



THE STORY OF CHESTER DRAWERS

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WILLIAM LABOV WROTE IN 1972 that words are “slippery creatures, and many scholars have been distressed by their tendency to shift their meanings and slide out from under any simple definition” (341). He continued, “It is not only the words that are shifters; the objects to which they must be applied shift with even greater rapidity.” Words are not the only elusive creatures; referents, too, slip easily from a firm grip. Such is the case for furniture terms and furniture forms. Detailed exploration of one set of terms, those for the piece of furniture often known as a *chest of drawers*, takes us on a journey through the development of the piece and the relationship between that history and the linguistic variation demonstrated in linguistic atlas studies.

The Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (LAMSAS) interviews provide a broad range of linguistic information which allows the dialectologist to catalog the vast amount of both lexical and phonological variation present in American English at the time of the interviews. Included in the LAMSAS data are responses for the “bureau question,” different terms for one item of case furniture normally used for the storage of clothes or linens, often found in the bedroom, and sometimes equipped with a mirror. The LAMSAS database for ‘bureau’ contains a total of 2,007 responses elicited from 1,162 informants.¹ Of those responses, 1,104 (55.0%) were *bureau*. *Dresser* (380, 18.9%) and *chest of drawers* (227, 11.3%) also were frequently given. The next most frequent response was *chest*, which was given as a response only 42 times, a sharp decline in frequency from the top three terms. The majority of the terms given in response to the bureau question appear only one or two times. This data takes the shape of a familiar pattern in lexical variation: a few terms are used with a high degree of frequency, and the most common number of occurrences for a response type is one. Table 1 lists all 37 response types for the bureau question as well as the number of occurrences for each type. In the case of the LAMSAS Gullah data, 21 informants offered 40 responses to the bureau question.² Of those responses, 52.5% were *bureau*, while the next most frequent response was *dresser*, which accounts for only 17.5% of the total responses. A complete list of Gullah responses is included in table 2. The variation found in other LAMSAS data sets generally follows the same pattern as the variation for ‘bureau’ terms. One, two, or three “core” terms

TABLE 1
LAMSAS Data for the Bureau Question

Bureau	1,104	Box	8	Checkrobes	1
Dresser	380	Stand	7	Chest upon a chest	1
Chest of drawers	227	Lowboy	5	Clothes stand	1
Chest	42	Chest on chest	4	Clothespress	1
Sideboard	34	Vanity	4	Chifforobe drawers	1
Washstand	30	Desk	3	Cupboard	1
Highboy	27	Case of drawers	3	Bookcases	1
Chiffonier	22	Dresser of drawers	3	Cabinet table	1
Trunk	22	Stand of drawers	2	Kast	1
Drawers	19	Set of drawers	2	Vanity dresser	1
Bureau drawers	19	Blanket chest	1	Wardrobe	1
Commode	17	Cabinet	1	Wash hands stand	1
Dressing table	9				

TABLE 2
Gullah Data for the Bureau Question

Bureau	21	Sideboard	6	Wash hand stand	2
Dresser	7	Drawer	2	Wardroom	2

have the highest frequency, while the lower-frequency terms, or “peripheral” terms, make up the majority of responses. This pattern of variation applies not only to LAMSAS data but also to a follow-up study conducted in 1990 by Ellen Johnson (1996).

Johnson compares information from interviews conducted in 1990 with information from the original LAMSAS interviews conducted in the 1930s. Her study focuses on 39 individuals from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. One of Johnson’s conclusions that is particularly relevant to the study of American furniture terms is that core vocabulary persists. The three core terms given in response to the bureau question in the LAMSAS data are still in the vocabularies of the 1990 informants. Sixty years later, *dresser* and *chest of drawers* are still core terms for this item. *Dresser* was the most frequent response at 32.1%, followed by *chest of drawers* at 30.4%. *Bureau* has become a peripheral term, accounting for only 8.9% of the 1990 responses. Looking at the data from Johnson’s study, we see evidence of lexical change, yet we see the preservation of terms as well (see table 3).

All of Johnson’s survey results were found in the LAMSAS ‘bureau’ data except for *press*, *linen press*, and *bachelor’s chest*. *Press* and *linen press*, though not found in the data were found in the data for the “wardrobe question.” Because chests and wardrobes are related forms within the

TABLE 3
1990 Responses to the Bureau Question (Johnson 1996)

Dresser	18	Highboy	2	Dressing table	1
Chest of drawers	17	Dresser drawers	1	Linen press	1
Bureau	5	Bachelor's chest	1	Press	1
Chest	5	Chest on chest	1	Vanity dresser	1
Washstand	2				

family of case furniture, several terms overlap in their designations. *Bachelor's chest* is a relatively new term, most likely arising in the United States during the 1960s (Gloag 1969), which explains its appearance in the 1990 data and not the 1930s data.

One problem with the LAMSAS and Johnson data is the fact that the exact referent for each item elicited is not certain. Respondents could possibly be naming objects that might fall into the same general category but were actually different pieces of furniture. In order to relieve my own skepticism about this matter, in 1998 I conducted a short survey using pictures to elicit responses for six target items, all of which were variations of the 'chest of drawers' form. I wanted to know if visual cues used to elicit responses would have an effect on the number of different responses received. I examined data from 60 surveys completed by college students between the ages of 18 and 24, all of whom were raised in Georgia. Thirty-nine of the informants were female, and 21 were male. I found that visual cues elicited the same kind of variation found in linguistic atlas data. For each picture there were core and peripheral terms used to identify the visual image—the core terms eliciting the highest number of responses, the peripheral terms given much less frequently. For example, the first picture on the survey was identified by the core terms *dresser* and *chest of drawers*, which were given at frequencies of 40.0% and 35.4%, respectively. The peripheral terms *chest* and *drawers* account for 6.2% each of the responses, and *bureau* for only 3.1%. Responses to each of the other five pictures yielded the same pattern. One response, *chester drawers*, orthographically represented a common pronunciation of *chest of drawers*. Complete results from the survey are shown in table 4. Not only did the results of my 1998 survey indicate that, even when elicited by visual cues, lexical responses from informants raised in the same state show variation, but this variation falls into the same general pattern as the variation recorded in the earlier, larger linguistic atlas studies.

Since the general pattern of variation seems to persist through the different surveys, we can ask how such a pattern might have arisen. If core terms are terms used most frequently to identify a particular item, where,

TABLE 4
Responses to Survey Using Six Pictures (A-F) to Elicit Furniture Terms

<i>Response</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>
Armoire	1 (1.5%)	1 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Buffet	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.6%)
Bureau	2 (3.1%)	4 (6.6%)	2 (4.4%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.3%)
Cabinet	1 (1.5%)	4 (6.6%)	1 (2.2%)	2 (3.4%)	1 (1.8%)	4 (6.6%)
China cabinet	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Chest	4 (6.2%)	7 (11.5%)	2 (4.4%)	3 (5.1%)	1 (1.8%)	5 (8.2%)
Chest of drawers	23 (35.4%)	14 (23.0%)	4 (8.9%)	19 (32.2%)	0 (0.0%)	14 (23.0%)
Chest drawers	1 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Desk	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.3%)	2 (4.4%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (22.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Drawers	4 (6.2%)	6 (9.8%)	4 (8.9%)	6 (10.2%)	4 (7.0%)	8 (13.1%)
Dresser	26 (40.0%)	19 (31.1%)	27 (60.0%)	24 (40.7%)	2 (3.5%)	21 (34.4%)
Dresser drawer	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Dressing table	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.6%)
Highboard	1 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Highboy	1 (1.5%)	1 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Hutch	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Night stand	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (5.1%)	7 (12.3%)	2 (3.3%)
Secretary	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Sideboard	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Stand	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Table	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	26 (45.6%)	3 (4.9%)
Vanity	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Vanity table	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
TOTAL	65	61	45	59	57	61

then, do all of the less frequently occurring lexical items come from? Investigating the history of this piece of furniture in America provides valuable clues in the search for possible sources of these peripheral terms. What follows is a brief history of the chest of drawers and related furniture forms. The history of the physical form of the chest and of the bureau sheds light on the origins of many LAMSAS variants given in answer to the bureau question.

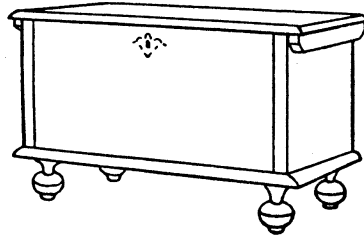
Dating individual pieces of furniture is an art. On occasion, documentation records the birth year of a specific piece; but, aside from relying on scattered records or labels, fixing an exact date for the appearance of a specific furniture form is an impossible task. Instead, the use of period labels is a convenient and helpful tool for locating furniture in historical context. The following periods are generally accepted in the antiques community. The William and Mary period began at the end of the seventeenth century and ended shortly after the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Queen Anne period covered the first two decades of the eighteenth century and is followed by the Chippendale period of the 1750s and 1760s. The Chippendale period is named for an English cabinetmaker whose style greatly influenced English and American craftsmen. The period is marked with the publication of Thomas Chippendale's *Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* in 1754. After the American Revolution, American furniture makers turned towards their own models for the designation of furniture style, form, and fashion. The last quarter of the eighteenth century is known as the Hepplewhite period. *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide* was published by George Hepplewhite's widow in 1788 (3d ed., 1794). Thomas Sheraton published his cabinetmaker's guide, the *Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing-Book*, in 1791, marking the Sheraton period in American furniture designs. The Sheraton period, generalized to the last decade of the eighteenth century and the opening years of the nineteenth century, meshed with the American Empire style that followed the War of 1812. American Empire style combined design elements of the Sheraton style with aspects of the French Empire design. Though the dates of these periods are approximate and overlap in some instances, they distinguish a change in style, form or influence worth noting.³

In an unpublished collection in the archives of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA), Bradford Rauschenburg has meticulously compiled furniture terms mentioned in wills and inventories from the Low Country region of the South. Every mention of every form and variety is cataloged, and the list spans 200 years from the earliest recorded estate information through 1820.⁴ MESDA, in its publication *Regional Arts of the Early South* (Bivins and Alexander 1991), divides the South into three

distinct regions: the Chesapeake, the Low Country, and the Back Country. The Chesapeake region includes the Chesapeake Bay area and areas quickly settled by emigrants from the Bay area: the coasts of Maryland and Virginia and the northern coastline of North Carolina. The Low Country, an area highly influenced by British and French culture and fashion, centers around Charleston and extends northward to the southern coast of North Carolina and southward to include the coast of Georgia.⁵ The Low Country ends at the fall line of these states, where the Back Country begins. The Back Country region was heavily influenced by migration of Germans and Scots-Irish who traveled down the Shenandoah River Valley and encompasses portions of western Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. For some furniture forms, different terms were used in each region. The cultural centers of each region and their contact with European countries, as well as the distribution of goods along trade and migration routes, account for some of the variation in terms used in each region. Forms and the names attached to them spread from region to region; thus, a term that manifests itself in the Back Country in the late 1800s might have been in use in the Low Country or Chesapeake region for some time before. For the sake of positing the forms and terms in some temporal scheme, the following account of the history of case furniture gives the periods in which each form appeared as well as the year that each piece debuted, if available, in Low Country inventories and wills.⁶

Our story begins with the *trunk*, a roughly constructed, box-shaped wooden container with a hinged lid used for the transportation and storage of various goods. A large box turned on its side and enclosed with outward-facing doors shifts the form to that of the *cupboard*. Both of these forms were in existence well before the colonization of America, and their forms predate any period designation. The first pieces in colonial America to be called *chests* were large boxes, much like the trunk in form but with more finished details (fig. 1). Chests began with hinged lids and were used for the storage of linens and clothes. As conditions in early America improved, cabinetmakers from England immigrated to the New World and set up trade. These newly American craftsmen instigated the addition of decorative features to the chest. Paneled fronts (versus those made of plain boards), painted fronts, and the addition of short legs were some of the features that became integral parts of the chest's form during the William and Mary period. Though the form of the decorative chest had undoubtedly been common for several decades, the name *chest* is documented in the Low Country for the first time in 1692. The addition of a wide drawer fitted below the well of the chest created the form of a *blanket chest*, a form that is still familiar today (fig. 2). In New England, the form of the blanket

FIGURE 1
Plain Chest



chest often had two wide drawers below the boxed well covered with a lifting top.

During the Queen Anne period, this basic form continued to change as more drawers were inserted into runners that became part of the structure of the interior of the chest. The drawers filled the well of the chest, making it necessary to change the lid into a fixed top. When the form received this addition of drawers, it was labeled literally as a *chest of drawers* (fig. 3). Also common were the terms *nest of drawers* (1742) or *case of drawers* (1695), the former reserved for chests with many small drawers and the latter stemming from the construction of the piece from a *case* filled with drawers from top to bottom. The term *cabinet* (1727), used in reference to the case form, became popular towards the end of the seventeenth century. Chippendale, in his cabinetmaker's guides, was the first to use the term *dressing chest* (1796) to describe the basic form of the chest. The Chippendale period saw the chest with drawers grow bigger and taller. With the addition of supports, either in the shape of brackets or feet, several new forms

FIGURE 2
Blanket Chest

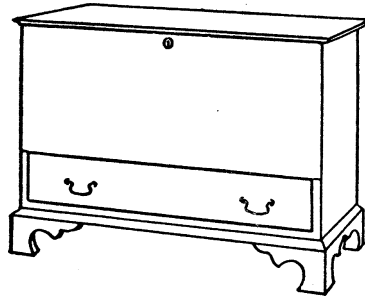


FIGURE 3
Chest of Drawers



appeared. The taller form on short yet slender legs was called a *chiffonier*, a term derived from the French word *chiffonnier*, which was used to designate a piece of furniture with drawers used for the storage of needlework. In some instances, long legs were added to the bottom of the drawered chest, creating the *highboy* or *chest on frame* (fig. 4). The latter designation was reserved for forms in which the large, box-shaped drawer section was set on top of an open frame or stand with legs that served as a base. The *highboy* (or *tallboy*, a common Back Country designation) was a tall chest of drawers that flourished in America, although it was produced only for a short time in England (fig. 5). Made as a companion piece to the highboy, the *lowboy* is a desklike form created to match the larger piece (fig. 6). Between 1700 and 1775, the highboy was in great demand in America, and variants of the highboy form remained popular until the nineteenth century. Each variation of form signaled a variation in terminology. The *chest on chest*, or *chest*

FIGURE 4
Chest on Frame

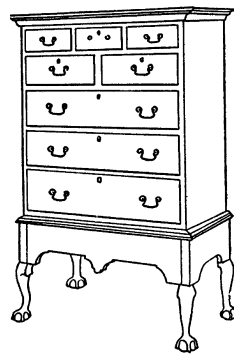


FIGURE 5
Highboy

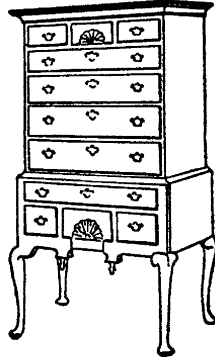
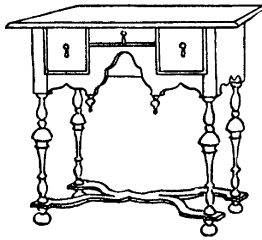
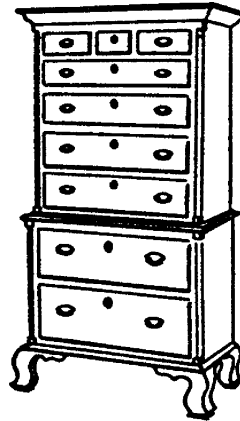
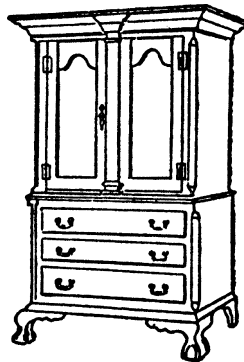


FIGURE 6
Lowboy



upon chest (1769), is literally one slightly smaller chest of drawers stacked upon a larger chest of drawers (fig. 7). The *linen press* carries out the same idea, but instead of one chest upon another, the *press* (1725) stacks a small cupboard on top of the larger-dimensioned chest of drawers (fig. 8). Later, the name of this form becomes the familiar *wardrobe* (1771). The wardrobe was another form placed on supportive legs in the same manner as the chiffonier, thus begetting the *chifforobe*, which one can occasionally still find in the South today.

In his guide, Hepplewhite (1794) includes the form of *dressing drawers*, a design indistinguishable from the design for the chest of drawers. Hepplewhite also included the design for a *double chest of drawers* (1771), his own design for the chest on chest form. As the demand for decorative features increased, new forms with greatly detailed woodwork and painted

FIGURE 7
Chest on ChestFIGURE 8
Linen Press

decoration emerged. These “fancy” pieces were often given fancy names. The *commode* (1762) has a front of decorated doors instead of drawers and was intended for use in a dining room or formal sitting room. The commode moved to the bedroom as decorative features in “private” rooms gained importance. Taking the design elements of the commode and adding them to the chest of drawers, Hepplewhite designed the *commode dressing table*, which looks like a chest of drawers with a rounded, ornately carved front. The commode was often the bearer of a washbowl and basin (which explains the later semantic shift of the term to ‘toilet bowl’).

Another term for the same piece, which was common in the Back Country, was *washstand* or *wash hands stand*. The *sideboard* (1775), an old form used for the storage of plates and dishes in the kitchen, began to be used for display as it gained decorative features during this period. The sideboard is a piece of case furniture that functions as both storage and decoration and was usually placed in the dining room or living room. The Back Country term for a sideboard, *slaboard*, can still be heard in rural parts of North Carolina.

The Sheraton period was an expansion on the designs of the Hepplewhite era. Sheraton (1794) includes designs for two types of chests of drawers. One, called a *lobby chest*, was to serve as a decorative storage piece in a hallway or foyer. The other chest of drawers design, labeled the *dressing chest* (1796), was to serve in the bedroom as a receptacle for clothing, linens, and other dressing “equippage.” The Sheraton period also saw the use of the term *dressing case* (1808) for the dressing chest. Sheraton used the term *bureau* in his drawing books and contributed his own designs for sideboards and *dressing commodes* (a term interchangeable with *dressing chest* during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries).

Dresser is a term obvious in its absence in the discussion of the evolution of bedroom furniture and dressing accoutrements. *Dresser* is a medieval term whose original denotation was an open-shelved sideboard used in the kitchen for the dressing of meats. In Europe, the same piece was called a *cupboard* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and a *kitchen dresser* in England in the nineteenth century. In the mid-seventeenth century, one variation of this form lost its open shelves and resembled a table with long legs and small drawers under the top boards. In another variation, the piece was filled in with drawers, causing it to resemble a chest. With one form similar to that of a dressing table and another form similar to that of the chest, it is easy to see how the semantic shift from ‘dressing meats’ to ‘dressing a person’ could have been made. Thus, the term *dresser* has a later American application to the forms associated with clothes chests and dressing tables. *Dresser* does not appear in the Low Country estate records, which indicates that it was not in use in the Low Country until after 1820. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* (1985-) includes the older denotation as the definition of *dresser*, stating that the piece is a “shelf, sideboard, set of shelves or cupboard often placed in the kitchen and used as a work surface and a place to store dishes, utensils, etc.” The use of *dresser* in reference to kitchen furniture appears in America as early as 1651 and as late as 1970, primarily used by speakers in the northeast, and is considered to be “old-fashioned.”

The development of a sibling form, the *desk* or *bureau*, mirrors that of the chest. Prior to the late 1600s, American cabinetmakers did not make “desks.” Instead, an upright box coupled with a stool served the function of a writing surface. Before the start of the William and Mary period, a box with a slanting lid served as a writing surface. One mention of a *writing box* was made in an estate inventory as late as 1817. Around 1700, the *bureau desk* appeared as a multipurpose form. The piece had three or four drawers beneath a slanted writing surface, often called a *slant-front*, so that it could function as a desk as well as storage for papers or linens (figs. 9 and 10). The form consisted of a set of drawers topped with a movable flat surface that could be lowered for writing and in the upright position served as a

FIGURE 9
Slant-Front Bureau (open)

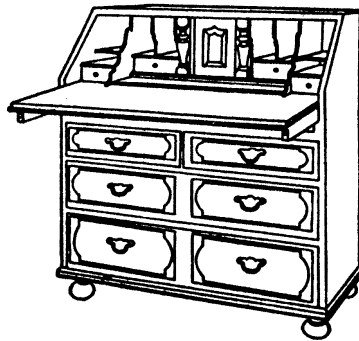
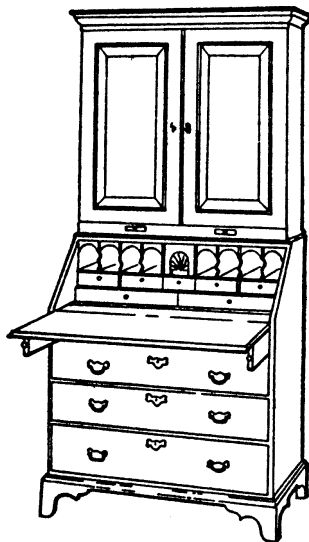


FIGURE 10
Slant-Front Bureau (closed)



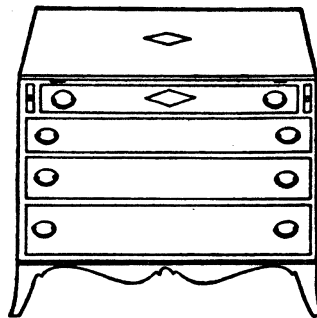
cover for a space filled with small drawers or cubbyhole compartments. The slanting front of the piece was the original referent of the term *bureau*, which later became the generalized name for the entire piece and other similar forms. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, during both the William and Mary and Queen Anne periods, a *bureau* (1768) was a desk. Somewhere between the William and Mary period and the Queen Anne period, the desk was lifted onto a frame, in this way reflecting the parallel development of the desk and chest forms. The resulting form, *desk on frame* or *desk with stand* (1692), was renamed in the Chippendale period with the French term *escritoire* (1713), which was later Americanized to *secretary* (1785) (fig. 11). The Chippendale period introduced the concept of dual and multipurpose pieces. Chippendale designs included specifications for a *bureau dressing table*, a form that served in the bedroom as both a writing table and dressing table. Other forms, such as the *bureau bookcase*, also embodied the desire for multifunctional pieces. Bureaus could be topped with bookcases, cupboards, or glassed-in shelving. The *bureau cabinet* consisted of drawers topped with glassed-in shelves for the display of china or glassware. One form, the *kast* (sometimes spelled *kas*), was a massive piece, often a wall-sized combination of doors, drawers, shelves, and writing surfaces.

FIGURE 11
Secretary



The Hepplewhite period saw an alteration in the form of bureaus, which were then made not with a slant-front but with a movable writing surface that, when upright, was flush with the drawer fronts below. When closed, the bureau would look exactly like a chest of drawers. Some pieces had, instead of the slant-front or false top drawer, a board that pulled out from above the first drawer (fig. 12). When not in use, this piece too looked just like a chest of drawers. These two innovations were probably responsible for the later semantic shift of the term *bureau* from a piece that functioned as a desk to various forms of the chest of drawers. Hepplewhite himself, however, abandoned the term *bureau* in his writings, using instead the terms *dressing drawers* (a form that included the pull-out bureau writing surface) for a chest of drawers-shaped article and *ladies dressing table* (which appears as *ladies dressing desk* in 1784) for a desk-shaped article. Both forms preserved the multifunctionality of popular pieces of the time. Though Hepplewhite preferred other terms, the name *bureau* remained in American vocabulary. George Washington's will mentions a "beureau (or as cabinet-makers call it, tambour secretary)," which was bequeathed to a family friend (quoted in Singleton 1970, 510). The bureau in question is assumed to be a large mahogany desk, an assumption supported by Washington's use of *tambour secretary* as an alternate description. Sheraton uses the term *bureau* to describe pieces that were "common desks with drawers under them," which he deemed "nearly obsolete in London; at least . . . amongst fashionable people" (quoted in Fastenedge 1962, 68). The simple bureau was replaced with larger pieces. Sheraton included two designs for these larger, grander variations of the bureau in his design book: the *secretary and bookcase* and the *cylinder desk and bookcase*.

FIGURE 12
Flat-Front Bureau



Recent additions to the chest of drawers family are pieces such as the *vanity* or *vanity table*. This piece has both the form and function of a dressing table but is always topped with a mirror. The term *vanity* in reference to a dressing table was first seen in print in America in the 1930s. The bachelor's chest is also a recent adaptation of the chest form. *Bachelor's chest* became a popular term for a small chest of drawers in the 1960s.

Glancing at the terms involved in the history of the chest of drawers and the bureau, one sees a list of terms related to each other by the similarities (in either form or function) of their physical referents. The form of a chest, in all its various guises, and the variety of names attached to each variation of the physical form sired a multitude of furniture terms, some of whose original denotations have been lost, forgotten, or generalized. Many of the LAMSAS terms are a direct reflection of the historical development of the chest and bureau forms. Given the history of the chest and related forms, one can reexamine linguistic atlas responses to the bureau question. *Bureau* itself, which accounts for 55.0% of LAMSAS responses and 8.9% of Johnson's 1990 responses, is an old term whose denotation evolved from a writing surface during the William and Mary period, to a desk form used both for writing and storage during the Chippendale period, and finally to the chest form during the Hepplewhite period. Though the frequency with which *bureau* appears as a response has declined since the original atlas interviews, this term was present in the data sets for five of the six pictures presented in my survey. *Dresser*, the most common response in 1990 with a 32.1% frequency, was a core term in the original LAMSAS survey with the second highest frequency (18.9%). *Dresser* is also a term whose designation has moved—from a cupboard-like *kitchen dresser*, a form that predates the William and Mary period, to its current reference for a clothes chest. This shift in designation seems to have begun during the Sheraton period when a chest form was given the name *dressing chest*. *Dresser* was popular in the survey that used pictures to elicit furniture terms; it was given as the most frequent response for all pictures except one. *Chest of drawers*, a designation made during the Queen Anne period, has remained a steady core term, accounting for 11.3% of the LAMSAS 1930 responses and 43.6% of Johnson's 1990 responses. *Chest of drawers* was also a frequent survey response, given with the second highest frequency for five of the six pictures.

The further variations in the form and function of chests produced a great number of terms that survive as the peripheral responses to the bureau question. *Chest*, of course, though a peripheral lexical item in terms of frequency (2.1% of LAMSAS responses and 8.9% of Johnson's responses), is a general term whose use dates back to possible origins in Old

English and whose presence in furniture vocabulary has been continual for hundreds of years. *Sideboard* appears 34 times in the LAMSAS responses and is absent in Johnson's 1990 data. The use of this term, which originated in the Hepplewhite period, has receded—though not completely—in the past 60 years. *Washstand*, or *wash hands stand*, is a term that originally labeled a small chest during the Hepplewhite period and seems to have been generalized. *Washstand* accounted for 14.9% of the LAMSAS responses and 3.6% of Johnson's 1990 responses. *Highboy* originated during the Chippendale period and is present in both the LAMSAS data and the Johnson data. *Highboy* was also a response for the wardrobe question in both sets of data.

The less frequently occurring lexical items range in date of origin from pre-1650 to the 1960s; these terms account for less than 2% of the LAMSAS and/or Johnson responses. The oldest peripheral terms, ones that predate the William and Mary period, are *trunk*, *cupboard*, and *box*. *Trunk* occurred 22 times in the LAMSAS data and was not present in Johnson's 1990 data. *Box* occurred 8 times in the LAMSAS data, and *cupboard* only once. These terms have obviously not vanished, but they seem to have kept their designations of different, though related, forms. From the William and Mary period, the terms *blanket chest* and *stand* survive. The Queen Anne period contributed *case of drawers* and *cabinet*. Interestingly, though *cabinet* occurs with a relatively low frequency in the 1930s and 1990 data, it is a term that appears as a response to every picture in the survey I conducted. The Chippendale period saw the development of many new varieties of the chest form, thus contributing greatly to the variety of peripheral terms found in atlas data. *Chiffonier*, *highboy*, *lowboy*, *chest on chest*, *chest upon chest*, *press*, *wardrobe*, and *kast* are terms arising in the Chippendale period. Of these terms, *highboy*, *chest on chest*, and *press* are present in the 1990 data. The Hepplewhite period added to the variation found in the bureau question with *dressing drawers*, *commode*, and *dressing table* (which is also present in Johnson's data). From the Sheraton period comes a crossover term, *bookcase*, as a designation for a large piece of case furniture which often has drawers as well as shelves.

Though considered by most as referring to distinct pieces of furniture, the bureau and wardrobe questions elicited many of the same terms from LAMSAS informants. The presence of these shared responses can be explained by the close relationship of the wardrobe form to the chest form throughout the history of case furniture. The presence of terms associated with the wardrobe form, such as *clothes stand*, *clothespress*, *chiffrobe drawers*, and *wardrobe*, within the responses to the bureau question illustrates the

link between these pieces and the larger forms of the chest. In fact, among the responses to the wardrobe question are familiar terms such as *cabinet*, *case*, *chest*, *chiffonier*, *cupboard*, *commode*, *highboy*, *sideboard*, *trunk*, *bureau*, and *vanity*. The blurred line between the forms and functions of case furniture is evident not only in the great amount of lexical variation associated with one piece but also in the number of terms that pass between members of the larger category of case furniture.

The history and development of the chest of drawers family also suggest the origins of several other terms not explicitly mentioned in the history of the form. The general term *drawers* (or *drawer*), though not preferred by decorative arts historians or cabinetmakers, is found in estate inventories and wills. The Low Country information contains 12 specific entries for *drawers* or *draws*, ranging in date from 1734 to 1817. The Low Country data also shed light on other peripheral LAMSAS responses. As evidenced by the entries *cabinet of drawers* (1750), *bookcase and drawers* (1806), and *chest drawers* (1732), the combining of related terms to form a compound description of a single piece was acceptable. Thus, compounds found in LAMSAS data, such as *bureau drawers*, *stand of drawers*, *dresser drawers*, *set of drawers*, *cabinet table*, *clothes stand*, and *vanity dresser*, are not unexpected. *Chifforobe* is a term formed by the blending of *wardrobe* and *chiffonier*. *Checkrobes* also appears to be a blend that incorporates *wardrobe*. *Wardroom*, a term used exclusively by Gullah informants, is also a blend that fuses *wardrobe* with *room*, perhaps as a testament to the original Old French designation of *wardrobe* as a 'dressing room'.

The benefit of stepping back and looking at lexical variation from a historical perspective is not limited to the possibility of finding sources of variation. The greater importance of this kind of analysis is its contribution to historical linguistics and to language variation theory. The story of *chester drawers* offers concrete evidence that language variation is the trace of language change. The variation found in responses to the bureau question stems directly from the history of case furniture. Only two lower frequency terms, *vanity* and *bachelor's chest*, are recent. The majority of the peripheral terms are remnants of the past. These lower frequency lexical items are often left over from the vocabularies of past generations. They are reminders of previous forms and functions. They are reminders that words have changeable designations; they shift, expand, contract as the material needs of speakers change. For the linguistic atlas 'bureau' data, the question "Where does all the lexical variation come from?" can be answered quite satisfactorily by a careful consideration of the history of the referent in question.

NOTES

All illustrations are by Norman B. Palmstrom and were reproduced from Ormsbee (1951).

1. This number of informants includes 41 African American respondents from Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Some informants were not asked the bureau question and some, even when asked, gave no response. There is no evidence that the African American respondents treated the bureau question any differently from the non-African American informants.
2. Lorenzo Turner interviewed Gullah speakers in 1933 as part of the original LAMSAS project. Although the data from these informants were not included in the final LAMSAS project, data from those interviews is included here as part of comprehensive LAMSAS information.
3. Information on the periods of furniture style and on the history of the chest and desk forms is from the following sources: Hepplewhite (1794); Ormsbee (1934), a detailed account of the genesis and evolution of various furniture forms; Ormsbee (1951), a dictionary-style reference guide to antique furniture that includes illustrations of the variations of the chest form; Symonds (1948), a collection of drawings and writings by Thomas Chippendale; Fastenedge (1962), a work containing details on the forms and terms in use during the Sheraton period and reproductions of Thomas Sheraton's drawings and comments from his *Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing-Book* (1794); Gloag (1969), a dictionary of furniture terms with descriptions, illustrations, and style definitions; Singleton (1970), a survey of specific pieces and general forms from colonial America; and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989).
4. The exact authorship of these documents is unknown, and this information does not represent the entire population of Charleston at that time. Rauschenburg's list is a composite of the written data available.
5. During the colonial period, South Carolina was ethnically diverse. The settlement history included in the LAMSAS handbook (Kretschmar et al. 1994, 155) mentions the presence not only of English and French settlers but also of Germans and German-Swiss, Ulster Scots, Highlanders, French Huguenots, and Welsh in the colony, as well as Sephardic Jews and Barbadians in the city of Charleston. Also noted is the fact that "the cities of Charleston and Savannah were 50% African American, with the rural Low Country of the region up to 95% African American" (163). Though the presence of different and varied groups most certainly had an impact on language use in the area, my research has not uncovered any direct correlation between any of these various populations and lexical variants for *bureau*.
6. The first mention in Low Country estate inventories and personal wills is presented in parentheses. If no date is given, the term did not appear in documentation dated before 1820.

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