

Strength & Style

In early America, all of the hardware was made in England and imported to the colonies. That was the law — it was illegal for the colonies to produce manufactured goods for their own use.

America sold iron and charcoal to the British who used those raw materials to produce hardware that was then sold back to the captive market here.

Almost all the early hardware in Eastern Pennsylvania was imported from England — but rules were made to be broken! As you move inland in Pennsylvania, many locally made examples of early hardware can be found.

Local blacksmiths in colonial America through the mid-19th century made much of the hardware that was needed for wagons to roll; buildings to be constructed; and doors to open, close, and latch. As an example, consider the large number of hinges that were needed for a single residential house. It would not be unusual for there to be about 10 doors (exterior and interior) in a home, each requiring 2 hinges and pintles, or about 40 pieces of hardware just for the doors. A strap hinge for a barn door might easily be 3 feet long and weigh about 10 pounds when finished. Turning and hammering that size iron bar into a nicely shaped hinge would require much physical strength and skill. And it is clear from the over 200-year old hinges that survive that blacksmiths and their customers often wanted hinges that were attractive as well as functional. Fancy shapes and decorative elements required additional time and skill. Hinges were not only needed for doors but for furniture, gates and any item that opened and closed.

For at least a hundred years, changes in hardware were almost non-existent. Sons of blacksmiths learned from their fathers who learned from their fathers who had brought original patterns from Europe. But as the number of iron furnaces in America grew, it brought about great changes in the production of hardware — and was a major factor in the start of the American Industrial Revolution. Machines were invented to produce iron screws and to produce rolled iron in sheets. Shutter hardware was one of the obvious first changes in American hardware. The old strap hinges and forged screws gave way to cheaply available screws and shutter bolts. The bolt relied on both the inexpensive new screws and the readily available plate iron. Strap hinges continued to dominate the market for hanging shutters but now the drive pintle started to be replaced by the plate pintle with the availability of rolled iron.

