

Queen Anne Handkerchief Table

Building a three-cornered masterpiece

by Eugene Landon



Landon's reproduction of a rare 18th-century handkerchief table is a study in pure Queen Anne lines.

In the middle of a very busy workday about four years ago, the phone rang. It was an elderly acquaintance who lived in a nearby town, calling to inquire whether I would be willing to repair a piece of furniture for her. "It's a handkerchief table," she said.

I couldn't leave what I was working on for a week or so, but agreed to go and look at the table when things slowed down a little. Secretly, I had my doubts about the piece—the handkerchief table is one of the rarest American furniture forms. Perhaps what she had was the larger version, usually called a breakfast table, or perhaps something else entirely. I mused about it for a moment, but almost as soon as I returned to what I had been doing, the table went completely from my mind.

Two years later, out of the blue, I heard the same voice over the phone again:

"Mr. Landon, aren't you interested in my table?" The earlier conversation came back to me instantly, along with a considerable flush of embarrassment. "I'll be right over," I said.

When I entered her home, I saw that she knew what she had all right.

The little table took my breath away. Even though it was missing the leaf, the hinged leg and all its knee blocks, it had a presence that epitomized pure Queen Anne, before cabinetmakers under the Chippendale influence began to add shells and gingerbread. I have nothing against Chippendale, but while such decoration may sometimes enhance a piece, it may also serve to disguise basic flaws in design. The little table was so stylistically pure that any such shortcomings would have stood out immediately. As I walked around the piece, I gradually realized that it had no flaws at all; it was perfect.

Much as I dislike extravagant claims, I believe that this handkerchief table is not only excellent Queen Anne, but that it is one of the finest pieces of furniture ever made in any time or place. You simply will not find a shaplier leg, nor one more perfectly proportioned to the rest of the table. The genius of the maker is evident everywhere: The four notched corners of the open top serve to restrain the eye's travel, yet when the leaf is down, the opened notches blend into a lovely curve. The back of the ankle is undercut just the right amount, the merest touch, to give the entire table poise and an irresistible uplifted energy. Even the chamfer on the front corner post strikes just the right balance—it defines the corner elegantly, yet is neither too sharp nor too weak.

It turned out that the table had been made in Boston, circa 1740, and that it had been in my client's family ever since the day it was made. The owner agreed to let me make a copy for myself, and I was so

convinced of the rarity and authenticity of the find that I took photos of it to Israel Sack, the antiques experts, in New York City. Robert Sack told me that the firm, in 32 years of business, had handled only one or two similar tables. My client's was truly as rare as I had thought.

I made my copy by following plans that I traced from the original. Figure 3 on p. 41, in fact, was adapted from a rubbing of the original table, which I made when I had the top off. The joinery has been added, and also the outline of the legs to show their orientation. I would advise you to redraw this top view full-size, and to add the joinery and wooden-hinge details as well. This step will immediately clarify the project and will also allow you to cut pieces to fit the sizes and angles on the drawing, rather than trying to measure them.

My table—my wife's table, as Jane would remind me—stands with its folded leaf against a wall in our living room. This shows the decorative apron on both sides. The table could also go in a corner, with the leaf folded down in front, or it could stand next to an armchair or a sofa, being just about the right height to hold a reading lamp. Because my table stands with its 90° corner facing forward, I'm calling that leg the front one; the folded leaf and the hinged leg are at the back of the table. The table also has a left leg and a right leg, both at the rear. The legs all end up different, so it is important to know which one is which.

The front leg is made like a regular Queen Anne leg, following the template shown in figure 1. Indeed, all the other legs *start* the same way, but then each must be modified. The rear legs, for example, are glued to the aprons, then their corner posts and the tops of their knees are reshaped to blend into the acute angle, as shown in the photo on p. 40. As also shown, the knee block of the left rear

Fig. 1: Leg template

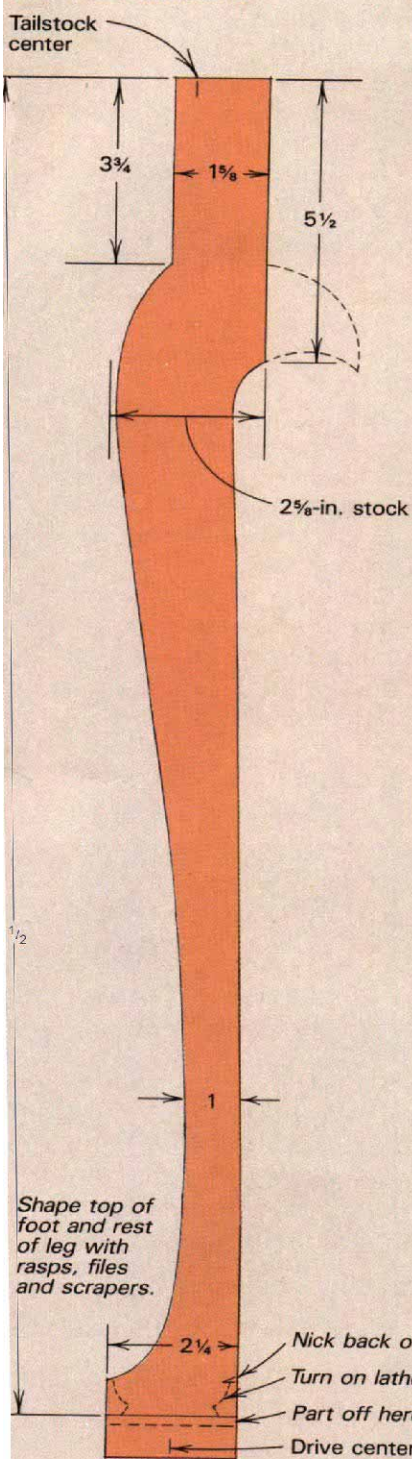
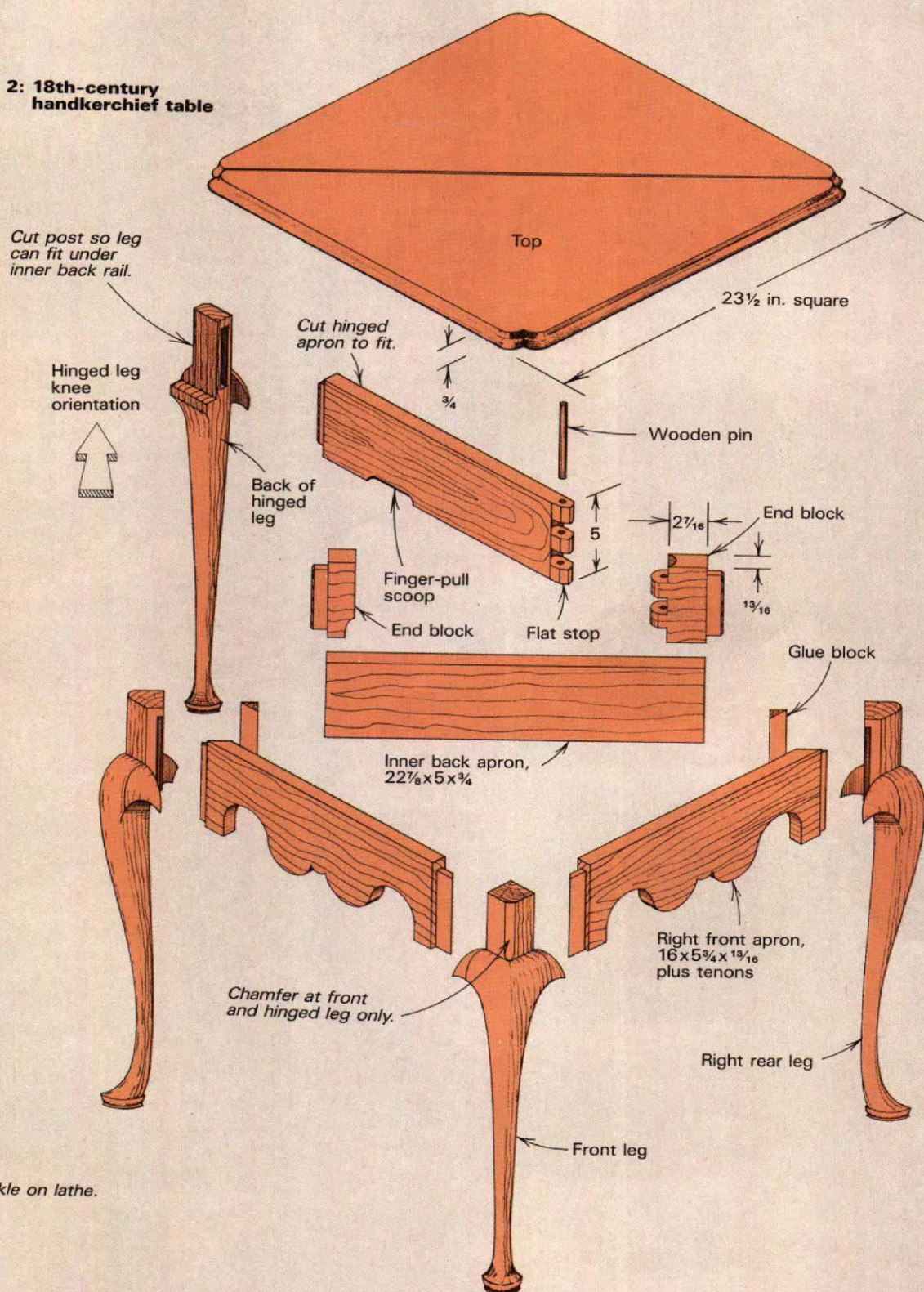


Fig. 2: 18th-century handkerchief table



leg must be modified so that the knee of the hinged leg can nest behind it. These and other modifications will be considered as they arise.

The first step is to bandsaw all four legs to the curves shown on the template. Notice that the back of the foot is not undercut at this time—to do so is a common mistake that affects the visual balance of the leg and leaves the foot without suffi-

cient body for good looks. Center the bandsawn blanks on the lathe and turn the bottoms of the feet. Then just nick the back of the ankle to define the top of the foot. Do not remove too much wood—the nick at the back of the ankle should be no more than 1/8 in. deep, and your chisel should barely graze the top of the foot at the front. These marks will be faired into a gentle curve as the leg is being shaped. I

use rasps, files and scrapers, repeating each step on all the legs with one tool before moving on to the next. When the legs are shaped and smoothed, set them aside. The knee blocks will be sawn and added after glue-up, then shaped on the table.

Cut the front aprons to length, but don't bandsaw the curves yet—that step comes just before glue-up. At the front end of both aprons, cut the tenons that will go

into the front leg. Then cut the mortises in the front leg. There is a $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. shoulder at the top of the tenon—which leaves some wood at the top of the corner post for strength—but there is no shoulder at the bottom. I begin with an undersized bit in my drill press, being careful not to get too close to the lines, and not to go so deep that the brad-point will leave marks at the bottom of the finished mortise. (I don't like to leave any machine marks on my reproductions, even when they will be hidden.) I complete the mortise with chisels prior to mitering the front tenons on the aprons, which I cut a little short so they don't touch inside the mortises. As a final touch, I undercut the shoulders a little so that the face of the apron will draw up snug to the post.

Now we come to the interesting part, the joinery at the back legs, which is shown both in figure 3 and in the exploded drawing. The two front aprons are mortised to the back legs at 45° . There are two back aprons, one of which carries the hinged leg.

Cut the inner back apron to length (no-

tice that this piece has no tenons). Then cut the hinged apron, leaving it about 8 in. overlong for the time being, and make the hinge. It is much like the card-table hinge I described in *FWW* #47, but there are a few noteworthy differences. It has a built-in stop at $64\frac{1}{2}^\circ$, and to make this work, the hinge pin must be offset more than half the board's thickness from the end. This leaves some extra wood to bear against the inner apron, as shown in the hinge details in figure 3. Final fitting of the stop is done by trial and error before the hinge strip is glued to the inner back apron.

As also shown in figures 2 and 3, there is an end block at each end of the hinged apron. One of these blocks is the fixed part of the wooden hinge, and the other can be made from the excess length of the hinged apron. It is by means of the end blocks that the back-apron assembly is tenoned to the legs. There is some careful fitting to be done before gluing up this assembly. First mortise the back legs and cut the tenons on the end blocks, then fit the hinge together. Next bandsaw the left-hand end block so the hinged leg can nest

into it (see the photo below if this sounds confusing). You can use the leg template to determine the profile of the curve.

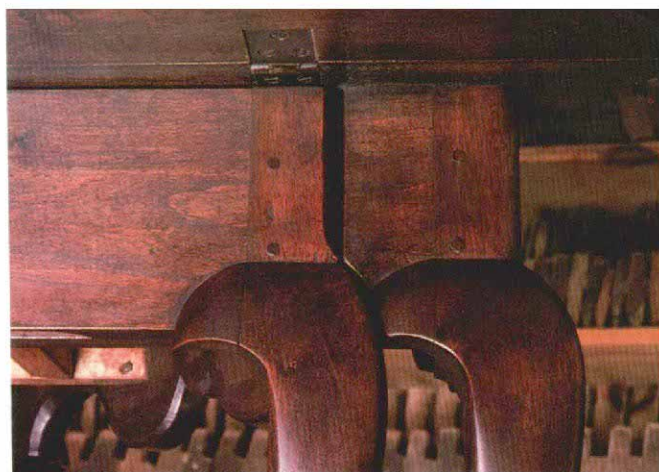
Now glue the end blocks to the inner back apron, but don't glue on any legs yet. As you can see in figure 2, the hinged leg's corner post must first be half cut away so the leg can swing under the inner back apron. Work on the mortise-and-tenon joint at the hinged leg until everything fits, paring back the shoulders on the hinged apron's tenon so that the leg ends up in exactly the right nesting position. Finally, glue up the back-apron assembly, including the hinged leg but not the others.

Now on to the angled mortise-and-tenon, which is not nearly so difficult to make as it may look. First the tenon: I set a sliding bevel to the angle shown on the plans, then transfer it to the top and bottom edges of the apron blank—I always mark such lines with a knife, since pencil lines are too fat to be accurate. Then I simply bandsaw close to the lines and pare down to them with a chisel, as shown in the photo below.

The mortise is a little trickier, but not



A look at the table's back corner (left) shows how the knee and post have been shaped to conform to the 45° angle. The hinged back leg nests as shown at right; note in the drawing on the facing page that both legs are oriented in the same direction. Below, Landon demonstrates the setup for starting an angled mortise. He supports the corner post in a V-block, and presses the leg against his forearm for extra control. Paring the tenon's angled shoulders is shown at right below. The first step is to bandsaw close to scribed layout lines. Then finish up with a chisel and a 45° guide block.



really difficult. You can pre-drill most of the waste by supporting the corner post in a V-block as shown. Using the drilled holes as a guide, pare the mortise to full width with chisels. You can protect the very thin area at the inside corner from splitting off by using the 45° guide block, just as when cutting the tenons.

With the joinery cut, it is time to bandsaw the curves on the aprons. The pattern is centered on the apron and extends as far as the tips of the knee blocks, as shown in figure 4. After bandsawing the curves, remove the sawmarks with a rasp and chamfer the inner edges with a knife or chisel. The original table shows rasp marks clearly, and the $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. wide chamfering is a series of very bold cuts.

Glue the table together upside down on a flat surface, and when it is dry, rub on the interior glue blocks. The front angle on the original table was $88\frac{1}{2}^\circ$ instead of 90° . I am not sure whether this was deliberate, so that the table would fit into a corner even if the room were slightly off-square, or whether it was just one of those things that happens. My table is also $88\frac{1}{2}^\circ$, and if you choose to follow the plans exactly, yours will be, too.

Now bandsaw the knee blocks and glue them on—but notice that the back knee block on the left rear leg must be relieved, as was done with the end block, so that the hinged leg can nest inside it. Bandsaw the relief cut before gluing on that knee block. Also notice that the forward-facing knee blocks at the back legs are larger than the others so they can meet the posts at a 45° angle. They must also be cut from slightly thicker stock, but these differences will be obvious when it comes time to make the blocks.

Reshape the tops of the knees on the back legs as well as the knee blocks to fair them back to the apron. Finish shaping the outsides of the back corner posts at the same time. Next chamfer the outside corners of the front leg and the hinged leg, then go ahead and make the top.

I cut the top's molded edge with an ogee plane and a hollow plane, but if you don't have these you can begin by cutting a shallow rabbet and then finish up with files. The notches are cut with bandsaw and chisels.

There is a curious joint where the leaf folds. It is not quite a rule joint, nor the tongue-and-groove that might have been found 50 years earlier, but rather a more delicate nesting rabbet-and-bead that does not conflict visually with the notched corners, whether the leaf is up or down. I

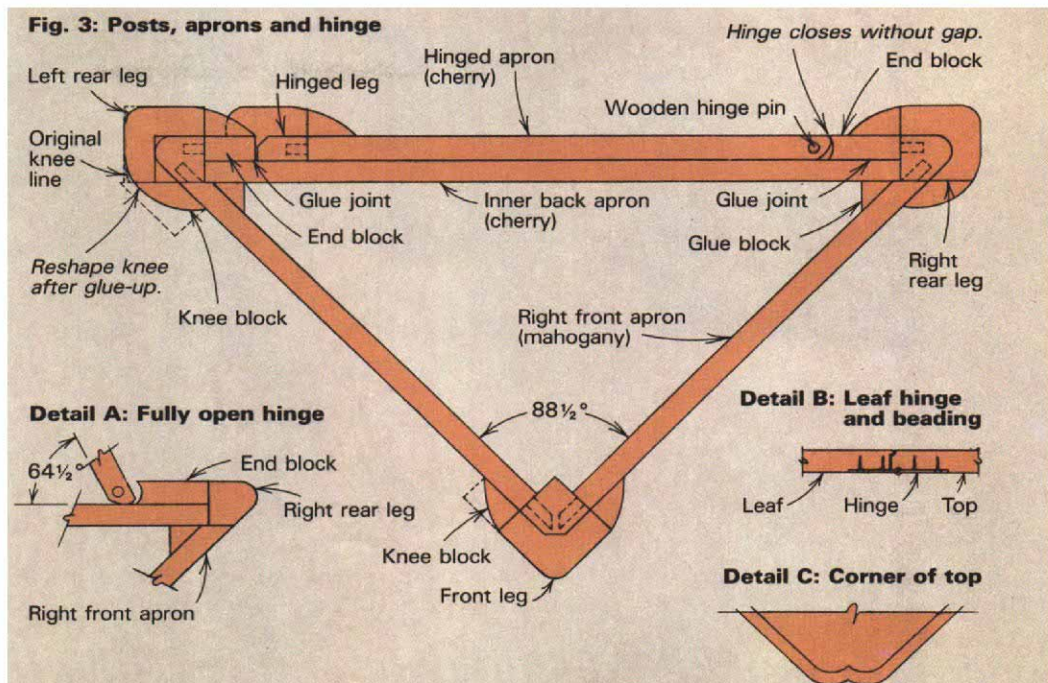
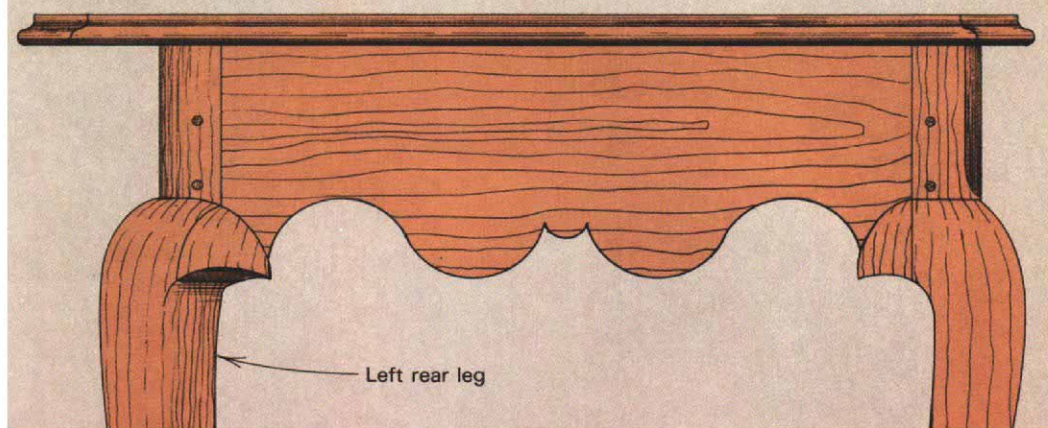


Fig. 4: Apron detail



made mine with old planes, but any method will work. Pay particular attention to the location of the hinge pin, which determines how the leaf will align with the top in both the hanging and upright positions.

I attached the top with rubbed glue blocks and nails, the same method used on the original. This allows no provision for seasonal wood movement, and you could fasten your top differently if you'd like. Some old pieces eventually split, and some did not. My table, in fact, has a nice small split already, which I welcome as a sign of age. The original's top, ironically, is still fine after more than two hundred years.

I don't like to think of it as faking, but you could say that my table aged a little faster than the original. I added some wear marks where the original table had them, then eased the edges with a Scotch-

Brite pad. I smoothed the bottoms of the feet by rubbing them with a brick, duplicating the moving around that the original must have experienced in its lifetime. For the finish, I applied a home brew of green walnut husks steeped for a month or so in water. This helps darken Brazilian mahogany so that it looks more like the Cuban variety used by 18th-century cabinetmakers. I sealed this with a brushed coat of thin shellac. Five or six subsequent shellac coats were padded on, with some dry pigments mixed in to achieve a semitransparent patina. I took off the gloss with some 0000 steel wool, and everything came together at once. Suddenly there were two old tables side by side, a gathering of the rarest of the rare. □

Gene Landon restores antiques and makes period reproductions in Montoursville, Pa.