

## *Small containers*

You are likely to find you will need small containers to store things like hairpins, jewelry, hairnets, sewing supplies, medicine, a first aid kit, etc. In the nineteenth century there were a wide variety of boxes made from wood, tin, pasteboard, bark, papermache, straw, etc.. They included Deed and Document boxes (wood, tin, paper covered), Small traveling boxes/trunks, Bark boxes, Sewing boxes, Pasteboard boxes, Chip boxes, Cash/money boxes, Dressing boxes, Snuff boxes, Patch boxes, Band & Hat boxes, Pantry and spice boxes, Artists' boxes, Salt boxes, Candle and tinder boxes, Liquor boxes, Teas boxes/caddies, Boxes for games, and many more.

When considering containers for an event, each one has its advantages and draw backs. You will want to consider factors such humidity, moisture in what you are storing, weight, lid tightness, wear and tear, and organization within the container. These materials are commonly used for boxes:

**Wood** - A wood box can withstand a humid or rainy weekend. The lids are generally not water tight.

**Pasteboard** – Pasteboard is sensitive to moisture, both humidity and rain. They are also sensitive to wear and tear.

**Tin** - A great many tins can be used for storing items that are moisture free. Tin is often water and critter tight if the lid is secure.

### **Types of Boxes and Containers**

A **packing or shipping box** can be very simple, possibly stenciled with contents or destination.

A **basic wooden box** can be made in a variety of ways to store many things. In the era these were homemade or purchased. Some had latches and/or locks. Most lids were flat or domed and hinged while some can have sliding lids. The exterior can be carved, stained, painted, gilt, or inlaid. Early nineteenth century boxes could reflect a patriotic theme with stars, flags, eagles and the like, either freehand painted or stenciled. Mid century painting tended towards sponging or swirling, faux graining or marbleizing, stylized foliage, life scenes, and stenciling similar to that done on interior walls, floors, and fireboards. Some late 1700s boxes resembled miniature dower chests. The interiors could be compartmented. Some of wooden boxes can be **document or deed boxes** used to store important papers.

Some boxes were covered with **leather or hide** resembling **small trunks**. Some hide used to cover trunks retained the animal's hair or fur. These often had latches and locks as well as strapping and decorative nails.

**Writing desks** are useful for writing letters or journal pages. They are wood with a slanted top or fold down top with a writing surface. Inside there are compartments for holding paper, pens and ink.



**Toilet or dressing boxes** and **trinket boxes** were popular for both men and women in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries among the wealthy classes. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, these boxes were popular for middle classes. Trinket boxes were similar to what we would now call a small jewelry box. (A trinket was a small ornament, usually an article of jewelry for personal adornment.) 19<sup>th</sup> century boxes were decorated or painted frequently by the woman who used it. They were most often rectangular or octagonal, occasionally with locks. Some were decorated to match dressing tables.

Undoubtedly, women will want a **band box or pasteboard box** for their bonnet, men for their hat. Band boxes were made of thin wood then covered with wall paper. Pasteboard boxes were made of paper-pulp pressed into thick sheets. These were also covered with paper. Some papers were wallpaper while others were printed specially for pasteboard boxes. These could be printed with information or illustrations regarding the bonnet, hat, or hair-comb inside. Either of these boxes can be used to hold headwear as well as other items. Pasteboard boxes were made in nesting sets intended to carry or store a wide range of lighter weight articles of



clothing such as dresses, caps, gloves, and collars. Oval ones were sometimes considered bridesboxes given as gifts to store finery and delicate trinkets. Band boxes and pasteboard boxes of the mid- nineteenth century did not have the convenient cording used to secure the lid that we are familiar with in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Instead they were secured with a strap of clasp. Cotton bags were



made to carry one or more of the pasteboard boxes. Pasteboard boxes can be round, oval, or rectangular of many different sizes. You can make one with a base box, period wallpaper and interior paper.

Bonnets could also be stored or transported in wooden boxes or bonnet trunks that were becoming more popular in the middle of the century.

Sometimes we need very small boxes to carry medication, a key, a dollop of sun-block, etc.. There were small wooden stave boxes made for medicines held in the pantry. This may not be the best choice for modern medications. Consider boxes similar to **snuff boxes** or **patch boxes** for this use. These boxes sealed well and were made from fine or utilitarian metal, enameled metal, tortoise shell, ivory, horn, and papier-mâché. (be careful not to put moist contents in the latter part of the list.)



### **Tin boxes and Tin trunks**

Tinsmiths made numerous tin containers for use in the mid-nineteenth century including canisters, tin boxes, tin trunks and small tins. Some have hinged lids with latches and handles such as the tin trunk which some used to hold documents. These can be nicely painted solid or painted with designs including stencils. Tin is nice for storing goods you want to keep dry. Consider a tin trunk or box for writing paper. A small, tightly sealed tin box can make a nice first-aid kit. Moist items can rust the inside of a tin container. I did find a tightly sealed tin container can stand up to the most curious of chipmunks, squirrels and some raccoons. Though, it

might not always be where you left it.

### **Specialized cases**

**Razor boxes** – These wood boxes had swivel or slide tops. Some had compartments inside for razors and brushes.

**Spectacle (glasses) cases** – These cases were shaped for the spectacles, made from metal, covered metal, leather, and papermache. They were most often lined inside.

**Candle and tinder boxes** – At an event you will want to keep your candles dry and if it is hot, straight. These were either wood or tin, the length of the candle. You will also want to keep tinder for the fire if it particularly wet. A period tinder box would contain a piece of flint, a steel striker, dry tinder, and possibly a tin damper to shield or extinguish the tinder. You will want either those items or dry matches, a striker, dry tinder (charred linen, paper, or wood shavings) or a fire starter and possibly a dry candle stub.

Boxes shaped like books are sometimes popularized for smuggling at events. These book-shaped boxes weren't an unusual item. They were constructed most often from wood to store important books or other items. They would open like a book or with a sliding cover in the back. Some had humorous titles. The author of *Neat and Tidy* says hollowed out books were popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Further Reading:

*The Art of the Tinsmith* by Shirley Spaulding DeVoe

*Neat and Tidy: Boxes and Their Contents Used in Early American Household* by Nina Fletcher Little

*Nineteenth Century Wooden Boxes* by Arene Wiemers Burgess