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Other Colonial Furniture

Dozens of companies (and individuals) produced Colonial Revival furniture. Many had been manufacturing it for decades. One producer was Danersk Furniture (the Erskine-Danforth Corporation) of New York City. In the 1920s, the company's president, Ralph Erskine, revised the product line from a typically eclectic array to one more focused on Colonial styles. Danersk advertising leaned heavily on patriotism and strict American integrity: a 1926 ad asserted that the values of the Founding Fathers "will be fostered in our children if we surround them in their homes today with furniture that breathes the spirit of the best American traditions." Danersk was flexible in its adaptations, though: one "faithful copy" of a highboy was made to house a radio.

The first curator of the new American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, R.T.H. Halsey, also was engaged in furniture making. As president of Oneidacraft, he chose models for the company to reproduce from the American Wing collection. One of Halsey's projects was a tall secretary (desk and bookcase) with a bombé front characteristic of French 18th-century Rococo and unusual for American furniture. The original in the Met may have been made during the Revolutionary War and is said to have been used by George Washington. Halsey, considering that his desk was destined for the John Hancock House in Ticonderoga, N.Y., apparently stipulated that a bust of Lord Jeffery Amherst be added to the reproduction. The *Bombé Secretary* is a fine piece of work. Halsey allowed his workmen to visit the American Wing and inspect the originals, which assured that the copy was more accurate in construction and dimension than most such furniture. The detailed carving and carefully modeled forms equal the craftsmanship of the original.¹

Another company that used the American Wing for models was the Val-Kill Furniture Shop, founded in 1926 by Eleanor Roosevelt and three friends. The Val-Kill Shop was intended to train Hudson Valley residents, especially farmers, in a productive trade that would generate extra income and off-season employment. Several expert furniture-makers were hired to run the shop and train the locals. While Val-Kill sometimes reproduced elaborate 18th century furniture, it was better known for small tables and chairs. Mrs. Roosevelt preferred simple designs like slat-back, rush-seat chairs, and used them to furnish her own cottage at Val-Kill and FDR's "Little White House" in Warm Springs, Georgia. She also encouraged Val-Kill employees to change designs on their own initiative, which was fairly rare among reproduction businesses. The results may not have been strictly accurate yet more in the experimental spirit of the original Colonial woodworkers. (One such American experiment was the rocking chair.) Ironically, one of the Val-Kill experts, a Norwegian named Otto Berge, complained about the company's failure to conform exactly to historical models.

The operation became Val-Kill Industries when it expanded to produce pewter and weavings. It was never profitable, though, and throughout the Depression it relied on Mrs. Roosevelt for financial support. After Nancy Cook, one of her partners, became more involved in politics, Val-Kill Industries closed in 1938.¹