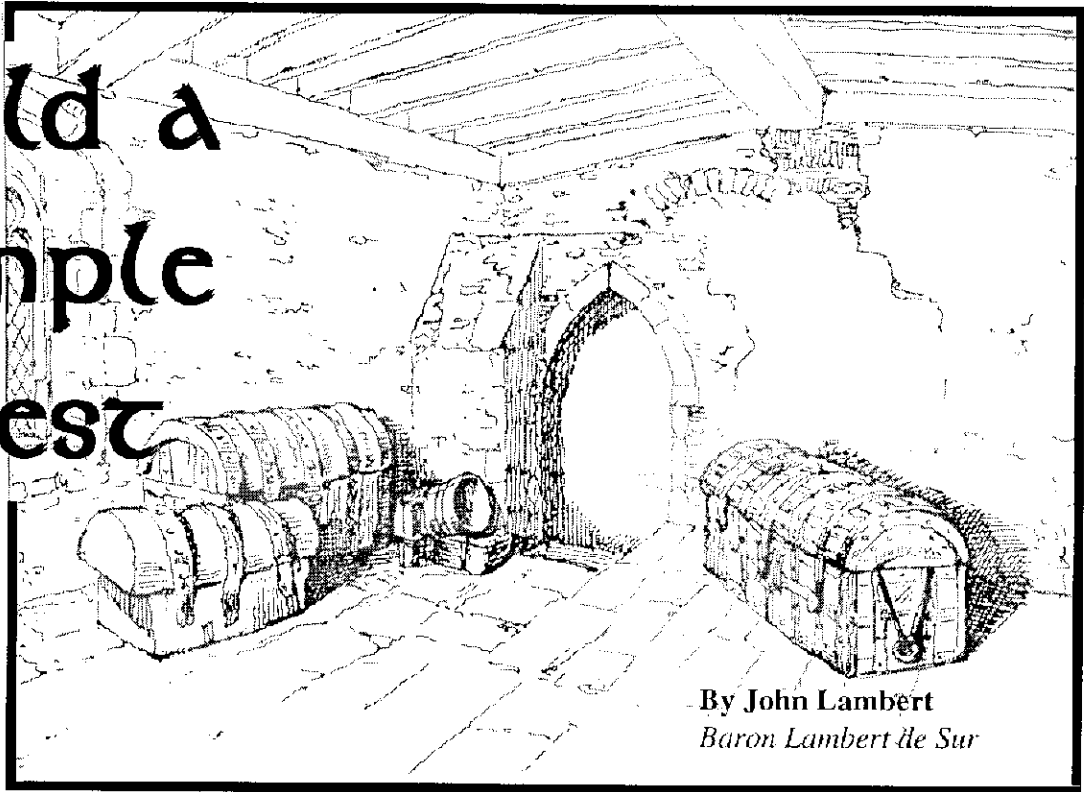


Then the firm oak of which the frame was form'd
No want of timber then was felt or fear'd
In Albion's happy isle
The lumber stood ponderous and fixed by its own massy weight

Build a Simple Chest



By John Lambert
Baron Lambert de Sur

Medieval homes were sparsely furnished by modern standards. The most common items were chests. They came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Besides serving as easily transportable storage containers, the chests also served as tables and chairs during the day and could be pulled together as beds at night. This note describes the construction of a small chest that can hold your valuables at an event and provide you with a comfortable seat. The length of the chest can easily be increased to hold longer items (banners, swords, etc.) and seat two. The chest is sturdy enough for hard use at camping events; the feet keep it off the damp ground. Although I use screws hidden by wooden plugs, the purist might prefer to use dowels. A carved design on the front adds a personal touch.

Economical Construction

The chest described here is a very traditional "six-board" design. The design makes maximum use of materials and requires a minimum of cutting. Over the past five years, I built nearly two dozen of these chests and now require about six hours to the construct the chest, not counting the decorative carving. The "half-lap" joints used are copied from a late Eighth-Century Viking tool chest (Nigelus le Haie described the building of this tool chest in the Spring AS XXV Tournaments Illuminated).

FIRST CUTS

The first thing to realize is that a 1" x 12" board is actually 3/4" thick and 11-1/4" wide. With this in mind, look at the attached diagrams and follow along with the instructions.

The 8-foot board is first cut in half; then a 15" piece is cut from each half for the chest ends. Cut the remaining two pieces in half for the top, bottom, front and back. You should now have two 15" and four 16-1/2" boards.

Select the worst long board for the chest bottom and cut 1-1/2" off of the length and 1-1/2" off the width. Select the best long board for the top. Put the top and bottom boards aside for now.

Half-Lap Joints

Look at the drawings. The end boards stand on end while the front and back boards run horizontally. Cut a piece 3/4" wide by 5-1/2" tall from both sides of the tops of the end board but this time, we can also cut the arcs in the bottoms of the end boards. These serve as handles for lifting and carrying the chest, and help the chest to sit better on uneven ground. Measure in and mark 2-1/2" from each side along the bottom. Draw an arc between the marks (I use a dinner plate). Cut

along the arcs.

You are now finished cutting the wood! Put the sides and ends together and check the fit. A little work with the rasp may be needed to clean up the corners. The fit will not be airtight. Much of the strength of the chest comes from the fact that the front and back are supported directly by the ends, not by the screws or dowels.

Carved Design

Now is the time to add a carved design to the front board of the chest. The design can be anything: a badge, emblem, or geometric shape. The carving can be done in shallow relief using a gouge for outlining or in mid-relief carving the design into wood to give the design depth. There are many books showing the different styles. I'll describe the mid-relief technique I use.

Locate the center of the front board and lay out the design. I usually place the design inside a circular or elliptical border. Use a chisel to cut perpendicularly into the wood to a depth of 1/4" around the border and the design. Using the gouges, remove the background area to a uniform depth. Don't worry about getting the background perfectly smooth. A textured background often adds to the final appearance. Using the carving tools, knives, or a motor tool, incise the outline of the design. Carve away the lower areas, leave the higher areas, and round the sharp corners to give the design depth and texture. It's hard to do anything wrong at this stage, just carve slowly and stop to admire your work often.

Assembly

For me, the assembly requires the most care, especially in drilling the holes for the screws. Do not glue the sections together. The grain of the wood runs in different directions and temperature and humidity variations would soon destroy a glue joint. If I were going to use dowels to peg the chest together, I would first assemble it with screws, then, one at a time, replace them with the dowels.

First join the front and back to the ends. Use two screws on each section of the half-lap joint. Mark the screw locations evenly spaced 3/8" from the edge. Holding two sections together at right angles, drill the screw holes perpendicular to the surface (my drill has a guide). Control the depth using a masking tape on the bit. Only drill deep enough to allow room for the plugs. Screw the sections together as you go.

After the sides and ends are joined, force the bottom into place. If the fit is too tight, you may have to file it down a bit. Mark screw locations to secure the bottom, two on each side and two in each end. Drill carefully and fasten the bottom in place. Cover all of the screw holes with the plugs using a small amount of glue and a few taps with the hammer.

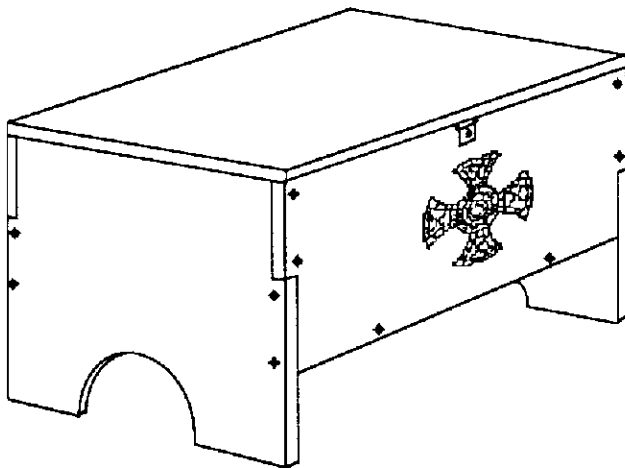
Finally, join the top to the chest with the hinges and attach the optional hasp. The screws and hinges used here are the least satisfactory aspect of the chest for me. They show and are not period. Strap hinges secured with pinged over nails would be more authentic. I attach the hinges and hasp now, then remove them while doing the finishing.

Finishing and Final Touches

There are many ways to finish wood. I use Minwax finishes to stain and seal the surface in one step, then wax the chest to protect it from the weather and wine spills. Any other technique, including painting, can be used. Before applying the finish, lightly sand the chest. I like to round the edges to give the chest a "softer" feel and appearance.

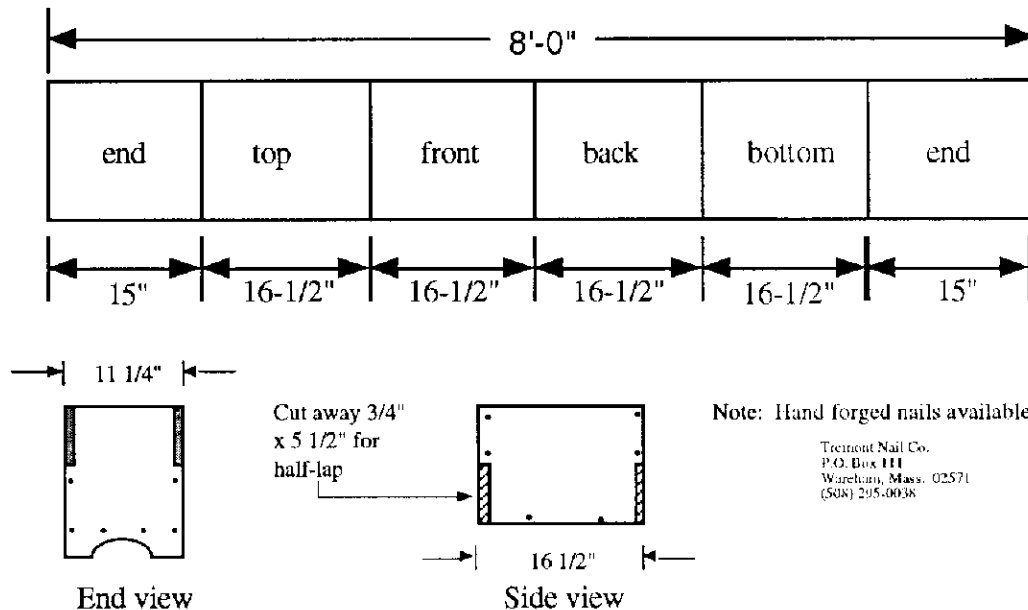
After the finish has dried, reattach the top and the hasp. Because the hinges are fairly light, I add a chain to prevent the top from falling back and pulling them loose. Attach a screw eye to one end near the front. Attach the other screw eye to the top so that it is in line and just behind the first. Open the top to the desired maximum position and measure and cut the chain. Open the eyes slightly and attach the chain.

The chest is now completed and should give you years of service. The only care it requires is a periodic wiping with a soft cloth and occasional rewaxing.



Editor's note: If you want to use hand-forged nails for this box, see the note accompanying the plans on the next page. Also—choose your carving based on your time period.

Simple Chest—Plans



List of Materials

- 8-ft. 1" x 12" pine board*
- 1-pair 2" x 3/4" hinges
- 1 hasp (optional)
- 2-doz. #6 x 1" wood screws
- 2-doz. wooden plugs for screw holes
(size to match bit below)
- Elmer's wood workers glue
- 1-pint Minwax stain
- Minwax wax for final finish
- Two brass screw eyes
- 18" of small brass chain

*Two 4-ft. boards can be used and are easier to transport, but be sure to match them for uniform appearance.

Tools Needed

- Saber (or hand) saw
- Drill
- Countersink bit for wood screws*
- Screwdriver
- Hammer
- Rasp
- Wood carving tools for design

*I use the Black & Decker U-1588 bit set and need 5/16-inch plugs.