

Federal Card Table

String inlay frames the game

by Michael Dunbar

At no other time in our history were Americans more fascinated with card playing than during the Federal period. So much time was devoted to cards that a special piece of furniture—the round card table with one hinged leaf that closed book-fashion—was created for just this purpose.

Often called demi-lunes, these tables were made from the early-18th century until the mid-19th century, but the form was never as popular as it was during the Federal period. A household that did not own at least one card table was as unusual as a modern household without a television. Card tables were often

the most elaborate pieces of furniture a family owned. When not in use, these tables were prominently displayed in the front hallway or the formal parlor.

This particular table has a visual intensity created by the string inlay, or stringing, on every visible surface except the top and the insides of the legs. Stringing was commonly used in formal Federal furniture, perhaps because cabinetmakers appreciated its ability to draw the viewer's eye—particularly when illuminated by candlelight. On this table, which is primarily mahogany, the light-colored inlay acts as a visual fence, bounding each area and

preventing the eye from moving easily from one to the other. For a brief moment, the viewer's attention is trapped inside each area, scans the perimeter several times, then moves on to the next surface where it is again briefly seized and spun around the outline of the stringing.

Each time I view this table, my eye is drawn first to the skirt. There it moves quickly around the long rectangle, like a marble spinning inside a tin can. The concave corners enable my eye to jump from a horizontal line to a vertical to the other horizontal. On less well-thought-out tables, where the corners of the stringing are square, the eye will follow the horizontal lines into the corners and the quick scanning motion is subverted. The effect is like trying to spin a marble in a box instead of a can.

From the skirt, my eye usually falls to a leg, where the stringing pulls it quickly down the long taper to the ankle, across the ankle banding and back up the other side.

Near the bottom of the tapered legs, two horizontal lines of light stringing flank a dark, thicker core of ebony veneer to define the ankles. If the stringing simply ran vertically to the foot, the eye would travel down to the floor and not easily jump from one edge of the leg to the other. The same triple banding is used as a border to delineate the lower edge of the skirt. The effect is strongest under candlelight. The banding creates a



A card table was often the most elaborate piece of furniture in the Federal-period home. The left rear leg swings out to support the hinged top, which opens up book fashion.

sharply defined line that prevents the edge of the mahogany skirt from fading into the shadows under the table.

From whatever direction you view the folded table, you see an arc of skirt framed by two legs. The veneer on the skirt is made from three adjacent cuts taken from the same flitch so that each surface is nearly identical to the other two. From the front, you glimpse two blank surfaces on the rear legs. It may seem odd that they have no stringing, but this would have scuttled the maker's noteworthy design. With inlay only on the extreme left face of the left leg and right face of the right leg, the table breaks into a symmetrical triptych—three identical sections made up of two legs and a panel, each one sharing a leg with its neighbor,

When the table is open this careful arrangement no longer exists. The maker knew that participants in a card game commonly draped a green, floor-length wool cloth over the table. Even if this were not the custom, one is more likely to interact visually with the piece when it is folded and against the wall than while playing cards on it.

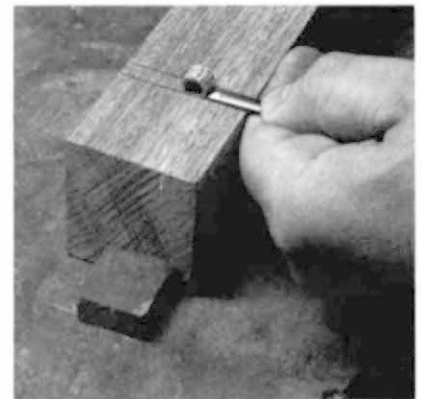
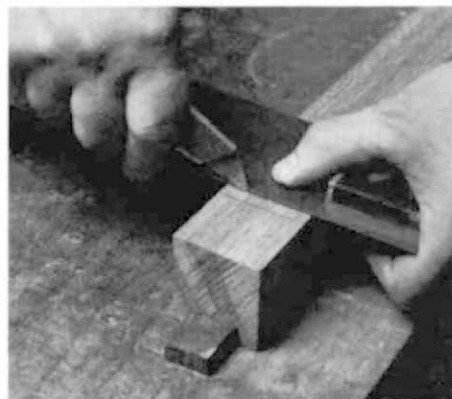
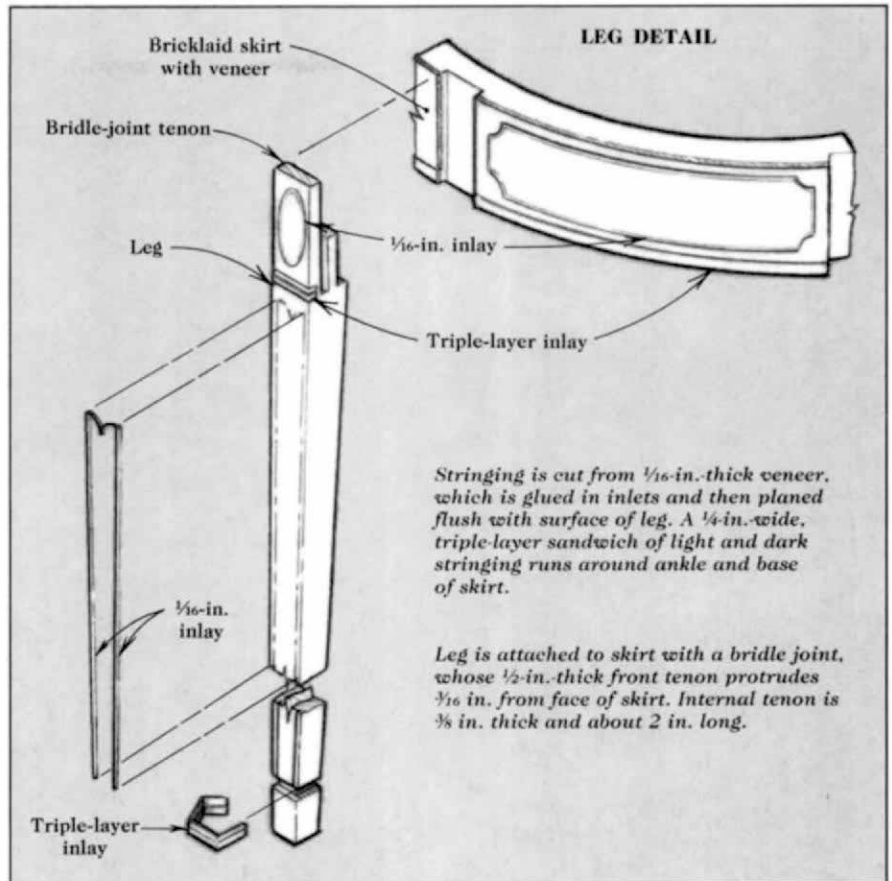
This card table is not a particularly complex woodworking project. Beneath its mahogany veneer, the curved skirt is bricklaid from two layers of pine. There are three curved segments in the top layer glued to two longer segments in the bottom layer. Once the glue hardened, the inner and outer surfaces of the segmented skirt were planed smooth.

There are about a dozen nail holes in the lower edge of the skirt, indicating that the cabinetmaker laid the glue on the mating surfaces then nailed the pieces together. The nails may have prevented the sections from slipping when being clamped or may have eliminated the need for clamps altogether. Either way, the nail heads were never set, and the nails were extracted after they had served their purpose.

Bricklaid construction makes a stronger skirt than would three single pieces cut from a plank. The short lengths of edge grain that occur in a curve are strengthened by the other layer. A bricklaid skirt allows for some joinery techniques that differ from the standard mortise-and-tenon normally used to join a table's legs to the skirt. The two center legs are joined to the skirt with a modified bridle joint. The rear tenon of the bridle is short, and housed in a blind mortise in the skirt.

The rear legs are treated differently. The right rear leg is fixed, and joined to the skirt and the back rail with a standard mortise and tenon. The left leg is a swinging leg, or gateleg, hinged to the middle of the back rail, from which it swings out to support the open top.

Some interesting joinery is required to enable this leg to swing. The back rail itself is two layers thick. The outer layer is made of two separate pieces, the movable rail and the fixed rail. These are connected in the middle by a series of interlocking knuckles that



To lay out the groove for the ankle banding on the leg, score the edges of the inlet on one face with a mat knife and square, then remove the wood with a chisel. After tapering, the leg, cut inlets on the remaining three sides of the leg.

form a wooden hinge (making this type of hinge is explained in detail in *FWW* #47, p. 45). The gateleg is attached to the end of this movable rail with a mortise and tenon. The inner layer of the back rail is glued and screwed to the fixed outer rail and joined to one end of the curved skirt with half-blind dovetails. The other end of the inner rail is butted against the skirt.

The two edges of the card-table leaves merely butt together when the table is open. A short tongue is set into the center of the rear edge of the hinged leaf, and a mortise is made in the rear edge of the fixed leaf. When the top is open, the locator tongue fits into this mortise and keeps the movable leaf from shifting. Otherwise, all that strengthens this butt joint between the leaves when the top is open are the two card-table hinges.

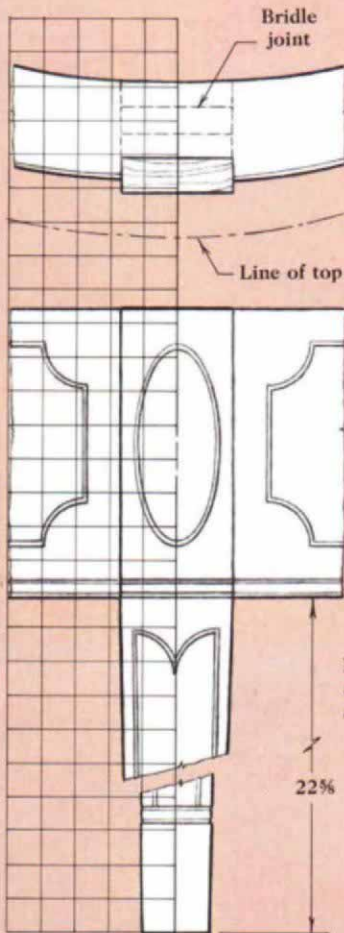
Card-table hinges (available from Garrett Wade) have two long

CARD TABLE

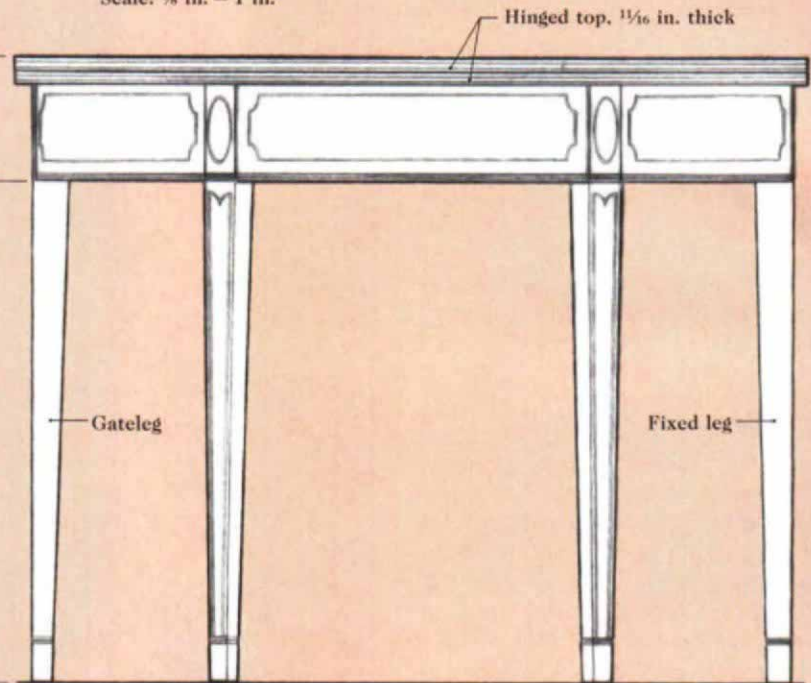
Scale: $\frac{1}{8}$ in. = 1 in.

PATTERN FOR FRONT LEG

Grid: $\frac{3}{16}$ in. = 1 in.



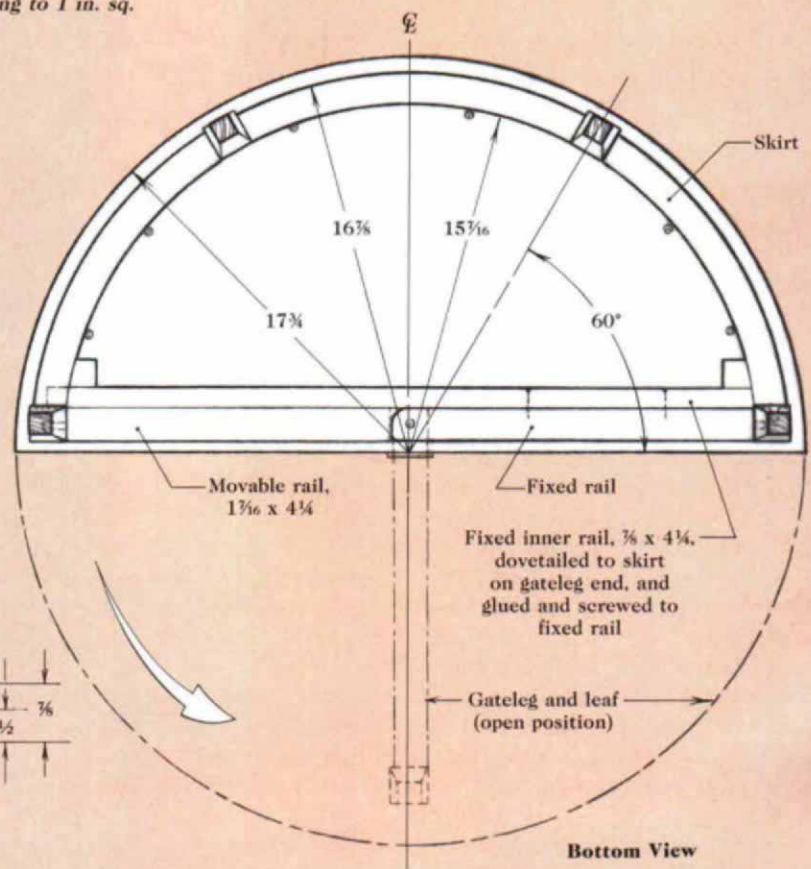
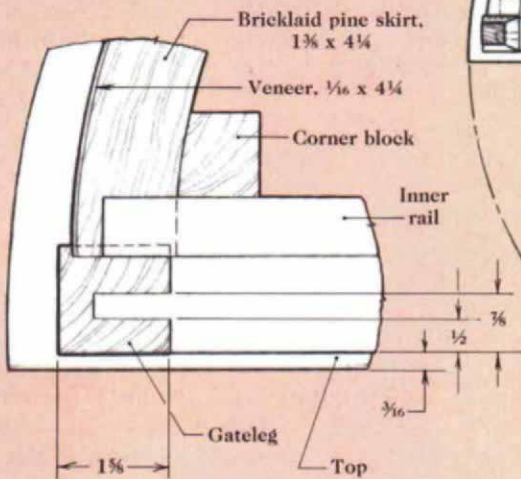
Note: Leg is 1 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. sq. at top, tapering to 1 in. sq. at foot.

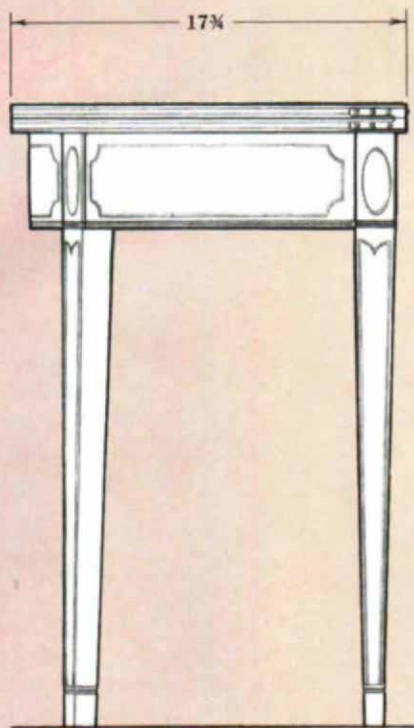


Front View (top closed)

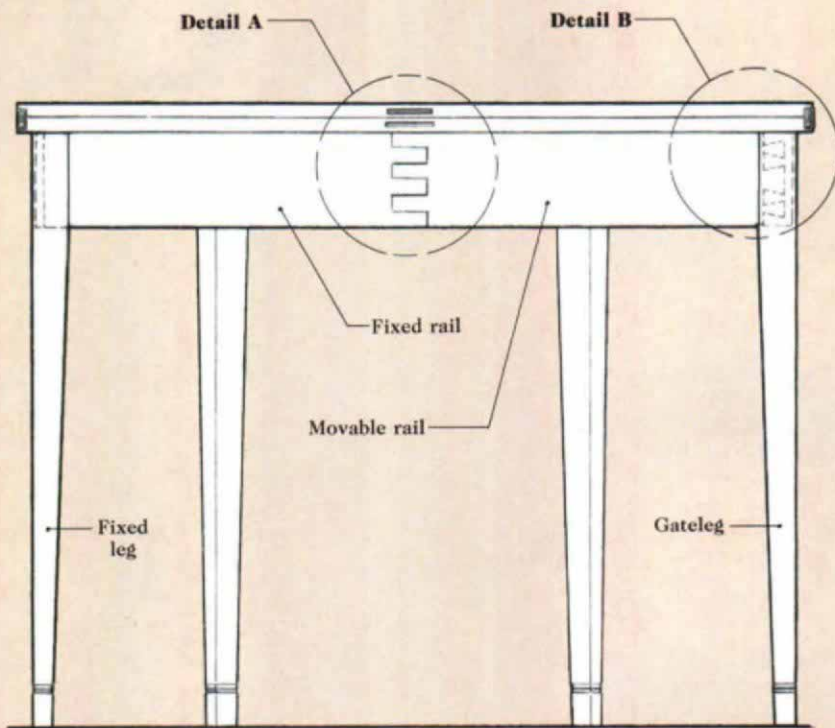
SECTION AT A

Scale: $\frac{3}{16}$ in. = 1 in.





Side View

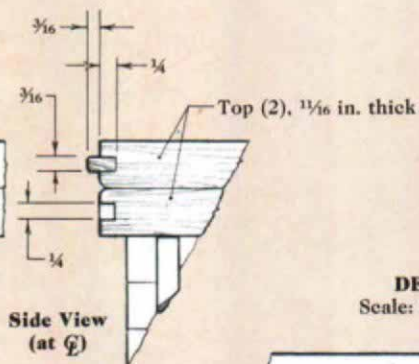
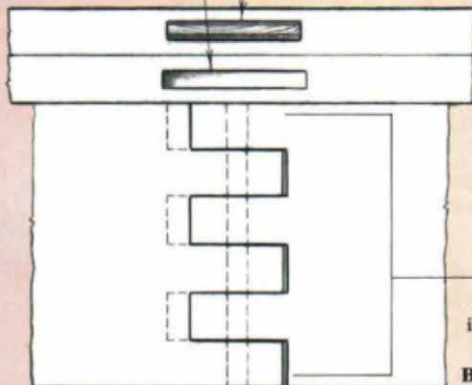


Back View

DETAIL A
Scale: 3/8 in. = 1 in.

Mortise for locator, 2 1/8 in. long

Chamfered locator tongue, 2 in. long



Side View (at ϕ)

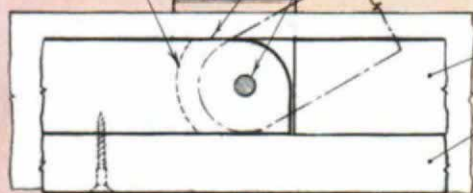
Hinge joint, equally divided into six knuckles

Back View

Clearance radius, 1 in.

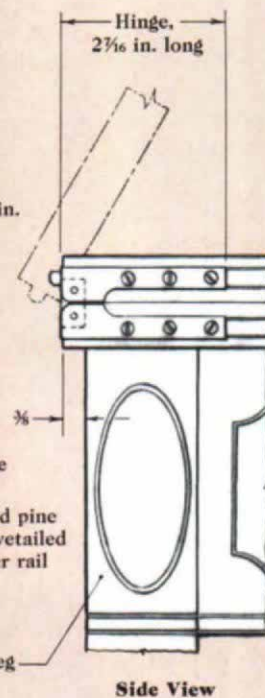
Fixed rail

3/16-in.-dia. steel pin



Bottom View

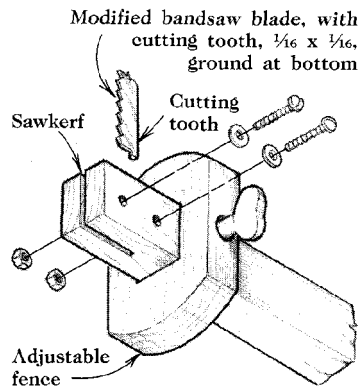
DETAIL B
Scale: 3/8 in. = 1 in.



Back View (with gateleg removed)

Side View

legs that open like a pair of scissors rather than opening and closing like table-leaf and butt hinges do. Both the table-leaf and butt hinges would have to be set into the playing surfaces of the leaves, which Federal-period cabinetmakers seemed inclined to



avoid. Instead, card-table hinges are set into the outside edges of the leaves.

String inlay—To make the inlets for string inlay, I prefer to use a couple of tools that I can quickly make myself.

I adapted an old marking gauge to use as a scratch tool for making straight inlets. It will also work on the edges of the leaves.

While the leg stock is still square, cut the inlet for the ankle banding only on the front of the leg. With a mat knife scribe two lines for a 1/4-in.-wide inlet and remove the wood with a 1/4-in. chisel. After tapering the sides and back of the leg with a handplane to the dimensions in the drawing, you can continue the front ankle inlet around to the sides and around the back.

Next, measure 4 3/4 in. from the top of the leg and draw a light pencil line across the front surface. This is the point where the two vertical lengths of stringing stop and turn inward.

To cut the two radii that turn inward at the top of the leg, I use a pair of modified dividers to lay out and cut this curved groove. One leg of the dividers is pointed, and the other leg has a notch filed into its end that scribes line 1/16 in. apart. Place the pointed leg near the top of one of the vertical inlets and set the dividers to one-half the distance between the inlets. You'll have to play with the opening to find the exact radius. You will also have to find, by trial and error, where to place the pointed divider leg in the straight inlet.

Swing the notched end of the dividers so that it scribes two concentric arcs. Do the same with the dividers positioned in the other straight inlet so that the two pairs of curved lines intersect in the middle. Now deepen the scored sides of the inlets with a mat knife and lift the chip out with a 1/16-in. chisel. The chisel will also clean up the intersection of the curved inlets with the straight inlets.

Because I think that white birch was used for the stringing on the original table, I chose this wood for my stringing too. I make a sheet of white-birch veneer by resawing thin slabs from a board on the bandsaw. I then thickness-plane them as thin as possible and finish them down to 1/16 in. with a smoothing plane. I cut the stringing from this veneer with a mat knife guided against a straightedge.

The ankle stringing is a 1/4-in.-wide sandwich of birch with a thicker, dark ebony core. The original, three-tiered veneer was undoubtedly cut in a single slice from three slabs of wood planed to the desired thickness and glued together. Make a similar sandwich of veneer for your ankle banding.

String inlay is meant to be enjoyed from a distance, and small imperfections are not noticeable. The finish will usually fill any gaps left after sanding. □

Michael Dunbar, of Portsmouth, N.H., has made Federal furniture since 1972. This article is adapted from a chapter in his book, Federal Furniture, available from the Taunton Press.