Europe, which encouraged importation of silverware and along with the silver probably knife boxes.¹⁵² Many purchased silverware and knife boxes at the same time.¹⁵³

Buying English knife boxes was also fairly easy for American customers. Americans could directly order them from England. All the customer had to do was tell their English contact that they wanted silverware and a knife box to go with it. However, Americans could also have gone to their local merchant or silversmith shop to buy imported knife boxes. For example, James Jacks, a goldsmith, jeweler, and watchmaker in Philadelphia, was selling English imported mahogany knife boxes in 1797.¹⁵⁴ It is also known that some knife boxes were bought over from England on ships and sold at auctions. In one example an advertisement for an auction in New York included the auctioning of fifty knife boxes with knives and forks in 1804.¹⁵⁵ It was therefore quite

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵¹ Burton, *Charleston Furniture 1700 - 1825*, 57.

¹⁵² Blackmore, "Just Imported and to Be Sold: Methods of Acquisitions and Use of Knives, Forks, and Silver Spoons in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," 68.

¹⁵³ "Gunston Hall Room Use Study."

¹⁵⁴ Other silversmiths who sold knife boxes include: William Slater in Baltimore, Ward and Roy, Byrne and Smyth, (U.S.), *The Arts & Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina ...*, 120-1.

¹⁵⁵ "The Daily Advertiser," November 1, 1804, America's Historical Newspapers, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.mutex.gmu.edu/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=O62R62YVMTM4Njg5MDA3MC41NTAyNzY6MToxMjoxMjkuMTc0LjIxLjU&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissuequeryname=7&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=7&p_docnum=9&p_docref=v2:10C778259DC1CC40@EANX-10D9E9301AFAD858@2380262-10D9E930A94A5FA0@2-10D9E932DC623858@.

easy for Americans to buy imported knife boxes either through agents in England or at local shops that sold imported goods. Not only were American cabinetmakers competing with other American and European cabinetmakers but when it came to knife boxes, cabinetmakers also competed with silversmiths, as many silversmiths were selling knife boxes in their shop. It is uncertain, however, if these silversmiths were selling American or European made knife boxes, as they do not specify.¹⁵⁶

English design and price book and some American price books often included knife boxes. Many American cabinetmakers were influenced by the English tradition of dining and design books. The similarity of knife box production practices, their design, and use of similar materials makes it challenging to differentiate between American and English knife boxes. However, by closely examining knife boxes and price books, it is clear some differences can be noted. For example, differences between American and English price books explain different shop practices of making knife boxes. Examining who was making them in England also confirms that while knife boxes were made by specialists, John Lane was not the only one making knife boxes in London in the late eighteenth century. American cabinetmakers, who were usually not knife box specialists as they probably were in England, borrowed from English tradition and design, but also created unique knife boxes.

¹⁵⁶ Silversmiths who sold knife boxes include: William Slater in Baltimore, Ward and Roy, Byrne and Smyth, (U.S.), *The Arts & Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina ...*, 120–1.

CHAPTER THREE: AMERICAN KNIFE BOX MAKERS

Twenty-four cabinetmakers in America have been identified as making knife boxes (Appendix). They worked in Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New York, New England, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Rhode Island, and Virginia.¹⁵⁷ This chapter will discuss the makers themselves and the next chapter will discuss the American knife boxes that survive. While some may have specialized in making knife boxes, knife boxes were typically not the only objects American cabinetmakers made. The earliest known American cabinetmaker to make knife boxes is John Head who made them in 1724 and the latest is most likely Willis Cowling who made them as late as 1828.¹⁵⁸ This chapter will discuss a few individual cabinetmakers and then go on to discuss cabinetmakers by region. This chapter is not meant to be a biography of each cabinetmaker but is meant focus on the knife boxes these cabinetmakers made and cabinetmaking practices that may have influenced their participation in creating knife boxes.

Before the revolution, John Seymour made at least one knife box during his time as a cabinetmaker in Maine. He made the knife box between December 1780 and 1784,

¹⁵⁷ This refers to areas where specific cabinetmakers were found. I have found knife boxes attributed to be made in other places, such as South Carolina, but these examples will be discussed in the chapter on knife boxes, and not in the chapter of the cabinetmakers since cabinetmakers from that region have not been located yet.

¹⁵⁸ “Willis Cowling (1788-1828) Richmond Cabinetmaker,” 55; Stiefel, “Philadelphia Cabinetmaking and Commerce, 1718-1753: The Account Book of John Head, Joiner.”

and it was priced at 3.12.0 pounds.¹⁵⁹ The knife box was among the most costly furnishings made in Portland, Maine, at this time.¹⁶⁰ However, no knife boxes made by John Seymour survive today, and it is not known if he made any more. Was knife box construction a trade he had learned in England or was this knife box a special case? John Seymour was trained in England and did not leave until the age of forty-six. Therefore it is likely that making knife boxes was a skill he learned in England.¹⁶¹



Figure 14. Pair of Federal style eagle inlaid knife boxes. Edmund Johnson. Salem Massachusetts. 1800. Mahogany. 17 x 9 1/2 x 12 (HxWxD) (Inches). U.S. State Department Rooms. Funds donated by the Honorable Mrs. Phleger. Accession # 1966.0110. <https://diplomaticrooms.state.gov/Pages/Item.aspx?item=15>

A pair of knife boxes was made by cabinetmaker Edmund Johnson of Salem, Massachusetts (Fig. 14).¹⁶² These two knife boxes are inscribed with his name and the

¹⁵⁹ Robert Mussey Jr., *The Furniture Masterworks of John & Thomas Seymour* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum, 2003), 19. This book is extensive and should be consulted to learn more about the life and cabinetmaking of John and Thomas Seymour.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 202–3.

¹⁶² Bjerkoe, *The Cabinet-Makers of America: Their Lives and Works with Illustrations*, 135; Johnson, *Pair of Federal Eagle-Inlaid Knife Boxes*.

date: 1795.¹⁶³ These knife boxes are concave, rather than the other American examples of this form which are all convex, which was probably a consumer choice. Although being concave is “unique” for this study these knife boxes do not represent a new form compared to the others, simply a variation. There are only twenty-six slots for utensils—one for a spoon, the rest for forks or knives. Having fewer slots for spoons is typical in knife box construction. Johnson made chairs as well as other furniture. He also signed the price book printed by the Salem Cabinet-Maker Society in Salem in 1801, indicating his status as a cabinetmaker in his local community.¹⁶⁴ Imported “knife boxes, tea caddies, trays, and bottle boxes” were readily available in Salem which may have contributed to the fact that not many knife boxes were being made in the area.¹⁶⁵ Sideboards, the object knife boxes usually sit upon, were not made in Salem until after the Revolution, suggesting that knife boxes were probably also not made in the area before then.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, Johnson may have been the only cabinetmaker making knife boxes before that date; however no other examples survive of his, suggesting this could have been the only set he made. Salem cabinetmakers were influenced by the designs of Thomas Sheraton’s *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Drawing Book* and certainly they adopted many new forms of neoclassical furniture from that book. However, knife boxes were not listed in the price book compiled by the society.¹⁶⁷ Johnson most likely learned the cabinetmaking trade from his father who was a shop joiner in Lynn, Massachusetts.

¹⁶³ William C. Ketchum and Museum of American Folk Art, *American Cabinetmakers: Marked American Furniture 1640-1940* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., n.d.), 188.

¹⁶⁴ Dean Thomas Lakikainen, “A Salem Cabinetmakers’ Price Books,” *Chipstone*, 2001, <http://www.chipstone.org/publications/2001AF/Lahik/lahikIndex.html>.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Lahikainen, “A Salem Cabinetmakers’ Price Books.”

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

Johnson was very active in the export trade and was a part owner of the schooner *Friendship* with George W. Martin, Jonathan Marston, and Samuel Barnard in 1802 and a half owner of the schooner *Theoda* in 1803.¹⁶⁸ Perhaps it was his involvement in importation that encouraged him to make knife boxes. Besides knife boxes, labeled pieces by Johnson include a sideboard, and a slant front desk.”¹⁶⁹ The sideboard features concave and convex surfaces, similar to the knife box.¹⁷⁰ Neither feature decoration such as the eagle, which appears on the knife boxes.

A New England account book of an unknown maker lists knife cases on June 11, 1812, along with a sideboard and dining table.¹⁷¹ Without knowing who the cabinetmaker was, it is difficult to say what influenced his career and the making of knife boxes. Considering that he also created a sideboard and dining table it seems likely that he wanted to create a full dining room set to sell.

Although he made other items as well, Job Townsend Jr. is currently the only known cabinetmaker from Newport, Rhode Island, who made knife boxes.¹⁷² In December 1762, he made a knife box for Samuel Burros for six pounds and on October 12, 1773, he recorded in his account book kept between 1762–1778 that he made a “mohogony” knife box and sold it to John Barker for four pounds.¹⁷³ With such a lapse of time between when the two knife boxes were made it might suggest that perhaps he made

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., fig. 11, 14.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., fig. 11.

¹⁷¹ Unknown, *Account Book, 1812*, n.d.,

<http://library.winterthur.org:8001/lib/item?id=chamo:26249&theme=winterthur>.

¹⁷² Luke Beckerdite, ed., *American Furniture* (Hanover and London: Chipstone, 1999), 75, 132.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

knife boxes because a customer asked him if he could, rather than knife boxes being an object that he sold on a regular basis.

Two cabinetmakers working in Virginia are known to have made knife boxes. John S. Johnson, a cabinetmaker from Mecklenburg County, Virginia, owned a birch knife box that was recorded in the appraisal of his estate in 1811. Included in the appraisal are materials he had on hand as well as unfinished pieces of furniture, suggesting that the knife box was an item that he made. Other items in the appraisal were also made of birch suggesting material he had readily on hand.¹⁷⁴ Only one knife box studied in this thesis incorporate birch. Johnson's knife box demonstrates the use of locally available material to make the highly desirable knife boxes. Sampson Diuguid of Lynchburg, Virginia, also made knife boxes, which are listed in his account book.¹⁷⁵ He worked from 1795-1856. An "attachment to all things English" meant that Virginians often imported their silver goods, and most likely knife boxes along with their silverware,¹⁷⁶ Willis Cowling who was a cabinetmaker in Richmond, Virginia, may have made knife boxes. The inventory of his property at his death in 1828 lists first his personal

¹⁷⁴ MESDA Craftsman Database, "Johnson, John. S Cabinetmaker" (MESDA Craftsman Database), accessed October 10, 2014, <http://research.oldsalemonline.org/ProficioPublicSearch/ShowImageView.aspx?75210+objects>; Virginia Department of Forestry, Several types of birch are native to Virginia: "Common Native Trees of Virginia" (Virginia Department of Forestry, 2010), www.dof.virginia.gov/print/edu/Common-Native-Trees.pdf, 45-7. According to this report, birch can be found in Mecklenburg County, Virginia. In *The Furniture of Charleston*, authors Bradford Rauschenberg and John Bivins stated that birch as a primary wood is not common. If birch is used as a primary wood this is an indication that the cabinetmaker was working far from convenient sources of mahogany, white pine, and other woods, Volume 2, page 599. This is true of John Johnson living in Mecklenburg Virginia which is, for example, about 140 miles from Williamsburg.

¹⁷⁵ "The Account Book of Sampson Diuguid," *The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts* XXX, no. 2 (Winter 2004), http://archive.org/stream/journalofearlyso3022004muse/journalofearlyso3022004muse_djvu.txt; Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, "Cowling, Willis (ID # 7595)."

¹⁷⁶ Coffin et al., *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table 1500-2005*, 43.

inventory and then his inventory of the ready-made furniture on hand at his death. A knife box of stained wood at .50, is listed in the inventory.¹⁷⁷ It is impossible to determine for sure but strong evidence suggests that he did make them since they were included among other items he had for sale from his shop. These three cabinetmakers represent the rare few who made knife boxes south of Baltimore. However, it can be speculated that Virginia examples would probably be of yellow pine and have other characteristics of locally made furniture.

Although the previously mentioned cabinetmakers are all from many different places, New York City, Baltimore and Philadelphia seem to be the main areas of knife box production. This is not surprising since these are the major population centers and the most affluent cities during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. To start, New York had several cabinetmakers who made knife boxes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Consumer demand certainly played a part in American cabinetmakers deciding to make knife boxes. The pedestal end sideboard, specifically made for knife boxes, was one of the most popular among the patrons of New York cabinetmakers. New York customers wanted knife boxes and preferred a type that was specifically made for pedestal sideboards. However, customers could have been buying knife boxes for the other sideboard forms as well.¹⁷⁸ One cabinetmaker, Joseph Adam Fleming, advertised that he made knife boxes in 1785 in New York.¹⁷⁹ Fleming, an immigrant from Europe,

¹⁷⁷ “Willis Cowling (1788-1828) Richmond Cabinetmaker,” 69.

¹⁷⁸ Peter M. Kenny and Matthew A. Thurlow, *Duncan Phyfe: Master Cabinetmaker in New York* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 195. This book is extensive, and should be consulted to learn more about the life and cabinetmaking of Duncan Phyfe.

¹⁷⁹ Comstock, *American Furniture*, 339.

also made harpsichords and other musical instruments.¹⁸⁰ Although he typically made musical instruments, his work as a skilled cabinetmaker allowed him to make other furniture forms such as knife boxes. However, no knife boxes are attributed to him today so it is impossible to know if his knife boxes featured the popular swelling bodice, typical in both knife boxes and musical instruments. Fenwick Lyell advertised in the *New York Gazette and the General Advertiser* on March 22, 1797, that “any persons wishing to be furnished with knife boxes, of a superior quality made after any fashion, to contain any number of knives, forks or spoons” to contact him.¹⁸¹ Clearly, Lyell felt confident in his ability to make any kind of knife boxes. Unfortunately, none are known to be made by him that survives today.

It also seems that American cabinetmakers who did not make knife boxes themselves might have subcontracted with someone who did have the time and skills to make them instead of importing from Great Britain. Otherwise they risked giving up that market entirely to others. For example, Duncan Phyfe placed an order for a pair of knife boxes in January 1809 with Fenwick Lyell. Lyell’s account book entry specifies that he made “1 pair of knife boxes/veneers found” for Phyfe.¹⁸² The pair of boxes Lyell made cost Phyfe sixteen pounds, showing just how expensive these pieces could be, especially in comparison to other Phyfe orders from Lyell. For example, Lyell charged Phyfe only £13.12.0 for an unspecified number of sofa frames in 1802.¹⁸³ This information

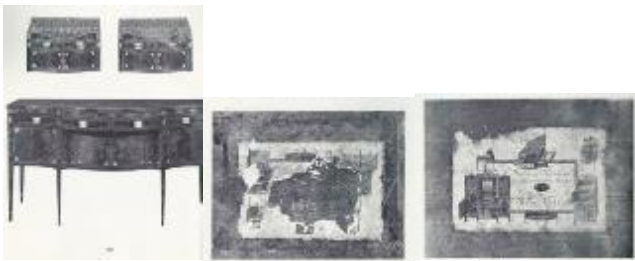
¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ “New York Newspaper Advertisements and News Items: 1777-1779,” *Oxford University Computing Services*, accessed November 21, 2013, <http://ota.ox.ac.uk/text/3151.html>; Kenny and Thurlow, *Duncan Phyfe*, 55.

¹⁸² Kenny and Thurlow, *Duncan Phyfe*, 35.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

demonstrates that Lyell created a lucrative trade for himself by making knife boxes. It also demonstrates that American cabinetmakers bought knife boxes from other American cabinetmakers. Although Duncan Phyfe turned to Lyell to supply him knife boxes, Phyfe may have made one pair of knife boxes that descended through the family of Phyfe's daughter, as suggested by family history.¹⁸⁴



Figures 15-17. Sideboard and knife boxes and labels. Made by William Whitehead. Owned by John Fulton. New York, 1790 – 1810. No dimensions given. Israel sack Vol. 5, 1254-5.

William Whitehead, a cabinet and chair maker working in Manhattan during the 1790s, made a sideboard and matching set of knife boxes for John Fulton or Red Hook, New York (Fig. 15-17).¹⁸⁵ Although the knife boxes were not labeled the sideboard featured his label. The label revealed that he knew about current fashions of the day as the images reflect the popular design books of the period, such as that by Thomas Sheraton. The sideboard is quite typical for the time period. However, the massive box shaped knife boxes with their serpentine fronts reflect that he did not always strictly

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁸⁵ *American Antiques from Israel Sack Collection: Brochure Thirteen 1965 to Brochure Seventeen 1969* (Highland Publishers Inc., n.d.), fig. 1254; Ketchum and Museum of American Folk Art, *American Cabinetmakers: Marked American Furniture 1640-1940*, 365.

follow popular furniture designs since the design of his knife boxes are not from a particular design book.

John Clark made shagreen and mahogany knife boxes in New York City in the late 1760s and early 1770s.¹⁸⁶ He is currently the only American cabinetmaker known to make shagreen knife cases.¹⁸⁷ None of his knife boxes survive today so it is impossible to determine if American shagreen cases differed than the English examples that exist.

The cabinetmaker team of Gifford & Scotland made knife boxes as well.¹⁸⁸ They advertised their wares in the *New York Daily Gazette* on April 29, 1791.¹⁸⁹ Besides knife boxes they made clock boxes, tambours desks, looking glasses, and dining tables among other objects. They stated that the “quality of their work and reasonableness of their prices” would insure the attention of the public. They also sold their wares to southern states and into the country.¹⁹⁰ Gifford & Scotland were not the only New York cabinetmakers to send their wares south, as it was quite common for New York cabinetmakers to send furniture to Charleston, South Carolina, and other southern ports.¹⁹¹ Their knife boxes were most likely also a part of that trade.

Another New York cabinetmaker who made furniture for southern consumption was Charles Christian, who among other wares made knife boxes. He claimed he “principally adapted his business for Southern demand,” and was “offering his work at 5

¹⁸⁶ Rogers, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 313.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ “New York Newspaper Advertisements and News Items: 1777-1779.”

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Maurie D. McInnis and Robert A. Leath, “Beautiful Specimens, Elegant Patterns: New York Furniture for the Charleston Market, 1810-1840,” *American Furniture*, 1996, <http://www.chipstone.org/publications/1996AF/Leath/1996LeathIndex.html>.

percent below New York prices.”¹⁹² It is unclear since none of his knife boxes have survived if anyone in Charleston took him up on his offer.¹⁹³ An immigrant from Great Britain, he was both a cabinetmaker and auctioneer by 1798.¹⁹⁴ In 1814, he advertised a showpiece sideboard that included pedestals, vase knife boxes, and candle branches which must have been large as it was made for a “spacious dining room.”¹⁹⁵ Since this knife box and sideboard was a show piece meant to attract customers it is interesting to wonder what his knife boxes looked like, but unfortunately, no knife boxes are currently attributed to him, and his advertisement is not descriptive enough. However, many cabinetmakers made knife boxes in New York in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. New York had at least eight cabinetmakers making knife boxes in the 1770s, 1780s and 1790s.¹⁹⁶ New York cabinetmakers made knife boxes as show pieces; some made shagreen knife cases; others sent their knife boxes to other areas of the country; and many advertised their creations.

As the fifth largest city in the nation by the early nineteenth century, Baltimore, Maryland, was another particularly popular area for knife boxes makers. The elite homes of Baltimore, not uncommon in all cities in the United States, were heavily decorated

¹⁹² Peter Kenny, *Honore Lannuier Cabinet Maker from Paris* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 100.

¹⁹³ McInnis and Leath, “Beautiful Specimens, Elegant Patterns: New York Furniture for the Charleston Market, 1810-1840.”

¹⁹⁴ “Founders Online.”

¹⁹⁵ Kenny, *Honore Lannuier Cabinet Maker from Paris*, 100. This book is extensive, and should be consulted to learn more about the life and cabinetmaking of Lannuier.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100; Israel Sack, *American Antiques From the Israel Sack Collection*, ed. Joseph Hennage, vol. 4 (Highland House Publishers, 1974), 313; Rogers, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 365; “New York Newspaper Advertisements and News Items: 1777-1779”; Kenny and Thurlow, *Duncan Phyfe*, 195.

with handsome furniture, including knife boxes.¹⁹⁷ Edward Priestley was born in Annapolis but moved to Baltimore in the late eighteenth century where he made furniture including sideboards and vase-shaped knife boxes.¹⁹⁸ He also made bookcases, dining tables, breakfast tables, card tables, work tables, portable desks, sofas and bedsteads.¹⁹⁹ His work was influenced by published design books such as Thomas Hope and Thomas Sheraton.²⁰⁰ Since no surviving knife boxes are currently attributed to him it is hard to say if design books influenced his construction of knife boxes, although it would be possible, considering that his other furniture shows their influence.



Figure 18. William Camp’s label. *Baltimore Furniture: 1760-1810*, 193.

Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, “A New Suspect: Baltimore Cabinetmaker Edward Priestley,” *Chipstone*, accessed November 4, 2013,

<http://www.chipstone.org/publications/2000AF/2000Kirtley/2000KirtleyIndex.html>.

¹⁹⁷ Bordes, “Baltimore Federal Furniture.”

¹⁹⁸ Kirtley, “A New Suspect: Baltimore Cabinetmaker Edward Priestley.” Significantly, Priestly did not operate a warehouse, his business is always referred to as a cabinetmaking shop.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

The label of William Camp from Baltimore, Maryland, shows a pair of knife boxes on a sideboard suggesting that he made knife boxes as well (Fig. 18).²⁰¹ Urn knife boxes are depicted. None of his knife boxes survive today Camp, however, owned the largest cabinetmaking shop in Baltimore in the early nineteenth century and advertised that he sold the “most extensive and elegant assortment of articles in the cabinet line” including selling lumber as well.²⁰² It is therefore likely that he did in fact make knife boxes, given that his advertisement displays knife boxes.

The cabinetmakers Johnathan and David Odgen from Baltimore, Maryland, worked in the early nineteenth century. They were among the few cabinetmakers who vehemently advertised their production of knife boxes and the only cabinetmakers so far to insist that their knife boxes were better than the ones being imported.²⁰³ In 1809, Baltimore cabinetmakers David and Jonathan Ogden offered "for sale a quantity of CABINET FURNITURE, consisting of, Pedestal Side Boards with Satin Wood, Vase Knife boxes, superior to any ever imported from Europe, Elliptic, do. Kidney do," along with “a host of dining, breakfast, card, and writing tables.”²⁰⁴ Elliptic shape knife boxes had a body that was oval shaped. One exists in the Colonial Williamsburg collection with a flat lid (Fig. 19). Kidney shapes were popular in the eighteenth century for furniture but no examples of kidney shaped knife boxes have been found during this study so it is

²⁰¹ Baltimore Museum of Art, *Baltimore Furniture: The Work of Baltimore and Annapolis Cabinetmakers from 1760-1810*, 193.

²⁰² “Furniture in Maryland Life by Janine Disviscour from *Antiques & Fine Art Magazine*,” accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.antiquesandfineart.com/articles/article.cfm?request=569>.

²⁰³ Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, “Odgen, D. & J.” (Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts), accessed August 31, 2014,

<http://research.oldsalemonline.org/ProficioPublicSearch/ShowImageView.aspx?26840>.

²⁰⁴ “Baltimore Ovioid Knife Box.”

impossible to say how they vary from other knife box forms, but they most likely would probably have been in the kidney shape and possibly not as tall as the box-like forms, perhaps resembling the ovoid knife boxes but having a different shape (Fig. 19).



Figure 19. Ovoid shaped knife boxes. Unknown maker. Baltimore, Maryland. 1790-1815. Mahogany, yellow pine (by microanalysis), and probably maple. 12 ¼ x 13 ½ x 8 ½ (HxWxD) (Inches). Curtesy of Williamsburg Collection. 1993-321, 1. <http://emuseum.history.org/view/objects/asitem/search@/1/title-desc?t:state:flow=b859e049-1d56-4523-b114-9c91bfe096a2>

Another Maryland cabinetmaker who made knife boxes was John Shaw, an Annapolis cabinetmaker. In 1803 he advertised that he had ready-made furniture available which included knife boxes.²⁰⁵ The inventory of his estate in 1809 listed a pair of knife boxes as well.²⁰⁶ Although his advertisement included knife boxes they could have been made by a different shop or imported.²⁰⁷ In the inventory taken at Shaw's death in 1829, a mahogany spoon case is listed at 1 dollar, 1 knife box listed at 25 cents, and its contents of 23 knives and 33 forks listed with it at 3 dollars and fifty cents.²⁰⁸ References to spoon cases are not as common. Shaw's inventory is the only cabinetmaker

²⁰⁵ Alexander Lourie, "To Superintend the Necessary Repairs': The Careers and Work of William and Washington Tuck," ed. Luke Beckerdite, *American Furniture*, 2006, 179.

²⁰⁶ Alexander Lourie, "To Superintend the Necessary Repairs': The Careers and Work of William and Washington Tuck," ed. Luke Beckerdite, *American Furniture*, 2006, 179.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ William Voss Elder, Lu Bartlett, and Baltimore Museum of Art, *John Shaw, Cabinetmaker of Annapolis* (Baltimore.: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1983), 171.

listing of a spoon box found in this study.²⁰⁹ While these knife boxes are listed in his personal inventory it is possible these came from his shop if he was in fact already making knife boxes. Researching Maryland cabinetmakers reveals this area was one of the richest areas for unique knife boxes including column, elliptic, kidney, quasi-urn, and slant front knife boxes and had at least four cabinetmakers identified in this study who created knife boxes in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The quasi-urn shape has the appearance of an urn, but has a completely flat top. The column knife box is circular with a fluted body, usually resting on a pedestal base and platform (Fig. 20).



Figure 20 Knife Box. David Sackriter. Philadelphia. 1810-1820. Mahogany and white pine. 26 1/2 x 11 1/4 (HxW) (Inches). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift in memory of Eugene Sussel by his wife Charlene Sussel, 1991. 1991-98-33.
<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/86813.html?mulR=1105443226|1>

Philadelphia was another popular area for American cabinetmakers that made knife boxes in both the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. John Head is currently

²⁰⁹However, they do show up in some household inventories. Two examples appear in the inventories studied in the Gunston Hall Probate Inventory Database. For example, John Fauntleroy inventory of his household taken on October 7, 1805 not only listed a mahogany knife case with one dozen green ivory handled knives and forks which included two carving knives and forks but also listed a case with one dozen tea spoons. Robert Gilmore of Lancaster, Virginia, had a case with twelve new silver spoons and five old silver spoons listed in the inventory taken of his household in February of 1783. “Gunston Hall’s Probate Inventory Database -- Background.”

the earliest known joiner cabinetmaker who made knife boxes, and his account book may be the earliest cabinetmaker account book in America. He emigrated in 1717 from England to Philadelphia and worked as a cabinetmaker until his death in 1754. He recorded in his surviving account book that he made knife box for Henry Clifton on May 21, 1724 at £0-2-0. He made other boxes including wig and candle boxes. In addition to knife boxes he made a full range of furniture including clock cases, high chests, and dressing tables.²¹⁰

Philadelphia cabinetmaker David Sackriter also made column shaped knife boxes. According to his account book he made at least one cylindrical mahogany and white pine knife box between 1810 and 1820 (Fig. 20).²¹¹ Several of his survive today including one at the Hill-Physick house once owned by the Cadwalader family (Fig. 21).²¹² These examples are all the same except for a small variation in the size of the finials. Despite having works known to be made by him, there is not much information known about this particular cabinetmaker.

David Sackriter is the cabinetmaker with the most knife boxes attributed to him. These knife boxes are also similar to those in the Colonial Williamsburg collection and Metropolitan Museum of Art collection. However, it is believed that the ones in the Colonial Williamsburg and Metropolitan Museum of Art collections were made in

²¹⁰ Stiefel, "Philadelphia Cabinetmaking and Commerce, 1718-1753: The Account Book of John Head, Joiner."

²¹¹ Attributed to David Sackriter, *Knife Box*, Mahogany and white pine, 1810, Philadelphia Museum of Art, [zotero://attachment/752/](https://www.pma.org/collection/artwork/david-sackriter/knife-box-one-pair).

²¹² Lucy Peterson, Visit to Philadelphia Museum of Art Exhibit and Storage Area, Visit, examination of artifacts, discussion with museum professional, July 30, 2014; David Sackriter, *Knife Box (One of a Pair)*, Mahogany and pine, 1814, Dallas Museum of Art, 1989.B.164.1-2, <https://www.dma.org/collection/artwork/david-sackriter/knife-box-one-pair>; Art, *Philadelphia*, 231-2.

Baltimore (Fig. 21- 23).²¹³ The body of the knife boxes definitely came from the same design source. The largest differences between these examples and Sackriter's are in the finials, hardware, and wood. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art knife boxes use tulip poplar, as opposed to white pine in the Sackriter example. The Metropolitan Museum of Art knife boxes also lack any kind of feet. The heights also vary slightly, the largest being 28 inches high and the smallest being 25 inches. The design source for these column-like knife boxes have yet to be located. It is very possible that Sackriter made the examples in the Colonial Williamsburg and Metropolitan Museum of Art given how similar they are in appearance to his documented examples. The differences, such as the use of brass hardware, or the different shaped finials, could have been a specific request of the customer, and could be why feet are not applied to all. Cabinetmakers were certainly traveling between the Philadelphia and Maryland so it is possible that one cabinetmaker had learned how to make the column shape knife box in one city and brought the knowledge with him.²¹⁴



Figure 21. Knife Box. 27 ½ x 15 1/5 x 11 ¼, Mahogany and eastern white pine. (HxWxD) Dallas Museum of Art, The Faith P. and Charles L. Bybee Collection, gift of Faith P. Bybee. <https://www.dma.org/collection/artwork/david-sackriter/knife-box-one-pair-1989.B.164.1-2>.

²¹³ Unknown Baltimore Maryland, *Knife Box, One of a Pair*.

²¹⁴ Chicirda, Visit to Colonial Williamsburg.



Figure 22. Knife boxes. unknown maker. Baltimore, Maryland. 1810. 28 x 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ (HxWxD) (Inches) Mahogany, tulip poplar, white pine, and brass. Williamsburg Collection, 1997-1,1. <http://emuseum.history.org/view/objects/asitem/search@/2/title-desc?t:state:flow=b859e049-1d56-4523-b114-9c91bfe096a2>



Figure 23. Pair of Knife Boxes. Unknown maker. Baltimore. 1815-1820. mahogany, oak, mahogany and amboyna veneers (secondary woods: oak, white pine, tulip poplar). Purchase Mrs. Russell Sage Gift. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970. 1970.260.1, .2. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/4628>

Sometime between 1808 and 1815, Philadelphia cabinetmaker Joseph B. Barry made a sideboard with accompanying knife boxes (Fig. 24).²¹⁵ It was originally owned by the Gratz family, most likely Rebecca or Rachel Gratz.²¹⁶ These knife boxes are rectilinear, with flat tops and show that Barry was familiar with the Empire style popular

²¹⁵ “Washington, Warhol, and Winterthur: Unexpected Provenance in the Museum Collection | Winterthur Museum & Library Blog,” accessed September 5, 2013, <http://museumblog.winterthur.org/2013/09/04/washington-warhol-and-winterthur-unexpected-provenance-in-the-museum-collection/>.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. However, the pointed arches demonstrated his knowledge of the Gothic style also popular at this time, and the use of acanthus leaves, reeded columns, and pylons demonstrated his incorporation of the Grecian and Egyptian style into his work.



Figure 24. Sideboard and knife boxes. Joseph B. Barry. Philadelphia. 1808-1815. Mahogany veneer; Tulip poplar; Pine, white; Wood; Brass. Winterthur Museum and Gardens. Museum purchase with funds provided by the Henry Francis du Pont Collectors Circle. 1988.0008.001, 1988.0008.002, 1988.0008.003.

The label engraved by James Akin for Barry displays a Federal style sideboard and knife urns. The illustrated knife boxes were much more delicate than the example that survives today (Fig. 25).²¹⁷ This sideboard with accompanying knife boxes was certainly designed to make an impression on dinner guests. Barry had been born in Dublin and completed his training as a cabinetmaker in Dublin and London, but had arrived in Philadelphia by 1794.²¹⁸ Besides sideboards and knife boxes Barry made

²¹⁷ Heckscher, "English Furniture Pattern Books in Eighteenth Century America."

²¹⁸ Carswell Rush Berlin, "Classical Furniture in Federal Philadelphia by Carswell Rush Berlin from *Antiques & Fine Art Magazine*," accessed August 31, 2014, <http://www.antiquesandfineart.com/articles/article.cfm?request=771>.

furniture that featured bouille work.²¹⁹ His knowledge of different styles and wide training demonstrate that Barry was a diverse cabinetmaker and very accomplished in all his work, including knife boxes.



Figure 25. Joseph B. Barry trade card. Maker: James Akin, Philadelphia, ca. 1810. Line engraving on paper. From an advertisement by the Old Print Shop, in *Antiques* 34, no. 1 (July, 1938): 36.

<http://www.chipstone.org/html/publications/1994AF/Hechscher94/HecherBig/1994HB23.html>

Henry Connelly, a cabinet and chair maker who worked in Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century, also used a label that depicted a slant top knife boxes (Fig. 26).²²⁰ Unlike all of the other labels which depict knife boxes resting on a sideboard, Connelly's label shows the knife box alone and unsupported by any other furniture form. The label demonstrates his creation of knife boxes; unfortunately none that survive can be attributed to Connelly's shop. The use of the shell on the lid of the knife box as depicted on the trade card also reveals his knowledge of popular English designs for knife

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Clark Pearce, Merri Lou Schaumann, and Catherine Ebert, "Robert McGuffin: Journeyman Extraordinaire for Henry Connelly," *AFAnews.com*, (May 8, 2012), <http://www.afanews.com/articles/item/1185-robert-mcguffin-journeyman-extraordinaire-for-henry-connelly#.Uo6wx-KzKSo>.

boxes. This is the only known example of American cabinetmakers using this popular decoration on knife boxes.



Figure 26. Henry Connelly Lable. Printed paper label nailed to a sideboard. Engraved by John Draper, Philadelphia. Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art . photography by Gavin Ashworth. <http://www.afanews.com/articles/item/1185-robert-mcguffin-journeyman-extraordinaire-for-henry-connelly>

Knife boxes were even made by cabinetmakers as far west as Tennessee. At least two cabinetmakers are known. Newspaper advertisements list sideboards, and many sideboards survive from Tennessee from the early nineteenth century, but as of yet no knife boxes.²²¹ However, looking into specific cabinetmakers' inventories reveal that James B. Houston as well as Daniel McBean made knife boxes. James Houston worked in Knoxville in 1810 and then in Nashville from 1814 to 1824. He advertised that he was an experienced journeyman from New York and Philadelphia and was aware of current eastern styles, which must have included knife boxes. The inventory of his shop taken after his death in 1824 included one knife box at 2 dollars, a knife box at \$1.50, a cherry knife box at \$1.56, and two knife cases at \$1.50 each demonstrating he made several

²²¹ Derita Coleman Williams, Nathan Harsh, and C. Tracey Parks, *The Art and Mystery of Tennessee Furniture and Its Makers through 1850* (Nashville.: Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Museum Foundation, 1988), 26.

knife boxes in his shop.²²² Since this inventory is of his shop, and does not include personal belongings, it is much more definitive that he made these, compared to other cabinetmaker inventories which mix both personal and shop inventory items. The estate inventory of Daniel McBean sold in November 1815 after his death included one cherry knife box which Williamson Adams bought for 56 cents and another cherry knife box bought by Samuel McChesny for \$1.25.²²³ The fact that these were from inventories of his shop helps confirm that these were objects they were selling in their shop and not just personal affects.

No knife box cabinetmakers have yet been found who worked in Charleston, South Carolina.²²⁴ Charleston cabinetmaker William Axson advertised that he was selling sundry articles including knife boxes, but it is uncertain if he made these himself. In the same advertisement he was also selling ceramics and glass bottles, and therefore the knife boxes most likely came from somewhere else.²²⁵ However, many Charleston cabinetmakers were aware of English cabinet designs such as those illustrated by Thomas Sheraton and Thomas Shearer, suggesting that they could have made knife boxes since knife boxes are published in those sources.²²⁶ Three urn knife boxes, all of the same set, are known to have been made in Charleston, South Carolina (Fig. 2). No other examples

²²² Derita Coleman Williams, Nathan Harsh, and C. Tracey Parks, *The Art and Mystery of Tennessee Furniture and Its Makers through 1850* (Nashville.: Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Museum Foundation, 1988), 26–7, 329.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 325.

²²⁴ Bradford L. Rauschenberg and John Bivins, *The Furniture of Charleston, 1680-1820: Neoclassical Furniture* (Winston-Salem: Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 2003), 450; McInnis and Leath, “Beautiful Specimens, Elegant Patterns: New York Furniture for the Charleston Market, 1810-1840”; Elizabeth A. Fleming, “Staples for Genteel Living: The Importation of London Household Furnishings into Charleston during the 1780s,” ed. Luke Beckerdite, *American Furniture*, 1997, <http://www.chipstone.org/content.php/13/Overview>.

²²⁵ Rauschenberg and Bivins, *The Furniture of Charleston, 1680-1820*, 893–4.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1256–7.

from South Carolina exist to compare them to, so it is impossible to know if they were typical of the area..²²⁷ At the same time many customers in Charleston were importing knife boxes rather than asking local cabinetmakers to produce these objects.

Several American cabinetmakers were also involved with repairing and finishing knife boxes, but it is uncertain if they made them as well. For example, Isaac Ashton of New York varnished one knife box for General Henry Knox in 1793.²²⁸ Some cabinetmakers who repaired boxes certainly had the skills to make them as well. In 1820, Richard Alexander repaired and varnished a pair of knife boxes for six dollars.²²⁹ Jacob Brouwer was also involved in this work, mending a knife box for New York Merchant Nicholas Low in January of 1796.²³⁰ Likewise, William Savery in Philadelphia repaired a knife box in 1774.²³¹ While it is uncertain if these cabinetmakers made knife boxes, and certainly repairing knife boxes is not quite the same as making them, these cabinetmakers were at least familiar with them.

Other cabinetmakers may have made knife boxes if asked, but simply did not record them in their inventories or list them in their advertisements. For example, many cabinetmakers advertised ready-made furniture but also included phrases that could encompass knife boxes. That a cabinetmaker carried “on the cabinet-making business, in all its branches,” created “all kinds of work in his line,” or made “all kinds of furniture”

²²⁷ James III Jordan, “The Neoclassical Dining Room in Charleston,” *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, November 1988,

http://archive.org/stream/journalofearlyso1421988muse/journalofearlyso1421988muse_djvu.txt.

²²⁸ Evans, “The Written Evidence of Furniture Repairs and Alterations: How Original Is ‘All Original’?”

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 80.

could imply that they also made knife boxes.²³² Therefore, it is possible that even more American cabinetmakers made knife boxes, but the written record and physical objects, do not reveal this to us.

Twenty-four cabinetmakers who made knife boxes in the United States have been identified for certain, and several more who may have. The majority of knife boxes were made in the northeast, as compared to the south as it seems that more people were importing knife boxes from England in the south.²³³ The earliest cabinetmaker could have been John Head in 1724, and the latest, possibly, Willis Cowling who made them as late as 1828, the time period largely corresponding with knife box use in the United States.²³⁴ Some such as David Sackriter and Fenwick Lyell might be considered specialist in making knife boxes, whereas the majority of cabinetmakers who made knife boxes made them on a more irregular basis.

Paralleling the popularity of knife boxes, the majority of cabinetmakers making knife boxes were working during the federal period and knife box constructions starts to wane in the early 1810s. A few knife boxes made by cabinetmakers Joseph Barry, David Sackriter, Edmund Johnson, and William Whitehead survive today and will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. However, many knife boxes that survive are not labeled, making it impossible to give specific cabinetmaker recognition for their work. While studying thirty cabinetmakers who made knife boxes is certainly not enough to

²³² Margaret Berwind Schiffer, *Furniture and Its Makers of Chester County, Pennsylvania* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), 192; (U.S.), *The Arts & Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina*, 161-65.

²³³ Fleming, "Staples for Genteel Living: The Importation of London Household Furnishings into Charleston during the 1780s."

²³⁴ "Willis Cowling (1788-1828) Richmond Cabinetmaker," 55; Stiefel, "Philadelphia Cabinetmaking and Commerce, 1718-1753: The Account Book of John Head, Joiner."

demonstrate that American cabinetmakers were making anywhere near as many as English cabinetmakers this research demonstrates that American cabinetmakers were making knife boxes in America. American cabinetmakers had reasons to make knife boxes and just as many reasons not to make them. English heritage and training, typical dining of the elite, consumer demand, and the opportunity to fit into a niche market encouraged many American cabinetmakers to make knife boxes. Inventories, advertisements, and account books reveal the variety and breadth of American cabinetmakers who made knife boxes. The surviving knife boxes in public and private collections reveal the ingenuity and contribution of American cabinetmakers to the creation of knife boxes in the United States.

CHAPTER FOUR: CATALOG OF AMERICAN KNIFE BOXES

Knowing which American cabinetmakers made knife boxes and their reasons for doing so, reveals the widespread construction of these objects throughout the United States and demonstrates they were not entirely imported. Looking at surviving American-made knife boxes not only reveals what knife boxes looked like when constructed by specific cabinetmakers but also demonstrates that a vast number of knife boxes are not simply attributed to a sub-group of cabinetmakers. This chapter will discuss the appearance, individual knife box construction, and design sources of the twenty-nine American-made knife boxes that have been identified in this study. In terms of construction, slant front knife boxes usually have a hinged lid and a glued case, sometimes with joinery elements such as dovetails or mortise and tenon joints. Vase knife boxes are usually hollowed out on a lathe from a single piece of wood. Their bases and finials are usually attached to the structure with a mortise and tenon joint. Other construction methods are noted where necessary below.

The two knife boxes in the United States Diplomatic Reception Rooms at the State Department made by Salem cabinetmaker Edmund Johnson are made out of mahogany and have eagle engraved Sheffield plate escutcheons (Fig. 14). Sheffield was an area in England which manufactured a great deal of pewter and silver which was sent

to the United States.²³⁵ This pair of knife boxes was made in 1795 and is inscribed with Johnson's name. An eagle inlay decorates the slanted top. The eagle had already been adopted for the United States Seal in the 1780s, however it is not an exact copy of the seal.²³⁶ Given the rather unrefined quality of the inlay it may have been done by an apprentice. The knife boxes also have stringing around the edges. Their concave façades mimics that of Sheraton's design.²³⁷ This pair is the only American example found that has a concave façade. They beautifully represent the federal period in the United States with its geometric form and the eagle motif. No other American examples of knife boxes have been found with the eagle decoration. It is also a rare example of a signed knife box. Only two sets of knife boxes that were signed by the maker were found in this study.

Several un-attributed knife boxes are known to have been made in Baltimore. One is of the slant top variety, common in America, features the initial "R" on the top (Fig. 27).²³⁸ Although the maker is unknown, there is a clear record of its owners. George Robertson and Mary Waters owned this knife box, and the R stands for their last name.²³⁹ It is one of a few knife boxes where the owners initial is incorporated into the design. The exterior box is mahogany, the interior dividers are made of poplar and the bottom is white pine following the typical pattern of secondary woods being used in spaces that cannot be seen. These woods are also typical American woods found in the mid-Atlantic region. The shape overall is that of Sheraton's or Hepplewhite's sloping front knife box with a

²³⁵ Coffin et al., *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table 1500-2005*, 64.

²³⁶ Bordes, "Baltimore Federal Furniture."

²³⁷ Johnson, *Pair of Federal Eagle-Inlaid Knife Boxes*; Sheraton, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, 89–90.

²³⁸ Weidman, *Furniture in Maryland 1740-1940*, 97.

²³⁹ Weidman, *Furniture in Maryland 1740-1940*, 97.

somewhat rectangular form. However, it does not incorporate the concave or convex façade. Instead, it has a center flat front. This center flat front is found on three other American examples. It has a brass escutcheon around the keyhole.



Figure 27. Knife box. Unknown maker. Baltimore, Maryland. 1795-1820. Mahogany with poplar dividers and white pine bottom. *Maryland Furniture*, 97.

Another Baltimore knife box has more of a rectangular box shape that is flat on the top (Fig. 28).²⁴⁰ This knife box was constructed between 1795 and 1810. It was constructed using mahogany as a primary wood and yellow pine as a secondary wood. This helps to confirm its southern origin.²⁴¹ The interior dividers and sides of the case are yellow pine and the bottom board is made out of poplar. This knife box is rectangular and has a flat lid which is unusual as most square and rectangle knife boxes have a slopping lid. It has a small concave and convex façade, following the typical look of knife boxes, and rests on small round feet. These pieces are believed to have Baltimore origins

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

because they have similar stringing and banding to other Baltimore federal furniture.²⁴² It is the only knife box identified with this rectangular body, flat lid, and complex façade.



Figure 28. Knife Box. Unknown maker. Baltimore, Maryland. 1795-1810. Mahogany, yellow pine, poplar. *Maryland Furniture*, 97.

A pair of unique mahogany, ovoid- shaped knife boxes with yellow pine secondary wood is also attributed to Baltimore (Fig. 19).²⁴³ These unusual knife boxes were made in Baltimore between 1790 and 1815. They have mahogany book-matched veneered fronts, demonstrating the amount of effort put into creating these knife boxes, as these veneers would have had to have been carefully chosen and applied without making any mistakes. The curved sides of the lid are composed of vertically laminated staves. This is the same kind of construction done by a cooper, suggesting this box may have been made by a cooper or at least someone influenced by the coopering trade.²⁴⁴ The flat back board is set into rabbets in the ends of the curved section. The top board

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ “Baltimore Ovoid Knife Box.”

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

also rests in a rabbet. The bottom edge is faced with nailed-on cock beading.²⁴⁵ This shape was also commonly used in tea caddies so it is possible local tea caddies inspired the maker of this knife box.²⁴⁶ Its ovoid shape and use of a flat lid is unusual. The cabinetmakers David and Jonathan Odgen listed ovoid shaped knife boxes among the wares that they made. Around the oval shape of the box is stringing. This stringing is made of contrasting light and dark wood placed in an alternating pattern. The unusual design as well as the large size of the knife boxes most likely drew attention from visitors. The insides would have also been lined with fabric, but only remnants of the fabric remain.²⁴⁷

Another example made in Baltimore is quite unusual.²⁴⁸ It was made between 1785 and 1795 and was made out of mahogany and another light colored wood.²⁴⁹ Although it has an urn-shaped bottom, the top lid is completely flat and not evenly circular. Around the top rim is an inlaid vine design, very much in the classical taste. It is uncertain where the design source came from, and no other examples with this design have been located. The vine pattern, along with the flat top, makes this knife urn unique at present.

David Sackriter from Philadelphia made a surviving cylindrical, column-shaped mahogany and white pine knife box between 1810 and 1820. The reeding on the sides is carved from solid mahogany (Fig. 20). It has a pinecone or pineapple finial with feet that

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Hurst and Prown, *Southern Furniture 1680-1830: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, 609–11.

²⁴⁸ It is currently in a private collection but is listed in a database operated by the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts as a Baltimore example. Do not have permission to use image in thesis.

²⁴⁹ It is currently in a private collection but is listed in a database operated by the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts as a Baltimore example.

have four hairy paws. The top sits on a central pole, all of which is removable. It has a locking mechanism, but no decorative escutcheons around the keyhole. This column-shape form was popular during the early nineteenth century, and other knife boxes of this form have been identified. So far the source for this design has not been located; however it clearly fits into the classical aesthetic with its use of the column form and reeding popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The slots for the silver are cut from solid pieces of wood. The body and top are carved from solid mahogany. The reeding is carved into the case and not applied. A mahogany veneer is applied to the top.²⁵⁰

The Dallas Museum of Art houses knife boxes that were made in 1814 by cabinetmaker David Sackriter. They are made of mahogany veneer and white pine as a secondary wood (Fig. 21). Both are signed in pencil “David Sackriter Jan 12. 1814.”²⁵¹ Only two sets of American knife boxes are signed, and this set is therefore an uncommon example of signed American knife boxes. It looks exactly like the knife box at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, solidifying the attribution to Sackriter of the knife box in the collection of that museum.

Two other pairs of column knife boxes from the Williamsburg collection and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have a unique column-like form that closely resembles the Philadelphia cabinetmaker David Sackriter’s knife boxes (Fig. 22-23). These also have distinct pineapple finials, a popular southern motif.²⁵² However, The Williamsburg and

²⁵⁰ Art, *Philadelphia*, 232.

²⁵¹ Boor et al., *Philadelphia Empire Furniture*, 537.

²⁵² Bordes, “Baltimore Federal Furniture.”

Metropolitan Museum of Art knife box finials are gilded. The two in the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection made around 1820 have a mahogany veneer, the secondary woods being oak and pine. Like Sackriter's knife boxes, it does not have the brass lock and feet, but simply has the pedestal base. Unlike the other column knife boxes, the Metropolitan Museum of Art knife boxes are not raised up on feet of any kind. The two knife boxes from the Colonial Williamsburg collection were made in 1810 of mahogany, tulip poplar white pine, with brass pulls. These knife boxes at 28 inches high are larger than most. The height of luxury, these knife boxes also incorporate the use of Australian lacewood veneers. This pair of knife boxes was first owned by the Austen family of Maryland. The knife boxes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Colonial Williamsburg have the same pineapple finial and use gilding unlike the Dallas Museum of Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art's knife box which are plain. Of all the surviving American-made knife boxes, this column form and design are the most common form found in this study. Given their similarities it is likely that these two were made in Philadelphia if not by Sackriter himself.

A knife box now in the Boston Museum of Arts is believed to be made in America, possibly in Philadelphia, although no maker is known. It was most likely made between 1790 and 1800 (Fig. 29).²⁵³ It has mahogany veneers with inlays of satinwood,

²⁵³ Unknown, *Footed Knife Box, One of a Pair*, Satinwood, rosewood, sycamore, and mahogany. 1790-1800, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/footed-knife-box-one-of-a-pair-44392>; Museum of Fine Arts Boston et al., *Eighteenth-Century American Arts: The M. and M. Karolik Collection of Paintings, Drawings, Engravings, Furniture, Silver, Needlework & Incidental Objects Gathered to Illustrate the Achievements of American Artists and Craftsmen of the Period from 1720 to 1820* (Pub. for the Museum of fine arts, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1950), 136.

rosewood, sycamore on the lid, and molding on cover.²⁵⁴ Although it has some curve, the very front is flat which is unusual. The unusual flat front is flanked by two half round corners on each side



Figure 29. Knife box. Unknown maker, Made in America. 1790-1800. Mahogany veneers with inlay of satinwood, rosewood, sycamore and mahogany; faces between cover and case of ebony; moulding on cover. 37.8 x 22.5 x 28.6 cm. Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The M. and M. Karolik Collection of Eighteenth-Century American Arts , 41.598b

A very similar knife box also in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is made around the same time possibly in Philadelphia (Fig. 30).²⁵⁵ Unlike the previous knife boxes it does not have a flat front, but rather a half round front flanked by two hollow corners a serpentine, rounded front, which shows up on seven knife boxes in this study. However, the shape of the front: flat or round, was most likely a consumer choice.

²⁵⁴ Unknown, *Footed Knife Box, One of a Pair*, Satinwood, rosewood, sycamore, and mahogany. 1790-1800, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/footed-knife-box-one-of-a-pair-44392>; Museum of Fine Arts Boston et al., *Eighteenth-Century American Arts: The M. and M. Karolik Collection of Paintings, Drawings, Engravings, Furniture, Silver, Needlework & Incidental Objects Gathered to Illustrate the Achievements of American Artists and Craftsmen of the Period from 1720 to 1820* (Pub. for the Museum of fine arts, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1950), 136.

²⁵⁵ Boston et al., *Eighteenth-Century American Arts*, 136; Unknown, *Knife Box*, mahogany veneers with inlay of satinwood. Tulipwood and ebony, 1790-1800, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/knife-box-one-of-a-pair-44383>.



Figure 30. Knife Box. Unknown maker, Americas. 1790 – 1800. Mahogany veneers with inlay of satinwood. Tulipwood and ebony. 15 1/4 x 9 x 12 3/8 inches. Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The M. and M. Karolik Collection of Eighteenth century American Arts. <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/knife-box-one-of-a-pair-44383>

Although it is known that Lewis Fueter made the silver fittings, the maker of the a set of three knife boxes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is unknown (Fig. 4).²⁵⁶ These three knife boxes are made of mahogany, mahogany veneer, white pine, and tulip poplar and are believed to have been made in the Mid-Atlantic between 1765 and 1795. The use of tulip poplar suggests a Mid-Atlantic origin.²⁵⁷ One of the three is slightly smaller than the other two. The inside of both resemble the construction of shagreen knife boxes which have box long slates that segment the interior of the box. Like shagreen knife boxes, these dividers are lined with fabric (Fig. 31).²⁵⁸ This is in contrast to knife boxes that use one board of wood that has slots cut out to hold silverware. This is the only

²⁵⁶ Fueter, *American Knife Box*; Rogers, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 313–4.

²⁵⁷ Rogers, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 313.

²⁵⁸ Vincent and Gallagher, *Visit to Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

wooden American-made knife boxes found to have the design layout commonly associated with shagreen knife boxes.



Figure 31. Knife boxes open. Lewis Fueter -Silversmith. Mid-Atlantic. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, white pine, tulip poplar. 1765–95. 14 5/8 x 8 3/4 x 8 7/8 (HxWxD) (Inches). Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1954. Metropolitan Museum of Art. 54.24.1, <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/4624>. Photography by Alexandra Parker

A pair of New York knife boxes is listed in the June 1966 brochure of antiques offered by Israel Sack and is believed to have been made by cabinetmaker William Whitehead (Fig. 15).²⁵⁹ They have a serpentine-shaped front that has inlaid banding and diamond-shaped ivory escutcheons. The silver shield on the lids is engraved GRML, which has not been further identified. Although it has a mahogany veneer, the secondary wood is tulip poplar. Whitehead's knife boxes are very unusual. These knife boxes mimic the shape and design of the sideboard they accompany. They are much wider than other knife boxes in this study. They do have the typical serpentine front shape seen on other

²⁵⁹ Israel Sack, *American Antiques From the Israel Sack Collection*, ed. Joseph Hennage, vol. 5 (Highland House Publishers, 1974), 1254–5.

knife boxes. When published in the Israel Sack brochure they were described as being unique, and rightly so: the shape of these knife boxes and inlay design is different than all other knife boxes in this study. The use of these corner fan inlays is a design only found on this knife box, although this was most likely due to its unique shape. This design simply would not make sense on a rectangular sloped front knife box or urn knife box.

Another knife box in the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art is labeled as English or American (Fig. 32).²⁶⁰ It is made out of mahogany and has silver mounts. The use of mahogany, without a good identification of secondary woods, makes attribution difficult which is why it may have been made in either place. The choice of wood, with its bold sweeping grain, follows the serpentine construction of the knife box. It is similar in shape to knife boxes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the escutcheon placement, if not the ornate design of the silver escutcheon, is similar as well. It is also lined with a red fabric.²⁶¹ Unlike the Fueter knife boxes, the silver escutcheon has not been marked so it is impossible to tell if an American silversmith worked on them. However, if American made, this knife box would be one of two that have ornate silver escutcheons on them.

²⁶⁰ Artist Unknown, *English or American Knife Box (one of a Pair)*, Mahogany with silver mounts, c. 1780, Philadelphia Museum of Art, [zotero://attachment/757/](https://www.pma.org/objects/757).

²⁶¹ Peterson, Visit to Philadelphia Museum of Art Exhibit and Storage Area.



Figure 32. Knife box (one of a pair). Artist unknown, English or American. c. 1780-90. Mahogany with silver mounts 14 ½ x 9 ¾ x 8 ½ . (HxWxD) (Inches). Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art. Bequest of Constance A. Jones, 1988, 1988-27-70. <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/159128.html?mulR=81928909711>

The pair of knife boxes in the Kaufman collection now at the National Gallery of Art have no known maker but are believed to have been made in the United States (Fig. 33).²⁶² They are made of mahogany veneer and white pine, the white pine helping to confirm an American origin.²⁶³ The inlaid decoration is elaborate with urn and flowers on the lid, two columns of inlay with urn decoration on the façade and a star inlay inside of the box. The bottom board and dividers are made up of pine. The beaded edge and feet are made of mahogany. The boxes have locks and are fitted with silver escutcheons. The lids are veneered on the sides. The inside is covered with a red wash. The inlaid urn design on the lid not only promoted the aesthetic of the federal period but also relates closely to the design on the knife boxes in the Los Angeles Museum of Arts (Fig. 34) Its pictorial inlay makes these objects stand out because none of the others in this study have this design.

²⁶² Flanigan, “Knife Box”; “Philadelphia Museum of Art - Collections Object : Knife Box (one of a Pair),” accessed September 26, 2013, <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/159128.html?mulR=1044571536|2>.

²⁶³ Flanigan, “Knife Box”; “Philadelphia Museum of Art - Collections Object : Knife Box (one of a Pair), ” 224. Wood based on microanalysis.



Figure 33. Knife Boxes. Unknown maker. American. Mahogany veneer, White Pine. Kaufman collection, National Gallery of Art. *American Furniture in the Kaufman Collection*, p. 225.

Two knife boxes are in the Los Angeles Museum of Art resemble the Kaufman collection knife boxes (Fig. 34). Made in the late eighteenth century they have a bombe front with sloping lid. They feature inlaid urns on their lids against rather dramatically grained mahogany. Although the maker is unknown, it is believed by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to have been made in the United States between 1785 and 1800.²⁶⁴ Unlike the Kaufman collection knife boxes these do not have any inlay decoration down the front. And although similar in form and having the same design on the lid, the Kaufman collection knife boxes and Los Angeles Museum of Art knife boxes are made out of different secondary woods. The Los Angeles knife boxes use larch and the Kaufman collection knife boxes use white pine.

²⁶⁴ Unknown, *Pair of Knife Boxes*, Mahogany, larch, 1800 1785, M.91.316.1a-b, Los Angeles Museum of Art, <http://collections.lacma.org/node/172828>.



Figure 34. Pair of knife boxes. Unknown maker. United States, 1785-1800. Mahogany, larch, inlays. 14 x 8 x 8 in. Gift of Mrs. Murray Braunfeld (M.91.316.1a-b). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. <http://collections.lacma.org/node/172828>

One example of another pair of knife boxes made in the United States is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They cases constructed satinwood and mahogany, both used on the outside of the knife box. They were constructed around 1790. It has a slant front lid with rectangular form (Fig. 35-36).²⁶⁵ The pair also features brass escutcheons and hinges. However, its shape as well as the framing on the lid resembles the knife box in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Fig. 29).²⁶⁶ Their interiors feature a star inlay on the inside of the lid and can hold eight spoons, twenty-six knives, and twelve forks which is more than most. Like several other boxes studied, they has a flat front.

Unknown, *Pair of Knife Boxes*, Mahogany, larch, 1800 1785, M.91.316.1a-b, Los Angeles Museum of Art, <http://collections.lacma.org/node/172828>.

²⁶⁵ "The Metropolitan Museum of Art - Knife Box," accessed November 26, 2013, http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/4622?rpp=60&pg=7&rndkey=20131126&ao=on&ft=* &when=A.D.+1600-1800&where=United+States&what=Furniture&pos=405.

²⁶⁶ Vincent and Gallagher, Visit to Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 35-36. Knife Box. Unknown Maker. American. 1790. Mahogany, satinwood. 14 15/16 x 8 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Ethel M. Yocum, 1964, 64.211.1, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/4622>.

The only knife box made out of flamed birch veneer to mimic the appearance of mahogany (Fig. 37). Tulip poplar is also used in its construction.²⁶⁷ It is believed to have been made in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.²⁶⁸ It has seven slots of spoons, forty-eight slots for forks and knives, and two slots at the very front for more forks. It rests upon small ball-shaped feet. The use of birch makes this knife box unique in this study.



Figure 37. Knife Box. Flamed Birch and tulip poplar. Private Collection.

²⁶⁷ Knife box is currently in private collection. All information known about this knife box is based on information provided by the current owner. Identification of wood based on wood analysis.

²⁶⁸ Knife box is currently in private collection. All information known about this knife box is based on information provided by the current owner.

The Brooklyn Museum has a pair of American knife boxes, with twenty-six slots for utensils each (Fig. 1).²⁶⁹ Made around 1800, they are made of mahogany veneer and feature inlay and stringing on the sides.²⁷⁰ No more specific information is known as to where exactly they were made, but they are believed to have been made in the United States. The pair has a typical slant front and is very plain overall.

A pair of knife boxes with sloped lids, but with much more rounded fronts than the other related examples in this study, incorporates the use of tulip poplar as a secondary wood, indicating an American origin (Fig. 38).²⁷¹ They resemble other knife boxes of the same region in private collections, which points to an origin in the greater Philadelphia area, including Odesa, Delaware, where the knife boxes reside today, and may have been from originally.²⁷² The mahogany veneer was particularly chosen for its dramatic grain patterning, and the use of the banding across the front of the lid is not seen often in American made knife boxes.

²⁶⁹ Unknown American, *Knife Box*.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ Philip Zimmerman, "Odessa Knife Boxes," September 15, 2014. These knife boxes are currently in the Wilson Warner House in Odesa, Delaware. The knife boxes were part of furnishings gathered by Mrs. E. Tatnall Warner (Mary Corbit Warner), who lived from 1843 to 1923, for the Wilson Warner House, which she set up as a historic house. Unfortunately, she left no information about origins or provenances of specific objects, although much of what she used to furnish the house had direct ties to the Warner family. Therefore, the full provenance of these knife boxes cannot be fully pinned down. However, if they were originally owned by the Warner family, they would have bought these knife boxes locally, according to email correspondence author had with Philip Zimmerman.

²⁷² *Ibid.*



Figure 38. Mahogany, Tulip Poplar. Wilson-Warner House, Historic Houses of Odessa, Photograph by Alexandra Parker, 1971.0628.001.

One knife box which originated from Massachusetts is very simple. It is made out of pine with dovetailed corners and is painted and marbled (Fig. 39). It is inscribed:

Made By Isiah Webster / Jan. [?] 1795 / Presented to C.H. Perry 2d / June 1st
1864 and inside was a piece a paper, now kept separately, that states "This knife
box was made by your Great / Grandfather Isiah Webster in Jan 1795 / the day
your grandmother Perry was / born. My mother gave it to me / June 1st 1864 - &
now I give it to / you to keep in your curio room. / the day of the month is worn
out / but your Mother can give you the / exact date. Respectfully yours / Chas H.
Perry / March 1896." To Lissie W(?) Foster / 99 Corning St. Beverly.²⁷³

²⁷³ Massachusetts, Unknown maker, *Knife Box*, Pin dovetail construction, painted overall with gray green and black marbelized smoke decoration, 1795, <http://www.historicnewengland.org/collections-archives-exhibitions/collections-access/collection-object/capobject?gusn=GUSN-2191&searchterm=knife%20box>.



Figure 39. Knife box. Unknown maker. marbled pine, painted. Inscribed. 1795. 4 x 4 1/5 inches. Probably Massachusetts. Cogswell's Grant. Courtesy of Historic New England 1991.200. <http://www.historicnewengland.org/collections-archives-exhibitions/collections-access/collection-object/capobject?gusn=GUSN-2191&searchterm=knife%20box>

This example is very simple with no lid which is unique for knife boxes. The inscription demonstrates that this was a highly treasured and valued object. Without the inscription labeling it as a knife box it would have been impossible to determine if this box specifically functioned as a knife box considering the lack of individual holes for utensils; it is simple an open box. This raises the possibility of more knife boxes that are open and with no individual compartments that may have been used as knife boxes, but may not be identified as a knife box if they were not labeled as this one was. However, because many open boxes do not have a similar inscription it is hard to say if knife boxes with this look are knife boxes. However, this knife box suggests that other boxes similar to it may have been used for storing utensils. This is the only knife box found in this study to have a simple form, dovetail construction, and an open top.

Another unique knife box currently in a private collection has a rectangular shape (Fig. 40-41).²⁷⁴ Although it looks like a small chest of drawers only the bottom drawer functions as a drawer. The hinged top lifts up to expose a board with 24 slots cut into it to hold silverware. The tips of knife blades held in this knife box sit in a board that rests in

²⁷⁴ Unknown maker, possibly New England, *Knife Box*, White Pine, 19th century, Private Collection.

the middle of the box. It has wooden knobs and is painted. There is a lock to protect the objects inside. It is certainly unique, as it is only one of two that features paint, has no veneered surfaces, and has an unusual shape for a knife box. It is made out of white pine and has brass hardware. The use of painted white pine suggests that it made in rural New England in the early nineteenth century.



Figure 40-1. Knife Box. White Pine and brass hardware. Possibly New England. Early nineteenth century. Private Collection. Photography by Alexandra Parker.

One knife box is believed to be American, due to its unusual design. It is almost fortress-like in appearance, with a scalloped rim and urn finial on top (Fig. 42).²⁷⁵ It is made out of solid mahogany, making it impossible to determine if it was made in America, based on secondary woods. It is the only American example that was discussed in Gregor Norman-Wilcox's two-part articles on knife boxes in *The Magazine Antiques* in October and December 1934.²⁷⁶ Unfortunately, this was the only reference found regarding this knife box and more information is not known about it.

²⁷⁵ Gregor Norman-Wilcox, "Knife Cases Part 1 & 2," *The Magazine Antiques*, December 1934, 225.

²⁷⁶ Gregor Norman-Wilcox, "Knife Cases Part 1 & 2," *Magazine Antiques*, December 1934, 225.



Figure 42. Solid Mahogany with mahogany veneer. American. 1800 – 1815. *The Magazine Antiques*, December 1934, 225.

Only three different urn shaped knife boxes have so far been identified as made in the United States. One of the three urn- shaped knife boxes is at the Yale University Art Gallery, another is in the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and a third in a private collection (Fig. 43).²⁷⁷ The Honolulu Academy of Arts knife urn is believed to have been made in Philadelphia between 1790 and 1800. Like the column knife box in the Colonial Williamsburg collection this knife box also has a thin strip rod of wood that props up the lid.²⁷⁸



Figure 43. Urn shape knife case. Artist unknown. Philadelphia. 1790-1800. mahogany and maple. 27 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches. Gift of Mrs. Edward T. Harrison, 1967. Honolulu Academy of Arts. 3493.1a. http://honolulumuseum.org/art/5378-urn-shaped-knife-casea_z

²⁷⁷ Unknown, Philadelphia, *Urn Knife Box*, Mahogany and maple, 1810 1790, Honolulu Academy of Arts, http://honolulumuseum.org/art/5378-urn-shaped-knife-casea_z.

²⁷⁸ James Jensen, "Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-Century American Furniture at the Honolulu Academy of Arts," *Magazine Antiques*, May 1978, 1092.

The Yale University Art Gallery has the second set of three urn knife boxes (Fig. 2).²⁷⁹ They were made between 1800 and 1820, by an unknown cabinetmaker in Charleston, South Carolina. They are the only known knives box from Charleston. Their urn shape, coupled with their American attribution make them rare. They are made out of mahogany and maple veneer with satinwood, ebony, rosewood, and curly mahogany inlay. Although mahogany is used as a primary wood, it is the only knife box known to also use maple as a veneer. The three have both rectangular and diamond shaped inlays around the top of the urn. The knife vases also feature finials. This set represents the classical design perfectly with its urn form and the use of geometric shapes such as the diamonds and rectangular inlay around the base. A third urn knife box is in a private collection (Fig. 44). It is believed to have been made in Philadelphia and is made out of mahogany veneer. Secondary woods include white pine and tulip poplar.²⁸⁰



²⁷⁹ Maker Unknown, *Set of Three Urn Knife Boxes*.

²⁸⁰ Knife box is currently in a private collection. All information known about this knife box is based on information provided by the current owner.

Figure 44. Knife Urn. Philadelphia, Unknown maker, Wood. Private Collection.

One example made in North Carolina is very different from all other examples.²⁸¹ It has a simple one slot for a few knives. It is possibly made out of cherry. It is the only knife box known to be hung on the wall. It is therefore different in appearance since it was made to hang on a wall and having only one narrow opening for utensils. It still incorporates a slanted form. A contrast to the high style of most of the knife boxes found it is a reminder that knife boxes were used and sought after by many Americans, regardless of wealth, for their practical use. It could have been made as late as 1800. It is a rare example of a southern made knife box as well, which adds to its unique quality because there are so few, due to the high importation of knife boxes to southern areas of the United States.²⁸²

The sideboard and matching knife boxes made by cabinetmaker Joseph Barry between 1808 and 1815 is made of mahogany veneer, tulip poplar, and white pine with brass handles (Fig. 24).²⁸³ The columns flanking the sides of the knife boxes are repeated in the shape of the columns flanking the doors in the base of the sideboard. The front façade of each features Gothic pointed arches. The columns are reeded, have an acanthus

²⁸¹ Unknown from North Carolina, *Knife Box*, Possibly Cherry, 1800 1730, Private Collection/MESDA database. In private collection. Do not have permission to publish image.

²⁸³ Joseph B. Barry, Philadelphia, *Sideboard and Matching Knife Boxes*, Mahogany, mahogany veneer, tulip poplar, white pine, brass, 1815 1808, Winterthur Museum and Garden, http://museumcollection.winterthur.org/single-record.php?resultsperpage=20&view=catalog&srctype=advanced&hasImage=&ObjObjectName=&CreOrigin=&Earliest=&Latest=&CreCreatorLocal_tab=&materialsearch=&ObjObjectID=&ObjCategory=&DesMaterial_tab=&DesTechnique_tab=&AccCreditLineLocal=&CreMarkSignature=&recid=1988.0008.001&srchfld=&srchtxt=barry&id=c89b&rownum=1&version=100&src=results-imagelink-only#.VAowCGPp-Ai; “Washington, Warhol, and Winterthur: Unexpected Provenance in the Museum Collection | Winterthur Museum & Library Blog.”

leaf capital, and terminate in hairy paws with three toes. It was owned by Rachel Gratz between 1783 and 1823.²⁸⁴ The design of this knife boxes with the veneered Gothic arches make these knife boxes different compared to all the other examples explored in this study.

Another empire style sideboard with matching knife boxes, possibly made by Joseph Barry, is known to be made in Philadelphia due to its provenance (Fig. 45-46).²⁸⁵ This sideboard with matching knife boxes was made in Philadelphia between 1825 and 1830. It was made from mahogany veneers, over white pine and yellow poplar. Ebony, brass, purpleheart, holly, lightwood banding, and some other unidentified woods are also used as inlays in its construction. The knife boxes are large, their height reaching almost 22 inches. The design incorporates ionic capitols and floral inlay on an ebony background. They are believed to have been owned by merchant Simon Gratz in Philadelphia. This work is also attributed to Barry because it is based on his advertisements in which he references boule work.²⁸⁶ Boule work is marquetry that combines metal and wood to decorate furniture. It is usually made out of sheets of metal and wood; in this case brass was used to create floral decoration.²⁸⁷ The brass inlay is set into an ebonized background. The use of brass columns is also unique to these knife

²⁸⁴ Boor et al., *Philadelphia Empire Furniture*, 394. For a full description of sideboard see Donald L Fennimore's *Searching for Roots: The Genealogy of a Philadelphia Sideboard* in the Cleveland Ohio western reserve antiques show catalogue, 1990, pages 14-15.

²⁸⁵ Unknown Philadelphia Maker, *Sideboard and Pair of Knife Boxes*, Mahogany, mahogany veneer, ebony, brass, lightwood banding, white pine, yellow poplar, unidentified hard woods, c 1825, Gallery 107, American Art, first floor, Philadelphia Museum of Art, <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/39683.html?mulR=1376945609|1>.

²⁸⁶ Boor, et al., *Philadelphia Empire Furniture*, 395; Elizabeth Bates and Jonathan Fairbanks, *American Furniture: 1620 to the Present* (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1987), 268.

²⁸⁷ Lucy Trench, ed., *Materials & Techniques in the Decorative Arts* (London: John Murray (Publishers) Ltd, 2000), 42.

boxes. These knife boxes have pagoda shaped lids. The lids are hinged so they simply open backwards like most rectangular or square shaped knife boxes, in contrast to the urn or column-shaped knife boxes which have lids that lift straight up on a pole. The knife compartments were originally glued the sides of the knife box but had to be reglued in place by a conservation team. The baseboards on the knife boxes are glued and pinned to the four sides.²⁸⁸ The inside of the knife boxes are not lined with any fabric, as are most American made knife boxes Each box can hold as many as seventy utensils each, an astounding number of utensils considering the standard utensil capacity, as documented in contemporary price books, is three dozen for each box. These knife boxes are they only known ones to survive and a magnificent example of silverware storage. Comparing the two sideboards and knife boxes attributed to Barry reveals how varied his knife boxes could be in design and materials, even though both retain a similar rectangular box like form.

²⁸⁸ Philadelphia Museum of Art Furniture Conservation Department, *Philadelphia Museum of Art Examination and Treatment Report of Knife Box* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987).



Figure 45-46. Sideboard and knife box and Detail. Unknown maker, possibly Joseph Barry. Philadelphia. Made for Simon Gratz, American. 1825-1830. Mahogany, mahogany veneers ebony, brass, lightwood banding, holly, purpleheart, white pine, yellow poplar, unidentified hard woods. Knife box: 21 5/8 x 13 1/2 x 14 1/2 (HxWxD) (Inches). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Bequest of Miss Elizabeth Gratz, 1909. 1909-2a-c <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/39683.html?mulR=1376945609|1>

Knife boxes were also constructed right into the sideboard. Which makes sense because knife boxes often sat on sideboards and both pieces of furniture assisted with the elaborate dining rituals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Knife boxes attached to sideboards, as opposed to just sitting on top may have been constructed at the request of the customer. A pair knife box attached to a sideboard in the Metropolitan Museum of Art has a tambour front (Fig. 47). This use of tambour doors on knife boxes is the only one found in this study. It was probably made in Philadelphia or Baltimore in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The pair is made out of mahogany, satinwood, yellow poplar, white pine, and have silver hardware. These are large knife boxes, have a square base and curved tambour cover, and when opened the serpentine layout for the silverware can be seen. At first glance the viewer may not realize that the knife boxes actually sit within a hollowed out groove cut into the top of the sideboard, and do not simply sit atop the sideboard. This pair is unique for its use of tambour doors.



Figure 47. Sideboard and knife boxes. Philadelphia or Baltimore. c. 1795-1805. Mahogany, satinwood, verre eglomise, yellow poplar, silver, white pine. 65 1/2 x 89 x 31 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest and Mitchel Taradash Gift. 45.77 <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/45.77>

Knife boxes made in the United States represent a wide range of forms, styles, and appearances. The twenty-nine surviving knife boxes in this study demonstrate that American cabinetmakers followed the typical English-inspired designs of urn and slant front tops but also created uniquely American knife box shaped as columns and ovoids and as urns with flat, box-like tops in contrast to the pyramidal tops. Knife boxes could be attached to sideboards but this is rare. There is a pair of knife boxes that have tambour lids, a pair with pagoda tops, and a pair with square tops pagoda tops. With more research the difference in American and English knife boxes may help make clear attribution, and more American knife boxes may be discovered.

CHAPTER FIVE: KNIFE BOX CONSTRUCTION

Since the previous chapter discussed construction of the individual knife boxes found in this study, this chapter will discuss the broader issues such as the progression of construction style, the different trades involved in knife box construction, and other major considerations in knife box construction. It has been demonstrated through the identification of knife boxes attributable to American cabinetmakers that American cabinetmakers possessed the skills necessary to construct knife boxes. However, this chapter will also address Thomas Sheraton's statement that knife boxes were made by specialists, which has led to a false impression about the nature of knife box construction.

An aspect that has confused decorative arts scholarship regarding knife boxes is the fact that Thomas Sheraton stated that specialists made knife boxes.²⁸⁹ Usually this source is cited with is no further explanation of if this was true or not, or how it applied to American cabinetmakers.²⁹⁰ For example, Nancy Goyne Evans in "The Written Evidence of Furniture Repairs and Alterations: How Original Is 'All Original'?" stated that "a number of skilled craftsmen in London specialized in making" knife boxes, and mentions that there were American cabinetmakers who made knife boxes. However, she does not suggest that the American cabinetmakers were specialists like those in England. Whether

²⁸⁹ Sheraton, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, 89-90.

²⁹⁰ Example: Flanigan, "Knife Box," 224.

knife boxes needed a specialist to make them is not addressed either.²⁹¹ J. Michael Flanigan in his description of the knife boxes in the Kaufman collection mentions Sheraton's statement about London specialists. Although Flanigan also goes on to mention a few American examples of knife boxes, the idea of knife boxes being made in regular cabinetmaker shops or by specialists in America is not addressed.²⁹² In *Southern Furniture* by Jonathan Prown and Ronald Hurst, the authors stated that "like...other small-scale cabinet wares, knife cases were made in quantity by British woodworks who specialized in such goods, and most used in America were imported from Britain" but again they do not discuss if the trade was specialized in American.²⁹³ These sources suggest that in England, specialists made knife boxes but do not discuss if knife boxes in America were made by specialists or not. The specialized nature of knife boxes is not explained in any of these discussions of Sheraton referring to knife box specialists. This study proves that Sheraton's statement has been misleading for both the English and American market. In England, several cabinetmakers were found who worked in the same time period. For example, John Folgham, Francis Thompson, and Thomas Page made knife boxes as well as other pieces of furniture.²⁹⁴ In America, only the cabinetmakers Fenwick Lyell, David Sackriter, and David and Jonathan Odgen could be called specialists based on their advertisements.²⁹⁵ However, American cabinetmakers, including the four above, made knife boxes along with other furniture forms. Although

²⁹¹ Evans, "The Written Evidence of Furniture Repairs and Alterations: How Original Is 'All Original'?"

²⁹² Flanigan, "Knife Box," 224.

²⁹³ Hurst and Prown, *Southern Furniture 1680-1830: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, 609.

²⁹⁴ Heal, *The London Furniture Makers*, 123, 183.

²⁹⁵ Kenny and Thurlow, *Duncan Phyfe*, 55; "New York Newspaper Advertisements and News Items: 1777-1779"; Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, "Odgen, D. & J."

advertising that they made knife boxes, many cabinetmakers were also working alongside each other in the same cities, suggesting that a customer wanting knife boxes could go to one of several cabinetmakers for knife boxes and did not have to go to a specialist.²⁹⁶

Like many other furniture forms it is likely that English cabinetmakers simply had more practice making knife boxes, and even when exported, could sell the same articles for less money. It is not so much that English cabinetmakers were more skilled or were all specialists, rather the time they devoted to make them did not cost as much as it cost American makers, so they were able to earn more. Sheraton's singling out of John Lane as a knife box specialist created a false impression; many Englishmen and American cabinetmakers made knife boxes along with other pieces of furniture while not necessarily being knife box specialists.

Were knife boxes a specialized form? Knife boxes were most likely tailored to the number of pieces of silverware a customer owned or was planning to purchase.

Customization would also include sometimes the shape of the silverware and often the height of the silverware. Customization suggests some specialization in the form of the knife box which would have been time consuming to make, but would not have necessarily required a special skill. However, some knife boxes did require special skills. For example, vase-shaped knife boxes were turned, requiring an understanding of how to use a lathe. Vase-shaped knife boxes may have been more difficult to construction, since only four of the twenty-nine examples were in this form. Cost, stylishness, availability

²⁹⁶ Examples are Fenwick Lyell, Charles Christian, Duncan Phyfe, all working in New York around the same time. Kenny, *Honore Lannuier.*, 100; Israel Sack, *American Antiques From the Israel Sack Collection*, ed. Joseph Hennage, vol. 4 (Highland House Publishers, 1974), 313; Rogers, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 365; "New York Newspaper Advertisements and News Items: 1777-1779"; Kenny and Thurlow, *Duncan Phyfe*, 195.

and customer choice also may have played a factor in why so few American-made vase-shaped knife boxes were made. Overall, knife boxes would not have been necessarily more challenging for the cabinetmaker to make than other furniture forms. Although Sheraton stated that knife boxes were made by specialists in England there are no references that were discovered that can demonstrate that this was the practice in America, or explain why a specialist was needed. The abundance of English examples in comparison to American examples of knife boxes was not due to the fact that skill was lacking in American cabinetmakers. Instead, knife boxes from abroad were cheaper and more abundant to buy, particularly since merchants in England and in America, as well as silversmiths, and cabinetmakers were all selling knife boxes to the American consumer.²⁹⁷

Knife box forms, and their construction details, evolved over time. It is impossible to determine what the first knife boxes looked like in America since seventeenth century examples were not found in this study. Starting with the mid-eighteenth century and onwards development can be seen in the examples studied. Coming into popularity during the Rococo era, the first knife boxes featured the swelled serpentine front which was popular throughout eighteenth century. The slant front top would continue to be used throughout the eighteenth century, but furniture began to move away from the curves of the Rococo era. With the age of Neoclassicism emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, knife boxes would take on a more flat appearance with a box shape. Neoclassicism itself directly influenced the use of the urn

²⁹⁷ Other silversmiths who sold knife boxes include: William Slater in Baltimore, Ward and Roy, Byrne and Smyth, (U.S.), *The Arts & Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina ...*, 120–1.

and the column shaped knife boxes.²⁹⁸ The Empire style also contributed to the development of knife box design. Their massive size in comparison to earlier examples and scale perfectly reflected the grandeur of the Empire period. The incorporation of pointed arches on the Joseph Barry sideboard suggests a hint of the Gothic style which became popular from the Chippendale period but continued into the nineteenth century.²⁹⁹

The different variations of knife box designs provide clues as to how they were constructed. The box-like forms were usually glued together with or without dovetailed. If the interior dividers were not cut from a solid piece of wood, thin slices of wood were used instead to create the box-like compartments for the utensils to sit in. Shagreen knife cases usually have square utensil holders created by strips of wood glued together in a lattice like arrangement (Fig. 3). If the dividers were not cut from a solid piece of wood and did not have box-like compartments, a thin board was usually placed across the top of the inside opening and contained holes that were cut out to hold the utensils (Fig 36). This board rested on wooden dividers and was glued to the sides of the knife boxes to keep the board stable.³⁰⁰ Some knife boxes were, of course, simpler than others. For example, some do not have wooden dividers or holes so that silverware was simply put in

²⁹⁸ In Thomas Sheraton's 1803 *The Cabinetmaker Dictionary* he stated that urns were "anciently [urns] were employed to preserve the remains of the dead after being burnt; and were placed sometimes under the tombstone on which the epitaph was cut. Urns were also used at their sacrifices, in which to put liquids," which demonstrated the use of urns in ancient societies, 331.

²⁹⁹ Barry, Philadelphia, *Sideboard and Matching Knife Boxes*.

http://museumcollection.winterthur.org/single-record.php?resultsperpage=20&view=catalog&srctype=advanced&hasImage=&ObjObjectName=&CreOrigin=&Earliest=&Latest=&CreCreatorLocal_tab=&materialsearch=&ObjObjectID=&ObjCategory=&DesMaterial_tab=&DesTechnique_tab=&AccCreditLineLocal=&CreMarkSignature=&recid=1988.0008.001&srchfld=&srchtxt=barry&id=c89b&rownum=1&version=100&src=results-imagelink-only#.VDAxexbp-Aj

³⁰⁰ Vincent and Gallagher, Visit to Metropolitan Museum of Art.

all together. Other times dividers are simply slots big enough for a knife blade, but not the handle. Many knife boxes were veneered, which required extra work such as cutting the veneers and adhering them to the main body. The column-shaped knife boxes and the elliptical one at Williamsburg have some influences from the coopering trade as narrow, vertical, wooden staves were glued together to form a curved surface, similar to the technique of barrel making.³⁰¹ Other considerations for knife box construction included the amount of decorative hardware on the knife boxes, the inclusion of fabric, the incorporation of decorative carving and the application of inlay, stringing and banding. To save material and labor costs several knife boxes in the study did not have fabric lining, metal escutcheons, inlay designs, or veneering.

Urn and column-shaped knife boxes would have been constructed differently than the box-shaped knife boxes. These knife boxes would have been turned on a lathe and hollowed out of a single piece of wood rather than knife boxes that are joined together different pieces of wood.³⁰² Column and urn-shaped knife boxes have carved slots for different silverware in tiered rows. Thomas Sheraton in his 1803 *Dictionary* suggested that the circular niches in elaborate library book cases should be veneered “in narrow strips” with pointed tops like the strips applied to a knife box.³⁰³ Although his description is a simplified explanation, it gives some idea of how vase knife boxes were veneered using narrow pointed strips. Veneering was achieved by using a saw to cut a flitch of thin sheets of wood. Since the veneer would be placed on a curved surface, it had to be cut

³⁰¹ Chicirda, Visit to Colonial Williamsburg.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Sheraton, *The Cabinet Dictionary. To Which Is Added a Supplementary Treatise on Geometrical Lines, Perspective, and Painting in General*, 260.

very thin, up to a sixteenth of an inch in order to be flexible enough to bend around the curve. Veneers on flat surfaces would then be attached with the use of hide glue and were hammered down and smoothed out with a special veneer hammer to remove air pockets and create a good bond.³⁰⁴ The particular necessity of applying veneers so precisely on a curved surface, rather than a flat surface was difficult and may have discouraged many to create vase-shaped knife boxes.

Urn and column shaped knife boxes also incorporated a top cover that was attached to a pole that slid up and down in the center of the knife box (Fig. 48). The pole was usually designed in such a way so that the top could remain open and the silverware visible to impress dinner guests. For example, a knife box at Colonial Williamsburg has two small pieces of wood attached to each side which flare just slightly from the central pole so that when pulled up, the small attachments would prop up the pole.³⁰⁵

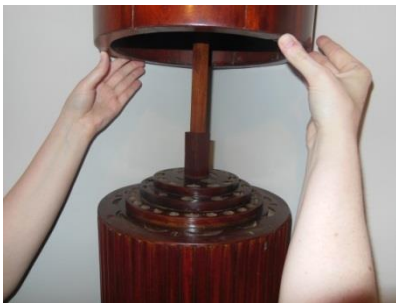


Figure 48. Knife Box, open. David Sackriter. Philadelphia. 1810-1820. Mahogany and white pine. 26 1/2 x 11 1/4 (HxW) (Inches). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift in memory of Eugene Sussel by his wife Charlene Sussel, 1991. 1991-98-33. Picture by Alexandra Parker.

³⁰⁴ Jeffery P. Greene, *American Furniture of the 18th Century* (Newtown, Connecticut: The Taunton Press, 1996), 167.

³⁰⁵ Chicirda, Visit to Colonial Williamsburg.

Knife boxes typically have different shaped cut outs for different utensils. The crescent shape is for spoons, since they were placed bowl side up.³⁰⁶ The spoon cut outs are usually found in the very front or back of the box-shaped knife boxes. However, in urn or column shaped knife boxes placement is more equal, with the different types of utensil holders around the edges of a tiered platform (Fig. 48). A small, square or circular shaped cutout was used to hold knife handles. The barbell shape was for forks since the prongs went down. Several examples of knife boxes have spoon holders in the front with a division between the spoon section and one central cutout area directly behind the spoons where the rest of the silverware is stored (Fig. 36). This is not the case for every knife box, but is common. For example, the rural New England knife boxes have simple slits just wide enough to fit the blade of the knife (Fig. 40-41). Having different shapes for different utensils was a trend that developed over the years as knife boxes grew in popularity and forks and spoons became more common. For example, early knife boxes, like shagreen knife boxes, had simple square slots for all utensils, but later ones generally had different sized and different shaped slots in consideration of what kind of silverware was being placed in them. The arrangement of the silverware often varied, although some layouts, such as having the spoons closer to the front, are most common. Cutting out superficially shaped silverware dividers also made the construction of knife boxes an extremely time consuming process, although some cabinetmakers cut corners by not finely smoothing the wooden dividers or did not create specific shaped cut outs. The precision of these cut outs vary from knife box to knife box, some being more uniform

³⁰⁶ Goldsborough, Questions about the relationship between Knife Boxes and Silverware.

than others. The number, size, and shape of the placeholders would have been determined entirely by the quantities and physical characteristics of the costumer's silverware as well.³⁰⁷ The placeholders were not difficult to make but took a bit of time and precision.³⁰⁸

As with all forms of furniture, a great deal of effort was put into wood choice and where the wood was placed in furniture construction. Obviously, mahogany was the favored choice for knife boxes because it was easy to work, had a beautiful grain, was easy to carve, and had great value in popular culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Knife boxes constructed with multiple woods usually have elements such as inlay design, veneer, banding and stringing. Not unlike other furniture forms, knife boxes usually have one type of wood used as a substrate to which a veneer is glued. The dividers inside are often a secondary wood such as pine or poplar. Knife boxes also sometimes incorporated the use of book-matched veneers to give a symmetrical effect (Fig. 19). The choice of woods and where they were placed throughout the knife box demonstrated the attention to detail that these objects received when being created and confirmed their status as fine pieces of furniture, which is true of all fine furniture. These considerations added not only beauty but also gave viewers something new to discover when they looked closely at these objects.

This study suggests that knife boxes were more time consuming and cost Americans more money to make than it cost their English counterparts, which is why

³⁰⁷ "Joseph Manigault House" (The Charleston Museum), accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.charlestonmuseum.org/N5Content/pdf/houses/jmh%20tourbook%20web%202011.pdf>.

³⁰⁸ Chicirda, Visit to Colonial Williamsburg.

many Americans bought knife boxes from abroad. An effort to create cheaper knife boxes may have been why American cabinetmakers made different forms. By making knife box forms, such as the ovoid, quasi-urn, and column-shaped knife boxes or designing knife boxes in more box-like shapes, such as Joseph Barry's knife boxes, Americans created forms which were probably easier and cheaper to make, and were probably forms that they were more familiar with (Fig. 15, 19, 20-24). Of course, given that cabinetmakers were mostly producing bespoke work, it is also possible that American consumers ordered uniquely American forms to stand apart from their neighbors.³⁰⁹ Since some knife boxes were made in rural areas, it is also possible that some American cabinetmakers were not aware of European knife box designs. In terms of knife box forms, despite the fact that American cabinetmakers seemed to have mostly avoided the urn shape, American-made forms could be just as complex in design if not necessarily in construction as English-made forms. American cabinetmakers were putting just as much technique and skill into the construction of their knife boxes as English cabinetmakers. On the whole, English cabinetmakers seem to have stuck more to the slant front and urn shape and used more silver hardware, more inlay, and more fabric. American cabinetmakers, overall, used less variety in materials than their English counterparts but created forms that have yet to be found in published design sources and English examples have yet to be found.

The popularity of knife boxes in the eighteenth century prompted more American cabinetmakers to make knife boxes. Overall, American cabinetmakers stayed with more

³⁰⁹ Although it is possible that the forms found in this study that are unique could have had design precedents or English examples that have not been discovered yet.

box-like forms in their design, rather than urn shapes. For example, the urn shaped knife box is much rarer in America and the use of shagreen is even rarer. Considering all of the cabinetwork of American cabinetmakers, in all forms of furniture including knife boxes, it is likely that it was not that American cabinetmakers were less skilled but rather they dedicated their time to other furniture forms because of how time consuming and costly knife boxes were to construct. Many different types of skills, such as inlay work, turning, coopering, veneering, japanning, silversmithing, and brass foundry work for hardware, were involved with creating knife boxes. This study has shown that those Americans who did want to participate in the making of high style English type knife boxes did so by copying English designs but also by creating unique forms.

CONCLUSION

Despite the common practice of importing knife boxes from Europe, American cabinetmakers did make knife boxes. Twenty-four cabinetmakers who made knife boxes from up and down the east coast of America and as far west as Tennessee, have been recorded. At least twenty-nine knife boxes survive in private and public collections today that were made by American cabinetmakers. These knife boxes can be found across the United States in museums, historic houses, historical societies, private collections, and other institutions. Knife boxes were made as early as 1724; they were certainly used at that time and possibly a little before, and were made as late as the 1820s in the United States. The growth of a local American silversmith industry, English dining practices, English cabinetmaking designs, competition with British imports, and the increasing popularity of these objects encouraged many American cabinetmakers to construct these refined case pieces. American cabinetmakers succeeded in emulating English knife box forms laid out in the drawings in English design books and price books and probably copied imported examples as well. However, they also constructed new forms, which created uniquely American styled knife boxes. Surviving knife boxes, cabinetmaker advertisements, labels, and inventories demonstrate the American cabinetmaker's contribution to the making of knife boxes in America.

While this thesis has demonstrated the importance of knife boxes in the ritual of dining in early America and has shown as well the contribution of American cabinetmakers to knife box production, more American-made knife boxes and their cabinetmakers may still be found. But even if this area of study has been exhausted, this thesis is a reminder that other furniture forms, such as cellarets, tea caddies, fire screens, and other forms may also have been neglected in decorative arts scholarship and should be looked at in a new and fresh light. By looking at furniture forms, such as knife boxes, that have always been assumed to be imported, or assumed to be made by specialists, it may be discovered that more were made locally and in greater quantity than has been previously thought.

These objects deserve reassessment. By brushing aside objects that appear self-explanatory, as knife boxes have been, or by adopting Thomas Sheraton's words "little need be said respecting these," we ignore areas of study that can help us to understand better how people lived in the past.³¹⁰ By studying a particular furniture form like the knife box, looking in depth at its use and history, and seeing the nuances in design and construction we can fully appreciate these furniture forms. As we continue to research and study American decorative arts we must remember to look at all furniture types and not make assumptions that exclude any from further study. In reexamining the origin and history of objects that have been previously neglected, as with the case of American knife boxes, we find that more American cabinetmakers were involved with their construction than once thought, that their form and design was more varied than previously discussed,

³¹⁰ Sheraton, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, 89.

and that more similarities and differences can be seen when comparing objects of the same function.

APPENDIX: CHRONOLOGICAL OF DOCUMENTED KNIFE BOXES AND REFERENCES TO KNIFE BOXES

1. 1724: John Head.
2. 1760s/70s: Job Townsend Jr.
3. 1760s/1770s: John Clark.
4. 1765- 1775: Lewis Fueter knife boxes, Figure 4.
5. 1780 – Knife box, unknown maker, private collection/MESDA database.
6. 1780 – 1790: English or American knife box, unknown maker, Figure 34
7. 1784: Seymour knife box.
8. 1785 – 1795: Baltimore knife boxes. Private collection/MESDA database.
9. 1785 – 1800: Knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 34.
10. 1785 – 1805: Knife boxes, unknown maker Figure 32.
11. 1785: Joseph Adam Fleming.
12. 1790: Knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 6-7.
13. 1790: Knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 35-6.
14. 1790 – 1800: Knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 43.
15. 1790 – 1800: Knife boxes, unknown Maker, Figure 30.
16. 1790 – 1810: Knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 29
17. 1790 – 1810 Baltimore knife box, unknown maker, Figure 28.
18. 1790 – 1810: William Whitehead Sideboard and knife boxes Figure 15-17.
19. 1790 – 1815: Ovoid shaped knife boxes, Figure 19.
20. 1791: Gifford & Scotland.
21. 1795: Massachusetts knife box, unknown maker, Figure 39.
22. 1795-1805: Philadelphia knife box, unknown maker, Figure 47.
23. 1795 – 1820: Baltimore knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 27.
24. 1797: Fenwick Lyell.
25. 1800: Edmund Johnson's knife boxes, Figure 14.
26. 1800: Pair of Knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 1.
27. 1800s (Early): Knife Box, unknown maker, Figure 40-1.
28. 1800s (Early): Henry Connolly, Figure 26.
29. 1800s (Early): William Camp Figure 18.
30. 1800s (Early): Duncan Phyfe.
31. 1800 – 1820: South Carolina set of three urn knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 2.
32. 1803: John Shaw.
33. 1807: Edward Priestly.

34. 1808 – 1815: Joseph B. Barry sideboard and knife boxes. Figure 24.
35. 1809: David and Johnathan Odgen.
36. 1810: Joseph B. Barry Trade Card, Figure 25.
37. 1810: Baltimore knife box, unknown maker, Figure 23.
38. 1810s/1820s: James B. Houston.
39. 1810s/1820s: Sampson Duiguid.
40. 1815: Daniel McBean.
41. 1815 – 1820: Baltimore knife box, unknown maker, Figure 22.
42. 1811: William Walker.
43. 1810 – 1820: David Sackriter Figure 20, 48.
44. 1811: John S. Johnson.
45. 1812: Unknown New England cabinetmaker made knife boxes.
46. 1814: Charles Christian showpiece
47. 1814: David Sackriter, knife box, Figure 21.
48. 1825-1830: Philadelphia knife box, unknown maker, 45-6.
49. 1828: Willis Cowling.
50. Unknown Date, knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 37.
51. Unknown Date, knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 38.
52. Unknown Date, knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 42.
53. Unknown Date, knife boxes, unknown maker, Figure 44.

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Object File

Artist Unknown. English or American Knife Box (one of a Pair). Mahogany with silver mounts, c. 1780. Philadelphia Museum of Art. [zotero://attachment/757/](https://www.pma.org/object/757/).

Attributed to David Sackriter. Knife Box. Mahogany and white pine, 1810. Philadelphia Museum of Art. [zotero://attachment/752/](https://www.pma.org/object/752/).

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