

Traditions of local house carpentry - A vernacular cupboard from Virginia

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has recently acquired a hewn white oak cupboard from a dilapidated frame-structured house in Amherst County, Virginia. Amherst is a remote rural area, located towards the centre of the state and relatively distant from the early urban centres.

The construction methods used in this cupboard share many construction techniques with those employed in early barns and houses to be found in Virginia. Physical evidence suggests that the craftsman who produced the cupboard had access to only the most basic woodworking tools. These included a *froe* for roughing out the lumber, an *adze* for smoothing its surfaces, a *chisel* and *mallet* for opening mortises and a *brace and bit* for drilling holes. The complex array of chisels, gouges, planes and other tools associated with more refined woodworking is not apparent in the construction of this piece. No screws, nails, hinges or other metal fittings were employed in the making of this cupboard. Instead, the shelves were attached to the side by means of projecting tenons pinned through on the outside, a technique widely used in the Chesapeake for construction of the sturdy ladders that led to attics and lofts. Timber preparation, using an adze was often used in this area and is evident on the underside of floorboards and joists.

Only one of the aprons that faced the shelves survives, but these were originally attached to the carcass with wooden pins. Even the wooden pintles on which the doors swing are integral with the doors themselves and rest in drilled holes in the frame, thus eliminating the need for conventional metal hinges. Similar pintled doors have been documented by the Department of Agricultural Research in a number of Virginia outbuildings. The construction date of the cupboard is difficult to establish, but nails used later to repair the frame are of the wrought, rose-headed variety, suggesting production sometime before the early nineteenth century. How the piece was originally used is still unclear. It may have served in a barn or shed for the storage of tools and seeds, or it may have begun life in the main living space of a very modest dwelling. In either case it illustrates a level of technology not hitherto represented in our collection. Despite the technical relationships which may have been observed, many questions concerning the cupboard's origins still linger. Are any members of the R.F.S.

aware of a British vernacular tradition that might help to place this cupboard in a cultural context? Are similar forms seen in England, Wales or elsewhere? Any assistance, ideas, inspiring thoughts, enlightening notions or any other reaction would be very much appreciated.

Jonathan Prown
Assistant Curator of Furniture,
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
Post Box C
Williamsburg, Virginia 23187

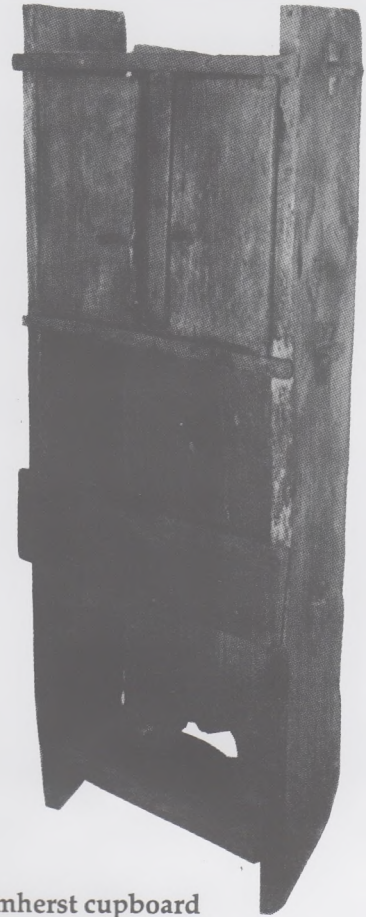


Fig. 8 Amherst cupboard

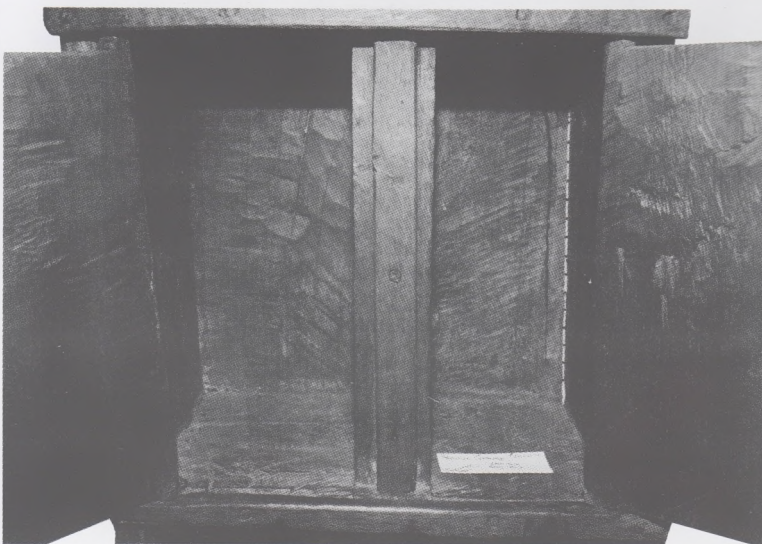


Fig 9 Pintled doors