

American Hearths

By Gregory LeFever



Photo © Mark Kimball Moulton

The kitchen hearth in the Henry Whitfield Museum in Guilford, Connecticut, is a good example of an early colonial hearth with its large apron and a lug pole for hanging pots over the coals. Built around 1640, the hearth measures nearly ten feet wide. The house is the oldest in Connecticut.

For two hundred years, the hearth was the heart of the American home. Built in many sizes and shapes, hearths helped us survive brutally cold winters, while their coals warmed the pots, pans and kettles that kept our families fed.

Necessary for survival in the New World, early hearths consumed huge quantities of wood that took weeks upon weeks in warmer seasons to chop and split for enough to last through the freezing months ahead. Summers posed a different problem, when hearths created stifling heat in homes. Separate “summer kitchens” or even outdoor bonfires allowed settlers to move meal preparation away from the house during the steamy months.

Beginning in the 1600s, American hearths evolved through four distinct stages: the pilgrim, colonial, and federal periods, and finally the era of the iron cookstove.

All the while, American ingenuity steadily improved the hearth’s heating and cooking efficiencies, making them smaller and their heat more intense. As the hearth evolved,

preparing meals became easier and faster, homes stayed warmer for longer periods while burning less wood, and the terrible hazard of destructive fire finally was brought under better control.

A Dangerous Necessity

It's hard to imagine the crude and dangerous hearths of the first European settlements in New England and Virginia. Most of the earliest homes during the Pilgrim period were small, primitive structures and their hearths were little more than stones, bricks, or hardened clay stacked against an interior wall.

Chimneys – wide at the fireplace and narrow as they penetrated the roof – were real problems. Sometimes getting a “draft” was elusive, and the home filled with smoke. Other times, the updraft through the chimney was so furious it literally sucked the heat out of the house. Chimneys frequently overheated and were responsible for burning down hundreds of homes in these early settlements.

Early European settlers brought with them an array of utensils for food preparation that would remain unchanged until the 1800s. Lug poles of either green wood or iron were suspended at the top of the hearth for hanging pots and kettles. A device called a “trammel” hung from the lug pole so cooks could adjust the height of pots above the fire. Skillets and pans sat on the hearth's apron, on beds of coals.

These primitive hearths were especially dangerous to women, who had to step deep into the hearth to adjust coals or the height of the hanging pots. Their long dresses caught fire easily, and fire-weakened lug poles would crash down, splattering scalding soups and stews everywhere.

More Safety, Less Strain

Safety was an understandable priority for hearths during the early 1700s Colonial period, with innovations to protect women who cooked the food, as well as new chimney designs to protect homes from destructive fires.

The “crane” was a big improvement by replacing the lug pole. Attached to the side of the fireplace, the crane was a hinged iron arm – with one or more pots hanging from it – so cooks could easily swing it closer or farther from coals – without having to step into the fireplace.

German and Dutch colonists introduced cooking hearths patterned after those in their homelands. Quite different from the English style of hearth, these had enclosed fireboxes of brick,



Colonial-era cooks stepped among the coals to prepare meals in hearths such as this 14-foot-wide example in the home of Ken Muth of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. This one features an iron crane, an innovation replacing the dangerous lug poles of the earlier period.



*During the 1700s, German and Dutch colonists in America brought the concept of the raised hearth from their homelands. Heated from underneath the stovetop, these hearths relied on overhead chimneys. They reduced the amount of bending the cook had to do, as well as improved protection of the cook from the fire.
(Frontier Culture Museum in Staunton, Virginia)*

often with hoods to catch smoke and send it up the chimneys. Anywhere from two to four feet high, these “potager” stoves often had grates similar to the burners on contemporary stovetops, so cooks would be working with pans and kettles at waist level instead of having to bend or step into the hearth.

Chimneys also were improved during this period, but the standard hearth of the day was soon to be surpassed by the remarkable Rumford fireplace.

From Hearth to Fireplace

In 1796, Benjamin Thompson – born in Massachusetts but moving to England in 1776 because he didn’t agree with the American Revolution – himself revolutionized hearth design forever. Known in England as Count Rumford, he was a physicist who knew a lot about how heat flows.

Known as the Rumford fireplace, his design was narrower and shallower than the traditional hearth, with the sides angled to radiate more heat into the home. But most important, he made the entrance to the chimney smaller to reduce turbulence as the smoke rose into the flue. As a result, the fireplace produced much

more heat, used less wood, and created far less smoke.

His ideas made Rumford a celebrity as homeowners throughout Europe and America adopted his improved design. People installed Rumford fireplaces – complete with cranes for cooking – in their keeping rooms, parlors, and bedrooms. In fact, restorations of many American homes of the colonial and federal periods reveal that Rumford fireplaces often replaced the larger, earlier-style hearths.

The Rumford fireplace was a giant step in hearth design, but the most radical design of all was just around the bend.

From Fireplace to Stove

The iron cookstove was invented in the late 1700s, but it had to wait for better cast-iron technology before it could be manufactured affordably for most homes. By the 1830s, the cookstove was being hailed as the most significant improvement ever in American cooking.

With its iron firebox, the cookstove’s fire could provide heat for several functions at once – boiling water, baking, frying and simmering – as well as providing comfortable heating for the home. High on its iron legs, the stove spared women from so much bending as they prepared meals, and the enclosed firebox made stoking the stove less of a chore.



Frontier farmhouses in Virginia during the 1820s often had traditional English-style hearths reminiscent of the hearths of a century earlier. Cooking was done over flames and coals in an assortment of iron pots, skillets, and kettles, such as the ones shown here. (Frontier Culture Museum in Staunton, Virginia)

By the Federal period, more Americans were settling into towns and cities, and firewood was becoming scarcer. With its ability to burn either wood or coal, the iron cookstove averted the shortage of fuel.

Home Economics

In the span of two centuries, Americans went from large, dirty, and dangerous hearths to the iron cookstove with its many improvements. Of course, a family's ability to own a cookstove depended on money.

Wealthy people, whether in cities or on larger farms, converted their open hearths to smaller Rumford fireplaces, and later they installed cookstoves. Meanwhile, families of lesser means maintained whatever type of hearth they could afford. In some poorer pockets of America, the early open hearths and Rumford fireplaces were in use into the twentieth century.

Historians have noted that what type of hearth, fireplace, or cookstove varied more according to a family's economic status than what region of American the family called home. And even in the more backward areas where older hearths and fireplaces continued to be used, no one can deny that their romantic appeal continued to linger as pleasantly as the aroma of wood smoke in the air.



This early walk-in hearth has an original, rare wooden crane for holding pots over hot coals. Cranes replaced the more dangerous lug poles during the 1700s, though most cranes were made of iron. This hearth is in the Pennsylvania home of Bernie Bogotnik.