

Walking Sticks

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

MANY OF THE WALKING STICKS EARLY AMERICANS CARRIED WERE IMPORTED, BUT LOCAL CRAFTSMEN PRODUCED A SURPRISING NUMBER OF CANES THAT HAVE SURVIVED. DILIGENT COLLECTORS CAN STILL FIND THEM, BUT PRICES ARE RISING RAPIDLY.



COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM

Two 18th-Century fashion accessories having strict codes of etiquette—the lady's fan and the gentleman's walking stick—appear in this 1775 English painting, *A Gentleman and Lady in a Landscape (Conversation Piece)*, likely by William Williams. The lady properly holds her fan in her right hand, and the gentleman holds his cane upright rather than beneath his arm, which would have been improper.

No personal accessory in human history claims a more diverse heritage than the walking stick. Rising from the humblest of prehistoric beginnings as a simple staff, it became a jewel-encrusted symbol of European royalty and papal authority. For centuries the walking stick steadied teetering peasants and adorned posing dandies. It served as a deadly weapon and an emblem of elegance.

In America, every member of the first Continental Congress likely had one, and a dying Benjamin Franklin bequeathed his own walking stick, which he obtained while serving as ambassador to France in the 1780s, to his good friend George Washington. Franklin's will in 1790 stated: "My fine crab-tree walking stick, with a gold head curiously wrought in the form of the cap of liberty, I give to my friend, and the friend of mankind, General Washington. If it were a Sceptre, he has merited it, and would become it."

Early Americans shared a fondness for walking sticks, or canes—the names are interchangeable—with their European peers, especially in fashion-conscious colonial cities north and south. Every American president from Washington through Harry Truman wore a cane, most in accord with the fashion of the day and others as ceremonial accessories. Only Franklin Roosevelt is known to have depended on his walking stick for stability.

While gentrified 18th- and 19th-Century Americans quickly adopted the European fashion of wearing walking sticks, skilled American woodcarvers also produced an array of folk-art sticks of exceptional artistic merit, and sailors resting between bouts with leviathans etched incredible scrimshaw canes of whalebone.

The sheer number of surviving American walking sticks and their endless variations make them popular with collectors, who can seek

canes that simply appeal to them or specialize in canes representing distinct periods or styles. Although little information exists about walking sticks in early America because European examples dominated the field both before and after Europeans settled here, generally walking sticks from America's early centuries carry prices ranging from \$1,000 to tens of thousands of dollars or more, depending on workmanship, condition, and provenance.

FROM SWORD TO FASHION

The term "walking stick" is based upon function, but the origin of "cane" is less clear. The leading theory attributes the term to the 1500s, when walking sticks were first made of imported bamboo or malacca, members of the cane family.

Still further conjecture



This early-19th-Century silhouette is thought to depict Colonel Henry Purkett, a participant in the 1773 Boston Tea Party. The profile displays two important accessories of the period's gentleman's attire—his top hat and his walking stick.



This cane, one of the first two objects the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association obtained in 1857, is likely the "very handsome gold headed cane" General George Washington received as a gift in December 1784 in recognition of his leadership during the Revolution. He took pains to have the top engraved with his coat of arms and the Washington family motto, *Exitus acta probat* ("The end proves the deed"). Presented to Massachusetts scholar and politician Edward Everett (1795-1865) in appreciation for his fund-raising efforts to help purchase Mount Vernon, the cane eventually came back to the estate in 1911, a gift from Everett's granddaughter.

COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

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The interpreter portraying Thomas Jefferson at Colonial Williamsburg models a wealthy gentleman's fashionable attire, including his walking stick. Canes in the American colonies were usually imported from Europe, while local craftsmen created them in much smaller numbers.

is that “cane” dates to ancient Rome and the Latin *canis*, for dog, when pedestrians often carried walking sticks to defend themselves from roaming packs of canines.

Whatever the case, the history of the walking stick from ancient times until the first canes reached American shores in the 1600s spans Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations on through the Middle Ages, when commoners and kings alike carried sticks known variously as staffs, rods, scepters, and croziers, useful for herding sheep and loyal subjects. Women have carried decorative walking sticks from the 11th Century on.

Walking sticks eventually took three forms recognized by today's

collectors. One is the decorative stick, worn as a sophisticated fashion accessory. Second is the folk-art stick, unique and highly imaginative canes created by skilled carvers. Third is the system or gadget stick in which a surprising array of mechanisms could be concealed in the shaft, from swords and drinking flasks to telescopes and pruning saws.

The story of the walking stick as it functioned in early America begins in Tudor England during the reign of King Henry VIII (1491-1547), when the walking stick evolved under the king's watchful eye into a fashion necessity, *de rigueur* at court. Walking sticks grew more ornamentally embellished, and the extended reach of England's shipping trade provided exotic woods with the beauty and strength they required.

Favorite native woods included ash, oak, crab apple, hazel, blackthorn, and juniper. Ships returning from tropical lands brought malacca, bamboo, cinnamon, and orange myrtle woods. Meanwhile, handles—beautifully carved or functionally plain—were shaped from horn, antlers, ivory, silver, and gold, among other materials.

Yet another important European fashion trend occurred a century later and also wielded considerable influence over the earliest years of cane carrying in the American colonies. European men for more than a century had worn swords, mainly rapiers, but during the late 1600s a lighter model known as the “smallsword” became essential for soldiers and civilians seeking status as gentlemen. With society's lessening need to brandish a sword in public, gentlemen eventually swapped the smallsword in favor of the walking stick. A number of walking sticks during this period were actually “swordsticks,” con-

taining concealed blades. In the wrong hands, the walking stick became such a threat that in 1702 London required a license to carry one.

Many ignored the permit requirement, but the law helped enforce a new etiquette related to walking sticks, some of which crossed the Atlantic. For example, the wearer never held a cane under the arm, lest a rapid turn result in striking an innocent bystander. Wearers were not to wave a cane in the air or lean upon it (unless he or she was infirm).

Proper stance with a walking stick called for a man to stand with one foot in front of the other, toes pointed out, and one hand resting on the head of his stick. Properly seated, a gentleman held his walking stick out from his body to present an alert yet relaxed appearance.

CANES FANCY AND PLAIN

The walking stick's development in the 1600s as a popular fashion accessory came to a standstill in America when colonists first landed on Virginia's sandy shores and then on New England's rocky coast. Clearly the elegant, highly decorative stick of the English gentleman had no purpose in the New World's harsh wilderness. Plus, Puritans settling the northern colonies shunned any form of aristocratic extravagance, quickly passing laws prohibiting silver, gold, and other ornamentation deemed as “immodest and extravagant fashion displays.”

Which is not to say the Puritans eschewed walking sticks entirely. Puritan leaders carried plain walking sticks of oak. “They used

Mid-19th-Century cane with a ship captain carved from hickory, probably in New England.

JOHN BIGELOW TAYLOR/COLLECTION AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK, P1.2001.361



pretty much the American woods,” according to Henry Taron of Tradewinds Antiques and Auctions, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts, a noted historian of canes who has specialized in selling them for three decades. “Sometimes they were carved with animals and usually were of staff length, which means the staff was not carried as we would carry a cane today, but would be held well below the handle, much like choking up on a baseball bat.”

The first fifty years of settlement in the American colonies saw little mention of canes other than as stout walking sticks colonists carried as they journeyed about on foot. But as villages grew into towns and towns into cities, residents adopted more trappings of European fashion, including canes.

“When you look at early America in broad categories, there were basically two types of canes,” explained Bill Rau, who operates M. S. Rau Antiques in New Orleans,



COURTESY OF M. S. RAU ANTIQUES, NEW ORLEANS

Called a system or gadget cane, this c. 1880 example contains tools for the traveling artist—brushes, a glass mixing bottle, and a paint palette for blending within its detachable shaft—as well as the cane segments themselves, which can be assembled into an easel. Artist canes such as this, complete with all of their components, are highly coveted among collectors for their rarity.

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LEFT This lead-glazed redware cane handle depicts a bird's head that curves around so the beak touches the neck, which has a socket to hold the shaft. The date "1841" is incised in the glaze as well as the name "E. Diehl." The handle is from Pennsylvania, and a Diehl family who made redware in Bucks County might be associated with this unique piece.

RIGHT This porcelain walking stick handle, c. 1720, features gilding and iron-red enamel with floral and scroll designs on its midsection. Although created in China, it is typical of the ornate handles on 18th-Century canes in Europe and America.

which has sometimes sold up to \$1 million in canes in a year. "There were canes you wore when you were fancy, and there were canes you wore when you were casual. Since most of colonial America tended to be less formal, there were certainly more casual or country sticks than there were

formal ones. It was in places such as New Orleans, Boston, New York, and the early cities of Virginia—places where there was good money and where there were more formal places to travel to—where we see the first fancy canes in America."

But with America's grow-

ing number of furniture makers, carpenters, and other craftsmen concentrating on supplying the colonies with life's necessities, they had little time to devote to manufacturing fashionable walking sticks. "They were mostly imported at that time," Taron said. "But if they were native,

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instead of ivory they would have stag horn for the handle because we had plenty of deer here in America.”

Imported canes—especially those having malacca shafts and ivory handles—were costly. “They were made of exotic materials, had to come by boat of course, and were expensive,” Taron added. “Only the real gentry could afford them.”

FOLK CARVINGS TO JEWELS

By the mid-1700s, goods frequently shipped between America and Europe. As population and wealth grew, colonists were quick to adopt European fashions—especially those of England—in everything from apparel to architecture.

“As we get toward the time of the Continental Congress (first convening in 1774), the canes by then are the more modern variety where you have a gold, or silver, or ivory knob as the handle,” Taron said.

Still, the vastness of colonial America comprised a patchwork of farms and villages where until well

into the 19th Century household furnishings, clothing, and accessories tended to be made close by. Local artisans gave rise to the most collectible genres of American walking sticks. “American folk art canes are very popular with collectors and are some of the most wonderful canes ever made,” Taron said.

“For instance, there was a carver from Virginia, a big man, over three hundred pounds, and he would send his slaves out for holly and their favorite place to go was Mount Vernon,” Taron continued. “Thomas Purkins loved to carve in holly because it didn’t crack as it aged, didn’t split. Then there was another fellow, Alanson Dean

Rare materials distinguish this c. 1820 walking stick. The engraved handle is fashioned of yellow gold in an intricate Gothic style, while the tortoiseshell-veneered shaft has a gold-rimmed cavity through which a leather strap was threaded for carrying. Walking sticks dating to the early 1800s often display this feature, although it is absent in later sticks.



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Women carried walking sticks from the 11th Century on and considered them fashion essentials in the 18th and 19th Centuries, as shown here in this 1787 French print. Women's canes often were decorated with tassels and ribbons corresponding to colors in their attire.

of New York State, who did some wonderful three-dimensional carving with religious overtones on canes. These two are probably the most pricey folk artists who created canes, but there were a lot of people who were just as good with a jack-knife but who are not recognized as much as Purkins and Dean."

Taron is right about "pricey." No one knows how many canes Purkins (1791-1855) of Stafford County, Virginia, carved, but Taron

sold one in 2001 for \$24,000. Dean (1812-88) of Oswego, New York, whittled the most expensive American cane on record. It belonged to P. T. Barnum, and a New York City antiques dealer purchased it in the 1980s for \$150,000. A decade later, the owner reportedly sold it to a private party for \$250,000.

Another highly collectible form of American folk art cane is the scrimshaw produced in the 19th Century during America's great age

of whaling. "The handles were made of carved and polished whale ivory—usually the teeth of the sperm whale—and the shafts of the better pieces were made of whale bone," Taron explained. "Usually they used the pan bone, which is below the jaw of the sperm whale, because it afforded the straightest and whitest bone suitable for shafts."

The walking stick reached its greatest popularity both in America and Europe in the 19th Century, culminating in the often-extravagant canes of the Victorian period. The *New York Times* ran an editorial in 1877 commenting on how the walking-stick craze was approaching the ridiculous. At the time, America's population numbered 50 million, 15 million of whom carried walking sticks.

Gentlemen of the mid- to late 1800s would sometimes change canes several times a day for different occasions. "They were a status symbol because it was the way you could judge how much money a man had," said Liela Nelson, owner of the online World of the Walking Stick in Englewood Cliff, New Jersey. "Tiffany made them, as did all of the important porcelain houses. Fabergé made sticks from quartz and jade. Some had diamond eyes, and artisans used enamel for the canes' collars. They were quite beautiful."

The era was also the heyday of the system stick. By the late 1800s, the U. S. Patent Office had issued more than 1,500 patents for walking sticks that, among thousands of uses, doubled as guns, musical instruments, barometers, and even pomanders containing herbs and disinfectants that could dispel bad odors with a tap.

WORKMANSHIP AND VALUE

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of collecting walking sticks is determining exactly what to collect. Focusing on American canes is complicated by the fact that so many early examples were imported. Taron said that of the many collectors he works with, "just a few" are focusing entirely on American canes. "And for those,



This bamboo walking stick, topped with an intricately inlaid knob handle, conceals a blade of blue Toledo steel. The Spanish steel used to create swords, first mentioned as early as the 1st Century B.C., is legendary for its tremendous strength. Today, these 19th-Century blades are heralded for their unrivaled quality, masterful craftsmanship, and fierce beauty.

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An early example of an English walking stick, c. 1680-1720, is made from malacca, silver, and iron.

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

This walking stick, likely English, dates to 1769-70, made of malacca, gold, and copper.

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA



Grouping of folk art carved canes from the late 19th or early 20th Centuries. From left: cane with horse head and bridle handle, dogwood, possibly Pennsylvania; cane with dog head handle, dogwood root with paint, attributed to "Schtockschnitzler" Simmons, Berks County, Pennsylvania; animals and vine cane with horse head handle, paint on wood, eastern United States; animals cane with dog head handle, probably the Bally Carver, Berks County; dog and rooster cane, wood with ink and varnish, eastern United States.

JOHN BIGELOW TAYLOR/COLLECTION AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK, P1.2001.356-360

it's almost exclusively the folk art canes," he said.

Nelson travels the world for the distinctive canes she sells for a few hundred dollars up to about \$20,000. "You can always get wonderful sticks, it's just more difficult and more expensive," she said. "Canes are very collectible today, but because of the economy, only the wealthy are buying, and they're buying the very best."

Another reason the collectible canes market is skewing toward the wealthy is because of steadily increasing values. One large collector, George H. Meyer, told the New York Times a few years ago that canes for which he paid \$400 in the 1970s had risen in value to \$2,400 in the 1990s. Those same canes would be worth perhaps \$3,400 or more today.

Diligent collectors can find examples and information on the web sites of dealers such as Taron, Rau, and Nelson. In 1993, Taron and his late wife, Nancy, pioneered America's all-cane auctions

President James Monroe's cane, made c. 1800 in England or America, has a 4 5/8-inch ivory handle depicting a mother eagle perched over her nest. The eagle was an important symbol to Monroe because it appears on the Munro clan crest. He used the eagle as his personal mark on many of his possessions, such as silver and china, and he was instrumental in the eagle being adopted as a symbol of the American presidency.



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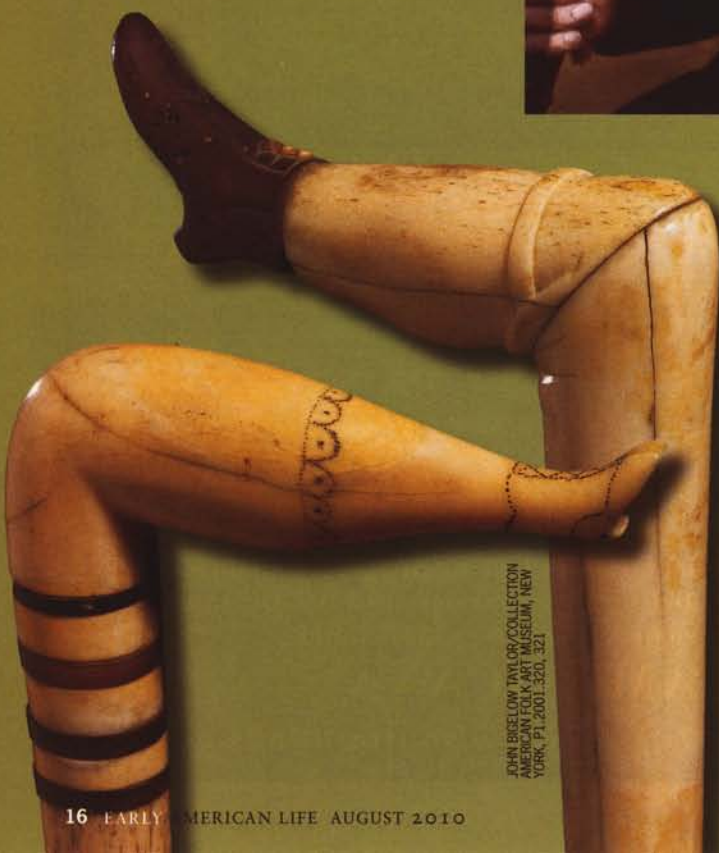
An 1823 portrait of an unidentified gentleman illustrates a familiar form of walking stick. His cane is capped with ivory and fitted with a wrist cord typical of the era.

BOTTOM LEFT Two c. 1860 scrimshaw canes, probably from the eastern United States. The left example is made of whale ivory and whale skeletal bone with horn, ink, and a nail; the cane at right is whale skeletal bone, mahogany, and ivory with paint. Canes, pointers, and riding crops were among a whaler's first scrimshaw projects, which may explain their profusion. In 1844, a whaler on the Delaware whaleboat *Lucy Ann* noted that enough canes had been made onboard "to supply all the old men in Wilmington."

BOTTOM RIGHT Two scrimshaw canes with fist handles date to the mid-1800s. The cane at left was made by an unidentified artist from Nantucket, Massachusetts, using whale ivory and whale skeletal bone with ebony, tortoiseshell, abalone shell, mother-of-pearl, and silver. The cane at right, likely also from New England, is made from whale ivory and skeletal bone with ebony, tortoiseshell, abalone shell, brads, and brass.



COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM



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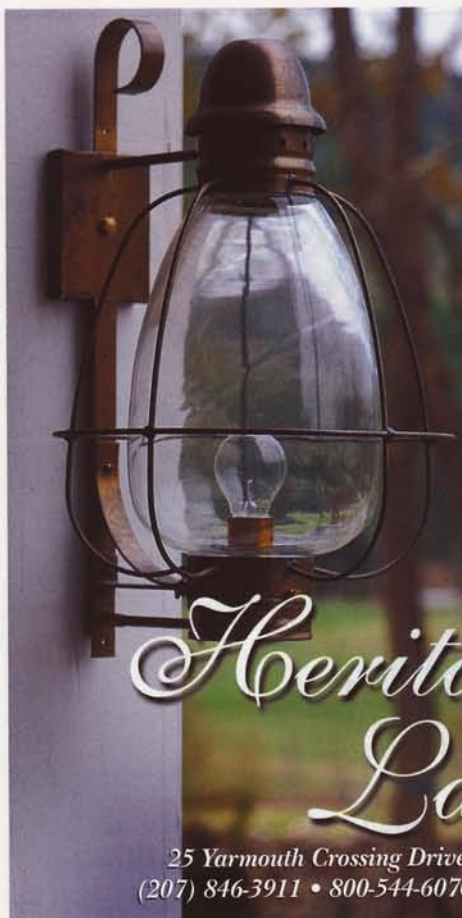
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LEFT Kentucky architect Gideon Shryock (1802-80) owned this circa 1840 walking stick. Bamboo-style turnings divide its 40-inch shaft, crafted from native maple. Shryock, of Lexington, designed the Greek revival old state capital at Frankfort in 1828.



COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM

RIGHT This elegant walking stick is inscribed "Jonathan Gage 1793" on its silver collar. The copper sheet wrapped around its tip has an engraved musical score and words, indicating the copper originally was a plate for printing sheet music and later adapted for use on the walking stick. The 45-inch tapered wood shaft is topped by an ivory handle.



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LEFT An excellent example of an American folk art cane, this c. 1800 stick has a carved eagle's head on the handle and two carved spirals extending the length of the yard-long shaft. The eagle was likely the most popular carved feature on early American walking sticks.



COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM

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RIGHT Wood and whale bone cane came from the family of Captain Joseph Warren Holmes of Mystic, Connecticut. The knob is turned and decorated with a black and white star surrounded by black dots. The shaft has a fluted bottom and mother-of-pearl inlaid arrows, diamonds, hearts, and crescents. The attached brown cord has two turned wooden acorn-shaped tassels. Holmes (1824-1912), was noted for sailing around Cape Horn 84 times and the Cape of Good Hope 14 times without a shipwreck or loss of a crewman.

and in 1999 conducted the world's first online all-cane auction.

"There are also several auction houses during the year that only deal in walking sticks," Nelson explained. "And one can go to antiques shows and antiques stores."

As with many other collectibles, provenance can play a key role in determining the value of an American walking stick. It is a challenging aspect, however, because of the number of walking sticks that were misplaced, lost, stolen, or discarded without records of ownership.

"There are many canes surviving from the period from about 1795 to 1830 and a lot of them were made in America," according to Taron. "Generally they were made with straight stag-horn handles and they run \$1,000 to \$2,000 now. Early pieces with the ivory and gold handles are running about \$1,500 to \$2,500. I did a valuation for the History Channel on a cane purported to have been given by either (Meriwether) Lewis or (William) Clark to a man in the St. Louis area, and it turned out to be true. That cane I would value much higher, around \$3,000 to \$5,000."

Rau made the same point. "An interesting fact about value: When you're dealing in canes, age is not all that important," he said. "A great cane from 1920 and a great cane from 1780 can be worth exactly the same."

"Now, historically speaking, if you own Thomas Jefferson's cane or somebody very important—for example, we owned a cane that had been given to someone by Andrew Jackson—then it will have greater worth because items associated with historical persons are rare and therefore worth more," Rau continued. "But a wonderfully carved cane or gold-topped cane from one period to another is worth about the same. With canes it's not the age, but the quality of the workmanship that people look at."*

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

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