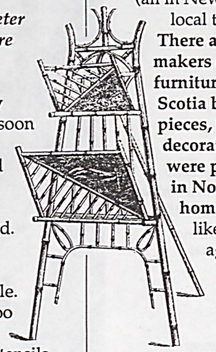
BAMBOO & WILLOW

Bamboos are the largest of the grasses, with woody stems that sometimes reach 30 centimetres in diameter and 30 metres or more in length. There are numerous species. Bamboo is especially common in the monsoon areas of East Asia, but can be cultivated in tropical and mild temperate zones throughout the world. It is versatile and functional. All parts of the plant are usable. In the Orient, bamboo is used for housing, clothing, domestic utensils, paper, fuel, food and furniture.

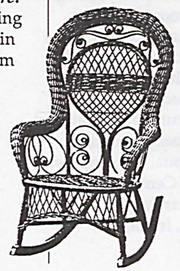


Bamboo furniture, first exported from China in the 1700s, became fashionable in Britain. English cabinetmakers (including Chippendale and Sheraton) designed in the Chinese style, using turned wood to imitate bamboo. The Royal Pavilion, built in Brighton about 1805 for the Prince Regent, was furnished in this Chinese taste and established a trend.

In North America there were six makers of bamboo furniture between 1880 and 1915, five in New York and one in Boston. Three used natural bamboo but the other three (all in New York) used local turned wood. **There are no known makers of bamboo furniture in Nova Scotia but some pieces, including decorative easels, were popular in Nova Scotian homes.** Bamboo, like rattan, is again in style.

Willows grow widely throughout the temperate zone and the pliant branches (osiers) have been used for centuries to make baskets and furniture. The planting and harvesting of willow, long practised in England, Holland, Belgium and Germany, was introduced into the United States in this century, particularly in the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys. At harvest time the thin willow branches are cut with a single knife-stroke, then graded, tied in bundles and placed in water until the loosened bark can be easily removed.

Willow seems not to have been as extensively used on this continent as rattan, or even bamboo. By the early 1900s basket-woven willow furniture, designed by European artists, was being exported to North America but during and after World War I, European willow was highly priced. The U.S. Department of Agriculture promoted the growth of willow crops in the United States and manufacturers in Boston and New York produced willow pieces and sets in the newly fashionable Mission Style. **By the 1920s, willow as a material for furniture manufacture had been replaced by machine-woven wicker, plastics, chrome and other high-fashion materials.**



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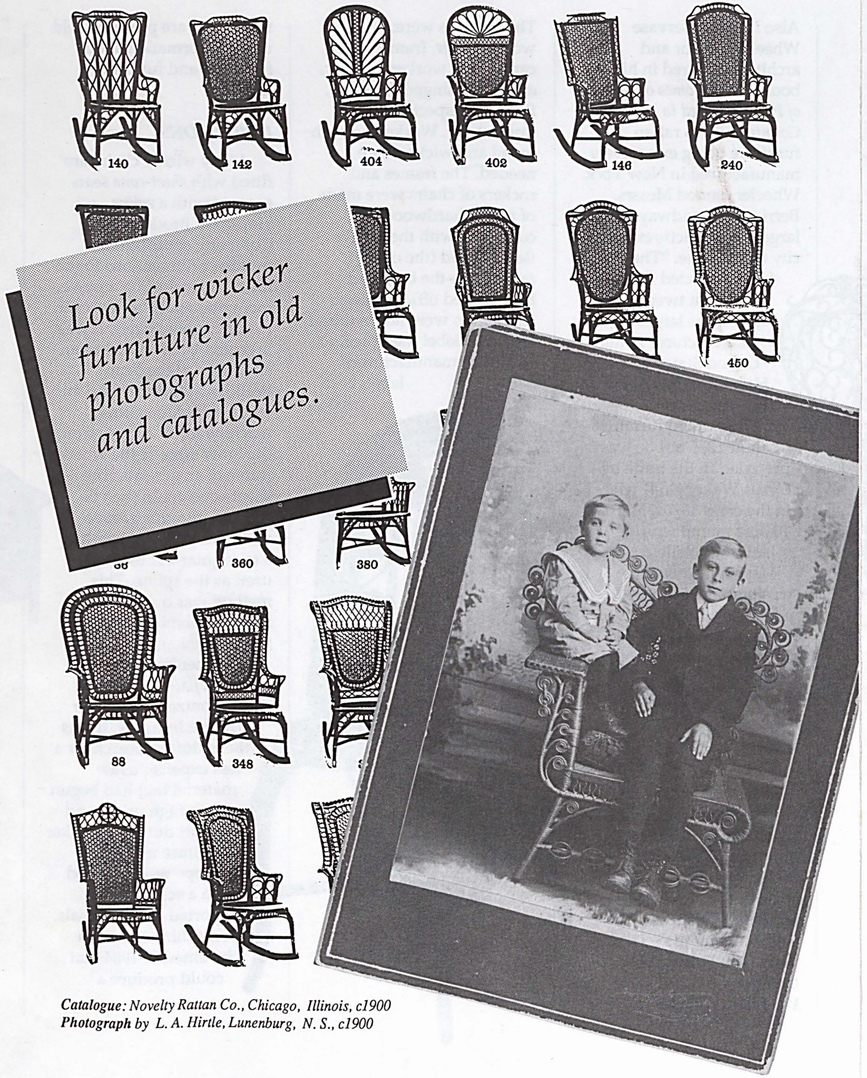


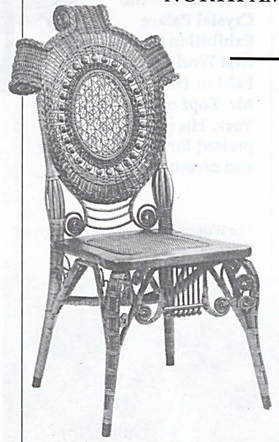
Catalogue: *Novelty Rattan Co., Chicago, Illinois, c1900*
Photograph *by L. A. Hirtle, Lunenburg, N. S., c1900*

Nova Scotia Museum 1747 Summer Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3A6

RATTAN, BAMBOO & WILLOW

WICKER

DESPITE ITS ORIENTAL APPEARANCE, MUCH WICKER FURNITURE POPULAR IN THE PERIOD 1860-1930 WAS MADE IN NORTH AMERICA, INCLUDING WINDSOR AND HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA.



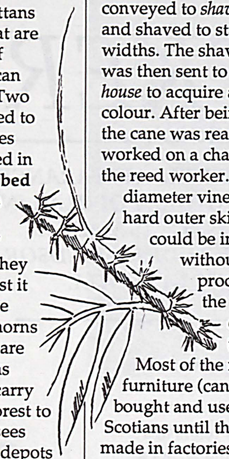
Side Chair, *c1890*
Rattan with hardwood frame
Labeled: Windsor Furniture Company, Windsor, N. S.
South Rawdon Museum, Hants County

Wicker refers to a technique, not a material. The term is derived from two Swedish words: *wika* - to bend and *vikker* - willow. Wickerwork is woven from exotic materials (rattan, bamboo, palm and raffia) or from local materials (such as willow, rush and straw). Basket-weaving is the foundation of wickerwork, and the production of wicker furniture is an extension of basic basket-weaving techniques.

Armchair, *c1915*
Rattan with hardwood frame
Labeled: J. E. Smith and Company, Windsor, N. S.
Nova Scotia Museum Collection

RATTAN

The most popular natural material for the manufacture of wicker furniture is rattan. Rattans are vine-like palms that are native to the jungles of Southeast Asia. They can grow 30 metres high. Two or three men are needed to harvest the largest vines because they are lodged in the jungle canopy. **Barbed with thorns, the vines produce unpleasant "surprise encounters" for the *collectors*.** As they drag it down, they twist it around an adjacent tree trunk to strip off the thorns Then the largest vines are cut into 3-metre lengths and one collector can carry 10 lengths out of the forest to the *licensees*. The licensees transport the rattan to depots for local processing. Here it is rubbed with an abrasive to produce a clean finish, then dried, fumigated, graded into large- and small-diameter vines and exported.

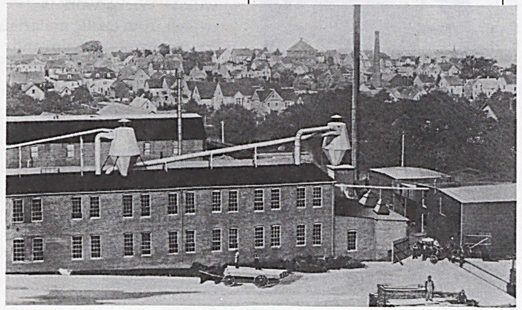


FURNITURE FACTORIES

Furniture factories in North America imported both large- and small-diameter rattan vines. The large-diameter vines were further processed by machine. After the rough joints were scraped off, the rattan was sent to the *splitting room* where long rows of splitting machines cut the glossy outer skins into long strands of *cane*, at the same time peeling the cane from the rattan core (*reed*). These uneven long strands of cane were then conveyed to *shaving machines* and shaved to standard widths. The shaved cane was then sent to the *bleach house* to acquire a "natural" colour. After being bleached, the cane was ready to be worked on a chair frame by the reed worker. Small-diameter vines had a hard outer skin and could be incorporated, without further processing, into the wickerwork design of the chair.

Most of the rattan furniture (cane and reed) bought and used by Nova Scotians until the 1930s was made in factories in North America, including Nova Scotia. The majority of these pieces were manufactured between 1880 and 1910. Nova Scotian manufacturers were the Windsor Furniture Company and J. E. Smith and Company (the Rattan Manufacturing Company) both of Windsor, and A. Stephen and Son of Barrington Street, Halifax. The Union Furniture Company, Bass River, distributed wicker furniture made for them by other manufacturers.

The manufacture of rattan furniture in North America dates from the 1850s. A wicker garden chair was shown in London at the Crystal Palace Exhibition (the first World's Fair) in 1851 by Mr. Topf of New York. His chair was praised for its novelty, taste and ornamental design.



The Windsor Furniture Company, Windsor, N.S. c1913

Also in 1851, Gervase Wheeler, author and architect, referred in his book, *Rural Homes or Sketches of Houses Suited to American Country Life*, to rattan furniture being extensively manufactured in New York. Wheeler named Messrs. Berrian of Broadway as the largest manufacturer in the city at that time: "They have, in fact, created the trade."

About twenty years later, the largest chair manufacturer in the United States was Levi Heywood of Fitchburg, Massachusetts. He began making rattan furniture around 1875 but he was preceded in the trade by Cyrus Wakefield II who, in the early 1870s, had a 10-acre manufacturing plant in Wakefield, Massachusetts. The two companies merged in 1897 and their furniture was widely distributed, some pieces finding their way to homes in Nova Scotia.

HOW MANY PEOPLE TO MAKE A RATTAN CHAIR?

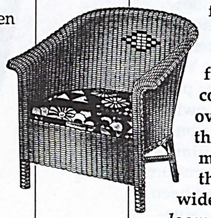
Nine workers were employed to assemble a rattan chair according to the paper label pasted on the underframe of this chair in the Nova Scotia Museum collection. It was made by the Anderson Furniture Company of Woodstock, Ontario.

The workers were: woodworker, framer, star caner, reed worker, winder, singer (he singed the reed), finisher, inspector and upholsterer. Workers in both wood and wicker were needed. The frames and rockers of chairs were made of native hardwood combined with the highly flexible reed (the core of rattan after the bark had been peeled off). Furniture companies were not required by law to label their products but manufacturers' labels and marks, when they are present, yield useful information about furniture and furniture makers.

INVENTIONS

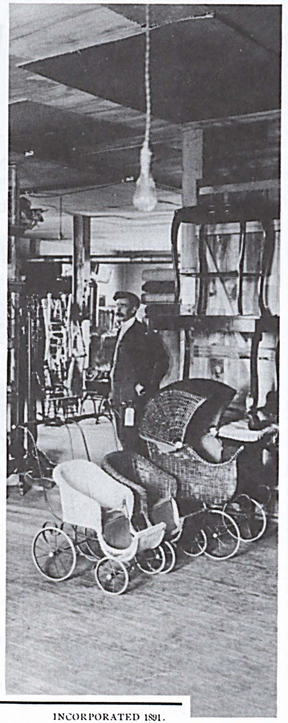
Many wicker chairs are fitted with *sheet-cane* seats secured with a *spline*. Heywood Brothers and Company contributed a number of inventions to the industry, including a power loom that could weave cane in continuous sheets. It was invented by A. Watkins, an employee of the firm. Watkins also developed an automatic channelling machine to cut a groove on the inner edge of the wooden frame of chair seats. The sheet-cane could then be pressed into this groove and tightly secured with a triangular-cut reed used as the spline. This method was quicker and more economical than traditional hand-caning.

Another invention, the *Lloyd flat-fabric loom*, revolutionized the wicker furniture industry. It was the endof the search for a less expensive raw material that had begun when high prices and import duties on wicker furniture made in Europe were coupled with a scarcity of imported raw materials. A machine had been invented in 1904 that could produce a substitute for natural materials. It used wood pulp to make a twisted paper fibre strengthened with a glue sizing. During World War I the U.S. Department of Agriculture attempted to induce American farmers to cultivate willow as a crop for use by furniture manufacturers, but with only mild success. The breakthrough came in 1917 when Marshall B. Lloyd, a manufacturer of rattan baby carriages, invented a loom that could weave the inexpensive paper fibre developed in 1904.



By 1930, almost all wicker furniture made in North America used Lloyd-loom woven fibre. This flat fabric could be stretched over frames and the furniture manufactured in this way became widely known as *Lloyd-loom furniture*. Natural rattan wicker continued to be used for airplane seats because of its light weight.

Rattan furniture is again in style, most of it now being manufactured in the Orient. So popular has it become that the rattan plants used in its manufacture are threatened by over use. Canada's International Development Research Centre is working with researchers in Malaysia, India, the Phillipines and Thailand to develop plant-breeding techniques and conservation practises.



New wicker baby carriages in a Halifax warehouse, 1918.

(Public Archives of Nova Scotia)

Advertisement from McAlpine's Gazetteer and Guide of the Maritime Provinces, 1892.