

Collecting Fine Early Baskets

By Ken Farmer

When Jane and I married in 1974, we learned early on that we loved the traditional music, arts, and crafts of the Appalachians. One of our favorite shops to browse in was The Cave House in Abingdon, VA. They sold locally produced items by artisans and craftspeople who followed traditional techniques, while also putting their interpretation on the objects they created. There was everything from batiks, musical instruments, and furniture, to carvings, paintings on barn wood, and more. The first things that caught our eye at the Cave House were baskets made from white oak splints by a woman everyone called “Miss Mary.”

At that time, we couldn’t afford the \$35 price tag. Later, when we learned about all the labor-intensive efforts went into making these baskets, we could appreciate the price tag. Miss Mary would go into the forest with one of her younger relatives and search for a white oak tree with no limbs and straight grain as far up the trunk as they could reach. After cutting the tree, they would then split it and begin to work

it down into wedges, then eventually into straight strips that would be smoothed out, tapered, and trimmed to the sections of the basket. The prepared pieces were soaked in a water trough or a nearby creek to make the material more pliable and more natural to bend. The finer-made baskets had precise trimming and smoothing so they would fit well together to create a sturdy, tight basket.

There was a wide variety of basket making traditions in the American South during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The earliest European settlers in Virginia and the South brought their craft traditions from their home regions in the British Isles and Europe. Enslaved individuals and free African Americans also utilized and continued their basket-making traditions from Africa. American Indians, who lived in the South long before Europeans arrived, had a long basket-making history.

Every home had to store grain, flour, spices, and other necessities. People needed something to collect and carry garden produce and eggs in, and baskets regularly



Ken Farmer is a lifelong resident of Virginia and currently resides in Charlottesville. He and his wife Jane have been avid students and collectors of Americana and Southern material culture since they married in 1974. Since his teenage years Ken has been a musician and singer of traditional Appalachian and American Roots music. As a performer he became interested in the songs, history, objects and stories of his native Southwest Virginia, which led to him the antique business where he has worked for over 40 years. Ken has also appeared on *Antiques Roadshow* since its inception in 1996, as a specialist in folk art, decorative arts, and musical instruments. Ken runs an antique and fine art appraisal and consulting business that serves collectors, estates, and individuals throughout the mid-Atlantic.

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This basket is a circa 1840 footed and tiered rye straw form with African influence found in Davidson County, NC. It is believed that this basket was created by an enslaved craftsman and is one of only three known to still exist. This item was from the Acacia African American Collection and sold by Slotin Folk Art Auctions in 2017 for \$28,800. It is a amazing form that today appears modern and timeless with the addition of the notched and carved legs.

fit the bill. We have all heard of egg baskets, garden baskets, key baskets, feather baskets, and many more types. The list is endless, limited only to the local materials available to the makers.

Some of the earliest baskets made by Europeans in America were coiled rye straws wrapped with oak splints. The straw from rye, used to make bread and whiskey, is very tough and durable—perfect for making a basket.

The Shenandoah Valley settlers with Germanic and Swiss heritage used this form exclusively. Similar styles found in Egyptian tombs and remnants of rye straw baskets have been found in Europe dating back 12,000 years.

When an object transcends its functional use and becomes a beautiful art object,

the market can produce high prices from advanced collectors who seek the best examples. In the days of pre-COVID auctions, these bidding wars could resemble a gladiatorial contest—thumbs up for the one who wins. Even though most auction houses are moving on with online-only bidding, the results are still robust for the very best items.

Another category of baskets is those made of wooden splints, splits, and rods. This is a collecting category that has room for everyone, with prices ranging from under \$50 and into thousands of dollars for rare examples.

This category is very near and dear to Jane and I, and the most plentiful type of item in our home. Sizes range from miniatures to large market baskets. The

material can be dyed, painted, or left plain. Some are basic, only designed to carry out chores on the farm. Others were finely made as “show baskets” designed to show their makers’ advanced skills. The material most often used for these types of baskets was white oak throughout Virginia, the Appalachians, and the South.

If you collect long enough you might have to focus on miniature baskets sooner or later as you run out of places to put the big ones. However, some collectors will always buy that next find and then worry about fitting it in once it’s home. There are so many great examples of baskets to discover in many forms and from many regions. Keep hunting and looking, you never know what you will find next.

Key Baskets

During the 1980s, while doing an estate appraisal, I encountered a leather key basket made in Richmond, VA in the mid-nineteenth century. I remembered seeing a picture of one in the book *Southern Folk Art* published in 1985 by Oxmoor House and edited by Cynthia Elyce Rubin. But what was I supposed to do to learn more and go about estimating its value? There was no such thing as the internet in those days, so I called a couple of advanced collectors and dealers. They figured it would sell for at least \$5,000. As soon as I put that price on it, one of the heirs immediately snatched it up and kept it as part of their share of the family estate.

Key baskets were used in large homes in the nineteenth century to carry the

numerous keys that locked various doors throughout the house and outbuildings. Each night, the woman of the home would have been responsible for locking up, and each of the doors would have had a sizeable handmade lock that required a unique iron key. These keys, four to five inches in length, would have been stored and carried in a leather key basket that was typically oval and 6 or 8 inches long. The key basket is a rarified regional form created by only a small number of craftspeople, both black and white, before the Civil War.

In 1995, I saw a heart basket in Charlottesville, where an old collection belonging to Henry Deyerle was being sold at auction. By this time, there was a lot more information available about

the possible makers, time frames, and origins of these objects.

This key basket was lined in red, shiny leather and had red hearts of the same material at the handle terminations. It has stitched, punched, and embossed decoration and still is a visual stunner.

This was the first time the national antiques trade had seen such a basket, and the response was overwhelming. It sold to David Schorsch, one of America’s preeminent folk-art dealers, for \$34,375. This extraordinary price was thought to be a one-off, but in 2018 a similar key basket brought \$28,000 at auction. A lesser example with fading and wear brought \$10,000 at auction in New York this past January.



This key basket with red diamonds embossed on the ends and handle is from my own personal collection.



The Deyerle key basket. Photo courtesy of David Schorsch Antiques.

This lidded picnic basket with red and blue splints is 9 inches by 8 inches. It is likely from North Carolina or Virginia. Note how finely the rods and splints are tapered and the exaggerated swell on the bottom—hence being called a “gizzard” or “buttocks” form.



Miniature Baskets My personal favorite above from Wythe County, VA, is a true miniature and very finely made. Some in this group have dyed splints and wrapped handles. The tallest is only 4 ½ inches high.

Wooden Splints, Splits and Rods Baskets



This basket with a cut nail in the handle dates before 1880, about the time cheaper machine-made nails replaced those requiring hand forging.



This rare and simple splint basket has a handle marked, "New Market, VA., April 14, 1935." We have seen very few signed and dated baskets in our collecting. I assume most baskets we see are 1900 or later.

If a basket has aged surface patina or paint, it is simply more desirable. Painted surfaces tend to add value—especially this blue and white 9 inches by 9 inches Giles County basket. Note the notched handle and wrapped rim.



This rare Wythe County, VA oak basket form is referred to as a fork or split handle. Most are similarly made with a fine woven and tapered oval tray with a handle bent at a 90-degree angle and wire nails attaching it to the edge. Baskets like this have been selling in the \$3,000 range since the 1980s.

This group of baskets made by sisters Mary and Eliza Shelton are from the collection of Tom Gray in Forsyth County, NC. The 1910 census lists both Mary and Eliza Shelton as “basket makers at home.” Their work is usually dated as late-nineteenth or early twentieth century. Their baskets are amazing examples of fine craftsmanship showing a consistently tight weave and minute details. Brunk Auctions in Asheville, VA, sold this set for \$31,860.



BRUNK AUCTIONS



This rare basket was featured in a segment of the popular PBS series *Antiques Roadshow* filmed in Charleston, SC. The owner stated that she got it at a church bazaar for \$3. The appraiser estimated a retail value of \$4,000–\$6,000. The basket has cut nails, a great tight weave, and a fantastic pierced and cut-out rim. This little gem now resides in the collection of Colonial Williamsburg, and who graciously allowed us to use this image. Colonial Williamsburg has recently finished a significant addition to its museum galleries, where you can see many great examples of southern and American folk art, art, and decorative arts.

ALBEMARLE

Dyed Rivercane Baskets

Dyed rivercane baskets in various sizes were made by the Cherokee Nation for hundreds of years. As quoted in the 1970 book, *Arts and Crafts of the Cherokee*, an eighteenth-century English explorer James Adair wrote of these early baskets, “They make the handsomest baskets I ever saw considering their materials. They divide large swamp canes into long, thin, narrow, splinters, which they dye of several colors, and manage the workmanship so well that both the inside and outside are covered with a beautiful variety of pleasing figures.” There are still beautiful examples of Cherokee basketry being produced in the Southern Appalachians.



Vintage Cherokee miniature



BRUNK AUCTIONS

Double-woven rivercane basket by Rowena Bradley (Qualla Boundary, Swain County, NC, 1922–2003). It sold for \$6,490 by Brunk Auctions.

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