Antiques & Home Décor

6th in the "History of our Homes" Series

By Gregory LeFever

Plimoth Plantation

Looking at the long history of the American home, one of our most intense expressions of love has been for our antiques and the settings we create to display them.

Plenty may disagree with that statement. But anyone who has been swept up in this romance will understand.

What else can make us scrape together precious dollars so we can prowl through cluttered shops, endure long auctions, and travel for days just to roam under a blazing sun through grassy fields of vendors' tents in hopes of finding the perfect antique treasure and then have to figure out how to ship it back home?

What else can make us take hammers, saws, and crowbars to perfectly good walls, ceilings, and floors just to rip them apart and replace them with early boards so we can erase any unwanted trace of modern construction? What else can make us build cupboards to conceal appliances our neighbors display with pride?

What else can make us willingly surrender valuable space – on floors, table tops, shelving, and walls – in favor of umpteen rickety chairs, tables, cupboards, worn rugs, and dozens upon dozens of early pottery, lanterns, bowls, candlesticks, portraits, cracked leather-bound books, hornbeams and brooms?

And what else can make us create a home and lifestyle that can be downright shocking to our visiting friends and relatives who live in a conventional world of contemporary things? They may look at us like we're nuts, and we know there's no way we can explain it to them. They either get it, or they don't.

Considering how intense this love can be, it's hard to imagine it wasn't always this way. In fact, for two hundred years after the first European settlers made their homes here, antiques were neither recognized nor valued. Not until the 1870s did this change, due to two events – the American Centennial celebration in 1876, and the Colonial Revival movement the centennial helped inspire.

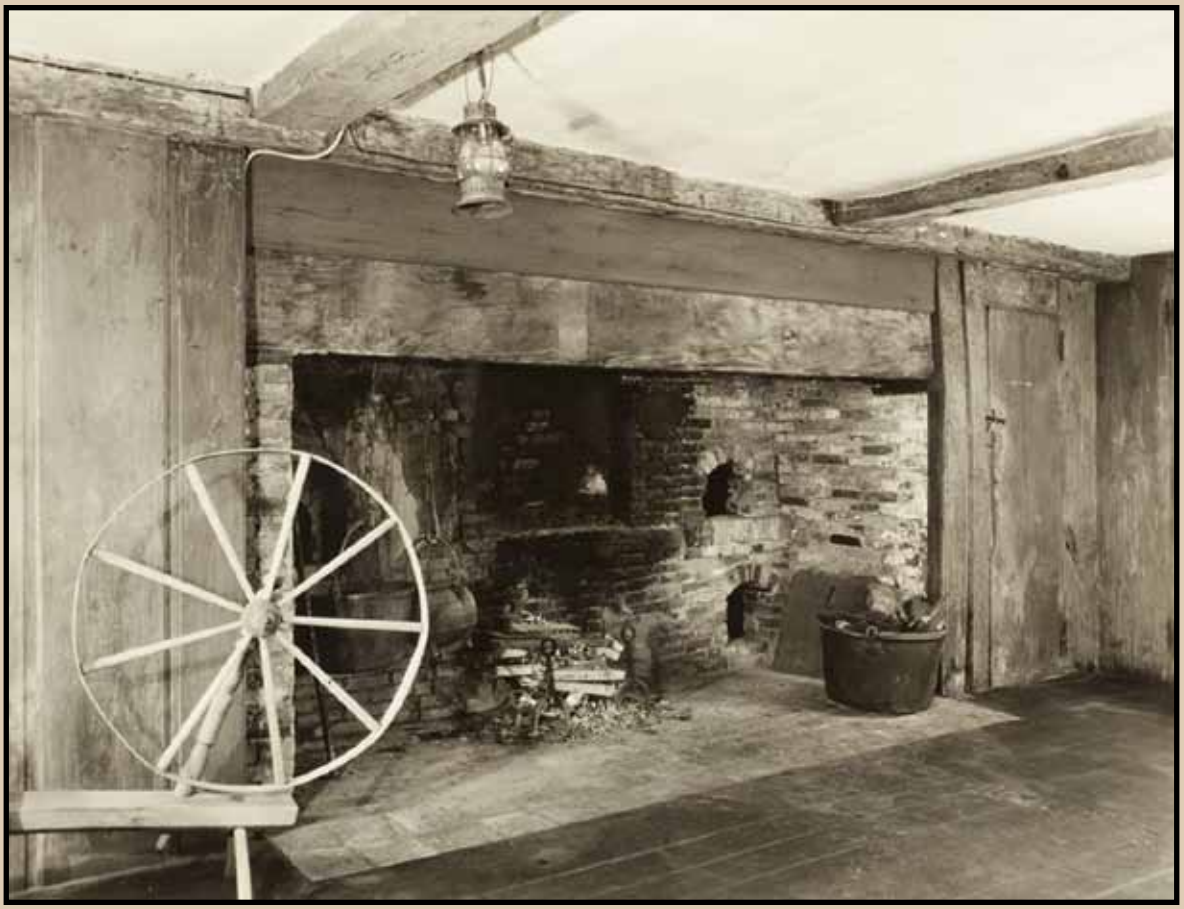
Since then, an entire business sector has come into being, with museums, collectors, investors, decorators, and thousands of dealers operating in antique malls, stores and shows in nearly every American community and online. Dozens of magazines have discussed all manner of antiques as collectibles and as home décor, while books about antiques have been one of the most active areas in publishing.

And even though the antiques business has waned in recent years, the impact of antiques in the American home has been nothing short of enormous.

True American Furniture

Early European settlers in North America had no surplus of furniture. From New England to Virginia, domestic inventories of the period listed only a few tables, chairs, chests, and bedsteads, and whatever worth these items had for the colonists was based on their immediate usefulness, not investment value.

Eventually, with the growth of the colonies in the 1700s, more furniture became available. Shiploads were brought from Europe for affluent colonists while a growing number of American



Interior view of the Swett-Ilsley House fireplace, Newbury, Massachussetts.

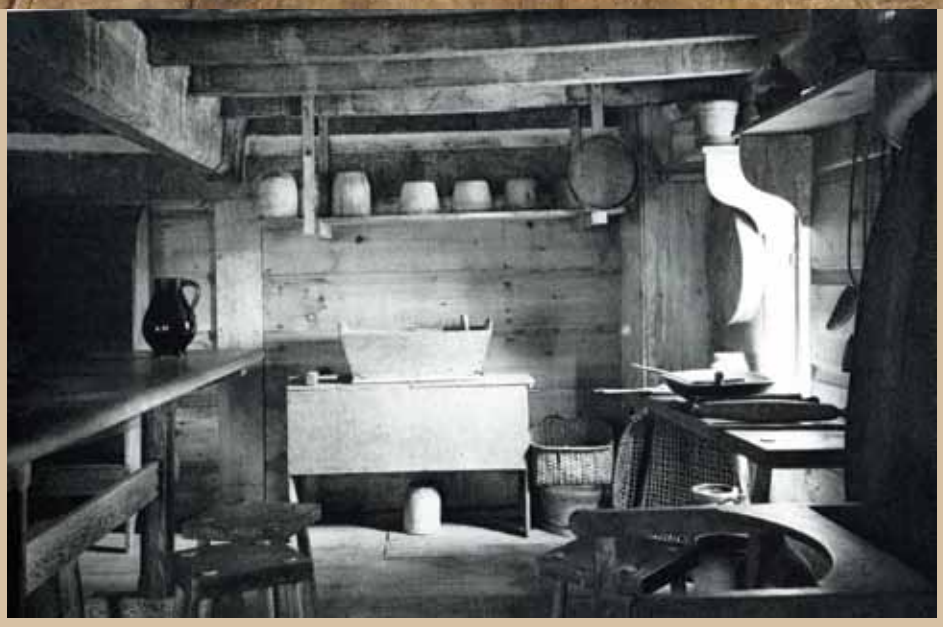
craftsmen copied popular European styles such as William & Mary, Queen Anne, Hepplewhite, and Chippendale, with the latter being by far the most popular style both here and in England.

But within a half-century, the nature of furniture in America began to change in ways that would have a major impact on the future realm of antiques.

For example, colonial furniture makers in the mid 1700s realized a style of chair being imported – the English Windsor – could be improved with lighter and stronger American woods. By using homegrown maple, pine, poplar, and oak, skilled craftsmen created the elegant American Windsor, an iconic line that came to symbolize the ingenuity of the American colonies.

And in 1791, a destitute 16-year-old Scottish immigrant arrived in New York. Blessed with a keen eye for proportion, balance, and symmetry, young Duncan Phyfe soon modified European furniture designs to create American styles popular especially among the wealthy in New York, Philadelphia, and the South. Recognized in the furniture world as the "United States Rage," Phyfe remains this country's best-known cabinetmaker.

Thus, America broke free of European dominance in furniture, and gave rise to hundreds of small cabinetmaker shops and many more home workshops across the land – many of which would unknowingly contribute to the inventory of the future American antiques market.



Interior view of Indian Hill, colonial kitchen, West Newbury, Massachussetts.

Celebrating the Past

By the mid 1800s, America had become a nation obsessed with its future. Northern factories manufactured scads of goods, the rural South became a world leader in cotton and tobacco, while shops large and small supplied life's necessities to an exploding population. But underlying tensions erupted in the 1860s with the terrible shock of the Civil War, prompting America to reexamine its values.

Just eleven years after the war's end, the reunited nation put its best foot forward at the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia, marking in two ways the hundredth anniversary of America's founding.

In one way, the exposition celebrated the roaring success of the Industrial Revolution with enormous exhibits dedicated to the manufacturing, machinery, and mining that was transforming the United States into a world industrial leader.

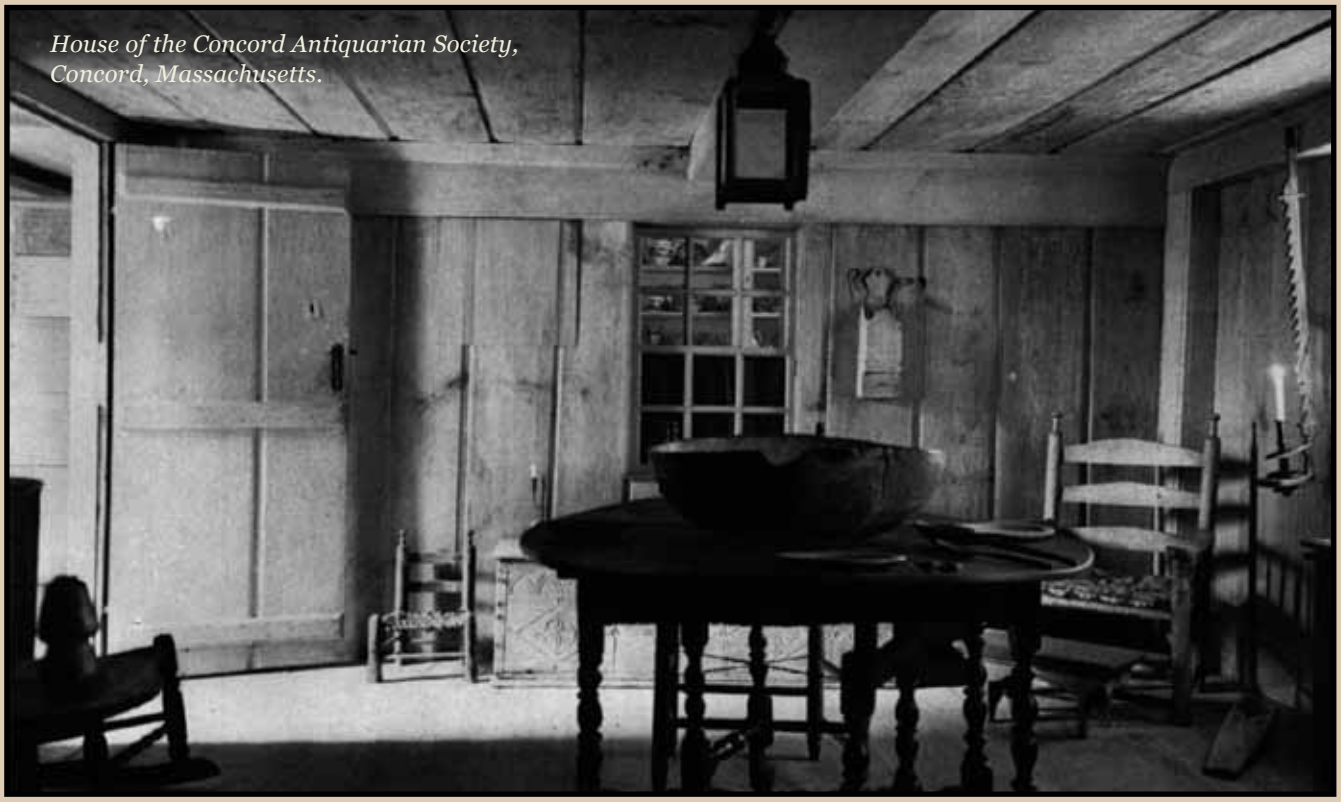
And in another way, the Centennial Exposition gave a small yet influential nod to America's past. Nearly alone among the exposition's future-oriented dazzle, both the New Jersey and Connecticut pavilions featured replicas of colonial life. Early kitchens were highlighted, with docents in period attire attending hearths alongside spinning wheels and tall-case clocks.

As if overnight, America's colonial past was deemed worth recovering.

Though the resulting Colonial Revival movement was focused on the past, the lens sometimes was distorted. For starters, the term "colonial" was loosely interpreted to include the period into the 1840s – instead of the more accurate 1607 to 1776 – thus adding an extra half-century to the movement's scope.

But while enthusiasm for the past sometimes sidestepped authenticity, the Colonial Revival had a sweeping impact on American architecture, furniture, and home décor. Gone were the days when early-period household items were used until worn out, passed down to family members, relegated to the attic, or burned for firewood.

Many surviving pieces now were seen as worthy examples of America's heritage, and their rising value made them commodities worth owning. And this in turn gave rise to many



House of the Concord Antiquarian Society, Concord, Massachusetts.

eager new dealers, collectors, investors, museums, and homeowners – all in search of the old.

New Business Selling the Old

Up to the 1880s, a few early American furnishings were peddled in curio shops or second-hand stores, but by the turn of the century, a number of small country stores in the Northeast were hanging out shingles as true antiques dealers.

After all, becoming a dealer was enticing. Start-up costs were low, and sufficient knowledge of antiques was available through hefty volumes such as Irving Lyon's The Colonial Furniture of New England, published in 1891, and Luke Vincent Lockwood's 1901 work titled Colonial Furniture in America.

People familiar with carpentry launched many of the first shops because their ability to repair old furniture gave them an advantage in developing a larger inventory at less expense. From the start, a discerning eye and the willingness to prowl through barns and attics, attend auctions and estate sales – plus the ability to bargain – have been essential for dealers in acquiring an inventory and selling it at a profit.

While America's antiques business first took hold in New England, the opportunity for growth beckoned from beyond, and soon a number of northeastern dealers were peddling pieces to more-distant regions. Trucks logged thousands of miles hauling early furniture to dealers and collectors in New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Georgia, and their environs, priming those places for development of their own regional antiques trade.

Meanwhile, thousands of American homeowners were intent on providing suitable settings for their newly acquired antiques.

Houses and History

Colonial Revival homes – a group of architectural styles emerging from the revival movement itself – were affordable and featured various sizes and designs enabling them to remain popular for decades to come.

Attributes such as colonial door surrounds, sash windows with multiple panes, and cornice dentils created an aura of historical authenticity. These homes offered a clear contrast to the preceding Victorian era, where houses were heavily ornamented and expensive to build, while the new Colonial Revival style blended easily with the more linear modern home designs of the mid 20th century.

At the same time, the movement breathed new life into thousands of surviving early houses. In the federal and Victorian periods, people had little interest in saving pre-1850 houses that had fallen into disrepair. These once-loved early homes lacked insulation, modern amenities, and often were plagued with decay. Haphazard remodels to accommodate growing families often had damaged original floorplans beyond recognition. And, with society's emphasis on new things, many historic buildings – houses and commercial structures alike – simply had been demolished.

Home of John & Nealene Ziebell.

With the Colonial Revival, many Americans were inspired to snap up these tumbledown properties and invest considerable time and money into restoring or renovating them. In the process, considerable work was created for carpenters, plumbers, electricians, and armies of handymen, as well as providing business for companies reproducing colonial-era house hardware, lighting, and other fixtures to enhance the authenticity of restored dwellings.

Thus, the 20th century's impact on antique furnishings and the settings for displaying them was a powerful new chapter for the American home – only this time it was based on turning back the clock.

Guiding the Early Look

In bringing America's past into our homes, people benefited from some excellent guides. A number of outstanding museums and publications helped homeowners define their décor, determine historical accuracy of their furnishings, and explore domestic styles

Home of Jim & Patti Agnoletti

reflecting different historic periods and places.

Among the earliest and most influential were Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia and the Henry Ford Museum – along with accompanying Greenfield Village – in Michigan. Both were launched in the 1930s with money from the Rockefeller and Ford fortunes respectively, and in their heydays, each drawing more than a million visitors a year.

Since then, more than a dozen other acclaimed living-history museums have been developed to show Americans the lifestyles, shelters, and furnishings of eras from the Mayflower Pilgrims up to the 20th century.

Likewise, a number of magazines have served as veritable manuals for homeowners on everything from acquiring antiques to creating period home environments. Among the most influential have been Antiques Magazine, founded in 1922; American Heritage, founded in 1947, and Early American Life, founded in 1970. Thousands of pertinent articles also appeared through the years in top-selling magazines such as Country Living, Country Home and Southern Living, among dozens of others.

Different Goals, Different Treatments

It's impossible to list all the treatments and ways antiques have appeared in American homes since 1900. But most tend to fall into some basic forms.

For some homeowners and collectors, a gallery approach has allowed them to display their antique collections on walls, floors, and shelving while the rooms themselves function as backdrops. It's been the preferred treatment for people collecting specific types of antiques and other instances where creating an entire environment has not been practical or desired.

Others have favored a museum treatment, where the home itself matches the specific period of the furnishings, be they antiques or reproductions. If a room, for example, is colonial, everything in the room represents that period – furniture, floors, walls, ceilings, windows, paint colors, lighting, and often the architecture of the house itself.

Examples could be an early Ohio tavern, a traditional colonial or Pilgrim-era home, or a pioneer Kentucky cabin. The owner of a 1970s ranch-style home, for example, might nail weathered wooden planks to the walls, paint mock soot on the ceiling above a reproduction hearth, and rely on scant lighting – all in support of a collection of early furniture and housewares.

Then there have been people preferring a stage-setting treatment. Here, they're free to mix and match according to their individual tastes, blending drapery, contemporary lighting, mixed-period antiques, reproduction furniture, and an artistic use of colors to suit their own vision instead of being bound to any particular historical epoch.

Along the way, there's also been an evolution in the way we treat our antiques themselves.

Home of Ron & Patricia Klopmeyer

Evolving Toward Authenticity

For much of the 1900s, the more pristine the antique, the better. Wealthy collectors and influential museums preferred high-end furniture in mint condition, which commanded the greatest value. Following this penchant for shiny, unmarred surfaces, many dealers and homeowners stripped paint from antique furniture and refinished it to achieve a clean and classic appearance.

Then, in the 1970s, collectors, historians, and many museum curators rethought the value of an antique's original surface. As a result, pieces whose never-painted surfaces were worn or "dry" grew in value if left untouched. The same applied to "original-paint" surfaces regardless of how much the paint was layered, chipped, faded, or cracked. In fact, pieces with battered and distressed paint became highly sought by antique lovers who have prized the aged grays, blues, reds, greens, and mustards of the old paints for their timeless appeal.

Similarly, the last fifty years have witnessed a progression of trends in home décor involving antiques. An exploration of different styles, better understanding of historical authenticity, and greater acceptance of creative expression have brought much more variety to decorating with antiques.

A “classic colonial“ look followed the peak of the Colonial Revival. Dominating the 1970s, it featured a recipe of white walls, woodwork in muted tones, wide-plank floors, and prominent fireplace mantels, along with antique and reproduction furniture and fixtures suited to the period. The look was popularized in books and magazines such as Early American Life, Colonial Homes, and by many dealers. The result was this interpretation of colonial New England décor becoming popular across America in homes old and new.

But the ongoing pressure of changing decorative trends – and a shrinking supply of available genuine early furniture – prompted newer looks to appear.

In the early 1980s, for example, “country” decorating dominated with its emphasis on simple, colorful home décor, natural textures, and vintage fabrics. Made popular by books such as Mary Emmerling’s Country Decorating and Country Living’s Seasons at Seven Gates Farm, as well as magazines such as Country Home, the look greatly expanded the types of antique furniture and housewares suitable for display, including pieces up to the early 20th century having rustic or farmhouse appeal.

Country décor in the 1990s spawned a look made popular by Rachel Ashwell’s Shabby Chic book, which promoted distressed whitewashed furniture and faded floral prints in a departure from the muted hues typical of some earlier looks. Also worth noting is that “shabby” decorating has employed furnishings from many eras, right up to the present, just so long as the pieces convey the light colors and unpretentious appearance the look requires.

Home of Chuck & Marion Atten

In a way, each of these treatments over the past half-century has contributed to "primitive" decorating – among the most favored of the antique-lovers' décors. Promoted by magazines such as A Simple Life and A Primitive Place, the primitive look ranges from classic traditional rooms to genuine log cabins, always with a preference for the rural and rustic. At its heart, primitive décor favors darker hues and seeks worn and mended furnishings – frequently "farmer made" – that reveal years of honest use in humble homes across America.

Keeping the Connection

Buying antiques for displaying in American homes began in the 1870s, crested in the late 20th century, and has waned in the early 21st century as antiques have lost value and new decorative trends have gained popularity. The reasons for the decline are many, but mainly are related to changing demographics pertaining to age and incomes, shrinking availability of antiques from the country's earlier periods, and the ever-changing tastes of the American homeowner.

It's fair to say that people who trade in American antiques – the collectors, investors, museum curators, dealers, and homeowners – are staring into a cloudy crystal ball. Perhaps the whole scene will decline further to the point of historical footnote. Or, perhaps like so many things, antiques will prove to be a cyclical appetite and will rise once more in popularity, maybe in twenty years, maybe in fifty.


Home of Ron & Marti Diederich

No one knows what the coming years will bring.

But what makes a revival in antiques possible is the same reason Americans got involved with them in the first place. It's been love of country and the charm of the past. It's been the excitement of finding a treasured piece from earlier days and then buying it – be it a chipped crock for $25 or a pristine Chippendale highboy for $25,000. Another forthcoming revival might see the treasure as a chair from the 1970s or a dining table from 2010, both perfect for display in a fully restored split-level ranch.

More than anything else, there will always be people who put value on our sense of connection to people and places that have come before us. A connection that only antiques can provide now and for years to come.