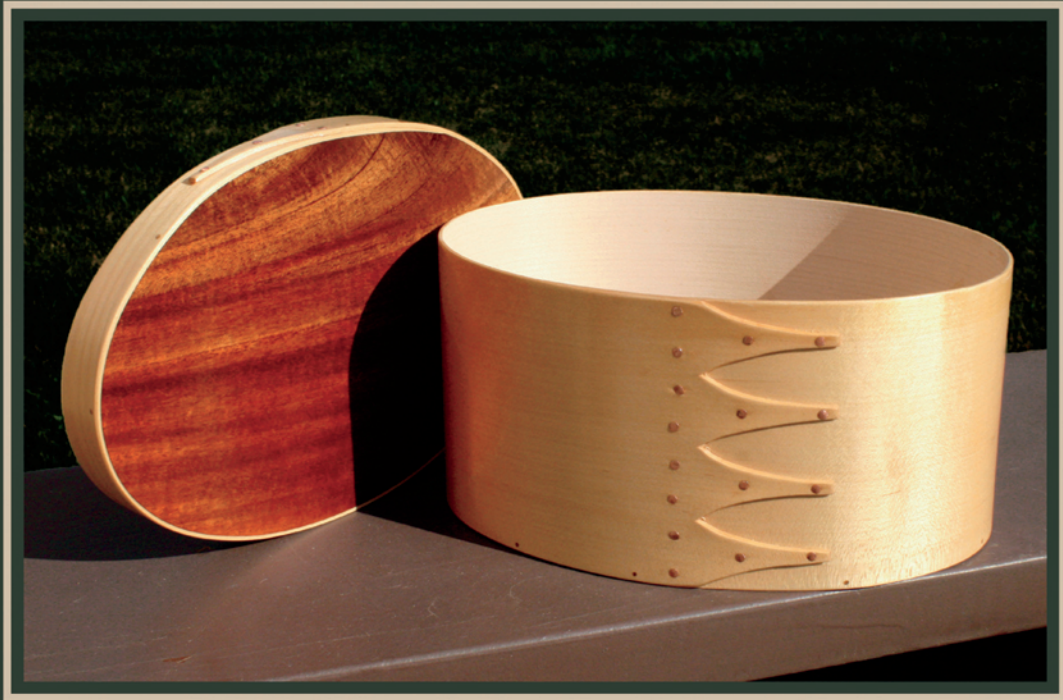# Shaker
Oval Boxes

VOLUME I

John Wilson

Shaker
Oval Boxes

VOLUME I

A Craftsman's Guide
to Original, Derivative
and Diverse Forms
of the Oval Box

John Wilson

The Oval Box —
Original, Derivative and Diverse

By **"original"**, I mean faithful replications of Shaker examples. If there exist examples not represented here, I welcome information that would enable them to be included in future editions. Two examples that exhibit interesting design variations from my research are Br. Delmer Wilson's narrow ellipse style (on pages 36-41), and the Canterbury carrier whose top and bottom ellipse have different proportions (page 80). Both are one-of-a-kind forms whose existence sets us to thinking outside the box.

By **"derivative"**, I mean extensions of original design by the hand of modern craftsmen as recognizable in the Shaker tradition. The body of derivative examples is large and growing, so that no complete representation is possible, only suggestive.

"Diverse" forms come from other cultural settings worldwide, and point to the parallel use of bent wood in the making of containers. Understanding and cataloging these traditions is a worthwhile endeavor that must be left for another time. The inclusion of a few here is made to inform box makers that we are part of a much wider universe.

About the Makers of the Oval Boxes

The majority of boxes in this book were made by me during 34 years of being a box maker. They represent a journeyman's collection on hand the summer of 2013 when the idea for this volume on Shaker oval boxes was conceived. Others, noted by name under the title line, were purchased, loaned or gifted to me. The talent and generosity of these craftsmen is gratefully acknowledged.

John Wilson
January, 2014

In a world where news of inhumanity bombards our sensibilities, where grasping for things goes so far beyond our needs, where time is squandered in busyness, it is a pleasure and a privilege to pause for a look at handiwork, to see beauty amidst utility, and to know that craft traditions begun so long ago serve us today.
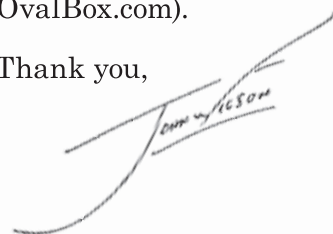
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Preface

On the morning of July 10, 2013, I took this photo of a birch bark oval box. The photo showed the bark texture, color full and warm, and the dark background dramatically silhouetting the image. Over the next few days I brought out oval boxes from my collection for their turn in the morning sunlight. From these images was born this gallery of oval boxes.

I made my first oval box in 1980. My work followed the design and construction of Shaker craftsmen who started their work shortly after tacks were made in America in 1779. Teaching others occurred in woodworking classes at Lansing (Michigan) Community College and later as an itinerant, freelance box maker in one- and two-day workshops in my shop and around the country and abroad. These events, 15 to 20 a year since 1983, give hands-on instruction to 10 to 20 would-be box makers at each session.

The bent wood box is a form wider than the world of the Shakers. So it is that this collection includes examples from other times and places. They serve as a counterpoint to the widely followed example from the American Shakers. The photograph of the birch bark box that sparked my interest in publishing this collection came from box maker and friend Jim O'Brien, who purchased it at the Finn Fest in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Imported from Estonia, the small country near Finland, it represents what to do when tacks are not available. However, most of this collection are tacked bent wood boxes. Some are direct copies of the Shakers attesting to our indebtedness to their craftsmanship. Others are derivative of this tradition, and owe their design to the imagination of recent craftsmen, whose work is recorded in this book.

My thanks to those who have shared with me, and to whom I have been able to serve as source of the small copper tacks and a range of materials for oval box making through the Home Shop (www.ShakerOvalBox.com).

Thank you,

Introduction

Learning to make oval boxes, teaching others, and meeting the need for supplies describes the Home Shop in Charlotte, Michigan. The business began in 1988 in the sunlit building within the circle drive off Broadway Highway bordering I-69. There we operate centuries old No. 4 Perkins tack machines for making the essential fasteners for Shaker oval boxes. The bulk of our day concerns rendering lumber into bands and top and bottom boards plus cores and shapers used in box construction. Find out more at ShakerOvalBox.com.

On Measurements: 1a + b × 2 × 3

Three common reactions by craftsmen viewing pictures of oval boxes are disappointment over frequent omission of any measurements, frustration over having to interpret overall measurements, and not having main band and lid band dimensions. Therefore the following format is used in this collection: 1a + 1b × 2 × 3. 1a is the width of the main or bottom band; 1b, the width of the top or lid band; 2, the minor dimension of the oval to the inside of the box; and 3, the major dimension of the oval to the inside of the box. All dimensions are in inches.

Knowing the width of both main and lid band is more helpful than some overall height, except in a carrier where both the main band width and the overall height to the top of the handle is given. Dimensions of the oval need to be the inside of the bottom and not the outside of the lid because the inside major and minor dimensions are what we make the core on which to bend the band. Most Shaker oval boxes are based on the ellipse, so that shape is assumed unless otherwise noted. It is common in other folk art oval boxes to use an obround, or extension of two half circles.

On Oval Sizes

Oval sizes are sometimes referred to by number. In this collection, as in reference work in all the materials supplied by the Home Shop, these numbers are derived from Ejner Handberg's "Shop Drawings of Shaker Furniture and Woodenware, Volume I," 1973, Berkshire Traveler Press. That book was my introduction to oval boxes when using it as reference in my woodworking class at Lansing Community College in 1977. Handberg

The Shakers had trees similar to these magnificent pine logs from which to make tops and bottoms for oval boxes. It is humbling to know that these pines were growing when Shaker craftsmen were making boxes. The Home Shop is connected in so many ways to these dedicated craftsmen of old. Shown left to right are John, Will and Molly Wilson along with Eric Pintar, my partner in the Home Shop.

was also the introduction to a whole new generation of box makers in the revival of the Shaker tradition.

In his collection, Handberg drew and numbered six ovals from the No. 1 at $2^9/16" \times 4^9/16"$ to No. 6 at $7^1/2" \times 10^7/8"$. To underscore the relationship of these oval boxes, he drew a stack of all six with their corresponding numbers. So effective was his presentation that readers assumed that these numbers were meant to name six oval sizes.

Not so. They were a convenience in illustration, not a recording of history. Handberg knew this, his readers did not, until the appearance of the collected volume in 1980 where many of the drawings were reproduced and he added instruction on construction. The stack is different in 1980 in that the smallest is missing from the top and the numbers expunged from stack and individual drawings. Handberg ended his description in the 1980 edition with this note: "the oval boxes were sold by numbers, the largest size being No. 1." He might have gone on to say that there were no consistent dimensions to the set of numbers either from one village to another, nor often to successive output over time in one village.

So where does this leave us? Historical correctness would favor Handberg in 1980 and leave numbers to various times and places were Shakers made oval boxes. Current makers of oval boxes generally favor Handberg's first publication, and ascribe a common sense numbering starting with the smallest in the series as No. 1. In either case, bigger boxes need larger numbers and smaller boxes a series of zeros. Hence, using Handberg 1973 the really small ones are 0, 00, 000, and even 0000.

The following table of sizes are ones used by the Home Shop, and serve as a reference to check what is meant by number reference when dimensions are not given in this collection. As I have stated, these are not Shaker numberings, but an extension of the six sizes, drawn, notated, and described by Handberg in his first seminal publication. Seminal means "having possibilities of future development," and little did he know how far reaching would be the nine pages of drawings he first published in 1973.

This gallery collection is the first book on oval boxes by John Wilson. The second will feature methods and projects in which specifics for many of these pictures are given. The third will give history, materials and other oval box traditions.
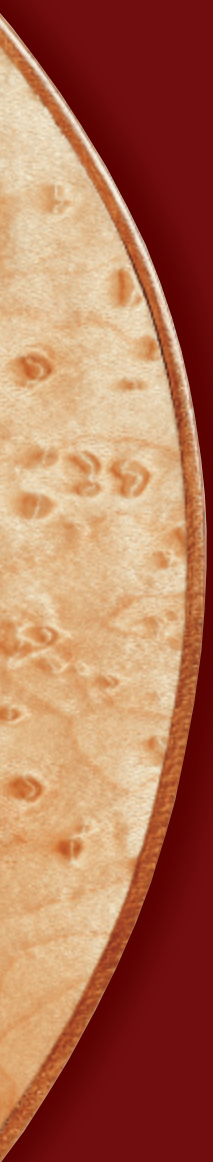
Table of Oval Box Sizes

(Following Ejner Handberg, 1973)

No. 0000	$1/4" + 3/16" \times 5/8" \times 1 3/16"$
No. 000	$1/2" + 5/16" \times 1" \times 2"$
No. 00	$3/4" + 3/8" \times 1 3/8" \times 2 5/8"$
No. 0	$1 1/16" + 7/16" \times 1 7/8" \times 3 1/2"$
No. 1	$1 1/2" + 1/2" \times 2 9/16" \times 4 9/16"$
No. 2	$2" + 5/8" \times 3 1/2" \times 5 3/4"$
No. 3	$2 1/2" + 11/16" \times 4 1/2" \times 7"$
No. 4	$3 1/16" + 3/4" \times 5 1/2" \times 8 1/4"$
No. 5	$3 11/16" + 15/16" \times 6 1/2" \times 9 1/2"$
No. 6	$4 3/8" + 1 1/16" \times 7 5/8" \times 11"$
No. 7	$5 1/16" + 1 1/8" \times 8 3/4" \times 12 1/2"$
No. 8	$5 3/4" + 1 3/16" \times 9 7/8" \times 14 1/4"$
No. 9	$6 7/16" + 1 1/4" \times 11 1/8" \times 16"$
No. 10	$7 1/8" + 1 5/16" \times 12 3/8" \times 17 3/4"$
No. 11	$7 13/16" + 1 3/8" \times 13 5/8" \times 19 3/4"$
No. 12	$8 1/2" + 1 7/16" \times 14 15/16" \times 21 3/4"$
No. 13	$9 3/16" + 1 1/2" \times 16 1/4" \times 23 3/4"$
No. 14	$9 7/8" + 1 9/16" \times 17 5/8" \times 25 7/8"$
No. 15	$10 9/16" + 1 5/8" \times 19" \times 28 1/8"$
No. 16	$11 1/4" + 1 11/16" \times 20 3/8" \times 30 3/8"$

For a complete list of numbered sizes with dimensions needed to make any one size, refer to "Shaker Oval Box Specifications" posted at www. ShakerOvalBox.com. This list is an extension of No. 1 – 6 published by Ejner Handberg in "Shop Drawings of Shaker Furniture and Woodenware, Vol. I," Berkshire Traveler Press, 1973.

A Gallery of Shaker Oval Boxes

Oval Boxes
No. 000 through No. 16

These views show what a tall stack of boxes looks like. All together the bottom portions remind me of a nautilus shell sectioned to give the repeat ellipse design. The tops progress to a mountain top where the tiny thumb size No. 000 perches. All together they are higher than I can reach, as shown in the photo outside the front door of the Home Shop shown below.

It is well that photos were taken as they are all I have of that set. Coincidence would have it that two customers would order finished boxes that together make up this dramatic show. I do not recall the person who ordered No. 000 through No. 12, but it was Martha Wetherbee, well known for her life's work in Shaker and Nantucket baskets, who got No. 13 through No. 16 to complete her set.

My son Andrew was working with me at the time and took the photos. Just as I was standing beside the tall stack a puff of wind started it to sway. Out of the corner of my eye I saw it lean precariously and so reached up with the No. 8 button box that I was holding to prevent disaster.

JOHN WILSON
CABINET MAKER

Oval Boxes Nested

T he Shakers made sets of oval boxes in graduated sizes such that they nest together. It makes a dramatic statement as seen both in the pyramid stacked up, and in these two views of concentric ellipse bottoms and stacked tops. Even in the set of five boxes students make in my Box Basics class they are displayed as a stack or stored together nested.

I have wondered how this design sequence came about. Today we find it natural to stack and nest, but surely this would seem a bit strange, if not comical, to makers and users of these boxes 200 years ago. They were utility objects, not items for display. Oval boxes held tea, coffee, sugar and spices, not other boxes. They were arranged on the pantry shelf, in fact referred to as pantry boxes, rather than stacked. So why keep sizes disciplined for nesting? The one thing that comes to mind is the convenience of nesting when ordering them in the shop and transporting to the point of sale. It is also true that the sizes are useful even if these customers never thought to stack or nest as we do today.

The tops of all 19 boxes in the tall stack make their own display.

Stack of
Six Small Boxes

T he lid to the smallest lying on the table is a counterpoint to the largest which is itself a fairly small box, as its place on the sewing table top suggests. The matching birdseye maple tops all come from a fine example of that wood with swirls and bits of bark intrusion to make it interesting. I find that the oval shape is perfect for presenting some of nature's best.

To admire graceful shapes and unusual wood does not rob boxes of their utilitarian origins. But what to store in a No. 0000 size is something of a challenge. This one is just right for the tooth fairy.

DIMENSIONS: No. 0000 — $1/4$" + $3/16$" × $5/8$" × $1 3/16$"

No. 000 — $1/2$" + $5/16$" × 1" × 2"

No. 00 — $3/4$" + $3/8$" × $1 3/8$" × $2 5/8$"

No. 0 — $1 1/16$" + $7/16$" × $1 7/8$" × $3 1/2$"

No. 1 — $1 1/2$" + $1/2$" × $2 9/16$" × $4 9/16$"

No. 2 — 2" + $5/8$" × $3 1/2$" × $5 3/4$"

Very Large Oval Box

T he English have the term "folly" for eccentric expressions in architecture that often emulate earlier buildings or monuments. There is the connotation that the builder did not have something more tasteful to do with his money.

So why did I make this first really big box? I had a really big cherry band that invited being made up into something unusual. This photo shows me unloading it at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village where I gave a show-and-tell introduction to my box making class. My next stop was Cooperstown, N.Y., Farmer's Museum. Again I was asked by participants and spectators alike, what was it? To seem more knowledgeable than baffled, I said "coffee table."

The remarkable outcome of this answer was someone wanting to know how much it cost. Again, I picked the first thing to come to mind "$400." The result? The person left, but came back soon and bought it. The moral is this: a folly or white elephant needs a name people can relate to, and they just might buy it.

DIMENSIONS: $17" + 1^3/4" \times 21^3/4" \times 32^7/8"$