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Creativity and tradition: The corner cupboards of southwestern Sussex County, 1790–1850

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University of Delaware, 1989

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CREATIVITY AND TRADITION: THE CORNER CUPBOARDS
OF SOUTHWESTERN SUSSEX COUNTY, 1790-1850

by
William James Macintire

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

December, 1989
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INTRODUCTION

In May of 1802 William Morgan completed his apprenticeship. Nathaniel Bailey of Lewes, Delaware, taught him the joinery trade without the benefit of formal indenture. Instead, the master craftsman apprenticed Morgan for three years under an oral agreement. Perhaps as a consequence, Morgan finished his apprenticeship unemployed, owning little more than the clothes he was wearing. Even so, he reassured himself, he "had a trade, which as Dr. [Benjamin] Franklin said, was an estate." Indeed, Morgan quickly parlayed his knowledge into a better situation. He walked sixteen miles west to Georgetown, the county seat of Sussex County, Delaware. There Morgan met Stephen Redden and agreed to take him on as an apprentice in exchange for the use of Redden's tools.¹

Morgan does not mention why Redden did not know how to use his own tools. Presumably, he inherited them or bought them with the intention of learning the trade.

¹
The story counters our expectations of standard shop practices. Traditionally, the master has his own tools and a shop when he takes on apprentices, but we must be cautious when we speak of what is traditional. While behavior did follow patterns (usually, masters with tools took on apprentices), people were not governed by those patterns. They lived complex, multifarious lives, and broke with the patterns when problems demanded innovative solutions (apprentices with tools could take on masters). Morgan's situation was a perfect solution to Redden's dilemma.

Sussex County, the southernmost of Delaware's three counties (figure 1), was no stranger to innovative solutions. Under the adverse conditions of low-lying, sandy soil and swamps, the people made a living. Foresters exploited the abundant woodlands, sawing lumber from the hardwoods and pines, and splitting shingles from the cypresses of the swamp. Farming was largely subsistence, and home manufacture of textiles from wool and linen formed an important source of income for the county's residents. Houses, even those of the upper classes, were usually single room; farms rarely had more than two outbuildings. The people, though, had a sense of style: they livened up interiors with bright colors and
Figure 1  Map of Delaware.
patterns, buying imported textiles and ceramics from the local stores.3

The present study concerns rural production and consumption of furniture and the tension between innovation and conformity. Such tensions are reflected in the work of rural artisans such as Redden and Morgan, or the family of joiners considered here, the Ralphs.4 Father away from the influence of London styles and pattern books, rural craftsmen were freer to interpret or to ignore those styles and patterns. Yet their clientele may have been more conservative in their wishes. Styles may have changed more slowly in rural areas than they did in urban areas. Even so, the rural consumers enjoyed variety as much as their urban counterparts. Within one style of rural furniture, even within one form, we will find constant variations on the same theme. From southwestern Sussex County one form stands out: the corner cupboard. Around Laurel, corner cupboards associated with the Ralph family shops were very popular in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Laurel, some sixteen miles further west from where Morgan taught Redden joinery, is sited along Broad Creek, which drains into the Nanticoke River, which in turn flows into the Chesapeake Bay. The town was laid out in
1789 by Barkley Townsend, a land speculator. It grew up as a sawmilling and shipbuilding town, and expanded rapidly when the railroad came through in 1859. Residents included merchants, bankers, workers and artisans among a majority of farmers.5

The cupboards in this study form a cluster phenomenon. Some eighty related pieces from Laurel and the surrounding area made between 1790 and 1850 are known to exist.6 Certainly many more than that were made, and more will turn up: one was recently located in Canada.7 The numbers are great enough to suggest this was an important, thriving furniture tradition; the exceptional quality and variety proves it. They provide an opportunity to study creativity in a rural context at that point in history just before factories transformed furniture production forever.

Traditionally, these cupboards have been attributed to one family of carpenters, the Ralphs. Charles Dorman first published this attribution in 1960 after talking to Mrs. J. Wheeler Campbell, a Laurel native. She said that Henry Bacon, an ancestor, bought five identical cupboards, to give to his daughters as wedding gifts, from Thomas Ralph prior to Ralph's migration to Indiana or Illinois around 1815 or 1821.8
Thomas Ralph's departure leaves us with few records of his existence, as his will and inventory would have been filed where he died. However, Charles Thomas Ralph (1775-1845, possibly Thomas's son) and his sons James English Ralph (1805-1849) and William Ralph (died 1859) were definitely carpenters. Their estate inventories list large numbers of carpenter's tools, including axes, saws, augers, squares, nails, chisels, braces, bits, and several types of planes: molding, bead, sash, bench, plow, and groove. Oral history connects the Ralph shop with the types of cupboards examined in this study; a single cupboard that descended in the Ralph family (figure 2) strengthens that connection. The great number of cupboards and their ornamental diversity suggest that other craftsmen participated as well.

The wonderful thing about the Ralph cupboards is that while they retain a continuous style, nearly every cupboard is different. New motifs constantly crop up; each new cupboard examined is an adventure. Old motifs are transformed in scale or moved to different locations on the cupboard. Like the hearts and crowns chair makers of Connecticut, or the Dunlaps of New Hampshire, or even the Townsends and Goddards of Rhode Island, the Ralphs and their fellow artisans established a unique style, independent of conventional London styles. They were
Figure 2  Corner Cupboard, Probably James English Ralph. Circa 1820-49, Laurel, Delaware. Private Collection.
not "slavishly aping high style," they were creating their own. They kept that style alive for over fifty years.

The forests supplied abundant raw materials for this furniture. Many farmers and foresters supplemented their income practicing carpentry. Others plied their trade exclusively as carpenters, cabinetmakers, joiners, and ship carpenters. The great number of craftsmen in this area partly explains the diversity of the corner cupboards we shall examine. But there are other reasons for it as well. Consider the "gossip" model Gerald Pocius proposes to explain the diversity of rural furniture in a small fishing village in Newfoundland. Gossip thrives on variety. To be of interest, it must be new and exciting. Gossipers discuss familiar people and places, but add new wrinkles of interest as they keep up with the latest developments. In a similar way, the furniture of the fishing village thrives on the new; the forms are familiar, but different decorative variations are prized. The same model can be applied to the corner cupboards of western Sussex county. They are at once familiar enough to be reassuring and varied enough to retain interest. That this model is applicable is reinforced by the judgement of Donald Ralph, a descendent of Charles and James Ralph: "there wasn't much to get excited about in
those days," he said, "except your own mouth you know." Or, quite possibly, your new corner cupboard.
Chapter 1
CUPBOARD DESIGN

Studying cupboards leads to questions of the nature of the creative mind. Creativity is the making of objects, skillfully and with aesthetic intentions. Some carpenters were creative, others merely imitative. The cupboard-building process invited creativity by the limitation of choices, offering an easily mastered framework. Like modern artists who painted the same image over and over again, the carpenters built the same cupboard many times, yet every painting and every cupboard was different. Unlike the systemic painters, the carpenters did not self-consciously restrict their choices. Their limitations were culturally imposed; like a house, a cupboard had to fulfill certain functions. Like the artists, though, the carpenters were creative, and they changed the rules where they saw fit. They sought new ideas, and added them to their palettes. The constancy of several motifs and their application lent the cupboards identity as "Ralph" cupboards no matter how many
new ideas were introduced. Constant innovation actually helped keep a furniture style flourishing for over half a century, in times troubled by economic and religious uncertainty.

There are many possible combinative schemes for cupboards, but they occur on a very limited number of forms. Of the twenty-nine cupboards examined in this study, twenty-eight are corner cupboards and one is a flat wall cupboard. The flat wall corner cupboard simply goes along a wall rather than in a corner; it has a correspondingly rectangular plan (figure 3). Among the types of corner cupboards, flat facade corner cupboards (figure 4) are the most common, composing twenty of our sample. Some of the smaller of these have single doors in the upper and lower cases, most have double doors at least in the upper half. One cupboard (figure 5) has a more complicated plan, with canted corners. There are seven turkey-breast corner cupboards (figure 6). This plan is also found on cupboards of the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Like the canted corner plan, it maximizes the cupboard's storage space within a minimum of wall space, although the turkey-breasting angle is so shallow on some Delaware cupboards that it must be more decorative than utilitarian. Within each type the basic construction is
Figure 3  Plan of a Wall Cupboard. Scale equals One Foot.

Figure 4  Plan of a Flat-Facade Corner Cupboard. Scale Equals One Foot.
Figure 5  Plan of a Canted-Corner Corner Cupboard.
Scale Equals One Foot.

Figure 6  Plan of a Turkey-Breast Corner Cupboard.
Scale Equals One Foot.
very similar. Variation occurred in smaller construction details and decoration.

Of the twenty-nine cupboards examined for this study, no two are quite the same, although groups emerge sharing similarities enough to suggest a common shop origin. Pairs exist that use the same design combinations and similar construction. Other groups can be tentatively related on construction similarities alone. The sheer ornamental variety is stunning. It is greater than that seen in an analogous family tradition such as that of the Dunlaps of New Hampshire, or the Townsends and Goddards of Newport, where variety is more likely to manifest itself in the application of a more limited set of design motifs to a greater number of different forms. This is intriguing: perhaps the greater consistency of those schools is a function of the nature of cabinetmaking as opposed to that of carpentry. It is easier for carpenters to saw out a new motif than it is for cabinetmakers to carve a new one. The carpenter-made cupboards reveal a tension between creativity and conformity in their continual striving for variety and their reliance on traditional models.

What are the traditional models? We can see where a Ralph cupboard resembles, say, one of Thomas Chip-
pendale's corner cupboards: the basic form is similar and the same areas are targets for ornamentation. It is apparent that the Delaware cupboards are part of the larger Anglican tradition of furniture and architecture. But the search for any direct source, in the sense that Chippendale's patterns are a source for Philadelphia furniture of the mid-eighteenth century, has so far proved fruitless. The Ralph family had been in America for at least a full generation. Their insularity is arguable, but they were not isolated. Records suggest free trade, travel, and communication between the southern Delaware region and neighboring areas, including Philadelphia and Baltimore. Inspiration for their decorative tastes could have come from anywhere.

Source is not the most important point. A direct source, if it exists and were found, might clear up several questions about these cupboards, but might raise new ones as well. Such a source may not exist, and even if it does, the Ralphs and their fellow artisans quickly moved beyond it. The sources of creativity are usually tenuous at best. The Ralphs probably did not worry much about them. They borrowed and invented ideas freely to please their clientele and themselves. Consider the simple scallop motif that constitutes a visual trademark for these cupboards. Similar ornament can be found in
many places. It occurs on Dutch doll houses, English dressers, and North Carolina cornices. It even turns up running along the ridge atop a circa 1765 medal cabinet in the form of a temple made by the Perth, England cabinetmaker George Sandeman. So far, none of these are traceable as a direct source. It is a fairly uncomplicated motif that could have arrived from any number of sources, or even have been reinvented.

One motif sometimes found on Ralph cupboards can be seen in a period pattern book. This is the astral fretwork, found supporting the plinths near the base of one cupboard (figure 7). A similar pattern can be found on a door panel in plate XXVI of William Salmon's *Palladio Londinensis*. However, we can search Salmon's book in vain for other direct correlations. If this book was a direct source, we would expect more of its patterns to turn up on cupboards. A similar case occurs with capped dentils, usually found on cornices (figure 7). Similar cornices are illustrated in Asher Benjamin's *Country Builder's Assistant*, but again there is not enough correlation to make the case for a direct source. Searching for sources is important, but can become an obsession that misses the point. Our craftsmen may be the descendants of English craftsmen who brought knowledge of William Salmon with them, or they may have apprenticed to
Figure 7  Corner Cupboard, Laurel, Delaware, Circa 1820-1840. Scale Equals One Foot. Private Collection.
masters who were familiar with the patterns in Asher Benjamin. This would explain the scattered correspondence with such sources.27

The pinwheel motif (figure 8) strengthens the case for multiple origins of stylistic motifs for cupboards. Delaware cupboard owners often refer to it as a "catherine's wheel." It is a fylfot, or swastika; a type of cross, and it is a popular motif on German/Swiss gravestones of central North Carolina.28 Obviously it is of religious significance; in fact, it turns up inscribed on the back of a pew at Christ Church in Broad Creek, Delaware.29 It is possible that craftsmen who migrated to Delaware from North Carolina brought the motif with them, but its use on the gravestones is contemporaneous with its use on the cupboards, about 1810-1840.30 This suggests that the idea could have come to Delaware from another source, from Germanic settlements in Pennsylvania or Virginia, or directly from Europe, by way of craftsmen, objects, or printed material.

Textiles, ceramics, prints, or books may have been just as important an inspiration as furniture or architecture. In the Ralph family Bible, for example, (figure 9) the family record page is decorated with a repetitive patterned border. Some of the entries as well are worth
Figure 8  Pinwheel, or Catherine's Wheel, Showing Compass Layout.
Figure 9  Detail of a Page From the Ralph Family Bible.
our notice, underlined as they are with scalloped calligraphic flourishes. These flourishes are related to cupboard scallops in the same way that the latter are related to English bedsteads or North Carolina Houses. As an artist, Ralph may not have borrowed directly from identifiable sources; rather, his imagination echoed his cultural landscape.

Creating a coherent and recognizable body of cupboards, a "style," while allowing for incredible variety, called for an informal agreement on what elements constituted that style.31 The Ralphs and others must have shared design concepts they could draw upon for ideas. These shared ideas constituted a "palette" of design motifs, a grammar of ornament, stored in minds, but reflected in patterns and pre-sawn parts scattered around the shops, and in the cupboards already constructed.32 This metaphor of palette implies the variety and freedom the craftsman enjoyed within a limited frame of reference. As they built cupboards, the palette expanded, changed, and contracted again. Old ideas fell out of favor and new ones were introduced.

Each new cupboard referred to others that had gone before. It was through built pieces that different families of craftsmen communicated ideas to one another,
and shared rival palettes. This may have been literally true of the way clients and craftsman negotiated a contract for a new cupboard: a customer requested ornament similar to that of another cupboard he fancied, but with certain changes (e.g., size and color) to suit his own tastes and needs. Cupboards responded to changes in fashion, but remained similar enough to their progenitors to retain the signature of their origin. Given the extensive celebration of the decoration that is evident in the later cupboards, we can assume that the artisans not only took some pride in their accomplishments, but felt that they had advanced the tradition. What began as a good idea sometime around the turn of the 1790's or earlier, continued to be a vital force more than fifty years later.

A great deal of scholarly attention in the material culture field concerns the creative process and questions of form versus fashion. Henry Glassie ties the meaning of "folk" to those items that were built in a traditional manner and remained essentially unchanged over a long period of time. In this line of thinking, fashionable ornament could, and often did, cover a traditional form. It is important to consider this in the context of the Ralph cupboards. The point is not whether we label them "folk," "popular," or "academic," but to
recognize that they differ from earlier corner cupboards and those of neighboring regions more noticeably by ornament than by form or construction. This suggests that subregional patterns tend to be ornamental rather than formal.

Dell Upton addresses these issues in terms of "style" and "mode," where style means the consensual material patterns of a larger community and mode the material preferences a small group uses to set itself apart from another. Upton uses Virginia churches as an example of style: with some exceptions, the patterns encountered there are very broadly regional, and the eighteenth-century Virginia traveller would have felt at home in most of the churches. For mode, Upton uses the example of a baroque style communion chalice in one church that reflects the tastes of the richer members of a community or, for a more modern example, the dress of the Amish Mennonites. Our cupboards would seem to fit into the category of mode, but they are a part of a slightly broader regional tradition, and in sheer numbers seem to have been fairly pervasive in their own region. They have both consensual and distinctive qualities, a sort of regional style with overtones of modal competitiveness. They reinforce local identity through their stylistic
consistency, and reinforce local class distinctions through the sheer range of options, or modes, available.

In Upton's sense of these terms, the Ralph cupboards began as a mode and evolved into more or less a style. What is not known is just how or when this took place. We can speculate that an individual artisan took a fancy to the already prevalent scallop motif (or responded to a customer's request), and added it to his palette, applying it to the corner cupboard form he already knew. At that moment a line was crossed. Something resonated in the new design. The old form was now something new. Demand for cupboards in the new style followed, and other craftsmen joined in. At this point, the cupboards were a status symbol: they were distinctive, or modal. As the idea spread and became more common, it became a local style.

The cupboard in figure 10 is one of the earliest known. It may have originated from the Ralph family or a closely allied shop. The use of wrought nails in construction and wrought hardware on the doors dates it earlier than most other cupboards. Stylistically, the raised panels and wide window muntins are consistent with a late eighteenth century date. The Greek key design would appear to be somewhat later if we associate it with
Figure 10  Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Delaware, Circa 1790-1815. Scale Equals One Foot. Private Collection.
Greek revival architecture, but the pattern turns up on late eighteenth-century North Carolina corner cupboards as well. The cupboards "high waisted" appearance is due in part to its short height, and in part to the loss of a cornice.

The cupboard is early, thus closer to the "prime object" of the style, to use George Kubler's term. Yet the style is already fully developed here. Demarcation between the upper and lower storage areas with a bolection molding is a feature found on cupboards of all regions. The narrowness of this molding, and its abrupt termination rather than joining the side moldings is distinctive. The surround of scalloping is the most telling feature. That, and a certain proportional sense suggests the origin of the cupboard. The meander below the missing cornice would seem to be a useful motif for the palette, but it is abandoned in favor of dentils on later cupboards.

The economic scaling of the cupboards is manifested most clearly in ornament. Size and form play roles, but a cupboard's presence depends on how it is decorated, given that the range of sizes and forms is relatively small. One would expect economic scaling to be clearly discernable, but the variety is so great that such a progression is not readily apparent. The lack of a
well-regulated shop tradition and the proliferation of the style to several shops are probably the reasons for this confusion of scale. While many cupboards clearly involved much more work than others, it is difficult to determine if the cupboard in figure 11 is economically above or below the cupboard in figure 12. On the first cupboard (figure 11), we find a sawn skirt and a crown molded cornice. The second cupboard (figure 12) probably had neither, but has side panels elaborated with reeding, and return moldings supporting the scallops rather than the short brackets seen in figure 11. In addition, the scallops in figure 12 are smaller and greater in number. Otherwise, the two cupboards share the same features: pinwheels, bolection waist molding, sixteen panes of glass, applied moldings around the panels, and butt hinges set into the stiles rather than into a nailed strip around the openings.

Each cupboard reflects a series of decisions made by the craftsman, and to some extent his client. Many of these are economic decisions: more decoration, a complex plan, or a larger size undoubtedly cost more money. Within a given economic range, there were several aesthetic decisions to make. The number of choices available allows cupboards of similar economic level to be quite different. The aesthetic decisions were as
Figure 11 Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Circa 1810-1835. Scale Equals One Foot. Private Collection.
Figure 12 Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Circa 1815-1840. Scale Equals One Foot. Private Collection.
important as the economic ones. The cupboards in figure 13 and figure 14 are an example of this. They are obviously related, perhaps even the product of the same shop (most likely within the Ralph family, judging from similarities to the documented cupboard discussed below), but they are also quite different. The first (figure 13) we might call delicate, or lacy; the decoration is frilly, and cut from thin wood. The second (figure 14) is a bit bolder, more forceful: repeats are larger than the former cupboard, decoration less frilly and cut from thicker wood. These were aesthetic decisions, reflecting the craftsman's ideas as applied to a particular piece, and probably his client's preferences for that piece as well.

It is very interesting to compare the second cupboard with the cupboard shown in figure 7. Here we have two cupboards differing in size and plan that share the same decoration. Obviously they are the work of the same hand. The larger cupboard (figure 14), a turkey-breast plan, probably had a cornice molding like that on the smaller cupboard. The latter, a canted-corner plan, probably had a skirt and feet like those on the larger cupboard. The decoration on both is precisely considered: the repeat of the cutout circles matches that of the scallops exactly, and both are calculated to mitre correctly at the corners. More telling is the fact that
Figure 13  Turkey-Breast Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Circa 1820-1840. Scale Equals One Foot. Collection of Bethel Historic Society.
Figure 14  Turkey-Breast Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Circa 1820-1840. Scale Equals One Foot. Private Collection.
this repeat is larger for the larger cupboard: the decoration responds carefully to the scale of each cupboard.

From this example, we might expect scallops and other repetitive decorations to always have larger repeats on larger cupboards, but there are too many exceptions to establish a rule. It is easy to find small cupboards with large repeats and the reverse, such was the diversity of decoration composed.

The cupboard in figure 12 illustrates that the lower panels could become a focus of decoration. By using an existing palette motif (reeding) and applying it to a new location (the panels) the craftsman created a new look for the cupboard. Reeding, a series of parallel beads planed into the surface is also found as a central waist molding (figure 15, figure 16) or an enframing surround (figure 2). Reeded boards were also cut and fitted together to make a chevron pattern for the central division (figure 13).

Transferring an existing motif to an unusual location on the cupboard was a way to expand the creative potential of a limited palette. This is graphically illustrated by the cupboard in figure 17. Here the pinwheel motif has been transferred to the lower panels.
Figure 15  Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Circa 1820-1850. Private Collection.
Figure 16 Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Circa 1820-1850. Private Collection.
Figure 17  Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Circa 1815-1840. Scale Equals One Foot. Private Collection.
The moldings surrounding these panels emphasize the decorated area. Similar moldings exist on the cupboard with the reeded panels (figure 12). Although panel moldings delineate unadorned panels as well, one heavily altered cupboard (in its original configuration quite similar to figure 13) retains evidence of painted striping on the flat panels.

Paint was doubtlessly an important element of the palette, but it missing from most of the extant cupboards. The cupboard in figure 13 retains early paint under a coat of later nineteenth-century graining. A cupboard that is most likely from the same shop (figure 18) was painted with white dentils capped with red tops, alternate white and yellow scallops, triplets of yellow, blue (or blue-green), and red gouges, and yellow and red moldings, all on a background of blue and green. The cupboard in figure 17 is painted in a similar array of colors; the vertical arms of the scallops are white, and the horizontal ones blue. Some cupboards were simply painted in solid colors, usually blue, but decorative paint was certainly an option. From these few samples it seems that the palette here consisted mainly of the primary colors red, yellow, and blue, plus white and green. The artisans picked out the decorative details in the lighter shades against darker backgrounds of blue and green. Of course, the
Figure 18 Corner Cupboard, Laurel Vicinity, Circa 1815-1845. Scale Equals One Foot. Private Collection.
color palette may have been more expansive and its use even less restricted on cupboards whose paint is now entirely lost.

Local cupboards of different modes, or "non-Ralph" types nonetheless shared some characteristics of the Ralph cupboards. The cupboard in figure 19 shows this clearly. It has a history of ownership in the Laurel area, and it is a turkey-breast plan. Construction is quite similar to Ralph cupboards, with continuous back boards, a mortise and tenon frame, and simple blocking of the feet. Shared palette elements include the moldings and the capped dentils. The fluted pilasters and continuous waist moldings are quite different. At present not much is known about these other shops. It is certain that the "Ralph" style was only one of several available, possibly the most prevalent.

The cupboards we have examined suggest a progression toward a more elaborate example that may exist. If we experiment with the palette ourselves, borrowing motifs from a number of cupboards, we can establish an idea of what such an ultimate example may have looked like. The result (figure 20) is only one example of how this could appear. Different motifs could be substituted for those chosen, or we could move them
Figure 19  Turkey-Breast Corner Cupboard, Southwest Sussex County, Delaware, Circa 1810-1830. Scale Equals One Foot. Private Collection.
about. Perhaps reeded side panels or a punch and gouge surround would look better. The point is that playing with the options takes us through a process similar to that of the craftsman's in choosing and combining motifs from the palette to design a new cupboard. That such outrageous elaboration proves to be plausible and not overly garish is a testament to the viability of the system of design used on these cupboards. An immense variety and a full spectrum of possibilities from fairly modest through the limits of ornamentation is implicit in its nature.
Chapter 2
CORNER CUPBOARD CONSTRUCTION

Conceptually, cupboard building can be divided into two processes. One is design work, the conceptual problem inherent in building a cupboard, focusing on ornamentation and aesthetic qualities; the other is construction, the actual tool and hand work that formed a cupboard out of wood, nails, glass, and paint. Before construction even began the artisan had an idea on paper or in his mind, a plan of the cupboard's final appearance. Construction actualized the conceived design, but that design could change subtly in the process. The reason is that the craftsman had to allow for creativity and correction of error. He may even have improvised some ideas as he went along. The construction progressed toward ornamental stages: the final steps of applying scallops, moldings, cornices, and paint were critical to the cupboard's final appearance.

Almost all artisans require a foundation before they move on to the level of ornament. In this case, our
craftsman built the base of a cupboard, but the ornament was not just applied to this base like paint to a canvas. Initial construction of the cupboard anticipated the planned design. For example, compare the relatively simple cupboard in figure 10 to the more complex one in figure 11. The first has just three basic ornamental motifs: a scalloped border, planed moldings, and the Grecian meander under the cornice. The second utilizes scalloping, capped dentils, planed moldings, a sawn and chiselled border surrounding the scalloping, and sawn fretwork pilasters. It also has wider side and toprails to accommodate the greater amount of decoration, a wider measure that was anticipated in the earliest stages of its construction.

To see this process move from the initial, mechanical stages through to the later, more ornamental stages, we will watch it unfold for one cupboard. The following narrative recalls the construction process for one cupboard from a close, almost archeological examination of a single piece. Where details are unclear (for example, the back of the chosen example could not be closely examined) other cupboards are used for corroborating evidence. This recollection is in the spirit, if not the technique, of experimental archaeology and action anthropology, wherein the scholar attempts to uncover past
practices by actually performing them. An archaeologist, for example, might grow crops using old seed stock and historic methods to estimate yields, or set a wooden chimney on fire to see if it really could be pushed over before the house caught fire as oral history suggests. While it would be instructive for us to build a cupboard with old methods, such an exercise is beyond the scope of this paper.

The cupboard we will examine below (figure 2) is the only one with a solid claim to attribution, by way of descent in the Ralph family. It could have been built by Charles Ralph (1775-1845), who left a corner cupboard to his wife in his will, but it was probably built by one of his sons. Charles' oldest son, James English Ralph (1805-1849), is the most likely candidate, as he is a direct ancestor of the current owner. Family tradition also holds that James is the maker.

It was fairly late in his career when James English Ralph took up his chisels, planes, and saws to begin this piece. There are reasons to believe that he planned this cupboard to be distinct from any he had made before. First, he made it for his own family; it became an heirloom. Second, James selected hardwoods such as maple and cherry for the front in place of the usual pine,
and apparently never intended for this piece to receive paint. While familial purpose suggests the cupboard is something special, Ralph had created fancier pieces in his shop. The harder woods were more difficult to work, and may have proved a daunting challenge. He may never have finished his work entirely, neglecting the cupboard for more pressing work, or even dying before its completion. From purely a connoisseur's point of view, moldings would be an improvement around the door panels, where they are found on many other cupboards. Still, the quality of work is very high, moldings are sharp, scallops crisp, and construction undertaken with meticulous care.

Examination of the cupboard suggests that Ralph began with the front, that is the framed facade, as it is logical for the back to respond to its measurements: the shelves align with the major divisions of the front, centering on the window muntins, and in plan, the sides respond to the width of the facade.

This facade begins with a mortise-and-tenon frame (figure 21), somewhat like that of a panelled door, with modifications. Ralph carefully dimensioned the boards for the stiles and rails, sawing them to the correct length, and planing them down on his workbench until they were smooth and square. He marked off the ends of the rails
Figure 21 Framing Of Corner Cupboard Facade.
and short stiles for the tenons, making sure that the reserve, the length that remains after tenoning, was precisely measured. With a saw, mallet, and chisel he cut the tenons, sawing along the scribe lines to the proper depth and splitting off the waste along the grain from the end to the shoulder with the chisel. He then marked the positions for his mortises, four along the inside edge of each long stile, two each in the lower rails, and one in each lower stile. He cut out these mortises, probably drilling out the wood first and then squaring up by cutting the waste with his chisel. He worked carefully, adjusting each mortise and tenon set so that they would fit together very tightly.41

The craftsman, in most cases, did not have to add any decorative details during construction. In some cases, however, there are decorative tool marks cut directly into the structural members, and in some of those cases it would have made sense to cut the decoration prior to assembly in order to avoid a costly error. For this cupboard, Ralph probably added the rondels decorating the central rail (figure 22) before constructing the facade. These he cut with special bit made for the job, turned in a brace.42
Figure 22  Rondel
Ralph then took up a plow (or "groove") plane and cut grooves along the edges of the rails and stiles to seat the panels flanking the lower door. Ralph tested his mortises and tenons, assembling the whole facade frame without pegging it to see that it fit. He measured for the panels, and shaped them from thin boards, planing the front surface flat and smooth, but shaping the back with roughly fielded or bevelled edges, leaving his rough plane marks exposed (figure 23). This flat-front panel was the style for the period. In an earlier time, he would have raised the front with a bevelled edge and carefully delineated fielding.

He was nearly ready to assemble the frame of the cupboard. But first he marked for the peg holes and drilled them out. The pegs he whittled from scraps of oak or hickory, and made them squarish in cross section for a tight fit. Ralph may have draw-bored the frame, that is, drilled the holes in the mortise a bit further back than those in the tenons, so that the boards would draw together tight as the pegs were hammered through.

Ralph began the assembly by pegging together the lower central frame, joining the two lower rails together with the lower door stiles, and the latter with the short rails dividing the flanking panels. He inserted the
Figure 23  Back of Lower Cupboard Door.
panels into the slots cut for them, with the unfielded faces forward, and then assembled the front, tenoning this assembly into one large side stile, along with the top rail, and then attaching the other side to complete the frame.

Ralph then cut thin strips of wood to line the openings, bevelling them at the corners and nailing them on with small finishing nails. These serve two potential functions. First, they draw a decorative line that emphasizes the openings. Second, when found, the strips usually compensate for the width of the butt hinges, with the door actually hanging on the frame of the cupboard. The latter is not the case here: Ralph chiselled partly into the door and partly into the strip for each hinge, attaching the hinge to the strip. He may have had a door fitting problem that led to this unusual practice.

Next, Ralph constructed the doors for these openings. He assembled the lower door in much the same way as the frame of the cupboard facade. This small door usually consists of a simple mortised and tenoned frame. To break up the face into more surfaces for decorative effect, Ralph added a rail dividing the door about a third of the way down, aligned with the short rails dividing the panels that flank the door, and a stile bisecting the
space above it to create a two over one panelled door (figure 23). He may have planned this in advance, or hit upon it as a solution that allowed him to use smaller stock for the panels. He made mortises, tenons, pegs, and panels for this door in the same way he did for the facade.

The glass doors were made like window sash. Ralph's inventory includes a "sash plane & chissel" for this job, some of the trickiest joinery in the cupboard. First, he made the separate pieces, molding the window muntins (probably in long strips that were later broken up) with the sash plane. As was popular in houses of the period, these muntins were narrow, with a shallow profile (figure 24). Ralph cut half of the same profile along the inside edges of the narrow boards that framed the glass doors. These were fitted with mortises and tenons much like the frame of the cupboard, except that the shoulder of the tenon had to be cut, with reasonable accuracy, to match the muntin profile along the edge of the board it was joining. This technique is similar to through chamfering, where the molded edges of stiles and rails run through the joints in panelling.43 The horizontal muntins were also tenoned into the vertical rails of the window frame, with through chamfering, and pegged. Ralph cut the vertical muntins into short strips, each one glass pane
Figure 24  Plan of a Window Muntin. Full Scale.
high, with their ends matching the profile of the horizontal muntin so that they could be glued in place. After assembling these frames, he had the glazing to do. He may have waited until final assembly for this step, to avoid breaking glass. Glazing involved cutting the valuable glass to the correct size, dropping each piece into the back of the frame, setting them in place with glazing points, and sealing off the edges next to the muntins with putty.

Unlike most cupboards of regions to the north or south, such as Pennsylvania or Virginia, Ralph's cupboard is one piece.\(^4\) It does not separate in the middle, a construction characteristic southern Delaware cupboards share with those of the Peninsula, the area contained in the Eastern shores of Maryland, Virginia and Delaware. While not physically separable for the convenience of movement, the top and bottom were conceptually separate. A line drawn by ornament, a carving or molding, divides them. The top was open to view behind the glass, the bottom, hidden, allowing for more haphazard storage of less presentable objects.

Perhaps for Ralph, however, the real separation was not top and bottom, but back and front: the storage area and the facade the cupboard presented to the room.
That is how he made it, built them separately and joined them. The backs of the cupboards (figure 25) are intriguing, as the roughness of their construction is, at least initially, a somewhat jolting contrast to the scholar or collector so impressed by the front. Such a contrast between front and back is not uncommon even with very fancy furniture. It reflects an economic choice to do as little work as possible were no one would notice anyway. The rough sawn and nailed back reveals quick construction, but it does not follow that the work was shoddy, imprecise, or even easy.

First, he had to calculate the correct sizes for the shelves and back boards, and fashion them to fit. Ralph cut the trapezoidal shelves alternately from a wide board. He finished the top surfaces and front edges of the shelves, and planed dish grooves about two inches from the back edges of the upper shelves, so that plates could be displayed standing. He also planed the bottom surfaces, more roughly than the tops.

While Ralph and the other craftsmen in his tradition did not elaborate the backs, aside from occasionally beading the interior facing edges of the back boards, it certainly required skill to keep the whole structure true during assembly. It may have required
Figure 25  Back of a Corner Cupboard.
assistance: he had to coordinate five or seven back boards, seven shelves, and the front assembly, and nail them together plumb and square. The difficulty of this is apparent when we try to reason out its sequence. Penciled or scored lines across the back boards centering the nails driven through to the shelves provide one small clue. They suggest that Ralph lined the boards up to shelves that were already in place. The shelves are nailed on from the front, under the decoration, so they had to have been added before the decoration was tacked on. Ralph added the shelves to the front, prior to ornamenting the face, and then the backboards to the shelves. He probably waited until the shelves were fashioned and nailed on to finish sizing up the backboards.

The backboards were made from mill-sawn stock; Ralph left the saw marks showing on the backs of the boards. He planed the other side smooth. He squared the edges of the boards and plowed a dado along one edge and planed a tongue along the other. Like floorboards, the backboards fit tongue and groove (figure 26). Along one inside edge of each board, except the central one, he planed a bead. This small detail helped emphasize the verticality of the cupboard and made the interior seem more finished. The central backboard he put on last, first beveling the edges at forty-five degree angles, with
Figure 26  Plan of Tongue-and-Groove Joint of Backing Boards, with Bead. Full Scale.
the interior surface wider to fit the shelves and the edges of the side backboards.

Ornament now became Ralph's main concern. This part of the job, easier to describe than the construction of the rest of the cupboard, may have taken much longer. Making the decorative elements was a laborious process of sawing scallops, running moldings, cutting the strips of ornament to fit, and nailing them on. The first layer was the scallops. He calculated these precisely, probably by making a pattern, so that they would mitre correctly at the upper corners. Here there was room for creativity. Would a large or small repeat look best? Where should the scalloping stop at the bottom? Decisions made, he cut the scallops from a thin piece of finished stock, first tracing the pattern, and then sawing with a hand saw. With care, he could probably save the negative scallops for use on another cupboard; it is possible that they were of lesser quality, as one sometimes sees cupboards with sloppy scalloping, occasionally not even mitering correctly at the corners.

The next layer above the scallops in this case is a surrounding frieze, reeded with a plane. Usually, this layer did not exist; instead, there were simply the scallops and the final moldings. The moldings were
similarly planed out and tacked on. Above this, at the top, more layers remained. First there is a strip of what collectors today call "candleflame" dentilation. The teeth of this were sawn out, and the holes, or "flames" above the spaces between them were drilled out. Finally above this, Ralph added a planed crown molding. All that remained was to finish the surface. This usually meant paint, sometimes in inventive color combinations. In this case, Ralph may only have added a clear oil finish, and polished it with a layer of wax.

Now he could step back and admire his work. From rough pieces of wood, he had made a cupboard. Ralph could perhaps get similar satisfaction from plowing a field or mending a fence, but cupboards were different. They were pieces of furniture, formidable objects that would last for generations. They speak to us today of the creativity of their makers. We should not romanticize this point too much; artisans built cupboards for pay. But we could also dismiss the emotive aspects too easily. Objects made so well, so carefully, and so beautifully, cannot have been made without pride. They built cupboards for money, but to sell them, they had to create them well. Doing that called for commitment and artistry. Anything less was not worthwhile.
Surviving cupboards document the aesthetic importance of the form; documentary sources can help us to place it in context. Several questions come to mind. How common were cupboards? What were they called? How highly did their owners value them? How did they use them? More elusively, what was their place in people's lives, how did they fit in to the cycle of work, leisure, dining, conversation, or, in short, daily life?

Sussex County inventories of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries reveal that cupboards were a popular form. In a survey of fifty-two property owners in Little Creek and Broad Creek hundreds from 1776 through 1840, we find cupboards of some type in an overwhelming majority, seventy-five percent, of the surveyed households, the most commonly encountered type of case furniture. That fact alone could mislead us into overestimating the prevalence of corner cupboards. Cupboards are described in inventories, if at all, by material, color, condition, and form. Material includes
wood and glass; if a specific wood is referred to, it is invariably pine. Color, rarely mentioned, is almost always blue. The few cupboards with surviving early paint are either blue or a multitude of colors in almost a circus wagon aesthetic, as we have seen. Benjamin Wooten's 1820 inventory includes a "pine painted" cupboard. Condition is referred to with the adjectives "old" and "new." Sometimes size is a category, either "large" or "small."

Form is the most revealing category. The word "cupboard" actually encompasses several types of storage furniture. Inventory takers sometimes tried to distinguish between them, usually when more than one type occurred in an estate. The terminology they used demonstrates that different forms were created for specific needs. The 1821 estate of Newbold Vinson, for example, included a "Corner Cupboard" worth $8.00, a "Kitchen Cupboard" worth $2.50, and a "Safe Cupboard" valued at $2.00. The corner cupboard was probably a fancy piece. Vinson used it for simultaneous storage and display of dining equipage: the "crockery ware" in it was valued at over $6.00, a high amount. From their low valuations we may assume that the kitchen and safe cupboards were more utilitarian than decorative, although they certainly could have been brightly colored or had
simple moldings. Objects in them were correspondingly cheaper. The "Earthen & Store Ware" in the Kitchen cupboard was rated at $1.50, while that in the safe was worth only twelve and a half cents. He used these two cupboards for the storage of kitchen utensils and food.

This pattern occurs again, with some variation of terminology, in the 1822 inventory of Joseph Copes of Broad Creek Hundred. Copes owned a corner cupboard worth $4.00, "one square cupboard in the cook room" rated at $2.00, and a $.50 "small cupboard." Crockery in the corner cupboard was worth as much as the cupboard itself, $4.00. The "cook room cupboard ware" was valued at $1.00. No such goods were listed for the small cupboard.49

A similar three cupboard set turns up in the 1840 inventory of Joseph Chipman's estate. Chipman owned an unspecified $8.00 cupboard, a $2.50 "safe cupboard" and a $.75 "Kitchen Safe."50 As with Vinson and Cope, we find an expensive display cupboard and two cheaper cupboards for food and kitchen wares. This three cupboard set represents either an ideal or an aberration. Only four of our fifty-two property owners enjoyed the full complement. Another six owners had two, and thirty-two had one.
Of the 52 inventories studied, twelve include a corner cupboard, described as such. An additional twenty-four are, as determined by value, use, or location, probably corner cupboards or formal wall cupboards. The owner of such a cupboard was twice as likely to own a clock as the non-owner, three times as likely to own a desk, and four times as likely to own a chest of drawers. This analysis suggests that a cupboard was almost a given in any large assemblage of case pieces.\textsuperscript{51}

Cupboards were hardly confined to well furnished houses, however; they were one of the first large pieces of storage furniture acquired by the less wealthy landowners. Dividing our 52 inventories into quartiles by estate value reveals that owning a cupboard was at least four times as likely as owning a clock, desk, or a chest of drawers in the lowest quartile, and three times as likely in the second (figure 27). In the upper half of economic society, cupboards are more of a given, and desks rise as markers of status, reflecting the extensive bookkeeping that goes along with larger estates. For the large body of people who are not included in the documentary record, we can only hazard a guess that this trend continues down the economic scale: that after a chest, a
Figure 27 Ownership of Cupboards, Desks, Chest of Drawers, and Clocks, Laurel and Broad Creek, Delaware, 1790-1850. Quartiles Arranged From Lowest to Highest Estate Valuation. Each Quartile Includes 13 Decedents, Total 52 in Sample. Source: Sussex County Probate Inventories, Delaware State Archives.
cupboard might be the most common storage form, although certainly not a given.

How were cupboards used? We have already seen how Newbold Vinson and others divided "classes" of crockery into three cupboards of descending value. Inventories are not always so helpful in revealing patterns of use, particularly when the estate has only one cupboard. Even so, when a lot of ceramics, pewter or other small items come just before or after a cupboard in an inventory, it is a good bet that at least some were stored there.52 John King's 1827 inventory, for example, includes a corner cupboard rated at one dollar. The listing is followed by "Queensware,...Earthen Dishes,...Jugs," and "Pitchers." The tripartite storage needs of dining, kitchen, and food storage are here served in one cupboard.53

Included in the 1803 inventory of Ephrim Knoles' property is a "Glass corner cupboard," worth four pounds, ten shillings. The specificity of this entry suggests that the glass doored corner cupboard was an unusual form for the area early in the century and, as listed, an expensive one. Within a few years, they were widespread. Compare Knoles' cupboard to the most expensive of the seven beds in his estate, worth seven pounds, and his
"new desk," worth six. "All the Earthenware and Glass in the Glass Cupboard" was valued at seventeen shillings. Other items which may have been stored in the cupboard are listed immediately after it in the inventory; they include pewter, cases of bottles, books, a coffee mill, candlesticks, snuffers, and tinware. Some of these, however, such as the candlesticks, may have been on the tables or chest listed nearby.\textsuperscript{54}

Knoles lived in a large house, forty by sixteen feet with three chimneys. Appraisers appointed by the Orphans Court to inspect his property noted that the house was in "midling" condition. A fourteen by sixteen foot log house in bad condition on Knoles' property was probably the dwelling of his single slave, George. Knoles was well off, worth over six hundred pounds when he died. In spite of his wealth, we do not find a three cupboard "set" among his possessions. At the higher economic levels, however, interior architectural fittings of the house begin to take over some of the functions of moveable furniture.\textsuperscript{55} The cooking room of the house (no separate kitchen was noted by the Orphans Court) probably had built-in shelving that served the purpose of the kitchen cupboard. Even entire buildings could serve the function a piece of furniture filled at a lower economic level: the "Coars Earthenware in the Milkhouse" listed
in Knoles' inventory suggests that his dairy stored food as well as milk.56

Analysis of several inventories enables us to explore the economic context of corner cupboards, names they were known by, and ways they were used. Close scrutiny of a single inventory will allow us to narrow the focus to the household level. While no one household can be considered average, universal, or normative, it does mirror its own culture. Studying one may open just a narrow window to history, but it is wide enough to show the importance of the cupboard in a family's daily life. We have already seen that cupboards, logically enough, are used for storage of ceramics, but this glimpse of an individual family will place the cupboard with other furnishings, a house, and a landscape beyond. This by no means is meant to imply a cupboard-centered universe: we could open the same window to examine chairs, pewter, or timber carts in the worlds of particular people.

Thomas Commean falls into the lowest quartile of the 52 inventories mentioned above. By modern standards he is a poor man; with respect to his peers, he is neither wealthy nor poor. When he died, his inventoried property was worth $288.94, and his log house measured only 14 x 16 feet, or 224 square feet on the ground.
floor.\textsuperscript{57} This dwelling house, the only building on his property by the time of the 1823 Orphans Court description, is listed in "bad" condition. Its condition probably deteriorated in the seven years since Commean died, but it still had some value. The loft was probably unheated. To modern eyes this documentation suggests a bleak existence, which it may have been: imagine a drafty interior with a sooty fire providing minimal heat and the drudgery of cooking or doing laundry (or even trying to read) under such conditions. Almost all of the daily activity occurred in the tiny downstairs room. We must, however, place Commean in the context of his own time. Almost all of his neighbors labored under similar conditions. Wood stoves were still novel. Bear in mind also that Commean owned land. His house may be somewhat smaller than the average size in the area, but land ownership elevates his status above a large crowd of tenants, servants, slaves, and the homeless. His situation is not remarkably bad for the region and the period. In addition to land, he had crops in the field, furniture for sitting, eating, and storage, and he could read. Slaves and tenants could not hope for so little.\textsuperscript{58}

Work in the Commean household was nearly constant. He worked the fields, his wife shuttled her hand-spun thread through the loom and cooked meals with
the children's assistance. The family was a model of income diversification. By pursuing as many ventures as possible, the Commean family protected their livelihood from the vagaries of the weather. This strategy was not always successful, but it was well established in America by Commean's time. Robert St. George identifies it at work among New England's seventeenth-century yeomen. There, the yeoman challenged the established order of society by increasing his profits and buying more luxury goods. St. George describes the yeoman's world as dedicated to the accumulation and display of material goods and a driving need to transform raw nature into finished culture; to "break," for example, flax fibers and weave them into cloth.  

By Commean's day the culture had changed a great deal, but the motivation remained the same. A seventeenth-century yeoman transported to Commean's nineteenth-century household would have been startled by the furniture styles, by the ceramics, by the table manners and strange fashions, but he would not have been surprised by the tools and the ways of working. The old order had been upset again and again, but the world changed in mostly superficial ways. Work remained the same.
Many of Commean's neighbors were foresters, cutting the trees on their property for the local sawmills, for fuel, or—for shingles. Commean could hardly have been one of them without a lumber cart, or chains. He did have an ax, but no saw and no stockpiled wood. He probably did not own enough land to employ one of the area's key economic strategies. He may, however, have earned wages assisting other foresters.

Commean was primarily a farmer: his time was occupied working outside of the house. The tools of his trade include three hoes, an ax, a plow, a harrow, a pair of traces, and a bridle bit. With these and his horse he cleared land, worked the earth, and made crops grow. Sixty bushels of corn, five of wheat, and several stacks of fodder were in storage when he died. He enjoyed the produce of an orchard of 25 apple and 35 peach trees. Most of the fruit was probably distilled into brandy. Commean, however, owned no still, so he probably sold or bartered his fruit to others or borrowed a still for the process.

Commean's animals are listed first in his inventory, a significant reflection of their importance. He owned about as many animals as needed for subsistence, perhaps a little more. They are nearly a quarter of the
total value of the estate. An old mare provided transportation and worked the fields; she could work faster than an ox, but also required more care. Even though "old," the horse was worth twenty dollars, the most expensive single animal in the estate. A cow and calf provided dairy products. A heifer and a young bull insured propagation and possibly a future sale. We can probably assume that Commean had chickens as well. Apparently of little value, they rarely turn up in inventories.

His two sheep probably provided wool rather than meat, the latter coming largely from the eleven hogs. He raised flax and the sheep for the raw materials his wife would laboriously transform into cloth on the wheel and the loom. He kept bees and slaughtered animals. The year was marked by the rhythm of annual tasks: planting, harvesting, birthing, slaughtering, feeding, plowing, processing, fencing, and clearing.

The lack of outbuildings in the Orphans Court record suggests that these animals were left outside, but that record comes seven years after the inventory: small buildings may have fallen, been dismantled, or carted off in the interim. Alternatively, he may have used a neighbor's stables. Or the animals may have sought
shelter where they could, under trees or next to the house. The "229 pannels fence" listed by the Orphans Court appraisers helped to fence the animals out of the crops.60

Storage represented a continual problem. There is no meat or smokehouse in Commean's Orphans Court listing, but he did have bacon in his inventory, listed among onions, leather, wearing apparel and cotton. Commean stored these items in his loft as well as salt, salted herring, barrels, soap, tow, and some harvested crops and seeds. A bed, a chest, and a wheel listed at the end of the inventory, separate from the best furniture, complete the loft setting. This was an area characterized by lack of heat, disorder, cheaper furniture, and raw materials.61

The room downstairs was where these raw materials became culture, where order was more imposing, where the best things in the house, including those in the cupboard, were displayed.62 This was a room dominated by women, the sphere of work and domesticity. It was the main work arena of the household, the seat of textile production and cooking. Wool and linen were the mainstays of home manufacture; sheep and flax raised on site provided raw materials for the cloth (possibly
supplemented with purchased raw materials). Commean's wife carded wool and broke flax, spun these on the wheels, dyed them in dye pots, and wove them on a loom. This was a labor-intensive cottage industry that had been around for some time, in America and Europe. Certainly, not all textiles in the region were of local manufacture: store inventories list a bewildering variety of textiles available to the consumer, and Commean may have had occasion to purchase some that his wife could not produce at home. However, the home production was an important source of cloth and income for the household.

The Commeans' little house was crowded with furniture. They had a bed, two tables, four chairs, a spinning wheel, a loom, and a cupboard in addition to the bed, chest, and wheel upstairs. The second highest rated item in the inventory (after sixty bushels of corn) was the "one Bed with Stead & furniture," worth twenty-eight dollars. The marital bed dominated the downstairs room, like the cupboard, one of its centers.

The tables were a site of work and dining. The better table is listed together with a piece of linen. With a tablecloth, this was the more formal table, perhaps a side table: the "one pitcher & one Cave bottle" listed just previous to it may have been displayed there.
Both were probably multi-use tables. The second table is described as "old," and listed together with a sifter and two tumblers, perhaps found there by the inventory takers. This suggests it was used for food preparation. We can imagine either or both in use to lay out the cloth for cutting, or the books for reading. The four chairs would gather around them, and later were pulled up to the fire, or stored against the wall.

Commean's cupboard was probably a corner or a flat wall cupboard, displaying mostly items of everyday use. Items listed immediately after it in the inventory show that it was used to store earthenware, bottles, a coffee pot, a bread bowl, wooden spoons, and possibly a candlestick and some inexpensive flatware. The sifter and two tumblers listed in the same line as an old table may well have had more permanent residence in the cupboard.

Commean's wife cooked meals on the hearth with a rudimentary set of tools. She had two pots, one Dutch oven, a skillet, a pan, flesh forks, a bread bowl, a sifter, and two wooden spoons. Some of these items, such as the ironware, may have been kept on the hearth, in the bottom of the cupboard, or possibly in an interior storage space such as a closet under the stair. The bread bowl, sifter, and spoons were probably stored in
the cupboard when not in use. These and the dinnerware kept Mrs. Commean shuttling back and forth from the cupboard to the hearth and to the table.

Several other items were stored in the main room of the house, either in the cupboard, on top of it, or in another area. These include a "blowing horn and ink stand," and some books (indicating that either Commean, his wife, or children were literate). Commean had a steelyard (scales), some meal tubs, a razor, some paper, and two baskets. Such items also suggest that the cupboard took on the role of other pieces of furniture in their absence. The storage spaces were divided, finer items above, tools and such rougher items below. It is the same division of space that Henry Glassie documents for the use of a dresser, a wall cupboard, in present-day Ireland:

The dresser, like the house, is at once a thing of appearance and use. Above, on the shelves, as above, in the room, it is clean and not for using. Below, behind closed doors, the dresser rests tools between moments of use as below, behind closed doors, the house rests people between moments of work. In the middle, on the dresser "shelf" and in the home's kitchen, delight and utility fuse in action.64

The "room" here is the formal parlor of the house. Commean did not enjoy a separate parlor, and it is likely that his use of his cupboard was unlike that in Ireland today, but we can assume Commean (or, more likely, his
wife) enforced as rigorous a division of his cupboard into functional areas. The separation of upper and lower areas of the cupboard for formal and functional storage is the same, and we could draw a similar metaphor with Commean's house. There, the loft corresponds to the lower part of the cupboard, the downstairs to the upper.

On such occasions as a dinner among friends, we can imagine the pewter or china dining ware being removed from the cupboard, the tables set, and the meal being served. Conversation filled the small room, candlelight sparkled against the glass panes of the cupboard (for those who had glass cupboards), and the meal slowly wound down. Finally, the dishes are washed and returned to safe containment and display behind the glass doors of the cupboard. The cupboard was a showplace for china; it interacted with the hearth, the table and the people in the house, proclaiming status and serving as a reminder of their culture.

In Commean's house, in houses large and small, the corner cupboard was a cultural intersection. Ceramics of the world met there with deep seated traditions of dining and conservation, imported teas and spices, local foods, and local traditions of work and creative artistry. Behind the frame of the cupboard's delicate tracery, a
modest collection of ceramics appeared larger (and everyday wares appeared more significant next to fancy wares): beyond, the room was enlivened by the glitter of the glass and the intricacy and color of the sawn painted wood. On the simplest level, the cupboard was an efficient storage space, housing a large number of things while occupying an otherwise useless corner of wall and floor space. On a more complex level, it was a reinforcement of local values, taste, and ideas: a piece of the local economy, the forest transformed, like a house, into culture.
NOTES


2. See, for example, Sussex County house-moving and, in one case, theft recalled in Bernard L. Herman, "Architectural Renewal and the Maintenance of Customary Relationships," Material Culture, 19, nos. 2-3 (Summer-Fall, 1987), 85-91.


4. It is, for example, reflected in the coastal Connecticut chair tradition Robert F. Trent documents in Hearts and Crowns: Folk chairs of the Connecticut Coast, 1720-1840 (New Haven, Ct.: New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1977). Like the furniture of the present study, these chairs exhibit tremendous variety and creativity within a long tradition.


6. Ned Fowler, interview with author. Laurel, Del.: Summer, 1985. Mr. Fowler located about sixty cupboards. Others have been brought to the author's attention by Gordon Lohr, Robert St. George, Bernard Herman, James and Marilyn Melchor, and Thomas Beckman, or located through dealer's advertisements.


12. From the 1850 census we can draw long list of their names, such as these Harold Hancock compiled from Laurel alone: William Anderson, Elisha W. Cannon, George W. Cannon, Jonathan Cathal, Ebenezer Collins, Minos Delaney, William T. Elliot, Jonathan Hearn, Eliza Hill, Benjamin Hudson, George Hussy, William B. Kinniken, Joshua Marvel, Risdon Miller, George Polk, Charles Sanders, J. S. Thatwell, Joseph Wharton, Alfred Williams, and Isaac Williams. See Harold Bell Hancock, *The History of Nineteenth-Century Laurel*, 13, 243-251. Some of these men may have made cupboards included in this study, but, so far, their participation in the area's corner cupboard tradition cannot be documented.


15. For a discussion of the origins and uses of the word "creative," see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press,
1976) 72-74. Williams deplores the trivialization of the term, a charge that could be made in the present study if poets are compared to carpenters, but within the limitations of cupboards, the term is apt.

16. On painting, see Lawrence Alloway on systemic painting, as quoted by H H. Arnason, History of Modern Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979) 678-679. On traditional carpenters, see Henry Glassie, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 67: "The houses he makes are similar to each other, but never are they identical in every particular."

17. Henry Glassie, Folk Housing, 67.


19. See Charles S. Parsons, The Dunlaps and Their Furniture, and Michael Moses, Master Craftsmen of Newport.


21. For example, witness the actions of the characters in George Alfred Townsend's largely historical novel of the Eastern shore of Maryland and Lower Delaware, The Entailed Hat (Cambridge, Maryland: Tidewater Publishers, 1955; reprint of 1884 edition), who travel freely between Princess Anne, Maryland and Dover, Delaware, and refer to the influence of Baltimore.

22. See Abbott Lowell Cummings, The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625-1725 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 202-209. The English sources of Massachusetts bay houses are more clear cut than those for Delaware corner cupboards, but they only begin to tell the story. The houses quickly evolved into an American form that harkened back to the English antecedents. The nature of that evolution is the focus of Cumming's study. See also Benno M. Forman, American Seating Furniture, 1630-1730 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988). Forman traces the English and European sources for American
chairs meticulously, but goes beyond this analysis to show how the American furniture became unique. See also Gerald L. Pocius, introduction to Walter W. Peddle, The Traditional Furniture of Outport Newfoundland, (St. Johns, Newfoundland, Canada: Harry Goff Publications, 1983), 15-16.


24. See Gervase Jackson-Stops, ed., The Treasure Houses of Britain: Five Hundred Years of Patronage and Art Collecting, (Washington, D.C.: The National Gallery of Art, 1985), 283. The scallops are barely discernable in the photograph, but were readily apparent in the exhibit.

25. William Salmon, Palladio Londinensis (London: Ward and Wicksteed, 1734), plate XXVI. First traced by Melchor et al., Raised Panel Furniture, 18-19, in a more straightforward adaptation to a door panel on a wardrobe. See also Deborah Dependahl Waters, Plain and Ornamental: Delaware Furniture, 1740-1890 (Wilmington, Del.: The Historical Society of Delaware, 1984), 40.


27. See Ned Cooke, Review of Raised-Panel Furniture by Melchor, et. al., in Winterthur Portfolio 19, no. 1 (Spring, 1984), 91.


32. This metaphor of "palette" is not one of the craftsmen's, but is suitable for describing their utilization of a set of motifs to form a consistently recognizable "oeuvre" of corner cupboards. The dictionary defines "palette" as "a particular range, quality, or use of color...[or] a comparable range, quality, or use of available elements esp. in another art (as music)," Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (8th ed., s.v. "palette"). This metaphor is used for its closer analogy to the decorative arts than such a metaphor as "language," which tends to suggest more communication than is actually occurring.


34. Henry Glassie, Pattern in Material Folk Culture, 33.

35. See Dell Upton, Holy Things and Profane, 101-102.


37. It is perhaps a trivialization of Kubler's meaning of the term "prime object" to apply it to a corner cupboard when he reserves it for works such as the Parthenon that altered the history of art and generated replications. However, the sense of the term applies on a smaller scale. Within a narrow region, the first statement of this style had considerable impact on two generations or more of artisans. George Kubler: The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962) 39-45.

39. Bill Kelso performed the latter experiment in 1988-89, finding it was difficult but possible to push over the chimney. Stacia Norman, conversation with author, February, 1988.

40. Bear in mind that the Ralphs probably worked together on many of their cupboards, and on several at one time. Available documentation sheds little light on their shop practices. Charles Thomas Ralph, James' father, left a cupboard to Phyllis, his wife, in his will of 1845. At least two of James' seven brothers, William and Machilon, were also carpenters. Machilon moved to Quincy, Illinois by the 1840's. Will of Charles Thomas Ralph, Sussex County Probate Records, Dover: Hall of Records, Delaware State Archives, Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs, vol. A94, p. 176. Donald Ralph, interview with author, Summer, 1985. Sussex County Probate Inventories: Charles Ralph, 1845; James E. Ralph, 1849; William Ralph, 1859. Ralph Family Bible, Collection of Donald Ralph, Laurel, Delaware. Henry Asbury, Reminiscences of Quincy, Illinois... (Quincy, Ill.: D. Wilcox & Sons, 1882), 105. This cupboard is also illustrated in Dorothy Williams Pepper, Folklore of Sussex County, Delaware, Sussex County Bicentennial Committee, 1976, 68.

41. Wherever possible, the tools referred to in this narrative actually occur in James Ralph's inventory. Sussex County Probate Inventories: Estate Inventory of James E. Ralph, 1849. Delaware State Archives, Dover, Del.: Hall of Records, Delaware Division of Historic and Cultural Affairs.

42. Gregory Landrey, furniture conservator at the Henry Francis DuPont Winterthur Museum, provided information on the most likely way this was done. Conversation with author, Summer, 1985.

43. See Victor Chinnery, Oak Furniture, 113-114, diagram 2:15g.

44. See Melchor, Lohr, and Melchor, Raised-Panel Furniture, 75-80, 89-131.
45. The inventories were selected from Sussex County inventories when the decedent's residence could be geographically located to either the Little Creek Hundred or Broad Creek Hundred areas, usually by the occurrence of the same decedent in Orphans Court records or the rare mention of location in the inventory itself. This tends to concentrate our study on those who had descendants and died young, and slaves or tenants are probably absent. Even so, many strikingly poor landowners are included.

Delaware State Archives, Sussex County Probate Inventories, 1680-1925; Sussex County Orphans Court, 1680-1850. Dover, Del.: Hall of Records, Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs.

46. Sussex County Probate Inventories: Estate Inventory of Benjamin Wooten, 1820.

47. Sussex County Probate Inventories: Estate inventory of Newbold Vinson, 1821.

48. The only case in the survey where listed cupboard ware is worth more is in the 1813 inventory of William Townsend, whose "pewter & cupboard ware" was valued at $8.25. Sussex County Probate Inventories.

49. Sussex County Probate Inventories: Estate Inventory of Joseph Copes, 1822. The square cupboard is probably what is today called a "wall cupboard."

50. Sussex County Probate Inventories: Estate Inventory of Joseph Chipman, 1840.

51. Interestingly, desk ownership is one and a half times more common than chest of drawer ownership. Cupboard ownership is actually under represented: bear in mind that some houses had cupboards built into their hearth walls and consequently were not inventoried. Wingate Short's 1818 inventory (Sussex County Probate Inventories) does not list a cupboard but does include "earthenware in a corner cupboard," probably referring to a built-in piece.

52. For the concept of "constellations," or proximity of items in estate inventories, see Beth Ann Twiss-Garrity, "Getting the Comfortable Fit: House Forms and Furnishings in Rural Delaware, 1720-1820," M.A. Thesis, University of Delaware, 1983.

53. Sussex County Probate Inventories: Estate inventory of John King, 1827.
54. Sussex County Probate Inventories: Estate Inventory of Ephrim Knoles, 1803.

55. Bernard Herman documents the significance of architectural furniture that was meant to be "as permanent as the buildings themselves" as symptomatic of a move toward permanent housing in Architecture and Rural Life in Central Delaware, 1700 - 1900 (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 54-55. The strength of the corner cupboard tradition in Lower Delaware in the early nineteenth century suggests that this shift took place later in Sussex County than it did farther north.

56. Sussex County Orphans Court, Probate Inventories: Ephrim Knoles, 1803. Knoles also had a 18 x 16 foot barn, a carriage house, a 14 x 16 foot log house, and an 11 foot square meat house. The pitfalls of documentary research are illustrated here by the fact that the milkhouse mentioned in Knoles' estate inventory does not turn up in his Orphans Court listing.

57. At most. The actual square footage must account for the thickness of walls, substantial in the case of a log house, unless the documented measurements were taken "in the clear", i.e., inside the walls.

58. Sussex County Orphans Court: Thomas Commean, 1823.


60. Sussex County Orphans Court: Thomas Commean, 1823.

61. St. George, in "'Set Thine House in Order'..." 170, discusses similar organization of storage functions in the seventeenth-century yeoman's household. His discussion helped make the similarity of Commean's situation apparent.


65. Even if Commean's cupboard is a pie safe or a jelly cupboard (a case form about the same height as a low chest of drawers, with two doors that open to interior shelves) the division between upper and lower areas holds true for the storage inside and the display area on top.
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Pepper, Dorothy Williams. *Folklore of Sussex County, Delaware*. Sussex County, Del.: The Sussex County Bicentennial Committee, 1976.


Ralph Family Bible. Collection of Donald Ralph, Laurel, Delaware.


