

. . . *Next to Godliness:*

A Sheraton Night Table

If it is true, as Francis Bacon wrote in 1605 in Advancement of Learning, that “cleanness of body was ever deemed to proceed from a due reverence to God,” then the absence of any widespread regard for personal cleanliness before the 1800’s or the facilities to make such possible is a sweeping indictment of the godlessness of the American public throughout at least two-thirds of its history. The simple fact is that before the advent of the modern era with its running water, municipal sewers, and its notions of public sanitation and hygiene, the American public (as well as its European contemporaries) was part of the “great unwashed.” No modern day restoration of colonial life at Salem, Wethersfield, or Williamsburg (in their antiseptic neatness) can ignore that fact without fostering in the visitor a false nostalgia for a past that even Miniver Cheevy would have scorned. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., the 19th century historian and descendent of an illustrious line of American patriots, noted in 1890 that his contemporaries, “if carried back suddenly into the admired existence of the past. . . [would] experience an acute and lasting attack of homesickness and disgust.” He concluded that “the earliest times in New England were not pleasant . . . the earlier generations were not pleasant to live with.”

The night tables and wash stands which first appeared in George Hepplewhite’s Guide in 1794 and Thomas Sheraton’s Drawing Book in 1793 are only the first timid blush of a century-long process which finally moved the proper locus for human ablutions from the kitchen and human elimination from the woods and privy to the privacy and convenience of the modern bathroom. Herbert Cescinsky (in English Furniture) wrote that “it is notable that Hepplewhite in the ‘Guide’ timidly introduces the washstand as an article of household furniture, but the designs which he illustrates appear to be very inadequate affairs, more in the nature of shaving or powdering stands. It was an age when cleanliness may have been next to godliness, but both were far removed from houses, and were not catered to by the cabinetmaker.” In short, the Sheraton night table which is the subject of this article, is a relatively rare piece of bedroom



furniture of the period, combining the wash basin and chamber pot (as well as their attendant functions) in one place.

This is not to say that the bedroom basin and the other crockery were early 19th century innovations, not to imply that other items of furniture had not previously appeared to house them. Rather it underscores the fact that in the preceeding centuries relatively few accepted the virtue of having either item in the house and certainly not in the bedroom. As far as washing and bathing were concerned, there had been both cultural and practical reasons for ignoring their necessity. In their hydrophobia, Americans were little different from their European cousins. In the late 1600’s Samuel Pepys, the English diarist, expressed his surprise that his wife not only took a bath but said that she might do it again. The attitude of the typical colonial woman is reported by Cecil Drinker in his account of colonial medical practice in Philadelphia (Not So Long Ago, 1937). Elizabeth Drinker, the wife of a well-to-do-Philadelphia Quaker, had a shower bath installed in her backyard for “therapeutic” purposes in 1799. Having tried it out, she recorded in her diary that “I bore it better than I expected, not having been wett all over at once, for 28 years past.” Charles Adams, noting that no house in Quincy,

Massachusetts had a bathroom prior to 1820, attributed the aversion of his ancestors to water to a quite practical reason: "When the temperature of a bed-room ranges below the freezing point, there is no inducement. . .to waste any unnecessary time in washing." In defense of practicality, Daniel Boorstin contends in The Americans: The Democratic Experience that running water was a labor-saving device; so wash basin and tub were moved about to wherever the water could be most conveniently carried. Unless there were servants in the home to fetch and carry, the placement of a basin or tub very far from the water supply or the source of heat made little sense, even to those relative few who were inclined to use them with any regularity. By and large, whether of high quality or low station, Americans were a rather rank lot who could ignore each other only because they shared a common condition. The American adoption of the European vogue of bathing was not attributable, strangely enough, to any sudden upsurge in their attachment to the practice as a requisite for heaven but rather to their acceptance of a premise of medical quackery: the assumption that disease was borne by bad odors. When the desire to bathe and wash gained currency, it was not a lack of perfume but a mistaken hygienic principle that fueled the movement. Wash basins were introduced as a common utensil for the same reasons that swamps were drained: to eliminate the health hazards posed by "bad air". So, if swamp draining and wash basins had a positive effect on public health (ie., by eliminating the breeding ground for malaria bearing mosquitoes, and by retarding the spread of germs), they were beneficial practices accidentally adopted for the wrong reasons.

While washing gained acceptance in an attempt to eliminate odors as the source of infection and promoted the placement of wash stands where they could be conveniently used, the acceptance of indoor facilities for human elimination was rejected on exactly the same grounds. To be sure, the chamber pot and a range of furniture pieces designed to enclose and disguise them had been fixtures in the better quality colonial homes for generations, particularly in those houses with servants. For several hundred years, the chief reliance for those unable or unwilling to seek the outdoors (ie., woods, barn, privy, "house of office", or "necessary") was the chamber pot (termed "Oliver's Skull" by royalist-leaning southern colonists whose dislike for Oliver Cromwell was displayed in other ways as well). In upper class homes it was disguised in a number of ways: as a bed step (with the utensil under the top step), the close stool (which could be any manner of chair converted for the purpose,



ie., wing chair with valances, corner chair, etc.), the *chaise percee* provision had been made for the enclosed placement of the pot). But whatever the disguise, the presence of the utensil was viewed as a health hazard and as generally undesirable (even though the privy, pigsty, and garbage dump were typically located in the healthy outdoors near the family well). As late as 1851, Millard Fillmore (whose administration was less than noteworthy) was publically criticized for having done something that was "both unsanitary and undemocratic" when he installed the first permanent bath and water closet in the White House. So the broad public acceptance of such indoor sanitary devices came well after that given the was basin and stand. That acceptance would come with such 19th century developments as public water and sewage disposal systems, the invention of water closets, the syphon, and flush valve toilets.

Against this background, the appearance of a "night table" in Sheraton's Drawing Book, incorporating facilities for both basin and pot, was something of a pioneering effort. While such pieces had been made by local cabinetmakers for years, usually converting another piece of furniture for this use, the publication of Sheraton's drawings

reflected a growing public acceptance of such pieces as standard items of household furniture. It was offered in two modes by Sheraton: one with a lift top and hinged doors, and the other with upper shelves, holding the basin and pitcher, which swivelled aside to uncover the chamber pot. Designed as a corner cabinet, Sheraton's stand was fitted with castors at the brackets so that it could

be readily wheeled away from the wall for use with the top swung aside. While no existing prototype of the night table has been located, the following plans (Figure 1) have been developed from Sheraton's perspective drawing as reproduced in Thomas Sheraton, The Cabinetmaker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book (New York: Dover Publications, 1972), Plate 23.

Bill of Materials

(Note: the material of choice is mahogany; the interior carcass pieces may be made from basswood and the exterior from mahogany, or the entire piece can employ stained basswood.)

Base:

3	Shelves	17"x17"x3/4" (cut to pattern)	1/16"
1	Side	18 1/2"x12"x3/4" (vertical grain)	1/16"
1	Side	17 3/4"x12"x3/4" (vertical grain)	1/16"
1	Bottom	19"x19"x1/4" (cut to pattern)	1/32"
6	Bracket Foot	Cut to pattern	1/16"
1	Swivel-pin Block	Cut to pattern	1/32"
1	Bowed Front	8 1/4"x27 3/4"x3/4" (vertical grain)	1/16"
1	Drawer Front	3"x27 3/4"x3/4" (vertical grain)	1/16"
1	Drawer Bottom	17"x17"x3/4" (cut to same pattern shelves)	1/16"
1	Drawer Side	2 1/4"x16 1/4"x3/4"	1/16"
1	Drawer Side	2 1/4"x17"x3/4"	1/16"
1	Drawer Guide	3/4"x1 1/2"x15"	1/32"
1	Bottom Shelf Facing	3/4"x27 3/4"x3/4"	1/16"

Shelf Unit:

1	Bottom Shelf	19 1/4"x19 1/4"x3/4" (cut to pattern)	1/16"
1	Basin Shelf	19 1/4"x19 1/4"x1/2" (cut to pattern)	1/32"
1	Top Shelf	8"x8"x1/2" (cut to pattern)	1/32"
1	Scroll-cut Back	14"x18"x1/2" (cut to pattern)	1/32"
1	Scroll-cut Back	14"x18 1/2"x1/2" (cut to pattern)	1/32"
2	Side Apron	3"x15 3/4"x3/4"	1/16"
1	Front Apron	2"x27 1/2"x1/2" (cut to pattern)	1/32"
1	Front Apron Brace	3/4"sq.x27 1/2" (cut to pattern)	1/16"
3	Turned Spindle	2 1/4"sq.x16 1/2" (turn to pattern)	3/16" sq.
1	Swivel Pin	13 1/2"L.	No. 61 guage rod

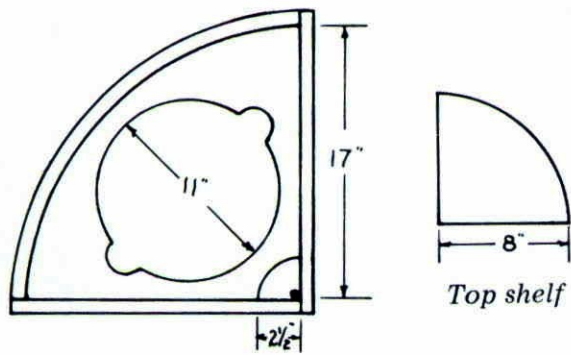
(Note: the drawer may be omitted by substituting a bowed front 12"x27 3/4"x3/4" for the front and drawer parts listed above.)

Base Construction:

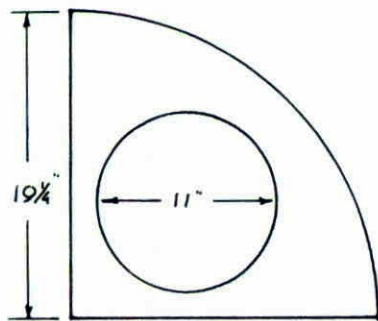
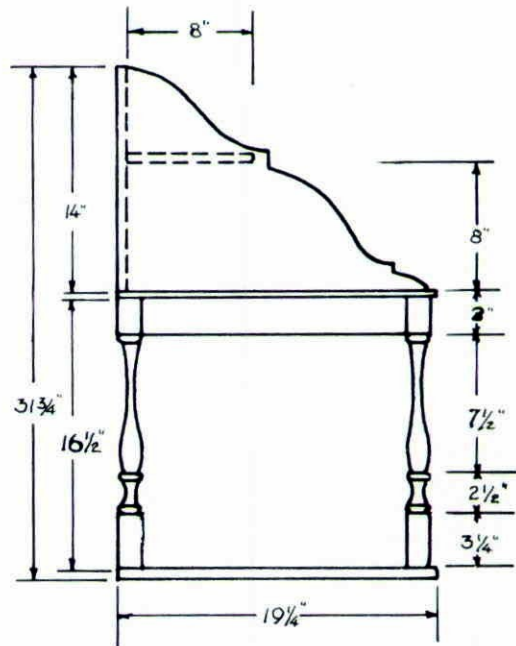
Lay out and cut all of the parts for the carcass. Note that two of the shelves and the drawer bottom are the same size and can be cut from the same pattern. On all shelves, which are quarter-circular, the curving side can be drawn more evenly and exactly with a compass after the two straight sides have been marked off. While basswood may be used for the drawer bottom and interior shelves of the carcass, the top shelf through which the chamber pot is suspended should be cut from mahogany. The scroll-cut bracket feet can be cut in the same operation by preparing a sandwich of six pieces of 1/16" stock, tack gluing the pieces together at the ends. Draw the bracket pattern on the top piece and cut all six

brackets at once with a scroll or jig saw.

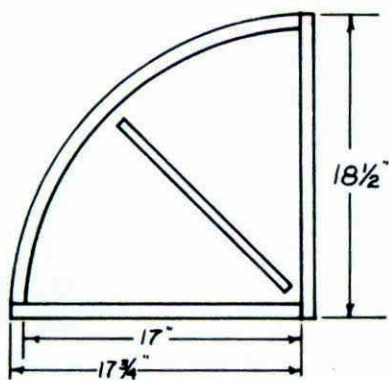
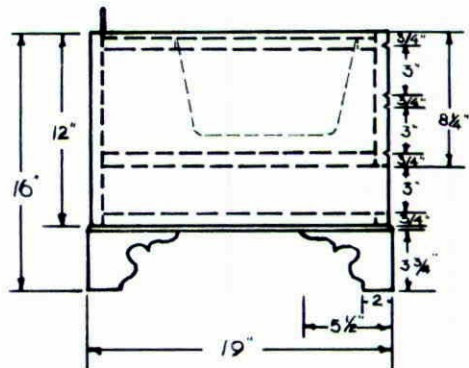
The curved or bow front facing of the carcass must be scored to simulate the fronts of two upper drawers and the rails that divide them from each other. Be sure that the grain runs vertically on this and the other front pieces. Using the top of a modeling knife, mark and score horizontal lines across the face of the piece at intervals given on the elevation drawing in Figure 1: i.e., measuring down from the top at intervals of 3/4", 3", 3/4", and 3". When the facing piece has been scored, mark the position of the drawer pulls (8" in from the end of the drawer and centered between top and bottom edge). Soak or steam the piece until it is pliable. Then mold it around the surface of a 3" diameter glass or can, holding it in place until thoroughly



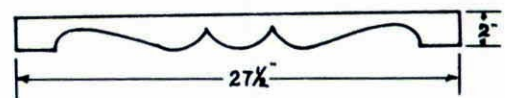
Top shelf (base) and swivel Pin Block



Basin shelf



Bottom shelf and drawer guide position



Front apron

FIG. 1 — Sheraton Night Table Plan

dry with tape or a heavy rubber band. Steam and bend the drawer front in the same manner. Cut a 3/4" square facing strip for the bottom interior shelf (making sure that the grain on the strip runs vertically) and glue it to the curved shelf edge. When dry, smooth the piece up with sandpaper. (Note: a quick jig for gluing the facing onto the curved shelf edge can be made from foam board and T-pins. Overlay the board with wax paper, secure that shelf to the board with pins pushed vertically into the foam board along the two straight edges of the shelf. Then secure the glued facing strip along the circular edge of the shelf in the same manner with T-pins set snugly against the glued strip.) When the shelf facing has dried, mark the position of the drawer guide strip on the center of the shelf top and glue the strip in place. At the same time, mark the position of the drawer guide strip on the bottom of the drawer. Rout out a groove at this position so that the groove in the bottom of the drawer exactly fits the guide strip on the bottom shelf. If correctly marked and cut, the drawer bottom should exactly overlay the bottom shelf when in the closed position and should slide easily along the guide.

Cut the hole in the top shelf for the chamber pot. Using a half-round file and sandpaper, dress up the edges of the hole and file in addition a hand-hole on each side of the opening to aid in the removal of the pot. Measure and mark on the inside faces of the two case side pieces the positions of the top, middle and bottom shelves.

Begin the case assembly by gluing the bottom shelf and two sides together, making sure that the butt joint between the two sides is aligned and square, and that the bottom shelf fits flush with the bottom edge of the sides. (It is always a good idea before any final assembly to make a "dry run", checking to see that every joint fits properly before glue is applied.) Next glue the top shelf in place a scale 1/4" below the top edge of the sides. A small scrap of 1/32" wood, slid along the top edge of the shelf, will serve as a handy depth gauge for aligning the shelf below the top edge of the sides. (This offset is necessary so that when the upper shelf assembly is in place its base will clear the top of the chamber pot.) Glue the center shelf in place.

When the side/shelf assembly is thoroughly dry, carefully fit the curved front piece in place so that it seats well at each end and against the face of the upper and middle shelves; some trimming may be required for an exact fit. Glue the front in place. Assemble the drawer (bottom, sides and front); when dry, sand to fit so that the drawer slides easily on the guide and fits flush with the face of the cabinet. With the drawer in place, sand the face of the cabinet (with the grain!) using 280

finishing paper mounted on a sanding block. (The flat sanding block assures that you will achieve a flat surface on the case front, rather than an undulating surface that will result from use of hand-held paper.) If in the process of sanding the scored lines on the case front have become faint, you may have to rescore them again with a modeling knife.

Fit the bottom to the case, making sure that it extends only 1/4" beyond the case on all sides, and glue it in place. Miter the corners (45%) of the bracket feet and glue the three pairs together. After the three brackets are glued flush with the corners of the case bottom, sand the front faces of the two front brackets to fit the curve of the case front. Drill the holes for the drawer knobs. Finally, glue the small, triangular bracing block in the back corner on the case top; it should fit flush with the top edges of the sides. This completes the assembly of the lower case.

Upper Shelf Assembly:

Lay out and cut the bottom and basin shelves to the same dimensions. Because the dowel and swivel rod holes in the bottom shelf are so close to the edge of the cut piece, you may avoid splintering out the edges of the holes when drilling by drilling the holes first and then cutting out the shelf. Lay out and cut all of the other parts for the upper shelf assembly. When turning the three spindles, note that on the front two spindles an integral dowel, 3/4" long must be turned on the lower end of each. Sand and stain the two scroll-cut back pieces and the small top shelf and lay them aside. The 3/4" square brace or rail that fits behind the front apron is cut to the proper curve (rather than bent) from a piece of 3/4" flat stock (front edge: 18 1/2" radius). When gluing the front apron to the brace, the proper curve of the piece must be maintained; this can be done by pinning the glued assembly over a template of the proper curve on a piece of foam board.

Assembly of the top can be a bit tricky if the proper alignment is to be maintained. Don't try to glue the entire unit together at once; rather do one side at a time. You should use a gluing jig or gluing box. Foam board and T-pins will do, but the magnetic gluing box from Woodworks is quick and easy to use in this kind of assembly and helps to assure a satisfactory result. Glue the back spindle and one front spindle to the bottom shelf; fit the side apron or rail between the top shanks of the spindles and glue. Lay the assembly flat on its side and, after testing for squareness, clamp it until dry. Then assemble the other side in the same manner. Fit the front apron and brace between the front spindles and glue it into place.

The swivel pin can be made by cutting off the

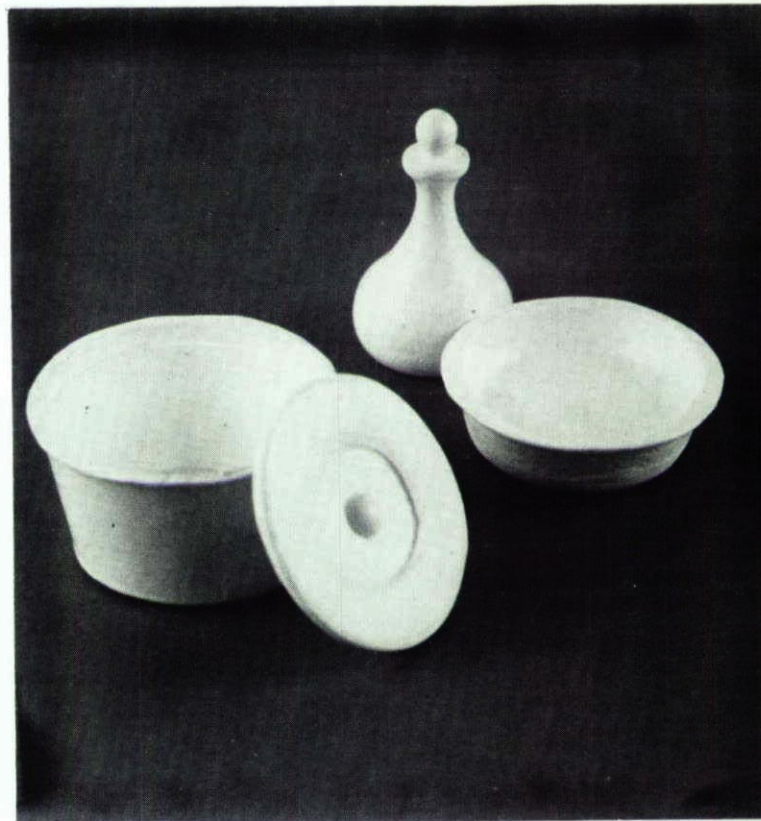
head of a T-pin, or by cutting the proper length from a 61 gauge brass rod. The rod fits exactly in the inside back corner of the lower case and extends from the bottom shelf to a point 1 1/2" above the top of the case. Using a No. 61 drill, drill down through the top and middle shelves. Mark and drill a 1 1/2" deep hole up through the back corner of the shelf unit base and into the lower shank of the spindle. Glue the basin shelf, the two back pieces, and the upper shelf in place. Clean up any glue spots, sand, stain (if desired) and varnish or laquer the upper and case assemblies.

The pulls pose something of a problem. No Sheraton-Hepplewhite pulls are available commercially to our knowledge. Therefore the pulls were fabricated from brass brads with heads measuring a scale 3/4" in diameter and back plates cut from shim-stock brass sheet. Dress-makers pins with gilded heads might also have been used.



The crockery is made from basswood and cardstock, using the techniques outlined in the article on cardstock dishes in this issue. The carage or water jug was turned from a piece of maple dowel and is 11 1/2" tall and 7" diameter at the widest section. It is finished with two coats of Duro White Porcelain Glaze.

The side of the washbasin is formed from a 2" wide arc of cardstock (drawn with a compass to an outside radius of 20" and an inside radius of 18"). A tapered ring is formed with a diameter at the top edge that is slightly smaller than the basin opening in the shelf. The ends of the ring are marked and cut (each with a tapered or feathered edge) so that



a slight, smooth overlap is made, and then glued. The bottom of the basin is formed by a 1/16" thick basswood disk, cut to a diameter of approximately 9 1/2". Glue the side to the top face of the bottom disk. Next draw and cut a cardstock ring, 1/2" wide, to an inside diameter that fits the upper edge of the basin side. Glue this in place, forming the lip of the basin. After the assembly has dried, sand the edge of the wooden base until it is flush with the face of the cardstock sides. Round off the bottom edge of the base. Trim the inside edge of the lip so that it is flush with the basin sides. When the surfaces and edges of the basin are smooth, apply several coats of gesso, sanding it smooth between each coat. Finally, finish the basin with Duro White Porcelain Glaze.

The chamber pot is fabricated in the same manner as was the basin. It is 6" high with an inside diameter of 11 inches at the top and 9" at the bottom. The sides are formed with a double thickness of cardstock, the inner strip being 1" narrower than the outer strip, thus forming a ridge on which the cover of the pot will seat. (Note: the outside shell of the pot is 6" high and drawn with radii of 37" and 31"; the inside is 5" high and drawn with radii of 36" and 31".) The pot cover is cut to fit the inside finished diameter of the jar and may either be turned from a piece of flat stock wood or laminated from two pieces of 1/32" wood. The finish of the pot is the same as that on the wash basin.