

Shaker Carrier

Dovetail box, steambend handle

by John Kassay

This not-so-difficult-looking project offers two challenges—the hand-cut, through-dovetail corners and the sculptured, steam-bent bail (handle). Carrier is the Shaker name for a box fitted with a bail. Those carriers that exhibit pleasing form, fine construction, and quality craftsmanship were made for the Shakers' own use, whereas carriers made for sale in Shaker stores, though well crafted, look mass produced. With the exception of the manner in which the bail is fastened, this carrier is a fine example of one made for communal use.

To make the carrier, thickness-plane enough pine (wood species is optional) to make the sides (A), ends (B) and bottom (C). All surfaces should be hand-scraped and sanded. Those surfaces that will be on the inside of the carrier should be finished surfaces and so marked. Now lay out the sides and ends and add $\frac{1}{32}$ in. to their widths and lengths, and cut accordingly. The extra length allows the ends of the dovetails to project minutely beyond the outside surfaces. After the sides and ends are assembled, these projections are planed or sanded off, resulting in a better appearing dovetail joint. The extra width is used for truing up the edges at the top and bottom of the carrier, again after assembly.

Mark out and cut the bottom $\frac{1}{4}$ in. longer and wider than the overall length and width of the carrier sides and ends. Sand the inside surface and shape the upper edges as shown in the drawing. Nail the bottom in place—a nice touch here would be to use $\frac{7}{8}$ -in. fine-cut headless brads (available from Woodcraft, 313 Montvale Ave., Woburn, Mass. 01888).

Nailing the bottom onto the carrier sides may seem to contradict all we have been taught about wood movement, but it is the way the Shakers did it—and they had central heating too. It has been suggested that the bottom ought to be let into a groove in the sides, like a frame-and-panel. However, I have rarely seen good results from altering a Shaker design. In this particular case, inletting the bottom would eliminate a characteristic Shaker form, the molding created by the protruding bottom, and it would greatly complicate the carrier's joinery. I think that when the bottom worked loose, the Shakers would just nail it on again.

The bail is made of ash; red or white oak or hickory could be used instead. Mill straight-grained stock to overall thickness, width and length (detail 2), then steam it and bend it around a mold before tapering it to shape. Although it's difficult to shape the bail after bending, it's more frustrating to lose a pre-shaped bail during the bending process.

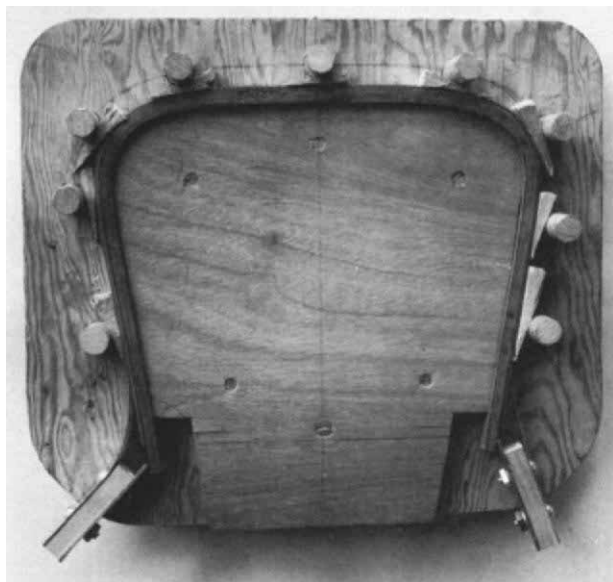
The photo on the facing page shows my bending jig, with a back-strap made of four strips of 24-gauge galvanized sheet steel, spot-welded together at the center (*FWW* #8, Fall '77, p.40, and #30, Sept. '81, p. 84). This apparatus will bend

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kiln-dried white oak that's been steamed for about two hours under low pressure (5 PSI to 10 PSI). If you use split-out green wood, the chance of a successful bend is greatly increased; you can probably substitute an ordinary band clamp for the steel back-up strap and end blocks. I leave the bent stock on the jig to set for a couple of days. When removed, it springs back just the right amount to fit the carrier.

Now make a full-size pattern of half the length of the bail, trace it onto the bent wood and cut out the shape. With a block plane and a scraper blade, taper the bail in thickness from the center to the ends, as shown in the edge view, then spokeshave it to the cross-sections shown. Note that the undersurface is rounded, while the outer surface is left flat. Both ends of the bail are flat where they attach to the carrier ends, and chamfered on their outer corners. Fine-sand all the surfaces and ease any sharp corners, except those where the bail meets the carrier. Fasten the bail with four brass rivets and washers, two at each end; you could substitute counter-sunk flat-head woodscrews.

The inside surface of the original carrier was protected with a wash coat of yellow milk-paint, while the outside was left natural. The bail was varnished. □



Wedges hold bent stock against bending form while it cools and sets. Steel back-up strap with end blocks helps make the bend, but once bent, the strap can be tipped away from the stock, as shown.

