

Room Decorating and Furnishing in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract/Résumé

Après avoir traité l'évolution de la maison, cet article étudie l'ameublement et la décoration des pièces au cours de la première moitié du XIXe siècle.

Moving from the development of the house this paper looks at the furnishing and decorating of rooms in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, house interiors underwent great changes and this is particularly true in Atlantic Canada. Until the end of the eighteenth century there was a great amount of effort expended in just settling in. By 1800 only seventeen years had elapsed since the Loyalists had arrived and, as this group made up the single largest segment of the population by far, the problems of agriculture, land clearing, and scraping enough money together to build a "permanent" house were still taking most of the available time.

Several publications had appeared giving directions for the construction of a log house, which consisted of one room with a sleeping loft and was usually a stopgap shelter, to be replaced when the permanent building could be put up. At times this single-room dwelling then became the kitchen to the house. More often it was relegated to an outbuilding in the farm complex. But by 1800 there were some substantial houses in Loyalist settlements, and, of course, in areas like Maugerville, Sheffield, Lunenburg County, and sections of the Annapolis Valley there were the houses of the pre-Loyalists.

During this time a thriving trade sprang up with England and New England. Lumber, which was being cut in vast quantities, was traded for manufactured goods. Often enormous primeval pines were squared by broad ax and shipped as deck cargo. At other times lumber was sawn into thick planks to be made into boards on arrival at its destination. The cargoes carried on the return voyage have great interest to the historian and include nearly every household requirement.

The half century which closed in 1850 saw the replacement of the open hearth by the cook-stove. These ranges, as they were often called, proved popular and changed the

arrangement of the kitchen. Simple pitcher pumps were available at a reasonable cost and some found their way into kitchens by 1850.

Houses were usually built on plans brought from New England; many of them were for all practical purposes copies of houses found in England at a much earlier time. The Lint house at Kings Landing for example is similar to fourteenth-century southern English houses: two rooms downstairs and two up. The English houses are of stone, those in New England are either of stone or wood, and the ones here are of wood with stone foundations.

The progression in house planning could be said to be from a single room, dominated by a massive stone hearth, to a second room over it, which was reached by a dog-leg stair by the chimney and which at times was fitted with a second fireplace making a rather grand sleeping chamber. The next stage was the house with two rooms down and two up, similar to the Lint house at Kings Landing. At Kings Landing also is the Eustace house where the two downstairs rooms, back to back, are supplemented by four tiny bedrooms on the lower floor and a loft and two bedrooms on the upper floor.

The Long house at Kings Landing, with its fan lit front door leading into a central hall, marks the next change. Off this hall are two major rooms and there is an unfinished loft on the upper story. The kitchen is in the basement, its pattern that of the single cabin room. This centre-hall plan is expanded to larger and ever larger houses. The Prescott house at Starrs Point, Nova Scotia, is a fine example of this basic plan elaborated upon, as are the four government houses in the Atlantic Provinces.

This half century was dominated by what might be called "Georgian" taste. Queen Victoria's accession in 1837 was

beginning to show in design changes by 1850 but only just, and it was a few years later before the design known as High Victorian came to be popular. The reigns of the four Georges stretched over a century and, since William IV's nine years brought no noticeable change, social customs and furniture design made slow progress during these years.

The log houses, for which there were published plans available to the new settlers, were of several basic designs. Many of them seem to have been eighteen by twenty-four feet with a seven-foot ceiling. The roof was pitched. Arrangements for the sleeping loft varied from a closed area with trap door and ladder to a three-quarter ceiling open at the fireplace end also reached by a ladder.

The logs were cut and squared, placed on a drystone foundation, and openings were left for the door and two windows. Boards were required only for the pitched roof and they were covered by split cedar shakes. The large hearth and its chimney took up most of one end of the structure. A massive hardwood beam was used as a lintel over the fire opening but the remainder was constructed of field stone. This room was furnished with necessities, ladder-back chairs, sawbuck tables, and easily constructed cupboards, as well as dual purpose items like hutch tables, settles, and folding beds. A bucket of water and basin were near the door. The fire would have produced light as well as heat. A swinging crane, andirons, and a poker furnished the bare necessities for the hearth. Cooking required, at the very least, one or more iron pots, a long-handled skillet, and a dutch oven. The main floor may have had a one-post bed with curtains hanging from a pole or rope to enclose it, or everyone may have slept in the loft. Animal skins on the floor were not uncommon in a house where there were small children.

When circumstances permitted, other items were obtained. As the family increased, the need for space made the permanent house a priority. With this dwelling came more and more furniture and furnishings. Rooms with board partitions between them and lathe and plaster on the outer walls followed. In the log house, whitewash or "distemper" was often used. Sometimes wallpaper was used. Door and window casings, surbases, and floors were commonly painted in earth colours. During research on the twelve houses at Kings Landing as many as five colours were found in a single room.

As dwellings enlarged, building techniques improved, and by the 1820s very sophisticated carpentry is found. This is certainly the case in the St John River Valley in New Brunswick. Then as rooms were designated for various purposes, more and more furniture was required. The kitchen had its own main table with a softwood top, well-constructed frame, and legs of hardwood. The earliest of these may have had square tapered legs; later turned ones were usual. Open-front cupboards, the offspring of the earlier court cupboard, came into being. Some had doors of

either wood panels or glass. These cupboards came in an amazing variety of shapes and sizes. The Miramichi area, like others, had had a boom in shipbuilding, and so the carpenters who could construct the most complicated and most beautiful item ever made by man — a wooden sailing ship — were certainly capable of a pine cupboard. Some of these cupboards are the work of superior artisans, removed by a country mile from mere carpentry.

To continue with kitchen furnishings, tables with drawers came into their own. Some had fairly long legs for tasks done standing; others were lower and the top often became the area for setting milk pans. Some houses had a pantry containing a series of shelves for the storage of dishes, cooking utensils, and the like, as well as a low shelf which served as a work area. Boxes and baskets of food stuff were left on the floor. Another room off the kitchen was for wood and items not affected by winter's chill.

The dining-room of 1800 was a specialty room and generally more expensively furnished than any other room. The main table was kept in its place and was not intended for other purposes. By this time the sideboard, a descendent of the earlier hunt board and an eighteenth-century creation, was quite common. It had drawers for the storing of table silver, wine, and other items. Dining chairs would have been matched set, but there would have been no attempt to have all furniture matching. Cupboards — built in or free-standing — were used to store the finer silver, dishes, and glassware. Pictures, mirrors, candle sconces, drop-leaf tables, and not uncommonly a writing bureau or desk were also to be found in the dining-room.

The living-room, called a drawing-room or withdrawing-room, was another specialized room. Its furnishings were expected to be used in their more or less permanent positions. By mid-century the room was often referred to as a parlour. The drawing-room of 1800 differed from the Victorian parlour, which was used only for wedding receptions, funerals, and visits by the clergy. In earlier times many families used this room much as we do today. Draughts, chess, and other games were played there; it doubled as a library, and the seating was comfortable. The armchairs by the fireside by 1800 had low backs — the high backs of eighteenth-century wing-chairs were not comfortable for gentlemen's new hair styles. Sofa tables were first made in the Regency period. Early descriptions state that they were usually an elongated table, often on a plinth and central column, with drop-leaves and a drawer in each side. They were used for writing, sewing, playing games, or other "sedentary occupations."

Floor coverings included imported oriental or ingrain carpets for the affluent and, for those less well-off, hand-loomed carpet, canvas, or, simplest and cheapest of all, paint. Both the hand-loomed carpet and the canvas floorcloth were made by sewing squares of material together to produce a piece the size of the room. Once sewn, the floor-

cloth was painted using stencil patterns, which frequently imitated carpet designs, and then varnished. The painted floor was similarly stencilled.

There was also a change in the treatment of the bed at this period. In the eighteenth century it was a common belief that a draft of air caused illness — thus bedclothes were constructed in a manner which would completely enclose the sleeper. The tester was a solid piece, as was the head-cloth. With curtains drawn, the chance of any air getting to the occupant was reduced. By 1800 some people realized that to breathe fresh air did not cause illness so the curtaining was reduced. Indeed, plain turned foot posts which had always been hidden were now exposed and furniture makers offered carved and decorated foot posts for older beds. Shipments of them came from England and were advertised by local craftsmen.

By 1810 Ontario chair-makers were advertising elegant fancy chairs. The old-fashioned Windsor and ladder-backs were still useful for some people and for some purposes, but painted chairs were new and fashionable. The same pattern appears to be the case in the Atlantic area. These chairs were in fact local renditions of the work of the Hepplewhite and Sheraton designs being made in England as well as in New England and New York.

I said that changes in furnishing patterns and in room uses had come in the first half of the nineteenth century in Atlantic Canada. Some of these changes appeared in Ontario about the same time or a bit later, but New England, New York, and other areas to the south saw some of them earlier. In terms of design the American Revolutionary War had less effect on the people who stayed where they were than it had on those who found it necessary to move.

Makers of fine furniture were well established in the Thirteen Colonies. Trained Scottish craftsmen like McIntyre of Salem and Fife of New York stayed on. The ones who left as Loyalists were interrupted in their work but soon settled into the new environment. Other Scottish cabinet-makers came to the Maritimes between 1810 and 1830, including Thomas Nisbet, Alexander Lawrence, Charles Thompson, John Tulles. These men along with

Robert Chillis and other Loyalist craftsmen began a proud tradition of furniture making. Lumber trading with Britain was augmented by the sale of fish to the West Indies, and thereby the Atlantic area had vast quantities of mahogany for furniture.

The first half of the nineteenth century was for the Atlantic area very much the pioneer era. The cities were somewhat more advanced, but a major person in every town was the blacksmith. He was the forerunner of the motor mechanic and the hardware-store owner. His wares were used in every dwelling — no matter what the socio-economic status — from saucer-shaped betty lamps which blacksmiths had made for centuries, through a full range of iron articles — nails, screws, spikes, bolts, hinges, and gardening and farming tools from hand rakes to ploughshares, wagon frames, axles, tires, cooking pots and pans, fireplace needs including mechanical spits, trammel hooks, and fire tongs. He made and repaired almost every metal object. His income was the same as that of the medical doctor in the 1840s and his social position in the community was similar.

There has been a common denominator in man's social activity which causes him to want to improve his surroundings. Things that were old and passé were to be dispensed with. "Old-fashioned" was a phrase which was often heard in a derogatory way. Indeed the thrust of that philosophy is of great importance. Man came out of the cave because of his desire to improve his lot and each stage of civilization has been reached by man's desire to find a new and better way. Perhaps for the majority of the population this is still a paramount factor. However what some discard, others regard. Often these discarded items fit into the decor of a well-furnished room. There are, of course, always those who furnish with "Antiques." The more knowledgeable may aim at a particular style and period like late Georgian, High Victorian, or Art Nouveau. Whenever this is done there is always the matter of making the room livable. But the ambience of a Georgian room can be destroyed by improper attention to lighting and lighting fixtures. For example, ill-chosen upholstery fabrics can cause problems: a fine Georgian wing-chair can lose its integrity when upholstered with inappropriate materials. The treatment as well as the collection of antiques require knowledge as well as care.