



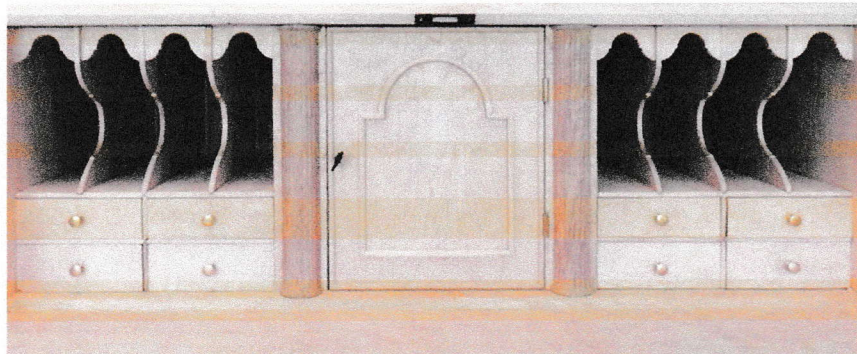
What Are The Prospects?

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WHAT'S IN A NAME? LET'S FIND OUT—OR NOT.

There's an old story about the captain of a mighty naval vessel who would start each day on the bridge by unlocking a small drawer and taking out a piece of paper. He would study it for a minute, then lock it away and get to work.

After many years, the captain was promoted to admiral and his first officer took command. The first thing he did was unlock the drawer to see what was on that piece of paper. What he read was: Starboard is right, Port is left.



the name 'prospect box' comes from." So I decided to see if I could track it down. It turned out to be a lot harder than I thought.

The first step, of course, was the internet. But after a fair amount of time poking around there, I came up empty. Lots of cat videos, though.

I posted a question on the SAPFM Forum. Plenty of views, but no answers.

The next step was to contact Dr. William Reeve, co-author of a book on John Doan, the cabinetmaker who built the piece I'm reproducing.¹ He's an avid collector of antique furniture and a regular contributor to *Canadian Antiques & Vintage* magazine.

His take on the prospect box? "I have always assumed that the 'prospect' refers to the possibility or likelihood of some future delight behind the prospect door. The other pigeon holes and nest drawers are immediately visible when one raises the flap, while their equivalents are concealed behind the prospect door. In the case of hidden drawers behind the prospect box, there is even greater cause for anticipation of some future delight."

Certainly a plausible explanation, but not the proof that I was looking for.

"I have no idea where the name 'prospect box' comes from."

Which is a long, roundabout, moderately funny way of saying that everyone likes to lock away important documents. Period furniture makers were no different.

I've just finished making a prospect box, part of a secretary desk I'm building. The box resides in the gallery of the desk, behind

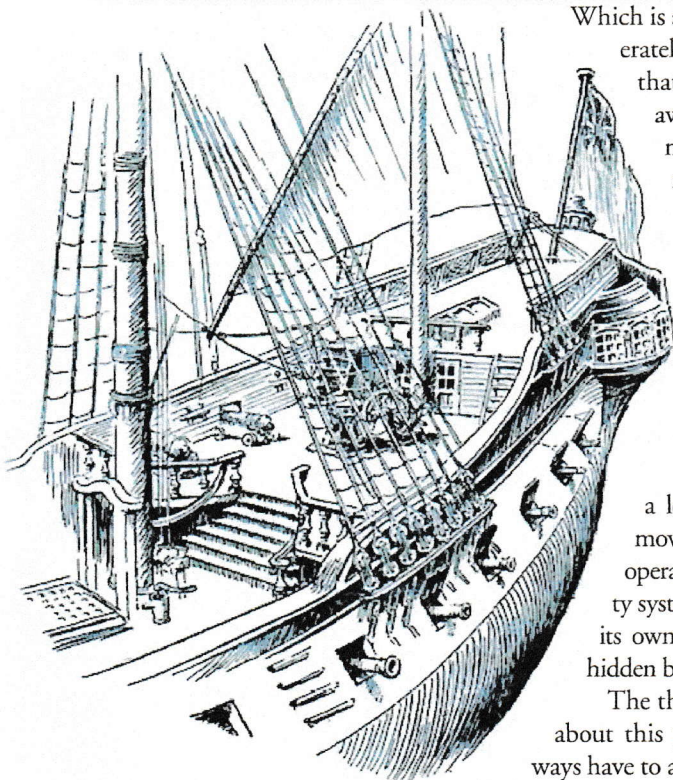
a locked door. It can be removed, if you know how to operate the 18th century security system. Once it's out, it reveals its own secrets: an assortment of hidden boxes and drawers.

The thing is, when I tell friends about this part of the project, I always have to add, "I have no idea where

I moved on.

My next email was to the Yale Furniture Study, well-known to many SAPFM members. It was answered by Patricia Kane. She's the Friends of American Arts Curator of American Decorative

¹ John Doan & Ebenezer Doan: *Canadian Master Builders & Cabinetmakers*. John McIntyre & William C. Reeve. Kingston Press, 2016



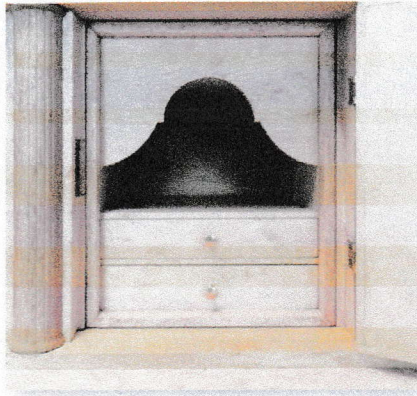


What Are The Prospects? (continued-2)

WHAT'S IN A NAME? LET'S FIND OUT—OR NOT.

Arts at the Yale University Art Gallery.

She says, "I suspect that the term prospect door that is applied to the small door on the cabinet in slant-front desks is a 20th century collectors' term. In the eighteenth century the term for this feature was 'cabinet.' I have seen 'cab' inscribed on drawers that fit into the locked section of interiors. In buying hardware [in the period] the term 'cabinet lock' and 'cabinet hinges' are often called out with other items that indicate the lot of hardware was intended for a desk."



That makes a lot of sense. But it still doesn't tell me where prospect came from.

At this point, I decided to go to the place that inspired so much American period furniture: the U.K. I emailed the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The V&A has been collecting furniture for more than 150 years. Its collection has thousands of pieces, spanning more than six centuries. I figured they would have run across the odd prospect box.

My inquiry was forwarded to Sarah Medlam. She's Curator Emeritus, Furniture, Textiles and Fashion Department, at the V&A. She says "To me, 'prospect' is certainly the small 'theatre' that you sometimes see within a cabinet, not just the drawers.the OED (Oxford English Dictionary) gives one of its meanings as 'a spectacle, a scene,' which is what those sort of set-ups suggest."

The museum has an amazing piece of furniture known as the Endymion cabinet. Open the doors and there is literally a theatrical scene. Sections

could be removed from the front, including the centrepiece. Check out this V&A video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPHgc0EKfk>

Medlam says these boxes are often referred to as "nests," as in a nest of drawers within a piece. These were generally made separately, then inserted from the front or back into a space left within the carcass. This nest of small drawers is also called a "caisson," a French word meaning a solid box.

So, if the whole scene is a prospect, than the central, removable section would logically be the prospect box. Even though today most of us call that "scene" a gallery. (And don't ask me where that came from.)

It's worth noting, however, that while the OED can trace those uses of "nest" and "caisson" back to the early 1700s, it makes no reference to the prospect box. That does suggest that it's a relatively modern term.

For what it's worth, I have my own theory. Secretary desks were the home offices of their time. Prospect is a word used to describe a potential customer or business opportunity. So the box would be where you kept valuable business papers.

However, that theory and a dollar will buy you a cup of coffee. Bottom line:



The Endymion cabinet on stand (1630-1650)
—Victoria and Albert Museum

I still don't know where the term came from.

That's as far as I'm going for now in my research. The "prospect" of finding more information seems slim.

Sorry. Couldn't resist.

If you can help solve this mystery, please send the details to me at woodworker@rogers.com

and we'll see about getting it into the next *P&T*.

—JB

