

What Really Was In That House?

Comparing Inventories of Revolutionary War Era New York and New Jersey

By Jacquetta M. Haley

This is the third in a series of installments that will discuss how various categories of furnishings are represented in the different inventories. The four groups will be examined to determine if there are variations in the types and numbers of objects in each category. Where valuations for specific items can be identified, are there differences between the groups? Are there regional preferences in the frequency of use for various objects? What interpretive information can be gleaned from studying individual types of objects across a large number of inventories?

HEATING

Just as a chair offered a place to rest after a long day in the fields and a candle helped light the way during the night, a fire to ward off the cold of winter was essential for the residents of Revolutionary War era New York and New Jersey. An examination of the inventories for tools and items associated with heating in 18th century homes provides some additional insights into the difficult task of staying warm.



Eighteenth century residents of New York and New Jersey relied on the fireplace for both heat and light. Settlers from Europe, the Dutch, German and French, frequently built hooded, jambless fireplaces in their homes, especially in the 17th and early 18th century. This restored jambless fireplace is in the Jean Hasbrouck House, Historic Huguenot Street, New Paltz.

In the New York City and New Jersey inventories ownership of heating equipment and tools is comparable to ownership of chairs. At least some type of heating equipment appears on 87% (NYC) and 91% (NJ) of the inventories. Eighty-three percent of the Ulster inventories include some type of heating implements while the surviving Westchester inventories show almost a quarter failing to include any items associated with heat.

When discussing 18th century heating the fireplace immediately springs to mind. Central to that image of the fireplace is a pair of andirons, frequently referred to as “handirons” on 18th century inventories. While it is true that pairs of andirons appear with great regularity on the Revolutionary War era inventories, they are far from universal. Andirons are missing from between a quarter and a half of the estates inventoried. The New York City group shows the

fewest andiron-free estates (26%) followed by the New Jersey group (30%) and Ulster County (41%). Looking at the Westchester inventories, over half fail to include andirons (57%). [See [Chart 4](#)]

Between 35 and 42 percent of the inventories include a single pair of andirons as part of the estate. New York City showed the highest percentage while the rural areas, New Jersey, Ulster and

Basic 18th century andirons, both wrought iron. The andirons on the right have been embellished with brass knobs, marking them for use in a wealthier household.



hearthstone. Kitchens in particular appear to be a likely room in which andirons might be unnecessary. Eighteenth century cooking was largely dependant on the use of coals placed directly under pots, as well as pots hanging over the fire, suspended from iron or chain trammels.

BEYOND ANDIRONS

Supporting the idea that many households used fireplaces both with and without andirons is the abundance of fire shovels and fire tongs. Tongs are the single most common type of fireplace equipment to appear in any of the

Westchester, showed 37%, 39% and 35% respectively. Ownership of 2 pairs of andirons ranges from 23% in New Jersey to 8 % in Westchester. Two is the maximum number of andirons found on Westchester inventories while three or more andirons appear on a limited number of New York City, New Jersey and Ulster estates, [NYC, 15%; New Jersey, 10%; Ulster, 3%].

The overwhelming majority of the andirons, between 81 and 97 percent, carry no descriptor. [See [Table 11](#)] If a descriptor is used it is most likely to be “brass” or “brass headed.” A few andirons are identified as iron or cast. Obviously the brass andirons are more highly valued, frequently coming in at over £1 for a pair. The least expensive andirons are valued at between 2/ and 4/6 for a pair. The most expensive andirons, found in New York City, are appraised at over £5 a pair. Interestingly, the New York City

and Ulster inventories show the highest percentage of inexpensive andirons (15% and 19% respectively) while only 4% of the New Jersey andirons are valued at less than 5 shillings. At the upper end all three areas have valuations in excess of £1. (New York City, 31%; New Jersey, 30%; Ulster County 25%). [See [Table 12](#), valuations are not available for the Westchester inventories.]

Just because between a quarter and half of the inventories fail to include andirons does not mean that those households suffered through the long winters with no heat. Obviously it is possible to build a fire in a fireplace without benefit of andirons. It seems apparent that many, if not all households, included fires built directly on the



Firetongs like these were found in most 18th century households. With fire shovels they formed the most common type of fireplace equipment on the New York and New Jersey inventories. These tongs date from the end of the 18th century but are similar in form to those used at the mid century. These are combination tongs with upper brass finials but the pincers themselves are made of wrought iron.

Ulster County inventories show a similar high ownership rate for one or more tongs (73%) and shovels (68%). Seventy-five percent of the New Jersey inventories list shovels.¹ The New York City inventories display a slightly lower incidence of fire tongs and shovels in Revolutionary War era households. Sixty-six percent of these inventories included shovels while 65% listed tongs. The Westchester inventories once again deviate with only 54% listing tongs and 42% showing shovels. [See [Tables 13](#) and [14](#)].



While far less common than the shovel or tongs, bellows are relatively common, appearing on less than a third of the inventories.

When thinking of modern fireplace equipment, shovels, tongs, and pokers are the most common combination. Pokers do not appear on any of the 18th century

¹ The shovels included here are those that appear in conjunction with other fireplace equipment or in specific rooms. "Shovel" also appears in the barns or outbuildings, in which case it has been interpreted as a shovel for digging earth rather than cleaning up ashes.

inventories examined for this study. A piece of wood probably worked equally well and cost nothing. Hand bellows appear on a minority of the inventories, ranging from 30% in rural New Jersey to 6% in rural Westchester. Urban New York City falls in the middle with 13% of the inventories showing bellows, while they appear on 10% of the Ulster inventories.² In addition to these common types of fireplace equipment there are occasional references to a miscellany other accessories.

"Fenders" appear on 3 New York City inventories and 2 New Jersey inventories. An "ironback" is listed on 1 New Jersey and 1 New York City inventory. Three New York City inventories, 1 New Jersey and 1 Westchester inventory include "firescreen." Three Ulster inventories and one New Jersey inventory variously list "mantletree cloth," "mantle cloth," "mantle vallen" and "chimney cloth," all references to a strip of fabric

² As with shovels, "bellows" appear in different contexts on the inventories. Those included here appear within the lists of household furnishings, usually in association with shovels, tongs, or andirons. Additional bellows appear on some of the inventories in outbuildings in a context associated with smithing. These bellows are never referred to as hand bellows and always carry much higher valuations than their domestic counterpart.

hanging from the hood of a jambless fireplace to help control the draft. This item appears in the two areas associated with a significant Dutch/European population rather than English settlement. In addition, a "hearth brush" appears on one New York City inventory. Obviously these items were available to Revolutionary War era residents of New York and New Jersey, but they were seldom used.

The items examined above have been tied to the fireplace. However, the inventories do list additional portable heat sources. "Warming pans," what we commonly refer to as bed warmers, appear on fewer than a quarter of the inventories. Twenty-three percent of the urban New York City inventories included warming pans, while they appear on 14% of the New Jersey inventories, 16% of the Westchester inventories but only 10% of the Ulster group. The warming pans on the New Jersey inventories carried higher valuations than those from either New York City or Ulster. The New York City warming pans ranged in value from 2/0 to £1, with an average value of 8/8. By



This brass warming pan displays the characteristics of a luxury item. The elaborately spiraled wood handle and the pierced decorative lid both point to the time and effort that went into its construction. By comparison the adjacent wrought iron fire tongs indicate a utilitarian tool made by the local blacksmith.

comparison, the New Jersey warming pans varied from 3/9 to £2, for an average value of 13/8 each.³ Ulster's warming pans ranged from 5/ to 16/ for an average valuation of 9/.

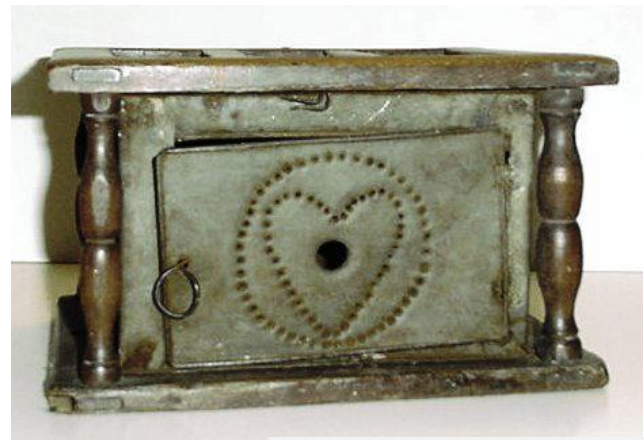
It is clear that the majority of Revolutionary War era residents did not enjoy the luxury of freshly warmed sheets before they climbed into bed each evening. In New York City, Ulster and New Jersey warming pans were a luxury item, not a common household fixture. Those on the New York

City and Ulster inventories may have had a slightly more utilitarian character, while the New Jersey warming pans were more clearly a luxury item.

A second portable heat source is the "stove." This appears to have two very different meanings in the inventories. "Stove" appears most frequently on the Somerset County, New Jersey and Ulster County, New York inventories, both areas settled primarily by ethnic Dutch populations. The word "stove" comes from the Middle Dutch *stove* meaning heated room. However the Dutch word *stoof*, pronounced similarly, is a small box with holes in it. One would place glowing coals inside so it would emanate heat, and then put one's feet on top of it while sitting (in a chair) to keep one's feet warm.⁴ This second use of stove, what we call a "foot warmer" appears to be the more common usage during the period under discussion, and it is an item especially associated with areas with large Dutch populations. Peter Kalm, a Swedish traveler remarked on their use among the

Dutch of Albany in the mid-18th century:

At this time of year since it was beginning to grow cold, it was customary for the women, all of them, even maidens, servants and little girls, to put live coals into iron pans which were in turn placed in a small stool resembling somewhat a footstool, but with a bottom... upon which the pan was set. The top of the pan was full of holes through which the heat came. They placed this stool with the warming pan under their skirts so that the heat therefrom might go up to the regiones superiores and to all parts of the body which the skirts covered. As soon as the coals grew black they were thrown away and replaced by live coals and treated as above. It was almost painful to see all this changing and trouble in order that no part should freeze or fare badly. The women had however spoiled themselves, for they could not do without this heat.¹



A tin "stove" or footwarmer in a wood case.

In both New Jersey and Ulster foot warmers appear on just over 10% of the inventories [NJ, 12%; Ulster, 11%].

³ The New York City and New Jersey inventories each included 10 warming pans with valuations.

⁴http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_words_of_Dutch_origin#S.

In addition to the foot warmers there are a few “stoves” with much higher valuations appearing on New Jersey inventories in the mid 1780s. These stoves, identified as

either “iron stoves” or in one case as a “Franklin stove” are much more expensive. These three stoves are valued at £3, £4.10.0 and £6 respectively, equal to or in excess of the valuation of a typical cow. Obviously these are not foot stoveplates,” component parts of large stoves.

When dealing with heating in historic house museums the clearest message is probably, “simplify your fireplace.” If you have only one fireplace it is equally correct to display it with or without andirons. Feel free to have only a shovel and tongs, with the fire laid directly on the hearth. With two fireplaces, display one with andirons and one without. You don’t need a shovel and tongs for each fireplace as they are easily transported from one active fireplace to the other. Use basic iron andirons for most houses, relying on brass andirons for only the most upscale homes, and then only in the parlor or possibly the

Variously referred to in the inventories as a “mantle cloth,” “manteltree cloth,” “chimney cloth” or “mantle vallene” these narrow strips of cloth hanging from the hood of a jambless fireplace helped control the draft of the fireplace, ensuring that the smoke went up the chimney rather than out into the room.



most important bedroom.

Additional fireplace equipment such as bellows should be included very sparingly.

They signify the appearance of the cast iron stove that will replace fireplaces as a typical heat source in 19th century homes. The Ulster County inventories also include a few references to expensive “stoves” as well as miscellaneous warmers. Elaborate brass warming pans are one of those items that have survived in relatively high numbers and make an attractive addition to the bedroom of an historic house museum, plus they provide a good story. However warming pans in any form were scarce luxury items and should only appear in the most important bedroom of a well to do home. Frequently foot warmers are displayed on the hearth next to the warming pan, yet they appear to have been equally scarce, with a greater prevalence among Dutch than English households. Historic house museums need to determine

if they are telling the story of what was typically found in their Revolutionary era household, or if they are displaying all the various heating devices available during the era. The two stories are not synonymous.

About the Author

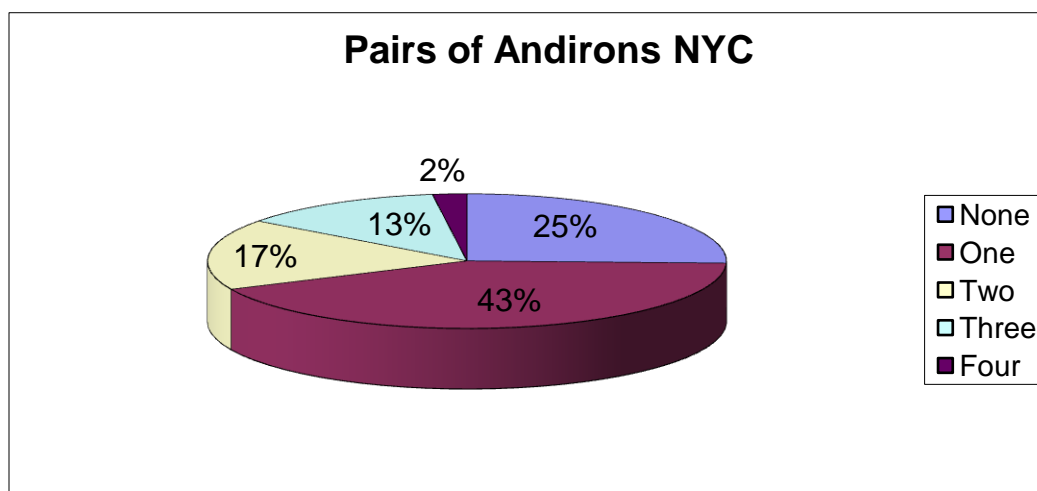
Jacquetta M. Haley has worked with historical agencies and sites in the Hudson Valley for many years. After 12 years working in the research and interpretation departments at Historic Hudson Valley Ms. Haley established Haley Research & Consulting. As a consultant she has published regional histories, curated exhibitions, developed interpretive strategies and prepared furnishings plans for many historic properties including Conference House and the Dyckman House for the Historic House Trust of New York City, Lyndhurst for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Mark Twain House and the Florence Griswold House in Connecticut, the Howell Living History Farm in New Jersey, the Alexander Ramsey House in St. Paul, Minnesota and the Owens-Thomas House in Savannah, Georgia.

Ms. Haley received her doctorate in American History from Binghamton University. She served on the board of trustees of Greater Hudson Heritage Network from 2003-2009, and again from 2010 to the present. Ms. Haley was president of the board of trustees in 2006-2009 and 2010-2011.

**CHART 4:
TYPES AND PERCENTAGE OF HEATING EQUIPMENT
APPEARING ON INVENTORIES**

Heating Equipment	New York City [47 inv.]	New Jersey [119 inv.]	Ulster [71 inv.]	Westchester [63 inv.]
None	13% (6)	9% (11)	17% (12)	24% (15)
Andirons	74% (35)	70% (83)	59% (42)	43% (27)
Shovel	66% (31)	75% (89)	68% (48)	42% (26)
Tongs	65% (30)	80% (95)	73% (52)	54% (34)
Bellows	13% (6)	30% (36)	10% (7)	6% (4)
Stove/foot warmer	11% (5)	12% (14)	11% (8)	0
Iron Stove	0	3% (3)	6% (4)	2% (1)
Warming Pan	23% (11)	14% (17)	10% (7)	16% (10)

TABLE 10: PAIRS OF ANDIRONS (continued on next page)



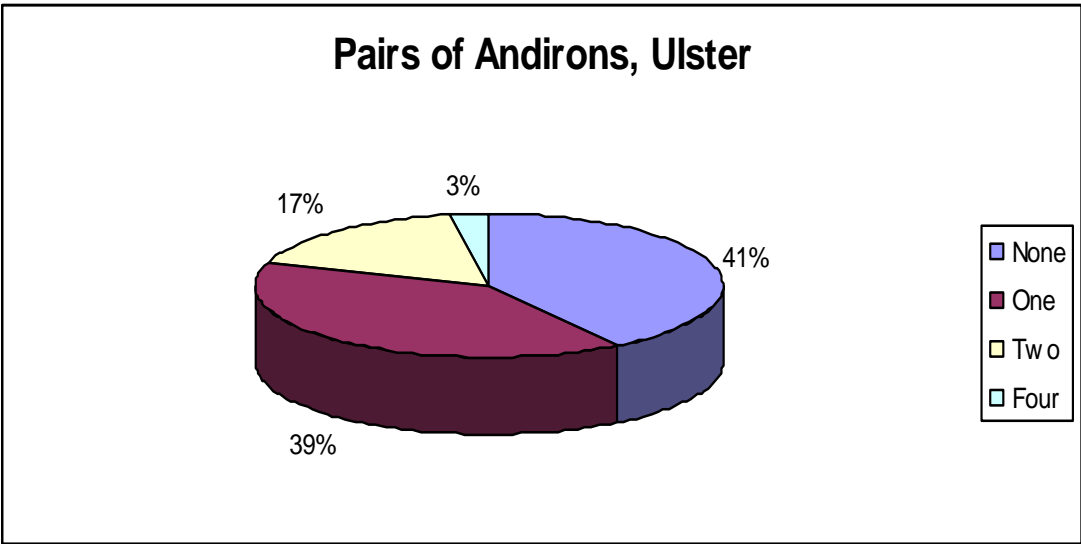
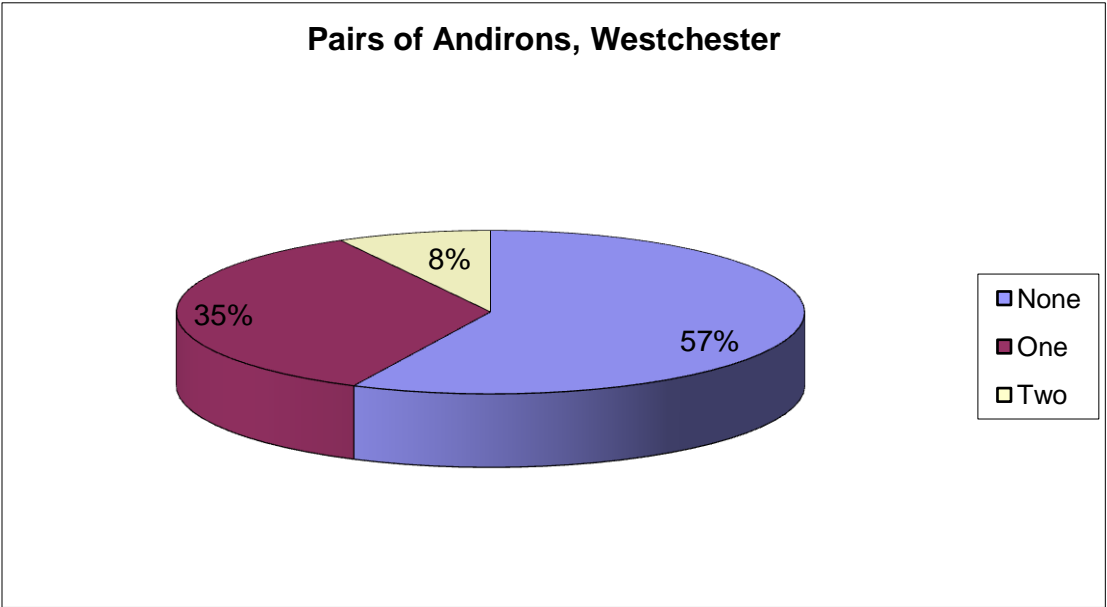
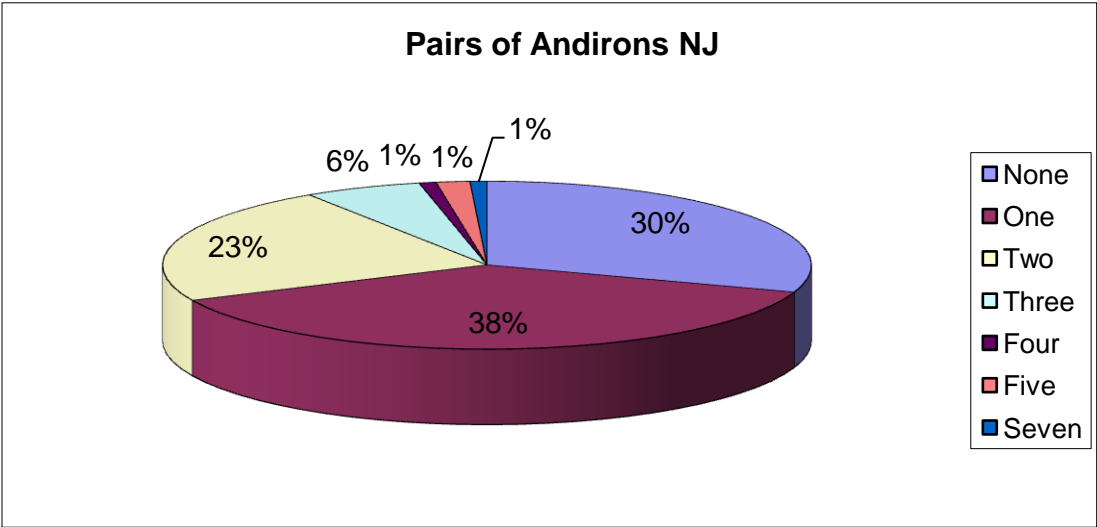
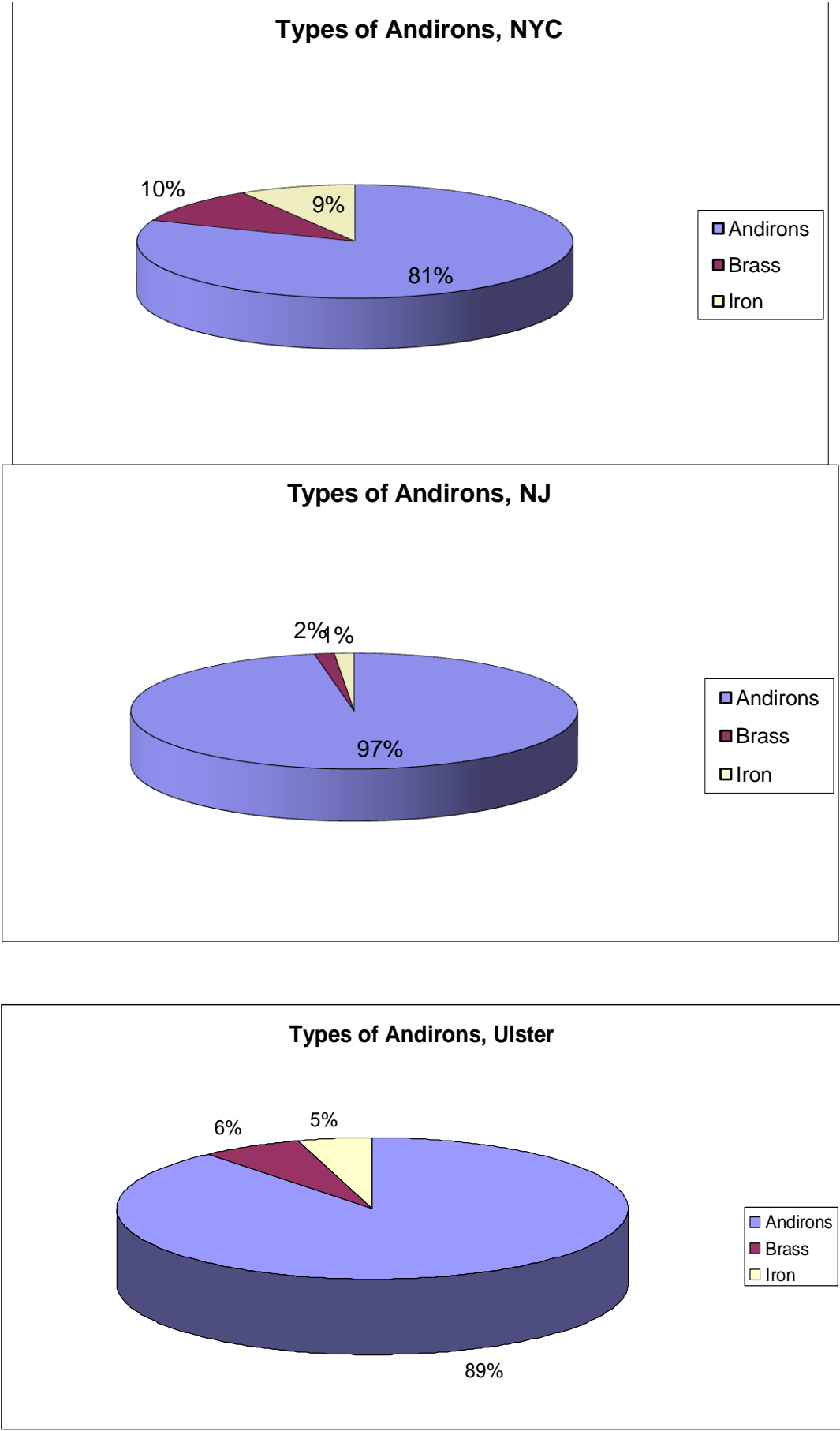


TABLE 11: TYPES OF ANDIRONS



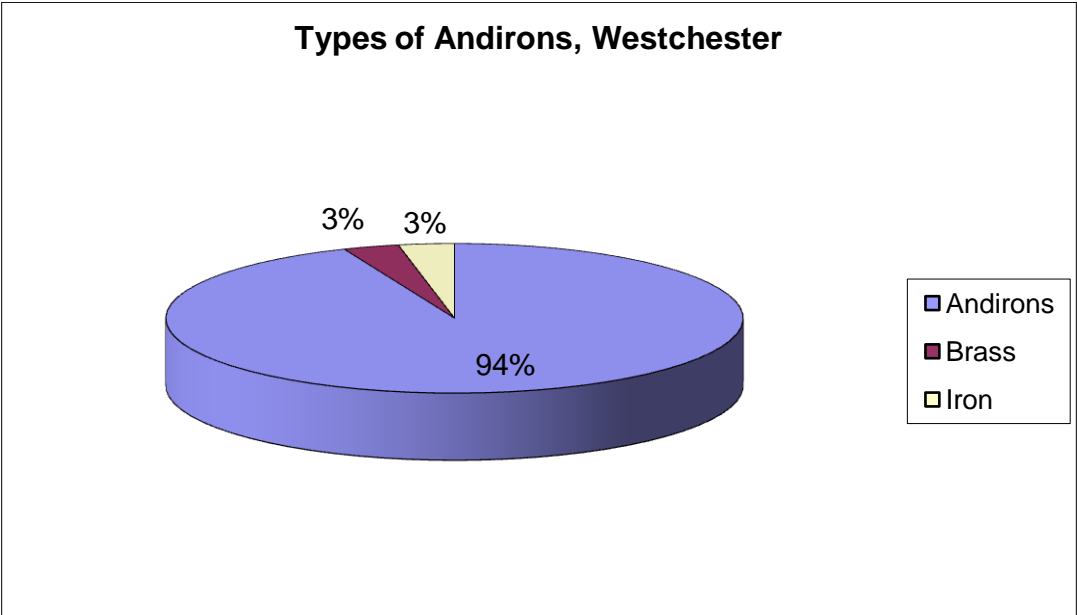


TABLE 12: VALUATION ON ANDIRONS

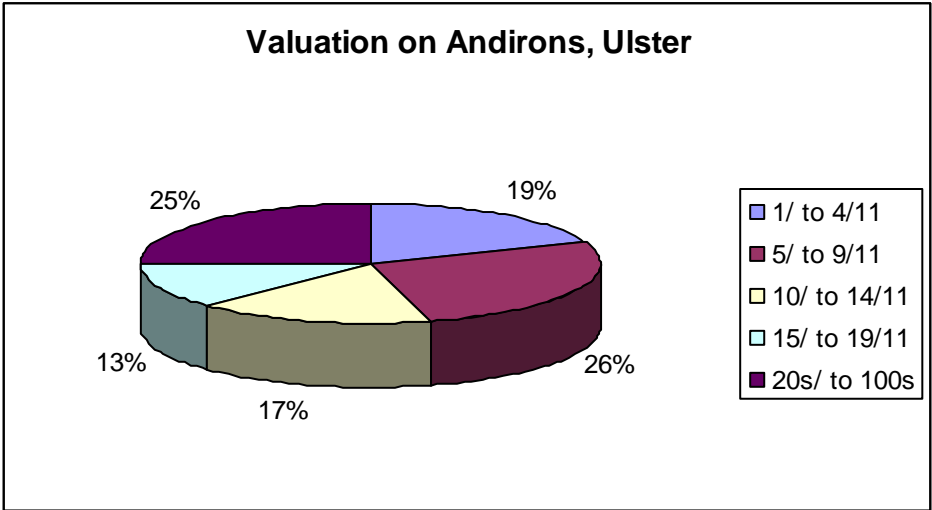
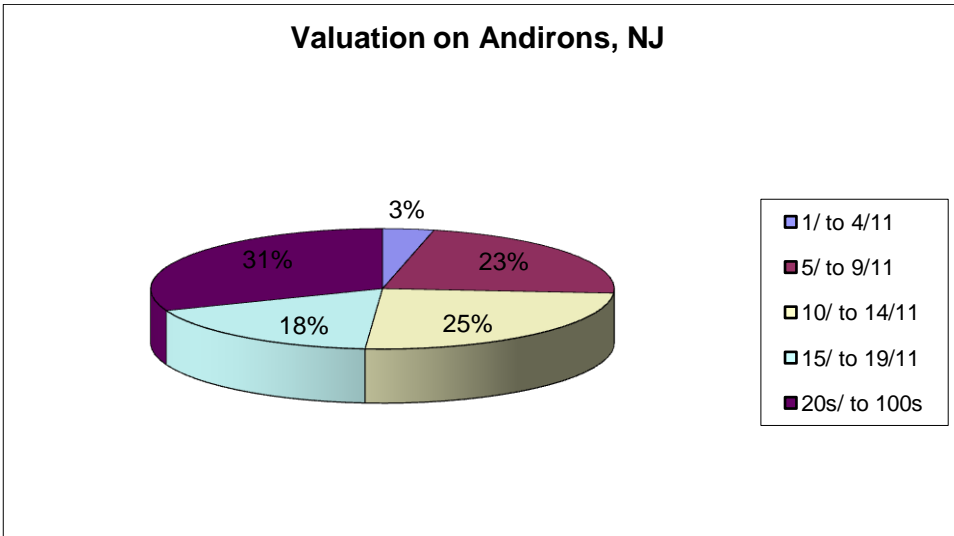
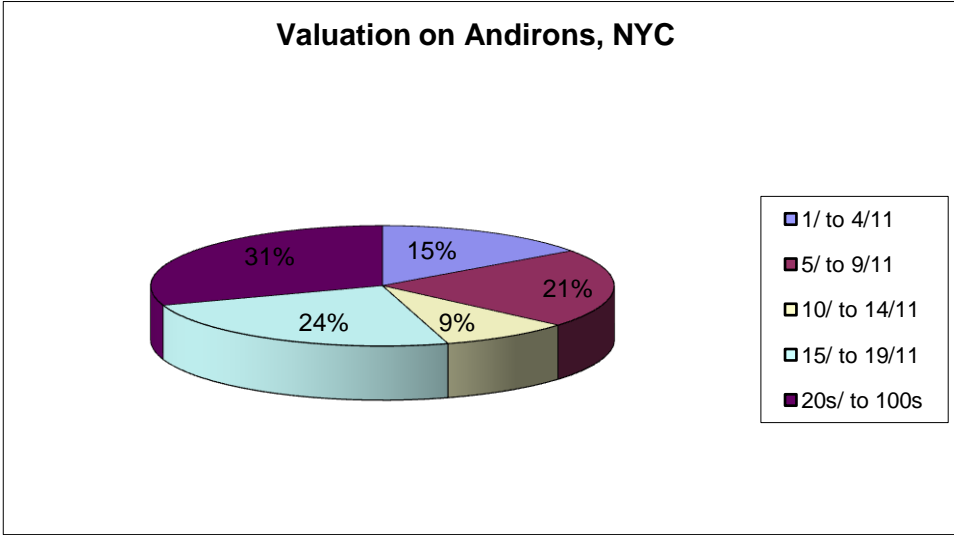
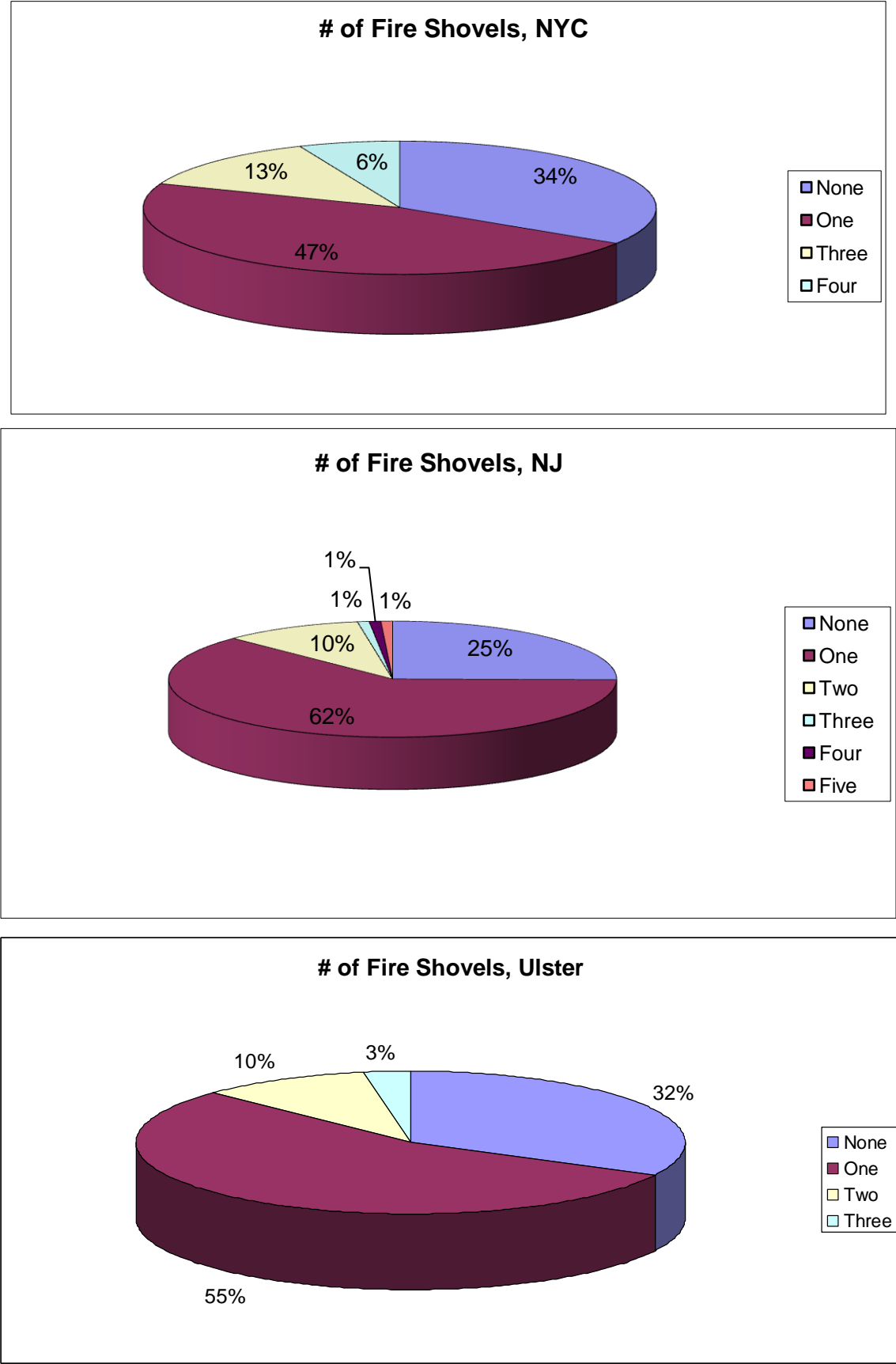


TABLE 13: NUMBER OF FIRE SHOVELS



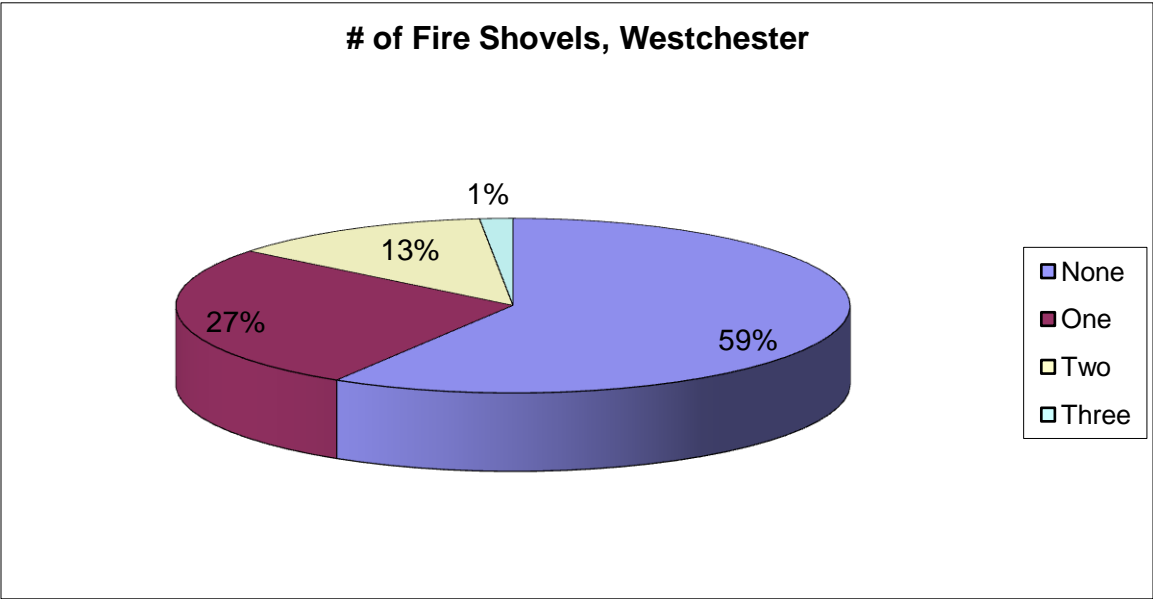


TABLE 14: NUMBER OF FIRE TONGS

