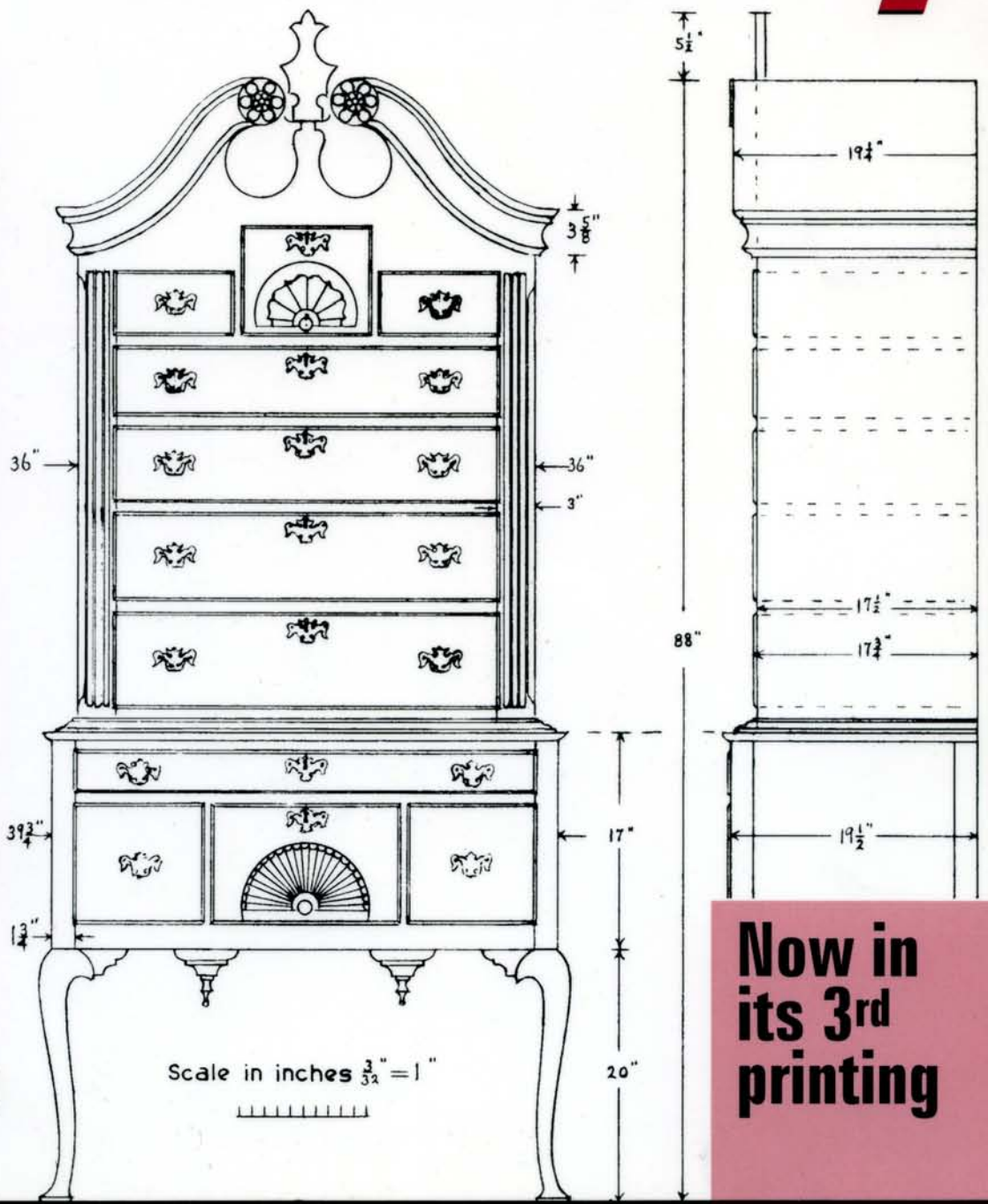
Measured Drawings

OF

18th Century

AMERICAN FURNITURE



Ejner Handberg

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Measured Drawings of Eighteenth Century American Furniture

by Ejner Handberg

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Measured Drawings of Eighteenth Century American Furniture

by Ejner Handberg

Berkshire House Publishers

Stockbridge, Massachusetts

To my family, without whose help and encouragement
this book would not have been finished

MEASURED DRAWINGS
OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
AMERICAN FURNITURE

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Photographs by Robert Shartrand

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FOREWORD

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are generally regarded as the golden age of furniture making. As roads improved and faster ships were built, worldwide commerce expanded greatly, carrying both raw materials and finished products to the far corners of the earth.

People, too, traveled the world in search of new lives. Those who came to the North American shores brought with them their hopes, customs, and possessions. Life here was hard for most, but eventually the new American citizens began to prosper. Goods were both imported and manufactured here to fill their needs.

The vast majority of New England's inhabitants were from the British Isles and were greatly influenced by their motherland's customs and styles. Before the Revolutionary War, it was considered the highest fashion to have imported English furniture in the home. Those who could not afford it — or would not put up with the long wait for English furnishings — had it produced in America. It was only natural and necessary that urban craftsman copied the latest London styles and in turn the country cabinetmaker/joiner copied the styles of the nearest cities.

In furniture making, just as in language, an American accent was developed. Just as in today's English language we have regional accents, so then in the golden age of furniture making an Americanized English style developed, breaking down into variations of regional style.

When I began my career as an antiques dealer, I was initially attracted to the intricate designs and woodworking acrobatics of the great French cabinetmakers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It didn't take long, though, before I developed a deep appreciation for the more restrained styles of our own American craftsman. In this book, the last work of Ejner Handberg, you will find primarily non-urban examples of New England furniture. These pieces are typical of what prosperous citizens of a budding new nation had in their homes far from the din of city life. As in his previous books on Shaker furniture, Ejner has undertaken the exacting task of making measured drawings to enable you to make accurate reproductions. It's up to you to do the rest. If you have only a limited experience with antique furniture, it would be a good idea to view similar genuine examples before starting on the more ambitious projects here.

Inevitably, the passage of time has altered and enlarged our understanding of certain pieces. The Red Lion Inn's highboy on page 16 has had an extra board added to the top of the lower case on which the top case section now rests: at some time, the lower case must have been used as a serving piece or lowboy by itself. The tall case or "grandfather" clock on page 2 has had its original pierced fretwork crest replaced with a later Victorian leaf design, probably done in the later half of the nineteenth century. In addition, the feet of the base are

a little short. The lowboy on page 30 is the bottom section of a highboy. The gate leg table on pages 42-43 is an early twentieth-century commercial reproduction adapted from a late seventeenth or early eighteenth century design. With all that said, Ejner's pioneering work is little diminished, for his invaluable book is among a precious few of this type that are available.

Whether recreating only one piece or many, you will derive the greatest satisfaction from a project if you follow the same guidelines the eighteenth century cabinetmakers did. Before you begin construction, select all the materials for the project and choose the best grade of materials available. Work in a methodical way and do your work in the neatest manner.

Paul Kleinwald
Great Barrington, Massachusetts
April 1993

PREFACE

Eighteenth-century American furniture is my favorite of all furniture: in my estimation it is the finest furniture anywhere. In my many years as a cabinetmaker in New England, I have restored and made reproductions of many fine seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American pieces, and I have found that books of measured drawings of such furniture are extremely scarce. There are many good books with excellent descriptions and photographs of rare pieces but, as any cabinetmaker knows, it is nearly impossible to make a faithful reproduction from a photograph.

It is therefore my belief that this book will be of great help to cabinetmakers working on reproductions of early American furniture. The pieces I have chosen for this book are those I have admired over the years and I feel that they represent some extremely fine examples of early American design. I have personally measured very carefully every piece, all of which are in either private collections or museums. In the case of one piece, the butterfly table, it was necessary to have it taken out of storage in order to get the exact measurements.

I would like to thank all those friends, including the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge, the Berkshire County Historical Society at Arrowhead, and the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, who allowed me to make drawings from their collections.

E.H.

SOME NOTES ON EARLY AMERICAN FURNITURE

Before the Empire period, the style of eighteenth-century American furniture followed very much the same lines as English furniture. This was owing, no doubt, to the fact that the first American cabinetmakers were in all probability English immigrants who had been trained in England. American cabinetmakers, however, made furniture that was simpler and less ornate, often adding a few of their own ideas, thereby creating a real "made in America" style that combined beauty and utility with the very finest results.

The furniture styles in the Colonies and New England always lagged behind those in England by ten to twenty-five years, particularly during the first part of the eighteenth century. After 1700, as times became more prosperous here, the Queen Anne and the later Chippendale designs which had been developed in England gained great popularity. These styles in their American version were again given simpler and less ornate lines, but were frequently made with mahogany after its introduction here in about 1720. The Queen Anne and Chippendale furniture was never altered extensively enough to create a new American style; however, the block-front desks and other pieces by John Goddard of Rhode Island and the furniture of Duncan Phyfe of New York were entirely different from the English designs.

The first pieces of Empire furniture by Duncan Phyfe were good, but by about 1820 they had become heavy and clumsy with meaningless curves and other very ornate details. After that came the Victorian period in which even more ornamentation was added, to the detriment, in my opinion, of good American furniture.

SOME ADVICE ON MAKING REPRODUCTIONS

The careful reproduction of simple, classic furniture can be a very satisfying and rewarding project. Whether or not a reproduction is a good or bad piece of furniture will of course depend of the quality of the workmanship that has gone into it. However, there are a couple of additional points that will be helpful in creating a successful reproduction.

First of all, before undertaking the reproduction of early American furniture, the wise cabinetmaker or woodworker examines the original piece for authenticity as well as beauty of design and pleasing proportions.

Making a reproduction true to size will give you the best result, but changes in design and size are decisions that the craftsman must make for himself. However, it is my opinion that copying a beautiful old piece and making it smaller is very bad. The value and beauty of the reproduction will depend on the good judgment and taste of its maker.

The same kind of wood and hardware used in the original will be the best choice for the copy. A well-made reproduction in plain maple or cherry will always be far superior to one that is badly put together in a poor grade of mahogany. (A list of the woods most frequently used in eighteenth-century American furniture is given on another page.)

One will very seldom see a good copy of a Windsor chair because the seat must be of a size and thickness to allow for the proper saddling of the upper side, which then reduces the thickness in the center of the seat by about half. Also, some of the turnings on a Windsor chair cannot be made on an automatic lathe.

These are just a few suggestions that can make the difference between a successful reproduction and one that doesn't quite come up to expectations.

SELECTION AND DRYING OF WOOD

I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of selecting the very best lumber for your project and being sure it is properly dried. The use to which the lumber is put determines how much moisture is to be removed in drying. Lumber for outdoor furniture need not be dried to as low a moisture content as lumber used for fine furniture which will be exposed to heated indoor air. The moisture content for fine furniture must be about 5% or less. Very dry lumber with less than 5% moisture will swell during humid months if it is not finished immediately after it is assembled with several coats of your choice of finish, and always the same on the bottoms as the top.

Any lumber that is newly cut must first be air-dried outside during the summer for six months or more. Air-drying of lumber consists of carefully piling the boards outdoors with stickers laid crosswise between each layer and about three to four feet apart to keep the layers separated. There should be about an inch space between the edges of the boards for air to move up and down through the pile. The top of the pile must be covered against the rain and sun. After air-drying, the lumber must be brought inside. A good place to store it is in the loft over the shop or a similar heated space. The time necessary to finish drying depends upon the thickness of the board: about six months or more for one-inch lumber, twice that for two inch, and so on.

To present splitting and case-hardening of the surface, never dry the surface of a board any faster than the moisture can be drawn out from the center of the board. Even if your lumber has been kiln-dried, but then left to build up moisture during humid weather, it must be brought back to a moisture content of about 5% or less before using it for fine furniture. For a more accurate guideline to the moisture content of wood for fine furniture, cut a sample of no less than ten square inches and weigh it very accurately to find its original weight. Then dry the sample in an oven set about 215 degrees until it stops losing weight; this will be its oven-dry weight. Now subtract the oven-dry weight from the original weight, multiply that by 100, and divide by the original weight. The result is the moisture content of the original sample.

Example (original weight 5 oz.)

oven-dry weight 4 1/2 oz.

1/2 oz. x 100 = 50/5 = 10%

FURNITURE WOODS

During the eighteenth century the American cabinetmaker used many different woods. Eleven of the most used are mentioned here. Except for mahogany the rest are all native to this country. Eight are hardwoods and three are softwoods. The softwoods are equally useful for cabinetwork since they were the woods used for items like drawer sides, backs, and bottoms, and also for much of the less expensive country furniture.

BASSWOOD

Straight-grained and soft brownish yellow color before it is finished. Used for drawer sides, backs, and bottoms; also for the backs of case pieces and occasionally a few pieces such as chests of drawers, etc., made by country cabinetmakers.

BIRCH (yellow)

Very hard and close-grained. The color is light brown, sometimes with a curly grain. Used for tops of small tables and also drawer fronts on birch chests of drawers. Also fine for turning. White birch is very soft and of no use for furniture.

BUTTERNUT

Hard and close-grained, light brown color when finished. It belongs to the walnut family and is sometimes called white walnut. Some eighteenth-century case pieces made of butternut have been found.

CHERRY (black cherry)

Very hard and close-grained; has a reddish brown color. Used for fine furniture in New England during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

HICKORY

The best wood for bending and other places under strain. It was used for bent parts of Windsor chairs, also for the spindles.

MAHOGANY (San Domingo)

Hard, heavy, strong, and durable. It was used for very fine furniture. The color is reddish brown with both straight and curly grain. It is more beautiful than any other wood.

Good mahogany is rare and expensive. Honduras, Mexican and Central American mahogany is softer and lighter in color, often called baywood. African mahogany is not mahogany and is very inferior.

MAPLE (hard or rock)

Very hard and close-grained; the color when finished is brownish yellow to amber. There are three kinds of maple: straight-grained, curly maple, and birdseye maple. During the eighteenth century both plain and curly maple were the most popular wood for furniture in New England. Maple was used for chairs, chests of drawers, highboys and many more pieces. It was also used for carving and turning. Soft maple is not as strong or beautiful, but was also used in some furniture and turning.

OAK (white)

Heavy, hard, and after about 1700 not used much for furniture except for Hadley chests and parts of late pieces. Red oak is softer, coarser, and not used for furniture.

PINE (eastern white pine)

Straight grained. The finished color is a warm yellow to a light amber. It was used in early New England furniture. It was the wood most used for seats of Windsor chairs and Boston rockers; also for unseen parts like drawer sides, backs, and bottoms of case pieces. Sometimes used as tops of simple tables. Seldom bothered by shrinkage or warping, and very popular for its ease of working. The California white pine is a little harder and is now used more than eastern white pine.

WALNUT

This wood is beautiful in both straight and curly grain. The color when finished is a reddish brown to a chocolate brown. It was used for fine furniture.

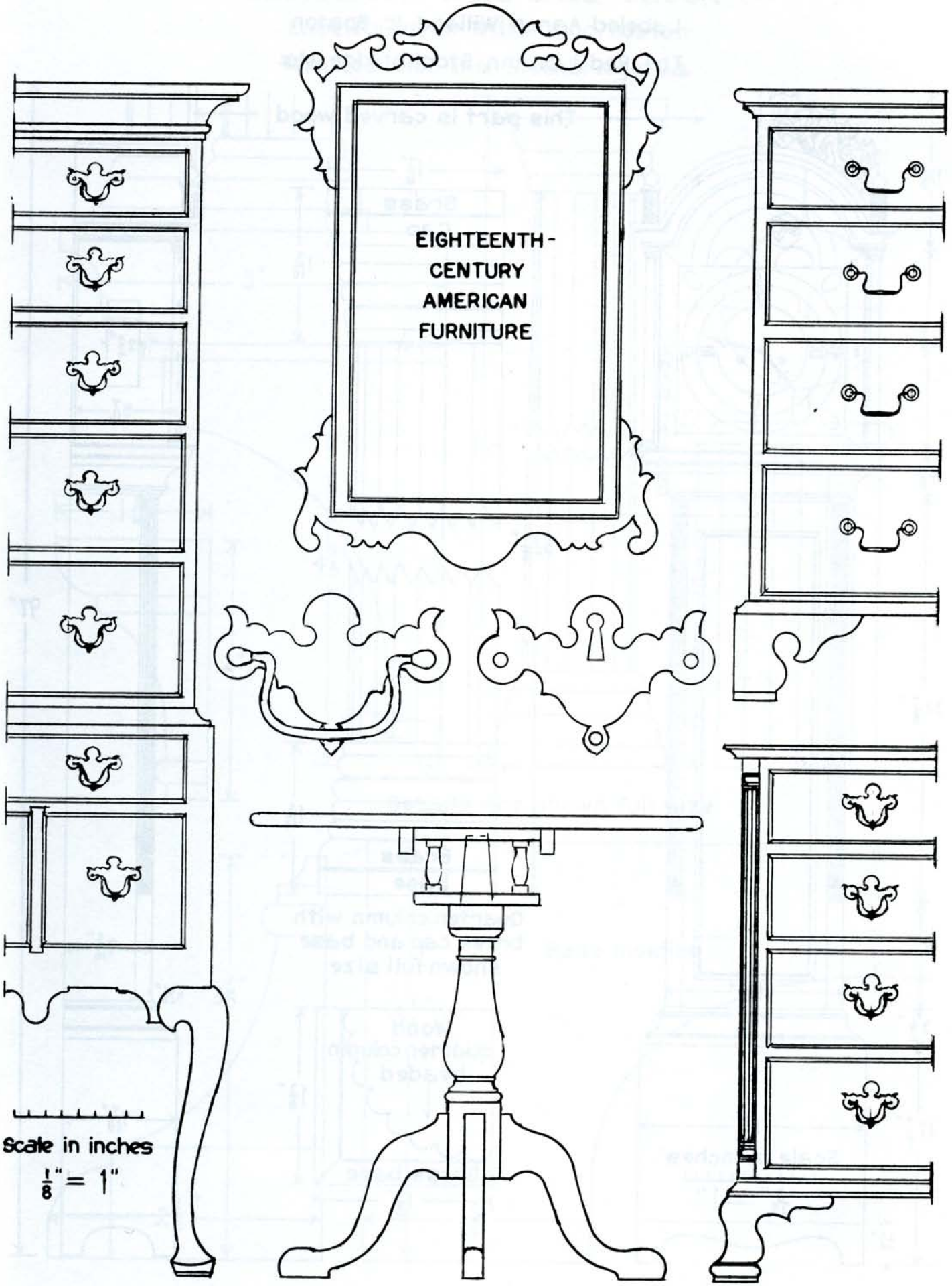
WHITEWOOD (tulip)

Fine grained, yellow to light gray. South of New England it is sometimes called poplar. It was used for drawer sides, backs, and bottoms in fine furniture; also for Windsor chair seats and country-made furniture.

E.H.

1982

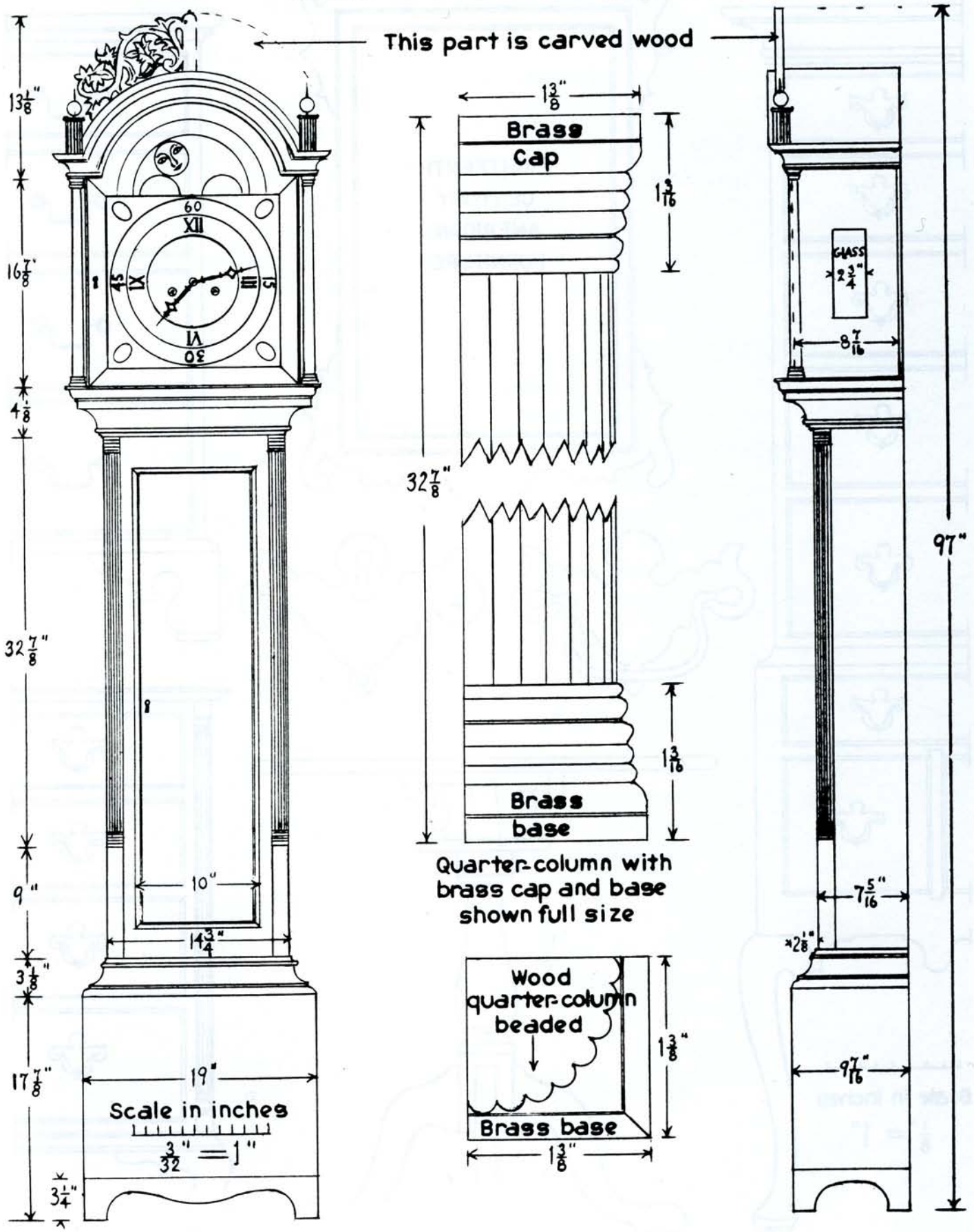
Blank


EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY
AMERICAN
FURNITURE
Scale in inches
1/8" = 1"

MAHOGANY TALL CASE CLOCK

Labeled Aaron Willard, Jr., Boston

The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Ma.



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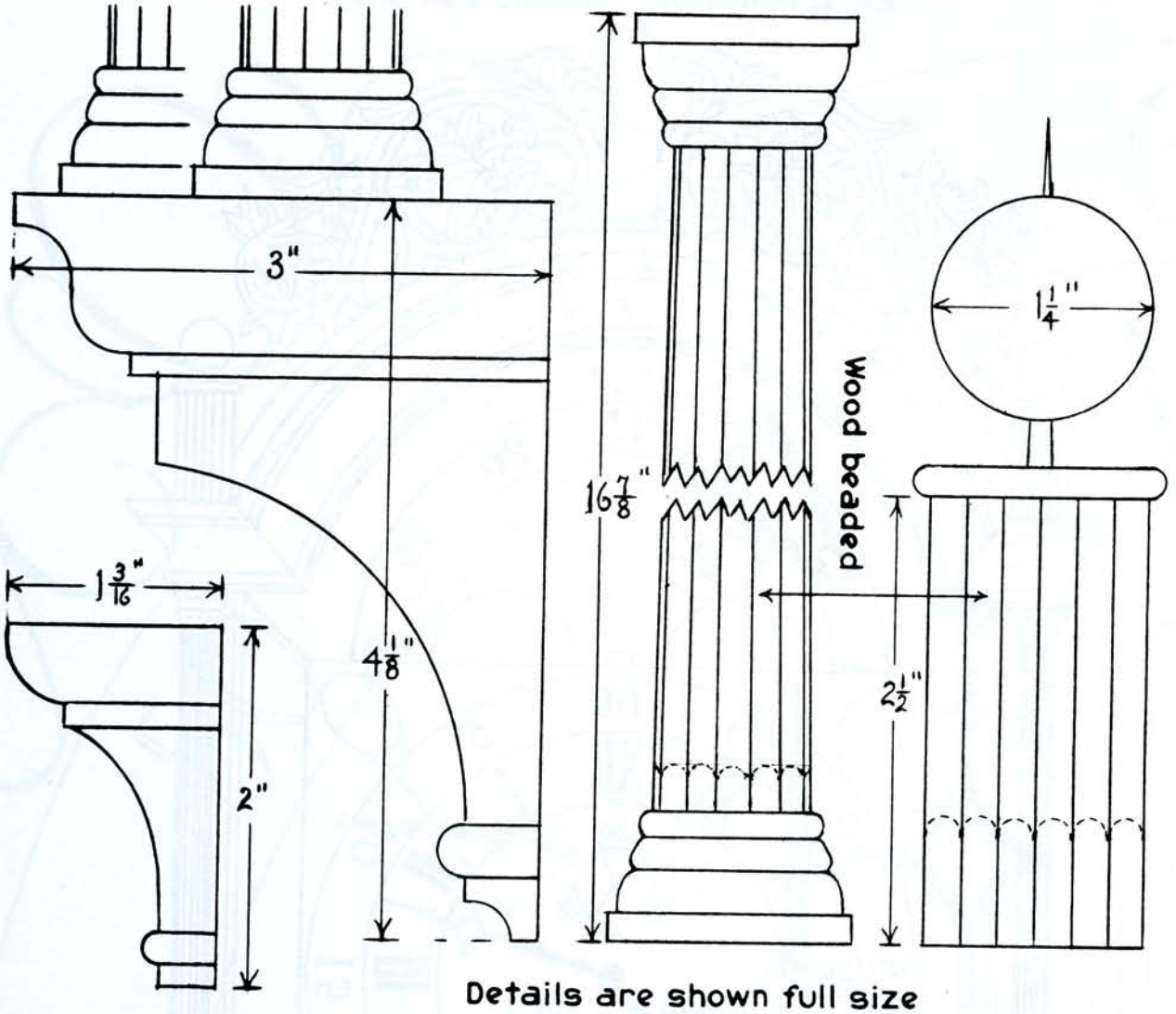

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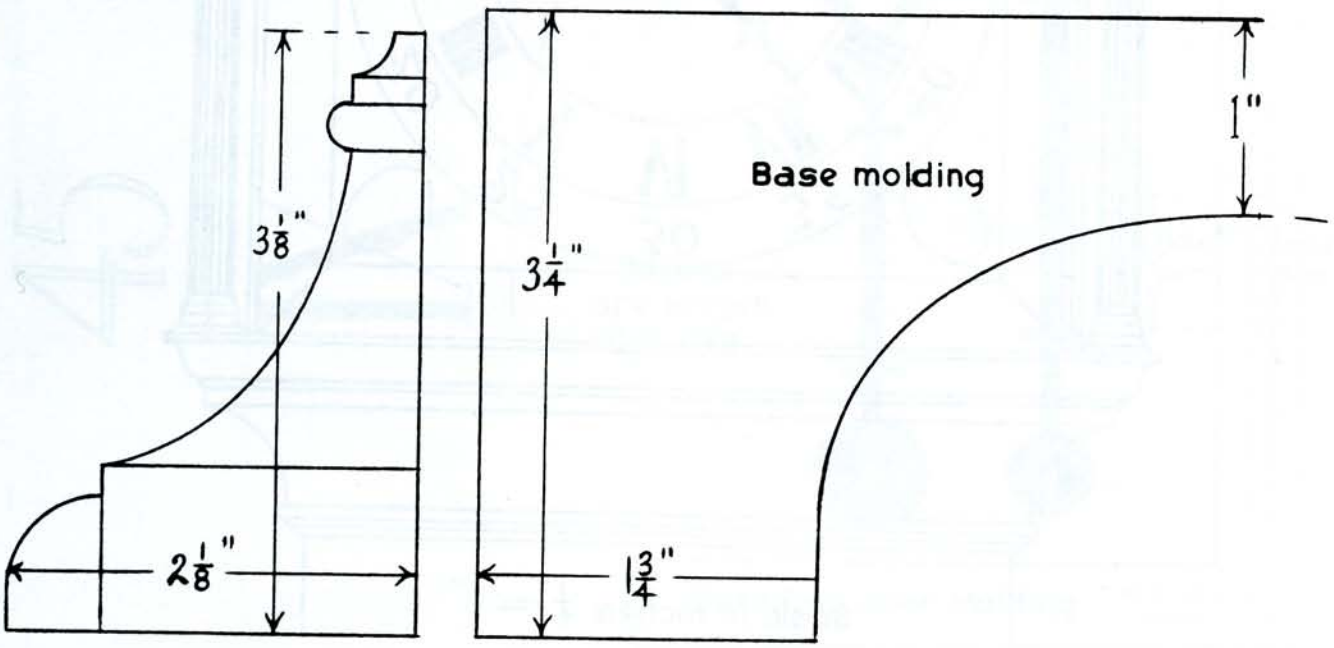

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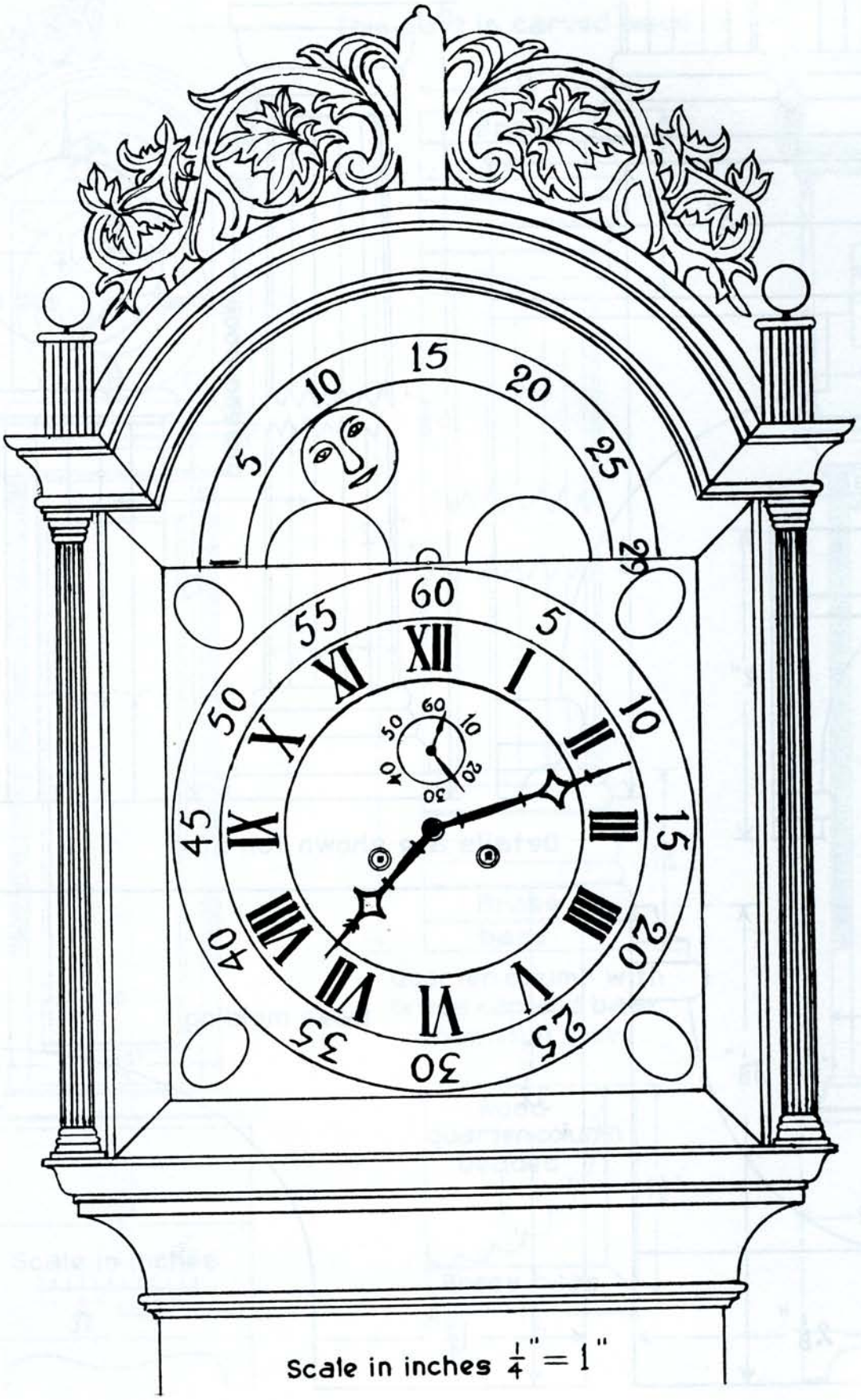

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MAHOGANY TALL CASE CLOCK

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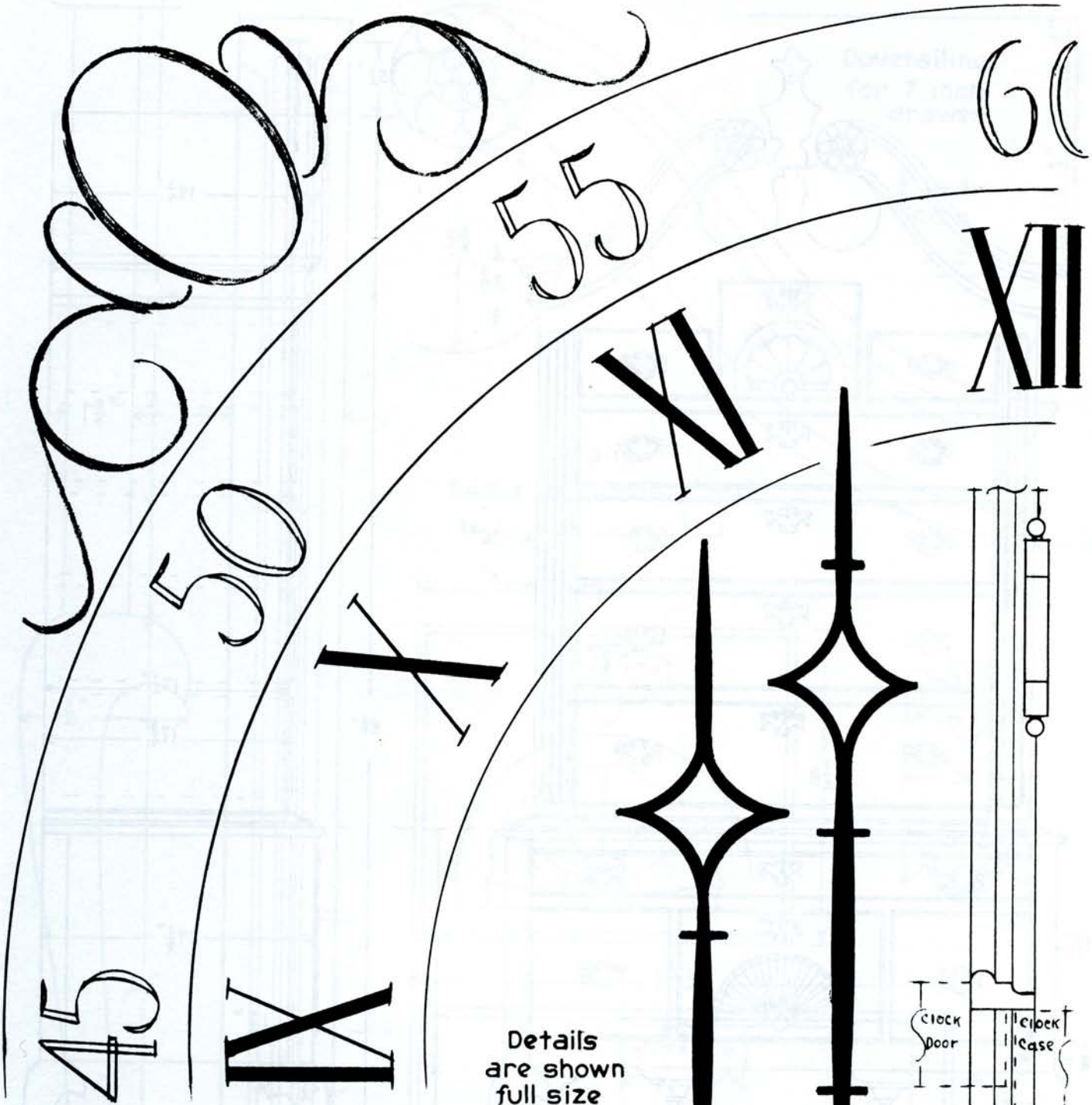
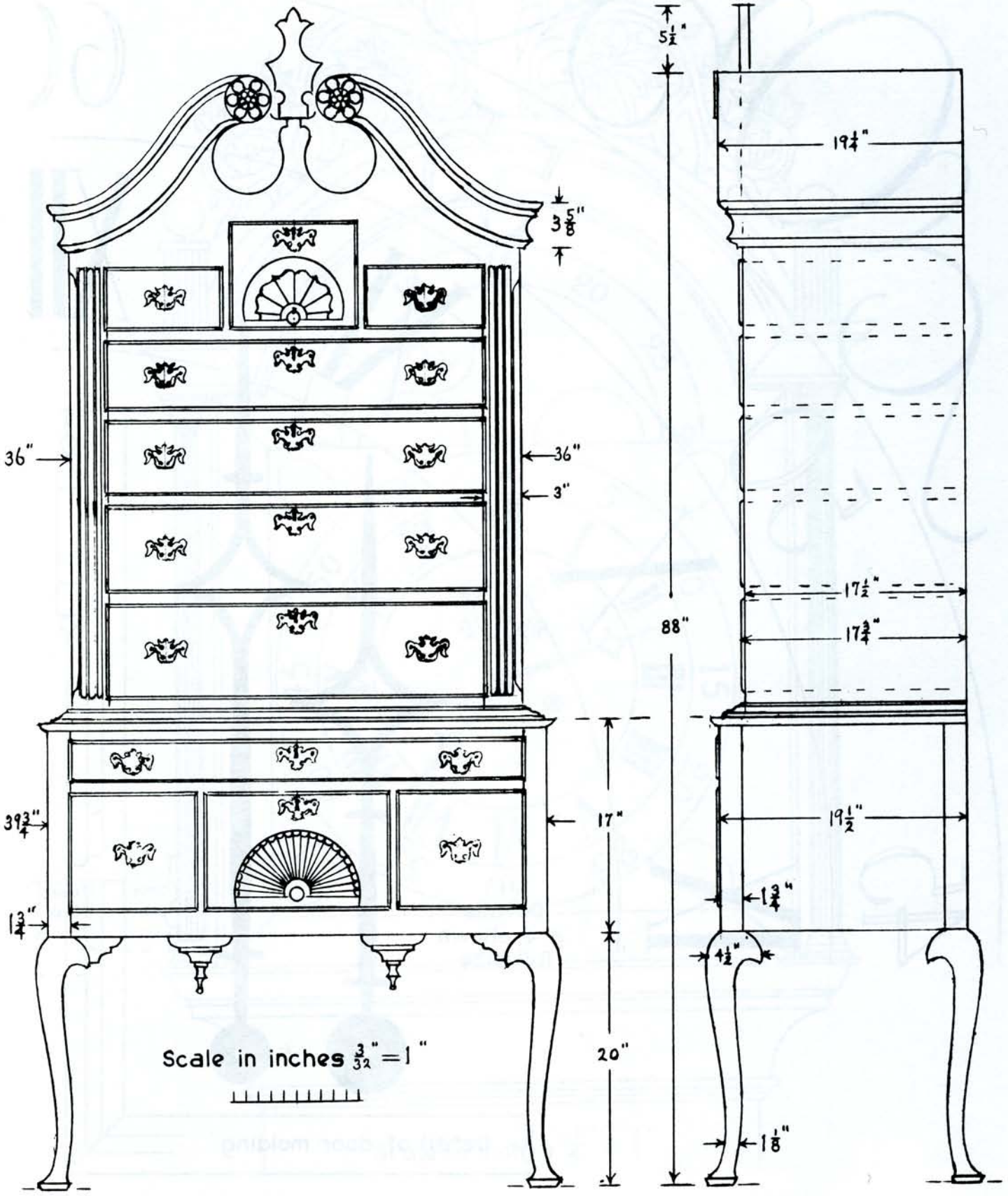


CHERRY BONNET TOP HIGHBOY

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1790

The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Mass.



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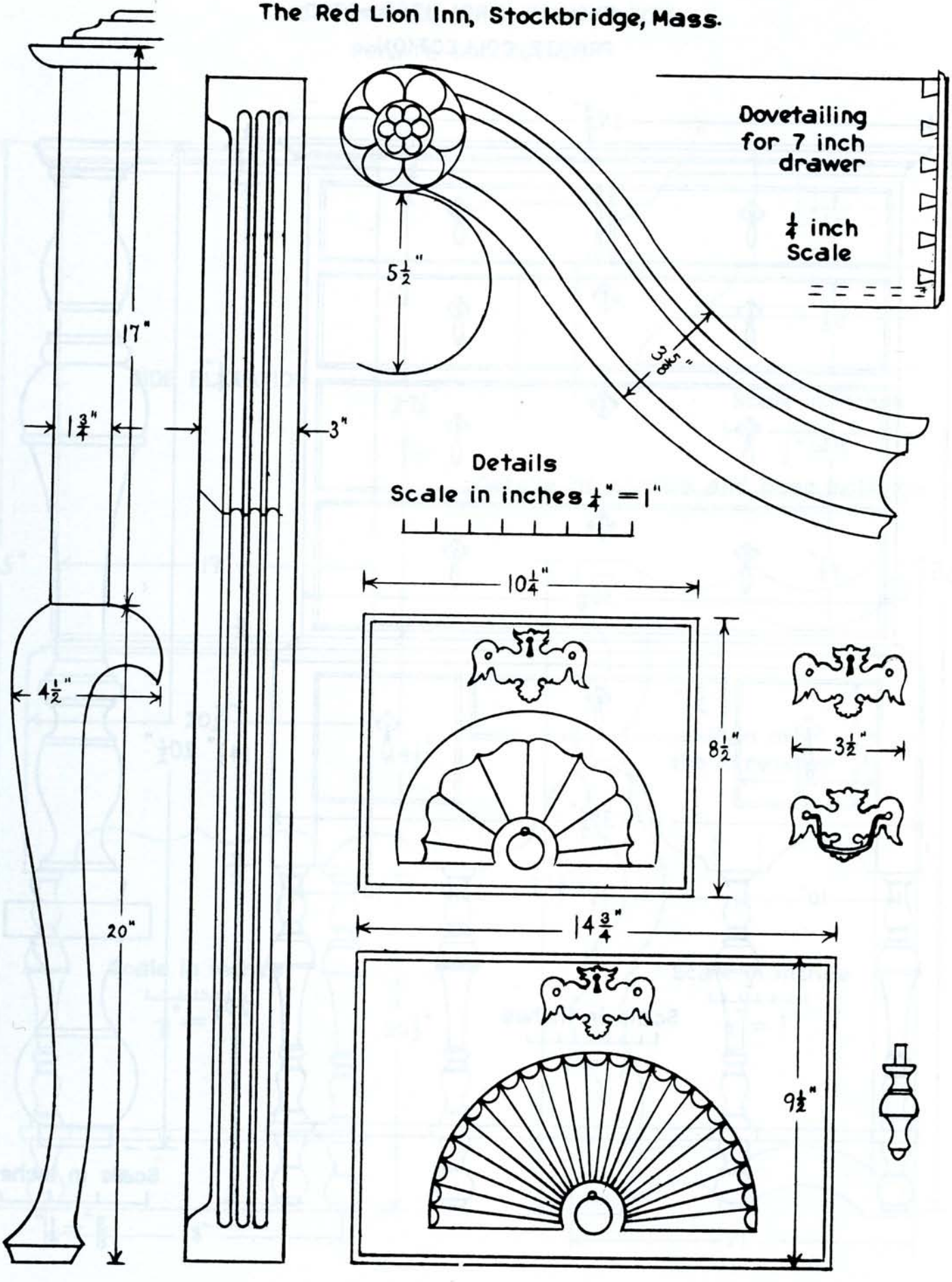
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1790

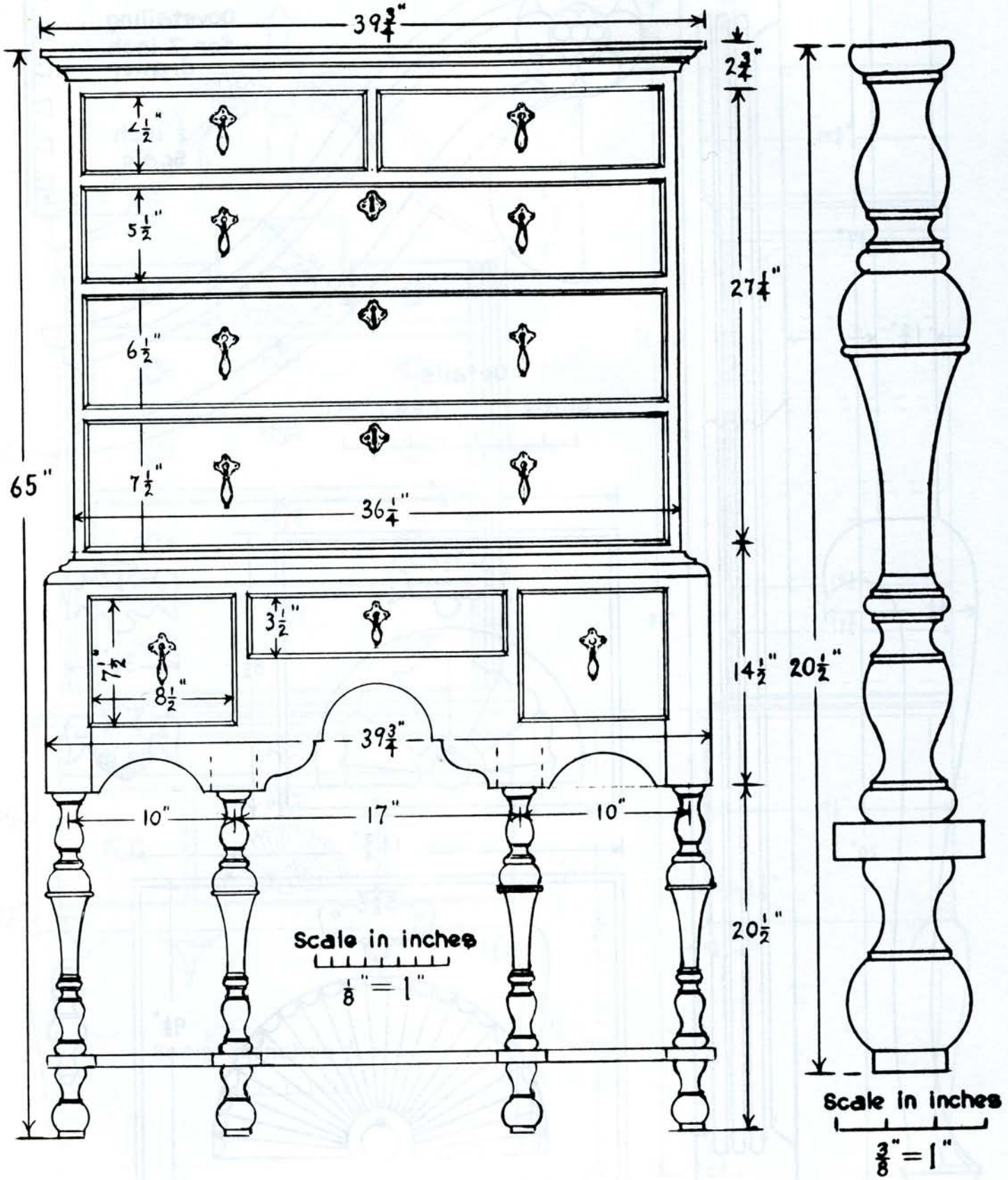
The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Mass.



MAPLE HIGHBOY

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1700 – 1720

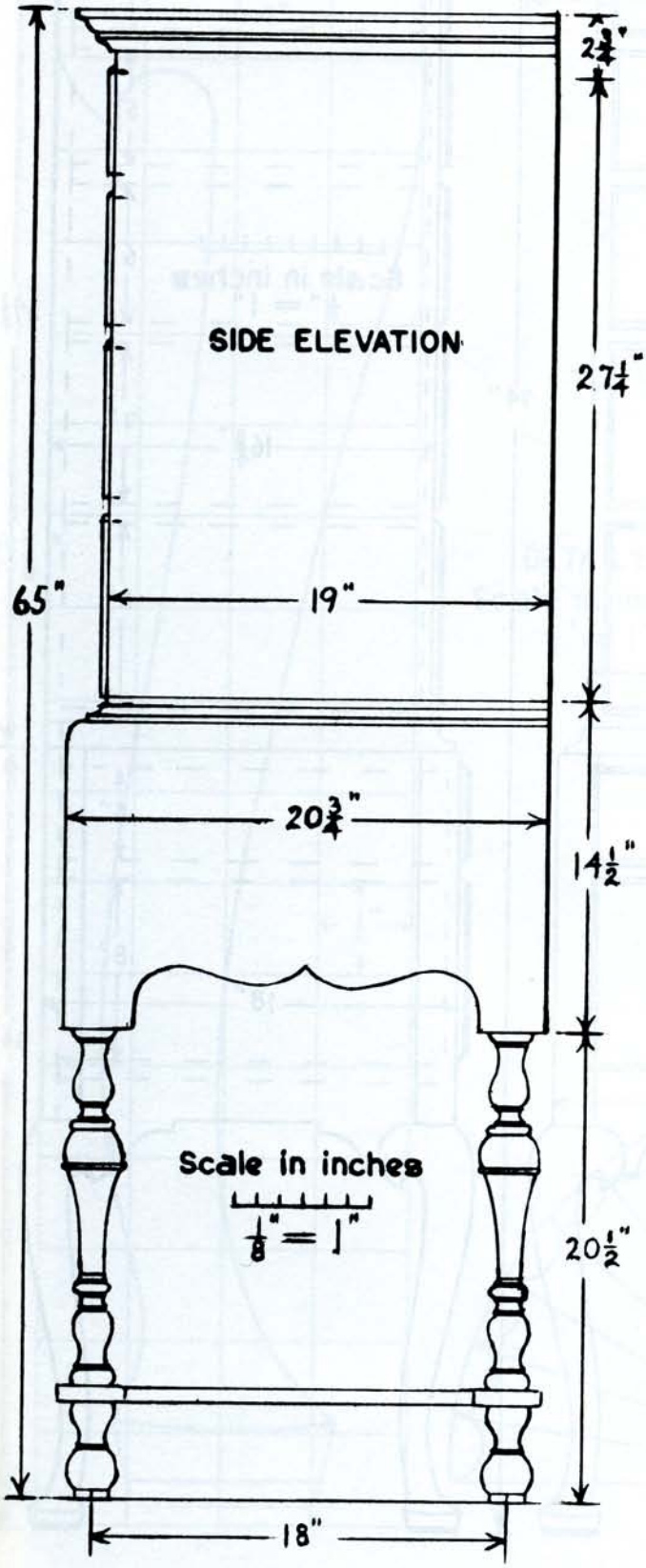
PRIVATE COLLECTION

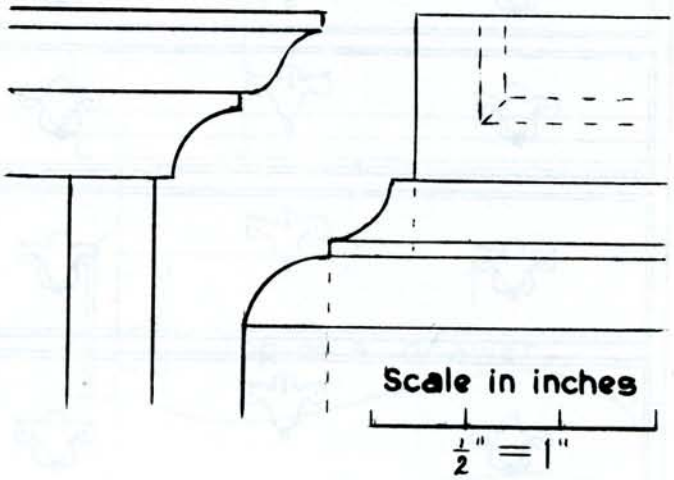


MAPLE HIGHBOY

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1700 – 1720

PRIVATE COLLECTION





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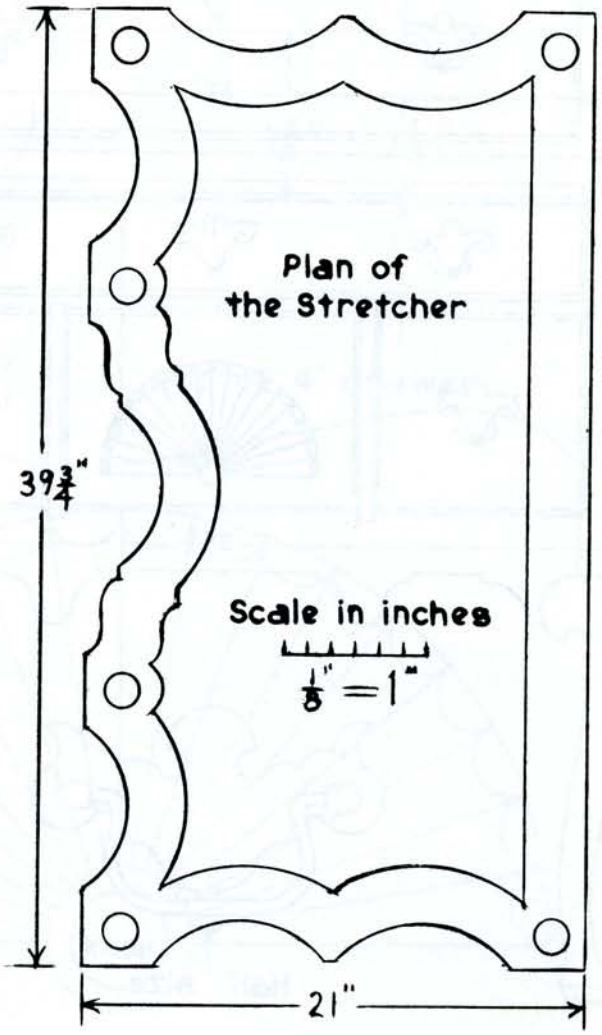
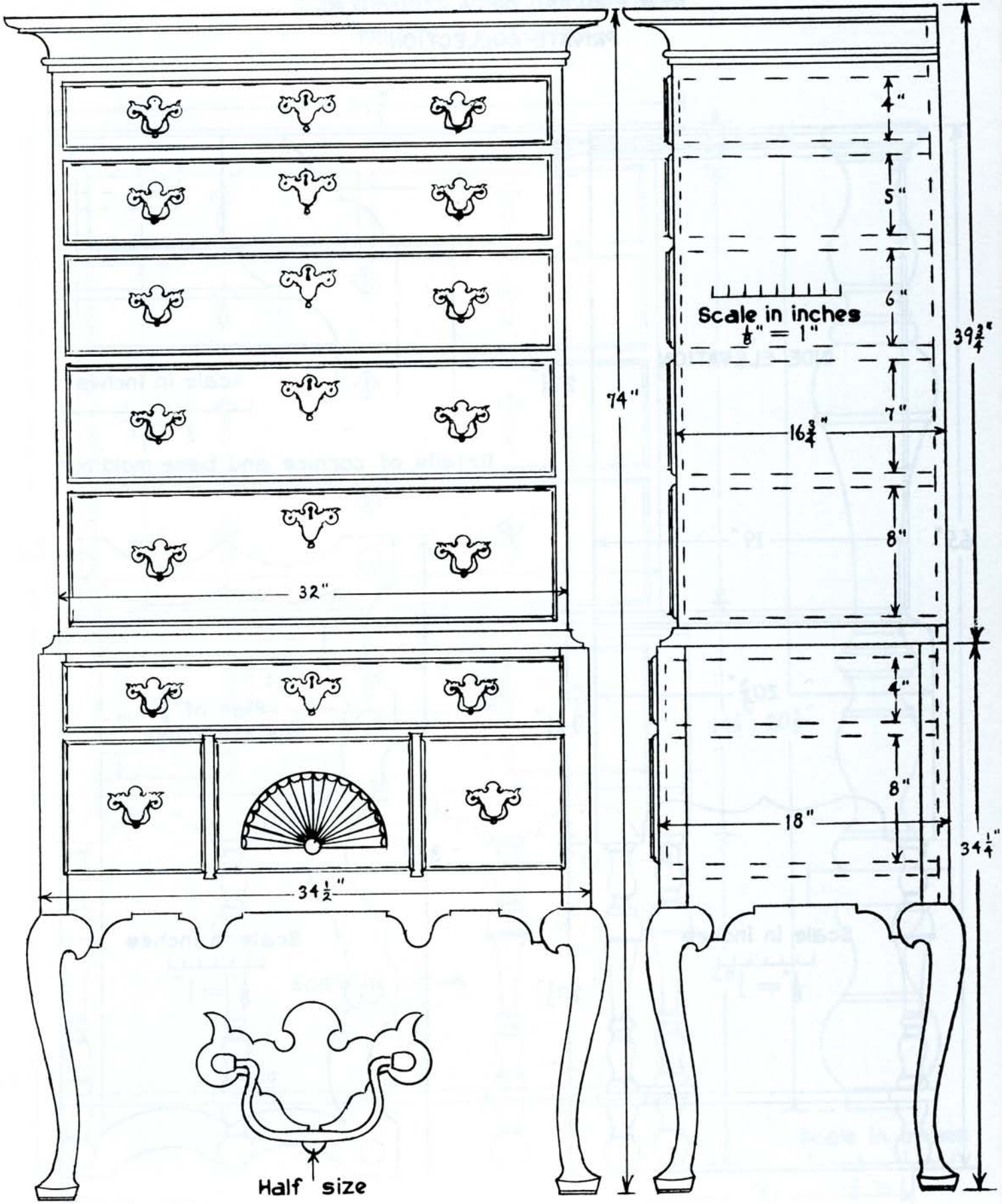


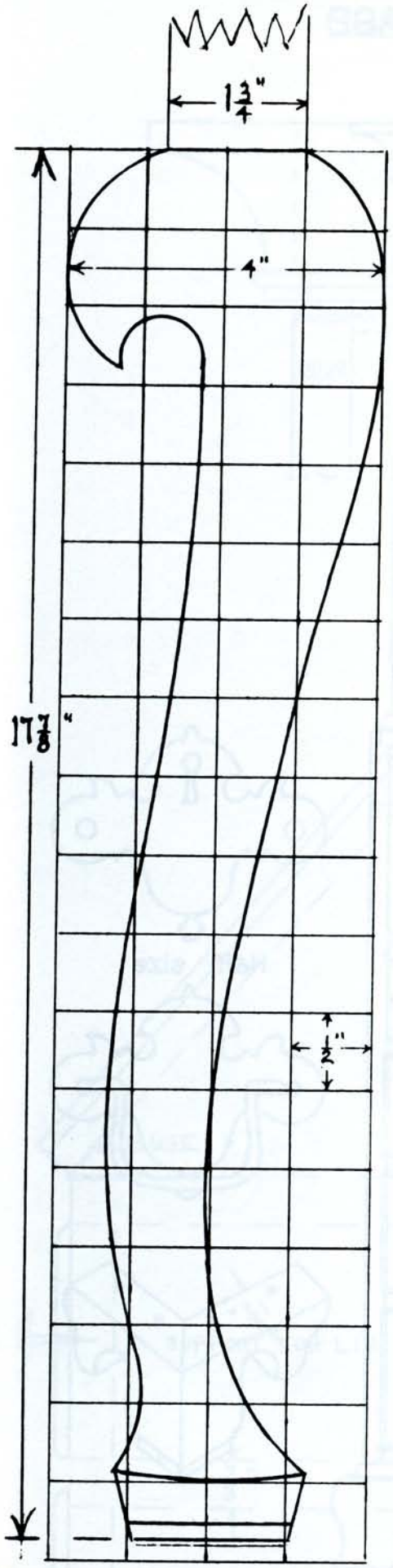
MAPLE HIGHBOY

Massachusetts, circa 1775



MAPLE HIGHBOY

Massachusetts, circa 1775



DETAILS
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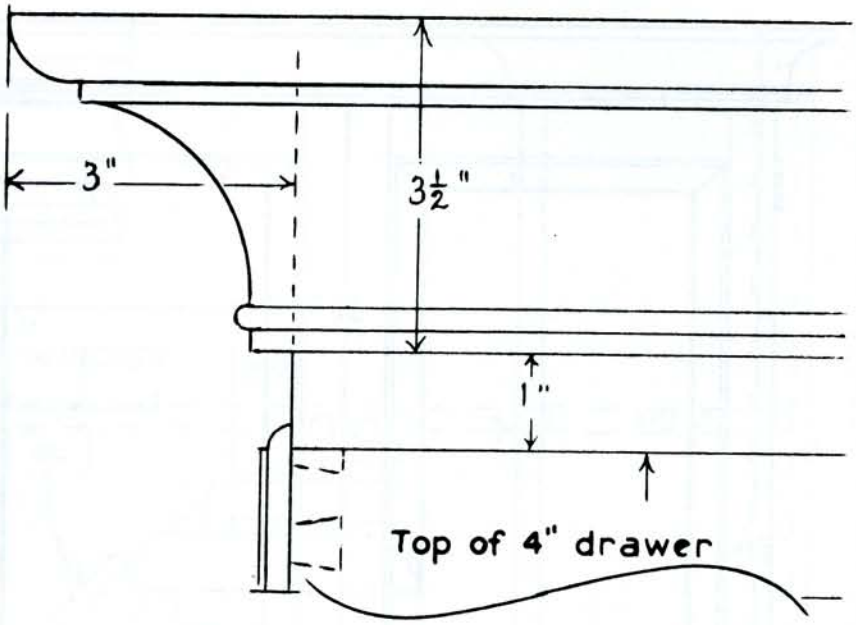
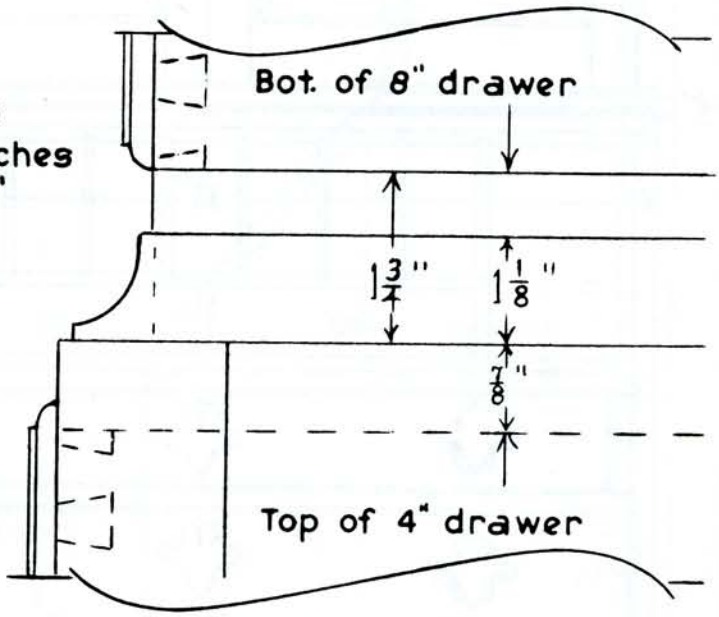
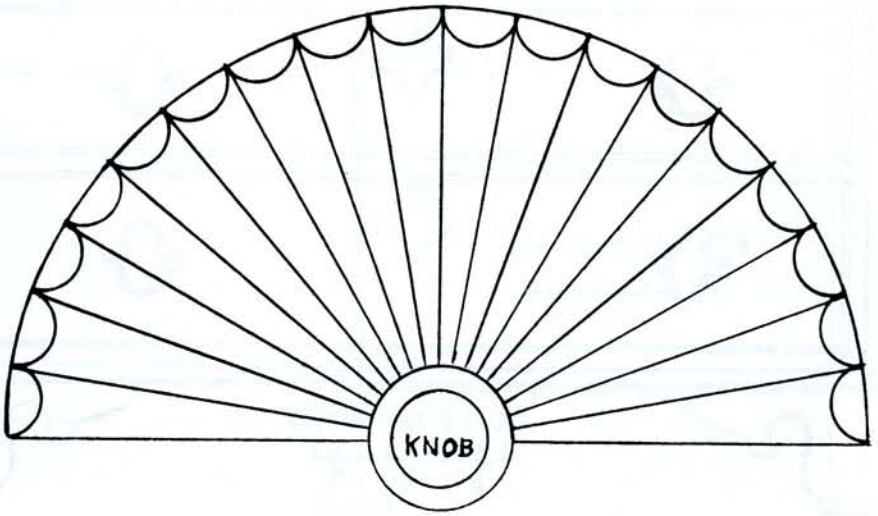
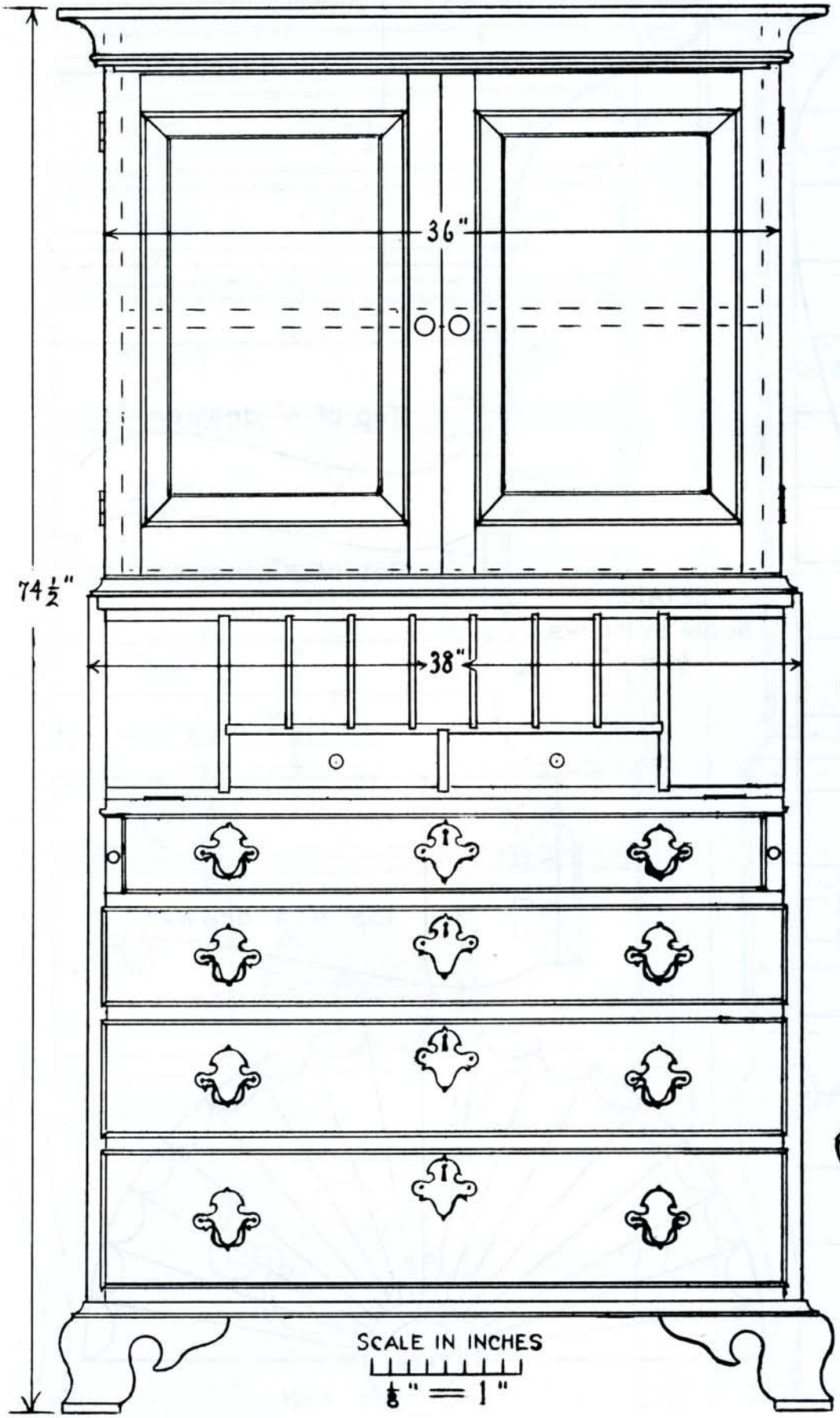


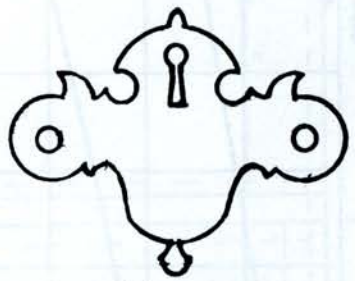




CHERRY DESK AND BOOKCASE

MASSACHUSETTS, CIRCA 1780





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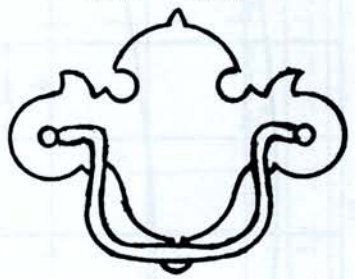
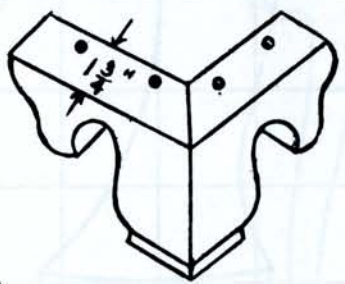
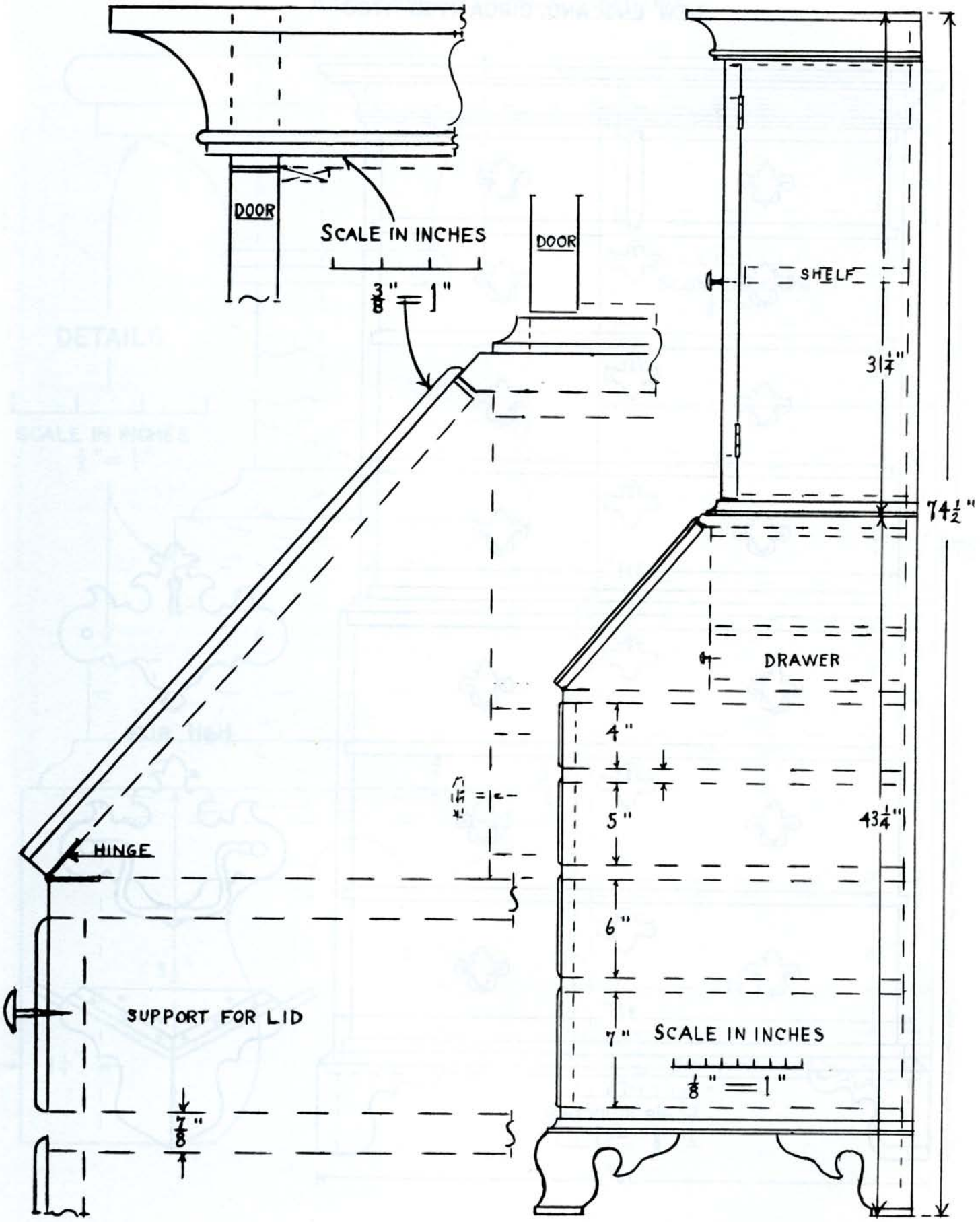




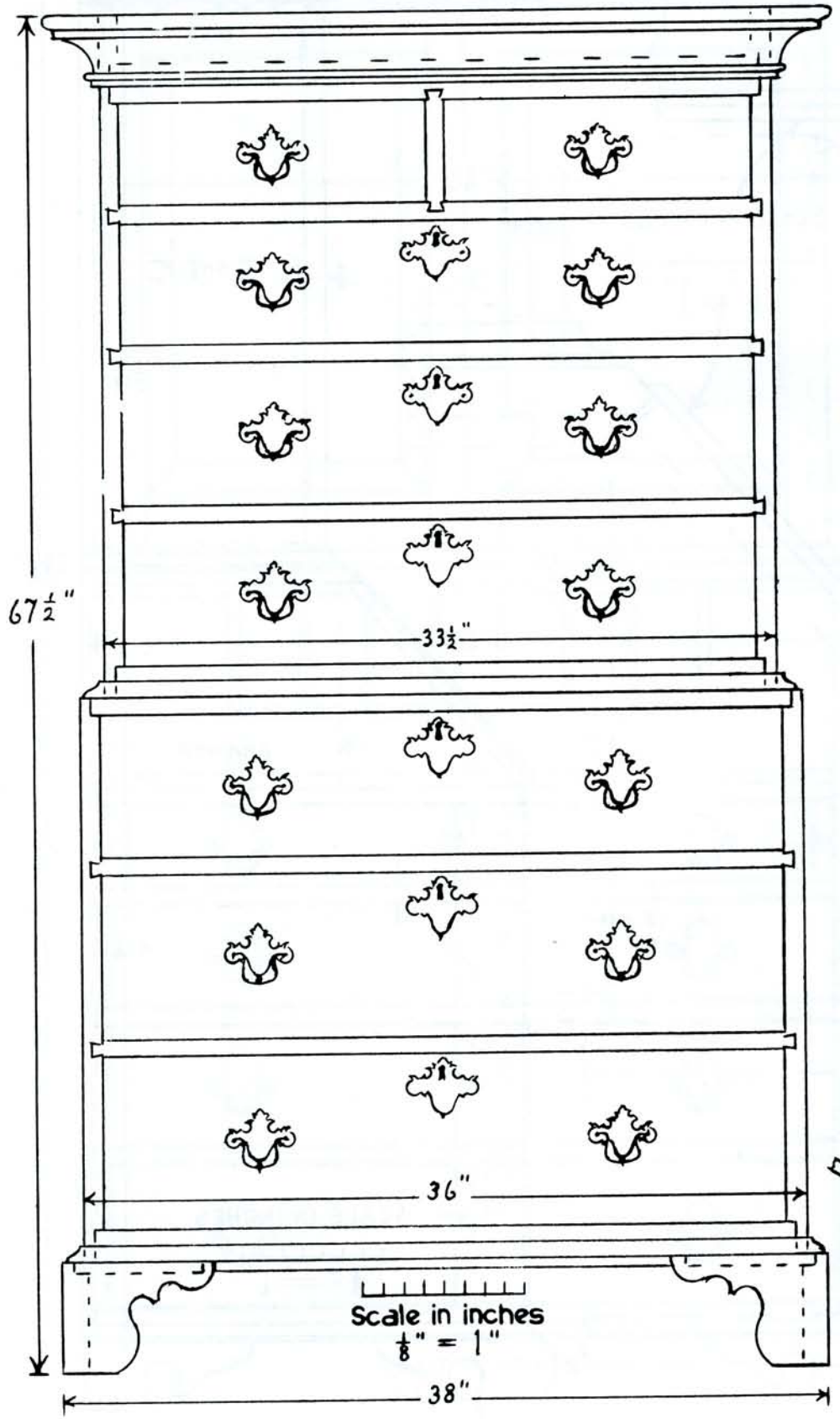
CHERRY DESK AND BOOKCASE

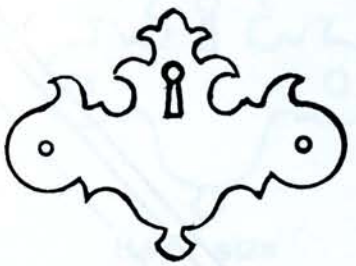
MASSACHUSETTS, CIRCA 1780



CHERRY CHEST ON CHEST

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1750-1780





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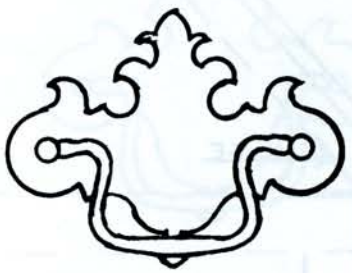
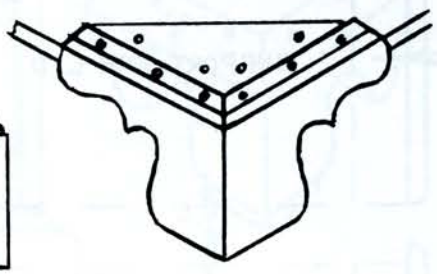
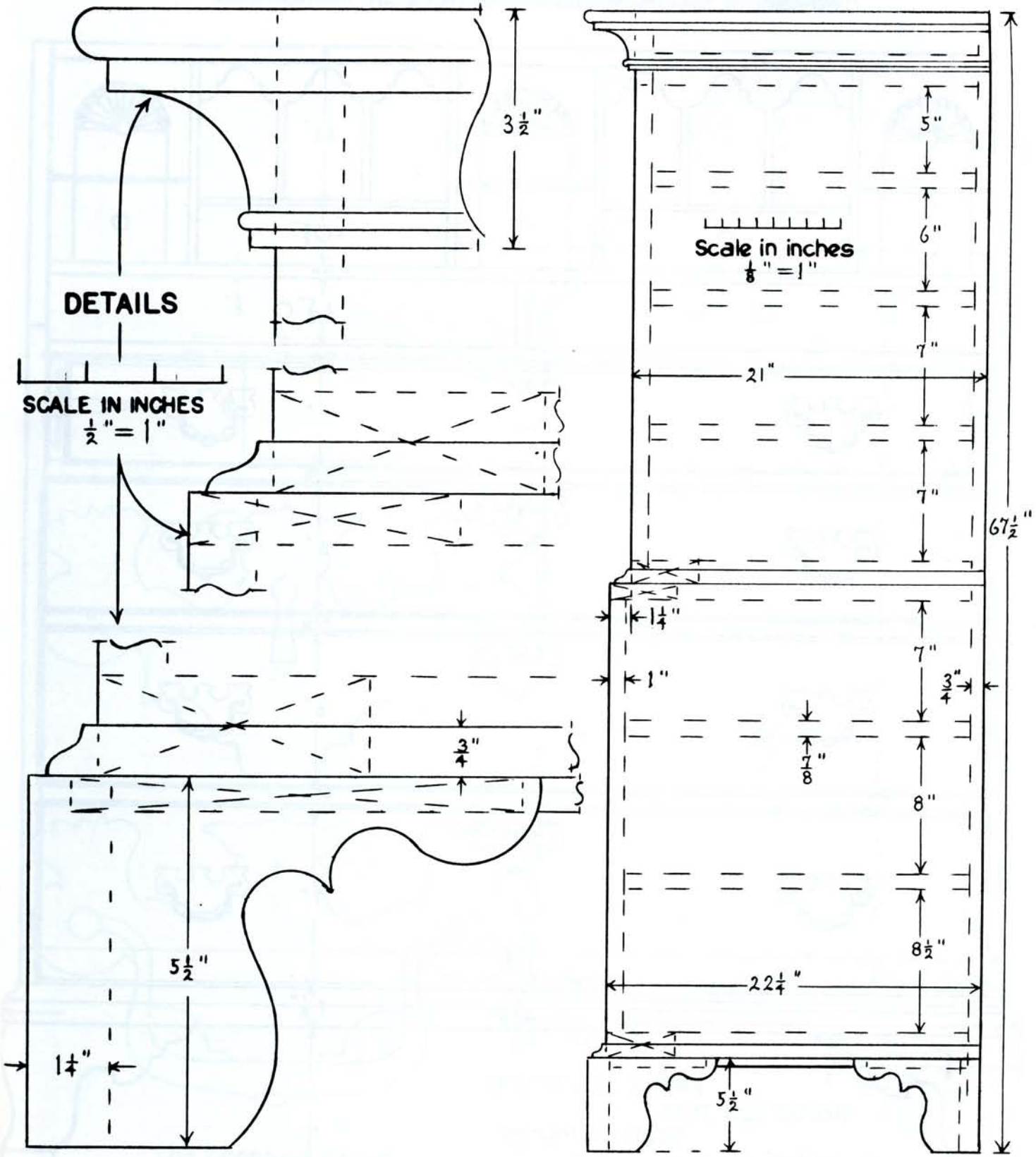




CHERRY CHEST ON CHEST

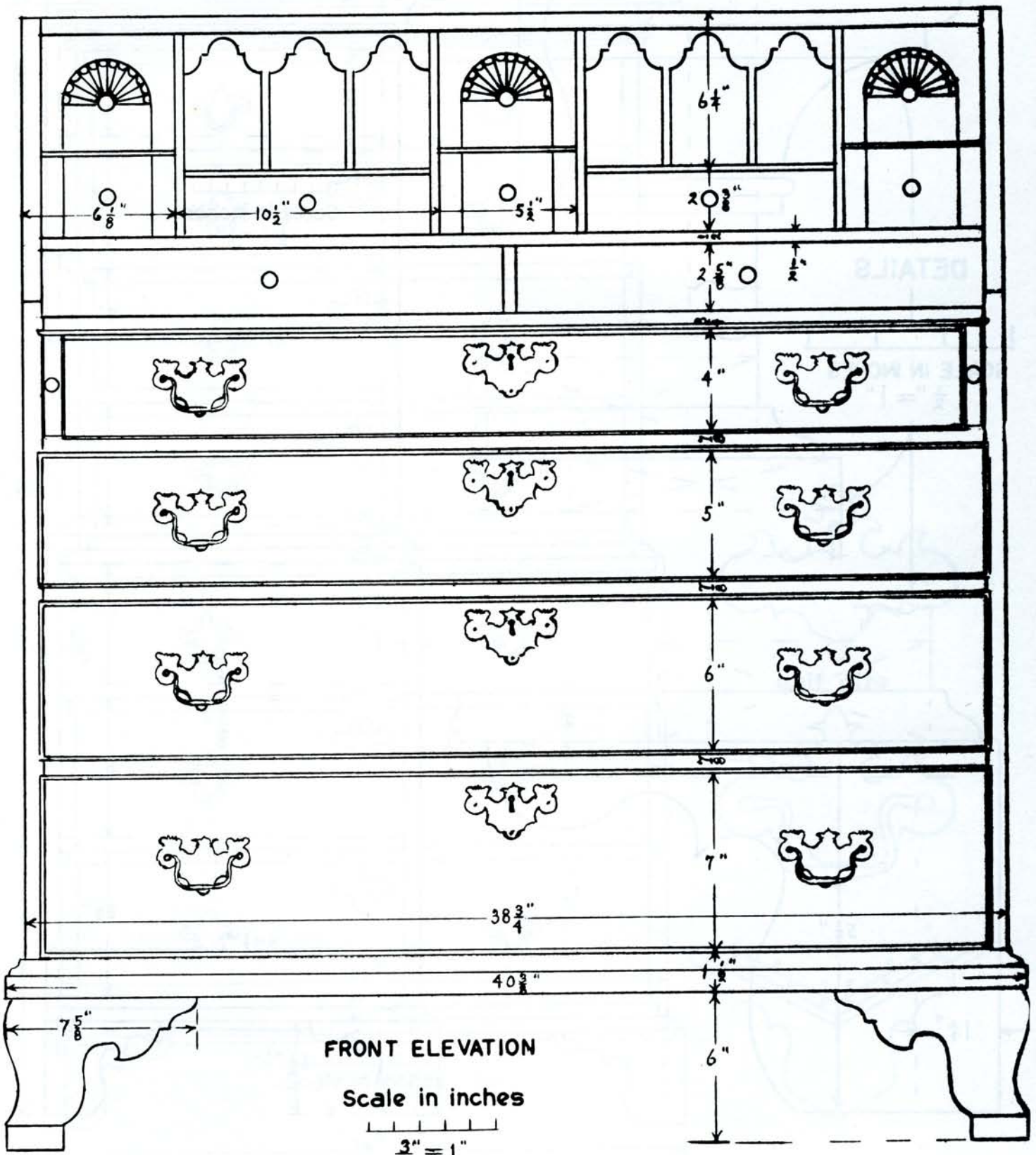
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1750-1780



CHERRY SLANT-FRONT DESK

CIRCA 1760-1780

Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD



FRONT ELEVATION

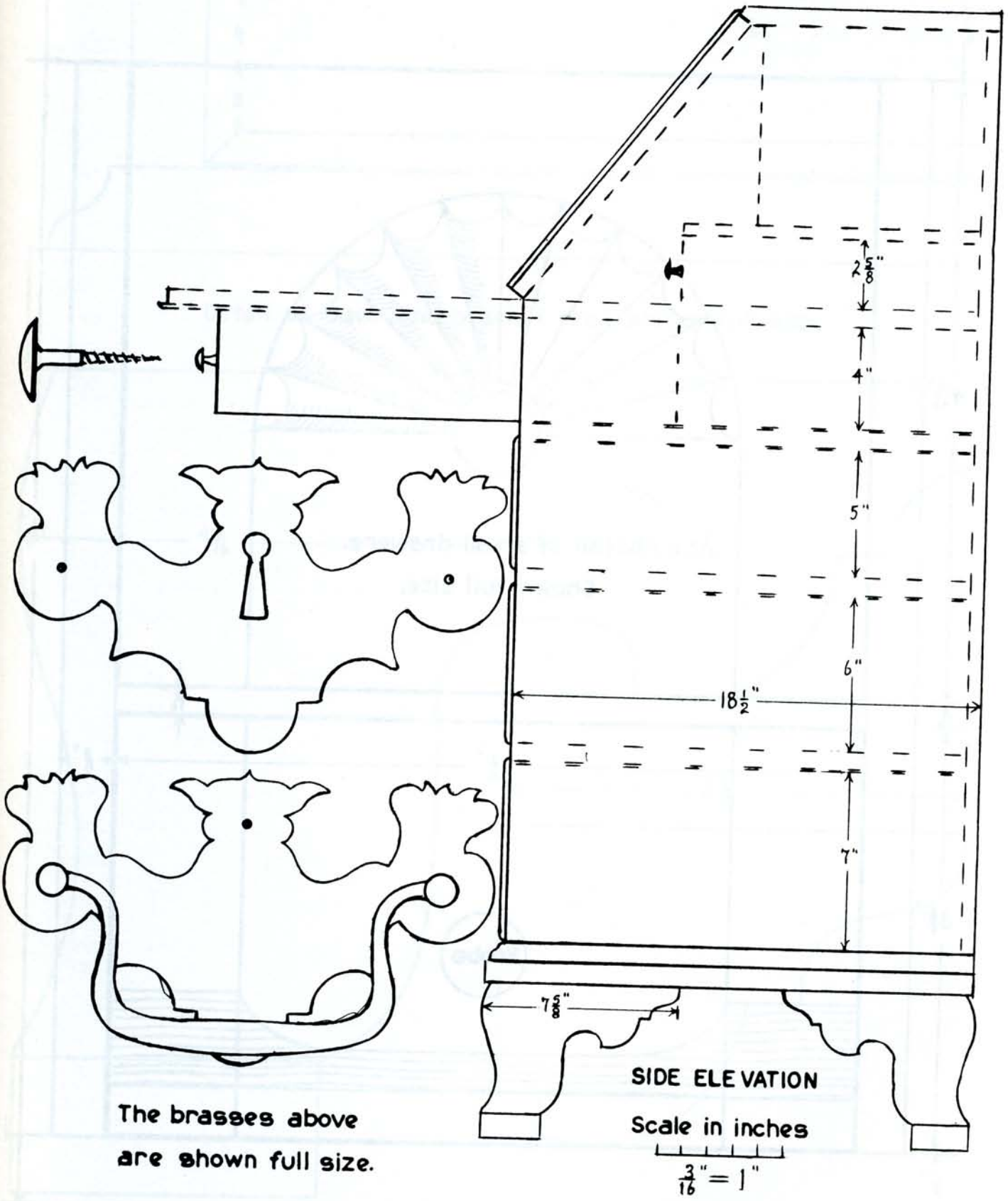
Scale in inches

3/16" = 1"

CHERRY SLANT-FRONT DESK

CIRCA 1760-1780

Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD



SIDE ELEVATION

Scale in inches

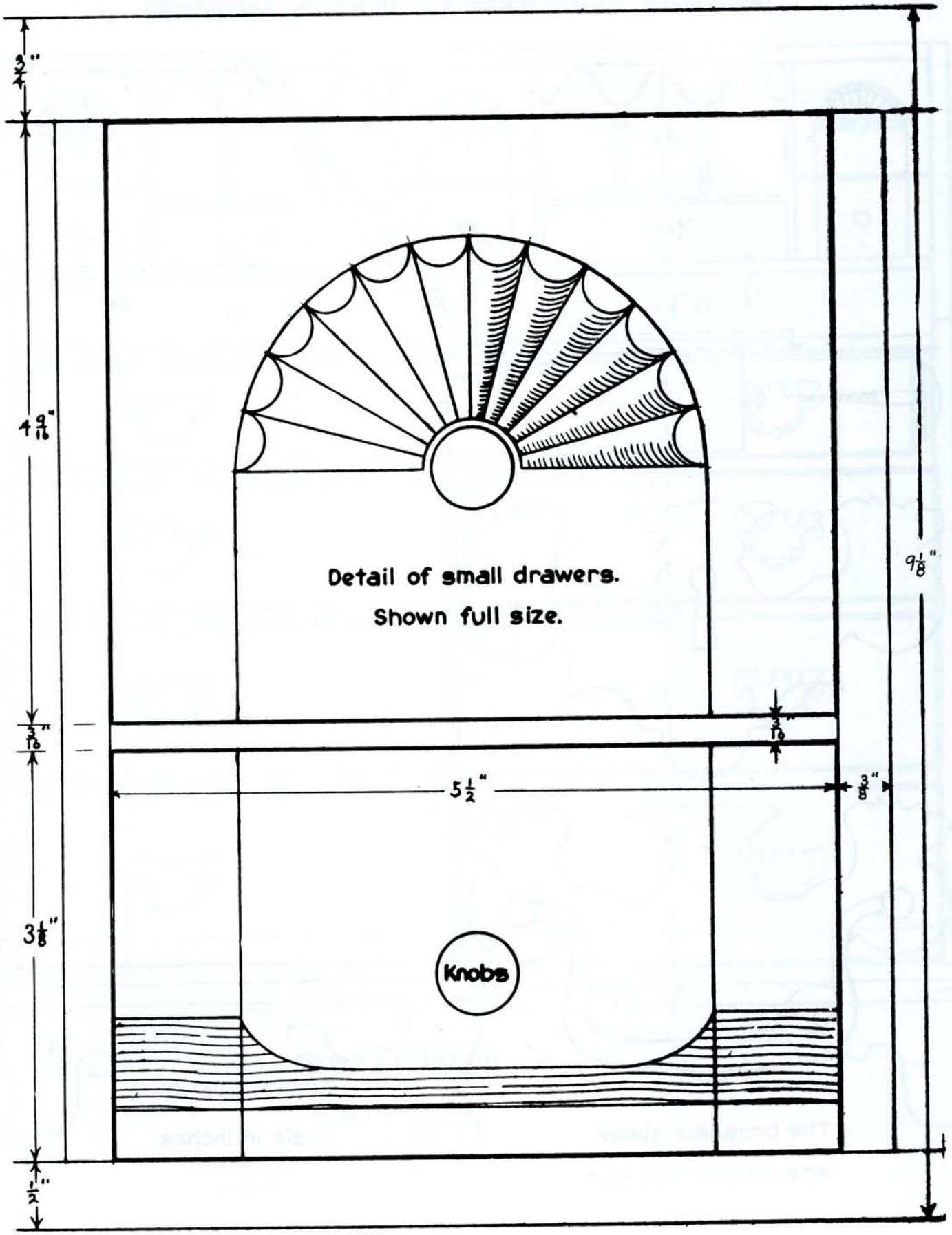
3/16" = 1"

The brasses above are shown full size.

CHERRY SLANT-FRONT DESK

CIRCA 1760-1780

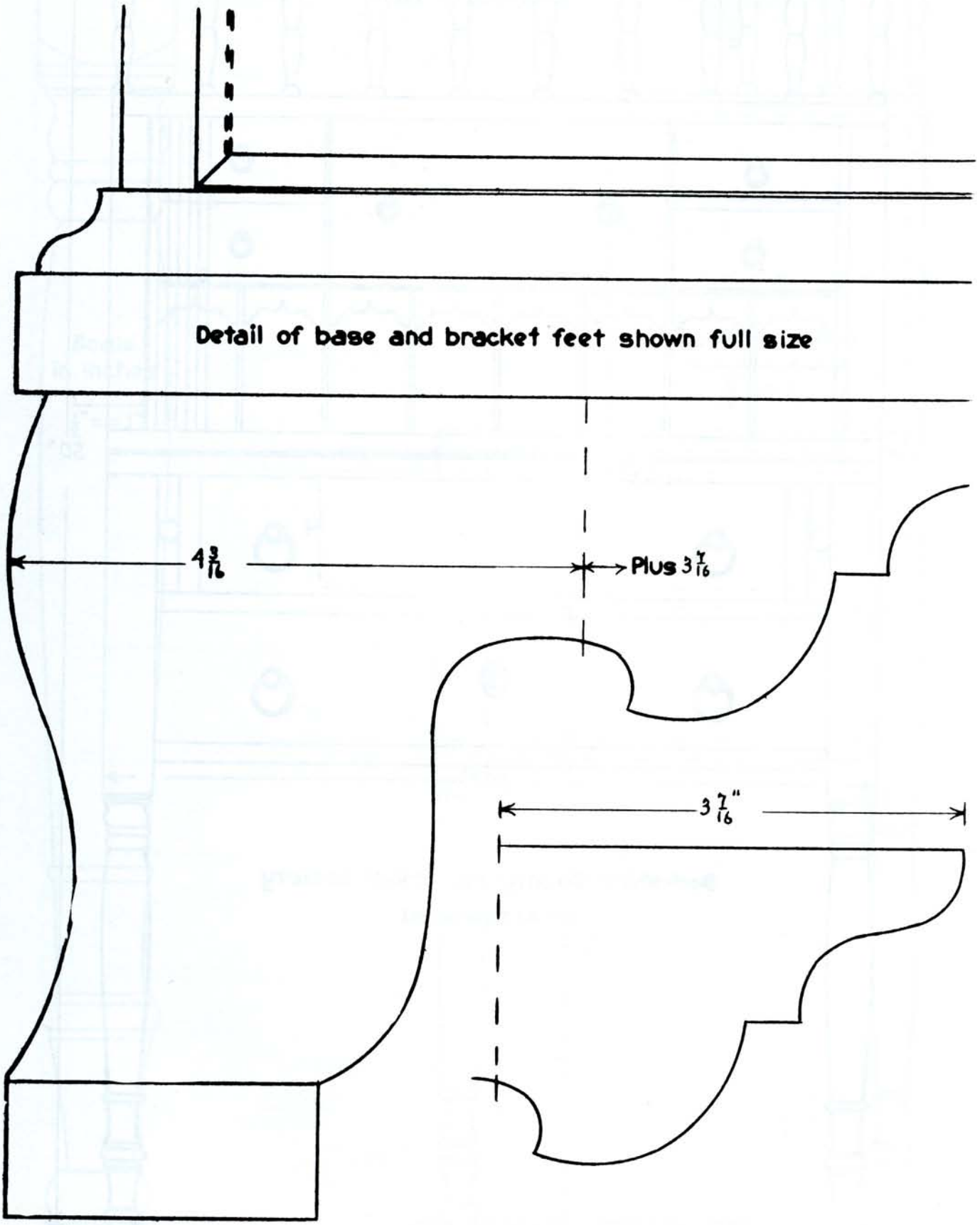
Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD



CHERRY SLANT-FRONT DESK

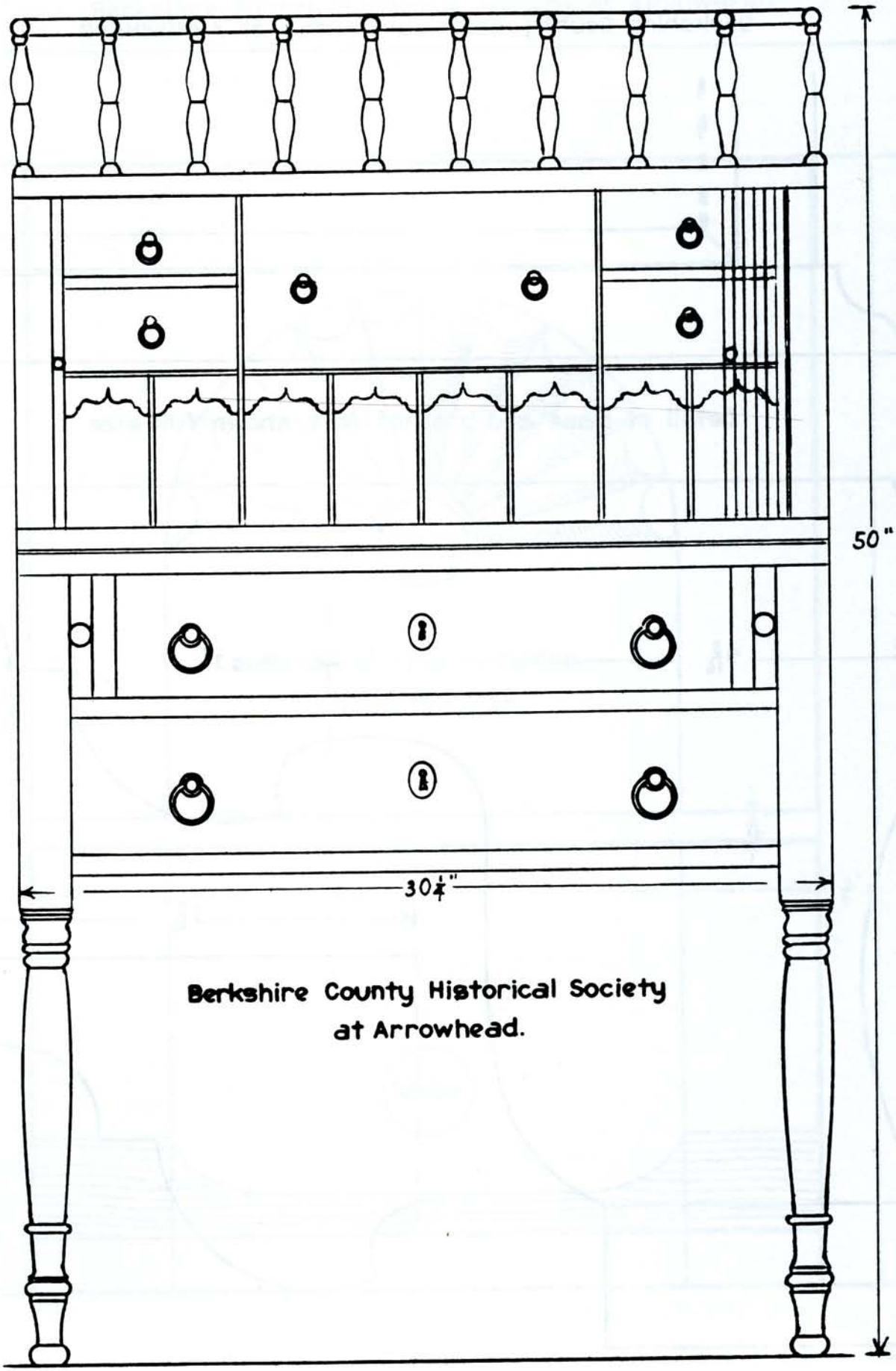
CIRCA 1760-1780

Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD



TAMBOUR DESK

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1790 - 1800

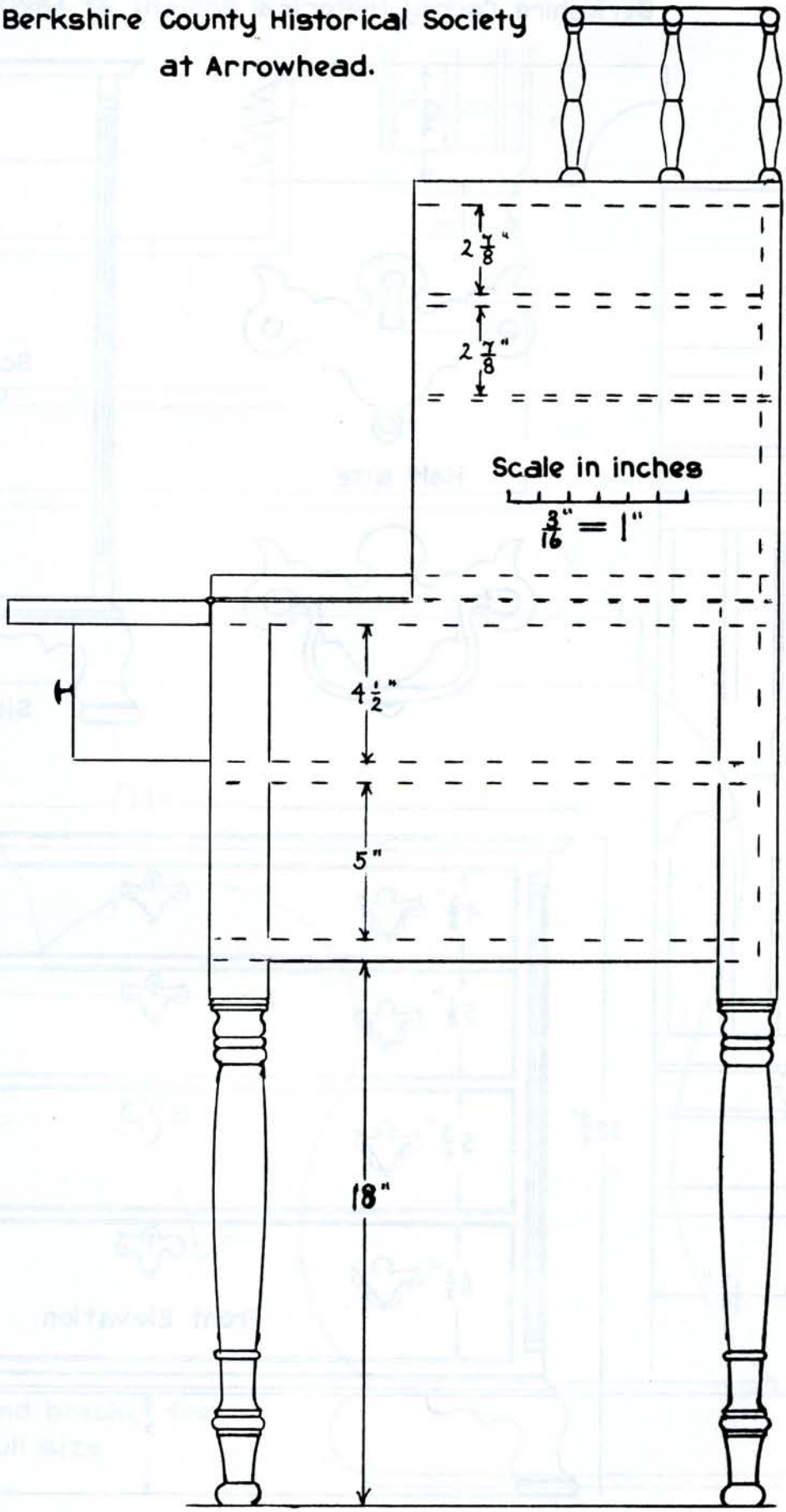


Berkshire County Historical Society
at Arrowhead.

TAMBOUR DESK

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1790-1800

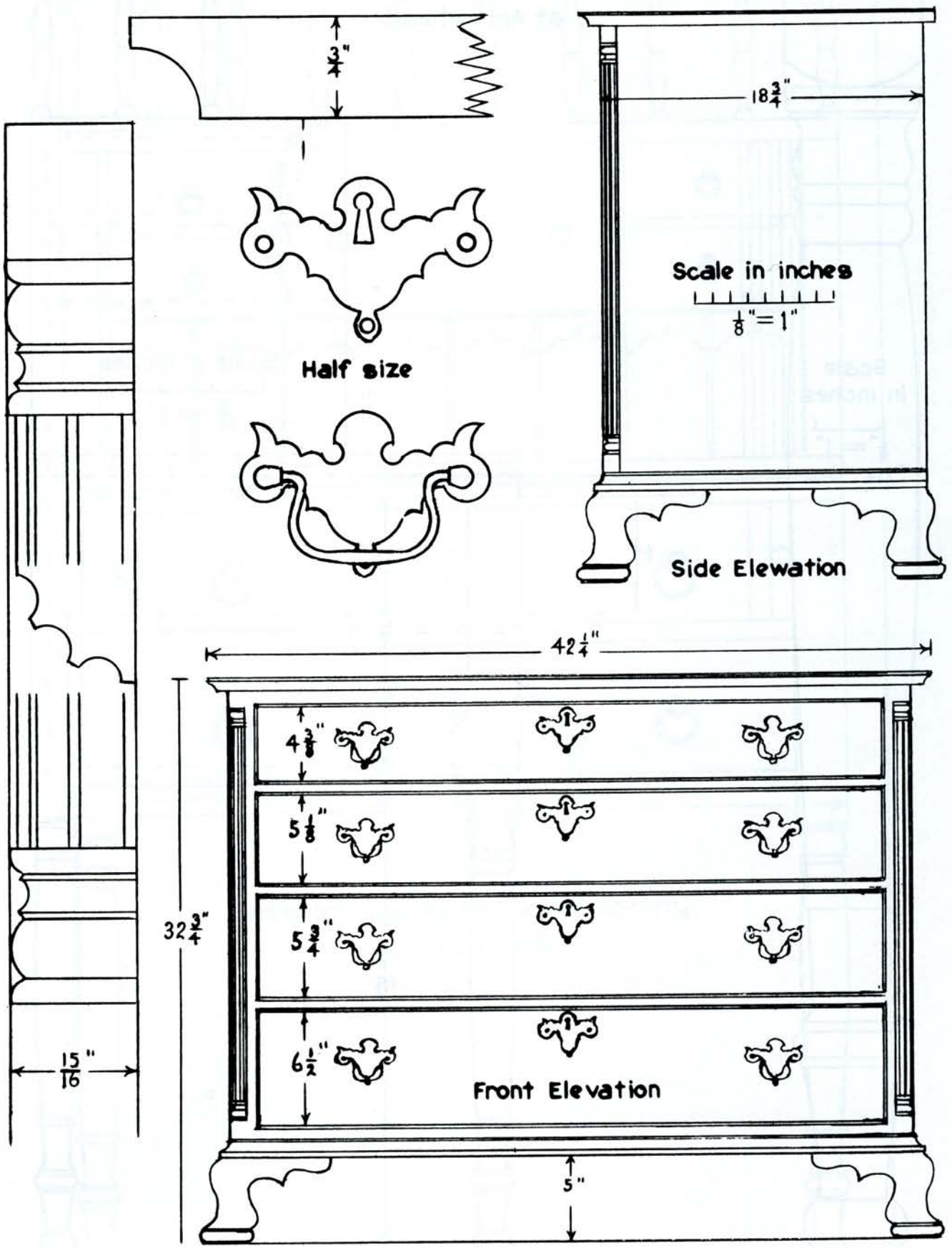
Berkshire County Historical Society
at Arrowhead.



CHERRY CHEST OF DRAWERS

With fluted quarter-columns. Circa 1760 - 1780

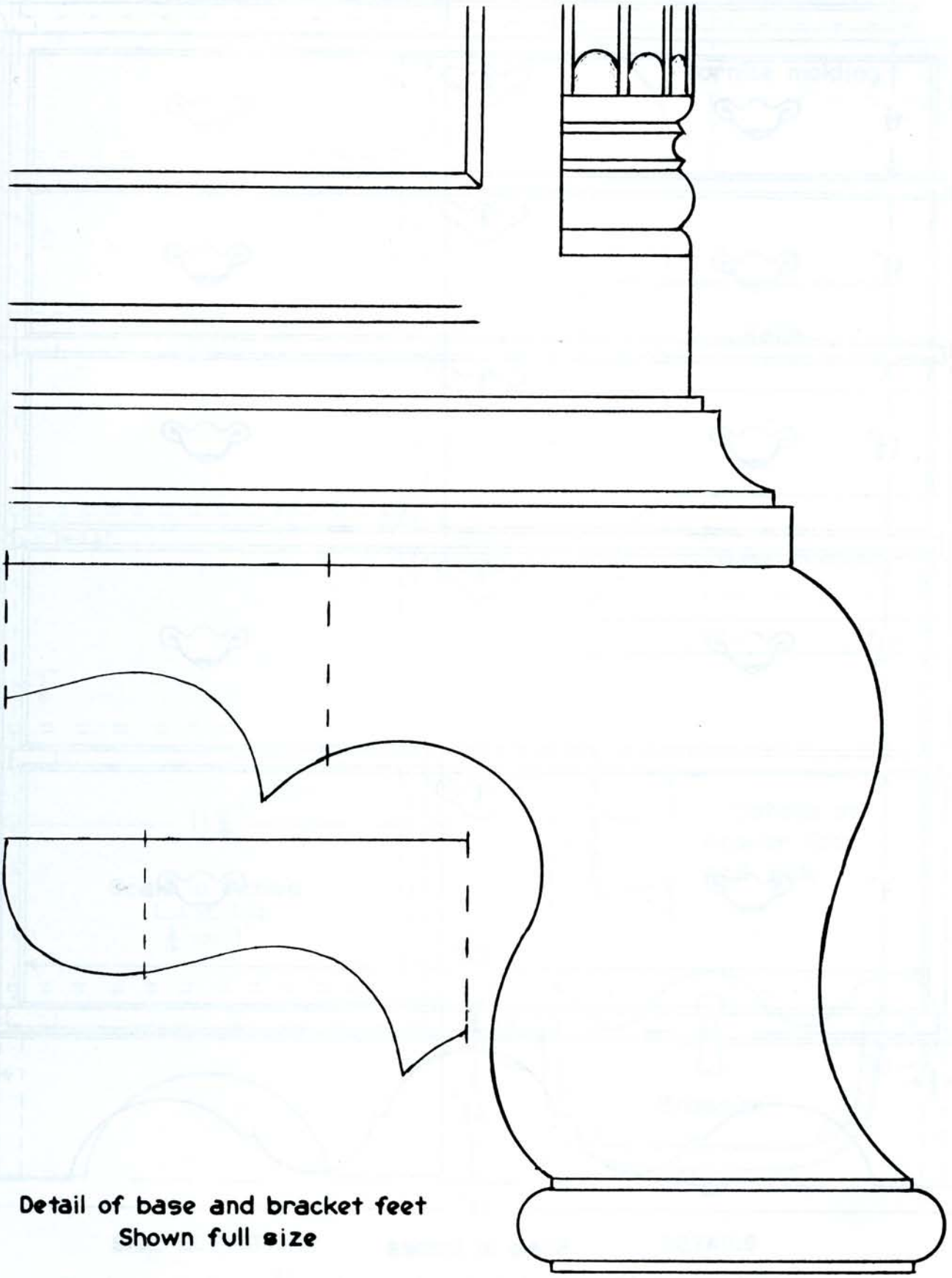
Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD.



CHERRY CHEST OF DRAWERS

With fluted quarter-columns. Circa 1760 - 1780

Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD.

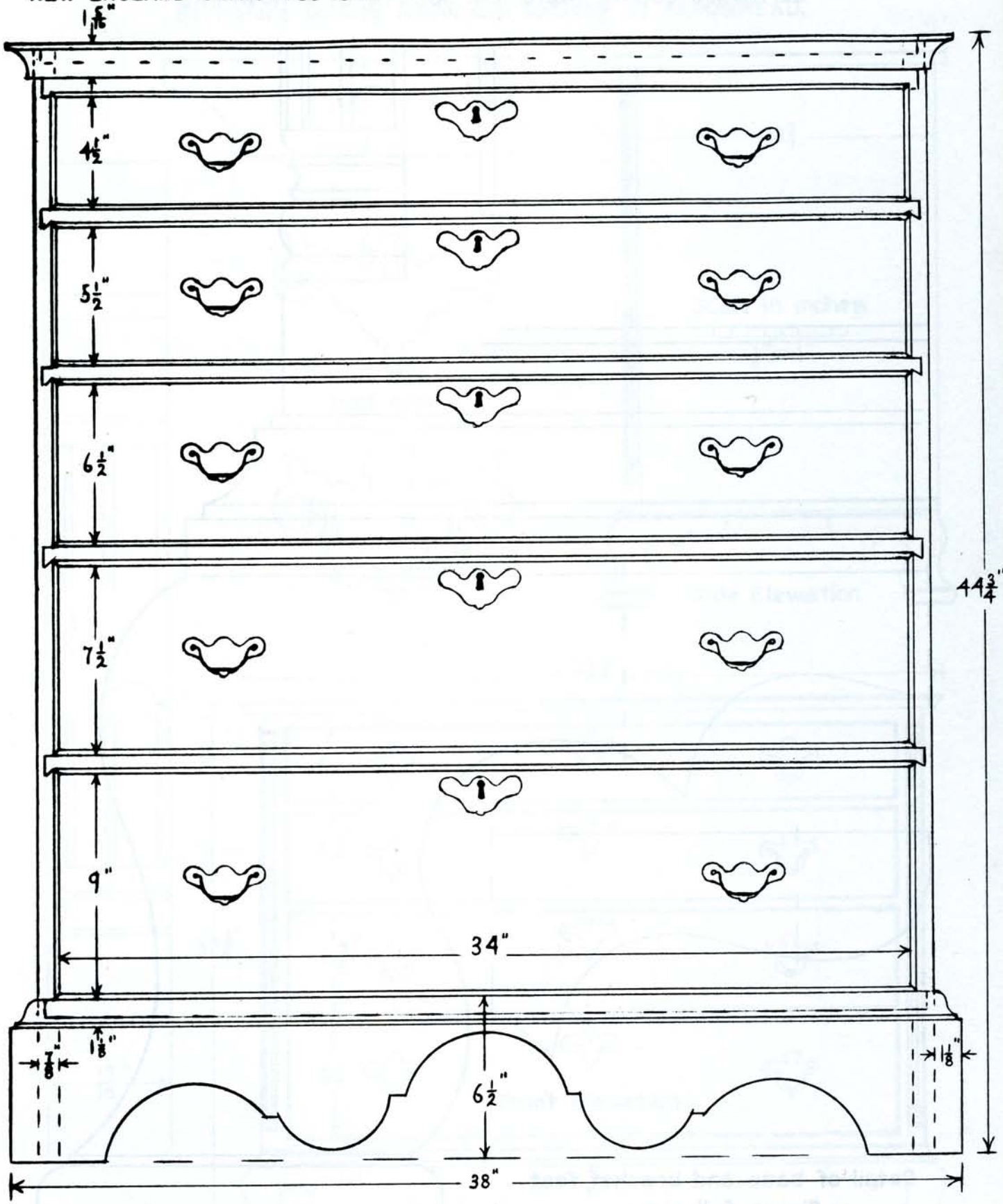


Detail of base and bracket feet
Shown full size

CHEST OF DRAWERS

NEW ENGLAND CIRCA 1780-1820

PRIVATE COLLECTION



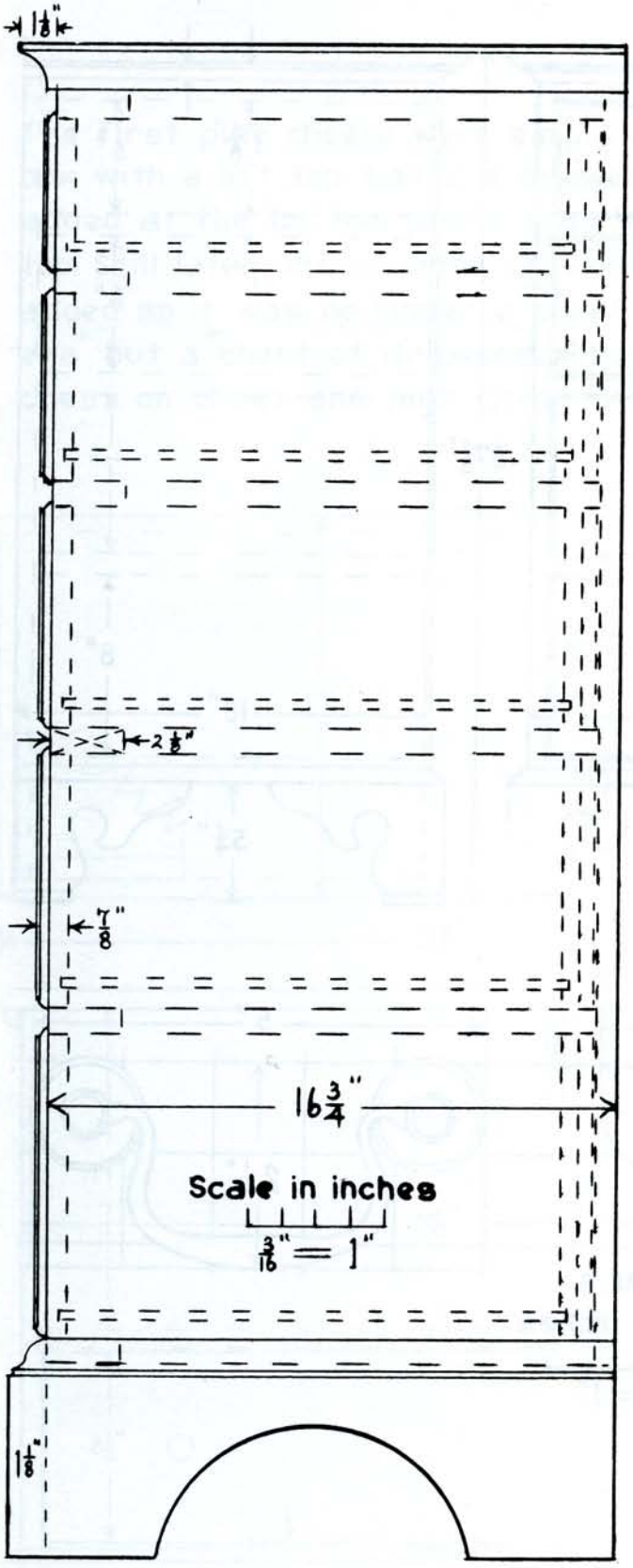
Scale in inches

3/16" = 1"

CHEST OF DRAWERS

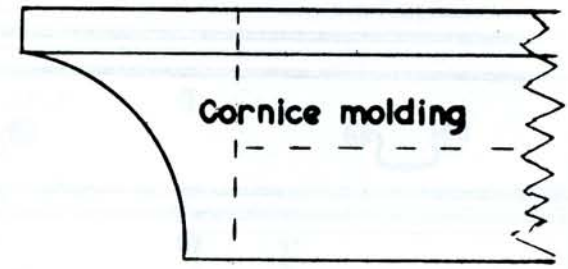
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1780-1820

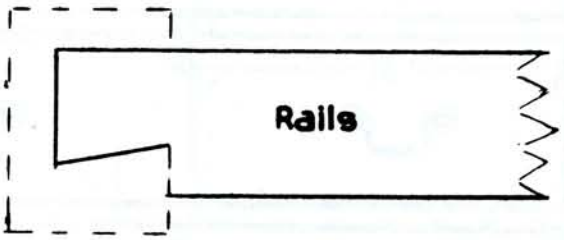
PRIVATE COLLECTION

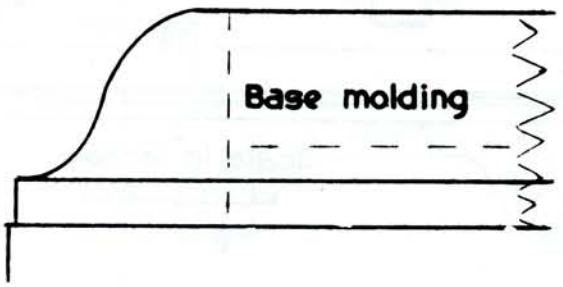


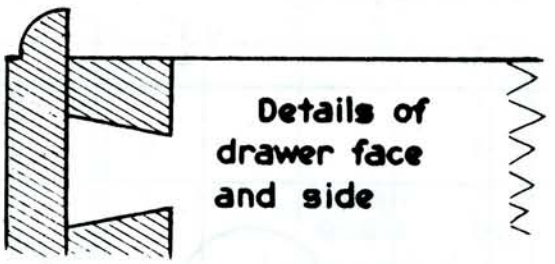
SIDE ELEVATION

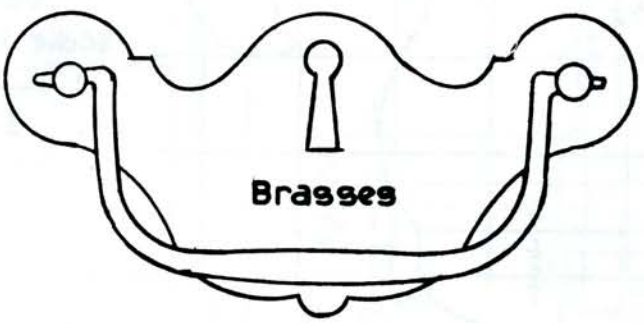
Scale in inches $\frac{3}{16}" = 1"$









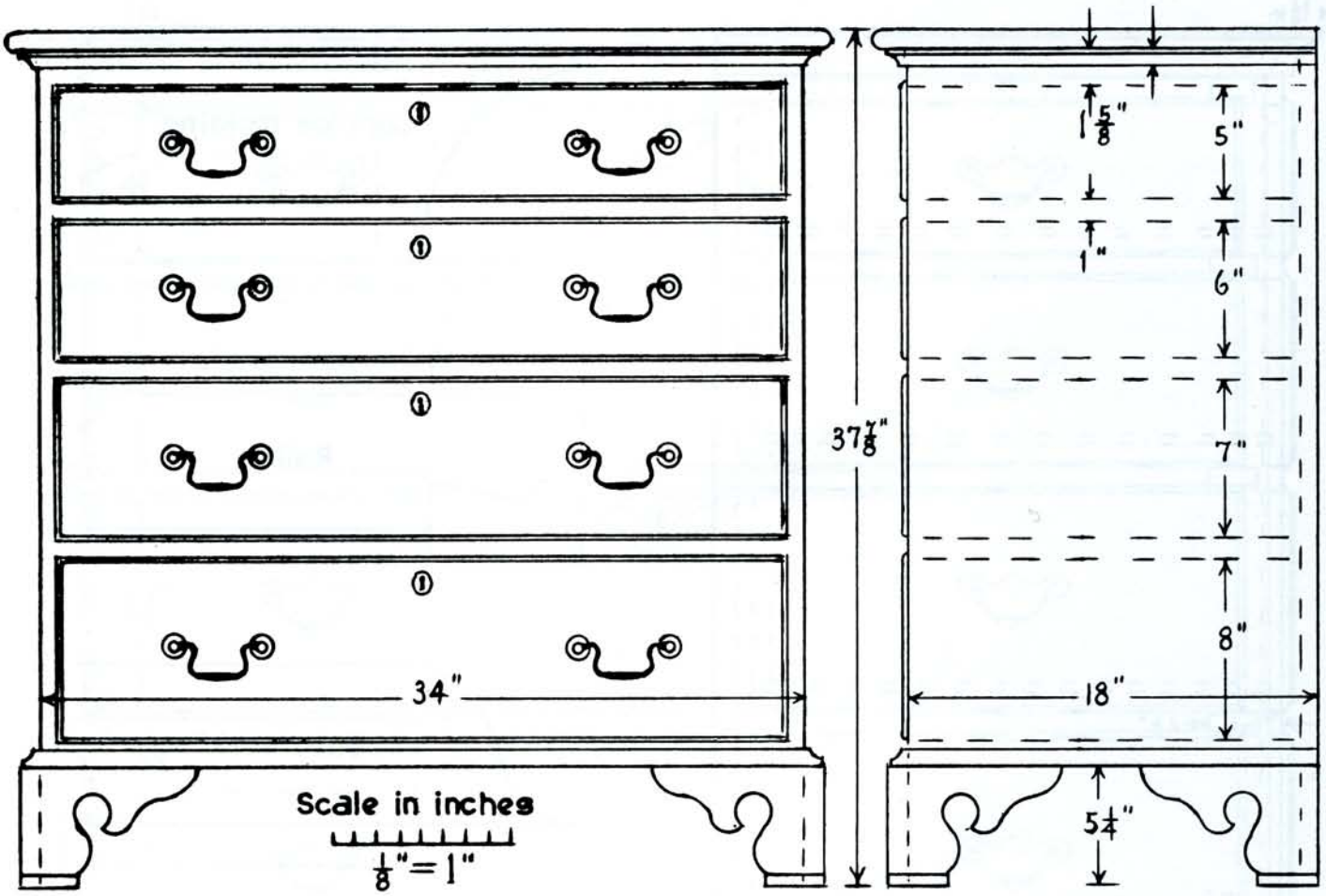


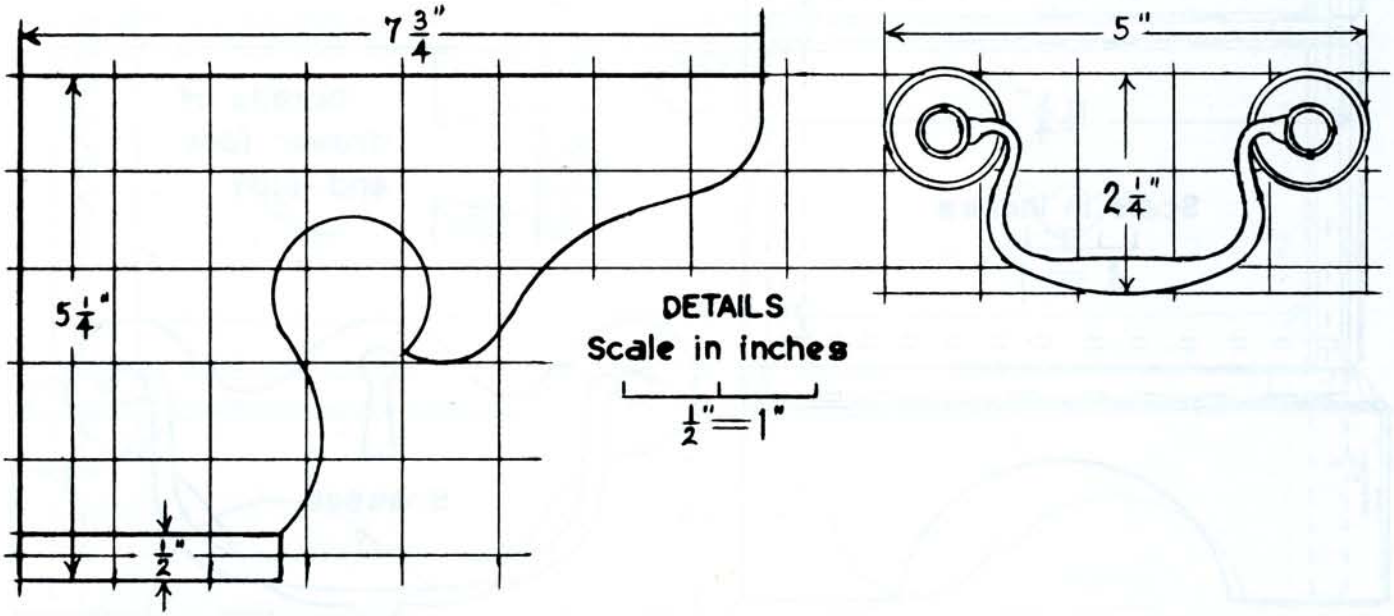
DETAILS

Shown full size

MAPLE CHEST OF DRAWERS

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1740 1790

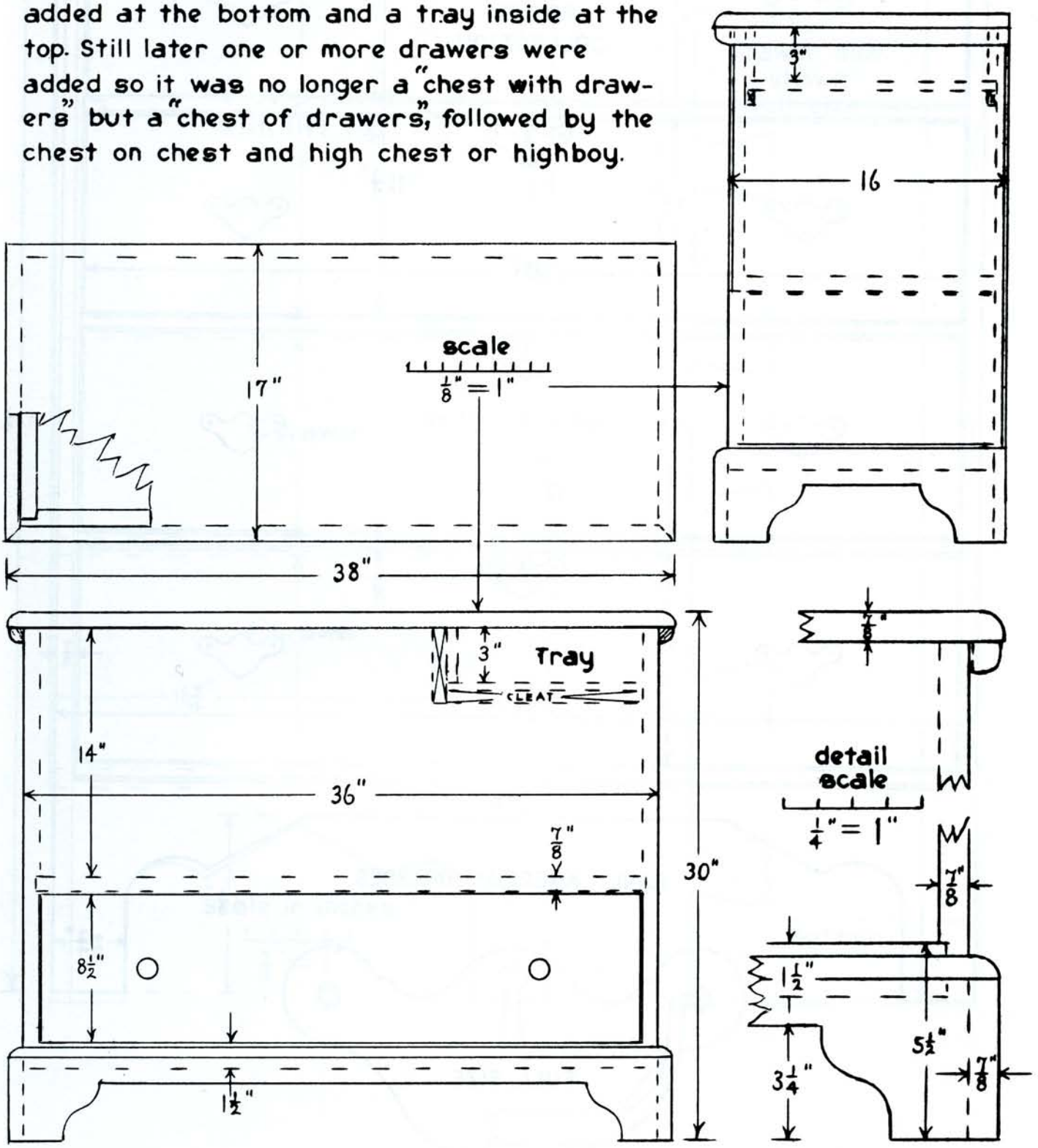




PINE CHEST

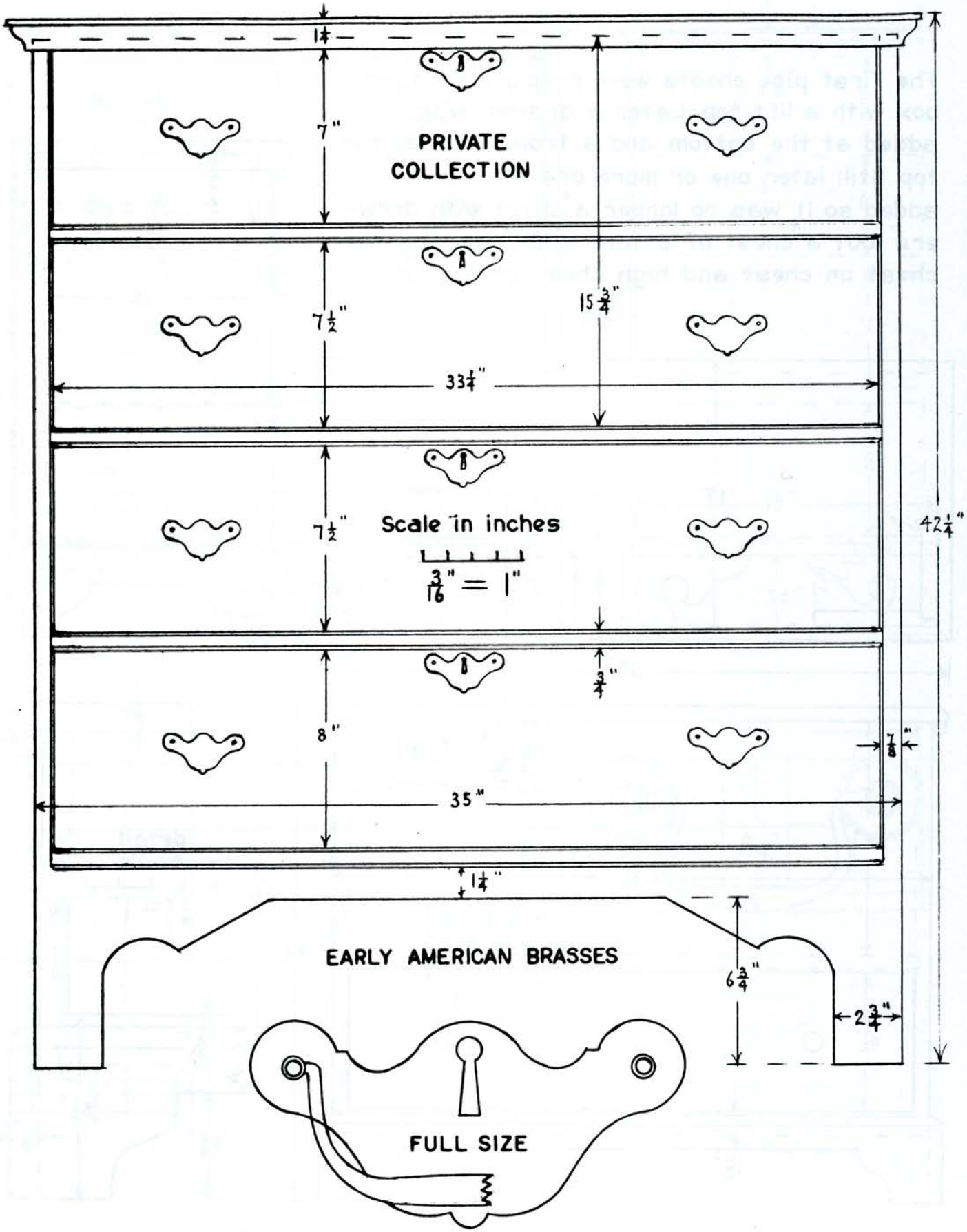
CIRCA 1690-1750

The first pine chests were simply a 6-board box with a lift top. Later a drawer was added at the bottom and a tray inside at the top. Still later one or more drawers were added so it was no longer a "chest with drawers" but a "chest of drawers", followed by the chest on chest and high chest or highboy.



CHEST WITH TWO DRAWERS BELOW

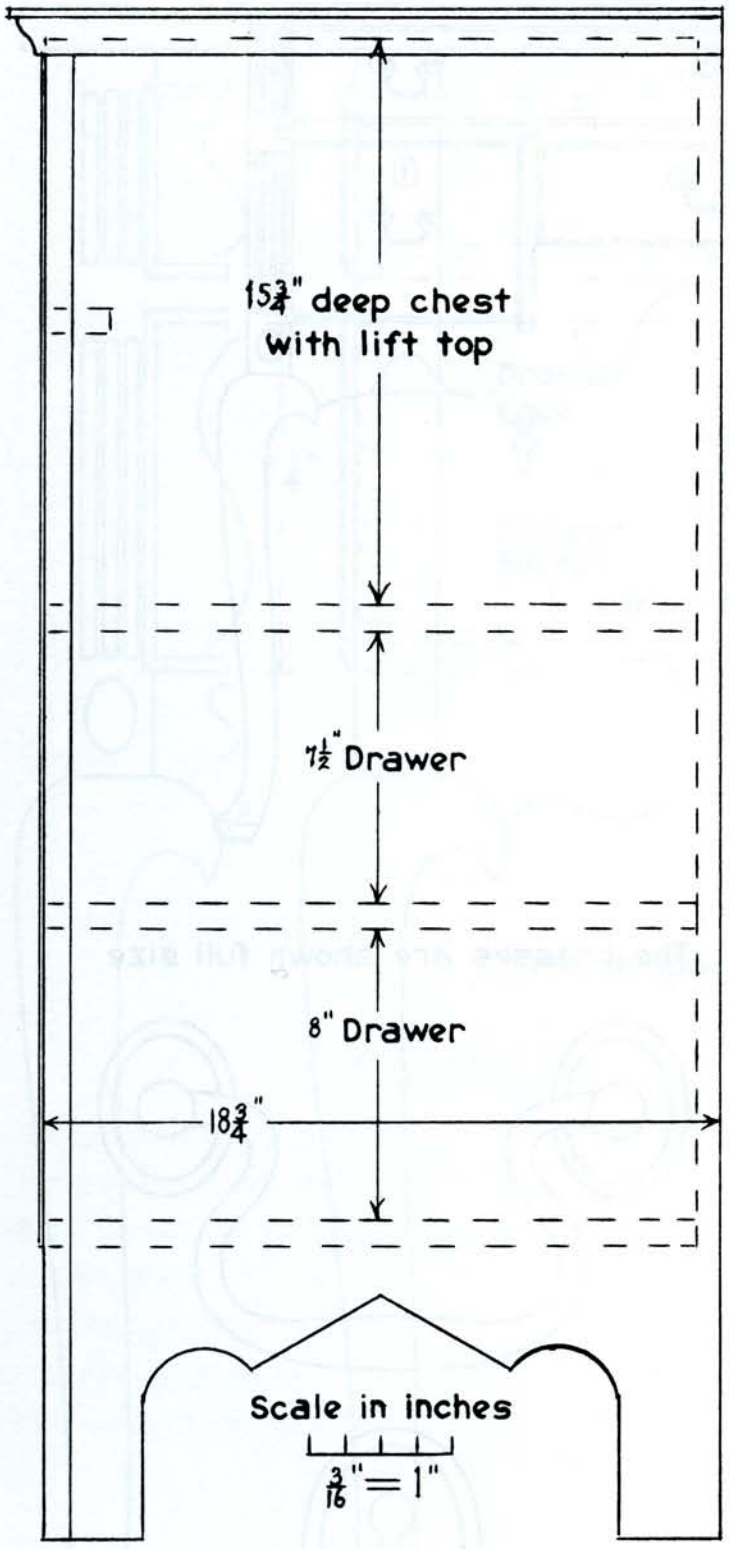
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1780 - 1800

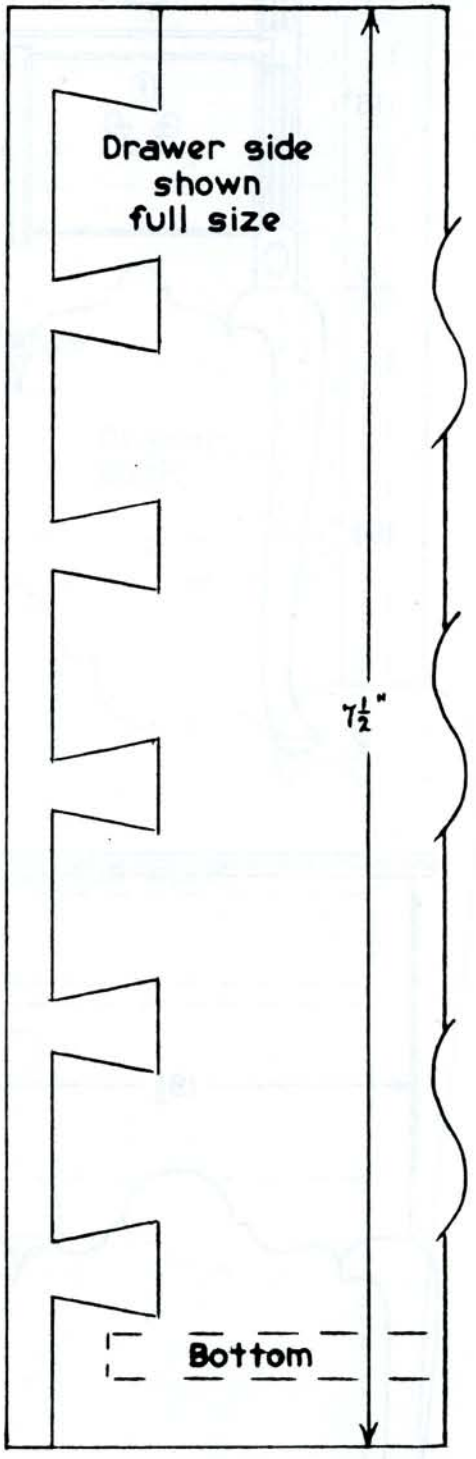


CHEST WITH TWO DRAWERS BELOW

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1780 - 1800

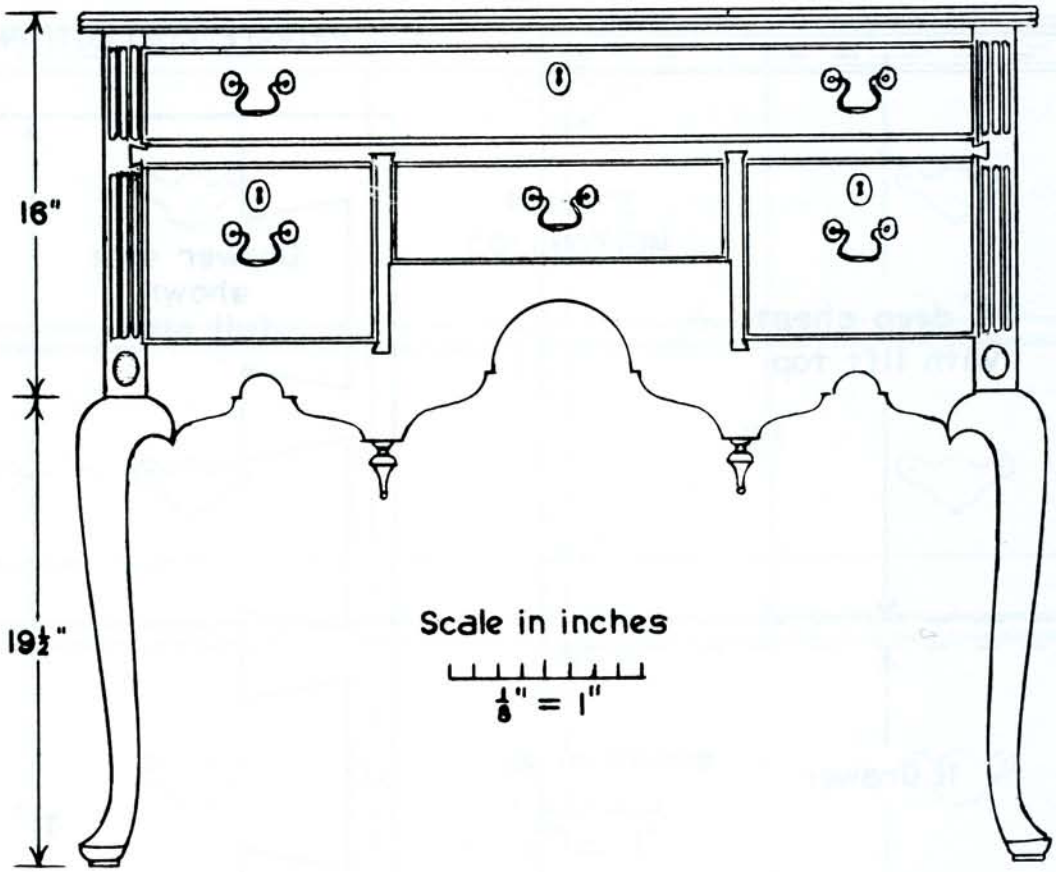
PRIVATE COLLECTION

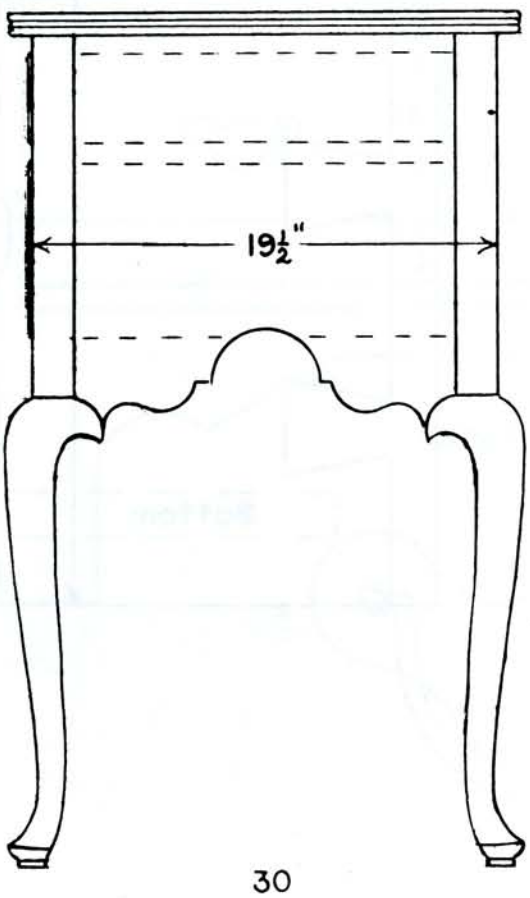




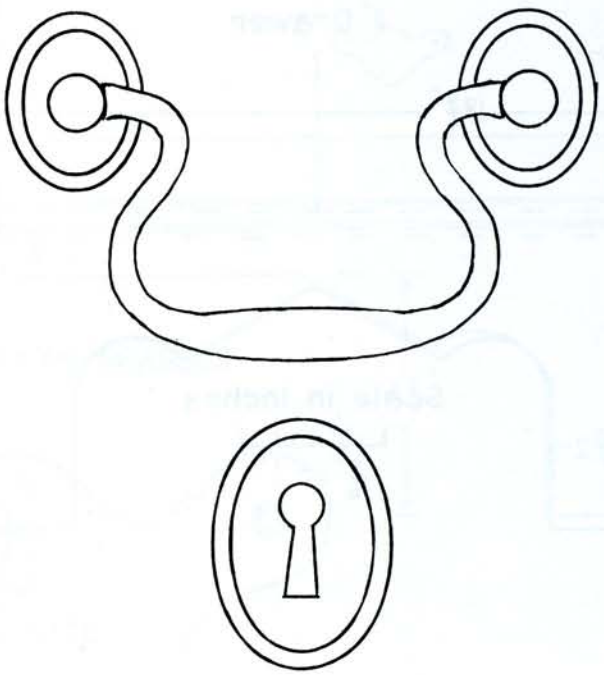
LOWBOY

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1750 – 1770





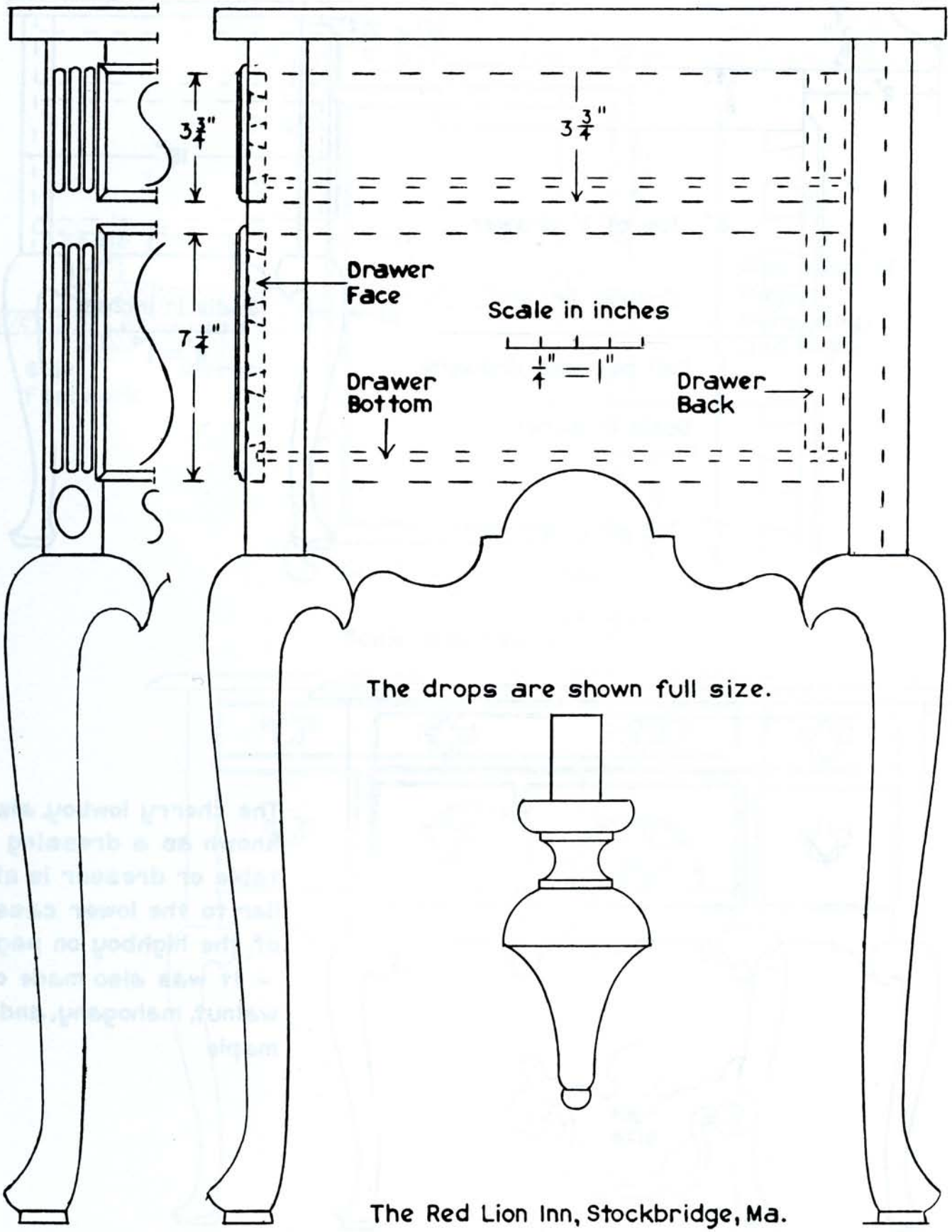
The brasses are shown full size



The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Ma.

LOWBOY

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1750-1770

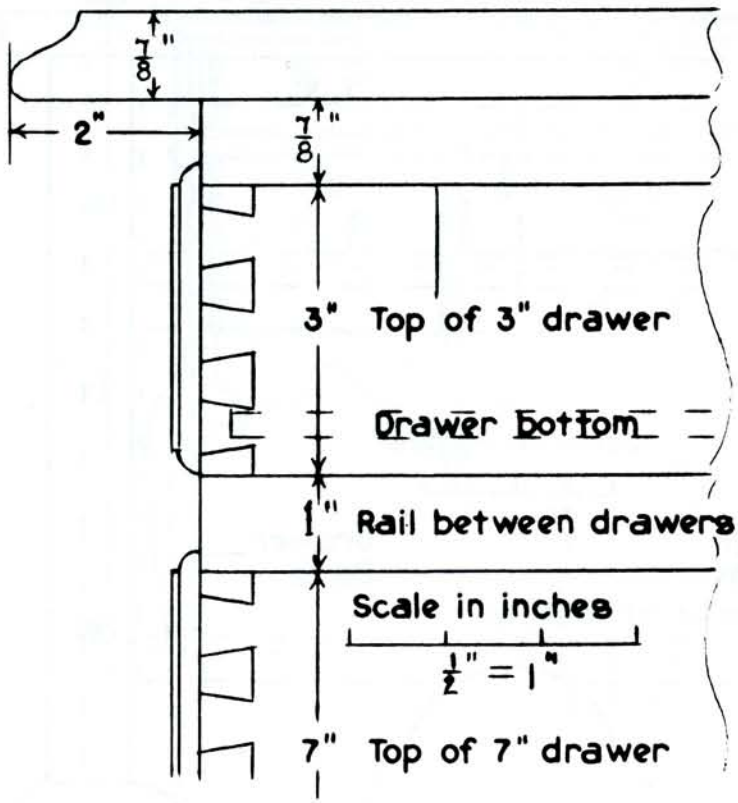


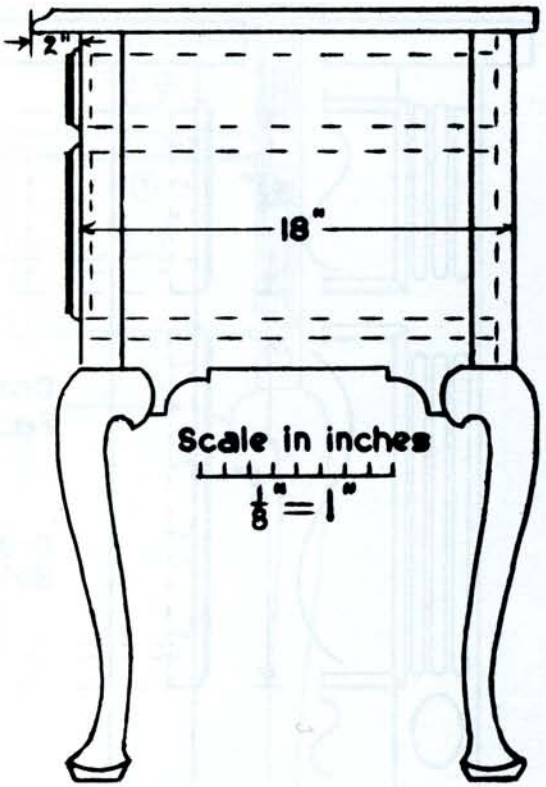
The drops are shown full size.

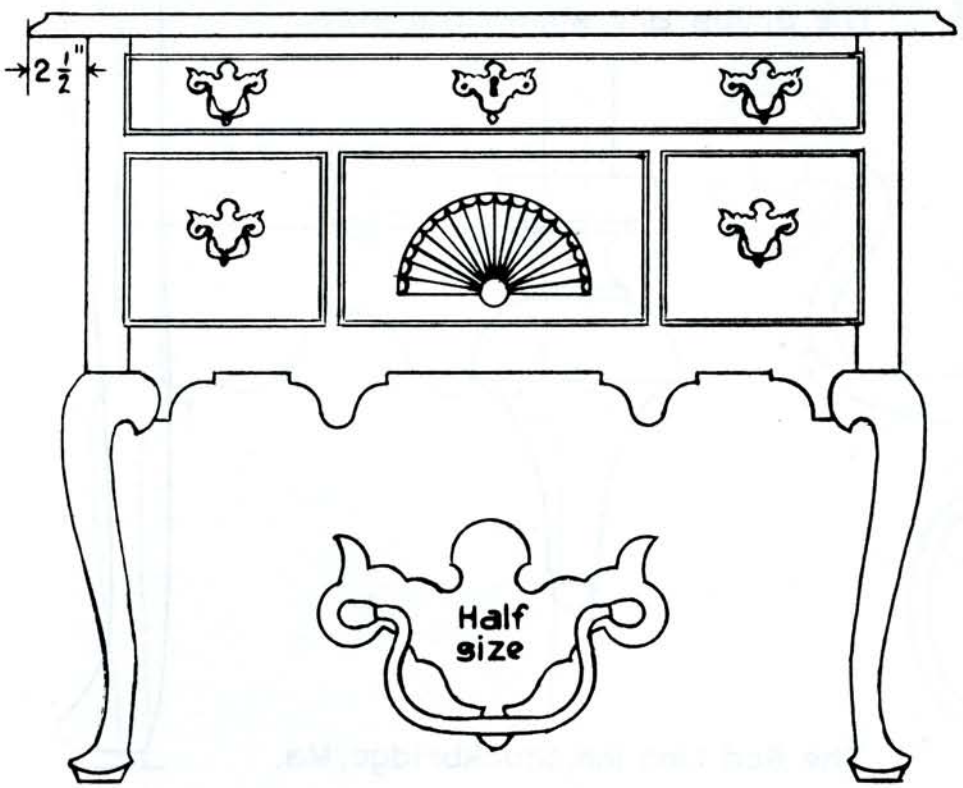
The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Ma.

CHERRY LOWBOY

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1750



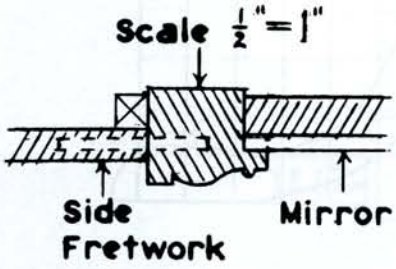


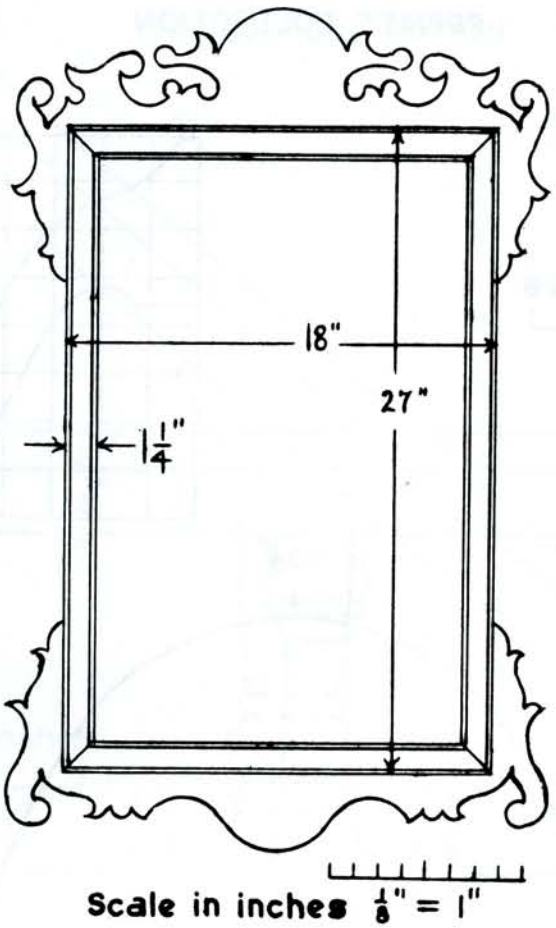


The cherry lowboy, also known as a dressing table or dresser is similar to the lower case of the highboy on page 33 – it was also made of walnut, mahogany, and maple

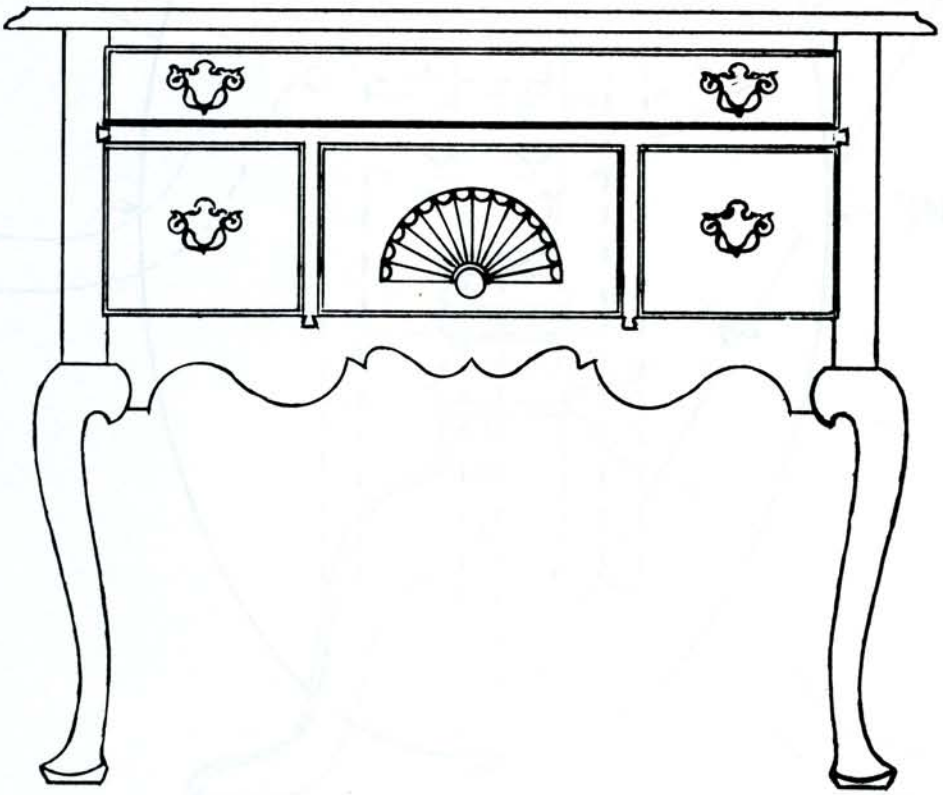
DRESSER AND MIRROR

CHERRY, CIRCA 1750





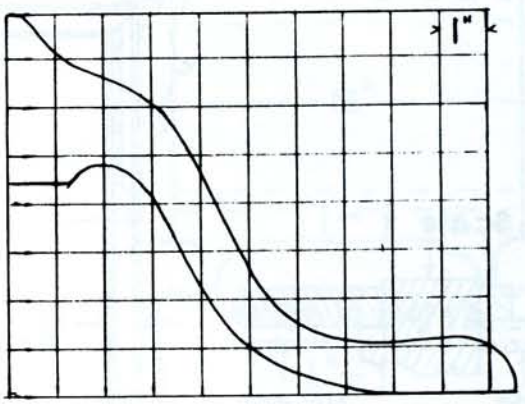
Also made of Walnut, Mahogany, and Maple



CHERRY TIP-TOP STAND

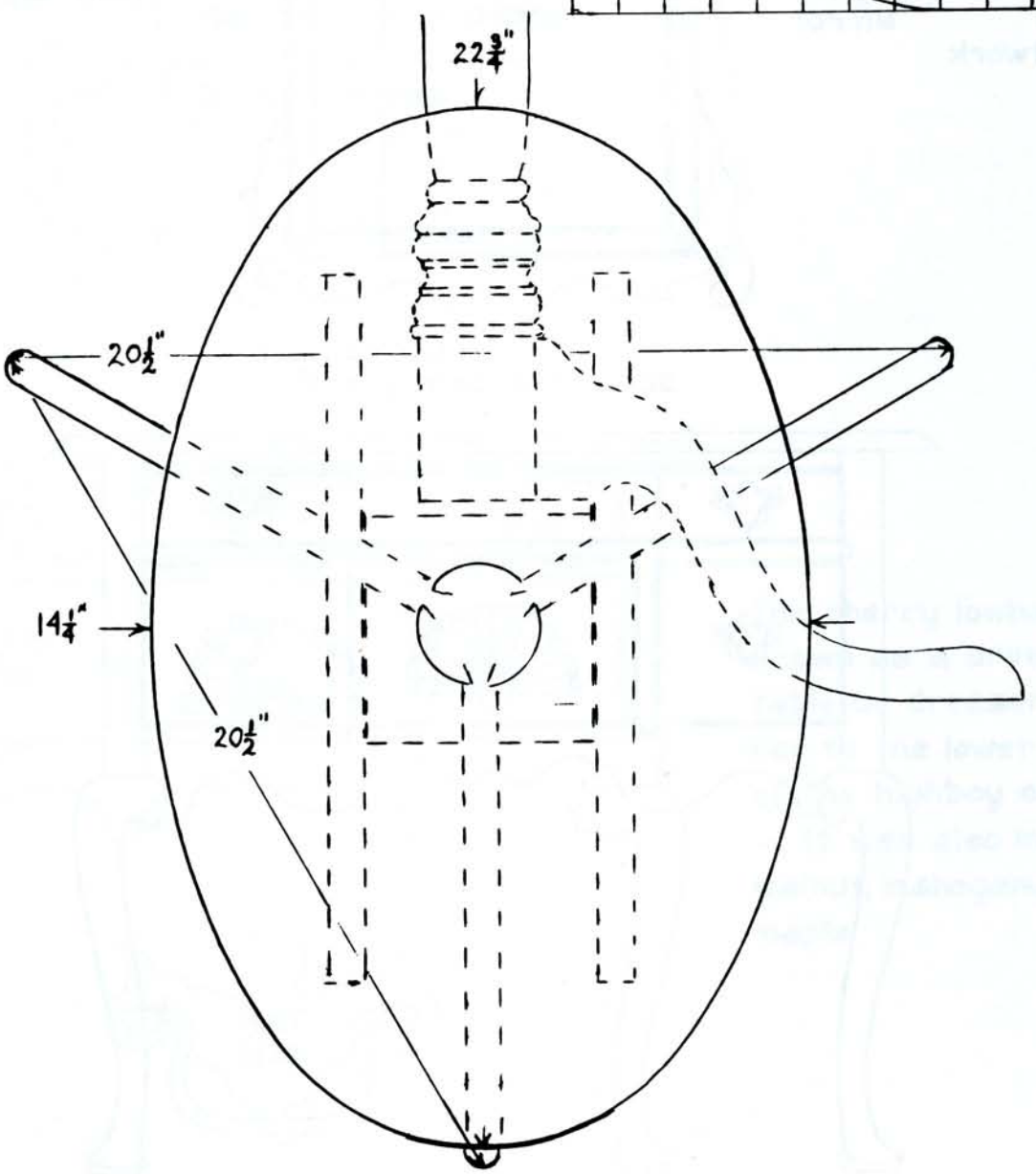
NEW ENGLAND

PRIVATE COLLECTION



Scale in inches

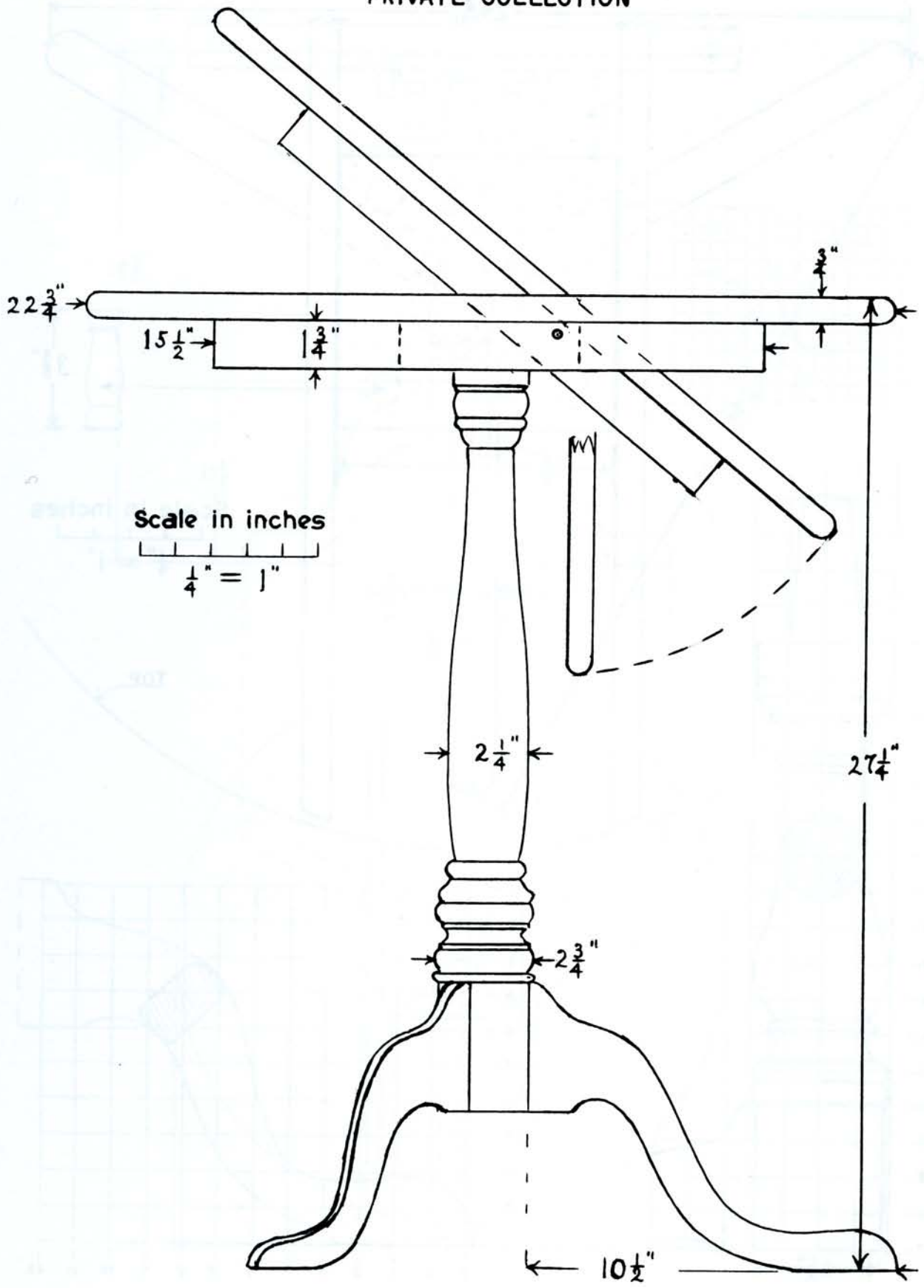
$\frac{1}{4}" = 1"$



CHERRY TIP-TOP STAND

NEW ENGLAND

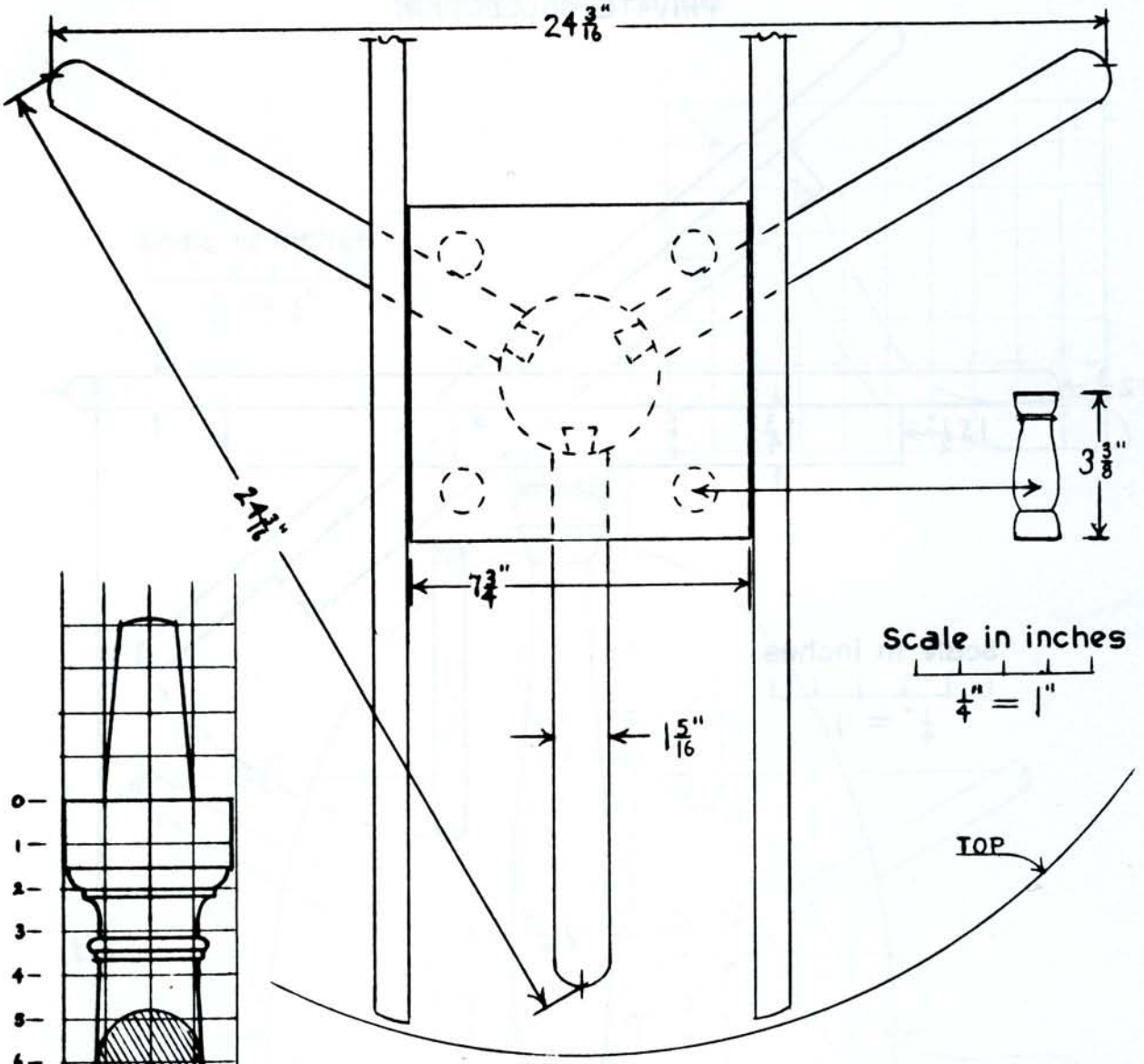
PRIVATE COLLECTION

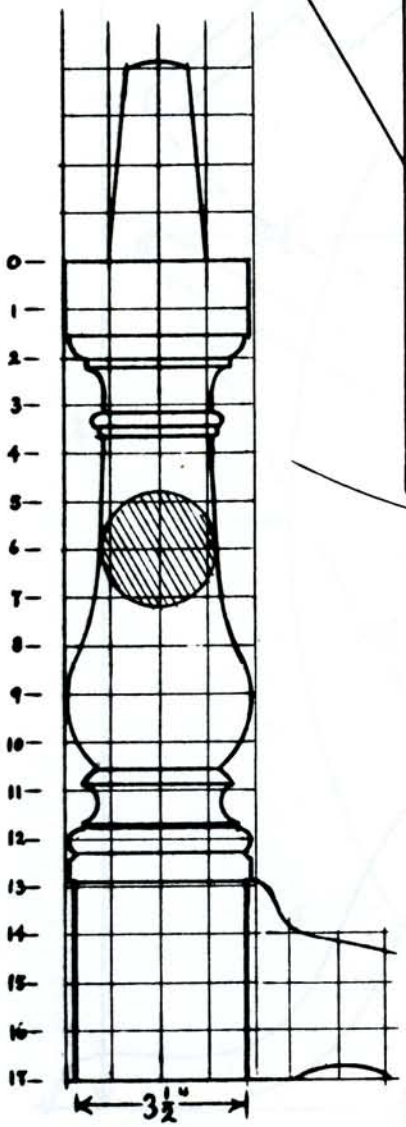


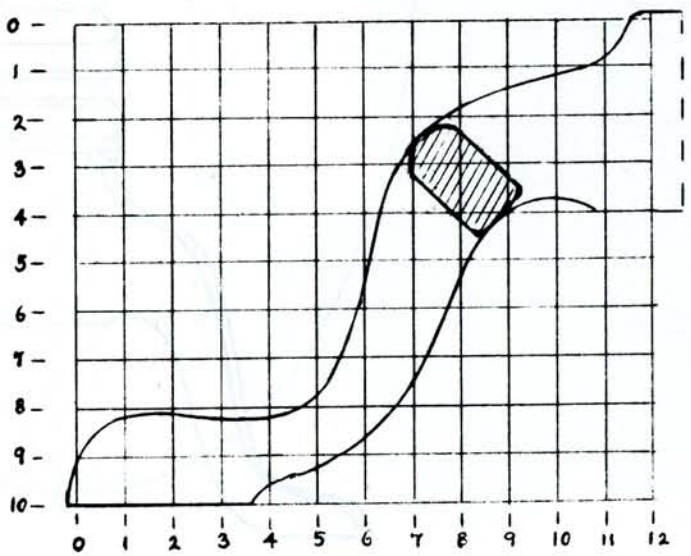
CHERRY TIP-TOP TABLE

CIRCA 1790

PRIVATE COLLECTION



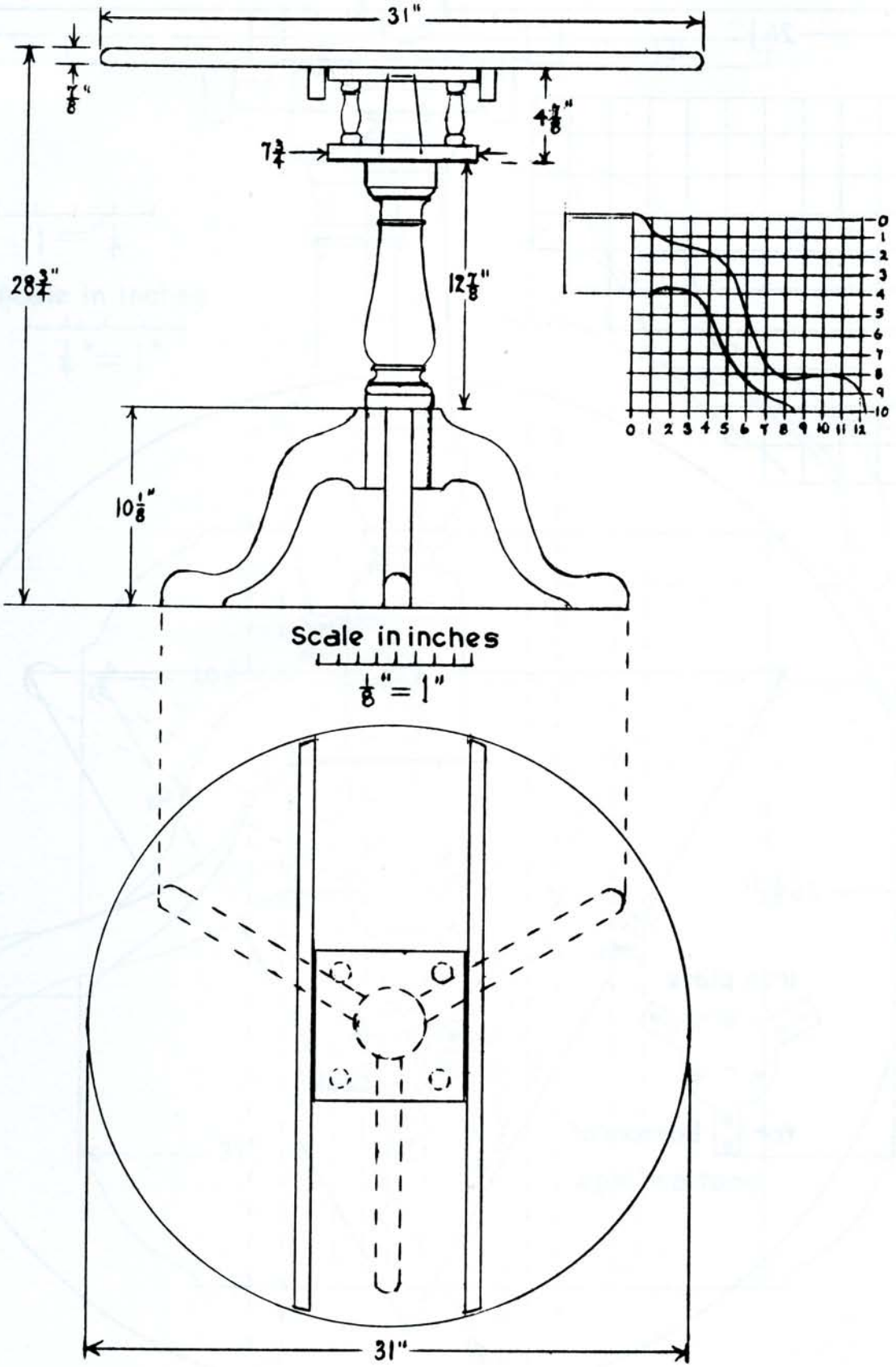




CHERRY TIP-TOP TABLE

CIRCA 1790

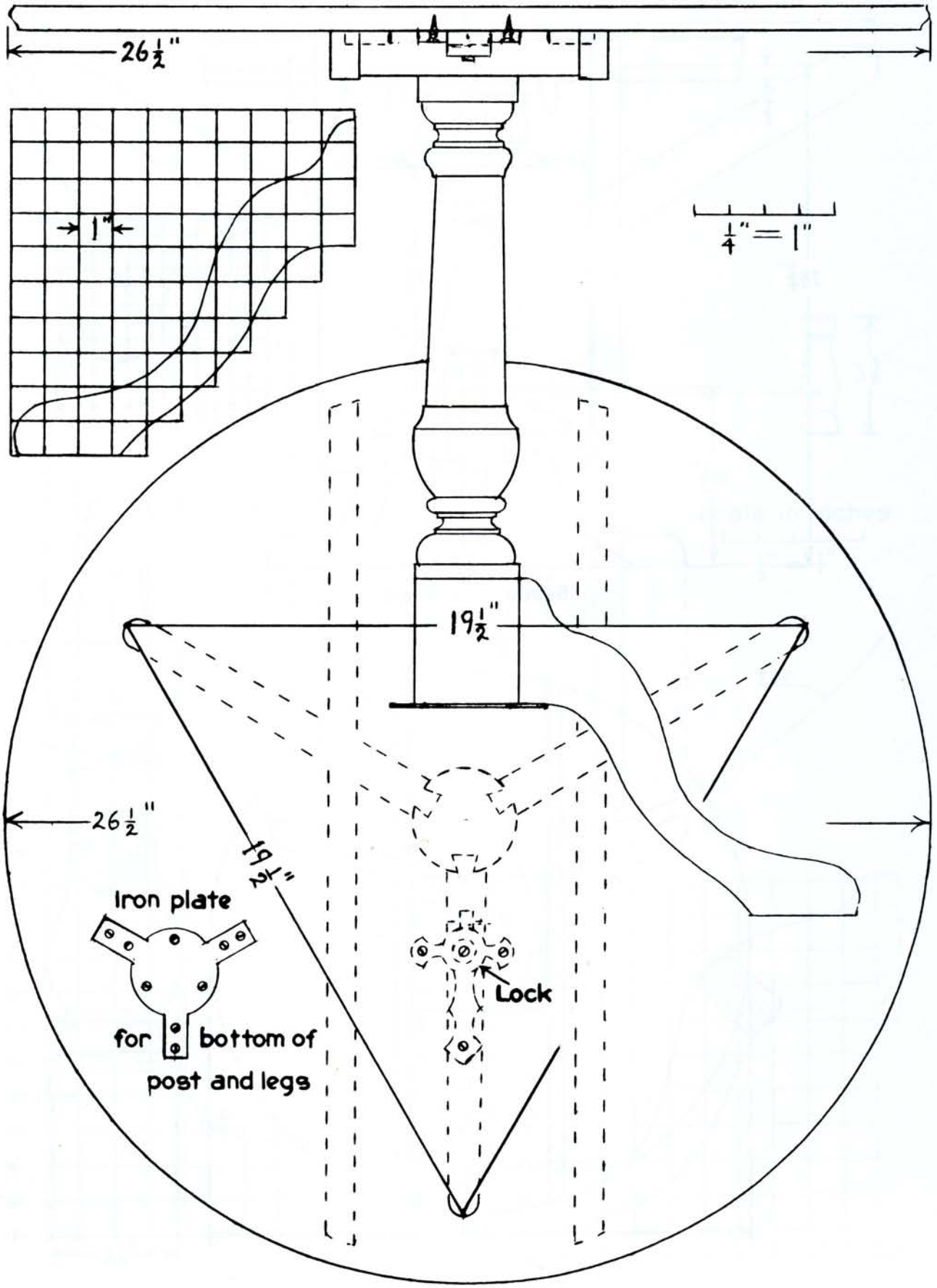
PRIVATE COLLECTION



CHERRY TIP-TOP TABLE

NEW ENGLAND, 1780 - 1790

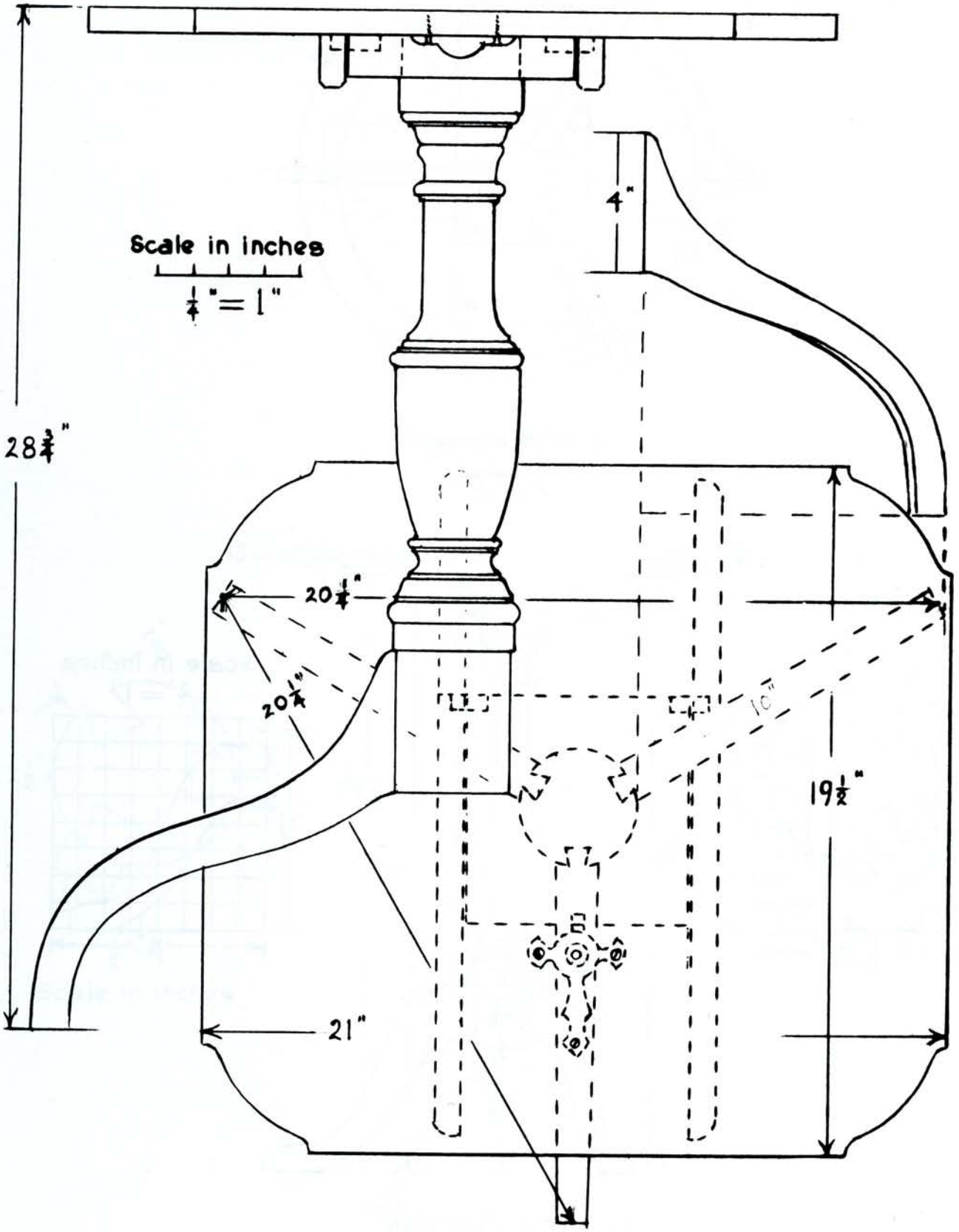
Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD



MAHOGANY TIP-TOP-TABLE

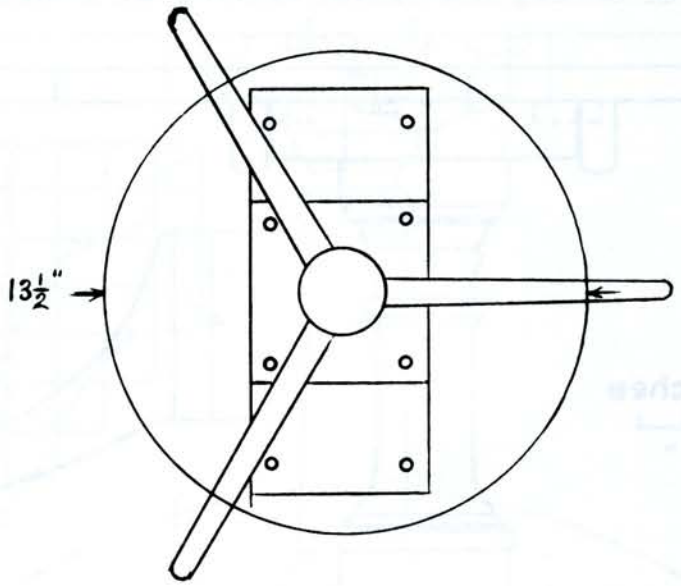
NEW ENGLAND, 1790-1805

Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD



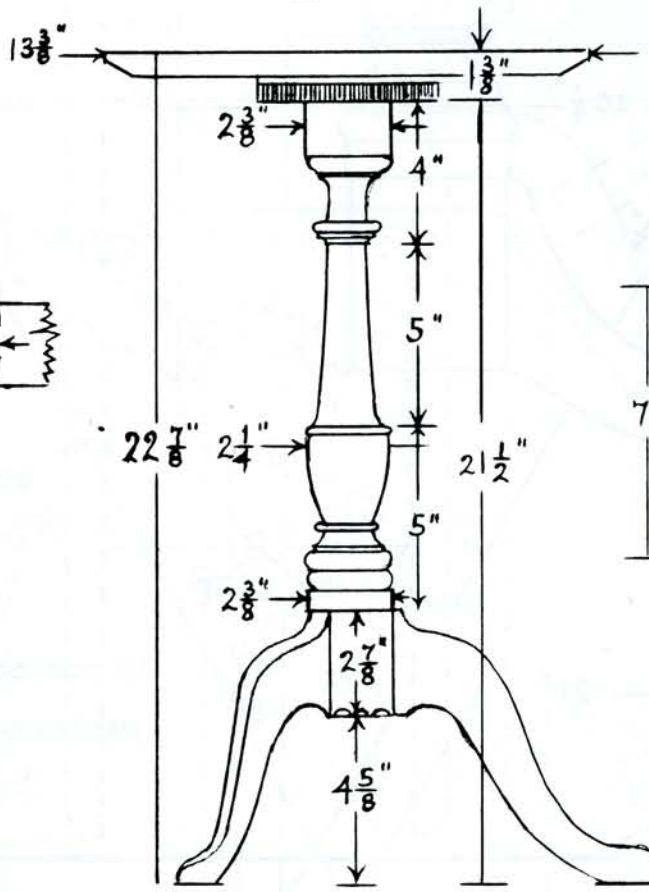
MAPLE STAND

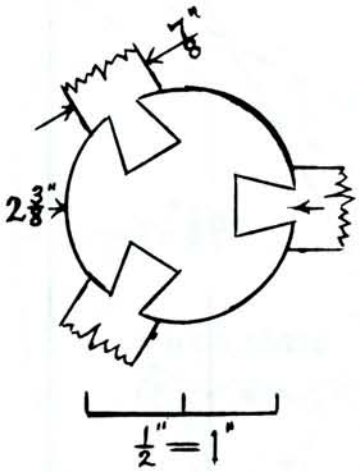
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1725 – 1750



Scale in inches

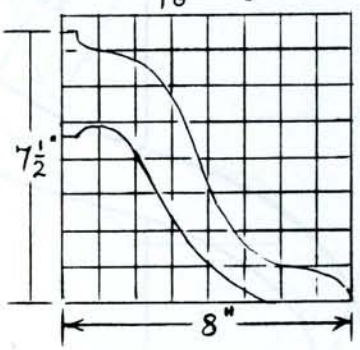
3/16" = 1"





Scale in inches

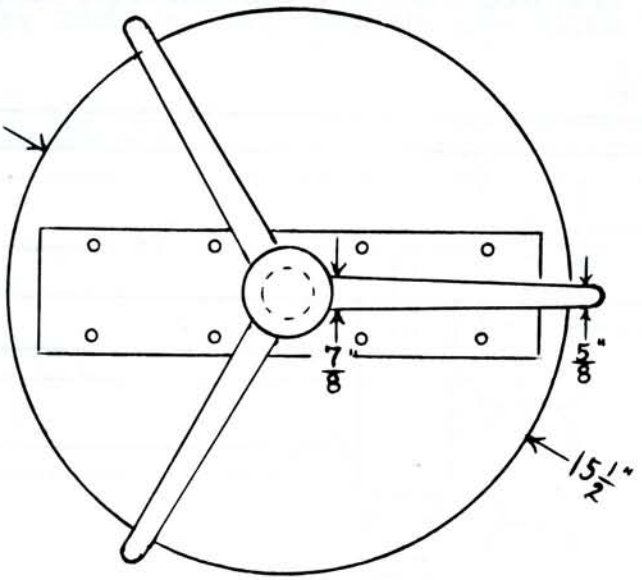
3/16" = 1"



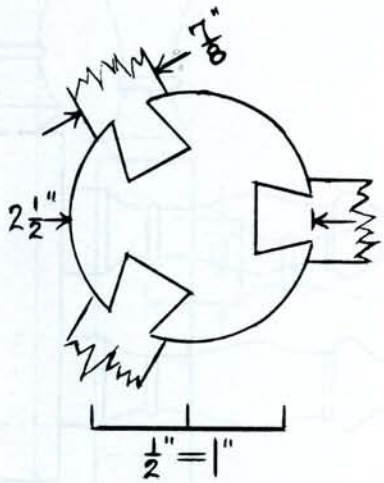
PRIVATE COLLECTION

MAPLE CANDLESTAND

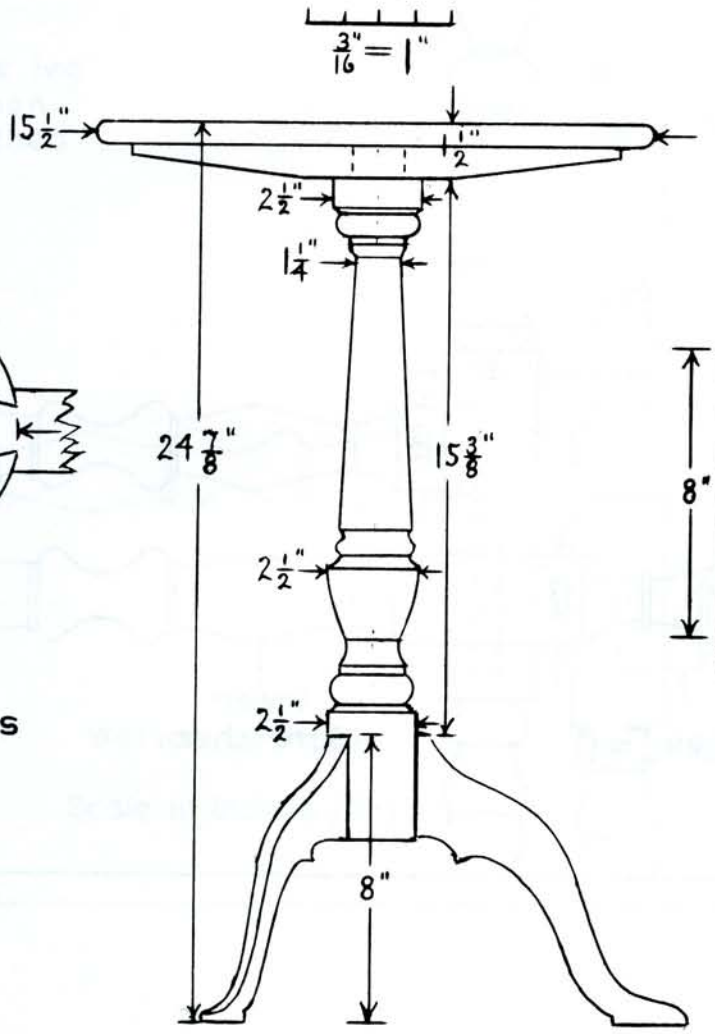
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1725-1750

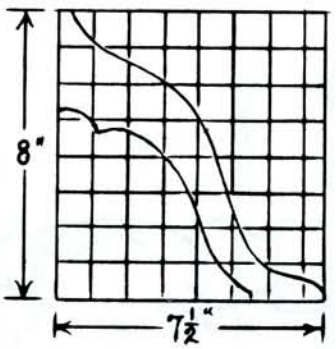


Scale in inches



Scale in inches



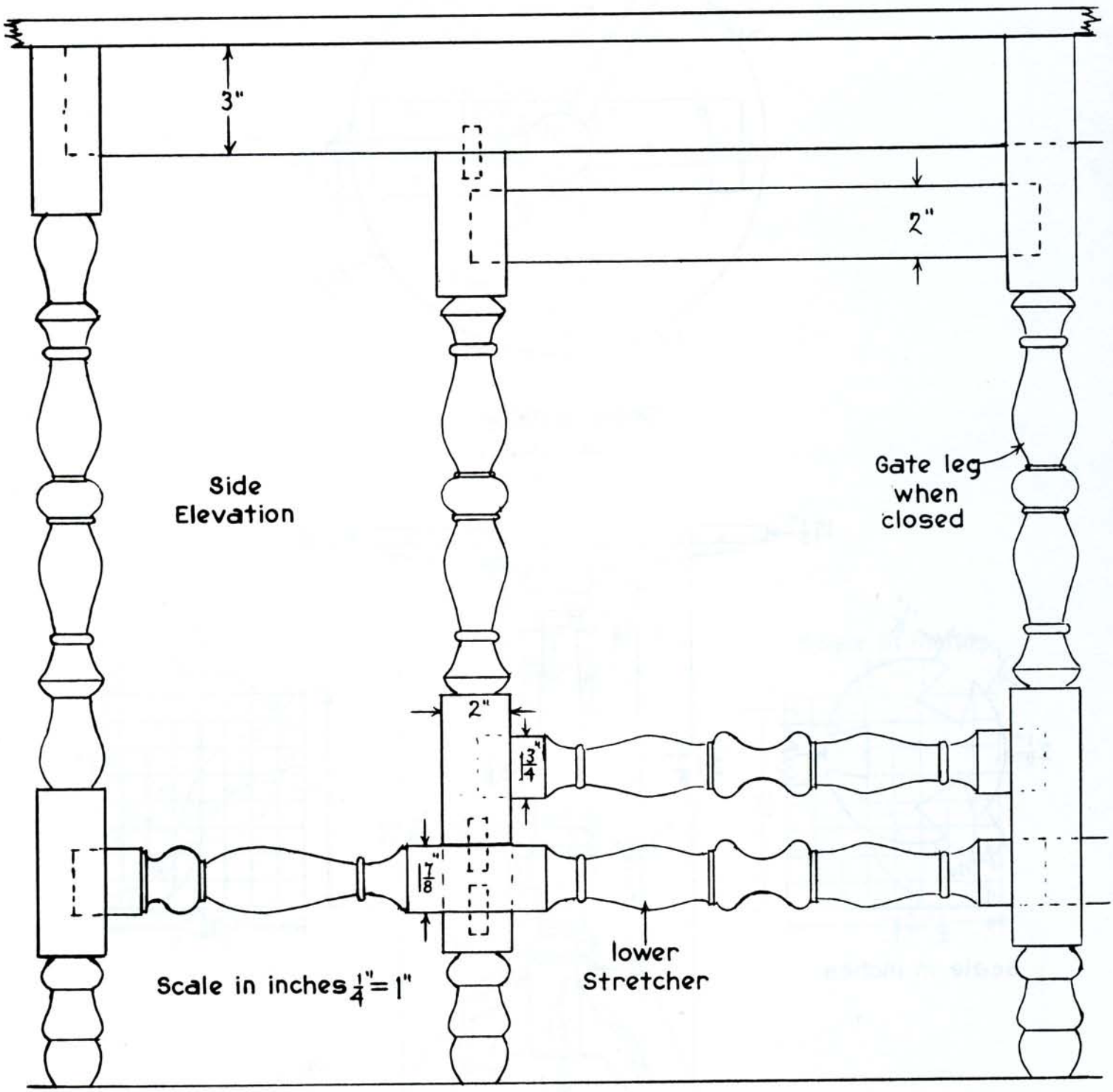


PRIVATE COLLECTION

GATE-LEG DINING TABLE

Eighteenth-century American

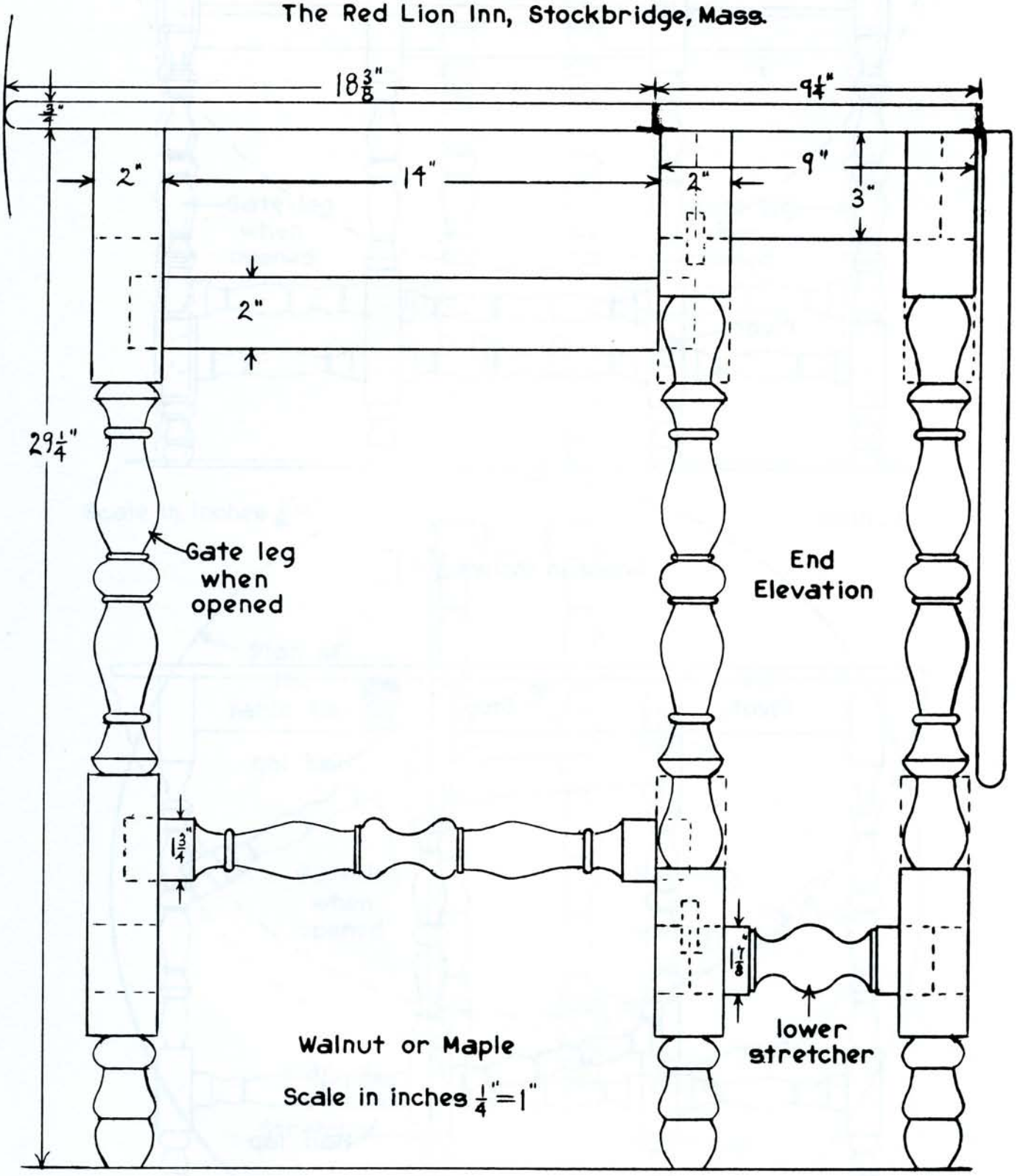
The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Mass.



GATE-LEG DINING TABLE

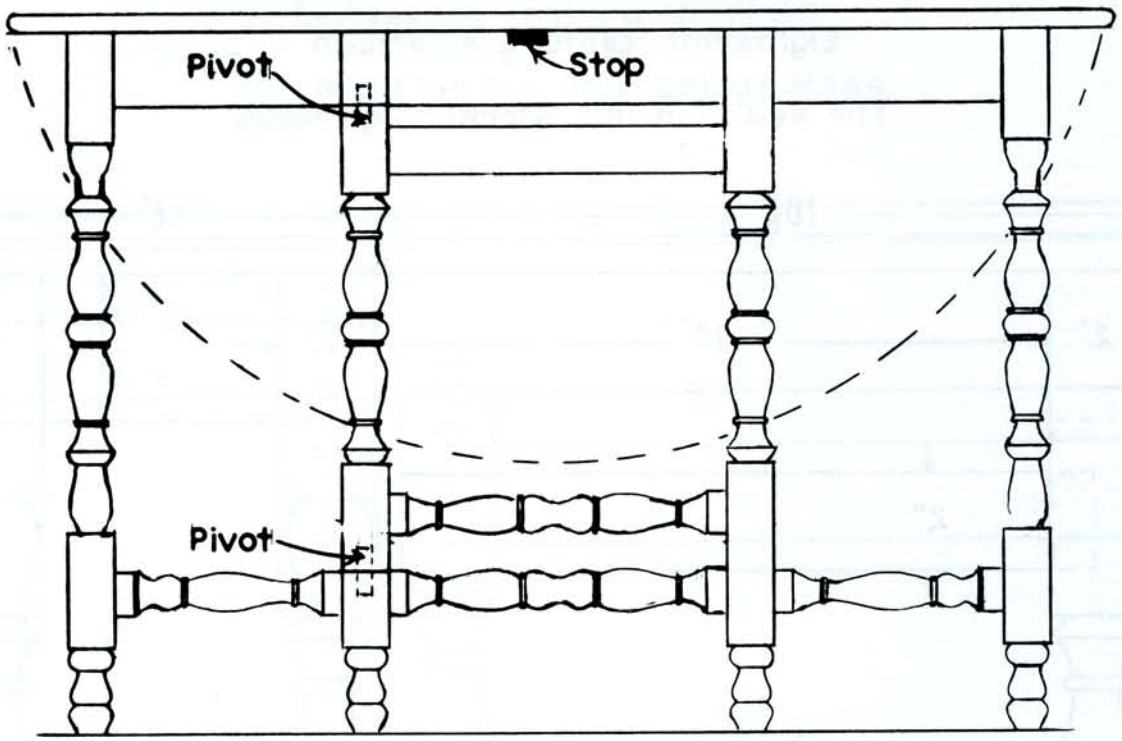
Eighteenth-century American

The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Mass.

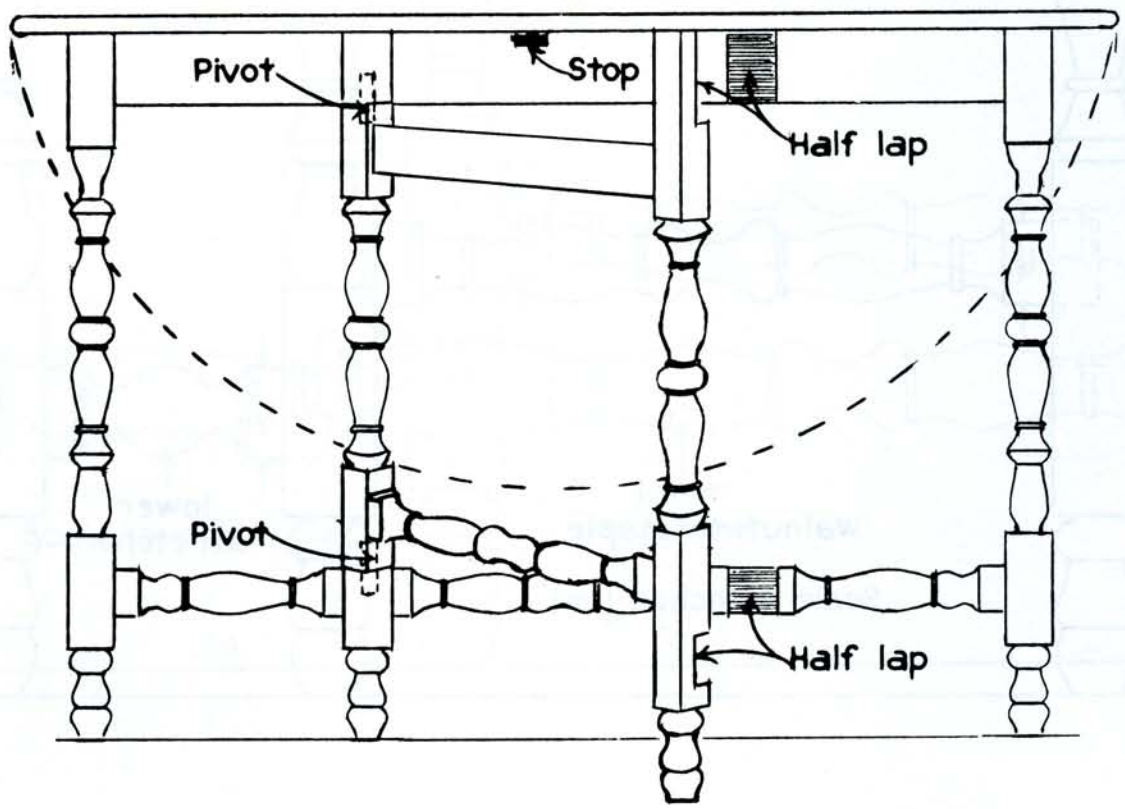


GATE-LEG DINING TABLE

The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Mass



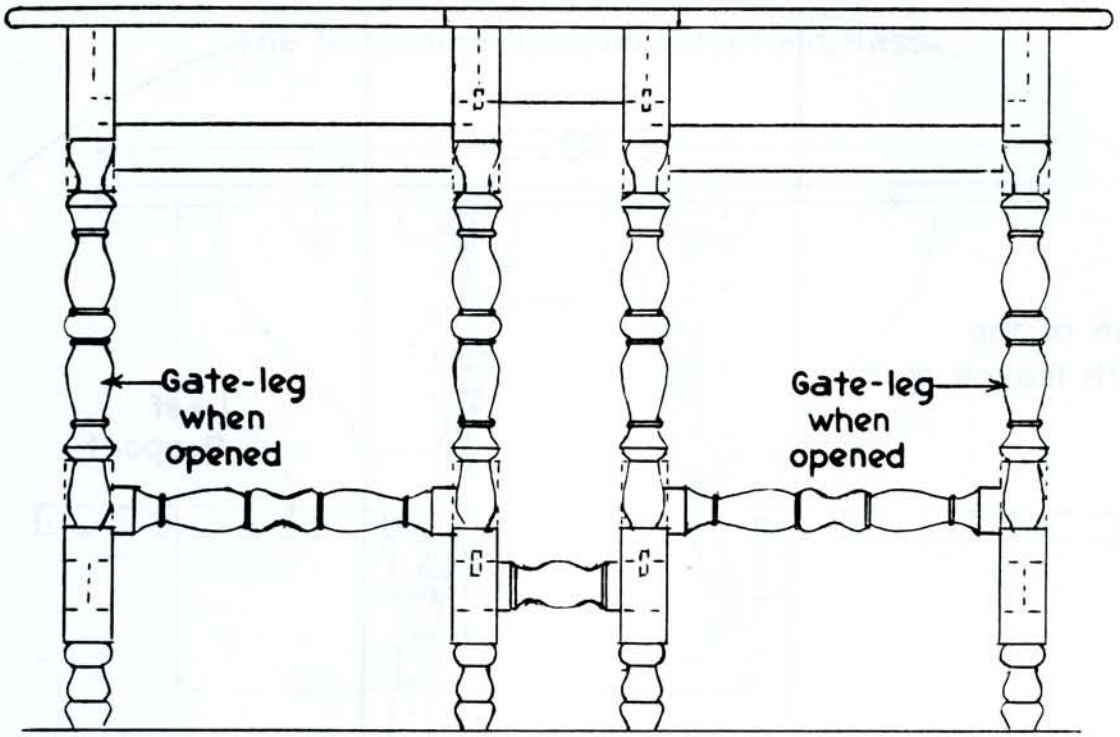
Scale in Inches $\frac{1}{8}'' = 1''$



Side Elevation

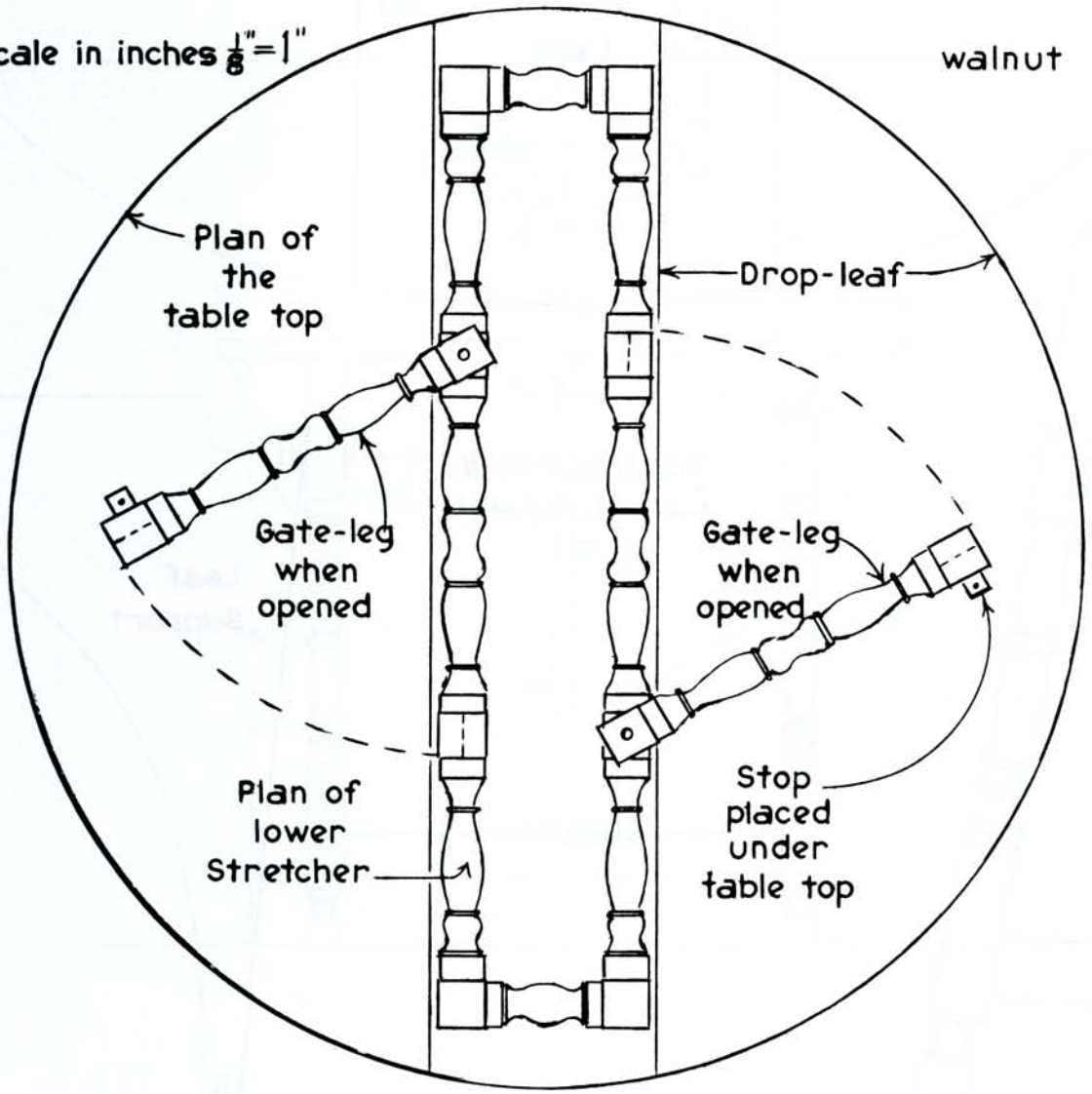
GATE-LEG DINING TABLE

The Red Lion Inn, Stockbridge, Mass.



Scale in inches $\frac{1}{8}$"=1"

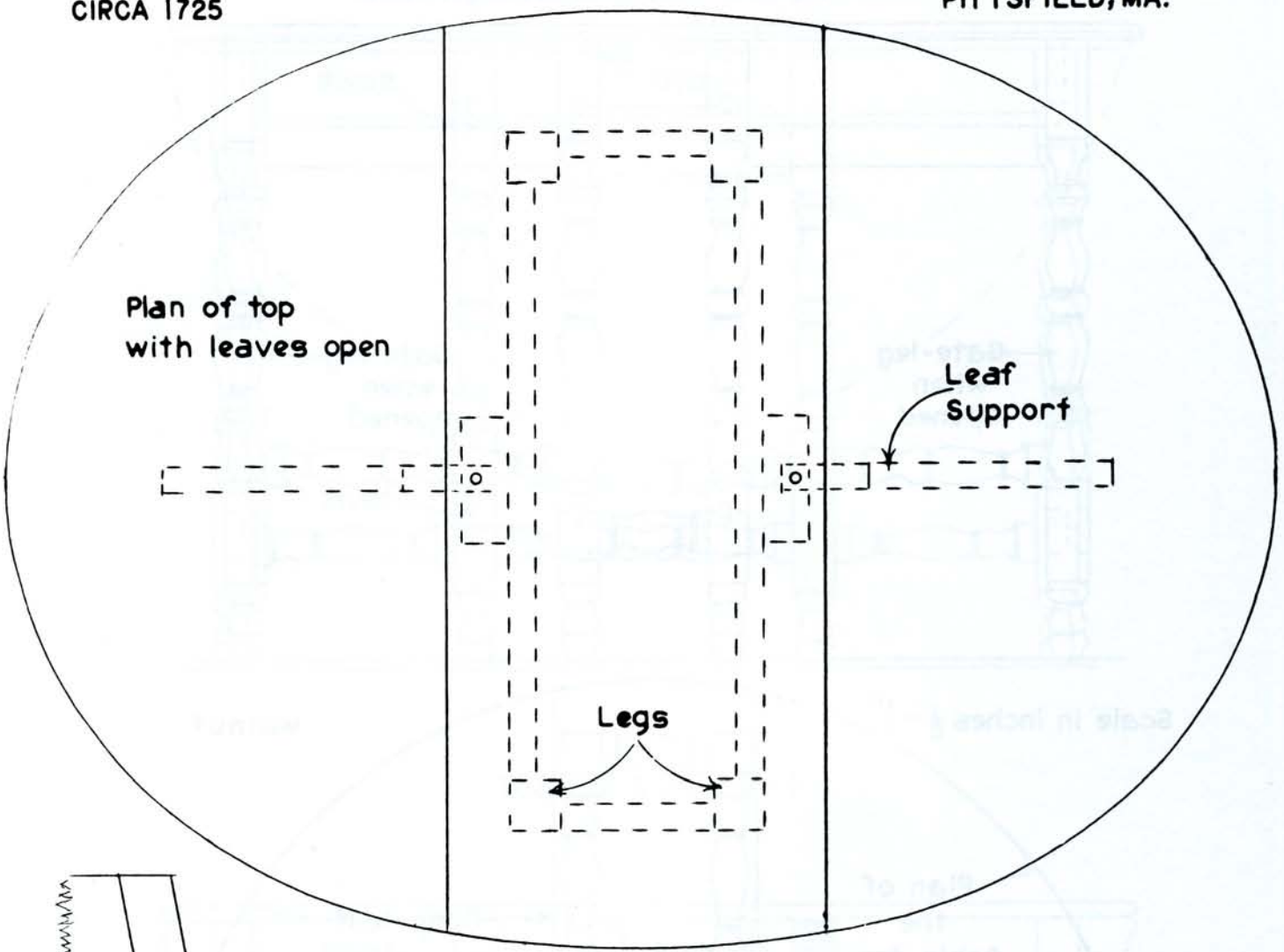
walnut

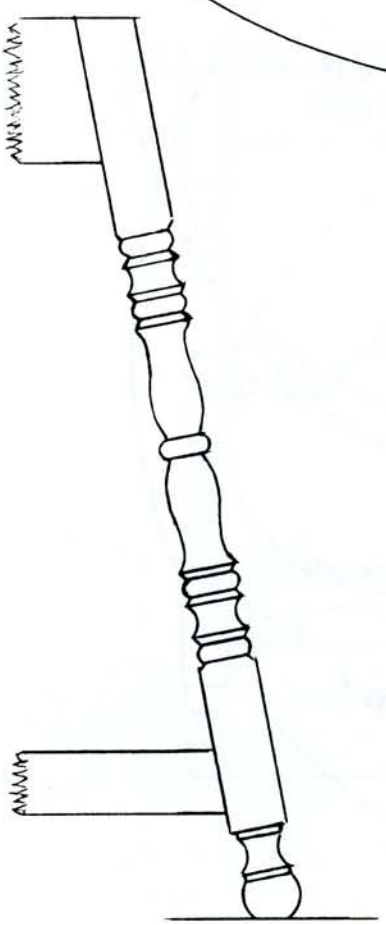


BUTTERFLY-TABLE

CIRCA 1725

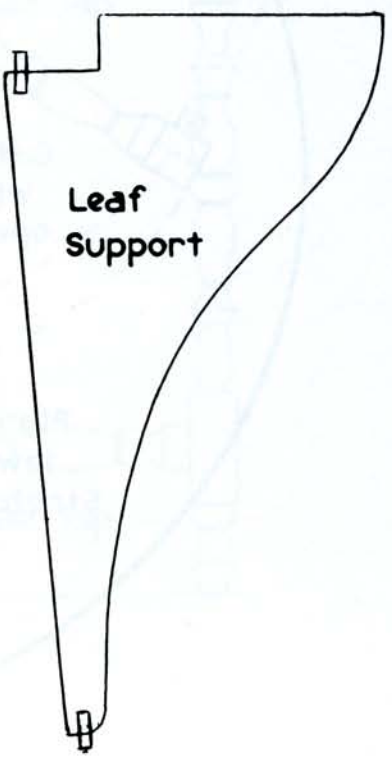
THE BERKSHIRE MUSEUM
PITTSFIELD, MA.





Scale in inches

3/16" = 1"

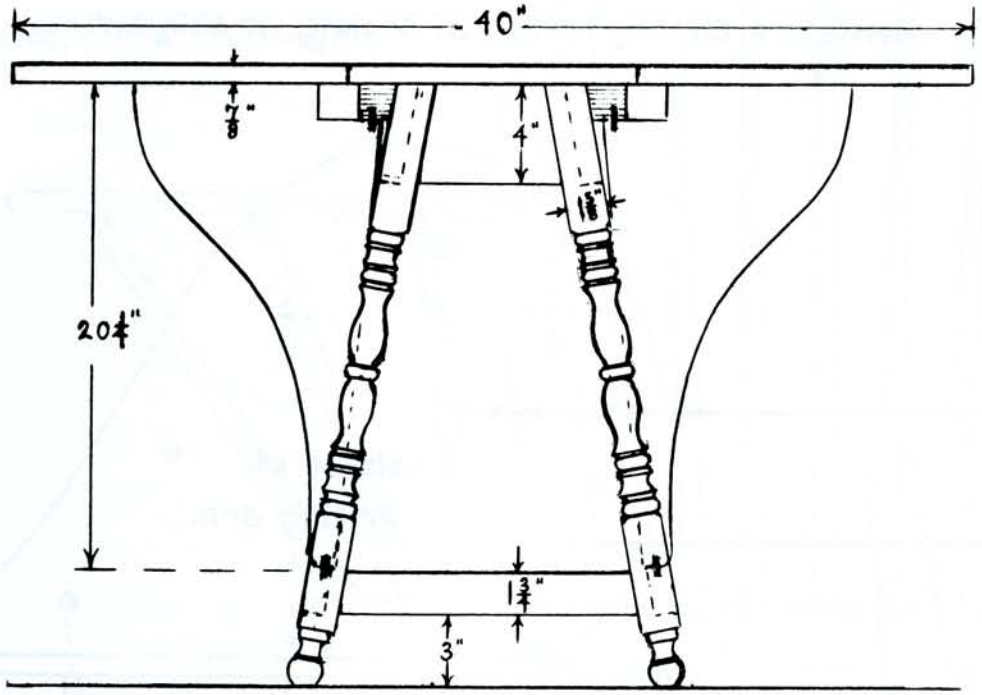


CHERRY

BUTTERFLY-TABLE

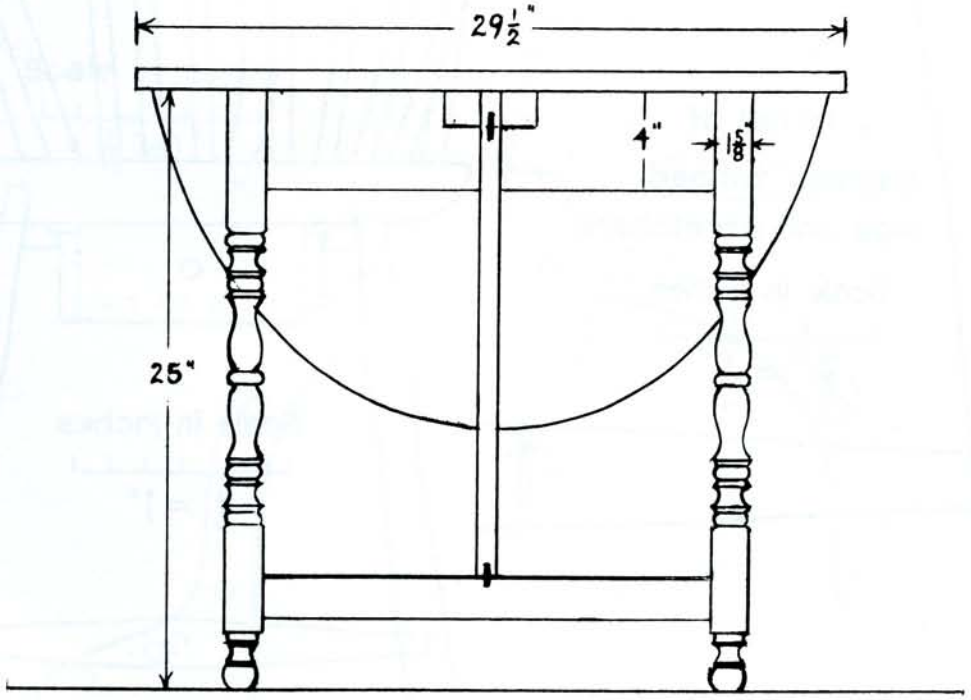
New England, Circa 1725

The Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, Mass.



Scale in inches

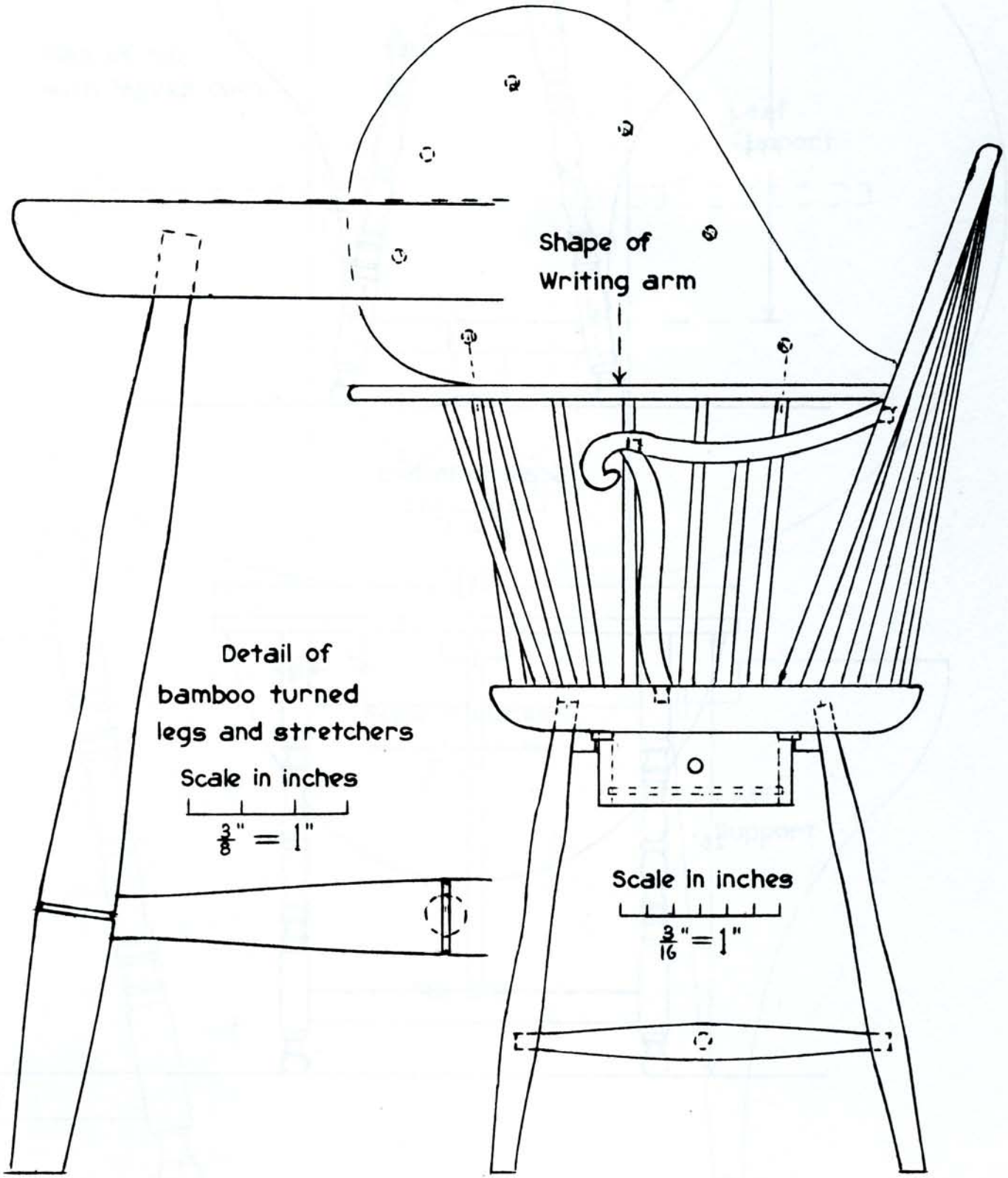
1/8" = 1"



WINDSOR CHAIR WITH WRITING ARM

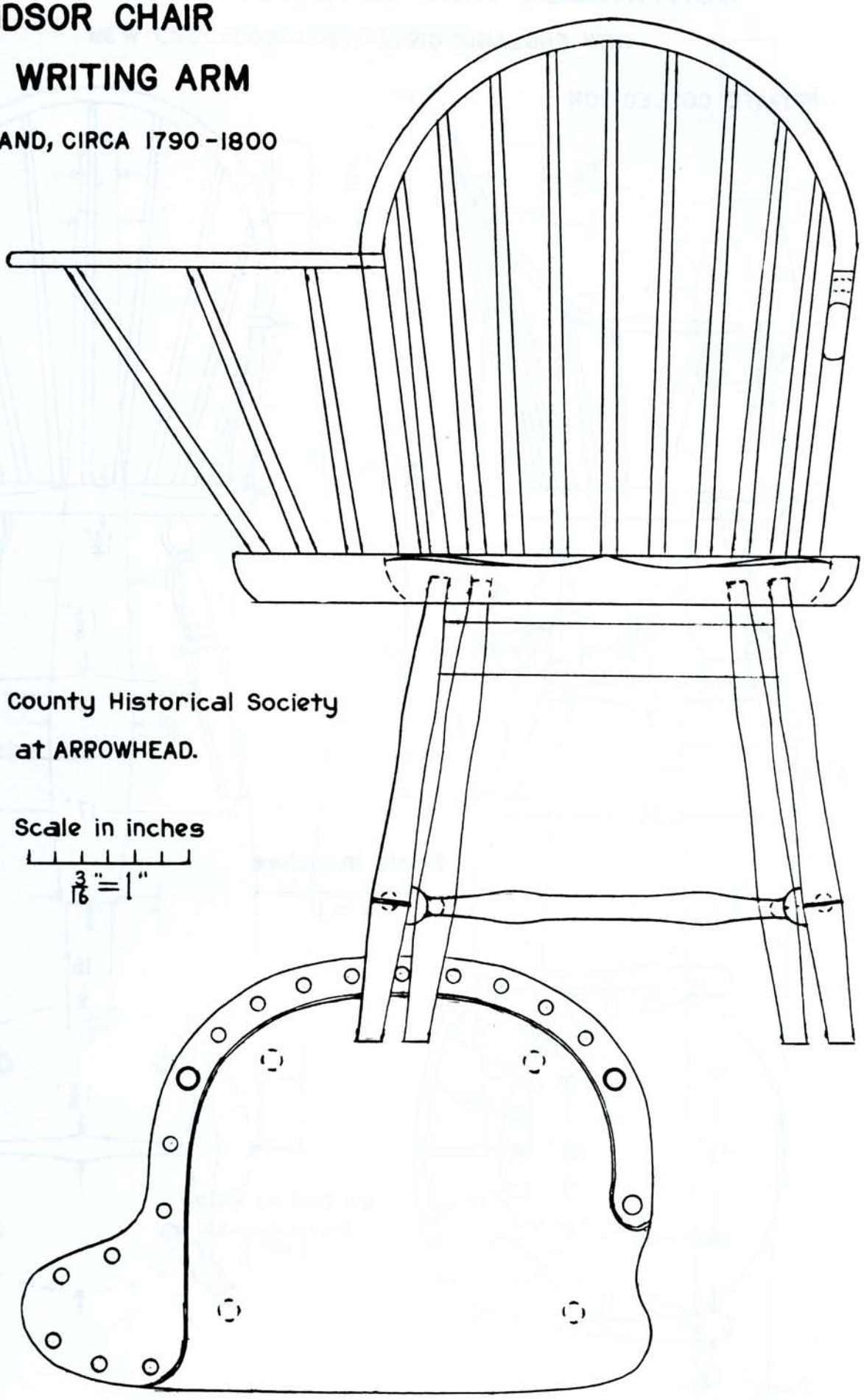
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1790 – 1800

Berkshire County Historical Society at ARROWHEAD.



WINDSOR CHAIR
WITH WRITING ARM

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1790-1800



Berkshire County Historical Society

at ARROWHEAD.

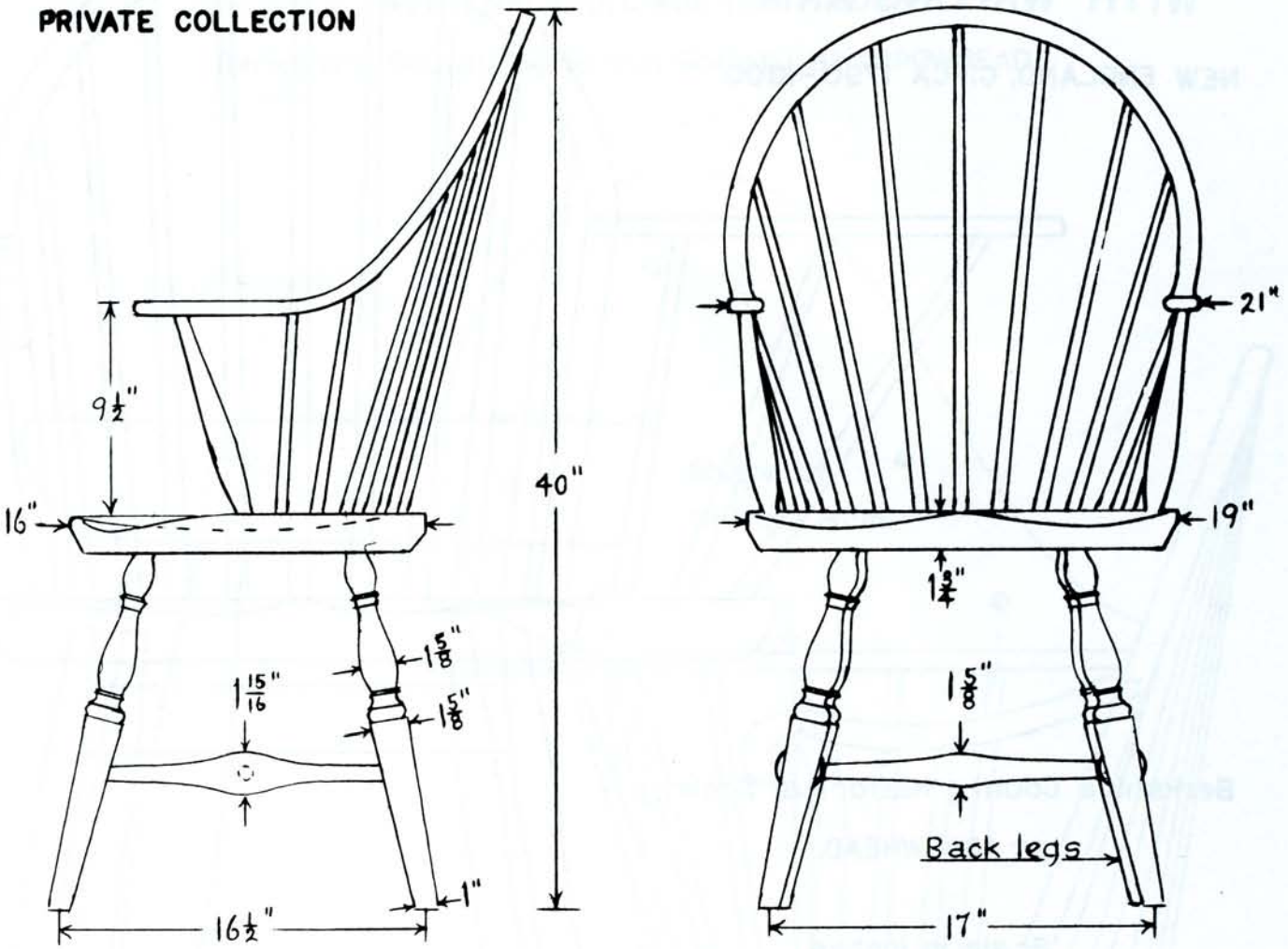
Scale in inches

$\frac{3}{16}" = 1"$

CONTINUOUS ARM WINDSOR CHAIR

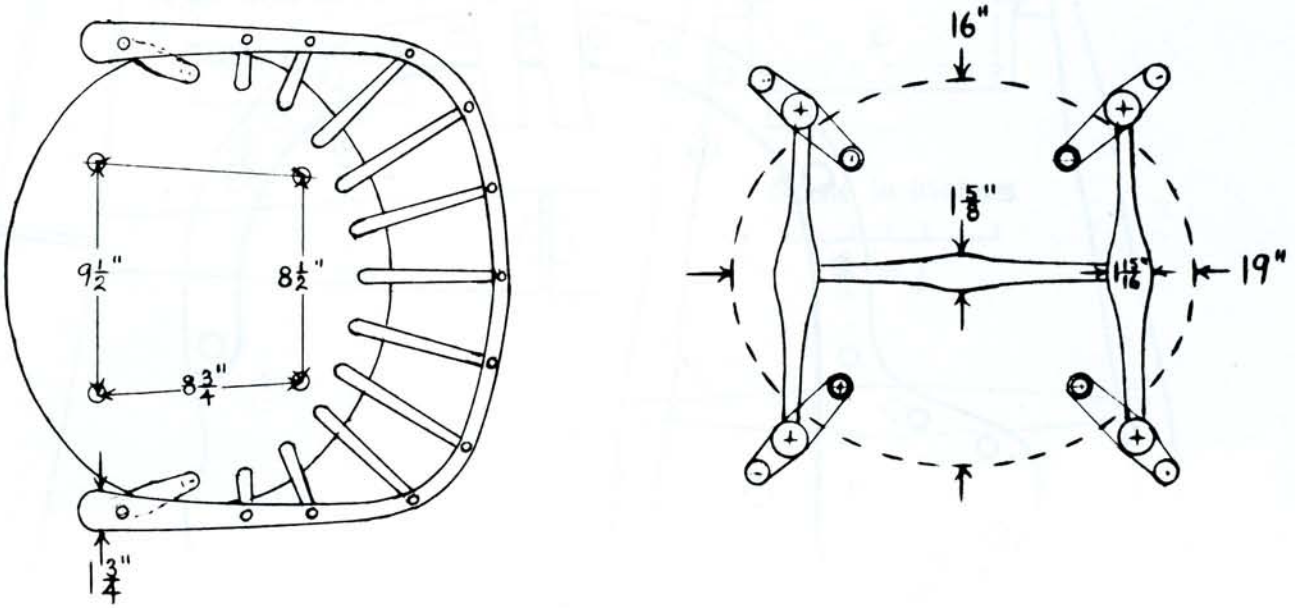
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1760 – 1800

PRIVATE COLLECTION



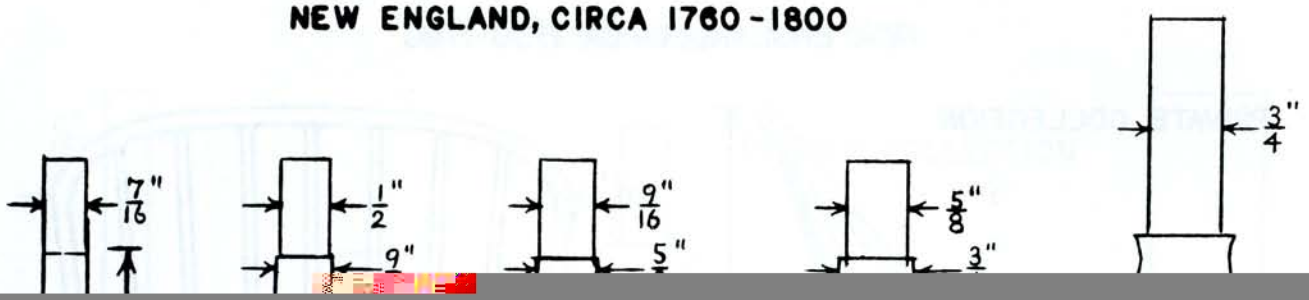
Scale in inches

⅛" = 1"



TURNINGS FOR THE WINDSOR CHAIR

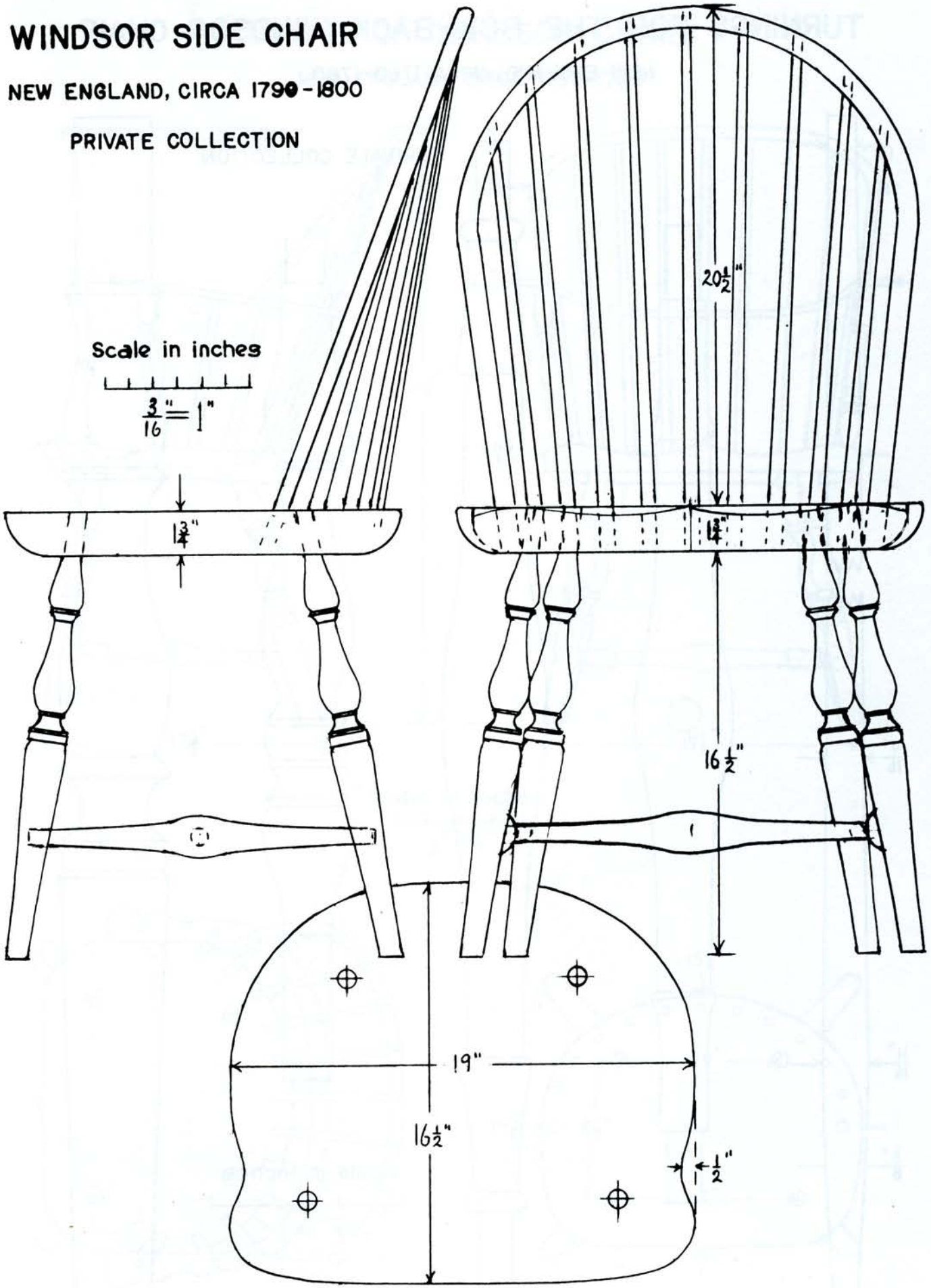
NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1760 - 1800



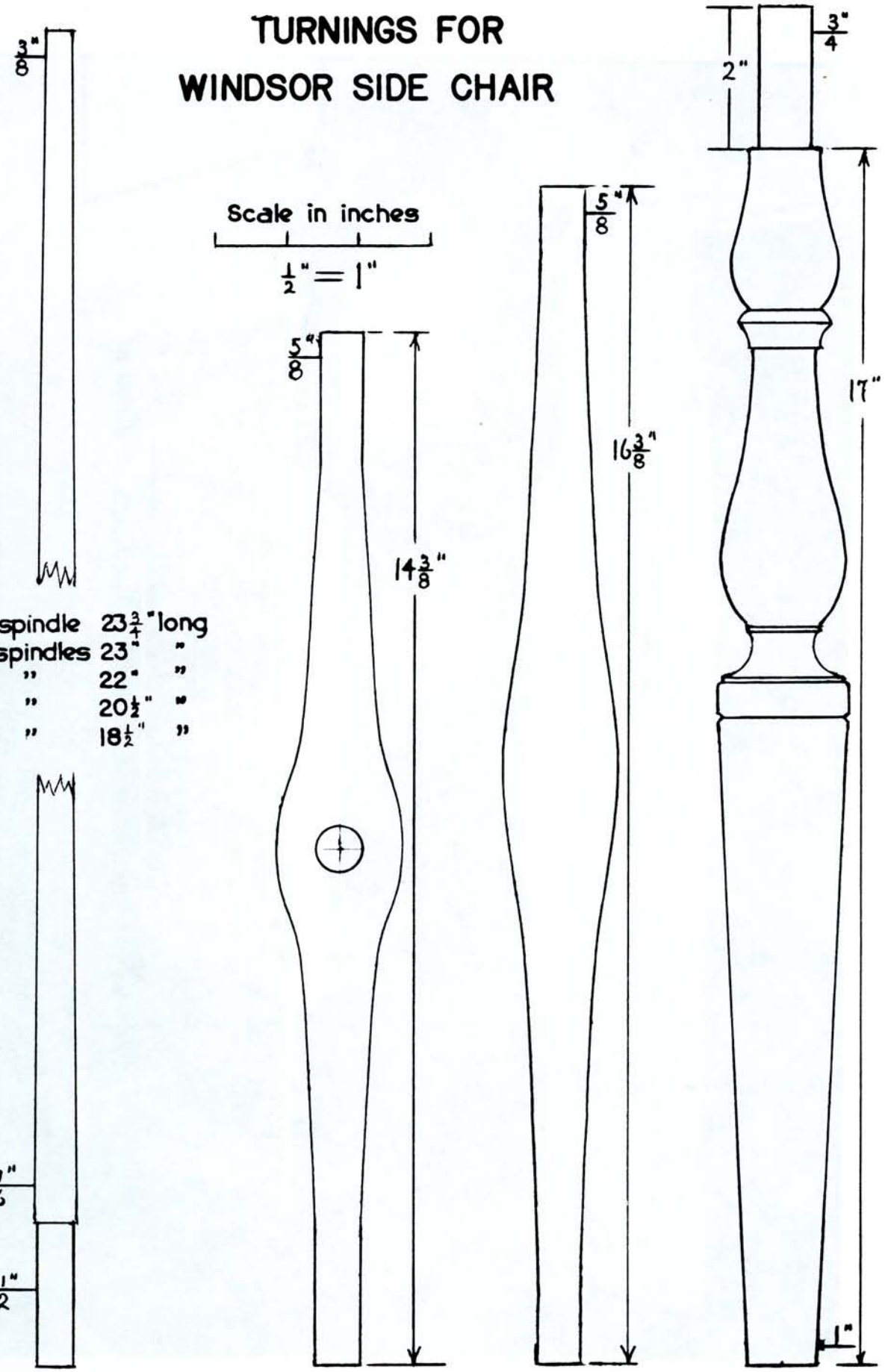
WINDSOR SIDE CHAIR

NEW ENGLAND, CIRCA 1790-1800

PRIVATE COLLECTION



TURNINGS FOR WINDSOR SIDE CHAIR



Center spindle	23 3/4"	long
2 spindles	23"	"
2 "	22"	"
2 "	20 1/2"	"
2 "	18 1/2"	"

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Mahogany tall case clock *(Courtesy of the Red Lion Inn)* (page 2)

Cherry bonnet top highboy *(Courtesy of the Red Lion Inn)* (page 6)

Tambour desk *(Courtesy of Arrowhead)* (page 20)

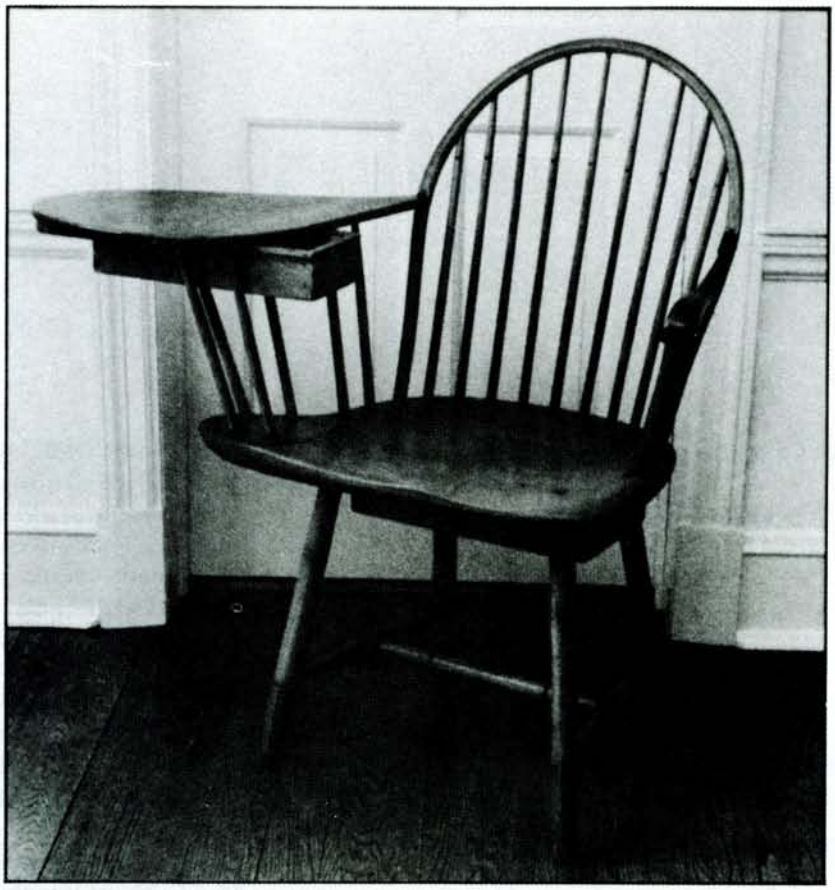
Cherry chest of drawers *(Courtesy of Arrowhead)* (page 22)

Lowboy *(Courtesy of the Red Lion Inn)* (page 30)

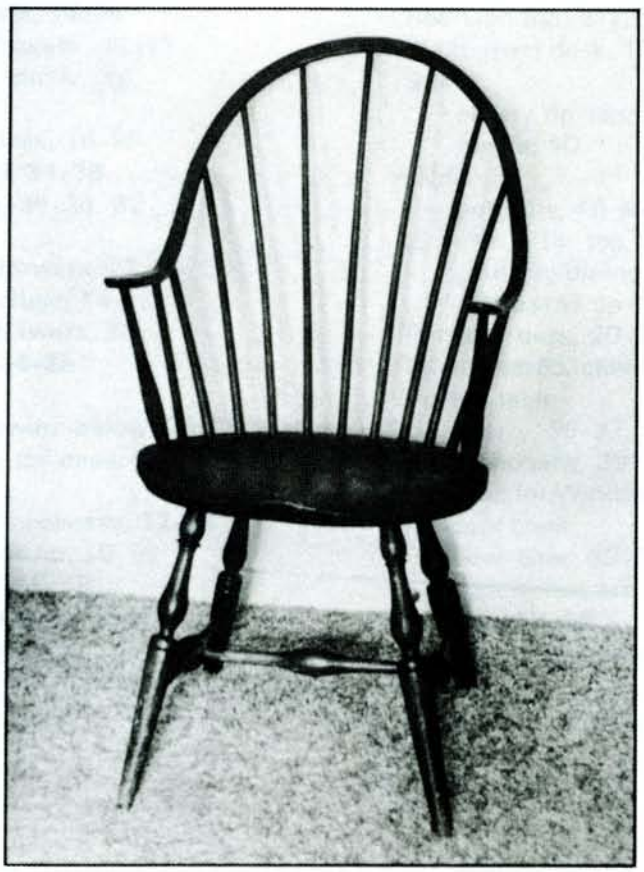
Mahogany tip-top table *(Courtesy of Arrowhead)* (page 39)

Gate-leg dining table *(Courtesy of the Red Lion Inn)* (page 42)

Butterfly table *(Courtesy of the Berkshire Museum)* (page 46)



Windsor chair with writing arm *(Courtesy of Arrowhead)* (page 48)



Continuous arm Windsor chair *(Ejner Handberg)* (page 50)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ejner Handberg was a skilled cabinetmaker of more than fifty years' experience. Born in Denmark, he came to the United States at seventeen years of age and learned his craft from nineteenth-century cabinetmakers who insisted on precision and accuracy.

Having developed a strong interest in Shaker furniture and won wide recognition for his five volumes of meticulously detailed drawings of Shaker objects, he also turned his attention to the task of measuring and drawing other fine American furniture he loved and admired.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Paul Kleinwald and his wife, Susan, are antiques dealers specializing in American and European formal furnishings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Working in his youth in the building trades, Paul moved in time to fine cabinetry work and then to antiques restoration, in which he is highly regarded. His restoration work today is limited to his own merchandise. A resident of Berkshire County, Massachusetts, for twenty-five years, he is President of the Berkshire County Antiques Dealers Association and a Director of the Great Barrington Historical Society.

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- Cherry Slant-Front Desk
- Tambour Desk
- Cherry Chest of Drawers
- Pine Chest
- Chest with Two Drawers Below
- Cherry Lowboy Dresser and Mirror
- Cherry Tip-top Table
- Maple Candlestand
- Gate-leg Dining Table
- Butterfly Table
- Windsor Chair with Writing Arm
- Continuous Arm Windsor Chair
- Bow-back Windsor Chair

Ejner Handberg (1902-1985) was born in Denmark, emigrated to America, and for many years was a cabinetmaker in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he helped design and build Norman Rockwell's studio.

Paul Kleinwald is a highly regarded restorer of antiques. He and his wife, Susan, are dealers in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, specializing in American and European furnishings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

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