

# Tables for Tea

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

**A**fter the Sun King, tables were no longer simply tables. The French court of Louis XIV demanded luxuriant furnishings with specific purposes—especially small, decorative tables and desks—and by the mid-1600s had bequeathed to later generations of Europeans such distinctive pieces as the writing table, night table, and dressing table.

Out of this revolution in furnishings came the tea table, a

small, graceful, yet sturdy platform dedicated to the latest beverage fad sweeping Europe.

As King Louis was furnishing Versailles, Portuguese and Dutch traders began making forays to the Orient and returning with crates of fragrant tea. The new brew gained popularity among the aristocracy and by 1750 the British East India Company was importing ton upon ton of aromatic leaves. With importation at new highs, the price dropped and tea became all the rage,

GRACEFUL YET STURDY, TEA TABLES WERE THE SOCIAL CENTER OF THE COLONIAL HOME. CREATING THEM IS STILL A LABOR OF LOVE FOR TODAY'S CABINETMAKERS.

Tea tables devoid of raised perimeter edges or molding often were covered with a cloth, as much for decorative appeal as for protection, as shown in this 1764 painting by British artist John Collet (1725-80), titled *The Honeymoon*. Because the practice was widespread, cabinetmakers frequently focused their artistic talents on the tables' pillars, legs, and feet through extensive use of fancy lathe turning and detailed carving.



COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

especially in England.

Along with crates of tea, European traders brought back Asian tables and the exotic woods used to create them. European craftsmen, already proficient in carving walnut and oak, had little difficulty creating a booming new market in furniture made of the harder ebony, rosewood, and mahogany—including renditions of the first European tea tables.

What, exactly, is a tea table? Wendy Cooper, curator of furniture at Winterthur Museum, gives a generalist's response: "A tea table is any table used for tea. There is no particular style. A Pembroke table might be used for tea, or a porringer table might be used for tea, and a small drop-leaf table might be used for tea. These tables might have straight legs, cabriole legs, pad feet, or claw-and-ball feet. In other words, life is not black or white, nor are tea tables exactly one form or shape or period style."

Still, what we today regard as a tea table falls into two main genres. The earliest form was a rectangular table with four legs and a tray top with raised edges to prevent china from slipping to the floor. The other form had a circular top affixed to a central pillar supported by three legs. The top could be raised to a vertical position for easy storage—a trait that made it by far the more popular style in early America.

When asked what types of tea tables early residents of the Connecticut River Valley used, Joshua Lane, assistant curator of furniture at Historic Deerfield, replied: "Both, although round-top tea tables survive in greater numbers and seem to have been the favored style in the third quarter of the 18th Century and into the 19th."

### AMERICAN TOUCHES

Tea made its American debut in New Amsterdam around 1650 when the city was under control of the Dutch and could savor goods provided by the Dutch East India Company. A century later, mostly through efforts of the British East India Company, tea had become the most popular

drink in the colonies—so popular that putting a tax on it could spell real trouble.

Tea tables began showing up in America in the early 1700s. In his book *New England Furniture: The Colonial Era*, author Brock Jobe, professor of American decorative arts at Winterthur, describes an early tray-top table purchased in Boston.

"Oriental trays with lipped edges and indented corners were, no doubt, the source for the tray-like top of this table and its English cousins. The Chinese influence on the design of the rectangular tea tables in Boston is most apparent on examples with straight skirts."

Soon cabinetmakers in Boston, Salem, Newport, and the Connecticut River Valley were adding their own stylistic touches to tray-top tea tables in the form of cabriole legs, scalloped skirts, and a particularly graceful stance.

A surprisingly early reference to a tea table is in the 1718 estate records of Huguenot immigrant Jean Marot, a tavern keeper in Williamsburg, Virginia, mentioning "a Tea Table & furniture." In fact, more recent exploration into early Southern furniture points to a number of tea-table designs originating with early cabinetmakers in Charleston, South Carolina.

On the matter of these Southern pieces, Ronald Hurst, vice president of collections and museums at Colonial Williamsburg, said, "The decorative elements of tea tables made in Southern cities are as different from one another as those from Northern centers. Southern furniture is not as well known or understood by furniture historians and collectors today because less of



This stunning piecrust tilt-top tea table, built in Boston c. 1745-65, has intricate scalloped carving on the perimeter of the top and finely carved ornamentation on the pillar and legs, which culminate in equally detailed ball-and-claw feet.

it has survived the vicissitudes of war and a humid climate. There was also less of it made to begin with because there were fewer urban centers in the early South than in the North."

### MAKING ROOM: THE TILT-TOP

An entirely different type of tea table appeared in England around 1720. It featured a round top two to three feet in diameter that tilted vertically for easy storage against a wall—a definite boon for cramped 18th-Century households. These tables had various names: "pillar-and-claw tables" for their central pillar and claw-like tripod bases, or just "claw tables" for the tripod, or even "snap tables" for the sound they made when the top was lowered and latched into position.

The tilt-top tea table—a more modern term—soon outnumbered its four-legged counterpart, as surviving examples suggest. “The broad acceptance of the newer design was due partly to its convenience and portable nature,” Hurst said. “With a triangular base and a tilting top, a round tea table was well-suited for upright storage and display in an unused corner of the room.”

The tilt-top table also showcased the cabinetmaker’s expertise. It demanded strength, dexterity, and skill to turn a three-foot-round piece of wood on a lathe to achieve the “dish” effect of the raised rim. Likewise, the mechanism that attached the top to the central pillar could be highly complex. The “birdcage” mechanism found on many of the tilt-tops enabled the table to not only be tilted up for storage but also—when lowered—to turn like a Lazy Susan for better serving guests.

#### TEA TABLES TODAY

Tea tables in either their tilt-top or tray-top versions remain popular

early American-style pieces, and nearly all of the leading makers of reproduction 18th-Century furniture offer at least one model.

Two of the eight cabinetmakers featured here have renowned furniture factories that employ other woodworkers, while the others are lone craftsmen. All eight are listed in the Directory of Traditional American Crafts.

Few of these men have had the luxury of physically examining the historic prototypes for their own tea tables, more often relying on photographs in books or provided by customers. As cabinetmaker Charles Bender, explained it, “Any time you develop a design solely from a photograph, the challenge is to determine the smallest of details from a photograph that was not necessarily intended for that kind of scrutiny.”

Each of these craftsmen admits that making a tea table is not easy and often barely profitable. The tables—meant to be graceful, elegant, and sturdy, often with intricate turning and carving—

require time, skill, and patience. They agree that making a tea table is a labor of love.

#### CHARLES BENDER

Charles Bender’s Salem/Newport tea table is distinguished by graceful legs culminating in ball-and-claw feet noticeably more prominent than the feet on most tea tables. Getting those proportions right, he noted, was a key challenge in creating the table.

“The most striking feature is the generous ball-and-claw feet. While the original table exhibits characteristics consistent with those made in either Newport or Salem, I personally believe it’s from Newport because of the refined nature of the carving on the feet.”

“The first time I saw the table, I knew it would be one of my favorite pieces to build, and it remains so today.”

Bender, who works from a shop in East Coventry, Pennsylvania, not far from Philadelphia, first created the Salem/Newport table several years ago at the behest of a customer who had seen a photograph of the original in an antiques magazine.

“The most difficult part of making it from a photograph was getting the shape and proportions correct on the long, sinewy legs that end in the boldly carved ball-and-claw feet,” he explained. “The tray top was another feature that took a fair amount of time to develop. I made numerous samples of the molding for it—each with a slightly different shape and size—until I got one that matched up to the original.”

Bender usually makes the table of mahogany, like the original, but he will use other woods upon request. In mahogany the table costs nearly \$4,000. His other, sometimes more complex, styles of tea tables include a Connecticut River Valley Queen Anne, an intricate Philadelphia piecrust tilt-top, and a rare, diminutive square-top Philadelphia tea table.

A cabinetmaker for thirty years, Bender sells directly to customers from his workshop in conjunction with his web site, which serves as a catalog.



Prominent ball-and-claw feet are among the distinctive features of Charles Bender’s tea table, based on an original Newport, Rhode Island, design. Bender painstakingly re-created the molding surrounding the tray top to match that of the original, which, like his, was made in mahogany. The table costs about \$4,000.



Little is known about this rare early tea table, now in the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum at Colonial Williamsburg. Built of black walnut in eastern Virginia, it likely dates from the 1720s.

Cabinetmaker Dennis Bork patterned his tray-top tea table after the 1720s original above. Although he made the apron slightly deeper, Bork's rendition faithfully captures the William and Mary styling, with much of the molding and apron created solely with hand tools. In walnut, like the original, the table sells for \$3,200.



## DENNIS BORK

For years, cabinetmaker Dennis Bork has been drawn to what he regards as the romanticism of William and Mary, so when he saw a rare tea table in that style in Colonial Williamsburg's DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, he naturally wanted to re-create it.

The original, made in the early 18th Century, is somewhat heavier in appearance than most tea tables because of its William and Mary pedigree. It displays a deep and ornate apron, with characteristically turned stretchers connecting the turned legs.

"I made this one of walnut, but cherry and mahogany could also be used," he said.

Bork uses traditional tools and construction methods whenever possible, as on the William and Mary table. "The half-round molding around the top is made using a molding plan, as is the tongue-and-groove," he explained. "Each leg is turned one at a time, and the finish is applied by hand."

In walnut or cherry, Bork's William and Mary tea table sells for about \$3,000. In mahogany, the price increases to about \$3,600. He also produces at least three other tea tables—a Queen Anne tray-top with candle slides, a Queen Anne tilt-top, and a porringer-style tea table—amid an extensive array of other pieces representative of furnishings from the late 17th to early 19th Centuries.

Bork earned a degree in physics, but his heritage as the son of a wood pattern maker and the lure of building furniture were too strong. Since 1985 he has operated his own furniture business in Delafield, Wisconsin, about thirty miles west of Milwaukee, with his web site serving as a catalog.

## LAWRENCE CROSSAN

Lawrence Crossan admits his greatest challenge in reproducing the graceful but sturdy lines of his Connecticut Queen Anne tea table was "making sure I didn't muck it up." That's hardly a risk, given that Crossan has been making fine



Lawrence Crossan builds his version of a Connecticut Queen Anne tea table using curly maple because the grain creates a spectrum of hues. It sells for about \$3,200.

reproduction 18th-Century American furniture for nearly three decades.

He spotted this particular tea table while thumbing through Volume 10 of *American Antiques from the Israel Sack Collection*—a mother lode of early American furniture designs—and was immediately smitten.

“You go through books like that and look for great stuff, and this one really caught my eye,” he recalled. “Its proportions are wonderful. It’s diminutive, but it’s scaled so terribly, terribly well. It’s a very simple table—its aprons are very plain and very straight—but its lines just flow, and it has a stance that’s absolutely wonderful.”

In curly maple—one of his preferred woods for the piece—the table costs about \$3,200.

Crossan uses traditional designs, materials, and techniques to build

a substantial line of 18th-Century pieces based on William and Mary, Queen Anne, Chippendale, Hepplewhite, and Sheraton designs. His workshop occupies a stone barn on the banks of the Brandywine River in Lyndell, Pennsylvania.

“I do this because I love it, and I hope it shows in the product,” he said. “There will always be some of us who are making 18th-Century furniture despite changes in taste and changes in the market. I’m just not comfortable making Mission furniture and I’m not comfortable making Crate & Barrel knock-offs.”

Crossan uses his web site to show examples, but he makes each piece to the customer’s specifications.

### D. R. DIMES

Although his company is the largest furniture maker featured here, with 27 craftsmen and a massive portfolio of 18th-Century furniture designs, Douglas Dimes considers his Boston tea table something special.



This graceful Queen Anne tray-top tea table from D. R. Dimes adopts a popular 18th-Century design originating in Boston. The silver tea set was crafted by South Boston silversmith Richard Dimes for his son and bride, Leslie and Marit Dimes, grandparents of Douglas Dimes, who operates the furniture company his father founded. The tea service is displayed in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

“We offer hundreds of pieces in many different forms, but there are always a few pieces that are favorites. We originally made this table in the early 1990s, and it’s such a great piece that it remains one of the best we make.”

Dimes saw a photograph of the original table in *American Antiques from the Israel Sack Collection*. “It’s difficult to remember specifically why you chose a particular piece because there’s almost always a variety of excellent examples to choose from,” he said. “But the ones you choose are those that just grab you, and you say, ‘Wow, what a fabulous piece.’”

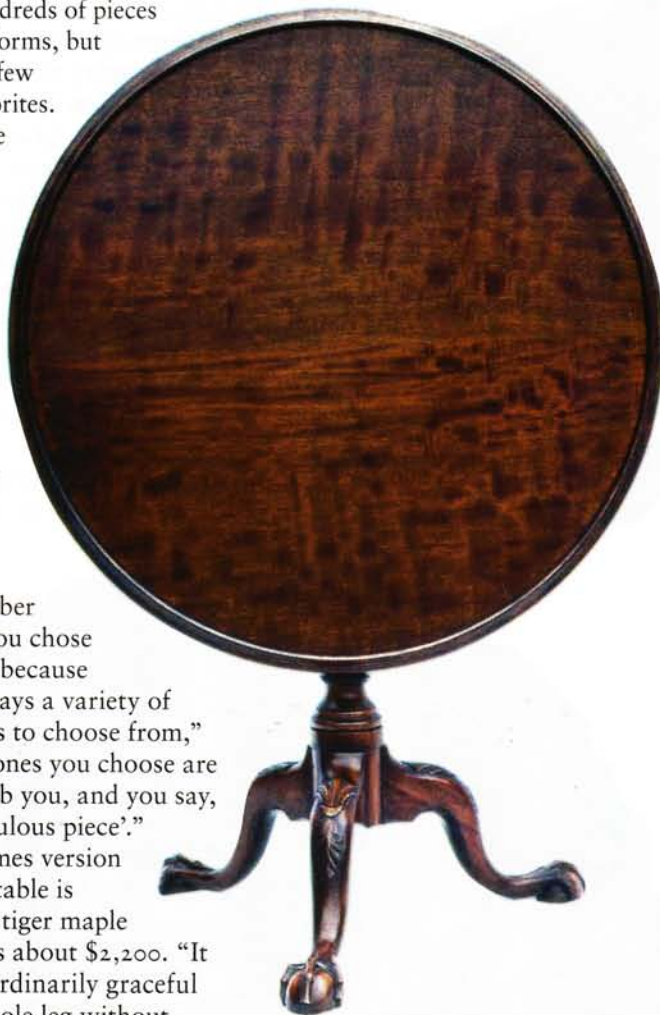
The D. R. Dimes version of the Boston tea table is available in either tiger maple or cherry and runs about \$2,200. “It features an extraordinarily graceful Queen Anne cabriole leg without which the design would fall short,” Dimes noted. “The molded skirt is a series of cyma curves and spurs that flow seamlessly into the leg. The table also features candle slides, which are typical for the form.”

The firm, founded in the 1960s by Dimes’s father, offers at least three other versions—a piecrust tilt-top, porringer tea table, and Queen Anne oval tea table—among dozens of other table styles.

The Dimes workshop is in Northwood, New Hampshire, but furnishings are sold only through the seventy authorized D. R. Dimes dealers spread from Maine to Texas. Their locations and an extensive display of the available pieces are listed on the company web site.

## ROY HUNTER

Roy Hunter decided to create his first reproduction Philadelphia tilt-top tea table when he spotted one across the street from his workshop in New



Roy Hunter copied an 18th-Century Philadelphia tilt-top table using quilted mahogany, which gives its dish top an unusually variegated and shimmering grain. Hunter’s table sells for about \$7,300 in the quilted mahogany.

Windsor, Maryland, about forty miles northwest of Baltimore.

“The original table went through the restoration shop across the street and I really liked it,” he recalled. “It was definitely a Philadelphia table—you could tell by the post and the turnings and the feet—with the legs a little more relaxed than you’re used to seeing.”

A striking aspect of Hunter’s Philadelphia tea table is the wood he selected. “I use quilted mahogany and mahogany,” he explained. “The quilted mahogany is unusual because, when the light hits it right, it looks like a wrinkled-up quilt on a bed. Of course that makes it more difficult to work with because the

grain switches all over the place. But it’s a very beautiful piece of wood and worth the effort.”

Another challenge on a table rife with tests of the woodworker’s skill is the design of the ankle and foot, Hunter said. “With this table’s design, you carve for quite a while before you actually start seeing the foot. I don’t know if it creates that much of a challenge for everyone, but this style has one of the hardest types of feet for me to carve.”

The extra work of matching the grain and carving the feet is reflected in the table’s price—about \$7,300.

Hunter has been making furniture for more than thirty years and full time for about a dozen. Customers find him through word-of-mouth recommendations, such as from a local bank that commissioned him to build a stately 36-foot boardroom table and other early New England reproductions.

## JAMIE JUCKETT

Asked to identify the origin of the graceful tilt-top tea table he builds, Jamie Juckett points across his living room. He and his wife,



The Jucketts own the original c. 1770 Chapin tilt-top tea table that serves as the model for Juckett’s reproduction. The top of Chapin’s table tilts vertically for storage but does not spin when lowered because it uses a block-and-latch mechanism instead of the more complex “birdcage” to join the top and the pillar.



Jamie Juckett has retained the signature traits of Connecticut cabinetmaker Eliphalet Chapin's 18th-Century tilt-top table, including the pillar turnings, sweep of the legs, and shape of the top's stretchers. Juckett prefers to use cherry as Chapin did on many of his Connecticut River Valley tables. Chapin added an iron reinforcing plate (below) as an option, but Juckett makes it a standard feature on his table. Juckett sells his version for about \$1,600.



Lisa—who also operate an antiques business specializing in 18th- and 19th-Century pieces in Croton-on-Hudson, New York—are proud owners of the circa 1770 tea table Juckett reproduces.

Eliphalet Chapin (1741-1807), a prominent cabinetmaker in the Connecticut River Valley, made the antique. Juckett said the turned column with its compressed ball is a telltale trait of Chapin's early apprenticeship in Philadelphia before he returned to East Windsor, Connecticut.

“Another interesting feature is the iron plate at the base of the





Tony Kubalak's showpiece Philadelphia piecrust tilt-top table (opposite) has a 34-inch top made from a single piece of mahogany. The birdcage mechanism enables the table's top to be raised for storage and then lowered for regular use. The table sells for about \$20,000.

column," Juckett said. "The weakest point on the table is where the legs are dovetailed into the column, and putting excessive weight on the top could cause a leg to split out. The iron plate was an option Chapin offered to strengthen the table." Juckett makes the plate standard on his version.

Also distinctive of Chapin's table is that the top tilts but does not spin. Chapin avoided the complex "birdcage" mechanism that permitted both tilting and spinning.

"This table has a block of wood attached to the top of the column and cleats to determine which way the top tilts," Juckett said. "Having the top up and the leg sticking out the back makes it easy to store in a corner, while having the top up and the leg sticking out the front makes it easy to store flat against a wall. Then and now, it's the customer's choice."

The price for an original Chapin tilt-top tea table can reach \$25,000, while Juckett's reproduction sells for about \$1,600.

Juckett has been building furniture for ten years and is known for his extensive research into both the pieces he creates and the originals he sells. His web site functions as his catalog, and customers can visit his workshop by appointment.

#### TONY KUBALAK

Tony Kubalak's Philadelphia piecrust tilt-top tea table has all the bells and whistles any 1750s customer would

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want. A complex piece of skilled workmanship, it tilts and spins and delights the eye with uncommonly intricate carving and lathe-turning.

"One of the more unique features of my table—aside from the ornamentation—is the fact that the 34-inch-diameter top is a single board of mahogany," Kubalak said. "It's getting more difficult to find wide mahogany boards these days, but to my mind it would be much less attractive if the top were laminated. All the good originals used single boards."

Such attention to historical detail enables Kubalak to charge nearly \$20,000 for this particular table, much of it built using 18th-Century techniques in his workshop in Eagan, Minnesota.

The table's design is from an original in a private collection. "I chose the piecrust style of tea table because, to my eye, it's the pinnacle of that form," he said. "I also like the carved elements, including the piecrust scalloping, the turned and carved pedestal, and the carved ball-and-claw feet."

Still, it is the top—that single slab of mahogany with its scalloped, or "piecrust," perimeter—that tests the woodworker's skill. Kubalak roughs out the circle with a saw then turns it on a lathe to raise the rim, leaving enough wood for the eventual carving. Then he flattens the inside of the tabletop with scrapers and sandpaper. "This flattening process is a bit tedious and a little frustrating when going right up to the rim," he said. Finally, he carves the entire raised perimeter to create the namesake piecrust.

A woodworker for more than twenty years, Kubalak said, "I do most of my work the way it would have been done in the 18th Century—that is, I use mostly hand tools, with power tools only to do some of the initial rough work. I think of the power tools as being my electric apprentice."

In addition to photographs on his web site, Kubalak displays his furnishings at Classic House Supply in Minneapolis. He encourages customers to contact him directly.

### DAVID LEFORT

David LeFort offers one of the broadest lines of early tea tables, including a turret-top design, based on the handful of originals that survive.

"It's a unique style for a tea table and is probably a Boston piece," said LeFort, who works from a shop in nearby Hanover, Massachusetts. "I've visited two of the known examples, at the Bayou Bend Collection [Houston] and at the Museum of Fine Arts [Boston]. It's a Chippendale-period table with an amazing amount of motion from top to bottom."

Four of the table's signature "turrets" form the corners and terminate in finely shaped ball-and-claw feet, while eight others adorn the sides and ends. "These turrets give the table's top and aprons a sculpted look," LeFort said. "And the table is in fact sculpted, as I can attest to from building it—it's a challenging project."

The faithfully reproduced turret-top table is made by order only—and runs about \$13,000.

Far simpler yet still arresting is his Wethersfield tea table, an adaptation of a Connecticut River Valley design. "With this one I try to incorporate the best design elements of the country tea tables," he said. "It has a porringer-shaped top that's chamfered to a



David LeFort's curly maple tea table has a chamfered porringer top, cabriole legs, and a shaped apron with two bold cyma lobes, all characteristic of the Connecticut River Valley. It sells for about \$1,500.



This complex mahogany tea table is one of seven known American examples with turrets, made by an unidentified Boston craftsman during the 1730s or 1740s. He started with a single slab of mahogany about 2 inches thick, then gouged and shaped it to form the molding. The turrets are lathe turned, planed into shape, sawn in half, then attached with glue and nails. The legs are secured to the apron frame with one screw each. This example was purchased by Historic Deerfield founder Henry Flynt in the 1950s.



David LeFort studied two of the surviving turret-top tea tables to create his replica, which he admits is a challenge to build because of the extensive carving and sculpting it requires. It sells for about \$13,000.

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quarter-inch at the edges of the top. It has cabriole legs that elevate its style from the coastal Connecticut tables that typically have turned Queen Anne legs. The shaped apron is unmistakably characteristic of the Wethersfield area, having two bold cyma lobes flanking the central 'cupid's bow' motif."

The porringer-style table is available in cherry, curly maple, or mahogany for about \$1,500. LeFort also makes a William and Mary table, tilt-top Queen Anne, and rectangular Queen Anne.

LeFort, a furniture maker for thirty-seven years, noted that he has "trained many, and currently employs four bench cabinetmakers" in his workshop. Customers can order pieces there or from his web site. ★

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



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Experts have long lauded this stately black walnut tray-top table as a superb example of the earliest American tea tables. Recent research by Ronald Hurst, vice president of collections and museums at Colonial Williamsburg, attributes the table to cabinetmaker Peter Scott (circa 1696-1775), an English immigrant who worked in Williamsburg from 1722 until his death. Its projecting rectangular top, convex skirt, cabriole legs, and pad feet would have been the pinnacle of style in Williamsburg in the early 1700s. Scott, the cabinetmaker, likely brought this fashionable Chinese-inspired design from England to Williamsburg where—during his half-century of working in Virginia—he produced tables and chests for residents and visitors, including Thomas Jefferson and Daniel Park Custis (first husband of Martha Washington).

## SOURCES

### Charles Bender

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