

Doghearty's 6-Plank Chest

By David Brown

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This is my version of an 18th Century six-plank box chest/seat that is large enough to hold about as much as one adult male can safely carry, and small enough to keep from being too much of a burden. It can seat one buxom wench or two skinny ne'er-do-wells if they like each other. People wondering about whether such a box is correct for the period should consider the following:

"The 6 PLANK CHEST has been built since the dawn of furniture building." --Atlantic College.

"And at the king's commandment they made a chest, and set it without at the gate of the house of the Lord." --2 Chronicles 24:8

Similar 6-plank chests have been found entombed at English Viking sites dating back to 800 A.D. They were carried into Persia by Alexander the Great; he sat on one just like this while pondering how to unravel the Gordian knot, &c., &c. Hannibal's elephants carried them out of Switzerland over the Alps into northern Italy, &c, &c.

Here's how I make mine. I decided I wanted the simplest possible design, using a minimum of materials and requiring the least amount of time. Some have praised this instinct, citing my Scottish sense of thrift or my Quaker-like sense of economy, but I must confess that at the root of it all lies my deeply entrenched motive of laziness.

I start with one (1) board of 1 x 12 spruce or pine (spruce is what you'll find), that is 12 feet (144 inches) long. The term "1 by 12" is a euphemism. The nice smooth boards we buy at the building outlets are what is called "plane lumber"-- that is to say it has been *planed* smooth. A piece of "1 by 12" plane lumber is really $\frac{3}{4}$ " by $11\frac{1}{2}$ ". Just be sure you have 144 inches in length. You're going to need all of them.

Go to the store and select the nicest board you can find. Don't be shy about filing through the lot until you find a good specimen with good straight grain, clean sharp edges, no cracks, and as few knots as possible.

Essentially, the box is made from six (6) pieces of board that are each two (2) feet long. What could be simpler??? Six times twenty-four equals 144 (6X24= 144), Aye??

Cut list:

Now, before we go any farther, I have to insist that you the builder must be competent enough to make accurate, square measurements and accurate, clean square cuts in soft lumber. The whole project depends on this, and if you aren't up to it, I'll build you a chest like this for \$40.

Take a look at the grain on either side of the board and decide now which side is going to be the outside of your chest. If you put your eye down level with the face of the board and look down its entire length, you should be able to see that one side is definitely rougher than the other. The rough side is where the grain "runs out" and this side should be the inside of your chest unless you're just perverse.

1. Cut two (2) side pieces 24 inches long.
2. Cut two (2) end pieces 24 inches long.

3. Cut two (2) pieces $22\frac{1}{2}$ * inches long. *One of these is the bottom; you want this one to be a tight fit. The other one is the lid; you want to be able to move this, so let's make this one $22\frac{3}{8}$ inches to give a little play at each end.

The two end pieces require the most work. Long centuries of experience have taught us that the most comfortable average seat height is 18 inches. I also decided that I wanted the legs of my chest to be 6 inches long. I figure if the mud or water in your camp gets any deeper than that, you will be gone or swimming to the next piece of high ground. 6 inches of clearance, plus $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches of side board, plus $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch for the thickness of the lid is about 18 inches, and that leaves about 6 inches above the lid for the handles. Clever, Aye???

End pieces:

Make two (2) of these exactly alike. Please refer to the drawing. Cut the two ears off at the top end by measuring three (3) inches in, and three (3) inches down, on either side. Draw the diagonal line between the marks and cut. Voi'la, you just made a 45° angle cut!!

Now measure six (6) inches up from the bottom and draw a line across the board. Find the center of this line (Remember, your board is $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches across, so the center will be at $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Right??). Draw a center line from here down to the bottom of the board.

I make the nice little arch at the top of the leg cutout by using one of those round saws you can put in your drill and make holes for doorknobs and light fixtures and stuff. Mine is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, so I measure down the center line $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches and make a mark for my drill. No matter how you choose to accomplish this, just be sure you DO NOT cut above the 6-inch line. Next, I measure three (3) inches in from each edge of the board and make a mark. Then I draw an asymptotic (look it up!!) line to each edge of the circle I just finished cutting, and cut out the rest along these lines with a saw.

To make the handle hole, I use a 1-inch diameter auger bit to cut out the two rounded ends; then I cut the rest out with one of those little pointy saws they use for sheet rock (hole saw). You could also do it with a jigsaw, or even whittle it if you have the time. I do NOT recommend using a flutter bit because these tend to cause a lot of damage to the wood when they break through. You want to be sure you have at least 1 inch of wood between the handle hole and the edge of the board –ends, too. Even so, you will find that the top of the handle wants to bust out, so before that happens, screw a support piece on across the top of the handle hole and try to put your end screws as far to the out side as you can.

Assembly:

For period correctness, I use 2-inch cut nails as fasteners everywhere the fasteners will show. Cut nails don't hold very well, and they will try to split your wood unless you pre-drill the holes for them. The head of a cut nail is oblong, so you need to toggle that drill back and forth a bit to accommodate the nail head. I also use a tough wood glue to add strength to the joints. Use waterproof Titebond or waterproof Elmer's. Clamping is really good, too. If you have clamps.

Nail/glue the side boards to the end pieces right at the 6-inch mark. If you do this right, you'll have a bottomless box. Now fit your nice exact and squarely cut bottom piece right down flush with the edges of the side boards. If this is a tight fit (and it should be), tap it into place carefully with a soft mallet or a chunk of 2by4. Don't smack it with a hammer!!! Once the bottom is in place, run nails into it all around the box. Try to space them evenly. Unless you plan to stand inside your box, the nails will supply enough support for the bottom. (Why would you want to stand inside the box??)

So. There's your box. Now all it needs is a lid. You'll see that the lid needs to be a little wider to sit properly on the edges of the box. Cut two pieces of $\frac{3}{4}$ " by $\frac{3}{4}$ " wood exactly $22\frac{3}{8}$ " long and nail/glue them on to the edges of the lid. Remember this joint also needs to be strong because sooner or later you will stand *on* this box. You also need to put two similar strips on the inside of the box to support the ends of the lid. If you don't add these supports, you will bust your lid, sure as shootin'. Make sure your lid will open and close without binding. Now's the time to sand or trim it if you need to.

I like to finish and paint the box before I attach the lid with hinges. For hinges, I use pieces of scrap leather held in place with big upholstery tacks. Sand off all the rough spots and sharp edges, and remove all of that excess glue that squeezed out of the joints. Paint your box with some kind of muted flat finish paint. Oil based paint will stick better and provide better protection from the elements.



PHOTO CAPTION:

Here's a skinny ne'er-do-well lazing around in camp, with two of the author's famous 6-plank chests in plain view. (photo by David Brown)

