

owned by 18th and early 19th century Americans. Although it may not be very informative to the modern reader to know that a typical cow was valued at £4, it would be informative to know that a pair of brass andirons also is valued at £4, and a mahogany armchair is valued at £5.

Suddenly that mahogany armchair sitting in the historic house museum's dining room and the pair of brass andirons in the parlor are true luxury items, not just examples of lovely 18th century furnishings.

If a historic house museum is fortunate enough to have one or more estate inventories for their property during its interpretive era, there can be a tendency to believe that all that can be known about the furnishings in the house is in hand. A few letters may survive to round out that knowledge, or there may be a few invoices relating to specific purchases. Overall, the estate inventory becomes the planning document for furnishing the historic museum and a basic piece of the site interpretation.

When a historic house museum does not have a site-specific estate inventory, alternative information is needed. Other surviving estate inventories for the local area that pertain to households at a similar socio-economic level can be examined to determine what types of furnishings were readily available to

other residents. This assumes that sufficient research has been carried out to determine the socio-economic status of the target household and that similar households can be identified. An examination of these inventories provides basic guidelines on what should or should not be included in the furnishings plan for the house.



The Chippendale side chair on the left would appear as a "mahogany" chair and would be one of a suite of 6, 8 or even 10 matching chairs. Queen Anne style "easy" chairs like that on the right were rarities, primarily seen in urban environments but occasionally found in very well-to-do rural households.

In both cases, historic houses with site-specific estate inventories and historic houses dependent on regional inventories of similarly placed households, the inventories frequently are viewed as discrete documents with little effort to establish their relationship to other inventories, and by extension, other households in the same area. How does the site specific inventory compare to other inventories from the same region and the same era. Is the household depicted typical or atypical? Are the valuations for objects in the inventory lower than, about the same, or much higher than the valuations found in other area inventories? Are the quantities of furnishings in the

household similar to those of its neighbors? Are there significantly fewer or more items listed? Does the quality of furnishings appear to be higher than that seen on other local inventories? The answer to all these can provide the historic house staff with a much clearer image of how their household compared with the others in the area. Were they wealthier or poorer than their neighbors? Did they own objects that were unique to their household?

Taking a broader view, are there differences in the types of furnishings used in an urban setting and a rural setting? Did settlers in New York and New Jersey furnish their homes in the same way? This comparative study of household furnishings in Revolutionary War era households in New York and New Jersey examines four groups of estate inventories to see what they can tell us about furnishings for late 18th century historic house museums. A group of 119 estate inventories from Somerset County, New Jersey dating from 1764 to 1790 is the largest collection. These inventories were originally examined to determine appropriate furnishings for the Revolutionary War era farm house belonging to a younger son of a well-to-do Somerset County resident.¹ The second group consists of 47 estate inventories from New York City, and the surrounding

¹ The inventories collected are all at the New Jersey State Archives, Trenton, New Jersey.

areas of Westchester, Richmond [Staten Island] and Brooklyn between 1771 and 1784. [Hereafter these will be referred to as the New York City inventories.] They were examined to determine the appropriate furnishings for the home of an important county landowner and politician who served in the colonial legislature and came from a maritime background rather than the farming background of the Somerset County households.² Seventy-one estate inventories from Ulster County, dating from 1755 to 1796, comprise the third group. These served as the basis for furnishing the mid-18th century farmhouse of a descendant of one of the original Huguenot families that settled New Paltz.³ The fourth and final group consists of 63 Westchester County, New York inventories dating from 1765 to 1785. These were collected as part of an early attempt to locate all surviving colonial estate inventories from Westchester County.⁴

² The inventories consulted are all in the collections of the New-York Historical Society, New York, New York.

³ These represent all the Ulster County inventories from the period that could be identified. The inventories came from three sources. Neil Larsen provided copies of several inventories that he had collected for other studies. A second group of inventories are from the collections of the Huguenot Historical Society. The third and largest group came from Gustave Anjou's *New York Probate Records, in the Office of the Surrogate, and in the County Clerk's Office in Kingston, N.Y.*, 2 vols, New York, 1906.

⁴ Field Horne and Jacquetta M. Haley, "Inventories of Westchester County, 1670 to 1795," research reports, Historic Hudson Valley, 1978. The Westchester County's colonial probate files, including inventories, were filed in New York City. The majority of these records disappeared during the mid 20th century, evidently the victim of overzealous housecleaning on the part of the New York City bureaucracy. This study located surviving

This study focused on the types of furnishings appearing on Westchester inventories and did not include information relating to the values assigned to the individual items.

Estate inventories by their very nature tend to represent the more well-to-do households in any community. They record personal possessions and wealthier individuals obviously owned more things. Wealthier households were more likely to be inventoried as part of the probate process as the estate was divided among surviving family members. Thus, the inventories studied have a built-in bias toward households in the middle and upper classes.

The majority of the inventories examined from New York City and environs were selected to represent upper class households, frequently merchants, in areas immediately outside Manhattan although a few less prosperous inventories were included. These inventories highlight the types and numbers of furnishings available to the colonial elite in and around a major port city. The Somerset County inventories included the wealthiest local households, but the

Westchester inventories in the New-York Historical Society, The New York Public Library, the Klapper Library on Long Island [these inventories have now been transferred to the New York State Archives in Albany, New York], plus additional miscellaneous inventories in the collections of local historical societies and associations in Westchester County. The post-Revolutionary War inventories are on file at the Westchester County Archive Center, Elmsford, NY.

overwhelming majority were simply well-to-do farmers. In addition, local artisans and industrialist such millers, tanners, wheelwright and weavers, as well as local shopkeepers were included. These inventories provide insight into the furnishings available to the inhabitants of a rural farm community initially settled in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The Ulster County group represents the majority of the surviving inventories for the county, many of them from the Huguenot Historical Society's manuscript collection and relate specifically to New Paltz families. The surviving Westchester County inventories cover all levels of the socio-economic spectrum, although once again they favor the wealthier households.

This is the first 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?

SEATING

Everyone gets tired and everyone needs a place to sit down. Some form of seating would appear to be a necessity in any household. The inventories bear this out. Chairs are the single most common form of furniture to appear on the inventories. A total of 1283 chairs appear on 119 Somerset County, New Jersey inventories placing an average of 10.8 chairs in each household. The New York City inventories include 593 chairs on 47 inventories with a slightly higher average of 12.6 chairs per household. Ulster County inventories show 569 chairs, an average of 8 per household. Surviving Westchester documents show far fewer chairs, only 351 on 63 inventories, averaging only 5.6 chairs per household. The low Westchester average reflects a higher proportion of poor and middle class households among the inventories.

One of the biggest differences in chair ownership between the four groups lies in the number of inventories that fail to list any chairs. In the cases of the New Jersey and the New York City groupings, 11% of the inventories fail to list any form of chair. The percentage for Ulster County rises slightly to 13%. But in the Westchester inventories,

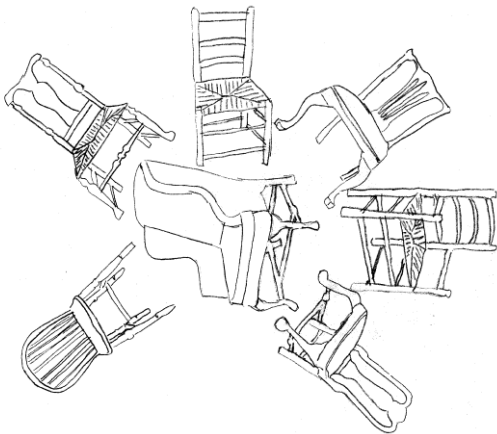


Figure 1. A selection of 18th century chair types. Drawing by Jaquetta M. Haley

nearly one-third (31%) of the inventories do not include chairs. A similar, although less impressive disparity appears for inventories listing large numbers of chairs.

Westchester inventories top out with 2% of the inventories displaying 25 to 29 chairs. New York City, New Jersey and Ulster inventories include individuals owning more than 30

Chart 1: Total Number of Chairs Appearing on Inventories

	New Jersey	New York City	Ulster Co.	Westchester
Total # of Chairs	1283	593	569	351
# of Inventories	119	47	71	63
Average # Chairs	10.8	12.6	8	5.6

chairs. While these well-chaired inventories account for just 3% of the New Jersey and Ulster inventories, they comprise 11% of the New York

City group. The larger percentage found in the New York City group underscores the fact that these inventories were selected to represent upper class households, the urban homes of New York’s elite. [See Table 1]

When looking strictly at the inventories that include chairs, the differences between the four groups are more striking. Over three quarters of the surviving Westchester inventories [77%] include 9 or fewer chairs. Rural Ulster inventories show nearly two-thirds of the estates with 9 or fewer chairs [63%]. On the other hand in both the New Jersey and the New York City, these account for about two fifths of the inventories, 41% and 42% respectively. At the high end of chair ownership, 14% of the inventories for chair owners in New York City listed 25 or more chairs as compared to only 5% in

New Jersey and Ulster County and 2% in Westchester. [See Table 2]

Leaving aside considerations of sheer numbers of chairs appearing on these 18th century inventories, distinct differences appear between rural Ulster, New

Jersey and Westchester and urban New York City when the types of chairs found on inventories are

considered. [See Table 3] In all three areas the majority of chairs listed are simply that, generic “chairs” with no descriptor, or descriptors such as “common” or “sitting.” In rural inventories approximately 70% of all chairs are generic, 73% in New Jersey and Westchester and 68% in Ulster.

If one adds in the chairs identified as “old” that brings the percentage of basic functional chairs up to 83% in Westchester and New Jersey, and 78% in Ulster. On the New York City inventories however generic chairs account for only slightly more than half of the listings, 52%. If one includes the chairs identified as “old,” that raises the percentage to 58%.

“chair” or “old” to account for more than 10% of the total chairs in any group of inventories is the mahogany chair that comprises 14% of all the New York City chairs. Mahogany was primarily an urban luxury phenomenon. The New Jersey and Ulster County inventories each include one estate with a suite of mahogany chairs, both belonging to merchants.⁵ The “fiddleback” or Queen Anne style chair made up 7% of the identifiable chairs in Ulster County while it comprised only 2% of the identifiable types in New Jersey

[See Table 3]

Table 4 looks at the # of inventories listing specific types of chairs. For the rural communities, the most popular chairs types, excluding “old” were the “great” chair and the “elbow” (also referred to as “armed”) chair. These chairs appeared as singles in the inventories, probably indicating their role as the status chair set aside for the head of the household. Elbow chairs also were popular in the New York City inventories, once again as singles. It is possible that “great” chair and “elbow” chair are in many cases synonymous, indicating the chair placed at the head of the table, usually with arms.

A variety of chair descriptors are included in the inventories: “low,” “high back” “painted,” “leather,” “rush bottom’d,” “kitchen,” “fiddle back,” “cane bottom’d,” “little,” “great,” “easy,” “elbow,” “new,” “Windsor,” “mahogany.” The only type other than



The ‘great chair’ generally held a place of honor in rural homes, usually with one of the highest valuations on an inventory and almost always as a single chair.

Slat back arm chair.
Historic Huguenot Street
Permanent Collection 1008.01
Gift of the Deyo Family.

Several inventories list “Windsor” chair. Unlike the “great” chairs and the “elbow” chairs, “Windsors” usually appeared in multiples, varying in number from 2 to 12 chairs to an inventory. These were most prevalent in New York City and in post-Revolutionary era Ulster County inventories. “Leather” or “leather bottom’d” chairs as well as “rush-bottom’d” also appear as multiples. Another single chair that appears in all four regions, but in low numbers, is the “easy” or “lining” [leaning] chair.

The chairs found on rural inventories differ significantly in value from those found on the more urban inventories. The valuations assigned to specific items on the New Jersey, Ulster and the New York City inventories are available for some but not all chairs.⁶ In some cases groups of items are appraised together making it impossible to identify the value of a



Queen Anne side chair.
Historic Huguenot Street
Permanent Collection 2012.00.112
Donor unknown.

⁵ Theodorus Van Wyck, Estate Inventory, March 25, 1778, 593R, New Jersey Archives, Trenton, New Jersey. Peter R. Fell, Estate Inventory, November 1, 1771, Montgomery, Ulster County, Gustave Anjou, *Probate Records, Ulster County, N. Y.*..., II: 208-209.

⁶ The valuations of the items on the Westchester inventories were not gathered.

particular item. In other inventories each item is listed individually, with a separate appraised value. Still other inventories are simple listings, without any assigned valuation.

As might be expected, the chairs listed on the inventories drawn from New York City bear higher appraised values than those found on the New Jersey and Ulster County inventories. [See **Table 5**] Nearly three quarters of the New Jersey chairs (70%) and Ulster chairs (73%) were appraised at less than 3 shillings. In fact 10% (NJ) and 17% (Ulster) of these chairs had a value of less than a shilling. In the New York City inventories, chairs valued at less than 3 shillings accounted for just a little over a third (37%) of the total chairs. The largest proportion of chairs in the countryside carry a value of 2 shillings to 2 shillings 11 pence per chair (31%). By comparison, in New York City the greatest proportion of chairs (37%) are valued at between 5 shillings and £1.10.0.

The higher valuation placed on chairs in the New York City inventories rests solidly on the greater proportion of non-generic chairs found on those inventories. The merchants and prominent landowners with homes in the New York City area had ready access to skilled cabinetmakers from whom they purchased suites of chairs in a variety of configurations. As residents of an important colonial port

the New York cabinetmakers could acquire imported woods such as mahogany for their creations. These mahogany chairs accounted for the most numerous type of chair appearing on the New York City inventories and they carried the highest valuations, ranging from 15 shilling to 30 shillings a chair. [This refers to side chairs, not armchairs.] Chairs in other styles and materials averaged significantly less. These include leather chairs, rush bottom'd chairs and Windsors. Fiddleback chairs, identified on the rural inventories but not on the urban inventories, averaged 8/9 a chair, however they have a wide range of valuations. The 15/ appraisal on one of the inventories probably indicates a high style Queen Anne chair with vase splat while the low end appraisals may indicate a much-simplified country Queen Anne version. Great chairs and elbow chairs generally appeared as the most highly valued chair on an inventory that listed generic chairs rather than specific types of chairs.

OTHER SEATING

Seating options beyond the ubiquitous chair were few and far between. Two couches appear on the New Jersey inventories, one appears in Ulster and two appear on New York City inventories. The most valuable couch, in New Jersey, was being used as a bed. With bedding it was valued at £1. The second couch in New Jersey was simply identified as a cane couch,

**Chart 2:
Value of Specific Types of Chairs
on New York City, New Jersey and
Ulster County Inventories**

Appears on # of Inventories
In shillings In shillings

Mahogany Side Chairs* [9]	Range 15/ to 30/	Average: 21/4
Fiddleback Chairs* [6]	Range 1/2 to 15/	Average: 8/9
Large/Great Chairs** [17]	Range 1/ to 30/	Average: 7/9
Elbow/Arm Chairs** [14]	Range 1/ to 12/	Average: 6/6
Leather/ leather bottom Chairs* [4]	Range 6/ to 10/	Average: 7/5
Rush Bottom'd Chairs* [4]	Range 3/ to 14/	Average: 8/4
Windsor Chairs*** [15]	Range 4/ to 10/	Average: 7/2

* Appear in suites of furniture, 6, 7, 9, 12, 15 or 20 chairs. Mahogany armchairs had significantly higher valuations. One suite of mahogany furniture included 20 side chairs at 30/ each and 2 armchairs valued at £5 each.

** Appear as singles, occasionally as a pair

*** Windsor chairs appear both as suites of chairs numbering 6, 8, 9, 11 and 12, but also with 1, 2 or 3 in an inventory.

possibly referring to a late 17th early 18th century caned couch in the William and Mary style. The Ulster County couch has a valuation of 10/. In the New York inventories the most valuable couch, also valued at 10/, was stored in the garret and had two cushions. The second couch was valued at 4/.

An alternative to the couch is the settle, a chair or bench that can be converted into a bed. Ulster County appears to have been particularly fond of the settle with a total of 12 settles appearing on 9 inventories. Two appear on New York inventories while there is only one on the New Jersey inventories. None appear in Westchester. Four inventories include “stools,” although it is impossible to determine if they are footstools or stools for sitting. In the New Jersey inventory two stools were valued at /6 each while in the urban setting two stools were valued at 1/ each.

The most common alternative to the chair is the bench. Once again it is difficult to determine if the piece of furniture so identified is a workbench rather than a bench as seating. Benches appear on 18 inventories, 15 in New Jersey and 3 in Ulster. They are frequently listed with tools or in common work spaces such as the kitchen, sometimes identified with specific trades such as a shoemaker's bench. One instance in which both stool and bench probably refer to seating is on John Leamont's 1769 inventory. Mr. Leamont's inventory lists chests, a table, a bed and other miscellaneous items but no chairs. Instead he had 2 stools and 2 benches.⁷

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS?

Most noticeably it underscores our awareness of what has been lost, what we aren't showing in our 18th century historic houses. Between half and three quarters of all chairs in use in these middle to upper class households were generic, non-descript “chairs.” These are the chairs that rarely survive years of hard use. They are the typical chairs that we skimp on in our houses. Instead we rely on surviving 18th century chairs, many of which are examples of the more expensive chair styles, frequently the output of urban craftsmen who produced high style mahogany furniture for the aristocrats or their rural counterparts who produced “fiddleback” chairs and “leather” chairs for the local gentry. The actual chairs available to households at the bottom and the middle of the socio-economic ladder seldom survive. We frequently end up furnishing their houses with pieces that are too “good” for the home.

When looking at suites of chairs, Ulster County residents displayed a greater preference for fiddleback chairs than inhabitants of other regions. Although Windsors appear on 5 Ulster inventories, they are singles in two instances. The one suite of 6 and two suites of 10 chairs all date to the 1790s. Overall however, suites of chairs are

If this slat back chair had a solid wood seat it would come closer to the generic chair found on the inventories. With its rush seat it increases significantly in value.



Slat back side chair.
Historic Huguenot Street Permanent
Collection 1977.10949
Gift of Mrs. Henry Forshay

uncommon, especially in the country. Country dwellers relied on generic chairs with a distinctive great chair or elbow chair for the use of the head of the household. Urban dwellers also made use of the great or elbow chair. Chairs in the country were overwhelmingly valued at less than 3/. The majority of chairs in New York were valued at 3/ or more. Mahogany chairs were largely restricted to the urban center. Country inhabitants might select high style chairs, but they would be constructed of native woods, cherry or maple for example.

It also appears that some styles that might be fairly common in an urban setting during the Revolutionary War years did not reach the countryside until later in the century. The incidence of Windsor chairs appears to illustrate this factor. Many Revolutionary War era sites, especially those that served as military headquarters for commanders

⁷ John Leamont, Estate Inventory, April 7, 1769, 373R, New Jersey Archives, Trenton, NJ.

in the field, rely on Windsor chairs. The military office, the domain of the aides de camp that accompanied field commanders and maintained the steady stream of paperwork, is frequently furnished with Windsor chairs in a variety of styles. A comparatively high number of New York City inventories list Windsor chairs (7) but they are much less common in rural areas, at least until later in the 1780s and 1790s when they appear on 5 Ulster and 4 New Jersey inventories. These Windsors are side chairs and generally among the more expensive chairs in the household. They would have been reserved for the parlor or the dining room, not used as rough and ready furnishings for a makeshift military office.

So why the reliance on Windsor chairs for military offices? Perhaps it stems from the quintessential image of a Revolutionary War era office, the Continental Congress at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. A visit to the site today shows the delegate's chamber fitted with Windsor armchairs. However what works and is appropriate for Philadelphia, a center for the production of Windsor chairs in the colonies, may not be appropriate for the rural winter quarters of commanders of the Continental forces. Charles Santore, in *The Windsor Style in America* may argue that the Windsor was "...a democratic

style, one which appealed to and was used by all levels of American society."⁸ However the Revolutionary War era references to Windsor chairs in rural New Jersey and urban New York environs indicate that it was an expensive chair, not yet readily available to all ranks, and that it was still an urban luxury phenomenon, just beginning its expansion into rural areas. Perhaps it is time to furnish those make shift offices with more make shift chairs.

Overall, if you are furnishing an 18th century house keep it simple as far as chairs are concerned. Even for a prominent family, a set of matching chairs might be available for the dining room, but furnishing the room with similar ladder-back chairs with rush bottoms is as acceptable as looking for a suite of Queen Anne chairs. A mix of chairs throughout the house is appropriate and many of the chairs would be distinctly used or old. Full sets of chairs with matching side and armchairs were largely limited to the urban setting.

⁸ Charles Santore, *The Windsor Style in America, Volumes I and II The Definitive Pictorial Study of the History and Regional Characteristics of the Most Popular Furniture Form of Eighteenth Century America 1730 to 1840*, Thomas V. Moss, ed., (Philadelphia, PA Courage Books), 1997, p. 29.

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.

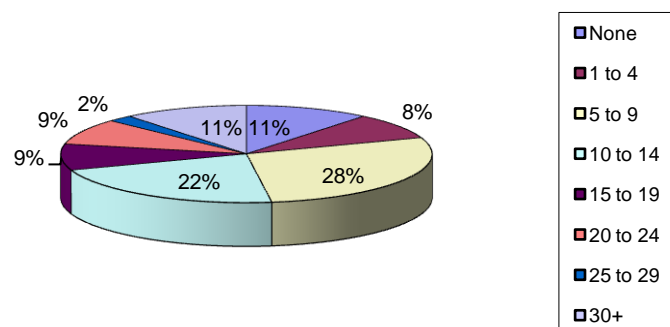
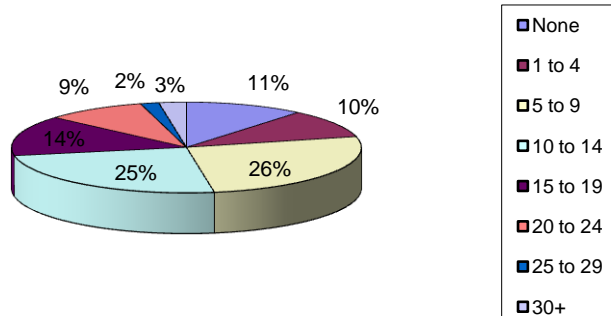
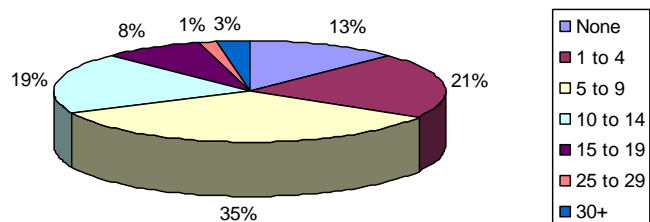
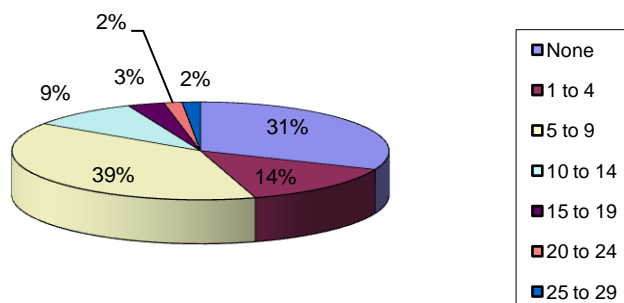
Table 1. Number of Chairs on Inventories**# of Chairs NYC****# of Chairs NJ****# of Chairs, Ulster County****# of Chairs, Westchester**

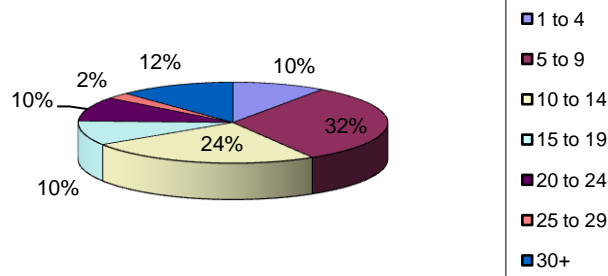
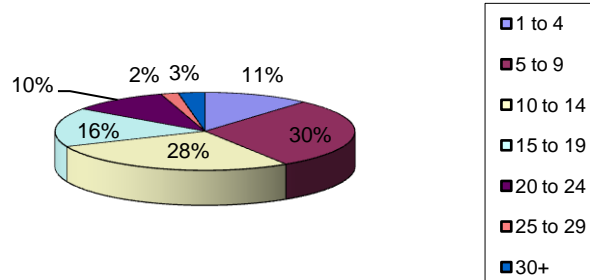
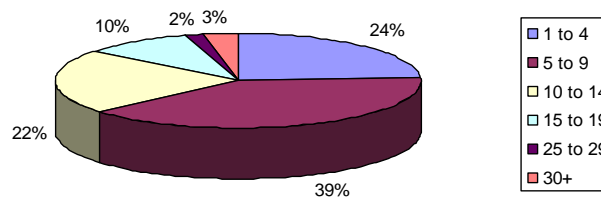
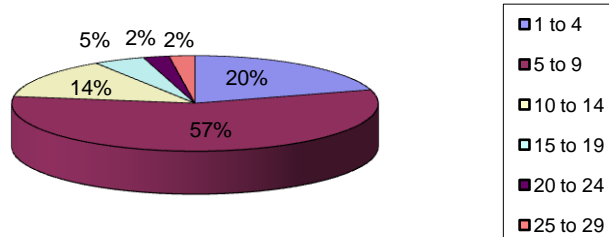
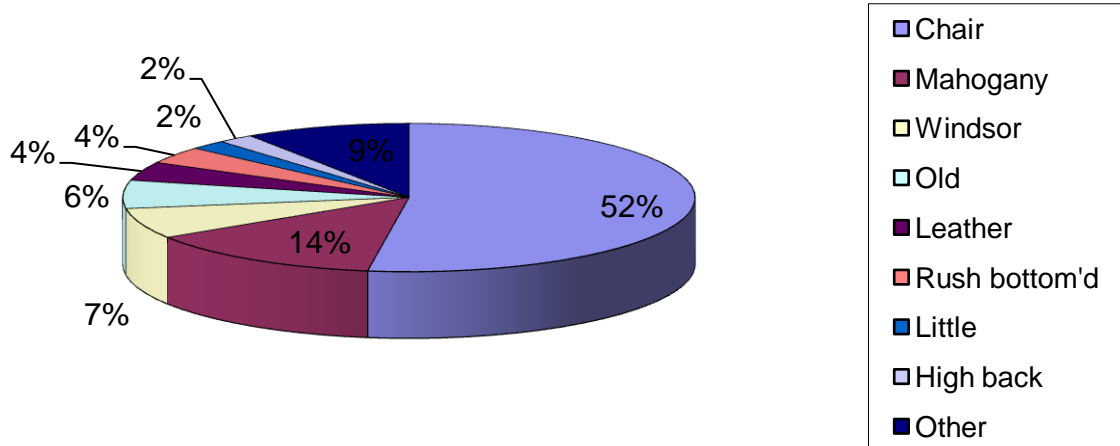
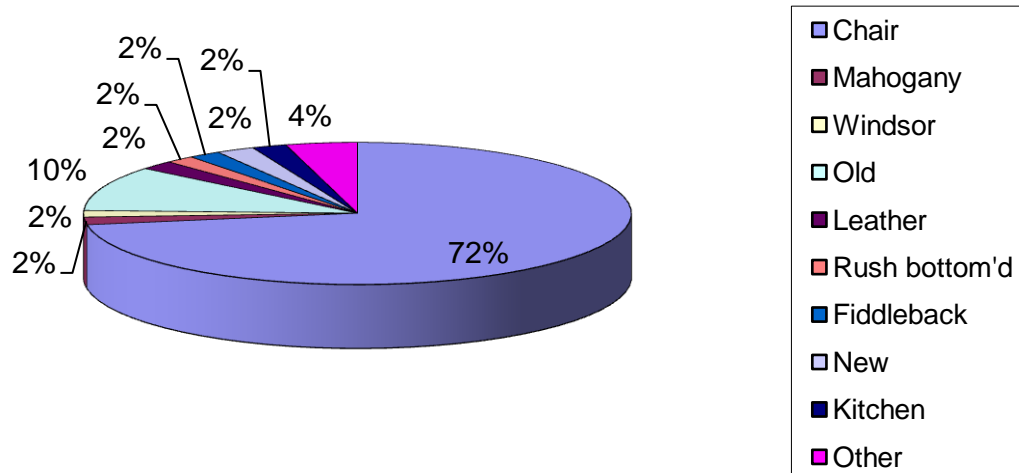
Table 2. Number of Chairs Among Chair Owners**# Chairs Among Chair Owners, NYC****# of Chairs Among Chair Owners, NJ****# Chairs Among Chair Owners, Ulster Co.****# Chairs among Chair Owners, Westchester**

Table 3. Types of Chairs (2 pages)

Types of Chairs, NYC



Types of Chairs, NJ



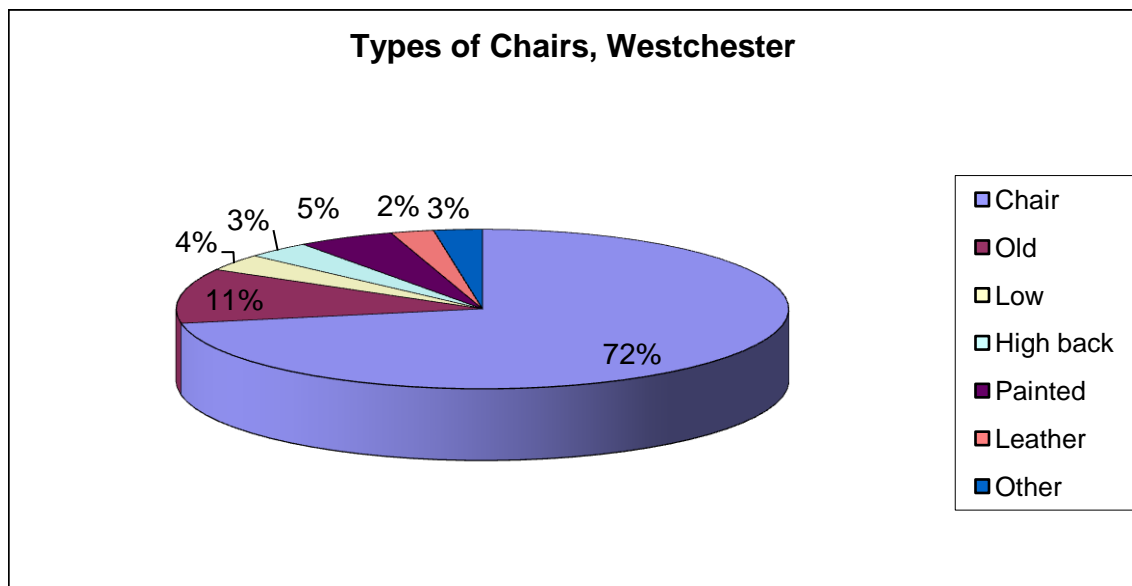
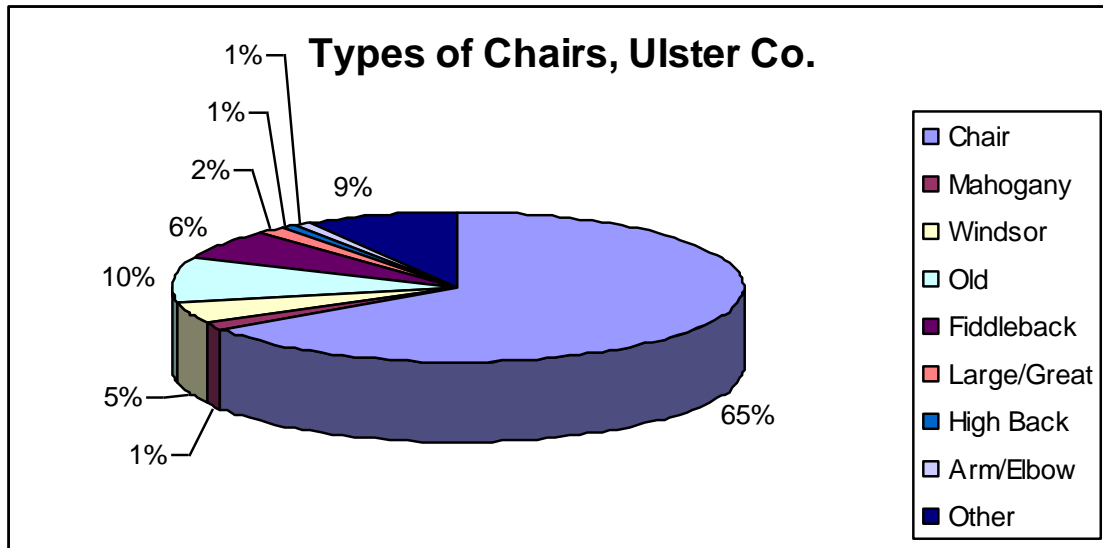
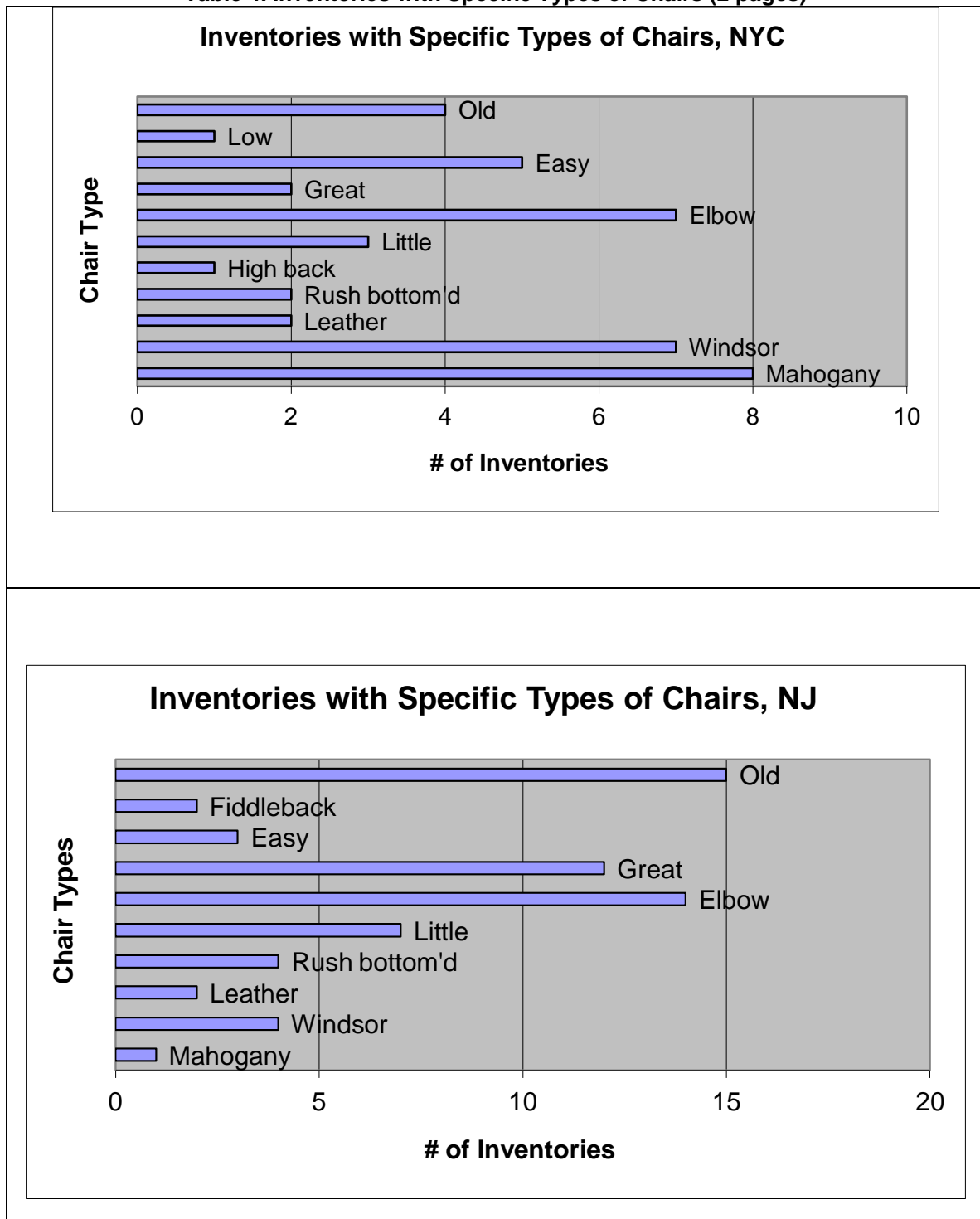
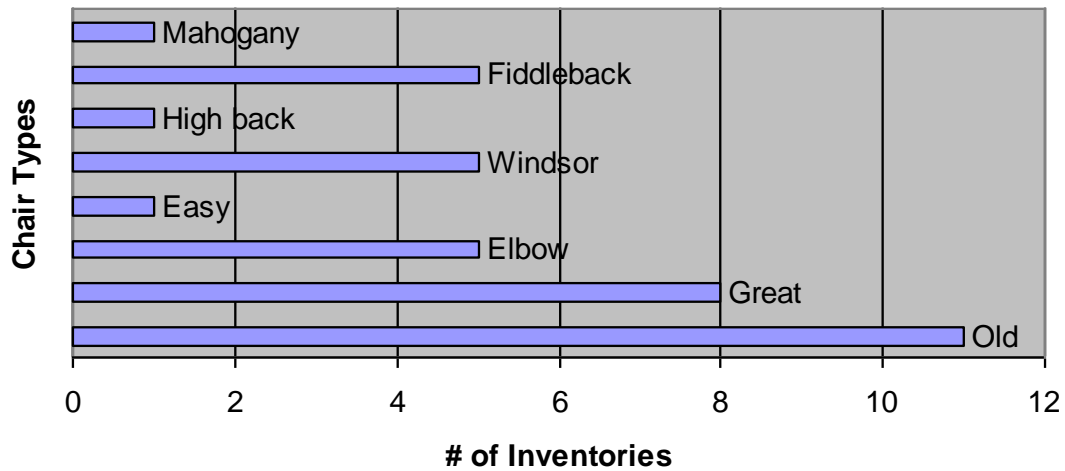


Table 4. Inventories with Specific Types of Chairs (2 pages)



Inventories with Specific Types of Chairs, Ulster Co.



Inventories with Specific Chair Types, Westchester

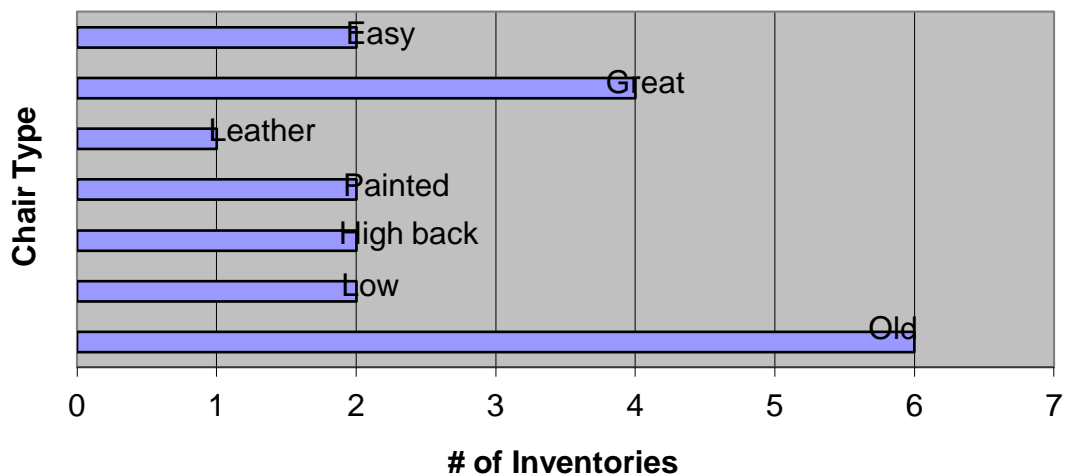


Table 5. Valuation of Chairs in Shillings

