

Mid Eighteenth Century English / Tidewater Drawer Construction -
A Presentation and Demonstration by Kaare Loftheim

The November meeting featured a presentation and hands-on demonstration by Kaare Loftheim a working cabinetmaker from the shop at Colonial Williamsburg. In his presentation, Kaare pointed out distinctive features of drawer construction typical of colonial case work from 1660 through the early 18th century. He explained that changing taste in furniture among English customers prompted cabinetmakers to expand use of walnut and other figured woods. As colonial cabinetmakers along the eastern seaboard were more often than not trained in England, the techniques learned there influenced cabinet work in the colonies. As in England use of veneer in colonial furniture required cabinetmakers to find ways to protect veneered edges of drawers from cracking and splitting. One solution was to insert a narrow strip of wood along the top, bottom, and sides edges of drawer fronts to protect veneer. This method which became known as cock beading coincided with dovetail design changes from through to lapped cuts which allowed a rabbet cut along the drawer sides to accept edge molding without weakening the joint. Kaare outlined phases in drawer construction and aesthetics defined by Adam Bowett in “A New Chronology for English Walnut Veneered Furniture” from *Antiques*, 2002, commenting on how variations in drawer construction affected labor, skill, and drawer rigidity and durability.

Kaare then turned to the workbench to demonstrate period design and construction using a previously assembled partially built drawer. First, he described the method of laying out and cutting dovetails to ensure rabbet cuts along the side do not compromise the top or bottom dovetail. Figure 1 at left shows cock



Figure 1 - Rabbet above pins forms seat for cock bead

bead applied to the drawer bottom with the side rabbet made above the tail pins to accept the side piece.

In Figure 2, at right, the cock bead strip is placed on the drawer top for sizing. Using a shop made jig, Kaare shaved the cock bead strip with

a smoothing plane until it reached uniform thickness along its length. When shaved to fit, the top piece and the drawer bottom piece serve to describe the length of side beading strips which are sized and mitered to complete the cock bead around the face of the drawer.

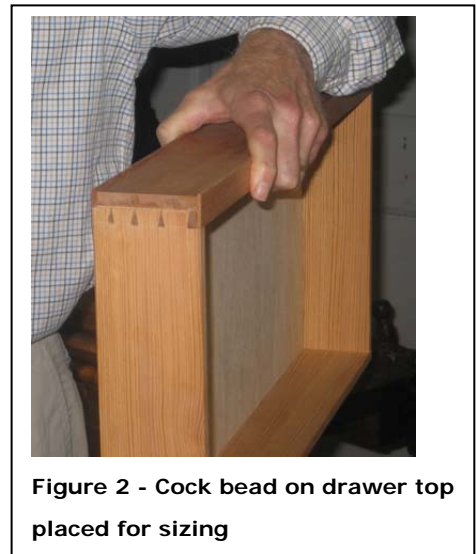


Figure 2 - Cock bead on drawer top placed for sizing

Another distinctive feature of English, and colonial, drawer construction is the method of attaching a drawer bottom using glue blocks to allow movement while providing a secure bond to sides and front. Oak drawer bottoms oriented cross grained to the front and back prevented wood



Figure 3 – Glue blocks placed along drawer bottom allow expansion.

expansion from bulging or collapsing drawer sides. Typically, the drawer bottom was glued to a rabbet in the front and sides, and tacked to the drawer back. Glue blocks spaced along the front and sides of the bottom allowed expansion and provided a very secure bond that added to overall stability of the drawer, particularly in small drawers. In the Figure 3 notice the slim distance placed

between glue blocks allowing sufficient room for movement while retaining firm contact with case surface to maintain overall drawer stability. Kaare noted that tacking drawer bottoms to the back can result in the drawer bottom pulling away from the front, and often period pieces can be found with sections of fabric glued

over split bottoms to repair and conceal such events.



Figure 4 - Using winding sticks to confirm trueness in a surface



Figure 5 - Shooting board with jointer plane

In the course of his demonstration, Kaare also illustrated use of miniature shop made miter jack, scratch stock made with flat head screw cutters, shooting board, and winding sticks.

In Figure 3, Kaare uses winding sticks to check for twisting and flatness in the smoothing plane he used to trim a drawer bottom with a shooting board. (Figure 5)



Figure 6 - Karre Loftheim and Lee Richmond examine cock bead plane belonging to PATINA member J.B.Cox

At left, Lee Richmond and Kaare Loftheim examine a cock bead fillister brought to the meeting by J.B. Cox. The plane was discussed in an article by J. M. Whelan published in 2002 by the Early American Industries Association. Except for its narrow size, the plane appears similar to other fixed or standing fillisters. Apart from its size, the bead fillister is quite similar to the common moving fillister. The fence intended to guide the cut along the drawer side and the adjustable depth stop that regulates the width of the rabbet cut into the drawer sides function just like larger sash or moving fillisters.