

## Thomas Lincoln: Cabinetmaker

Thomas Lincoln, the father of the president, has been treated by many writers with a measure of contempt -- sometimes open, sometimes partly concealed. A fair example comes from John G. Nicolay, an important early biographer of the president. Writing in 1902, Nicolay said, "Thomas Lincoln was evidently one of those easy-going, good-natured men who carry the virtue of contentment to an extreme. He appears never to have exerted himself much beyond the attainment of a necessary subsistence. By a little farming and occasional jobs at his trade, he seems to have supplied his family with food and clothes."<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that Nicolay is trying to say in a diplomatic way that Thomas Lincoln was lazy, unambitious, and shiftless. It is hard to see from the record why Nicolay was so harsh in his assessment of this man. This is not the place to attempt a full-scale biography, but a few episodes in Thomas Lincoln's life may be cited in order to give some insights into his character.

Thomas Lincoln was born, his son Abraham believed, in 1778. Thomas's father (also named Abraham) moved to Kentucky from Virginia in 1780. Upon the death of his father, Thomas received no inheritance. Yet in 1803 at the age of twenty-five he bought a 238 acre farm in Hardin County, paying 118 pounds (Virginia currency) for it. In 1808 he paid \$200 for a 300 acre farm and it was while he and his wife were living at that farm that Abraham, the future president, was born.

In 1816 Thomas Lincoln was appointed a county surveyor to oversee the building of a road. When he moved to Indiana in 1816, he first built a flatboat, loaded it with possessions, and floated downstream first on Kentucky rivers and then on the Ohio. When he reached Perry County, Indiana, he landed. There he sold the flatboat, left his possessions with a settler, and returned to his family. Later they set out together. They had two horses for the trip. When they had crossed the Ohio River and reclaimed their possessions, Thomas hired a wagon to continue the trip to the spot he had chosen. He probably decided to take his family overland rather than by boat because the overland trip was safer.

If moving from Kentucky to Indiana was a sign of shiftlessness, then most of southern Indiana was settled by shiftless people, for Thomas Lincoln was following a pattern that was very common. It is true that people moved into southern Indiana from states other than Kentucky, but Kentucky was the main source of early settlers.

What is more important for our purposes, however, is that Thomas Lincoln was an excellent craftsman, a skilled woodworker. He was a joiner, a maker of furniture of many kinds and a builder of the finished wooden parts of houses -- mantelpieces, staircases, doors, windows, and the like. Of course, the tools and woodworking methods needed to build furniture are the same as those for finished mantelpieces, etc.

Unfortunately, almost none of the houses that Thomas Lincoln helped build have survived to the present time as far as anyone

knows, including those in Indiana and Illinois he built for himself and his family. On the other hand, a substantial amount of the furniture he built is still extant, some in museums, some in private hands.

The following list has been compiled from a variety of sources and includes a number of pieces of furniture which there is reason to believe were made by Thomas Lincoln. The list is not to be considered complete because there may very well be other pieces of furniture which are not on the list. The location of those pieces in museums is given together with the year that they were known to be in the institution mentioned. Those pieces in private hands have no indication as to their location.

#### Corner Cupboards

(i.e., a cupboard more-or-less triangular in cross section, designed to stand in the corner of a room)

2 in private hands

5 in public institutions as follows:

Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan (1964)

Knox College Library, Galesburg, Illinois (1984)

Museum of Arts and Sciences, Evansville, Indiana (1984)

Speed Museum, Louisville, Kentucky (1984)

William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan,

Ann Arbor, Michigan (1964)

One similar cupboard with two sides, a back, and a front intended to stand against a wall

Rockport, Indiana Courthouse Museum (1964)

Two sideboards or hutches

One day bed

One sugar chest

One chest of drawers

Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois (1964)

One table

While it is impossible to present photos of most of this furniture, some general remarks can be made. These remarks are based upon a personal examination of nine of the pieces. First, the workmanship on all the pieces is of excellent quality. One piece has deteriorated badly over the years due to abuse and poor treatment. This is the wall cupboard which has been on display in recent years at the Rockport, Indiana County Courthouse and the Lincoln National Memorial near Lincoln City, Indiana. The abuse and poor treatment of the cupboard occurred before it was acquired by these institutions. It should also be mentioned that most of the other pieces of furniture have been refinished and probably repaired in some ways so that the contrast they provide to the wall cupboard is very marked.

Second, the designs of the pieces of furniture clearly show that Thomas Lincoln was familiar with fashionable furniture of



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation  
Inlaid cherry chest of drawers made by Thomas Lincoln and exhibited at  
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois.

the period in which the furniture was made. For example, he used inlaid flower and vine designs on some of his cupboards and he used narrow inlay strips of light colored wood to outline the drawer fronts on some of his pieces, including cupboards and the chest of drawers. He also used dentil moldings below the crown moldings on some of his cupboards.

Finally, an examination of the furniture confirms the conclusion that Thomas Lincoln had a large number of woodworking tools and that he must have had a workshop of some kind. Furniture of this quality could hardly have been made on the kitchen table after the supper dishes had been cleared.

But what would his tools and his workshop have been like? First of all, we have some tantalizing glimpses into the question of the tools he owned which are provided by written records.

An old friend of the Lincoln family, Christopher Columbus Graham, who claimed to have visited in the Lincoln home and to have known the family well, stated that "Thomas Lincoln had the best set of carpenters' tools in Hardin County [Kentucky]"<sup>2</sup>

There are, moreover, a few entries in an Elizabethtown, Kentucky store ledger of items bought by Thomas Lincoln including a "casteel" (i.e., cast steel) saw, a plane bit, and a file in 1804; another saw and file in 1805; and sandpaper, screws, and a gimlet in 1807.<sup>3</sup>

Such documentary evidence gives further credence -- if it were needed -- to the assertion that Thomas Lincoln was a joiner. It is not very helpful, however, in answering the question, "Just

what was in Thomas Lincoln's admired tool chest?"

In trying to answer that question, there are two possible sources of information. It would be possible to examine the pieces of furniture that Thomas Lincoln made to determine what tools must have been used to produce them. For example, let us assume that such an examination finds a perfectly round hole one inch in diameter bored through a board in the piece. It is almost certain that a drill bit one inch in diameter produced such a hole.

Such an examination would be valuable but, unfortunately, in many instances it would produce inconclusive results. For example, boards must have been cut to exact widths and lengths by a saw or saws, but what kind of saws were they? One can speculate on this point from a general knowledge of saws, but nothing about the boards themselves could answer the question.

Another source of generally useful information remains and that is knowledge about what tools a typical joiner/cabinetmaker would have owned at the time. Fortunately for us, so-called "inventories" do exist.

While there are other kinds, far and away the most common inventory is that made at the time of a person's death or shortly thereafter. These inventories were required by law and by custom in most parts of America to determine the estate of the deceased. This was necessary partly for inheritance purposes and partly for tax purposes. After all, most people had relatively little money. Their "worldly goods" consisted mostly of real estate and

artifacts, "real and personal property." Appraisers or "viewers" were appointed by the courts and copies of the inventories and appraisals were filed at the courthouse. Sometimes when an auction sale of the goods was held, the items sold and the prices realized were also listed and filed. In the following I will list some of the strong and some of the weak points of such inventories as a source of data for determining what tools Thomas Lincoln might have owned. These inventories present both opportunities and challenges.<sup>4</sup>

### Opportunities

1. The court was required to appoint competent people to make the inventories. A cabinetmaker was often chosen to inventory and appraise a deceased cabinetmaker's tools. In a few instances where I have been able to discover the identity of the appraiser, such has been the case.<sup>5</sup> This fact means that the inventories have special value. One cabinetmaker looking at the tools of another would know what the tools were, the names actually in use for them in the area, and their value. Conversely, the appraiser would also know what tools were of little value so that they were silently omitted from the inventory or lumped together with other valueless items.

2. Tools are presented in some kind of context in the inventories. Many of the inventories are so detailed that we can reconstruct the workshop of the deceased with some accuracy and



place many of the tools in it. For example, an inventory may list a stove in the workshop, may use a phrase such as "scrap lumber in the loft [of the workshop]" or "in the rack by the window [not a window, but *the* window]" or list a workbench and then list tools "in the drawer."

3. We can tell sometimes which tools were used with which other tools. As an example, pit saws tend to appear in context with other tools that we recognize as wagonmakers' tools. Pit saws were used to cut boards from a log. They do not appear usually with carpenters' or cabinetmakers' tools. It would appear that carpenters and cabinetmakers got nearly all their lumber from sawmills, at least in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wagonmakers undoubtedly got a great deal of their lumber from sawmills, too, but they probably needed large sizes of heavy lumber such as a long tapering shaft that could be cut from a squared log with a pit saw but which a sawmill would not normally provide.

4. In some instances the context provided gives some indication how a tool was used. For instance, a cabinetmaker might well own an axe, but if it was listed in his inventory as being in the woodshed rather than in the workshop, we could assume it was used primarily for chopping and splitting firewood rather than for building furniture.

5. Inventories can ideally answer such questions as, "Did a typical nineteenth century cabinetmaker own more tools in general or more tools of one type (i.e., planes) than an eighteenth

century cabinetmaker?" or "Did a craftsman in a city own more tools or more tools of a certain type than a craftsman in the country?" or "Did a pioneer cabinetmaker in the backwoods of Kentucky or Indiana in the early years of settlement own fewer tools than a cabinetmaker 'back East.'"

6. Values are assigned tools or groups of tools. (i.e., 1 set bench planes . . . \$3.50) in the inventories. Moreover, when an auction sale was held, the prices actually reached at the sale are listed and can be compared with the appraiser's estimates. One can, therefore, determine which tools were expensive and which cheap. A final advantage here is that other goods are likewise appraised so that one can compare the value of a saw, let us say, with that of a chair.

7. Perhaps even more important is the larger, or more general, context. The inventories often show us what is so often overlooked; that is, that the rural cabinetmakers in Pennsylvania and the Midwest were also farmers. The inventories consistently list in addition to woodworking tools the tools and implements needed in farming. Individual inventories also sometimes specify as property such things as, "About one acre of wheat, 4 acres of grass @ \$4 per acre, and 4 acres of oats."

Indeed, a detailed examination of all the goods listed in inventories would make it possible to say a good deal about the daily lives of the craftsmen and their families. Spinning wheels, looms, churns, lard rendering kettles and such possessions show what tasks were carried out in or near a

person's dwelling. Moreover, the names used in inventories for rooms in a house and for outbuildings such as smokehouses tell us a great deal about the farm structures of the era. A person's level of wealth and standing in the community can be assessed by analyzing inventories and comparing one with another.

### Challenges

1. Inventories of the type described are not easy to find. In some counties the records of this sort have not survived due to fire, accident, or carelessness. In any county it is difficult to know who were the woodworking craftsmen and when they died. Some craftsmen get listed in compilations such as Betty Larson Walters, *Furniture Makers of Indiana, 1793 to 1850* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1972). Those who are so listed are the craftsmen who lived in cities or larger towns and advertised their wares. On the other hand, craftsmen who lived in the countryside often farmed as well as worked at their crafts. Such craftsmen usually appear in records such as censuses as "farmer" rather than as "cabinetmaker" or whatever.

A case in point is Thomas Lincoln. We know that he was a cabinetmaker and joiner and quite a number of his pieces of furniture have survived. Yet he did not advertise in any newspapers or the like nor is he listed in any records as a cabinetmaker. He does not appear at all in the 1820 Census of Manufacturers, for instance, even though many cabinetmakers do so

appear.

At any rate, if one wished to do research in any specific county, one would probably have no other recourse than to read through inventories hoping to find some woodworking craftsman who could be recognized by the fact that he owned a large number of tools. This is, unfortunately, somewhat akin to looking for a needle in a haystack.

2. Should one find an inventory with a large number of tools listed, can one be sure he has found a specialized craftsman? He may have found a farmer who owned somewhat more woodworking tools than the average farmer. In trying to find data to help with Thomas Lincoln's case, I was looking for cabinetmakers specifically. If I found an inventory with a large number of woodworking tools, it could be that of a carpenter, a wagonmaker/wheelwright, a chairmaker, a cooper, or perhaps others. I finally decided that if the inventory listed ten or more molding planes, I would consider that man a cabinetmaker. While this is certainly arbitrary, it is nonetheless logical. A wagonmaker/wheelwright would need and use very few molding planes.<sup>6</sup> (A coachmaker would certainly use molding planes, but a coachmaker would be a pretty rare bird in rural areas in early times.) Chairmakers and coopers also used very few molding planes because the chairs made by chairmakers and the barrels made by coopers have virtually no moldings. If a carpenter also did "finish work" including staircases and mantels as Thomas Lincoln did, he certainly would have required many planes. It

was, however, a common practice for the finish work to be done by a "joiner" who was also a cabinetmaker so that the presence of a number of molding planes in an inventory still seemed to be a reasonably reliable criterion in deciding which inventories belonged to cabinetmakers.

3. It is true that great numbers of tools are listed in the inventories and that specific values are assigned individual tools or groups of tools (i.e., Brace and set of bits . . . \$1.50). It is also true, however, that some tools needed by a cabinetmaker are consistently not listed in inventories. There is one possible explanation. Perhaps the appraiser saw a certain tool in the workshop of the deceased but knew that it had little or no value. If it had no value he might well have omitted it from the inventory. After all, the appraiser's task was to determine the value of the estate, and if an item had no monetary value, there was no point in listing it. If the item had little value, it might get lumped together with others such as "A box of sundries . . . \$.10." We must always try to remember that items we value today or which we consider worthless were not considered so necessarily in earlier times. While we today consider worn-out files to have no value, they must have had some two hundred years ago for they are consistently listed in inventories.

In individual cases an appraiser may have omitted a tool because it was so worn or so old as to be valueless, but if we can examine a number of inventories, we can make allowances for individual discrepancies.

In trying to estimate what tools Thomas Lincoln might have owned, I decided to find as many cabinetmakers' inventories from the period around 1800-1850 as I could and take as much of an average as was possible. I was indeed fortunate to be able to take advantage of the inventories copied out and published by Mrs. Margaret Schiffer.<sup>7</sup> Because she carried out research in Chester County, Pennsylvania records over a period of many years, she was able not only to locate and copy at least a hundred inventories but was also able to find in obscure records of many kinds references to the deceased men as being cabinetmakers. An example would be James Henderson. His inventory shows a number of woodworking tools and Mrs. Schiffer was able to find a document which stated that in 1792, "James Henderson, cabinet-maker" bought a piece of property in West Chester. In this instance we need not bemoan the fact that a hurried appraiser lumped together "A lot of planes" and "4 axes" for a total of \$18.75 so that we can't tell if Henderson owned molding planes. The document cited proves that he was a cabinetmaker.

Since I was able to find fifty-five inventories of cabinetmakers' tools for the era I was concerned with in Mrs. Schiffer's book, it is this monumental tome that really made this study possible. I also located a few other inventories from other eastern localities besides Chester County, Pennsylvania and a few from Kentucky and Indiana. While I wish I could have found more from other localities besides Chester County, the number I

did find (a total of eleven) did show that the inventories from Chester County were surprisingly representative of all inventories from the 1800-1850 era.

In justice to the richness of Mrs. Schiffer's book and to her dedication to her task, I should note that there are about sixty inventories in her book I did not use for a variety of reasons. Some are from years too early for my purposes and some were done by hurried appraisers who did not give adequate detail. In addition, there are inventories and other documents reproduced for clockmakers, for example, while also other documents besides inventories are reproduced. In general, a wide variety of material is given for a wide variety of craftsmen. Small wonder that the author of the foreword, Charles F. Montgomery, said of the book, "The wealth of information is incredible." (p. 7)

Table 1 is a geographical comparison of tool inventories. The first four columns list the results from fifty-five inventories from Chester County, Pennsylvania; the middle four columns give the parallel results from four inventories from other localities in the eastern United States.<sup>8</sup> The final four columns present the comparable information from seven inventories from Kentucky and Indiana, areas that had not been settled long at the time the inventories were taken.<sup>9</sup> Each of the geographical groupings presents the information for, respectively, the average number of each tool owned, the number of owners, the number of cabinetmakers not owning any of that tool, and the number which the inventory said owned several

	Average Number Owned A	Number of Owners A1	Number not Owning A2	Number Owning Several A3	Average Number Owned B	Number of Owners B1	Number not Owning B2	Number Owning Several B3	Average Number Owned C	Number of Owners C1	Number not Owning C2	Number Owning Several C3
PLANES	27	55	0	28	50	4	0	0	53	7	0	4
ADZE	1	33	22	4	1½	2	2	0	1	1	6	0
AUGERS	4½	43	12	14	5	1	3	0	2	4	3	0
BROAD AX	1¼	32	23	0	1½	2	2	0	0	0	7	0
OTHER AXES	1¼	22	33	0	0	0	4	0	2	1	6	0
BEVEL	1¼	8	47	1	2	3	1	1	2	1	6	0
BRACE	1	34	21	1	1	4	0	0	1	5	2	0
BITS-ONE SET	1	27	28	0	1	1	3	0	1	1	6	0
CHISELS	10¼	55	0	24	16 3/4	4	0	0	15 3/4	5	2	1
CLAMPS	3¼	17	38	5	7	4	0	0	1	3	4	0
COMPASSES	2	19	36	3	1	1	3	0	1½	3	4	0
DRAW KNIFE	2	39	16	4	1	1	3	0	1	2	5	0
FILES	5½	30	25	15	0	0	4	0	4½	6	1	2
FROE	1	21	34	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	7	0
GAUGE	3½	21	34	12	6½	3	1	1	4	6	1	0
GIMLET	2	14	41	6	0	0	4	0	3½	2	5	0
GLUE POT	1	34	21	1	1	1	3	0	1	2	5	0
GOUGE	7	29	26	9	15½	2	2	0	14½	3	4	0
GRINDSTONE	1¼	20	35	1	2	1	3	0	1	2	5	0
HAND SCREWS	9	14	41	5	0	0	4	0	15	2	5	0
HAMMER	2	33	22	2	3½	2	2	0	2½	4	3	0
HATCHET	1	21	34	2	1	2	2	0	2	2	5	0
HOLDFAST	1¼	18	37	1	0	4	0	0	0	7	0	0



	Average Number Owned A	Number of Owners A1	Number not Owning A2	Number Owning Several A3	Average Number Owned B	Number of Owners B1	Number not Owning B2	Number Owning Several B3	Average Number Owned C	Number of Owners C1	Number not Owning C2	Number Owned Several C3
LATHE	1	35	20	0	0	0	4	0	1	3	4	0
LATHE TOOLS, SET	1	23	22	0	0	0	4	0	1	2	5	0
OILSTONE	1	22	33	1	1	2	2	0	1 $\frac{1}{4}$	3	4	0
PATTERNS, LOT	1	10	45	0	0	0	4	0	1	1	6	0
PINCERS	1	16	39	3	1	3	1	0	1	2	5	1
RASP	1	6	49	1	1	1	3	0	1	2	5	1
RULE	1	13	42	0	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	2	2	0	2	2	5	0
SAW	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	49	6	9	8	4	0	0	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	7	0	0
SAW SET	1 $\frac{1}{4}$	9	46	2	1	1	3	0	1	1	6	0
SCREW DRIVER	2	8	47	2	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	2	2	0	2	2	5	1
SPOKESHAVE	2	8	47	1	1	1	3	0	1	2	5	0
SQUARE	1 $\frac{1}{2}$	51	4	6	3	3	1	0	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	6	1	1
WORKBENCH	2	31	24	1	0	0	4	0	5	3	4	0

(i.e., a "set") without specifying exactly how many were owned.

Even a hasty glance at the table will show that some interesting and valuable comparisons can be made. The first is, that the cabinetmakers in Kentucky and Indiana whose inventories were taken in the early decades of settlement -- the pioneer era -- had as many tools, if not more, than their eastern counterparts. If we add together the inventories from Chester County, Pennsylvania and the other representative eastern inventories -- a total of fifty-nine -- and the average thus obtained is compared with the Midwestern pioneer cabinetmakers, the results are instructive. Table 2 gives the results for some of the more common tools.

Let us look at another statistic: the total number of planes owned by any one cabinetmaker (bear in mind that the dates of the inventories are 1800-1850):

84 planes the largest number owned as shown in any one inventory, owned by Absalom Wells of Woodford County, Kentucky, who died in 1827.<sup>10</sup>

66 planes owned by James Williamson, London Grove Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania. Inventory taken May 16, 1848.<sup>11</sup>

58 planes owned by John G. Henderson of Salem, Indiana. inventory taken in 1820.<sup>12</sup>

So much for the supposition that Midwestern pioneer

cabinetmakers had fewer tools than their eastern brethren! It is possible that the men who moved to the newly settled frontier intending to make cabinetware brought extra tools with them because it would be more difficult to obtain them in their new homes. In another chapter, however, I have shown that specialized craftsmen who made wooden planes were working in towns such as New Albany and Madison, Indiana well before 1850.

This survey of cabinetmakers' inventories reinforces the conclusion reached in another chapter of this work, "The Tools Used in Building Log Houses in Indiana." I concluded that at least seventy-five tools were needed to build the typical log house associated in the minds of most people with the frontier. I further suggested that pioneers were better provided with tools than is generally assumed. This conclusion certainly seems to hold true for pioneer cabinetmakers as well.

On the basis of these inventories, therefore, it is possible to make an estimate as to the specific tools that Thomas Lincoln probably owned while living and working in Kentucky and Indiana. This estimate will err on the conservative side and cannot hope to include every tool. However, the data compiled from the inventories is supported and complemented by the examination of the furniture Thomas Lincoln is believed to have made.

(For tools with an asterisk, see below.)

1 "set" of 3 bench planes

40 molding planes\*  
4 augers  
1 bevel, T  
1 broad axe\*  
1 other axe\*  
1 brace  
1 set of bits (from 1/4 in. to 1 in.)  
14 chisels  
3 clamps  
1 compass  
1 drawknife  
3 files\*  
2 gimlets\*  
1 glue pot  
12 gouges  
1 grindstone\*  
8 hand screws  
3 hammers  
1 hatchet  
1 lathe  
1 set of lathe tools  
1 mallet\*  
2 marking gauges  
1 mitre box\*  
1 oilstone  
1 pincers

1 rasp  
1 rule\*  
4 saws\*  
1 saw set\*  
1 scraper\*  
1 scratch awl\*  
1 screw driver\*  
1 spoke shave  
2 squares  
1 workbench\* with holding devices

#### Comments on Tools

Molding planes: an examination of Thomas Lincoln's furniture not only shows that he owned many molding planes but also tells us the shapes of some specific molding planes he owned. One molding plane cut one specific shape of molding so a cross-section through a molding reveals the exact shape of the molding plane that made it.

Broad axe: there is a record that Thomas Lincoln was hired in 1806 to hew enough logs to erect a mill in Elizabethtown, Kentucky.<sup>13</sup> Hewing logs requires a broad axe.

"Other" axe: the hewing process involves cutting gashes at intervals into the sides of a log. A chopping axe is used to cut

these gashes. Then the wood between these gashes is split off with a broad axe.

Files: as mentioned above, a surviving Elizabethtown, Kentucky store ledger shows that Thomas Lincoln bought two files in 1804 and 1805. It is reasonable to estimate that he would have owned at least three, for files of different sizes were needed to sharpen saws of different sizes and shapes. It should be noted that only files can normally be used to sharpen saws. An oilstone cannot be used for a saw.

Gimlets: there is a record that Thomas Lincoln bought a gimlet at a store in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. The hinges on the cupboards that he built are held in place with wood screws and we know also that he bought wood screws at the same store in 1807. Making the preliminary (or "pilot") hole for a wood screw required a gimlet that makes small holes less than 1/4 inch. The smallest bit for a brace is usually 1/4 inch so the brace could not be used for pilot holes for a screw.

Grindstone: it is hard to understand how Thomas Lincoln could have kept many tools including axes and drawknives sharp without a grindstone. An oilstone (also called a whet stone) could be used to "touch up" edged tools between sharpenings, but an axe used as Thomas Lincoln must have used his would almost certainly require daily sharpening on a grindstone. When an axe

is used all day long as in hewing enough logs for a mill or in clearing ground for planting, it soon gets dull.

Mallet: no inventory listed a mallet, yet cabinetmakers must have used one frequently in driving a chisel into wood and in many other ways. It is probably true, however, that craftsmen made their own mallets by fitting a handle to a block of wood that would be hard and not prone to splitting. The fact that mallets were so made seems to explain why appraisers did not list them. They thought the mallets had no monetary value.

Mitre box: no inventory listed a mitre box, but these simply made devices were a great help in cutting moldings to length and in many other ways. Craftsmen probably made their own by nailing three short boards together and cutting slots for a saw at 90 degrees and at 45 degrees. Again, appraisers did not list them because they thought the boxes had no monetary value.

1 rule: as I have stated above, the inventories can occasionally be misleading. A few craftsmen in the survey of inventories must have bought folding rules of boxwood with brass fittings. When the appraiser saw such a rule, he considered it to have value and listed it. Far more craftsmen, however, must have owned home-made wooden rules of some kind which the appraisers thought to have no value and hence omitted from the inventory. One writer who lived in southern Indiana not too far

north from where the Lincolns lived described how he and his acquaintances acquired rules. They took a stick to a store and laid off measurements on the stick from the store owner's yardstick.<sup>14</sup>

Saws: one saw owned by Thomas Lincoln deserves some special notice. The last task that Abraham Lincoln completed in southern Indiana before the family moved to Illinois is described by a neighbor in these words, "Abe whipsawed, saw him cutting down a large tree one day: I asked him what he was going to do with it: he said he was going to saw it into planks for his father's new house -- the house was not completed until after Lincoln left for Illinois."<sup>15</sup> We can say, therefore, that Thomas Lincoln owned a whip saw. But just what is a whip saw?

Unfortunately, the term "whip saw" was used in the past for two quite different kinds of saws. One is the saw usually called today a cross-cut saw (it may be either a "one-man cross-cut saw" or a "two-man cross-cut saw.") These saws were used to cut a log into lengths, that is, to cut across the grain. So, for example, an English writer in 1677 called a two-man cross-cut saw a "whip saw."<sup>16</sup>

The other saw is one which is more frequently called a pit saw. It is a saw with a very long blade up to ten feet long used to cut boards and planks from a log, that is, with the grain. There are, for example, manuscript records from Massachusetts between 1647 and 1677 referring unequivocally to saws of this



type as whip saws.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, a hardware catalog of 1865 shows these saws and calls them pit saws.<sup>18</sup>

So, was the whip saw young Abraham Lincoln was using one that cut across the grain or one that cut with the grain? The neighbor quoted says that Abraham was going to saw the log into planks, which would therefore imply that the saw in question was one we would call a pit saw. On the other hand, a pit saw required two men to use it, the term pit saw seems to have been in use in the nineteenth century, and no cabinetmakers' inventory listed a pit saw. Probably the saw in question, then, was what we today would call a cross-cut saw.

1 sawset: in order for a typical saw to cut properly, it must be "set." That is, one tooth must be bent slightly to one side while the next tooth is bent an equal amount in the opposite direction. If this is not done, the saw will bind in the cut. The inventories show that few cabinetmakers in the years under survey owned sawsets. Nonetheless, since Thomas Lincoln owned saws and files with which to sharpen them, it is quite possible that he owned a sawset, for this is a simple and inexpensive tool. It is possible to set a saw by tapping each tooth with a punch and a hammer though this is a very tedious process.

1 scraper: it is quite likely that scrapers were used in the final finishing of wood surfaces, yet they do not appear in the inventories. Since scrapers were made from odd scraps of

steel such as pieces of broken saw blades, it is likely that appraisers did not assign any monetary value to them. They were, therefore, not listed in the inventories.

1 scratch awl: a cabinetmaker certainly would need to mark on wood to show where to saw, to chisel, and to bore holes as well as for many other uses. A pencil at that time would have been bought at a store while a scratch awl could be made by inserting a nail in the end of a rod of wood and sharpening the nail. Once more, appraisers probably overlooked them because they had no monetary value.

1 screwdriver: if Thomas Lincoln mounted hinges on his cupboards with wood screws and if he bought screws at the store in Elizabethtown as mentioned above, he almost certainly owned a screwdriver. Why so few of these simple tools appear in the inventories it is impossible to say.

1 workbench: it is hard to believe that furniture of the quality made by Thomas Lincoln could have been made without a workbench. It is aggravating in the extreme to try to plane a board unless it is held firmly on a solid surface. And in the period under consideration every cabinetmaker planed by hand the boards he used in his furniture -- unless he had a trusted apprentice or helper to whom he could turn over this demanding task.

## The Workshop

If Thomas Lincoln had a workbench, it is quite likely that he had a workshop of some sort. What is believed to be the foundations of the Lincoln house near Gentryville, Indiana have been preserved. They show that the house had one fairly large room on the ground floor. The house probably had a sleeping loft over this room. It should be stated that research has shown that at least 80% of the houses in southern Indiana at that period were of very much the same size. One cannot, therefore, cite the modest size of the Lincoln house as a basis for negative criticism of Thomas Lincoln as a "poor provider" for his family.

The size of the house, however, makes it unlikely that Thomas Lincoln would have set up his workbench within the one room of the house itself.

A comparison can be made with a weaving loom. Every nineteenth century loom known to me is of very heavy construction, much heavier than twentieth century manufactured looms. The older looms are so heavy because they are made so that they can be taken apart and stored away when not in use. The large timbers are used so that joints can be held together and tightened if necessary with wooden wedges. It was, therefore, possible to set up a loom, weave for long hours, and then disassemble the loom and store it away.

But why was a loom built so that it could be used for relatively brief periods in the house? Why was a separate

weaving shop or loom shop not built if a cabinetmaker had his own separate -- though small -- workshop? Because weavers who wove mainly for their own family were normally women. They had to keep an eye on children and on pots bubbling at the fireplace at the same time that they were weaving. A workshop separate from the house would have been very impractical for them.<sup>19</sup>

But to return to Thomas Lincoln and his workshop. Workbenches are usually at least six feet long and one would need clearance of at least four feet at each end for boards to extend past the end of the bench. One dimension of the workshop would, therefore, need to be at least fourteen feet. There would undoubtedly have been a window in the wall directly above the workbench with a door probably in the opposite wall. There would have been shelves and racks for odd pieces of lumber and tools on the walls but there would also have been a loft of some type overhead for storing lumber protected from the weather. This loft would have had doors or perhaps windows on the gable ends for access to the lumber. There might also have been an open shed of some sort against an outside wall for more lumber.

It is rather unlikely that the workshop would have been heated. In my fieldwork over the years I have seen only three early woodworking shops, two for cabinetmakers and one for a gunsmith. None of these had a fireplace. Indeed, an open fireplace would have been dangerous in a shop with quantities of sawdust and shavings.

At the same time, stoves were very rare in the early decades

of the nineteenth century. They would have cost quite a sum of money. Indeed, an English lady who had moved to Bloomington, Indiana in 1833 wrote to a friend back in England that her husband had purchased a stove for her kitchen. It came from Louisville and cost \$50.

In a letter written at the same time by her husband, he says that they are "renting a comfortable house here for \$40 [per year], with large garden, stable, and field for cow."<sup>20</sup> The stove, therefore, would in today's dollars cost several thousand dollars. In sum, then, it is likely that Thomas Lincoln's workshop would have had neither a fireplace nor a stove.<sup>21</sup>

#### NOTES

1. John G. Nicolay, A Short Life of Abraham Lincoln (New York: The Century Co., 1903), p.6.

2. "The Elizabethtown Carpenter," Lincoln Lore, no. 513, Feb. 6, 1934.

3. Ibid.

4. The two types of research I mention represent an overly

simplified classification. It ignores several other types of research that do not fit neatly into categories. For example, an outstanding example of research starting with the tools actually owned by a family of craftsmen is Charles Hummel's With Hammer in Hand (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968).

Some important research has also used handbooks and encyclopedias that tell craftsmen what tools to use or describe the tools that craftsmen theoretically used.

5. See Margaret Berwind Schiffer, Furniture and Its Makers of Chester County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), p. 180 where Amos Darlington, cabinetmaker, was named one of the appraisers of Thomas Ogden's property. See also Mrs. W.H. Whitly, A Checklist of Kentucky Cabinetmakers from 1775 to 1859 (Paris, KY, 1982, 2nd ed.), p. 84. For the cabinetmaker named Pew who died in 1811, she says, "One of the three appraisers was a cabinetmaker." See further Wallace P. Guslar, Furniture of Williamsburg and Eastern Virginia, 1710-1790, (Richmond: Virginia Museum, 1979), p. 182.

6. See George Sturt, The Wheelwright's Shop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923). Sturt mentions decorative chamfers on wagons. The chamfers were made by drawknives. He never mentions moldings on wagons made by planes.

7. See note 5.

8. L.B.Romaine, "A Yankee Carpenter and His Tools," EAIA Chronicle, 6, no. 3, (July, 1953), 33-34 [Amana Thompson, 1827. Thompson was also a joiner and cabinetmaker]; Alfred Coxe Prime, The Arts and Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland, and South Carolina 1721-1785 (The Walpole Society, 1929), I, 164 [Joseph Cresson, 1779]; John S. Kebabian, "The George W. Cartwright Tool Chest," EAIA Chronicle, 30, no. 4 (December, 1977), 68-69 [G.W. Cartwright, died 1867 but his tools would have been acquired well before his death and hence fall within the time limits]; Wallace B. Guslar [see note 5], p. 182 [Major Edmund Dickenson, 1778]. Because of the scarcity of inventories I could find in eastern localities outside Chester, Pennsylvania, I have included some inventories that fall outside the 1800-1850 limits by a few decades.

9. Kentucky inventories: Whitly (see note 5), Wm. Thompson, 1792, p. 107; Chas. Wentling, 1799, p. 114; Jas. Pew, 1811, p. 84; Absolom Wells, 1827, p. 114; Indiana: John G. Henderson, 1820 in Betty L. Walters, Furniture Makers of Indiana 1793-1850 (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1972), p. 110; The following from the archives of the Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement, Noblesville, Indiana: Charles Davis, 1837; Nathan Hockett, 1839.

10. Absolom Wells, 1827; see Whitly, (note 5), p. 114.

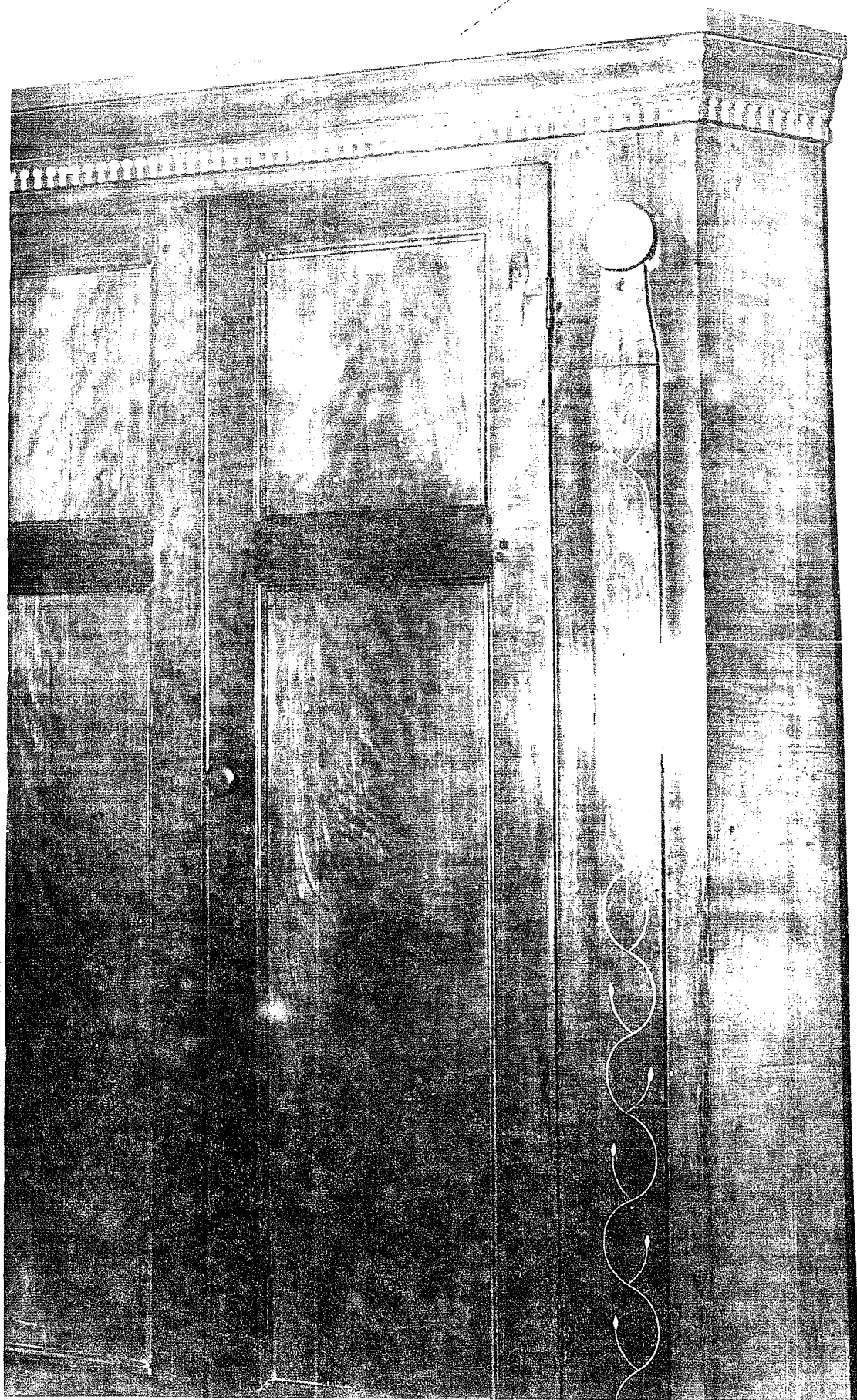
11. Schiffer (note 5), pp. 252-3.
12. Walters (note 9), p. 110.
13. Lincoln Lore no. 1580, Oct. 1969, p. 2.
14. Baynard Rush Hall (pseudonym, Robert Carlton), The New Purchase (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1916, Indiana Centennial Edition), p. 94
15. Lincoln Lore, no. 513, Feb. 6, 1939, p. 1.
16. R.A.Salaman, Dictionary of Tools (New York: Scribner's, 1975), p. 435 citing Joseph Moxon, Mechanick Exercises (London: 1677).
17. Henry C. Mercer, Ancient Carpenters' Tools (Doylestown, PA: The Bucks County Historical Society, 1960, 3rd ed.), p. 23.
18. Russel and Irwin Illustrated Catalogue of American Hardware, 1865. Reprinted by the Association for Preservation Technology, 1980, p. 163.
19. It should be mentioned that there were professional weavers, almost all of whom were men, who also were farmers and who had weaving or loom shops separate from their houses. It was



these professional weavers who owned complicated, large looms much different from the simple looms used by housewives. It was those so-called Jacquard looms used by the craftsman-weavers that made it possible for them to weave the lovely Jacquard coverlets so prized by collectors today, those coverlets that often have the names of the weaver and the date woven into corner blocks.

20. The letters in question are reprinted in the Indiana University Alumni Quarterly, October, 1933.

21. The research on which this chapter is largely based was done while carrying out a study for the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial near Lincoln City, Indiana. The research was supported by the Eastern National Park and Monument Association. The assistance and support thus provided is hereby gratefully acknowledged. I would also like to thank Raymond R. Townsend of Williamsburg, Virginia who was kind enough to send me a great deal of helpful material he had accumulated in his research and to thank David G. Vandersteel, Senior Historian, Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement, Noblesville, Indiana, for sending me useful inventories from central Indiana.



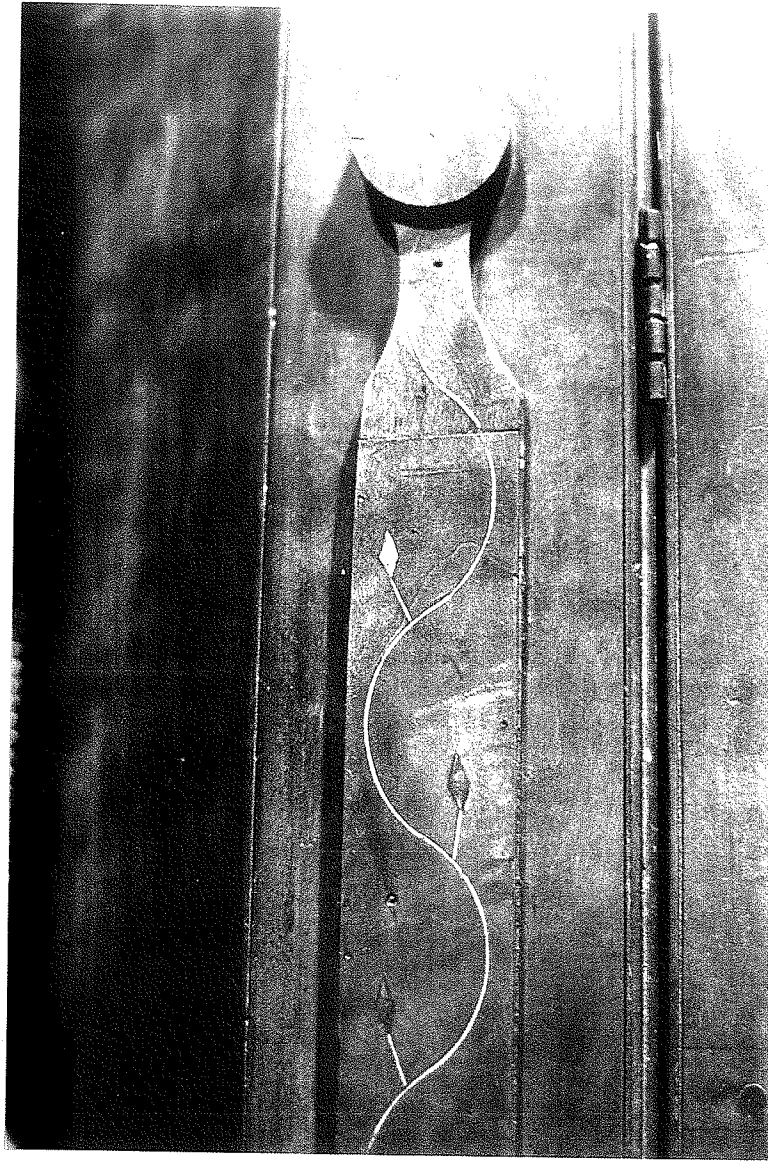
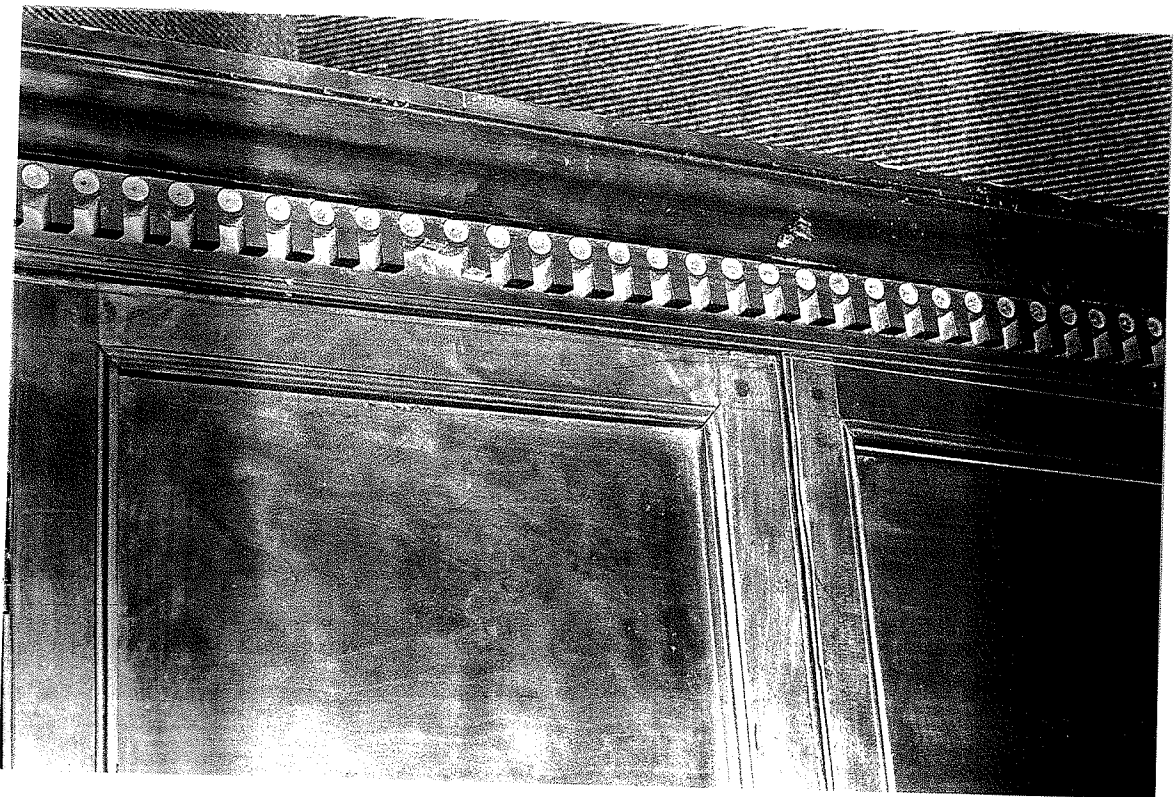


Fig.  
Details of the corner cupboard privately owned in Fort Wayne,  
Indiana.

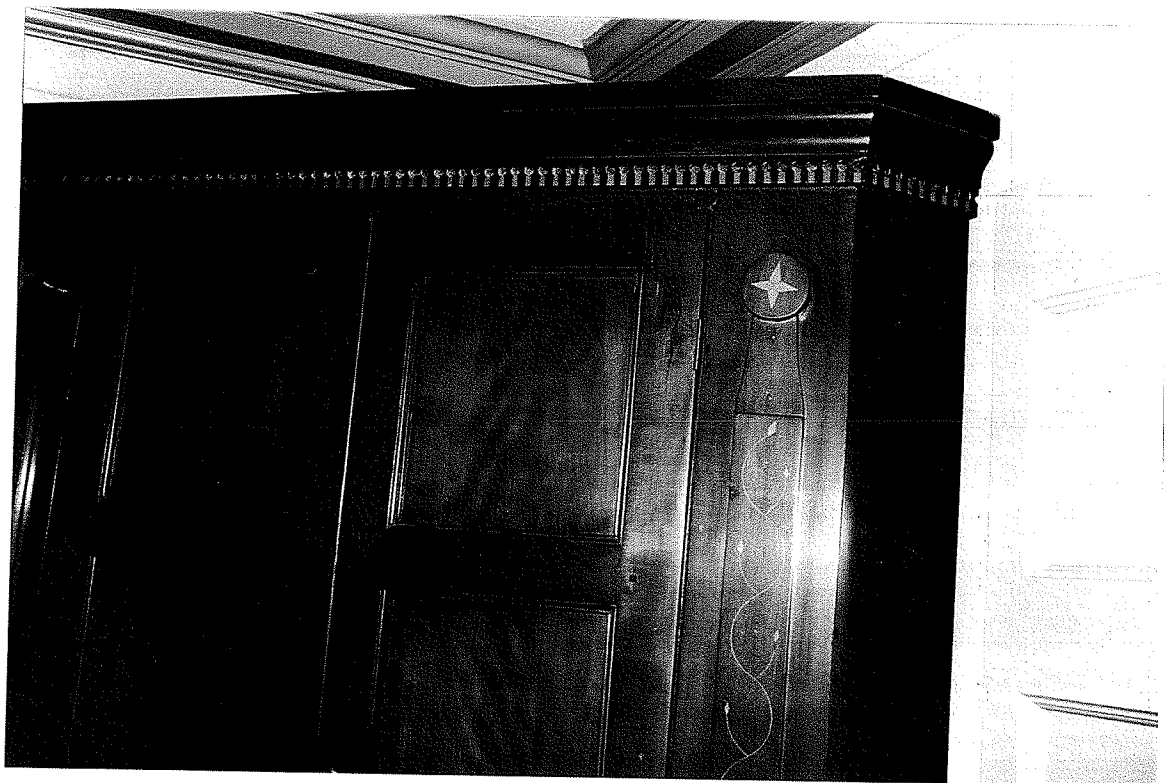


Fig.  
Detail of the corner cupboard, privately owned in Fort Wayne,  
Indiana.

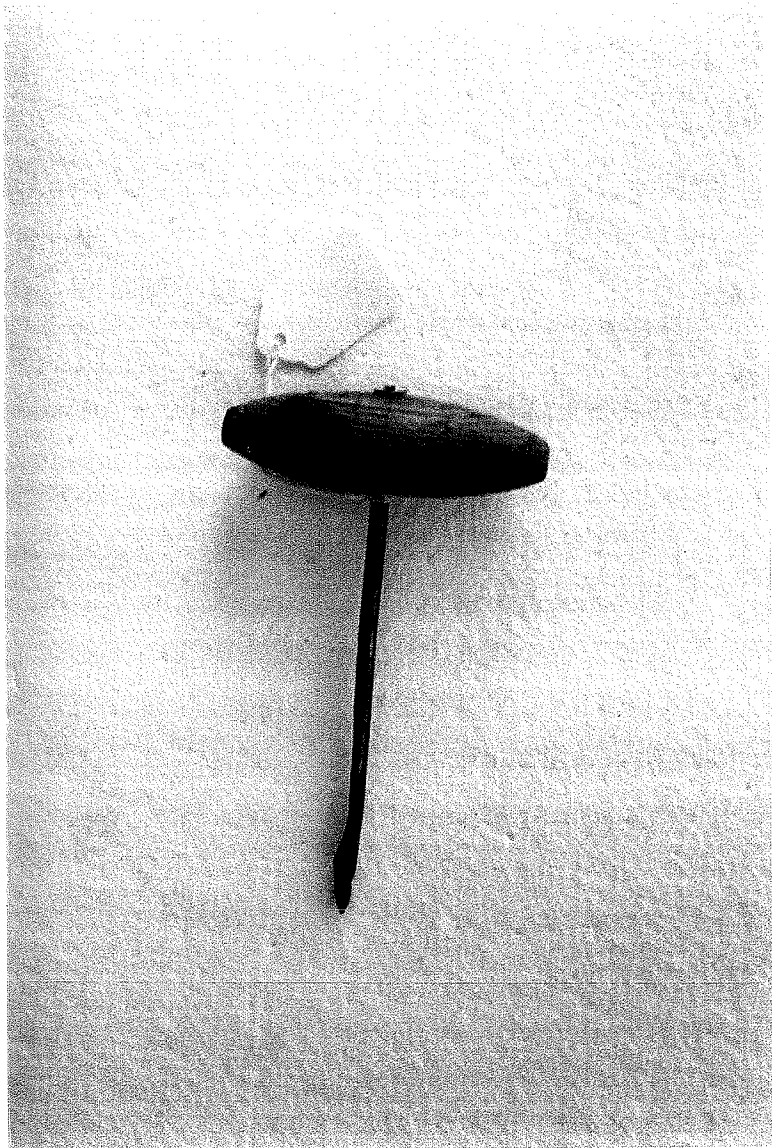


Fig. 5-2: A gimlet designed to bore a small hole in wood. This example would make a  $\frac{3}{16}$  inch hole. The blade is 5 inches long.

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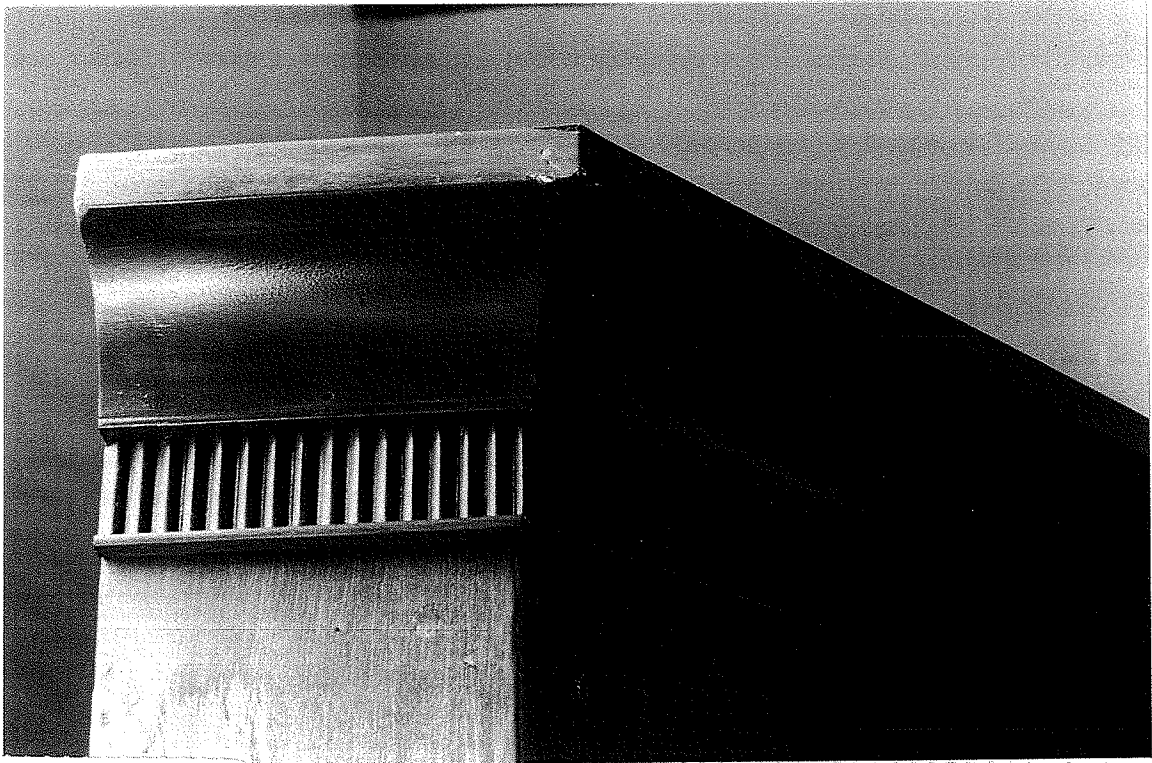


Fig.  
Cornice of the corner cupboard now at Gale College.



Fig.  
Drop leaf extension dining table privately owned in  
Elizabethtown, Kentucky.





Fig.  
Sideboard or hutch privately owned in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

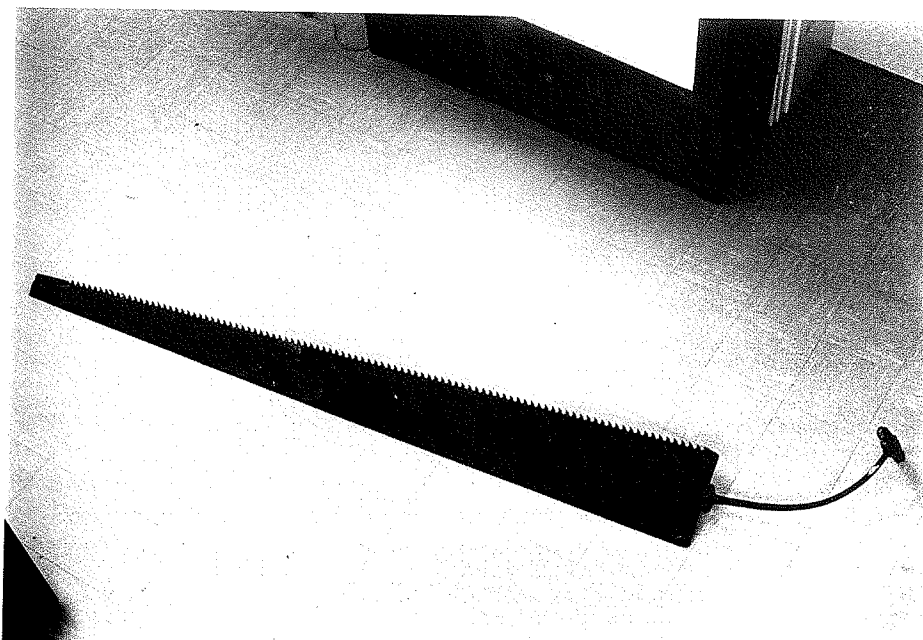


Fig.  
A pit saw. The blade is eight feet long. The handle or handle grasped by the top sawyer is to the right. The handle used by the pitman is missing.

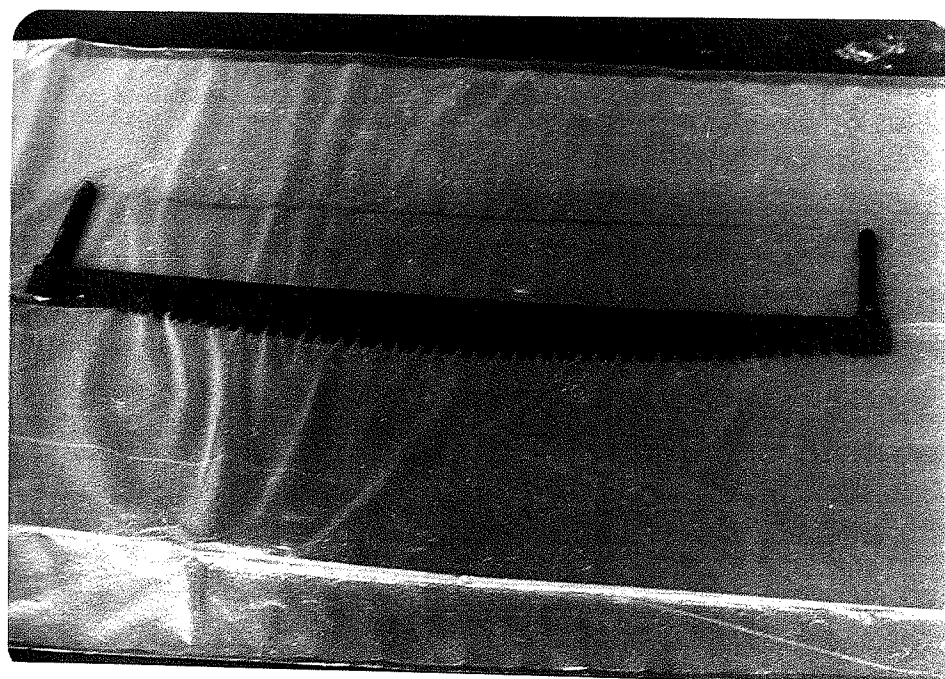


Fig.  
A two-man-crosscut saw used for cutting logs to length.

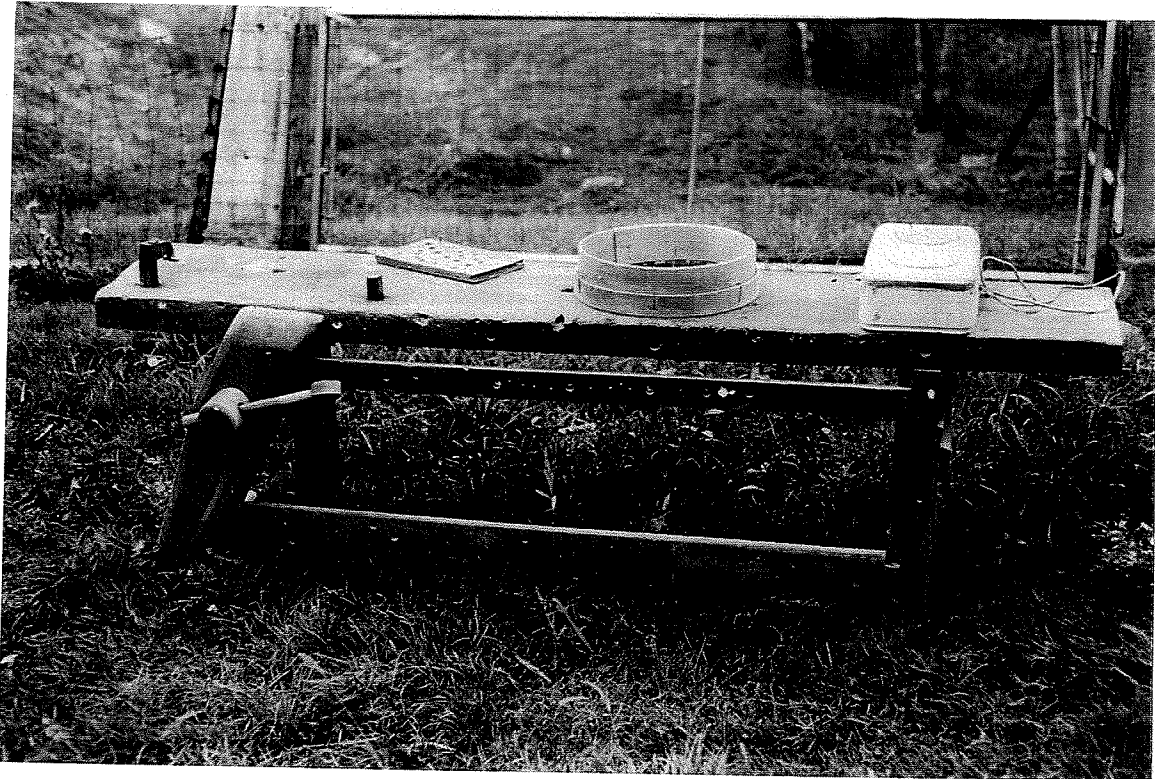


Fig. 5-1: An early workbench photographed at an auction outside Bloomfield. Some non-woodworking objects are sitting atop the bench.

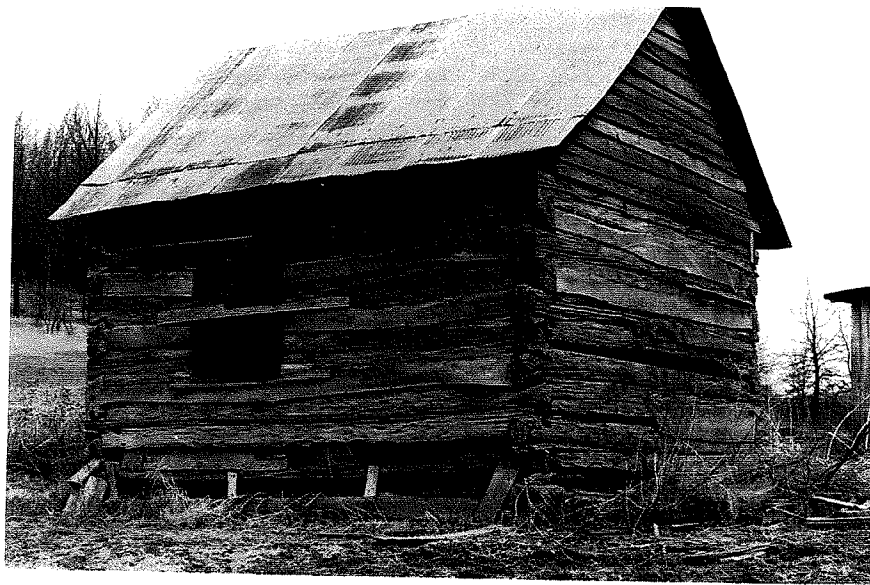


Fig.  
The Deckard gunsmith shop in southern Monroe County, Indiana.  
The window opening is covered with a piece of tar paper. Through  
this window the gunsmith test-fired his guns using a large  
sycamore tree across the creek as a target.