

SURROUNDED BY WHAT YOU LOVE

Jack and Betty Rhodus have remained on the leading edge of early American antique collectors and dealers through knowing what they - and their customers - want.



By Gregory LeFever
Images by Jill Peterson

For more than fifty years, Jack and Betty Rhodus have collected and sold an amazing array of prized American antiques, managing miraculously to keep their fingers on the pulse of the country's changing tastes in period furnishings.

They buy and sell pieces they love. Furniture treasures dating from the early 1700s will find a niche in their lovely replica 1715 saltbox until it's time to transfer them to the hands of other eager buyers. Likewise, their vintage 1835 Kentucky log cabin – which they labored for two years to rebuild on their Lebanon, Ohio, property – will be filled to the rafters with great old pieces and then emptied as customers take possession of them.

“We know, when all is said and done, that we're only the keepers of these wonderful things for a short time and then they go to someone else who can love them and care for them like we have,” says Betty of the many antiques that have gone on to other homes. “I'll say it's been quite a journey.”

So true. Jack and Betty have been active on the antique circuit as both collectors and dealers for decades and are among the top tier of dealers who have helped the American antiques community retain its integrity through an amazing variety of decorating trends.

“As collectors, we're always updating, always switching things around,” Betty says. “Jack and I have been doing this most of our married lives, and we've been married 52 years. We began collecting back in the late 1960s and started doing shows in the 1970s. We began with Victorian and we stripped furniture back in the days before people learned not to do that. We went through a Shaker phase for a number of years and then got hooked on the period pieces of New England – the Queen Anne and Chippendale furniture – and now we're in what people are calling a more primitive phase. So we just keep evolving.”

Opposite, top: A rare oil-on-board portrait by itinerant limner Zedekiah Belknap (1781-1858), who combined circuit preaching with portrait painting in New England and New York State in the early 1800s. The Rhoduses have two portraits attributed to Belknap.

Left: The front of the Rhodus home in Lebanon, Ohio, near Cincinnati. They built the replica saltbox in 1994 with plans from architect Russell Swinton Oatman, who based it on the 1715 Richard Dole-Little house in Newbury, Massachusetts. The retaining wall around the flower bed is made from original foundation stones from the 1836 log cabin located behind the house.

Top: This vignette features an early New England shaved broom. The giant mortar and pestle is from Williamsburg, Virginia, in the 1700s, and the early hearth shovel is stamped “Paris Kentucky.”





Top: The keeping room contains some of the Rhoduses' most prized antiques. Jack discovered a date of 1711 on the underside of the stretcher-based tavern table with its pine top, maple stretchers, and birch legs. The chairs are c.1710 sausage-turned ladderbacks, with finials that could indicate a Massachusetts origin. The late-1700s large step-back cupboard is from New Hampshire.

Above, left: The keeping room cupboard holds part of Betty's large collection of rare American treenware, much of it from New England and Kentucky.

Above, right: During cold months, Betty enjoys cooking stews and chowders on her c.1715 hearth. Displayed here are a griddle from the 1700s, a rare kettle tilter with an early kettle that belonged to Betty's mother, and an early iron trivet Jack found in an abandoned log house in Kentucky.

For years their business has been known as Plain & Simple Antiques. “The name goes back to when we dealt with Shaker pieces, but we still keep it because Jack’s plain and I’m simple,” Betty says and then bursts into her characteristic laughter.

Period Perfect

Jack and Betty are native Kentuckians and direct descendants of its early settlers. They’ve spent their married lives in the area surrounding Cincinnati, with Jack working for over forty years as a technician with the Ford Motor Company while Betty raised their four children. Over the years they built a brick ranch-style home, restored an 1823 Federal farmhouse, and in 1994 built their new saltbox.

The home in Lebanon, about forty miles northeast of downtown Cincinnati, is their dream house. Modeled after the 1715 Richard Dole-Little House that still stands in Newbury, Massachusetts, the Rhoduses obtained the plans from architect Russell Swinton Oatman, who helped the couple make certain modifications to meet Ohio building codes. Still, entering the Rhodus home is stepping back in time, with the large cooking hearth and adjoining fireplaces, quaint buttry, period-style feather-edge wood paneling and wide-plank floorboards.

Jack designed and built the home’s colonial-style buttry and shelving that holds Betty’s extensive collection of firkins and pantry boxes as well as several of his own collection of Kentucky and Cincinnati stoneware.





Above: The floor in this corner of the buttery holds a couple of unusually large firkins and one of Jack's rare oversized early crocks from the Grinstead Potters of Kentucky.

Top right: One of Betty's favorite pieces is the old barrel marked "Butter Milk" in old green paint, from York, Maine. Near it are an early bonnet and apron, vintage cornhusk broom, and an early basket. She loves gourds and uses them in decorating throughout the year.



Right: Betty rescued this huge 8-foot, 5-inch cupboard from an Indiana chicken coop where it had sat for 32 years and was covered in chicken manure. It's now one of the highlights of the buttery.



"We've always had a love of first-period New England architecture, and when we built the salt-box, we bought furniture to go with the timeframe of the house," Betty explains. "Then when we put up the log cabin out back, that became our antique shop and we bought things that pertained to the period of the log cabin."

The result is a collection of tables, chairs, cupboards, and other domestic items that span over a century and represent a range of styles. While the Rhodus house contains a number of rare, stately pieces from New England and other eastern regions, the cabin contains mostly rustic items suitable to that type of structure and time period.

The reconstructed cabin is from Pendleton County, Kentucky, north of Lexington, where a man named Archibald Thompson built it in 1835. Workmen dismantled it in 2003 and hauled



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Above: The front parlor features feather-edge paneling, with some of the boards 28 inches wide. Jack designed the fireplace surround, with all of the paneling painted an old red to create a period atmosphere. The table is a 1700s country Chippendale from Maine, with a single drawer and a stretcher base. Its pegged construction is still visible and the base wears its original old red paint. The chairs are New England ladder-backs, of which two are from Deerfield, Massachusetts. The large step-back cupboard is also from Maine, with its unusual pinkish-mauve original paint. The builder had to add two small strips to the doors to make up for shrinkage caused by using green wood. It holds several pieces of Betty’s prized pewter collection.

Left: Also in the front parlor, this small pine blanket chest has cotter-pin hinges, but never any drawer pulls. A rare pewter whale-oil lamp from Cincinnati sits on the chest beneath a primitive oil-on-board portrait of a woman. The chair next to the chest is a 1700s bannister back, found in Union, Maine.

the logs, roof, fireplace, and chimney a hundred miles north to the Rhodus home in Lebanon, where it was up to the Rhoduses to put it back together again.

“When we found the cabin, it was in pretty bad shape,” Betty recalls. “The floors were gone, the chinking was gone. It took a lot of hard work.” It became a 15-month family project, with the Rhodus children and grandchildren helping, especially with the difficult chinking on the story-and-a-half cabin. A stretch of mortar bears the imprints of little handprints of the grandchildren who worked on the project.

Primitive in Perspective

At a time when people talk a lot about the “primitive look,” Betty prefers the phrase “pioneer look” to describe the often rough-hewn pieces of furniture and household items reminiscent of simple, often rural lifestyles of the past. She doesn’t consider a piece to be primitive just because its paint has worn away.

“I’ve heard the word ‘primitive’ for several years and have even heard it used to describe a piece of furniture – say, a blanket chest that’s Queen Anne or a Chippendale piece – just because it may show its age. But it still was made with skill,” Betty explains. “I’ll call a piece primitive if it was made by a craftsman who wasn’t particularly skilled and may have needed

Below left: The tavern table is circa 1750 from New Hampshire, with its original Windsor green paint. The chair is a make-do with an early base. The hanging “whale-sided” shelf is an 18th century piece from Massachusetts and holds a variety of Betty’s smaller treasures, including an early Kentucky horn cup with the word “Davis” on it, which reminds her of her ancestors named Davis who settled that state shortly after the Revolution. The handsome man’s portrait is from the 1830s, believed to be from Connecticut.

Below right: The crude candle stand is one of Betty’s longtime favorite pieces and was made by an untrained woodworker in the Shenandoah Valley in the late 1700s or early 1800s. The chair is a reproduction Carver chair.





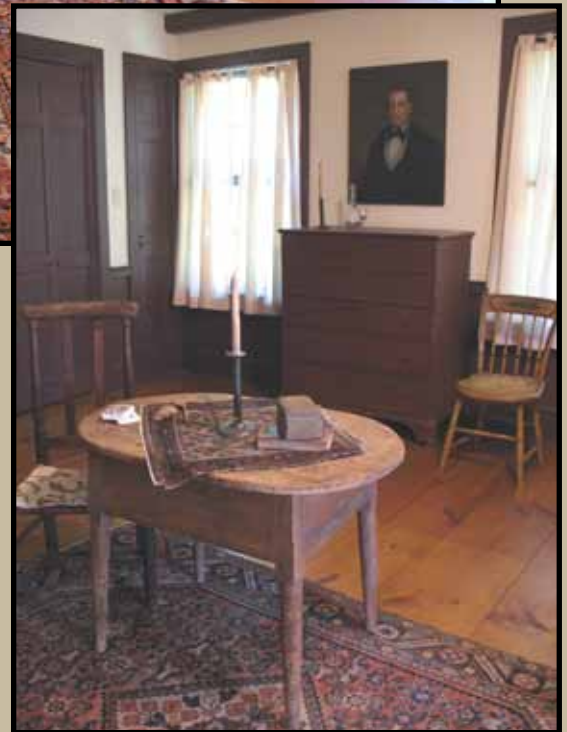
a particular piece, so he went out to the woodshed and knocked it out right away. That doesn't mean it's not good. It's primitive, but more like a piece of folk art."

A good example is a truly primitive candle stand from the Shenandoah Valley that has a place of honor in the Rhodus home. Its age is uncertain and its lines are a bit rough with not a hint of frill. "I love that thing," Betty says. "It was made by someone who wasn't trained but who needed a candle stand. To me, it's a piece of pure folk art."

In fact, the Rhoduses bought it years ago at a show in Nashville and then sold it in their own booth the next day, but Betty had become so attached to it that Jack had to track down the woman who'd purchased it and, after considerable haggling, bought it back from her at a much higher price. "Sometimes you get so attached to these things," she says. "That little candle stand just spoke to me and I couldn't bear to part with it."

Top: The master bedroom has reproduction pencil-post bed in cherry, wearing crewel bed hangings Betty sewed from old curtain fabric. The bed's linsey-woolsey quilt is from the early to mid 1800s. The mirror is early Chippendale with old glass. The table is an unusual scrub-top tea table with its original wooden pins, from Pennsylvania. The chair beside the table has Queen Anne features and an early crewel seat cushion.

Above: The chest-of-drawers along the wall of the master bedroom has a lift-top with cotter-pin hinges. It is an early 1800s piece from New Hampshire and still has its original old red paint. The portrait hanging above it is another one by itinerant limner Zedekiah Belknap (1781-1858).





Above: The guest bedroom holds a reproduction pencil-post bed of tiger maple, covered with an early linsey-woolsey quilt from New Hampshire. The country Queen Anne high chest supports some of Betty's early bandboxes, including the yellow one made in 1831 in Portland, Maine, and the top one, which is circa 1830 from Kentucky.



Above: This blanket chest in the guest bedroom is made of pine. "Its surface is phenomenal, with a lot of personality," Betty says of its original old red paint. The mirror is early 1800s from Connecticut with its old glass and hand-carved sides. "I like mirrors where you can't see yourself," Betty jokes.



Left: The "Grandbabies Room" has a rare press bed from the 1700s and a trundle bed beneath it. The quilt is linsey-woolsey and the dolls are part of Betty's large collection of rag dolls and other early textiles.



Joy of Collecting

Like many antiques dealers, the Rhoduses have extensive collections of favored items displayed throughout their home. Their collections feature some extraordinary pieces because of the Rhoduses' attention to detail and knowledge of antiques. Jack is especially good at sleuthing. For example, he's been able to pinpoint the origin of one of their early tavern tables based on the builder's use of birch wood for the legs. He also points to the odd construction of two doors on an 18th century step-back cupboard from Maine. "The guy who made those doors had the wood dry up on him, so he had to add two little quarter-inch strips to make up for the shrinkage so the doors would work right," he explains. "That's the kind of thing we look for in early furniture, the little things that tell a story."

Top: The Rhoduses bought this story-and-a-half 1835 log cabin in Kentucky and spent two years reassembling it on their Ohio property. The chimney is distinctive because its lower section is outside the cabin, but its higher section is in the interior of the loft to provide more heat. The Rhoduses' children and grandchildren did much of the chinking.

Above: The cabin holds much of the merchandise the Rhoduses sell through their Plain & Simple Antiques business. The stairway leading to the loft is original to the cabin.

Jack has an impressive collection of stoneware, much of it from the Waco, Kentucky, area where his ancestors migrated from South Carolina after the American Revolution, and other crockery from historic Cincinnati potters. Betty over the years has collected period textiles, several dozen firkins and other pantry items, bandboxes, numerous pieces of American treenware, an array of period pewter and other groups of items on display throughout their home.

Whether it's furniture or domestic items, the Rhoduses offer this advice, based on a half-century of collecting: "If you're going to buy an antique, I've always said you should buy the best with what money you have," Betty says. "I tell the young collectors today that if you've got \$35 to spend on an antique, buy the best you can find for that \$35. As times goes on, you can refine your collection and upgrade it."

Jack, harking back to years of experience, adds: "It always helps to be in the right place at the right time."



Above: A selection of the merchandise offered through Plain & Simple Antiques at the time the photo was taken. The table is an early 1800s hutch table from New York State. The top folds down to provide a back, while the two-drawer part can serve as a seat. Other items that have since been sold include firkins, pantry boxes, chairs, breadboards, bowls, and pewter chargers.

Right: This is Micah, the Boston Terrier of which Betty says: "He's the real boss of the house and our most prized possession."



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