



Figure 1. Circa 1760 Dutch-style gumwood kast after restoration.

PRESERVING CHANGE IN THE RESTORATION OF AN 18TH CENTURY NEW YORK KAST

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Kasten are the large, ornate storage cabinets that were used in homes in the Netherlands to hold linens and other valuables and to display ceramic, silver and glass objects on their tops. They were integral to the clean and well-ordered homes the Dutch were famous for in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The kast was equally important in the Dutch settlements in the New World. They were found in Dutch, English and French homes in what is now New York City, Long Island, New Jersey, western Connecticut and the Hudson River Valley. The 17th century Dutch settlers brought their domestic habits, aesthetic preferences and woodworking methods with them to America. The first kasten known to be made in the New York area were built during the second half of the 17th century of riven oak, employing frame and panel construction. Oak was the traditional substrate for the structure of old country kasten. Urban versions were often veneered with exotic hardwoods, trimmed with ebony moldings, and elaborately carved. American interpretations were understandably limited by the needs of less wealthy people in a much rougher environment and were simpler in both form and construction. Their designs reflected rural and urban Dutch forms. Their innovations were prompted by the availability of new materials and possibly the influence of other traditions.

The builders of 18th-century American kasten employed wide board, dovetailed case construction. They preferred woods from America's deciduous forests such as red gum, walnut, poplar, and cherry, but also occasionally built with imported mahogany. The wood most commonly used, though, was red gum, a fairly dense hardwood with a tight, interlocked grain and a reddish color, which planes and turns nicely but has a tendency to twist, especially in wide, flat-sawn boards. It is native to the mid-Atlantic and southern states, but was shipped and used as far north as Albany during the colonial period.

Although the English took political control of New York in 1664, Dutch-based communities remained established throughout the region for another century and a half. I have heard from more than one source that in the Hudson Valley there were small towns whose main language was Dutch into the 19th century. The basic kast form that had developed by the early 18th century continued to be produced with only minor design changes for over a hundred years.

The kast that I am going to discuss was brought to me because its cornice had been cut down and needed restoration. It was most likely built in the Kings County section of Long Island, now Brooklyn, and incorporates many elements characteristic of that school of kast making. It was built in two sections. The lower one was a dovetailed base unit, with a large side-hung drawer made to look like two drawers. It is supported by large, turned bun feet in front and straight board feet in the rear. Turned, half bun feet have been added to the rear feet, probably at a later date.

The upper cupboard was built of wide boards rabbeted and nailed together enclosing one narrow and two wide shelves and an inner shallow drawer. The façade is made up of three wide vertical stiles, with applied mahogany insets and molded glyphs. It encloses two frame and panel doors with triple fielded raised panels.



Figure 2. Side of the base section showing the two part dovetailing process. The sides must be joined to the backboard before the front boards can be fit to the sides.

The cornice is nailed to the upper case sides and capped with pine boards to make a flat top surface.

A common characteristic of Kings County work, which is evident on this piece, is an unusual method of dovetailing the lower case parts. The face grain tails and end grain pins show on both the front corners of the façade and the back corners of the sides. This joining requires that the sides be fitted to the backboard before the front can be fitted to the sides. (fig. 2)

The method seems to be unique to work done by certain shops in Kings County, as Peter Kenny noted in the catalogue to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's show of American kasten.

Upon examining this piece, I noticed that it had been significantly modified at least twice before it got to my shop. The cornice had been cut down by about 1/3, eliminating the smaller elements. (fig. 3) This seriously reduced the strong diagonal movement typical of both the Dutch and American Baroque kasten. The top had been carefully finished with 1/2" thick pine boards laid front to back, their perimeter edges beveled and their joints covered with 1/4" battens, all of which had been stained. The work looked old, possibly 19th century.

The cupboard doors had been through two changes. Originally mounted on hidden pivot hinges and set behind the face frame stiles in the Dutch manner, they had been removed, cut down in width and re-hung flush to the face frame, using butt hinges. This is a method more in keeping with English style furniture. A common cause of hinge failure on these pieces is the wedging action that takes place when a door is opened too far and contacts the face frame stile. Evidence of broken wood in front of the original pivot hinges indicates that the doors did suffer from this problem. Perhaps whoever repaired this damage wasn't familiar with the pivot hinging and felt that it would be easier to cut the doors down and re-hinge with butt hinges.

A later worker restored the missing wood and replaced the doors into their original positions.

The other noticeable change was the addition of the turned half-round feet that had been applied to the plain board back feet. Turned feet in front and straight board feet in the rear supported most kasten of this design, although some were built with the more expensive option of four turned feet. It is not uncommon to find old world examples with six turned feet. The back feet on this kast were inconsistent in both design and technique with the front ones, and it would be hard to attribute them to the same hand and period. They were probably added later to increase the desirability of the kast. (fig. 4)



Figure 3. A sample of the proposed restoration was made to show the missing elements.

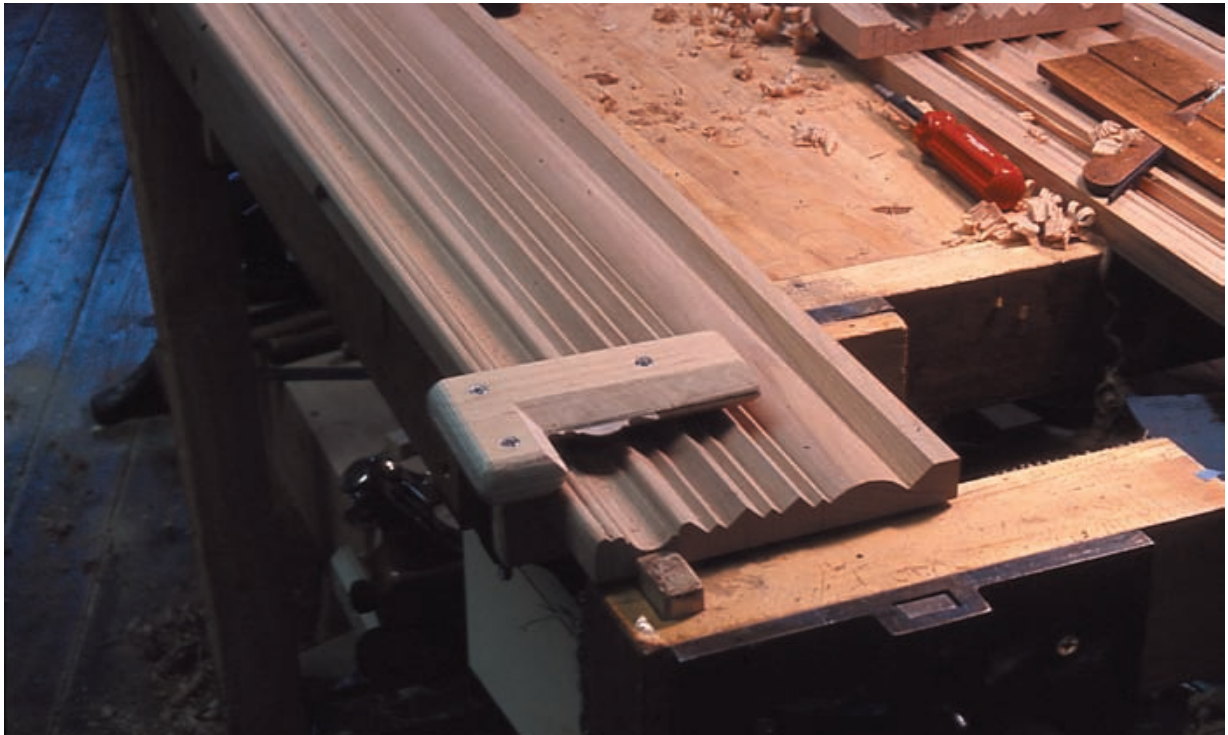


Figure 4. The turned half feet were added to the original straight back feet at a later date.

Over the years, the large cornices of many American kasten were cut down. Perhaps, when no longer considered fashionable or when being passed from one owner to another, a kast would be removed from a large to a small room, which had lower ceilings; or would have to be carried through doorways that were too narrow to pass through with the cornice intact. Cornices were often cut down or removed altogether and the kast relocated where it could continue to function storing linens or clothing. Many also had their interior shelves removed and were then fitted out for hanging clothes.

Another motive for cutting the cornice could be an attempt to modify the overall look of the form. Changing hardware, finishes and sometimes veneer to update a piece of furniture were not unusual practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A nineteenth-century owner might have felt that by decreasing the weight of some of the Dutch Baroque details, he or she could make the kast more harmonious with current tastes. Conversely, the subsequent restoration of the doors and the addition of bun feet to the rear seem to indicate that at a later point, there was a revived appreciation of the object's original nature.

If the cornice reduction and the re-hinging of the doors *did* indicate a stylistic change to this object, I wondered if perhaps there were other kasten that had been modified for this reason during the same period. I discussed that possibility with a curator and some historians. They weren't aware of any evidence to support the notion of a widespread urge to modify these Dutch forms at a particular



Figures 5 & 6. The shaping of cornice elements underway.

period. Most felt that the cornices had been cut down for functional reasons but that one couldn't rule out a style-motivated change in this case.

The owner and I decided to save the existing modification to the top of the kast because it was carefully considered and well crafted. We would allow access to that work by making the cornice restoration removable. The new section would be built as a single unit that could be lifted on or off.

I took measurements and tracings for the profile's missing elements from the cornice of a Kings County kast at the Van Alen House in Kinderhook, NY, which is owned by the Columbia County Historical Society. This kast was chosen because it was a fairly typical example of one from this school, and because it was accessible and had lower elements in the cornice which were similar in design and scale to those existing shapes on my client's kast.

Cutting the cornice's profile proceeded in a typical manner. From the drawn design, a template was made and the cornice profile traced onto both ends of each hand-planed board, which would make up the front and two sides of the cornice. Parallel lines were projected from the high and low points of each element and drawn along the faces to guide both the wasting cuts on the table saw and the planing cuts that would develop the profile. It is possible that some kast cornices were cut with one or two large molding planes, but most of the ones that I have examined appear to have been worked with hollow and round planes for the large curved elements and individual molders or straight rabbet planes for the smaller shapes. The existing lower cyma and ovolo shapes of this cornice appear to have been cut using hollows and rounds since they show faceted markings along their length. I used hollow and round planes, straight rabbet planes and a shop-cut scratch bead scraper to cut the new section.

The profile was checked with the template at various stages in the process to maintain control of its emerging shape. It is notable that the square fillets on these cornices often end in obtuse angles at their points, which appear to be the original intent,

though are certainly somewhat affected by shrinkage of the width of the board over time. (figs. 5 & 6. The images show the cutting of a larger cornice from a different restoration, but they illustrate the same procedure and results.)

Once the cornice was brought to final shape, I made a few cleaning passes with the planes and the scratch stock, to match as closely as possible the rhythm of starts and stops in the planing of the old profiles below. Some light sanding was done with 220-grit sandpaper to soften corners and simulate wear and some areas were burnished with a soft wooden block to emphasize that effect.

The angle at which the cornice projects from the sides of the cupboard was measured, and the front miter angles were laid out on a piece of plywood. Blocks of wood cut to the angle of projection were screwed down to an outline of the top view of the kast on the plywood. The molding pieces were clamped to these blocks and held in place while the miters were cut and adjusted to fit. Once the miters were fitted, glued and nailed, the three sides of the cornice were propped into their position on top of the existing cornice and the dimensions and the angles for the pine backboard were measured.

The backboard was cut to size and notched along the bottom to accommodate the existing battens, which pass through it. Next, the backboard was fastened to the molding returns with glue blocks and brads. Interior bracing boards were attached to the front board with glue blocks and to the backboard with rose head nails. (fig. 7)

To finish off the top, I fitted ½" thick pine boards, laid front to back at the ends. These simulate the boards that would have originally filled the gap between the cupboard sides and the top of the molding before the sides were cut down. The space between these boards was then filled in with pieces running parallel to the front and back. These were tacked into place and finally nailed down with rose head nails. (fig. 8)

When the cornice unit was assembled, it was set into its position on top of the existing cornice and



Figure 7



Figure 8. Fitting the top boards to the removable cornice extension.



Figure 9

the extra wood left on the bottom was scribed and planed off to bring the new wood tight to the old. The slight gap between the top and bottom sections all but disappeared due to its location under the fillet. (fig. 9)

The entire new section was given a wash coat of de-waxed orange shellac before being stained with a few coats of walnut crystals water stain. Each stain coat was sandwiched between thin applications of shellac to build towards a good color match. Once I had arrived at the right color, I brushed and wiped on additional coats of shellac until the surface matched the old in density. The sheen was later adjusted by rubbing with 4/0 steel wool and pumice. (fig. 10)

The top and the secondary wood on the new assembly were also stained, and all surfaces were sealed to provide as much stability against moisture-induced movement as possible.

The method used to provide access to the old treatment of the top did not affect the restoration

budget significantly. I have used variations of this process on other cornices where the new work was glued into place.

The kast now represents, to a reasonable degree, the original aesthetic and functional designs of its builder. Whether the changes to this kast were motivated by stylistic or by functional concerns is uncertain. However, the accumulation of evidence of the changes to this far from pristine object gives clues to its use and its fluctuating value during more than two hundred years of existence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Brennan is a furniture maker and restorer working in the New York Hudson River Valley. He studied drawing, painting and filmmaking at the University of Rhode Island and the San Francisco Art Institute and in studios and museums in the US and Europe and has been designing, building and restoring furniture for the past fifteen years.



Figure 10. The cornice with the removable restoration completed.

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