Making Furniture in Preindustrial America

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Glossary of Furniture Terms

Throughout the book, period terms for furniture forms and parts have been used as often as possible. This glossary is for the reader unfamiliar with period terminology and current furniture nomenclature (see also figures 2–5).

**Ball-and-claw foot:** Elaborately carved foot, at the bottom of a leg, that represents an animal’s paw or bird’s claw grasping a ball.

**Baluster:** Vase shape of crookedback chair banisters or the turned decoration of a fiddleback chair’s posts or front rounds.

**Banister:** Splat. Vertical back support of a chair which is tenoned into the crest and shoe rails of a turned chair or the rear seat rail of a joiner’s chair.

**Bureau:** Chest of four drawers. The term was first used in the early national period and often denoted a chest of drawers about three feet six inches wide, with thin, flaring bracket feet, cock-beaded drawer edges, and inlaid decoration.

**Case of drawers:** Highboy; also called a high chest of drawers. Consisted of a lower case that resembled a dressing table surmounted by an upper case that resembled a chest of drawers. Tops were flat or pedimented; cases with the latter were called crown cases of drawers.

**Cornice:** Uppermost projecting molding or series of moldings on case furniture.

**Crest rail:** Horizontal element set atop the rear posts of a chair or tenoned between the tops of the rear posts. Often embellished with sinuous shaping and carved or modeled surfaces.

**Crookedback chair:** Type of flag-seated chair characterized by sawn-out rear legs, with a curved ogee or canted profile. Also featured baluster-shaped banisters, rounded crest rails, a turned front round, and front legs that were sawn out and decoratively turned.

**Crooked leg:** Cabriole leg. Modeled, curved leg that curves out at the knee and then inward toward the ankle. Common on joiner’s chairs, dining tables, dressing tables, and cases of drawers.

**Crown:** Broken-scroll pediment that can top a case of drawers. Also used to identify a type of early eighteenth-century western Connecticut turned chair with an elaborate crest rail, the sawn-out profile of which resembled a broken-scroll pediment.
Cushion seat: Slip seat. Separate upholstered wooden frame, which was set into the rabbets on the inside edge of the seat rails of a joiner's chair.

Drawer blade: Horizontal rail that separates drawers from each other. Often let into a dado that was cut into the inside surface of the carcass side.

Drawer linings: Collective term for the sides and back of a drawer (see fig. 5).

Dressing table: Lowboy. Supported by crooked legs, it usually had four drawers and featured a large flat surface on which to lay out toilettries. Often made en suite with cases of drawers.

Drop: Turned pendant that ornamented the skirt of a dressing table or case of drawers.

Escutcheon: Brass plate that covered a keyhole or backed a bail, or pull.

Fall leaf table: Had hinged leaves that could fold out, supported by a fly rail.

Fiddleback: Flag-seated chair with turned posts, baluster-shaped balusters, rounded crest rails, and a turned front round. The turned rear legs most easily distinguish it from the crookedback.

Finial: Turned ornament at top of the rear post of a turned chair or a separate turned decorative element that embellished the corners or plinth of a crown case of drawers.

Flag: Rush-like plant (Acorus calamus), the leaves and stalks of which were twisted together and then woven to bottom the seats of turned chairs.

Fluting: Series of parallel shallow, concave grooves running vertically. Often found on quarter-columns or pilasters of case furniture or on the straight legs of tables or chairs.

Fly rail: Separate rail on a fall leaf table that swings out to support a leaf. Attached by a finger joint to the fixed rail and tenoned at the other end into the upper part of a leg.

Joiner's chair: Featured sawn-out frame elements, no turned elements or decoration, framed seats consisting of four rectangular rails tenoned into the legs, and upholstered cushion seats, which set within the framed seat.

List: Framing member of a flag seat that was tenoned into the legs. Flag was woven over the lists.

Midmolding: Molding or series of moldings that adorned the waist of a case of drawers or desk-and-bookcase. Often disguises the separation joint between the upper and lower sections of these forms.

Pegging: Wooden pins or treenails driven into holes to secure mortise and tenon joints.

Pilaster: Vertical architectural element, rectangular in section and adorned with fluting, that adorned the front corner faces of case furniture.

Post: Rear leg, or stile, of a turned chair.

Primary wood: Exterior, or show, wood of a piece of furniture.

Rabbet: Open-sided groove cut along only one edge of a board.

Round: Turned chair's stretcher, a framing member tenoned into the chair posts below the seat level to join and strengthen the legs of a chair. Also used on turned table frames.

Secondary wood: An interior or structural wood.
Shoe rail: Horizontal rail tenoned into the rear posts of a turned chair just above seat level. The banister was tenoned into the shoe rail.

Skirt: Horizontal board tenoned into the legs of a table, forming its frame, or into the legs of a piece of case furniture, forming its lowest carcass rail. Usually ornamented with sawn-out profile along its lower edge or with carving.

Slat: Horizontal back supports that were tenoned into the rear legs of a turned chair.

Spindle: Rounded rod, tapering slightly at each end, used for the back of a Windsor chair.

Stile: Another term for the legs of a turned chair.

Stretcher: Framing member, rectangular in section, tenoned into chair legs or other stretchers to join and strengthen the legs of a chair.

Turnings: Series of turned decorative elements.

York chair: Flag-seated chair with a round-shouldered, saddled crest rail, broad baluster-shaped banister, and a turned version of the popular crooked legs for the front legs. Resembled round-top chairs except for the York chair’s substitution of pad-footed, bulging legs for regular turned front legs.

Windsor chair: Plank-seated chair with turned legs and rounds and with backs made mainly of shaved spindles. The chairs usually were painted to unify the various woods from which they were made.