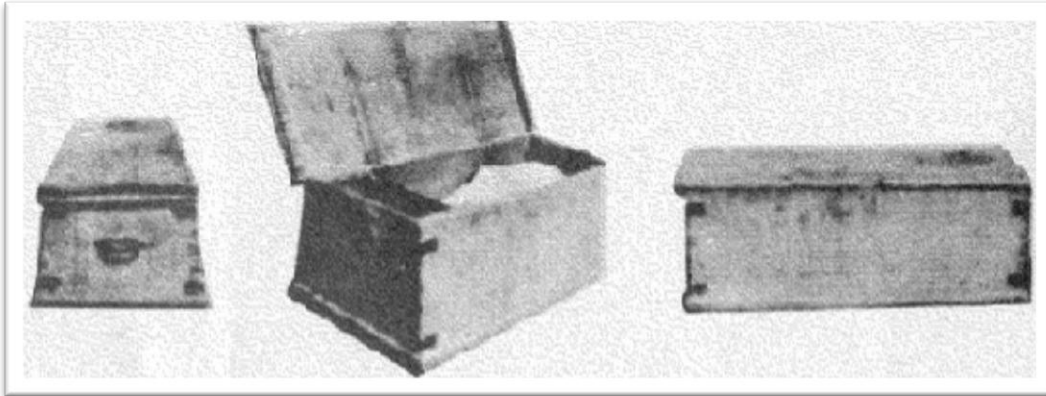


Francis Kirtley's Pine Chest

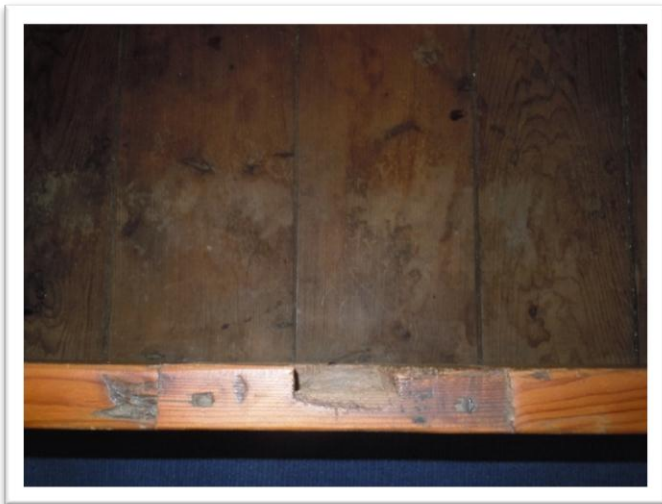
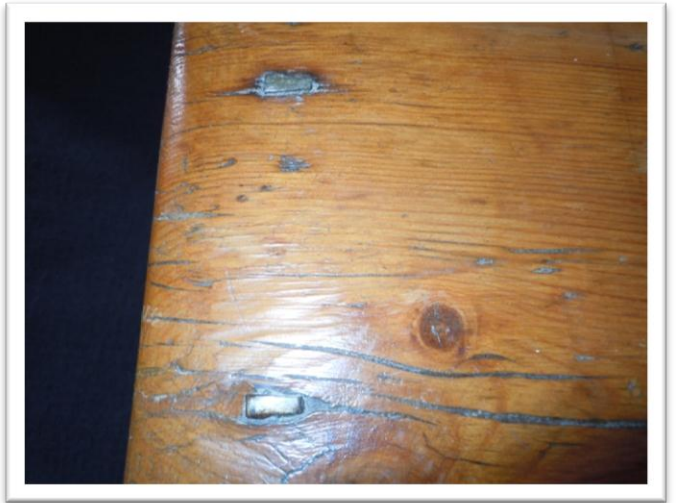
This is the chest that carried all the earthly possessions of Sir Francis Kirtley when he arrived in Virginia in 1710. It is the most significant artifact in the history of the Kirtley family. Prior to obtaining photos in 2011, the most recent images of the chest were from the 1930's.



1930's Picture of the Francis Kirtley Chest

Current Photos:





Description of the Chest

The chest would have been made in England prior to 1710. It's constructed of common pine and is clearly utilitarian rather than fine furniture. It is similar to Colonial-era blanket chests. One unusual feature is that the front and back are slanted inward slightly, so that the top of the chest is narrower than the bottom. It has wrought iron brackets holding the corners together, typical long wrought iron hinges for the lid, and inside on the left is a "till", a small wooden compartment for valuables, commonly found on such chests.

¹The construction of the chest is substantial. It is still quite solid, and the dovetail joints are tight. It is made of pine, possibly yellow pine. The fittings are iron and in very good shape with no signs of rust or fatigue. The front and back of the chest are rectangular, the sides are trapezoidal; that is slightly wider at the base than at the top (although this doesn't come through in the photos.) The lid has a lip, and there is rounded molding around the bottom edges. It appears that the lid was originally secured with a wrought iron hasp, which was later replaced with a keyed lock, and now that too is gone.

The dimensions are: 48" wide, 18.5" high with top closed, (17.5" when open), 24" deep at base, 20" deep at the top. The iron handles on each end are centered 11" from the bottom. The boards are 1.25-1.5" thick. It has not been weighed but two people could lift it easily when empty. The top does show the wear of 300 years, but that is to be expected.

The Origin of the Kirtley Chest

In 1710 a young man about twenty years old, with dark hair and blue eyes², walked down the gangplank of a ship, and watched the unloading of his pine chest. He had just arrived in Virginia, and the chest was his "suitcase" containing all his earthly possessions. For a time he was a merchant in Falmouth, Virginia³. Probably, he was engaged in the substantial tobacco trade that was conducted there. By 1722 he had married⁴ and moved to Spotsylvania County (the part that was later Culpeper County,) and began acquiring land and planting tobacco. He eventually owned thousands of acres of land and became a prominent citizen. He was acquainted with both Governor Spotswood and Lord Fairfax⁵. He was a vestryman of St. Marks Parish⁶, which covered all of today's Culpeper County. This was a lifetime position as one of 12 men who governed both the civil and religious affairs of the parish (although he resigned in his later years when he moved further west.) In 1749 these vestrymen hired a 17 year-old George Washington as Culpeper county surveyor⁷. Francis was a member of the Virginia Minute Men, a captain of the Spotsylvania County Colonial Militia⁸, and a veteran of two Indian Campaigns, the last being the French and Indian War in which he commanded a company of foot soldiers⁹.

Francis had four sons and two daughters. At least three of his sons were officers in the Virginia Militia and fought in the Revolutionary War¹⁰. Francis didn't live to see American Independence; he died in 1763. In his later years the old wooden chest must have had special meaning to Francis Kirtley. He specifically mentioned it in his will¹¹, leaving to his wife, Margaret: "one Feather Bed & furniture her Choice, ONE CHEST, two Pots, two Dishes, half a Dozen Plates. . .", etc. From there the chest was handed down to their son, Francis Kirtley II, to Francis Kirtley III, to his son St. Clair David Kirtley Sr., to St. Clair David Kirtley II, to St. Clair David Kirtley III, then to his daughter Janie Kirtley. During all this time the existence of the chest was probably not widely noticed outside the immediate family.

In the early 1930's Richard Edwin Kirtley of Kansas City, Missouri, wrote a Kirtley Family History. In it was a picture of the trunk with the caption, "This is the Pine Chest or Trunk in which Sir Francis Kirtley brought his clothes from Wales to America in 1710 and now in the possession of Miss Janie Kirtley, Stonypoint, Va." (Regardless of Richard Kirtley's mention of Wales, modern research has clearly shown that the Kirtley family originates in the northeastern English counties of Durham and Northumberland.)

The Search for the Chest

Now, fast-forward to 1999. Over the intervening years many Kirtley genealogists had seen Richard Kirtley's account of the Kirtley chest and had wondered where it was, or if it still existed. This precious connection to the earliest US Kirtley ancestor was nearly 300 years old. Various Kirtley descendants remember hearing something about it, but no one knew exactly where it was. Email messages asking about the Kirtley chest floated about on genealogy forums, without result.

In February, 1999 I decided to search for the Kirtley chest by asking some very specific questions. I knew three things from Richard Kirtley's book: Janie Kirtley, 1930, and Stonypoint, VA. I couldn't find Stonypoint on the Virginia map, so I sent a message to the Virginia Rootsweb Listserv asking for help. Three or four people replied with the location. It was a very small community northeast of Charlottesville.

One of the people who responded said he had grown up in Stonypoint, so I asked if he knew of any contacts who might have known Janie Kirtley. He sent me several contacts, including five Kirtley's out of the local phone book. I called the first two and had wonderful conversations about Kirtley history, but they had no knowledge of the chest. I could tell by her voice that the third person I called was an elderly woman. When I asked her if she knew of Janie Kirtley the answer was "Oh yes, she was my aunt." I asked about the chest. She knew of it but wasn't sure who had it. After more conversation

she said she thought it might belong to Janie's grandnephew, Frank Doherty, and gave me his address. (His first name is actually Francis, after Sir Francis Kirtley.)

As soon as I hung up, I searched the web and found Frank's email address. I sent him a message asking if he was the right person. The next day he replied affirmatively, and I immediately called him on the phone. I asked him if he knew where the Kirtley chest was, and he said "I think I own it," but, after hearing his description it was clear that his chest was different from the illustration in Richard Kirtley's book. Frank then said, "Well, I think it may have been lost when my mother's house burned around 1939." My heart sank, but at least I had apparently brought closure to the search. This was on a Friday. On Monday, I got an email from Frank saying he had located the Kirtley chest!!! It was in the possession of his second cousin, Janie Bowen, who had inherited it from her uncle James, who was a nephew of Janie Kirtley. Needless to say, I was thrilled. I immediately called Janie Bowen, who lives in southeast Virginia. (Apparently the chest has not left Virginia since it arrived in 1710.) She was a delightful person, and was fully aware of the significance of the Kirtley Chest.

Although I had wondered about the Kirtley Chest for years, the elapsed time from when I began to make a specific diligent search for the chest to when I found it was only a week and a half!

The Long Quest for Photos of the Chest

After locating the chest I had hoped to have photographs in a short time. I was too far away to visit in person. I tried several different times to engage the help of other Kirtley researchers who might have a chance to travel to Virginia. Somehow the circumstances never worked out. Ten years passed. Then in the summer of 2010 I received terrible news. Janie Bowen had tragically met an untimely death of natural causes at age 56. My heart sank. I felt distress for her family's loss, and naturally wondered about the eventual fate of the chest. After waiting several months I started inquiries and eventually made contact with Janie's brother Art, who responded warmly. Art very generously sent me a number of photographs, which are included here. I am very glad to know that the historic Francis Kirtley chest continues to be in safe hands with the Bowen family.

Provenance of the Kirtley Chest

Here's the full provenance of the Kirtley Chest: Francis Kirtley Sr. (ca. 1690-1763), left in his will to his wife Margaret Kirtley, to their son: Francis Kirtley II (1733-1774), to Francis Kirtley III (1756-1818), to his son St. Clair David Kirtley Sr. (1770-1845), to St. Clair David Kirtley II (1807-1852), to St. Clair David Kirtley III (1852-1930), to his daughter Janie Kirtley (1877-1951), to her sister, Lucy Pearle Kirtley-Brown (1888-?), to her son, James E. Brown, then to his niece Janie Bowen, then to her family. (Janie Bowen was the daughter of Virginia M. Brown-Bowen, who was the daughter of Lucy Pearle Kirtley-Brown.)

Footnotes:

¹Description of the chest supplied by Art Bowen

²History and Genealogies of the Kirtley and allied families, ca. 1955, Mrs. Lena Kyle Miller, Charlottesville, Virginia

³Nugent's Cavaliers and Pioneers

⁴*Virginia County Records SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY 1721-1800, DEED BOOK B 1729-1734, page 113*

⁵Saint Mark's Parish Vestry Book 1730-1785, 1983, Rosalie Edith Davis

⁶The Fairfax Line, by Thomas Lewis, 1746, reprinted by Shenandoah Co. Historical Society, Rt. #1, Box1-B; Edinburg, Va. 22824.

⁷George Washington, A Life, William Sterne Randall, 1997, Henry Holdt & Co., NY

⁸*Virginia County Records SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY 1721-1800, COLONIAL MILITIA DEED BOOK A 1722-1729, page 517*

⁹Genealogy of Virginia Families, Vol. III, He-M, 1982

¹⁰Chronicles of the Scotch-Irish Settlement in Virginia, Volume I
AUGUSTA COUNTY COURT RECORDS,
ORDER BOOK No. VIII., FEBRUARY 21, 1763.
ORDER BOOK No. XV.

¹¹Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations From the Revolution Through the Civil War
Series M: Selections from the Virginia Historical Society, Part 4: Central Piedmont Virginia
Section 84, will of Francis Kirtley probated in Augusta County, Virginia (witnessed by James Coursey, Jane Crawford, and William Kirtley)