

“An Abode of Sweetness”

THE SUGAR CHEST AND SUGAR BOX



FIGURE 1.
Sugar Chest, attributed
to William Winchester,
Sumner County,
Tennessee, 1799–1804.
Walnut with light wood
inlay; tulip poplar
secondary. HOA 37 3/8",
WOA 25 3/8", DOA 19 3/8".
Collection of the Her-
mitage: Home of Andrew
Jackson, Nashville,
Tennessee, Acc. 1942-2-1.
Photography by John
Bivins.

BY ANNE S. MCPHERSON

A brief discussion entitled “An Abode of Sweetness” appeared in a 1929 issue of *The Magazine ANTIQUES*. The subject of that discussion was the sugar chest. The author characterized the sugar chest “as a kind of domestic fortress” designed for the storage of a plantation’s sugar supply.¹ Sugar was both a valued and valuable commodity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—a symbol of status and a necessary food item, and Southerners living in the backcountry developed forms of furniture specifically designed to store it. Although the sugar chest is encountered throughout the

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entire southern backcountry, the rich lands of Middle Tennessee and Central Kentucky provided fertile grounds for its widest proliferation. In the sugar chest's core area of production, many variations of the basic form exist, including:

- sugar desks
- sugar cases
- sugar tables
- sugar stands
- sugar bureaus
- sugar presses
- sideboard sugar chests.

Alternative smaller forms, like sugar boxes, were used in households without the need or ability to purchase and store the quantity of sugar that could be locked away in a sugar chest.²

The most common form of sugar chest outwardly resembles a bottle case—a rectangular box-shaped, hinged-lid storage bin set on legs. And indeed, some of the earliest bottle cases also provided sugar storage.³ The sugar chest in Figure 1 descended in the family of Andrew Jackson and is attributed to William Winchester, a Maryland-trained cabinetmaker who worked in Sumner County, Tennessee, between 1798 and 1804. The elaborate inlaid decoration is unusual for furniture from Middle Tennessee, but in other respects this sugar chest is representative of early forms from both Middle Tennessee and Central Kentucky. Most sugar chests are constructed of local woods with cherry or walnut as primary woods and tulip poplar and yellow pine as secondary woods. This particular chest is walnut with tulip poplar as its secondary wood. While the bin of a bottle case is partitioned to accommodate the storage of bottles, the bin of this sugar chest is divided into three compartments, one large and two of smaller size. The larger was intended for the storage of brown sugar, the smaller two for loaf sugar and coffee. Unlike bottle cases, the upper case of most sugar chests is not readily detachable from the base. Sugar chests, like bottle cases and indeed most southern case furniture, are fitted with locks. Usually there is a drawer below the bin. The drawers of some early chests, like the Jackson one, are also fitted with compartments. The drawer conceivably provided storage for utensils such as sugar nippers or for spices.

While the most typical arrangement of the interior storage bin is into two or three compartments, sometimes sugar chests are not divided at all. The form of the small cherry sugar chest in Figure 2 with its turned legs is typical of later



FIGURE 2.
Sugar Chest, Davidson or Maury County, Tennessee, 1820–1830.
Cherry; tulip poplar secondary. HOA 29", WOA 18 3/4", DOA 18 1/2".
Private collection. Photography by John Bivins.

sugar chests, but its interior is not partitioned. It probably was intended solely for the storage of brown sugar.

GUARDING A PRECIOUS COMMODITY

While the need to provide a discrete form of furniture in which to store large quantities of sugar is difficult to understand today when sugar is relatively inexpensive, plentiful, and already included in many food stuffs, sugar historically had been kept under lock and key. Sugar was used not just as a sweetener, but also as a preservative. When Middle Tennesseans and Central Kentuckians elected to store their sugar in a locked case, they were responding to a tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages when sugar was both extremely rare and extremely expensive.

Once sugar was introduced to Europe around 1000 AD, its use spread slowly and gradually through society from

royalty through the ranks of the nobility and eventually to the middle class. A late sixteenth century painting by Jan Breughel, entitled "The Distinguished Visitor," depicts a guest offering a gift of a loaf of sugar to his hosts. This tradition of valuing sugar and giving it as a gift continued into the nineteenth century. Andrew Jackson wrote in February of 1815 from New Orleans to a friend in Nashville that he had shipped a hogshead of good sugar to Nashville, part of which was intended as a gift for his friend's wife.⁴

The symbolic importance of sugar, its expense, its relative scarcity, and its importance in dietary and entertainment customs resulted in a perceived need by nineteenth century Americans to safeguard this commodity. In 1811, white sugar cost as much as \$0.50 per pound and the lesser brown sugar \$0.20 per pound in Middle Tennessee.⁵ Moreover, sugar was only available in the stores in the spring when boats from New Orleans arrived on their annual visit. The irregular availability of sugar before the advent of steamboats in conjunction with a tendency during this era to buy supplies in bulk resulted in large-volume purchases of sugar when it was available. Widow's allotments of the period provide evidence not only of the importance of sugar but also of the quantities of brown sugar and loaf sugar needed on an annual basis. In 1822, the yearly provisions awarded by the Sumner County (Tennessee) court to Sarah Owen included 125 pounds of brown sugar, 30 pounds of coffee, and 10 pounds of loaf sugar.⁶ Large plantation households like those found in Middle Tennessee and Central Kentucky clearly required more sugar than smaller households with fewer or no slaves.

WHO OWNED SUGAR CHESTS

Inaccessibility to the market, household size, and wealth thus created among the elite of Middle Tennessee and Central Kentucky a unique set of circumstances that generated both the need and the ability to purchase and consequently to store large quantities of sugar during this period. During the late eighteenth century, artisans and their patrons responded by developing a piece of

furniture to store a household's supply of sugar. The first documentary reference to a sugar chest located by the author is in an estate inventory from 1805.⁷ By the mid-1810s, sugar chests and related forms appear with frequency in the inventories of persons of relatively substantial means in Middle Tennessee. Given the evidence of surviving sugar chests from Central Kentucky, the form followed a similar pattern of distribution in that state.

The 1806 inventory of Lewis Green of Davidson County (where Nashville is located) reflected a comfortable household, probably one of the most comfortable in Middle Tennessee at that time, but did not reflect the proliferation of material objects seen in later years. At the time of his death, Green owned 15 slaves, 2 head of horses, 18 head of cattle, 24 hogs, and 24 geese. His inventory also listed in part:

*Five Beds and furniture, 11 lbs. of Feathers, one Desk, 3 Tables, one Sugar Chest, one Rhum Case, two Looking Glasses, Eleven Chairs, 3 Trunks...*⁸

Ten years later, the inventory of the estate of the merchant William Tait contained more consumer goods. Tait, a former mayor, was the wealthiest man in Nashville at the time of his death. The inventory of his estate not only listed the items he owned, but also placed a value on them. Among these items were the following:

*One secretary and bookcase valued at \$70.00
Fifty-nine yards of Brussels carpeting valued at \$177.00
One sideboard valued at \$50.00
One Sugar chest valued at \$3.50
One "sett Dining Northumberland Tables" valued at \$25.00
Twelve red "guilt" chairs with two arm chairs valued at \$50.00
One "sett Blue Table china ware" valued at \$50.00
One backgammon box valued at \$6.00⁹*

The advent of steamboats in the early 1820s resulted in a more frequent arrival of shipments of sugar from New Orleans, and by 1824, the price of white sugar fell to

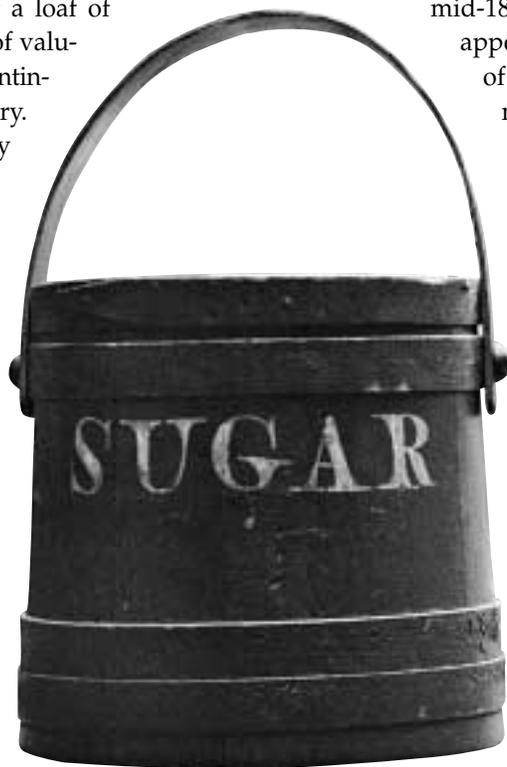


FIGURE 3. Sugar Firkin. American, 1820–1880. Unidentified wood. HOA (excluding handle) 9 3/4", WOA 10 1/4". Private collection. Photography by the author.



FIGURE 4.
Sugar Box, Central Kentucky, 1810–1835. Cherry;
tulip poplar secondary. HOA 16 1/8", WOA 15",
DOA 8". Private collection and photography.

around \$0.35 per pound and that of brown sugar to between \$0.12 1/2 and \$0.14 1/2 per pound. With lower prices and more regular availability of the commodity, the sugar chest declined in popularity by the 1830s—at least among the elite town residents. The form was still found routinely in the inventories of farmers of lesser means living in close proximity to town and of wealthy plantation owners living further removed from town. One significant point about sugar chests is that they were meant for display and connoted the ability of the owner to possess sufficient quantities of sugar to require a specialized piece of furniture in which to store it. Once the commodity was neither so expensive nor so rare, the sugar chest was less important and carried less status.

Although sugar chests were found in the greatest numbers in relatively wealthy households in Middle Tennessee and Central Kentucky, the symbolic importance of this

valued “spice” and the need to store it securely existed in other parts of the southern backcountry and among families within Middle Tennessee and Central Kentucky who did not have large enough households to compel them to purchase it in the quantities that the wealthy plantation owners did. Mrs. Polly Caruthers received a relatively modest allotment of sugar for herself and her children from the Williamson County (Tennessee) court in 1827—“\$5. worth of sugar.”¹⁰ Assuming the widow only purchased brown sugar, the court thus awarded her around 40 pounds.

OTHER FORMS FOR STORING SUGAR

Extant objects as well as inventory references provide evidence of the existence of alternative methods of storing sugar, but the terminology of estate inventories frequently leaves the researcher at a loss as to what the specific object being inventoried was. The firkin shown in Figure 3 was commonly used in other parts of the country to store sugar and no doubt was also used in the southern backcountry, but the term “firkin” was not found in any of the inventories reviewed by this author. Was the “Shugar Cannester” purchased by the widow at the sale of the estate of Ezekial Lindsey or the “Pail of Sugar” valued at \$3.50 in the inventory of Isaac Dorris in fact a firkin?¹¹ The disadvantage of a container like this is that it does not provide locked storage; nonetheless, if you had a small household and owned no slaves, such a container might have served your needs.

The seemingly simple term “sugar box” frequently appears in inventories. But does it refer to a small “tin sugar box,” a “Sugar box japan’d,” or is it a small wooden box referred to alternatively in one estate’s records as a sugar box and as a sugar chest?¹² There can be little doubt that Figure 4 was modeled on a sugar chest form and was partitioned to hold either the two forms of sugar or one of them and coffee. Today, it probably would be referred to as a miniature sugar chest. It is smaller and has less storage capacity than the relatively small sugar chest illustrated in Figure 2, but in the period, was it called a sugar box or a “small sugar chest”? When the wealthy planter Henry H. Marable died, he gave to his wife both a sugar chest and a small sugar chest.¹³ The modest estate of Thomas Norfleet, however, contained only a small sugar chest which (with sugar in it) sold for \$0.37.¹⁴

There is a general dearth of references to sugar chests in estate records for East Tennessee, but there are numerous references to sugar boxes. Unlike Middle Tennessee, the mountainous landscape of East Tennessee did not lend



FIGURE 5.
Sugar Box, East Tennessee, 1810–1835. Walnut with an unidentified tropical hardwood and boxwood inlay; tulip poplar secondary. HOA 16 3/4", WOA 17 3/16", DOA 11 3/8". Courtesy, Museum of Early Southern Arts, Acc. 2500.

itself to the development of a plantation economy, and the percentage of population in East Tennessee constituted by slaves was around 10 percent as compared to more than 30 percent in Middle Tennessee. There was less wealth, smaller household size, and presumably a lesser demand for large quantities of sugar in East Tennessee. The modest estate inventory of Jacob Bishop of Knox County in East Tennessee included “one table, one desk, one Trunk, *one Shugar Box*, Four chairs, one Bed and furniture.”¹⁵

The box in Figure 5 is from northern East Tennessee. While its original use cannot be known with absolute certainty, its unique decoration—perhaps a portrait of the owner’s house—connotes that this little box housed something of value. Given its form of a box over drawers—a small version of a sugar chest although without partitions



FIGURE 6.
Sugar Box, Carter County, Tennessee, 1810–1835. Cherry; tulip poplar secondary. HOA 15 3/4", WOA 16 3/4", HOA 15 3/8". Collection of Mary Jo Case. Photography by Pat Cagney.

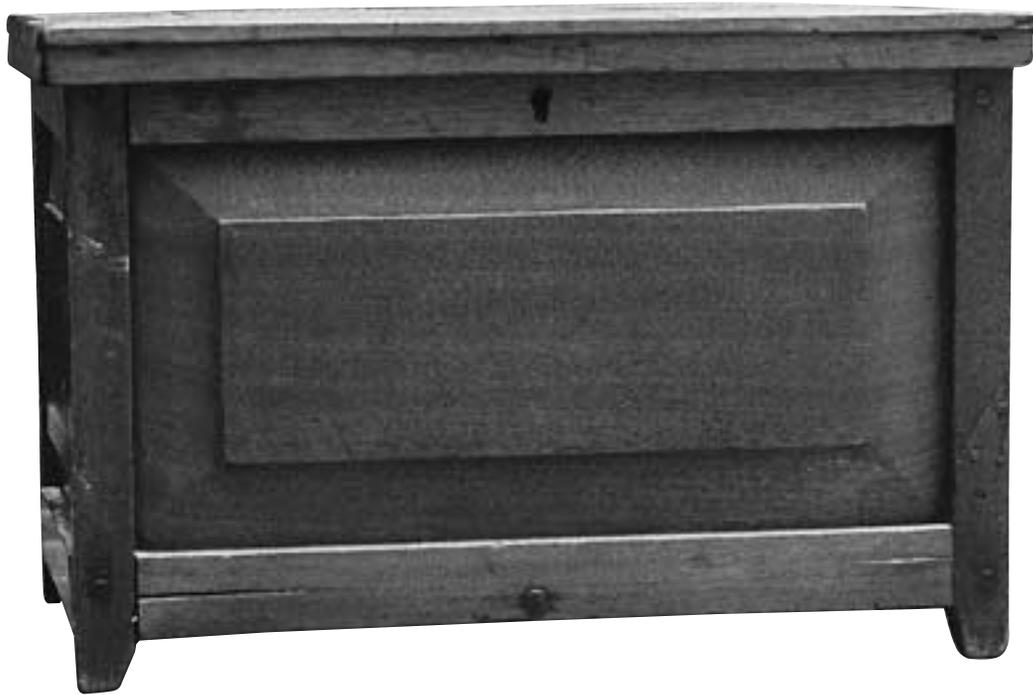


FIGURE 7.
Sugar Box, Piedmont Georgia, 1810–1835. Walnut; yellow pine secondary. HOA 10 ½", WOA 16 ¼",
DOA 10". Private collection. Photography by the author.

or a lock—it seems likely that this box stored sugar and perhaps spices.

The sugar box in Figure 6 is from Carter County in East Tennessee and again mimics the sugar chest form in miniature. Like Figure 5, it has no partitions and no lock. The residents of this mountainous and sparsely populated area must have had no fears of someone sampling or stealing their sugar.

Georgia furniture historians note references to sugar boxes and sugar chests in the records of that state, but point out the relatively rare occurrence of the sugar chest form. The walnut and yellow pine sugar box in Figure 7 has a provenance in Piedmont Georgia. The raised panels on the top, front and sides relate this sugar box to a full-size partitioned sugar chest, also from Georgia.¹⁶ Unlike the preceding two examples, this walnut box does have a lock.

Not all sugar boxes were constructed of the typical primary woods of walnut and cherry, nor did all have the decorative details of inlay, reeded molding, or raised panels. The sugar box in Figure 8 is completely of tulip poplar painted or stained red to lend the appearance of walnut or cherry. The “small sugar chest” owned by Mr. Norfleet at

his death may have been similar to this one. Note, however, that this box does have a lock on both its bin and its drawer. It was purchased in Middle Tennessee in 1980s.

As mentioned above, variations on the sugar chest form developed in Middle Tennessee and Central Kentucky. Figure 9 with its applied columns and simulated drawer fronts is a scaled down version of a sugar bureau—a rare hybrid form that combined a lift-top partitioned storage bin with one or two full-size bureau drawers below. This author only found four references to sugar bureaus, all in northern Middle Tennessee. Sugar desks were more common than sugar bureaus, and occasionally examples of miniature sugar desks are seen today.

The need for a “domestic fortress” in which to store sugar prompted enterprising cabinetmakers and their patrons in the southern backcountry to develop forms to suit their particular needs, which varied depending upon the size and wealth of a particular household. A large family with a considerable slave work force purchased and stored large quantities of both brown and white sugar; the same size family of lesser means may have primarily used brown sugar and would have had a chest designed to store only one brown sugar. A sugar box may have been of



FIGURE 8.
Sugar Box, Middle
Tennessee, 1810–1835.
Tulip poplar. HOA
17 ½", WOA 19 ¾", DOA
13 ¾". Collection of
Mary Jo Case.
Photography by the
author.

sufficient size to store the sugar required by a smaller household. Whether it was a chest or a box, this “abode of sweetness” would have been valued by its owner and within each domestic setting would have carried a symbolic meaning that may have exceeded its economic cost.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

- Figure 1, courtesy of The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson, Nashville, TN.
- Figure 2, photo by John Bivins.
- Figures 3 and 7–9, courtesy of the author.
- Figure 4, courtesy of the owner.
- Figure 5, courtesy of Old Salem/Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts Research Center.
- Figure 6, photo by Pat Cagney.



FIGURE 9.
Sugar Box, Northern Middle Tennessee,
1810–1825. Cherry with walnut inlay;
tulip poplar secondary. HOA 22 ¼",
WOA 17 ¾", DOA 11 ¾". Private
collection. Photography by the author.

NOTES

1. "An Abode of Sweetness," *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, Vol. 16 (August 1929), p. 104.
2. This article is derived in part from an article previously published by the author and from the author's master's thesis. "That Article of Household Furniture Peculiar to Earlier Days in the South: Sugar Chests in Middle Tennessee and Central Kentucky, 1800–1835," *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Winter 1997), pp. 1–65; and "Sugar Chests in Middle Tennessee, 1800–1835" (Williamsburg, Va.: College of William and Mary, 1996).
3. Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts file S-29109. Ronald L. Hurst and Jonathan Prown, *Southern Furniture 1680–1830 The Colonial Williamsburg Collection* (Williamsburg, VA.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1997), p. 533.
4. Andrew Jackson to Colonel Robert Hays, February 4, 1815, in John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. II (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1927), p. 157.
5. Account Book for Winchester & Cage, Cairo (Sumner County), Tennessee, 1811, private collection. A microfilm copy of this account book is in the archives of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, NC.
6. Widow's Support to Sarah Owen, Davidson County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, June 1822, Book 8, p. 110.
7. Inventory of the Property of Thomas Bedford, Rutherford County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, January 1805, Book 2, p. 2.
8. Inventory of the Estate of Lewis Green, Davidson County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, October 1806, Book 3, p. 138.
9. Inventory of the Estate of William Tait, Davidson County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, August 1816, Book 7, pp. 42–46.
10. One Year's Provision for Mrs. Polly Caruthers, Williamson County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, August 1827, Book 7, p. 16.
11. Account of the Sale of the Estate of Ezekial Lindsey, Maury County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, 1807, Book 1, pp. 9–10. Inventory of Isaac Morris, Robertson County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, Book 5, pp. 55–58.
12. Inventory of the Estate of Benjamin Owen, Davidson County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, February 1802, Book 2, pp. 225–226. Inventory of the Estate of Elisha Weatherford, Smith County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, September 1807, Book 1, p. 94. Inventory and Account of Sales of the Estate of David Lockhart, Logan County (Kentucky) Wills and Inventories, 1815, Book 1, pp. 385–88, 413–20.
13. Inventory of the Property Given by H. H. Marable to his Wife, Rutherford County (Tennessee) General Records, February 1834, Book 9, pp. 119–120.
14. Inventory and Account of the Sales of the Estate of Thomas Norfleet, Rutherford County (Tennessee) General Records, September 1835, Book 9, p. 254.
15. Inventory of the Estate of Jacob Bishop, Knox County (Tennessee) Wills and Inventories, October Session 1823, p. 342.
16. *Neat Pieces: The Plain-Style Furniture of 19th Century Georgia* (Atlanta Historical Society, 1983), pp. 6, 126.