

Early Cooking Hearths

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

IN THE VINTAGE COLONIAL HOME OR ITS FAITHFUL REPRODUCTION, THE HEARTH CAN REFLECT HISTORY AND STILL PRODUCE A DELICIOUS EARLY AMERICAN MEAL.



COURTESY OF HISTORIC HOUSES, BREWSTER, NEW YORK



COURTESY OF PLIMOTH PLANTATION, PLYMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS

Nothing about the early American house conveys the sense of home as much as the hearth. For the better part of two centuries, the fireplace provided heat, light, and hot meals in homes large and small, rich and poor. The image of the massive stone hearth with simmering pots of food suspended over glowing coals is familiar to anyone with a fondness for America's early history.

The principles of hearth cooking evolved little from the 1600s to the early 1800s, when changes to the kitchen would become dramatic. For those first two hundred years, the differences in American kitchens were rooted in the home's economic status far more than geography or any other consideration. Whether in the northern or the southern

colonies, the hearths of the poor remained primitive and ill equipped, while the gentry enjoyed an assortment of tools, cooking utensils, and advances in fireplace technology.

Because of the cooking hearth's historical character and romantic appeal, people who today surround themselves with early period furnishings often strive to re-create the colonial hearth. In period houses, they diligently restore old hearths to their former usefulness. In faithfully designed reproduction houses, the cooking hearth remains a focal point.

Most of these early-style hearths—if well constructed and properly equipped—can fulfill their original purpose. A handful of producers of quality 18th-Century hearth reproductions can supply cranes and trammels, andirons and

Pilgrim-era fireplaces were primitive and dangerous, as accurately depicted at Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts. Pots and kettles were suspended from a wooden lug pole installed at the top of the fireplace. Usually about three inches in diameter, lug poles occasionally burned and broke, resulting in serious scalding injuries. Here a docent portraying Fear Allerton stirs food in a period frying pan.

OPPOSITE The fireplace in the 1796 saltbox owned by David and Nancy Sposato in Bridgewater, Connecticut, is accurately equipped with reproduction items from the couple's Historic Housefitters business—a period-style crane, kettle, frying pan, gridiron, trivet, and toaster, as well as assorted ladles and tools. The Sposatos enjoy preparing traditional hearth-cooked meals, which are a hit with dinner guests.



The hearth in the north kitchen of the Sheldon House at Historic Deerfield in Massachusetts is an excellent example of a late-18th-Century transitional fireplace. Still tall and wide like typical cooking hearths in the mid-1700s, it also has angled sides resembling a late-1700s Rumford fireplace. An oven built to the left of the hearth is heated from the firebox below it. The Sheldon House dates from 1754, but an 1802 addition contains this kitchen.

gridirons, Dutch ovens and kettles, and plenty of spoons and ladles to re-enact the colonial cooking experience. Plus, books and teachers can provide ample information on the process and recipes for preparing delicious meals over fireplace coals.

One of today's foremost proponents of hearth cooking is William Rubel. In his 2002 book *The Magic of Fire: Hearth Cooking: One Hundred Recipes for the Fireplace or Campfire*, he rhapsodized: "Compared with the stovetop, the open hearth is a cooking tool with spatial dimension. You can cook beside the fire, under the fire, over the fire, on the hearth in front of the fire, and on the hearth over embers. In many cases, you can apply heat to what you are cooking from more than one direction at the same time, and

you can control the heat from each of the directions independently of one another. All of this means that the hearth cook has unparalleled nuanced control over the application of heat to dishes, which translates to unparalleled control over taste, texture, and presentation."

Whether you intend to cook meals on the hearth or simply want your hearth to accurately reflect the historic period of your home, it helps to be familiar with the evolution of the fireplace and its accoutrements in early America.

EARLY COLONIAL

Purist homeowners wanting to accurately replicate Pilgrim-era cooking hearths should beware. They were crude, dirty, smoky, inefficient, and dangerous. An honest

representation would never meet today's fire codes.

The earliest European settlers in America built small, primitive houses with stones piled against an interior wall to form the fireplace. They built a fire on the floor, and smoke escaped through a simple chimney extending through the roof.

As living quarters expanded, fireplaces of fieldstone, brick, or hardened clay grew to be deep and nearly as wide as a wall, patterned after the English model. Chimneys had large openings at the hearth's throat and grew smaller as they penetrated the roof.

The changes resulted in incredible inefficiency. Fires had to be large and replenished frequently because the strong updraft in the chimney burned wood rapidly and sucked

heat from the house.

"Cooks built a large fire to start, then let it moderate, stoking it steadily until it burned down to coals and maintained an even heat," wrote Sandra Louise Oliver in her informative 2005 book, *Food in Colonial and Federal America*. "Cooks used coals to create smaller 'burners' of varying intensities on the hearth. In fact, large, open hearths were very flexible spaces."

Essential to these early hearths was a device called a lug pole. Made of green wood about three inches in diameter or more rarely of iron, the lug pole was suspended horizontally at the top of the fireplace, creating a bar from which to hang pots and kettles.

"If this big pole were not replaced frequently, it would burn through, causing damage to those around the hearth," according to former Fort Scott National Historic Site park ranger Alice Maffett. "Scalding was a common accident when people used lug poles."

An apparatus called a "trammel" hung from the lug pole. "The (trammel's) height is adjusted by inserting a stop into one of a series of holes, by a catch working against a sawtooth-like arrangement, or by hooking a link of a chain," according to Don Plumber in *Colonial Wrought Iron: The Sorber Collection*. "The adjustment technique had to be one that worked swiftly and surely. Fumbling over an open fire with one's hands can be quite uncomfortable. Having a pot of mutton stew slip from its trammel and dump onto the fire would be

cause for great distress."

Clearly, cooking in these early hearths challenged the cook, who had to step into the hearth—amid the burning logs and piles of glowing coals—to reach or adjust cooking containers at the rear of the fireplace, or to redistribute coals where needed.

LATER COLONIAL

Styles of fireplaces from the early 1700s and later are more amenable to historic and reproduction homes. While they have the dimensions of the large, late-1600s hearths, they feature improved chimneys and a device that has become synonymous with the colonial hearth.

The "crane," which replaced the lug pole, vastly improved fireplace technology. This hinged, iron arm attached to one side of the fireplace holds trammels and S-hooks to suspend pots and kettles over the fire. The crane's major benefit is that it swings from over the fire outward and enables the cook to tend the pot without having to step into the fireplace.

As the colonial population grew less transient and more prosperous, kitchens became more sophisticated,

with variations based on economic, geographical, and ethnic factors. For example, the hearths of early Dutch and German settlers were styled after those of their homelands instead of the more prevalent English model.

"New Netherland Dutch homes had jambless hearths with a hood projecting over the fireplace to catch the smoke and direct it up the chimney. The Dutch built in this fashion up to the mid-18th century," Oliver stated. "German settlers were accustomed to working on a hearth raised as high as thirty-six inches, on which they maintained small fires, using small pieces of wood. They gradually adapted to American conditions and dropped the hearths to eighteen or even six inches."

While poorer families managed with their primitive hearths, the kitchens of the well-to-do displayed new forms of fireplaces. Potagers—also known as "stew stoves," long popular in Europe—were brick structures enclosing a firebox that contained coals or burning charcoal. An opening at the top, covered with a grate, acted like a burner on a contemporary stovetop.

Docent Barbara Scherer removes skin and fat from a Virginia ham after it has soaked and simmered in the large fireplace in the 1715 Peyton Randolph House, one of the earliest and most historic homes in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. The size of the hearth is typical of a large and affluent 18th-Century household, with its broad cooking area, large swinging crane, and assortment of iron cookware and tools. Unfortunately, an 18th-Century cooking hearth was markedly inefficient, with strong updrafts causing logs to burn rapidly and pulling much of the heat up the chimney.



COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA



The cooking hearth at Monticello is a classic Rumford fireplace, with its smaller scale, angled sides to better reflect heat, and narrower "throat" at the top of the fireplace to reduce air turbulence and greatly improve the hearth's overall efficiency. Introduced in Europe in 1796, the new design became an instant sensation there that greatly appealed to Thomas Jefferson, who incorporated Rumford's innovations when he rebuilt Monticello's kitchen in about 1809.

THE FEDERAL FIREPLACE

In the late 1700s, an American-born physicist living in England modified the fireplace with such profound improvements that it revolutionized hearths everywhere. Benjamin Thompson—born in 1753 in Woburn, Massachusetts—was a loyalist who moved to England in 1776, eventually becoming Sir Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford. A student of the principles governing heat, he wrote a paper in 1796 that led to the creation of the innovative Rumford fireplace.

Rumford's design called for a tall, shallow, narrower fireplace with angled sides to better radiate heat. Most importantly, he streamlined the chimney by restricting its

opening at the top of the fireplace to reduce turbulence so smoke flowed easily up the flue. The improved airflow and shape of the hearth proved far more efficient than the earlier style of hearth, producing more heat with minimal smoke and using less wood. When it first appeared in the homes of London's wealthy in the late 1790s, the Rumford fireplace was an instant hit and the count became a celebrity.

The Rumford fireplace reigned on both sides of the Atlantic from 1796 until the mid-1800s. Thomas Jefferson built them into Monticello and Henry David Thoreau regarded the Rumford as a household necessity.

"Rumford-style fireplaces required cranes because they closed

off the chimney throat where the lug pole had been installed," Oliver noted. "In many houses dating from this era, cranes were installed in fireplaces in parlors and bedrooms. This points to a more flexible use of rooms than might be imagined. In these fireplaces, people heated water for hot tea or chocolate, warmed porridges or soups for tea or supper, or heated water for washing."

Rumford fireplaces are frequently uncovered during restorations of early American homes—many earlier hearths were retrofitted with Rumfords in the 19th Century—and the style is frequently incorporated into reproduction historical houses because of its clear decorative advantages over

the gaping hearth of earlier times. As people remodeled their older hearths in keeping with Rumford's smaller design, they frequently used the surplus space to build bricked-in ovens at one side of the hearth.

TOOLS AND COOKWARE

From the earliest colonial times, cooks maintained their hearth fires with a set of essential tools. Shovels and peels—shovel-like implements with flattened blades, also used to lift baked items from an oven—were ideal for scooping and moving hot coals. Long tongs adjusted burning logs, pokers stirred the fire, and bellows puffed air onto it.

Andirons supported burning logs and sometimes featured hooks to hold spits for roasting. Gridirons were grills with legs that could perch

above a bed of coals and hold pots and pans or accommodate broiling.

Most colonists arrived in the New World with the same basic set of cookware whether they settled in New England or Tidewater Virginia. "The Plimoth Company and the Virginia Company recommended or provided at least a pot, a kettle, a frying pan, and a gridiron, plus a couple of skillets, a spit, some wooden platters, dishes, spoons, and trenchers," Oliver wrote.

As with everything else related to early American cooking, the household's array of kitchen tools reflected its wealth.

"In the 17th century, the array of kitchen tools a cook used depended on his or her economic status and degree of cooking expertise," Trudy Eden wrote in *Cook-*

ing in America, 1590-1840. "Most cooks had relatively few tools. That changed, however, after England entered its industrial revolution in the 18th Century and made available a wide array of less expensive culinary equipment. By then, basic kitchen equipment consisted of a knife and/or cleaver, a meat fork, spoons, a colander, a strainer, a sieve, mortars and pestles, a grater, a sugar nipper, and a rolling pin. Baking tins and molds for jellies and puddings were useful, if not basic."

That observation is seconded by Alice Ross, one of America's foremost cooking historians and culinary teachers. "The basics for a wealthy family would be far more numerous and more encompassing than they would be for working folk," she said. "For that matter,

When Jefferson remodeled his kitchen, he sought to replicate the sophisticated dining and food preparation he had experienced in France. The most distinctive feature is this eight-opening stew stove with an integrated "set kettle" for hot water. Also called a "potager stove," it contains eight fireboxes with stovetop grates, which function like a modern stove. Stew stoves had been popular in Europe for nearly 200 years before they began appearing in the large kitchens of affluent Americans.



COURTESY OF THOMAS JEFFERSON'S MONTICELLO

urban people of the same levels as their rural counterparts might have more utensils. Ethnicity has something to do with all this as well, and geography. The closer to the frontier, the rougher and more minimal the kitchen wares.”

Cooks boiled or deep-fried food in iron pots and kettles hanging on trammels or S-hooks suspended from the crane or earlier lug pole. The popular iron Dutch oven, a pot with a tight, rimmed lid, provided even cooking because it could be placed directly on the coals, with more coals heaped on the lid.

“Generally you can figure that iron was expensive early, and it paid to make the pots thinner and with discardable molds,” explained Ross, who operates Alice Ross Hearth Studios in Smithtown, New York. “As time went along and the mining and blasting of iron improved, the metal became cheaper and the pots were no longer as thin and elegant, being heavier and coarser in style.”

Skillets and frying pans also were among the most basic cookware. “Some skillets were three or four inches or more deep and made of iron or brass,” Oliver wrote. “Dutch and German skillets were often made of redware pottery. Skillets in the 17th and 18th centuries usually had three or four short legs.”

Frying pans, which were shallower than skillets, often had long handles. The “spider,” an iron frying pan with tall legs and an exceptionally long handle, was par-



COURTESY OF KIM THOMAS



COURTESY OF HISTORIC HOUSEFITTERS, BREWSTER, NEW YORK

Americans began importing tin kitchens, such as this example from Historic Housefitters, from England in about 1800, but within a few years American tinsmiths were creating them at prices suitable for middle-class households. The ovens had a reflective tin surface that hastened cooking time, a spit for turning meat, and a built-in drip pan. The open back faced the fire to capture heat.

ticularly suitable for simmering or stewing food. “Frying pans were heavy, cast, clunky pieces early, sitting on three short and stubby legs,” Ross said. “By the 1700s they were still fairly much the same, but in addition to the cast iron, there were blacksmith-made, spun iron, thinner frying pans with tall legs and longer handles.”

Roasting advanced in popularity in about 1800 with the introduction of the “tin kitchen.” Made of bright, reflective tin, it featured a curved front and bottom, a spit

running through the center, and enclosed ends. The back was open and faced the fire’s heat, which was reflected onto the meat or poultry roasting on the spit. The bottom caught the drippings.

“Tin kitchens were costly at first, being imported from England, but gradually American tinsmiths made them inexpensively enough that, by the early 1800s, middle-class household could afford them,” Oliver wrote. “People considered tin kitchens a great improvement in roasting technology and, by confining the heat, they reduced the time and fuel needed.”

COMING OF THE COOKSTOVE

Meanwhile, a far more radical innovation was in the making that would change the kitchen forever—and eventually bring an end to hearth cooking. Although Benjamin Franklin invented the iron cookstove in

Traditional blacksmith Kim Thomas of Seville, Ohio, created this unusual roasting fork from a colonial-era prototype. The fork holds the meat and the ornate trivet holds a drip pan. Thomas is known for creating rare early cookware based on museum pieces, using only traditional methods, which has made his work a favorite of restorers and re-enactors.

HISTORICAL ERRORS IN THE HEARTH

Early American cooking hearths are particularly susceptible to historical inaccuracy. Culprits usually are the intrusion of coal-burning equipment where none would have existed and items mistaken to be fireplace tools that never were.

Even some experts unknowingly have fallen victim to these inaccuracies, according to historic preservationist Donald Carpentier. Armed with a degree in historic preservation and an unquenchable thirst for early American buildings, Carpentier has personally restored more than twenty buildings—focusing on the 1780s through 1840s—on his 14 acres called Eastfield Village in upstate New York. There, he and associates also teach workshops in masonry, millwork, and similar restoration techniques, plus other specialties, including “Early American Fireplaces, Bake Ovens & Cooking Equipment: 1650-1840.”

THE FICTITIOUS CRANE

A stickler for historical integrity, Carpentier recently cited two flagrant examples of misrepresented cooking-hearth equipment. One is the so-called “standing crane,” and the other is the use of coal-fire equipment in a wood-fire hearth.



COURTESY OF DON CARPENTIER

Wrought-iron trestles used by the British military to support field tables are often mistakenly called “standing cranes.” These examples are shown at the Army Museum at the Halifax Citadel in Nova Scotia, Canada. From the time of its founding in 1749 through the 19th Century, Halifax was one of four principal overseas naval stations in the British Empire. The 1856 building was later used as a temporary army barracks for troops going overseas during World War II.

Hearth cranes became popular in the early 1700s, replacing the lug pole. Cranes typically are attached to one side of the hearth and can pivot outward so the cook can tend to pots and kettles hanging from the crane.

“This thing they call a ‘standing crane’ is actually a wrought-iron trestle, used mostly as table bases by the British military,” Carpentier explained. “I’d see them all over the place for years, in shops and in fireplaces. Then I went to England thirty years ago and there they were, being sold on the street as British military surplus.” He said they were particularly popular with market vendors who used them for their original purpose: as supports for table tops.

These table supports—used on military tables from the 19th Century into the 1920s—are marked with a British Board of Ordnance insignia, a “B” and an “O” formed in the iron itself.

“I found thirty-seven of them in a reclamation yard in England,” he recalled. “They were purchased by an antiques dealer from Lincolnshire, who turned around and sold them to a dealer from New Hampshire, where they were sold as ‘standing cranes.’ What can I say?”

Carpentier said he has found one wrought-iron structure that actually functioned as a free-standing hearth crane, in the historic DeWint House in Tappan, New York, where George Washington stayed four times during the Revolution. The device was an iron arch with trestle feet specifically fitted to the hearth, with three iron hooks forged into the arch. “That device—shoved into the fireplace—was the only true standing crane I’ve ever seen,” he said.

FOR COAL FIRES ONLY

The other category of misplaced hearth equipment Carpentier mentioned includes items designed for coal-burning fireplaces. Charcoal had been a fuel in England for centuries, but coal was discovered in the 1700s to burn cleaner and hotter. In the English fireplace, coal burned in an elevated basket—called a coal grate or hob grate—instead of on the hearth floor. “Because the fire basket was about eighteen inches above the floor, all of this equipment was developed to capture the fire’s heat directly,” Carpentier said. “Most of this fireplace equipment stands on legs so it can be used with coal grates. For the most part, these things weren’t used in American fireplaces.”

One example he has encountered is a “hastener,” an enclosed spit with a bottle jack at the top. “The whole thing stands on legs about twelve inches high, so the meat is up about eighteen inches, or right in front of the coal fire,” he said. “If you put one of those in a wood fire, you’d burn the legs off before you cooked the meat.”

Japanned-tin plate warmers are another example of an elevated item suitable only for coal-burning fireplaces.

Carpentier said some American fireplaces in the late 1700s were properly equipped to burn coal, such as in the Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg and some homes of the wealthy in Philadelphia and New York City.

“There were wealthy people using coal fires to cook their food, but the people with wood-burning fireplaces—and that’s nearly everybody—couldn’t use the same equipment because it wasn’t situated in the right place to capture the heat of the fire,” he said.

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OUTFITTING THE EARLY AMERICAN HEARTH

Through the efforts of skilled traditional craftspeople, a homeowner today can have a fully equipped—and reasonably historically accurate—hearth for cooking scrumptious meals right out of the colonial era.

A number of excellent companies specializing in reproducing vintage iron products—from those with several employees down to lone blacksmiths—offer essentials such as fireplace cranes, andirons, pokers, and shovels. Somewhat fewer sell cast-iron pots, Dutch ovens, gridirons, and the like. Fewer still offer specialty items such as authentic trammels, tin kitchens, and a rare spit jack.

As with most traditional crafts, price often is commensurate with authenticity and quality. For example, when it comes to the essential hearth crane, you can get a small, basic, machine-made model for under \$50, while the historically accurate, hand-wrought version will run \$200 or more.

Here are several leading suppliers of hearth equipment and cookware.

HISTORIC HOUSEFITTERS

By far, the broadest offering is from Historic Housefitters, an established company with a varied line of 18th-Century furnishings, in Brewster, New York. “The hearth-cooking items are an active part of our catalog,” said owner David Sposato. He and his co-owner wife, Nancy, are hearth-cooking aficionados who enjoy hosting hearth-cooked dinner parties at their home.

“We’ve noticed that with a typical cookout, you have a gender separation—the women in the kitchen and the men out by the barbecue,” Sposato said. “But with hearth cooking, everybody seems to get interested, to get involved. The meal becomes a fun, group effort.”

Among the unique offerings from Historic Housefitters is a reproduction tin kitchen for roasting meat or fowl, for \$498. They also offer an accurate “spider” with a long handle for \$145, along with Dutch ovens for less than \$100 and gridirons for about \$200. Finely crafted utensils include trivets, skewers, ladles, forks, and skimmers.

Fireplace tools include standard cranes from \$60 and hand-wrought ones at \$200, andirons from \$200, a long-handled 18th-Century peel for just over \$200, plus reproduction pokers, shovels, tongs, and brooms for about \$400 a set. Sposato said his company also creates a number of special-order hearth items.

KIM THOMAS

Kim Thomas of Seville, Ohio, is a prime example of the independent blacksmith who uses traditional tools and techniques to create fireplace equipment hard to distinguish from 18th-Century originals. In fact, many of his customers are re-enactors and restorers.

“Colonial has to be handmade—there’s no way around it—if you want it to have an authentic look,” Thomas said. “It’s important to use the original techniques if you want the original look, and there are very few who have mastered those techniques.”

Although he has a display of colonial reproduction hearth items on his web site, nearly all of his work is custom. “No two pieces are exactly the same, just like it was back then,” he said. Thomas has been forging ironwork since 1984 and has been in the *Early American Life* Directory of Traditional American Crafts for several years.

Among his more common hearth items are cranes from \$200 to \$250, ratchet-style trammels for \$100 and up, a spider, a selection of unusual trivets, and roasting forks. Thomas searches for images of

original colonial cookware and has perfected several designs available nowhere else.

BALL AND BALL

Ball and Ball Hardware Reproductions of Exton, Pennsylvania, devotes part of its large 18th-Century-to-Victorian catalog to fireplace tools.

Specialty items include trammels based on early-1700s designs—featuring a sawtooth raising and lowering mechanism—with prices varying according to the buyer’s specifications.

The company, now run by the third generation of the Ball family, has a wide selection of iron and brass andirons, including some designs Paul Revere is believed to have created, for up to \$1,000 a pair. It also offers made-to-order fireplace cranes. Sets of fireplace tools copied from vintage shovels, pokers, tongs, and brooms are about \$500 a set.

The most unusual hearth offering from Ball and Ball is an exquisite reproduction of a spit jack—also known as a clock jack because of its clock-like works—for use with a special pair of andirons and spit. The spit jack slowly rotates the spit for roasting a large piece of meat. It sells for \$2,500.

KAYNE & SON

Another family-owned business soon to be in its third generation is Kayne & Son Custom Hardware of Candler, North Carolina. Its line of hand-wrought fireplace items is considered among the company’s specialties.

Kayne & Son makes a variety of fireplace cranes up to 30 inches wide for \$250 to \$300. Andirons are available in hand-forged iron and cast brass in either gooseneck or arrowhead styles for about \$1,000. Fireplace trivets, pokers, shovels, and rakes are available, as is an unusual 36-inch “blow-through” poker for \$150—hollow so the cook can puff directly on the fire to revive it.

Other unusual Kayne & Son offerings are two styles of oven doors. One is an ornate, curved-top Moravian-style door, and the other is a plainer, rectangular door. Both are only custom-made and priced according to the buyer’s specifications.

LEMÉES

Lemées Fireplace Equipment of Bridgewater, Massachusetts, family owned for fifty-four years, sells fireplace cranes in various sizes costing \$30 to \$42, trammels for \$35, and a set of four S-hooks for \$28. The company offers an ornate oven door for \$150, several styles of andirons for \$150 to \$200, as well as log holders, fireplace tools, and screens.

LEHMAN'S

Publisher of the popular *Lehman's Catalog*, the company was founded in Kidron, Ohio, in 1955 to serve the Amish and others who spurn electricity. Its extensive product line is durable, mass-produced, and frequently economical. Although the design of kettles, skillets, and oven doors is plain and functional, they are not necessarily patterned after early period pieces.

For the hearth cook, Lehman's has iron skillets from \$12 to \$50 and cooking kettles in many sizes from a few hundred dollars to an 85-gallon size for \$3,500. Dutch ovens cost \$40 to \$90, and a chicken fryer is \$40. Fireplace cranes are about \$50, and iron oven doors are \$125.



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COURTESY OF KIM THOMAS



This unusually ornate gridiron is based on an 18th-Century original, reproduced by Kim Thomas.

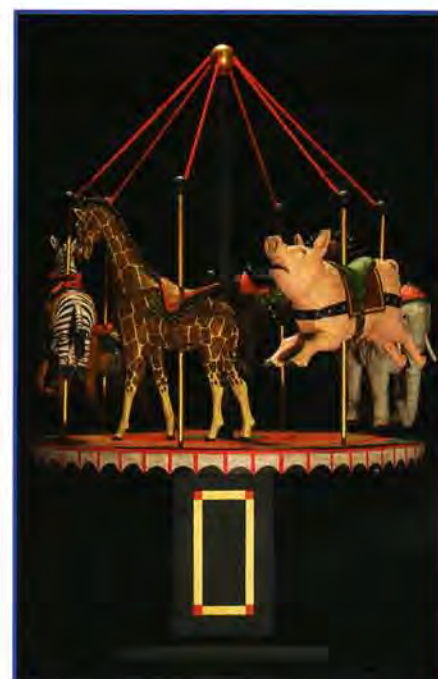
1742, it languished until improvements in cast-iron technology in about 1830 allowed it to be mass produced and widely affordable.

"Cooking on a cookstove offered many advantages," wrote James Volo in *Family Life in 19th-Century America*. "The raised cooking surface required less bending and heavy lifting than cooking at a hearth. It also only required one fire for any number of cooking tasks, including baking and heating water. Hearth cooking often required a cook to tend several fires, in the fireplace, on the hearth apron, and possibly in the oven. The cookstove usually worked from a single firebox and many could accommodate the use of coal—an important feature of urban environments where firewood was at a premium."

Historian Jack Larkin discussed the cookstove in *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840*, noting that by the late 1830s cookstoves were coming into use among middling city families and in Northern commercial villages.

"Made possible by major improvements in the technology of cast iron," Larkin wrote, "it marked the most significant change in the technology of cooking since the widespread adoption of the fireplace and hearth." *

Oregon writer Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.



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