

North Carolina Kettle Stand

A Research Note on a Rare Survivor from the Era of Tea

By

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Tea first came to the American colonies in the mid-17th century but did not reach its heyday until the second quarter of the 18th century. The British and Colonial desire for tea itself also spurred an entire market for the accoutrements required for the proper consumption of the drink. Early on, proper tea consumption was likely reserved for more wealthy households. However, the middle class had the desire to partake though not always the means to do so properly. The advent of less expensive creamware tea sets and other accessories allowed such patrons also to partake in the tea ritual.

Tables dedicated to tea drinking became just as integral a part of the tea service as the ceramic tea sets and kettles themselves. Today, when we think of a tea table, the first thing to come to mind is the typical round-top, three-legged version with a turned baluster. This form, conceived in Britain, also was produced by colonial craftsman in both northern and southern colonies. It soon became the standard form, even designated in early inventories as a “tea table “. The round-top tea tables, as well as the less-common, square and rectangular tea tables can be found in many styles, ranging from neat and plain, utilitarian examples to lavishly carved, Rococo versions.

Most kettle stands, like the tea tables, were the round-top, three-legged, turned-baluster style, and they were nearly identical to taller candle

stands. Kettle stands and candle stands could have even been used for the same purposes.

The rarest form of furniture dedicated to the consumption of tea is the square kettle stand. Kettle stands likely were intended to hold the hot-water kettle separately. For stability reasons and considering their smaller sizes, kettle stands were usually lower in height than the tea tables they would accompany.

The onset of the Revolutionary war drastically stifled the American desire for tea but did not stop it all together. Merchants turned to Dutch-owned, trading companies for their supplies, along with the black-market teas being brought over in order to circumvent the highly taxed British pre-cured teas. This slowdown of tea importation affected the need for furnishings and vessels dedicated for the ritual, so not surprisingly, we find much fewer tea tables and kettle stands surviving from the late 18th century onward.

One example of such is a walnut kettle stand found in New Bern, NC (Figs. 1 & 2, New Bern kettle stand). It has slightly tapered, splayed legs, beaded skirt, and a two-board top, joined with a spline (Fig. 3, Spline top joint) (Fig. 4, Construction view of Fig. 1).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

It is difficult to date accurately tables as this, but this example probably has an earlier date based on the splined, pinned top. It likely was constructed between 1790 and 1800. Found in New Bern, a very prosperous and important North Carolina port city, this stand supports the idea of tea consumption still being practiced well after the Revolutionary War. Being the capitol city until 1792, New Bern

certainly had its share of affluent residents and visitors. So, with that, and with the access to ocean-going trade, they likely continued the practice of tea consumption. The scarceness of kettle stands is due in part to the small numbers originally produced. Further, the delicate nature of their small size made them less useful for other things, as many tables were demoted to use as work tables when styles changed. This kettle stand represents the more-modest, rarer, middle-class, square version of a hard to find furnishing dedicated to the ritual of taking tea (Fig. 5, Kettle stand shown for scale with a tea table and chair).



Figure 5