

Stories of Old Baskets

BY ELLA SHANNON BOWLES

TUCKED away under the eaves of old garrets, redolent with the ghostly fragrance of bunches of dried tansy, sage, thyme, marjoram, pennyroyal and savory, baskets used in the many activities of early American home life are awaiting the hands of the arts and crafts worker and the antiquarian, for the collecting of examples of old-time baskets is quite an unexplored field.

Such a garret in a New Hampshire homestead, to which a daughter of the family has fallen heir, is a gold mine for collectors who are interested in the customs of the past and who wish to begin the study of the historical and artistic significance of the homely

handicrafts practised by our forefathers.

"I have one of those rare houses now that has not been vandalized by antique-hunters," the owner of the homestead, who knew of my interest in baskets, whimsically told me, "and it is filled with antiques. I should presume that I have more than fifty old baskets in my possession, all the way from knitting-baskets to those holding cheese curd."

Basketry is one of the earliest forms of handicraft and even antedates that of pottery-making. According to H. H. Roberts, Jr., of the Bureau of American Ethnology, the basket-makers who wove baskets and textiles, but made no pottery,

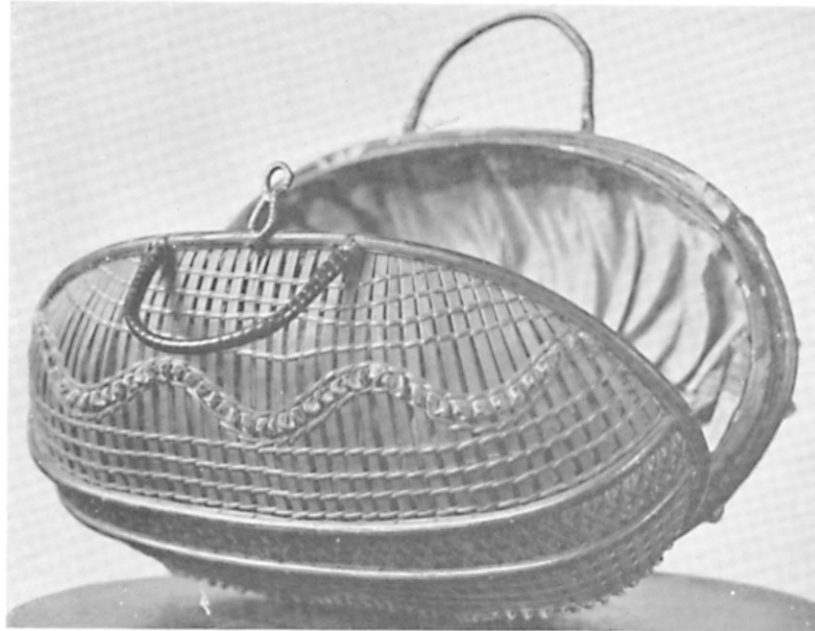
*"Chairs to mend, and delf to sell!
He clashes the basins like a bell;
Tea-trays, baskets ranged in order,
Plates with the alphabet round the border!"*

— WILLIAM BRIGHTY RANDS

were the first of the cultures preceding the Pueblo people, whose great apartment-cities stand as a permanent memorial to their complicated civilization.

You will recall the fact, too, that the Israelites were commanded to offer unto the Lord as soon as they came into the Land of Canaan the first fruits of the earth in a basket, though there is

evidence that this basket may have been made of beaten gold. Baskets over six thousand years old have been unearthed in middle Egypt, and the ancient Britons were expert in the art of making them. In fact, baskets were produced by all peoples in all centuries. Some shapes like the

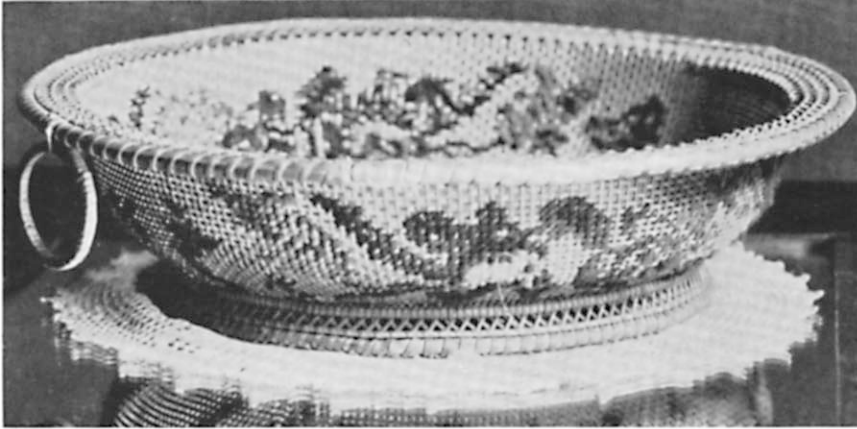


Miss Anne Grant's Cap-Basket

melon or saddle-basket woven by our southern mountaineers from designs brought from Africa by the Negroes have become international. As for weaves, one expert tells us that there is not a weave of any kind, no matter how intricate, that has not been handed down in perfect form in their basketry by our savage ancestry.

The average person usually thinks of Indian baskets when the word is mentioned. In 1635, William Wood wrote of the baskets made by the squaws in the New World.

"In summer they gather flags of which they make mats for the houses," he said, "and hemp and rushes with dyeing stuff of which they make



Basket Decorated with Berlin Work

curious baskets with intermixed colors and portraits of antique imagery. The baskets be of all sizes from a quart to a quarter, in which they carry their luggage."

But the baskets of interest to us are those which were made on farms by our own American ancestors or which were sold by itinerant basket-makers who traveled about from hamlet to hamlet, peddling the news of the day with their wares. Their fathers had learned the art of basket-making in rural England, for you will recall that Dyer, the poet of the country-side, speaks in "The Fleece" of rude baskets woven from the flexible willow.

The basket is a useful article and usefulness was the predominant note in the handicrafts of early America. First, there were the various types brought into being by the needs of the heavy farm work, the baskets for gathering the harvests, for carrying grain to the stock, for bearing the seeds to the planting. Sometimes baskets were used as sifters or for winnowing the chaff from the seed. Not long ago, a collector found, in an old barn in the White Mountains, forms of basketry, crudely woven in huge sheets, which must have been used to sift grains.

Cider, that great drink of early New England, was compounded by pounding apples by hand in wooden mortars, and the pomace thus formed was pressed through baskets.

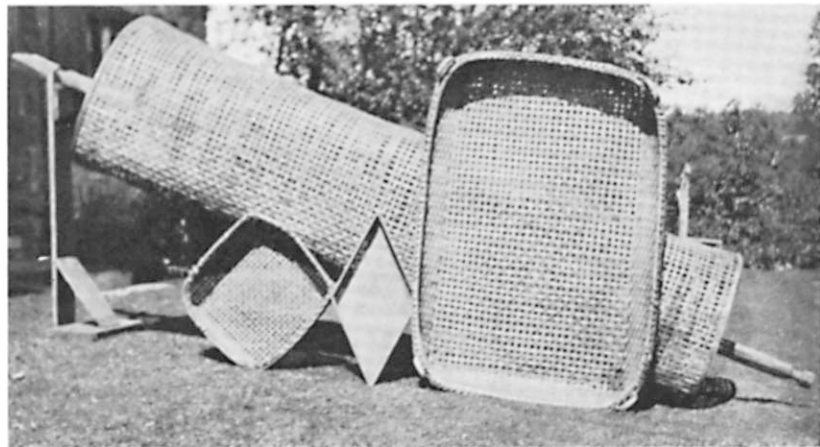
Yes, baskets are associated in our minds with apples, but they are even more closely identified with the history of Indian corn! At apple-bees and corn-huskings the basket played an important part.

Did you ever, by any chance, attend a corn-husking, held in the great cobwebbed barn, overflowing with provender for sleek cattle? The corn-husking is nearly a social gathering of the past, yet the custom is kept up in remote parts of New England. During the nineteenth century a corn-husking was as much a part of the autumn activities as the cider-making.

Stacks of corn stalks heaped in corners faintly

lighted from candles set in tin lanterns, laughter and chaffing from the groups of neighbors assembled to help break the ears from the stalks and strip the husks from the ears, the row of round-bellied pumpkins scooped out for Jack o'Lanterns and set outside the barn to welcome the guests, such were a few of the ingredients of an old-time husking-bee! How the fingers flew, with tongues keeping to the tempo! Hither and thither hurried strong-armed boys bearing baskets to the huge granary, "full to overflowing" with golden ears of corn! The white husks piled up. A red ear, signal for snatched kisses, was found. Now the last basket was sent out, the work was over, and the host announced the event of the evening, the bountiful supper, spread out in the long kitchen of the farmhouse.

In the manner of the Indian basket-maker, the farm craftsman made use of the materials at hand, and so the native hickory, willow and ash were gathered for the weaving of the baskets. Black ash was especially suitable, for it could be easily split into weavers of workable thickness, after



Basketry Found in Old Barn at Sugar Hill, New Hampshire

they were hammered out with a wooden beetle. In the South, workers are still making hickory baskets by the same designs and methods as did their fathers and their fathers' fathers before them.

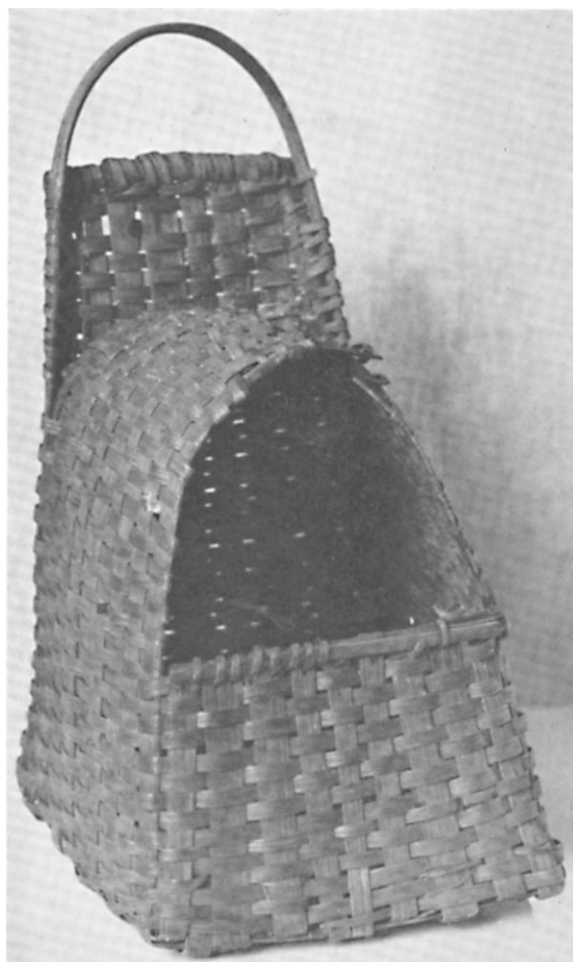
The long pine needles of the South also gave material to the basket-makers. But the products were purely dainty, feminine objects. We are told that one of the first American women to take up the work of weaving needles into baskets was a Mrs. McAfee of West Point, Georgia. She first used the needles for this purpose during the Civil War when the lack of raw materials compelled the Southerners to rack their wits to find suitable substitutes for their handicrafts. And do you know what was the first piece of basketry she made? Just a hat for her father, and she sewed it with the last spool of thread the family owned! So, after that, she was obliged to spin her own thread when she wished to sew baskets!

Now that we are speaking of hat-weaving, we might mention the fact that in this country straw-braiding was commenced in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1798, by Mrs. Betsey Baker. Each strand of her first bonnet was woven of seven straws with bobbin set in the openwork, and the dainty piece of headgear was lined with pink satin. Wide field hats were woven from rye straws in New England, and fast flew the fingers of the daughters of large families to provide head-coverings to protect their "men-folks" from the hot sun of the great hayfields.

This craft of hat-weaving also brought in a small bit of spending money for the girls and women, in a day when even a well-to-do farmer's daughter would "hire out" for a dollar a week to earn the money to buy her wedding "chiny." The traveling traders who dickered at the farms purchased palm-leaf in bales, and brought it to

the women, who slit and braided it into hats. Then the completed hats were collected, but the makers received but a mere pittance for their work.

Added to the many duties of the girls of colonial days was that of basket-making. Listen to this extract from Abigail Foote's diary, and you will get a slight idea of the occupations which engaged that young lady's attention:



Weaver's basket to hang on loom to hold shuttle-spools

"I fixed a gown for Prue — mended Mother's riding-hood — spun thread — Fixed two gowns for the Welch girls — spun linen — Worked on cheese basket — Hatchel'd flax with Hannah — we did fifty-one pounds apiece — Pleated and ironed — Read a sermon of Dodridge's — spooled a piece — Milked the cows — Spun Linen, did fifty knots — Made a broom of guinea wheatstraw — Spun thread to whiten — Set a Red Dye — Had two scholars from Mrs. Taylor's — Carded two pounds of whole wool — Spun harness twine — Scoured the pewter."

The cheese baskets mentioned by Mistress Foote were important household utensils. They were frequently constructed of hickory splits, woven in open simple weaving, that the curd might pass through. Usually they

were round, but sometimes larger square baskets were made.

The method of using the basket and "slicing the curd" has been carefully described by Eliza Nelson Blair in "Lisbeth Wilson":

"A wooden tub sat in the entry; and across it were four thin slats, mortised together, each two crossing the other at right angles, the whole named 'cheese-tongs.' Upon them sat a square, shallow cheese-basket, lined with a sheer strainer that held the amber curd. She took a thin, sharp knife, and drew it gently through the soft mass, time after time, streams of whey following each



Basket Containing Two Bottles

delicately drawn seam, until the curd was in blocks half an inch square."

You, of my generation, who remember your grandmothers, may think of them as I do, in connection with their work-baskets and knitting-baskets. They were of great importance to the busy housewife when she had a few minutes to spare from the routine of her heavy work. Some of the covered knitting baskets were woven from flattened ash weavers, but work-baskets were more often made from the best of willow saplings.

In Pennsylvania, straw withes were used in the construction of utensils designed for dry purposes. One characteristic type was the bread basket to hold the brown loaves when they were drawn from the old bake-oven.

Speaking of Pennsylvania, I must not forget to mention a type of basket that is still being made in Lumberville by a very old man. I shall quote the words of the collector who first told me about this basket-maker and his products:

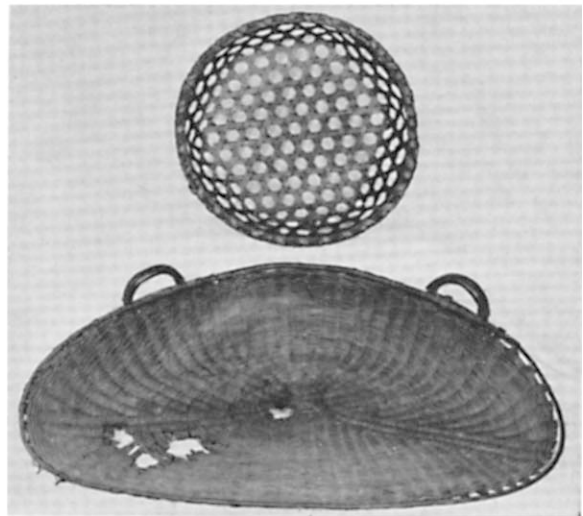
"It seems that some itinerant 'basketeer' from New England came into that vicinity, many years ago, and introduced the method which, I believe, is still in vogue there. And the present 'artist' is much enamored of his peculiar means of occupation and takes great pride in displaying it. The baskets have been used for about a hundred years on the Lehigh Canal, for feeding mules — they are fed, you know, as they walk along the

tow-paths, with the baskets tied under their noses — and are generally used by the residents in that locality. They are also bought by tourists and collectors, not only on account of their curiousness, but because they are exceptionally serviceable, as well as decorative."

Sometimes in old-time basket-making, as well as in all arts and crafts, a name of a craftsman who did his work well lingers. A New Hampshire town history tells of one, Nathan Hunt of Boscawen, who earned his living making baskets and bottoming chairs. And the historian assures us that no better baskets were ever made, for they were strong, evenly woven, and of symmetrical form. What more could be asked of a basket?

I have talked so much about the serviceable basket, may I tell you something concerning the more delicate and ornamental types, so perishable that but few of them remain? A woman who loves and cherishes all the products of the handicrafts of homespun days, a Virginian, born in "The Valley," owns a dainty basket made by her great-aunt, an invalid, who designed a quilt and a basket for each one of her nephews and nieces. This basket is constructed of white oak splits, trimmed down to less than an eighth of an inch in width. It is about five inches in diameter and is kidney-shaped. It was the owner of this basket who first introduced me to the charming little baskets made of honeysuckle vines. Virginia is the only home I have so far found for them.

By-products of basketry are the woven cases found on certain old jugs and flasks. Let me describe one unique example owned by a Massachusetts collector. First, there are two lovely glass bottles, each ten and one-half inches high and of a delightful aquamarine coloring. And



*Old Cheese Basket. Winnowing Basket, about 1690.
From the Essex Institute Collection*

each bottle, by the way, bears the greatly desired pontil mark! The basket which contains them has two compartments, but the reed separating them does not divide the basket all the way. It is lined with straw, not crammed in, but woven. The basket is sixteen inches high and twelve inches wide.

The spread of Berlin work in America set its seal upon basket decoration. Imported baskets were used for the work, and gay garlands and nosegays of flowers were picked out in gaily colored wools. During the early Victorian period the art was as popular as that of beading bags. Just where the baskets were purchased we do not know, but the following advertisement from *The Boston Almanac* of 1846 may throw some light upon the subject:

"S. Herman, 166 Washington Street, keeps constantly on hand a good assortment of Tin, Wooden, Iron and Shaker Wares, Japan, Canton, French and Common Baskets, Fancy Goods and Toys. Also Manufacturers of Willow Carriages, Cradles and Baskets."

It was during this period, too, that bead baskets and alum baskets were made for household decorations. Alum baskets did I say? Certainly! Look in Godey's *Lady's Book* for 1859 and you will find that their success depended somewhat upon chance for "crystals will sometimes form irregularly."

"Dissolve alum in a little more than twice as much water as will be necessary for depth of basket," the directions for the popular handicraft of our grandmothers continue, "Put in as much alum as the water will dissolve, using an

earthen jar. Boil solution until half evaporated. Suspend the basket from a little stick laid across the top of the jar in such a manner that both basket and handle will be covered by the solution. Set in a cool place where not the slightest motion will disturb the formations of the crystals."

The basket-frame was made of wire or of willow and every portion of it was wound with worsted. The modern craftsworker will find interest in the suggestion for coloring the basket by boiling gamboge, saffron or turmeric in the solution to produce yellow, and logwood for purple.

We must not leave the subject of baskets without speaking of the lovely little cap-baskets in which my lady carried her dainty trifle of silk and lace when "she a-visiting did go." And when she arrived at her destination off came her street bonnet and on went the cap which she had preserved so carefully in her little basket.

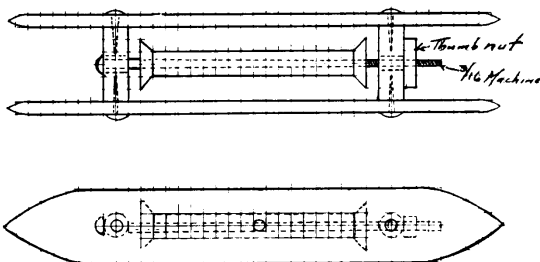
A friend of mine recently came into possession of the prettiest cap-basket I have ever seen. It consists of two hollow ovals, each about twelve inches long and nine inches wide, and made of narrow oak splints, interlaced with brown reeds and curving decorations of pale blue. Each section is lined with blue-gray watered silk, banded with purple. When the oval sections are closed together they make a safe nest for a fragile and expensive cap. And this particular cap-basket belonged, if you please, to a certain Miss Anne Grant, who was a famous belle and one of the great ladies of the South. She lived "next door" to Mrs. Jefferson Davis, and was, my informant assured me, her most intimate friend.



A Suggestion for Using a Rag Shuttle as a Spool Shuttle

BY RALPH A. HALL

TAKE some one-half ($\frac{1}{2}$) inch dowels and cut them in pieces to fit between the sides of the rag shuttles; bore one-quarter ($\frac{1}{4}$) inch hole in the center of each piece.



Fit them in the rag shuttle the proper distance apart to fit your shuttle spools with the holes in line.

Obtain some three-sixteenth ($\frac{3}{16}$) inch machine bolts with thumb nuts to fit and use them to hold the spools in place.

Bore a one-quarter ($\frac{1}{4}$) inch hole in the center of the side of the shuttle to lead the thread through.

Use a roll of adding machine paper and lay your color scheme out on a strip of it as long as your weaving is going to be (border and center). Attach one end of it to your weaving where it starts and let it roll up with your work. Both ends will be similar and equal.