

History of a Windsor

The date is July 4th, 1776. The place is the Assembly Room in the Pennsylvania State House. Congress is voting independence for the Colonies. The furnishings of choice? Windsor. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams all favored these chairs. The Windsor has many descriptions: strong, durable, graceful, comfortable. But when viewed through the lens of history, the Windsors' less apparent qualities are revealed, qualities that ultimately contributed to its long-standing success.

A DEMOCRATIC CHAIR

The introduction of the Windsor to the U.S. and its rise in popularity reflected early American history. Charles Santore, author of [The Windsor Style in America](#), describes the Windsor as, "...a democratic style, one which appealed to and was used by all levels of American society." Santore, observed that the Windsor, "...knew no social boundaries." This characteristic is especially poignant considering Windsors became the choice of Americans just as the country was establishing itself as a democracy, free from England's monarchy.

A REGAL DISCOVERY

Ironically, the discovery of the first Windsor chair is owed to a monarch. Legend says that England's King George I was on a country outing and sought refuge from the rain in a small cottage. He took a seat in a clean-cut chair. According to Santore:

This chair had a seat made from a single plank of wood; the legs were attached to the seat through holes drilled into it. The back of the chair consisted of spokelike sticks that, like the legs, were stuck into holes in the seat, too. So enthralled was the king with this humble but comfortable piece of furniture that, on his return to Windsor Castle, he ordered several made after the same pattern. Hence, of course, the legendary derivation of both the chair and the name of the chair.

King George's fancy of the Windsor chair started a trend. It was fashionable for members of his court to prefer the Windsor. By the 1720s Windsor chairs were in vogue for indoor and outdoor settings.

AMERICAN STYLE

During this time, London was the beacon of high fashion. Much of the Colonial America, especially Philadelphia, looked to London for the current fads. Thus, if you were a proper person with acquired wealth living in the Colonies, then your home and garden *had* to reflect your refined tastes. What better way to furnish it than to import London's trendiest chair of the time? A green painted Windsor was *the* thing. As these Windsors were on display in prominent gardens throughout Philadelphia, people noticed. And while the Windsor represented high style for some, the chairs were highly affordable and thus, accessible to the masses.

The first experience American craftsmen had with Windsors was most likely repairing finished chairs imported from London, or making a duplicate to expand a client's set. The earliest original American Windsor was made around 1730. Affordability, accessibility, and comfort, accelerated the popularity of the Windsor. By the 1770s the Windsor chair was even referred to as the Philadelphia chair. In the mid-1780's the port of Philadelphia exported over 4600 Windsor chairs across the Colonial America.

THROUGH THE YEARS

The Windsor chair has remained popular for nearly three hundred years. Stylistic flourishes have been added through the years but the basic construction has not changed. These chairs are a testament to quality. People used paint color to reflect current trends. There are many Windsors from the original Colonies that share the same paint history. The base color is the original green. This was covered in bright red, the color of choice in the early to mid-9th century. And finally, the top coat is black. Today, many people will paint and distress new Windsors with this specific color combination to achieve historic accuracy.

RETURN TO ACCESSIBILITY

The original Windsors are a testament to those craftsmen who were thoroughly dedicated to quality. Over two hundred years later their chairs are still strong and sought after by collectors. Ironically, due to its

phenomenal success, this “democratic chair” has become overpriced for most Americans. Lita Solis-Cohen observed in the March 2003, *Maine Antique Digest*, that original Windsor chairs were auctioned off for tens of thousands of dollars. So if you want a Windsor in your home, what are your options?

Look-alike Windsor chairs are mass-produced for a fraction of the cost. They have similar traits in their appearances but lack the important fundamental elements: comfort and durability. These mass-produced chairs are stiff, uncomfortable, and loosen over time. Fortunately, there are master chairmakers who have dedicated themselves to the art of making Windsor chairs using traditional methods. Bill Peck of Blue Knight Windsor Chairs is one of these craftsmen. Dedicated to quality, his chairs are a connection to our American heritage and are ready to continue a reputation of durability for the next two hundred years with time-honored Windsor style and a personal flourish.