



History books had taught me the names of heroes and the principles of independence and representation. But the day-to-day work and settlement of this land had been in the hands of unknown soldiers and families, farmers and tradespeople. I had never been told their story. Tools, tableware, bedcovers, birth certificates—what survives today from those pioneers who laid the foundations for the society in which I live, for the civilization that is so special in human history?

—Ralph Esmerian



DOWER CHEST
 Attributed to
 Johannes Kniskern
 (1746-?)
 Schoharie County,
 New York
 1778
 Painted pine with iron
 hasp, key, and hardware
 19 1/4 x 47 x 21"
 American Folk Art
 Museum, promised gift
 of Ralph Esmerian,
 Pl.2001.184

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By Andrew Albertson

A STATELY CHEST BEFITTING ITS OWNER JACOB KNISKERN'S SCHOHARIE COUNTY CHEST

Dower Chest will be on view
 at the American Folk Art
 Museum in the exhibition
 "Surface Attraction: Painted
 Furniture from the Collection"
 (September 20, 2005-
 March 26, 2006).

Ralph Esmerian, a celebrated American folk art collector, first asked himself the preceding question more than forty years ago when he stepped into the world of collecting "everyday" things that had survived centuries of domestic use—objects that often hid in the tall shadows of well-known works praised for their artistic merits and intrinsic values.¹ By the time he began collecting in the mid-1960s, however, there was already "substantial competition" in the folk art arena, with at least two generations of American folk art collectors leading the way.² But Esmerian's refined eye led to his eventual acquisition of more than three hundred objects that he promised in 2001 to the American Folk Art Museum on the occasion of its grand opening in a permanent home in New York City.

Among Esmerian's prized pieces is one that until its recent transfer to the museum sat in his New York City home with objects carefully stored inside and stacks of books and catalogs neatly piled on its lid. For Esmerian, this chest, which was made in 1788 for Jacob Kniskern, of Schoharie, New York, is a treasure valued more for its beauty and craftsmanship than for its high monetary value. He enjoys it for its unpretentious yet stately decoration, and for its obvious utilitarian function. Yet a journey into the life of its first owner, Jacob Kniskern, and the significance of the period in which it was created for the Schoharie native, impart the object with a heightened historical importance and a more personalized interpretation than perhaps previously supposed. Jacob Kniskern's extraordinary chest is a fitting reminder of the early Schoharie hero who was captured by and escaped from loyalist forces, served his congregation as a trustee, and built an agricultural empire on the banks of the Schoharie Creek after his property was pillaged during the Revolutionary War.

Oral tradition holds that Schoharie resident Johannes Kniskern made the chest for his brother Jacob in 1788, about the same time he purportedly made two smaller chests for his daughters Margreda and Elisabet (see p. 50).³ After a thorough review of available sources, however, the original source of that claim remains obscured. While it seems plausible that Johannes Kniskern could have made the chest for his brother—there were woodworking tools in his probate inventory—it is also possible that a friend or neighbor of Jacob Kniskern may have been the craftsman of the chest.⁴ Therefore, while it seems most likely that Johannes Kniskern created the chest for his brother Jacob, other possibilities should not be ruled out.

In his master's thesis on New York German chests, Cory Amsler points to Johannes Kniskern's inventory to suggest that Jacob's brother was the creator of his chest, but a closer look at other period inventories suggests that woodworking tools were not all that uncommon in the Schoharie region.⁵ Schoharie resident David Bouck's inventory, for example, included planes, chisels, and punches, all tools essential to the construction of a chest.⁶ Johannes Hutt, of Sharon, owned tools similar to Bouck's, in addition to handsaws, an adz, augers, squares, and a drawknife. Hutt's inventory also included two workbenches that would have proved useful for the manufacture of chests and other furniture.⁷ Abraham Lawyer, of Middleburgh, had an adz, screwdrivers, a compass saw, augers, and a variety of other tools associated with the construction of chests.⁸

In looking for chests produced in the United States in the German tradition, a host of scholarship on Pennsylvania German decorative arts emerges, but few scholars of material culture have examined the goods produced by Germans in New York State, specifically those of the early pioneers of Palatine settlements in and around Schoharie County. Mary Antoine de Julio, the former director of the Montgomery County Historical Society, in Amsterdam, New York, initiated formal interest in the subject in the 1980s with "German Folk Arts of New York State," an exhibition organized at the Albany Institute of History and Art.⁹ The show's accompanying catalog provides a crucial glimpse into a culture previously thought to have "vanish[ed] without leaving much behind."¹⁰

In her analysis of German goods produced in New York State, de Julio examined several chests, including those thought to have been made by Johannes Kniskern for his daughters Margreda and Elisabet, and suggested that the circa 1778 pieces and other late-eighteenth-century examples differ from later examples in their composition and adornment. Indeed, Margreda's and Elisabet's chests have bracket bases with medial feet and have molding around the edges of their lids, both characteristics of eighteenth-century pieces.

Jacob Kniskern's chest bears similar features. His example also has bracket bases and a medial foot, as well as molding around the lid. But Jacob's chest stands out most for its powerful combination of painted decoration and architectural elements. Jacob Kniskern's chest is the only known New York German chest with architectural details, specifically applied ears and pilasters. "Such architectural elements, even in the form of painted panels, are unheard




of on New York chests but are far more prevalent among Pennsylvania forms," stated Amsler, who cited examples from the latter group in his study.¹¹

Naturally, one may wonder why such a regal chest, complete with its architectural elements and careful decoration, was made for Jacob Kniskern, and what the chest, as a personal object, reveals about the man who owned it. While the chest itself suggests that Jacob Kniskern was an important figure in early Schoharie history, official records offer more definitive explanations for the creation and adornment of such an important chest.

Born on November 21, 1753, Jacob Kniskern was the child of Henrich and Elisabeth Schafer Kniskern, of Schoharie County, New York. Henrich's parents, Johannes and Elisabeth Barbara Kniskern, were among the first groups of Palatine Germans who sailed from Rotterdam to London in 1709, finally arriving in New York in mid-1710. Originally sent up the Hudson River to Germantown, New York, Johannes Peter Kniskern obtained two patents totaling three hundred acres of land for himself and others in the Schoharie Valley about 1730.¹²

The Kniskern family's presence in Schoharie County is evident from its prominence in local churches, town government positions, military appointments, and from the significant land holdings acquired by family members.¹³ Jacob Kniskern was the eleventh of thirteen children and was baptized a week after birth, sponsored by his mother's brother Jacob Schafer and his wife, Elisabeth. While most of his activities during his formative years are undocumented, church records indicate that he was confirmed in 1771 and was selected as a trustee of his parish, the Schoharie Lutheran Church, for three consecutive three-year terms (in 1798, 1801, and 1804).¹⁴ In February 1781, Kniskern married Christina Enders, and they had two daughters, Christina and Elisabeth. His wife died before 1792, the year in which he married Maria Schultes, who bore him a daughter named Eva.¹⁵





While Kniskern's leadership in the Schoharie Lutheran Church suggests that he was a respected member of the congregation, his activities during the Revolutionary War in fighting loyalist forces also likely elevated him within the community of Schoharie and beyond. According to New York State militia records, Kniskern enlisted to serve with patriot forces about 1778. He served under captains Richtmyer and Miller as a soldier in the Albany County Militia, Fifteenth Regiment, along with his brother Johannes, but was captured the same year at Moak's Hollow in Turlach (known today as Dorloo). War records indicate that he escaped from "Rebel Island" in Canada, on a float constructed of brandy kegs, shortly after his imprisonment and made his way back to Schoharie, where he continued to fight against British forces and the Crown's Native American allies.¹⁶

Revolutionary fighting first came to the Schoharie Valley in 1777, just one year after New York and the other colonies first declared their independence from Great Britain. The plan to "dismember" the province centered around the Schoharie Valley, a strategic location cited by British troops as the gateway for conquering Albany, their ultimate aspiration. A small number of troops moved into the Schoharie Valley in early August 1777 and pillaged the farms of Jacob Kniskern's neighbors, including the Vroomans.¹⁷ Ten months after the initial raid on the upper Schoharie Valley, a large force of Native Americans surprised Schoharie inhabitants with another raid, this time with a greater force of approximately 350. Fifteen Schoharie militiamen proved no match against the Native Americans, who outnumbered them by more than twenty to one. Several patriot troops, including Jacob Kniskern, were captured at Cobus Kill, which was reported by majors Thomas Cheson and Jost Becker as "DESTROYED."¹⁸

The year 1778, the date on Jacob Kniskern's chest, was not only a pivotal year in its owner's life, it was also the year in which property belonging to his family and neighbors was laid to ruins. "The people of Cobus Kill, whose houses and Effects are burnt, only came off with what they

had upon their Backs," reported resident Abraham Wempel of the desperate situation in the Schoharie Valley. "I have buried the dead at Cobus Kill, which was 14 in number; found five more burnt in the ruins . . . they were butchered in the most inhuman manner; [the enemy] burnt 10 houses and barns, horses, cows, sheep &c. lay dead all over the fields."¹⁹

"Destitute" barely begins to describe the situation in which Schoharie area residents found themselves in the wake of the loyalist sweep of 1778; and as if one raid wasn't enough, British forces plundered the Schoharie Valley twice more just two years later. In their subsequent campaigns, they destroyed the remainder of the Schoharie homes and farms left from 1778, among them the Kniskern family mill on the Schoharie Creek. In sum, 134 buildings were burned in Schoharie County during the Revolution, many of which were leveled during the 1780 expeditions. "Added to the great loss of grain, dwellings, stock, etc., was the great depreciation of the paper money of the country, large amounts of which were in the possession of the [Schoharie] farmers, having been taken in exchange for their farm products," wrote the Middleburgh Historical Publication Committee in an historical review.²⁰

Jacob Kniskern eventually rebounded from the ills of the Revolutionary War, however, as historical records attest. By 1790 his family numbered five individuals, and he owned at least one slave.²¹ In 1810 Kniskern owned three slaves, and he had at least five, valued at a total of \$390, by the time he died in 1818.²² In sum, Kniskern's slaves accounted for more than 10 percent of his estate's total value upon his death.²³

In addition to his slave holdings, Kniskern's probate inventory lists four pages of textiles (including clothing), a page of books, several tools for blacksmithing, painting, and shoemaking, dozens of agricultural implements, extensive amounts of lumber, and scores of livestock. By all accounts, he was financially secure, with an estate worth almost \$3,200, including all the components of a large-scale, self-sufficient farm complex.²⁴

Among the furniture listed in Kniskern's inventory are seven chests—a "green" one, three of "pine," two with "rubbish" inside, and one simply described as a chest. Their assigned values range from \$.50 to \$5.62 for a pine chest with "3 pair of wollen stockings, 1 fox comforter, 2 linen shirts, and one old Hat, of coloured man"; the average value is \$2.16. It is clear from the items listed before and after each chest in the inventory that six were in private bedroom areas and that the one valued at \$5.62 (including its contents) may have been in use by a slave, as suggested by its contents. Although determining which of the seven chests might be the one bearing Jacob Kniskern's name remains problematic, one conclusion is certain: Jacob Kniskern's estate included more chests than the average Schoharie home.²⁵ In fact, if a testator's worth could be established by the number of chests in his inventory, Kniskern would be near the top.

Jacob Kniskern died on March 9, 1818, at 64 years of age. He was buried in Sloansville Village Cemetery, Sloansville, New York; his second wife, Maria, who died at the age of 81 in 1849, is laid at his side. It is very likely that Jacob Kniskern's chest was sold or given to one of the



couple's children upon Maria's death. And a rare but doubtful possibility is that the chest was used by one of Jacob Kniskern's slaves who bore his name. Indeed, a slave, simply listed as "coloured man Jake," did possess his own "Box . . . with Rubbish," valued at a mere \$.50 in Kniskern's inventory at the time of his death.²⁶

While determining who inherited Jacob Kniskern's chest may never be possible, the uniqueness of the object's architectural features and the significance of the year 1778 to Jacob Kniskern, his family, neighbors, and fellow New Yorkers suggest that the chest may have been a powerful object for its owner and his family. As the year in which Jacob Kniskern was captured by British forces as well as the year in which the Schoharie Valley was first plundered by his captors, 1778 may very well have been the most memorable year in Jacob Kniskern's life. For this reason, Jacob Kniskern's chest is an extraordinarily important reminder of its owner—a man who, to borrow donor Ralph Esmerian's words, helped "[lay] the foundations for the society in which [we] live, for the civilization that is so special in human history." ★

Andrew Albertson received his master's degree this spring from the Cooperstown Graduate Program in History Museum Studies, a unique institution cosponsored by the State University of New York College at Oneonta and the New York State Historical Association, in Cooperstown. While enrolled at Vassar College, where he earned his B.A. in American culture in 2001, he served as an intern with the American Folk Art Museum, working on the catalogs for the 2001/2002 exhibitions 'American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum' and 'American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum.'

Notes

- 1 Ralph Esmerian, "Journey," in Stacy C. Hollander, *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 10.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 See Mary Antoine de Julio, *German Folk Arts of New York State* (Albany, N.Y.: Albany Institute of History and Art, 1985), p. 4, and de Julio, "New York German Painted Chests," *The Magazine Antiques* 127, no. 5 (May 1985): 1156–58.
- 4 Where the oral tradition stating that Johannes Kniskern made the chest for his brother Jacob originated is unknown. In examining documents of ownership, the earliest owner recorded is Rockwell Gardiner, a renowned mid-nineteenth-century Connecticut antiques dealer who sold the chest to Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, of New York, in the 1940s. While it is possible that Gardiner knew something of the chest's creator, his scholarship on the piece has not passed through the various owners' hands. Files belonging to individuals and institutions through which the chest passed in the last seventy years are devoid of information on its origin, but all claim with certainty that Johannes Kniskern was the craftsman of the chest.
- 5 Cory M. Amsler, "New York German Chests: A Study in Craft Influences" (M.A. thesis, State University of New York College at Oneonta, 1987), p. 65.
- 6 Inventory of David D. Bouck, 1826. Schoharie County Surrogate's Office, Schoharie, N.Y., File 1826-003.
- 7 Inventory of Johannes Hutt, 1819. Schoharie County Surrogate's Office, Schoharie, N.Y., File 1819-018.



CHESTS FOR ELISABET AND MARGREDA KNISKERN
Attributed to
Johannes Kniskern (1746-?)
Schoharie County,
New York
1778
Painted pine
7½ × 15¾ × 9";
8 × 16¼ × 8¾"
Old Stone Fort Museum,
Schoharie, New York

- 8 Inventory of Abraham Lawyer, 1839. Schoharie County Surrogate's Office, Schoharie, N.Y., File 1839-019.
- 9 De Julio, *German Folk Arts*, op. cit.
- 10 Roderic H. Blackburn, "Foreword," in de Julio, *German Folk Arts*, p. i.
- 11 Amsler, p. 34.
- 12 Genealogical information on Jacob Kniskern in Walter Hamlin Kniskern, *Some of the Descendants of Johann Peter Kniskern of Schoharie County, New York* (Petersburg, Va.: Plummer, 1960), pp. 7–10.
- 13 In researching Jacob Kniskern, his family's prevalence was evident in myriad probate inventories, wills, deeds, records of land holdings, and other vital documents kept by the Schoharie County Surrogate's Office. The Kniskern family was large enough to warrant its own page in the Surrogate's Office index to Schoharie County records.
- 14 Arthur C.M. Kelly, *Schoharie County New York Early Records: Family Lists, Marriages, Deaths, 1730–1904* (Rhinebeck, N.Y.: Kinship, 2001), pp. 71–72.
- 15 Kniskern, p. 298.
- 16 See George H. Warner, *Military Records of Schoharie County Veterans of Four Wars* (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1891), p. 23. Although this record lists the year of Kniskern's capture as 1780, it must have been 1778, because the battle in which he was taken prisoner was fought in 1778, not 1780.
- 17 Edward A. Hagan, *War in Schoharie, 1777–1783* (Middleburgh, N.Y.: Middleburgh New Press for the author, 1980), pp. vii–ix.
- 18 Thomas Cheson and Jost Becker, letter to General Starke, May 30, 1778; *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 19 Abraham Wempel, letter to General Starke, June 6, 1778; *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 20 B. Wesley Andrew et al., eds., *Bridging the Years, 1712–1962* (Middleburgh, N.Y.: 250th Anniversary Historical Publication Committee, 1962), p. 15.
- 21 *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States, 1790, New York* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1908), p. 45.
- 22 U.S. Census Office, 1810 (microfilm). Schoharie, Schoharie County, N.Y. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1958), p. 38.
- 23 Inventory of the Estate of Jacob Kniskern, May 13, 1818, Schoharie County Surrogate's Office, Schoharie, N.Y., File 1818-007, p. 68.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 See Amsler, p. 10, in which the author states that "23 of 100 [Schoharie inventories] had two or more chests, 10 had three or more, and 6 listed four and up. The largest number of chests in a single household was eight."
- 26 See Inventory of the Estate of Jacob Kniskern, p. 55.