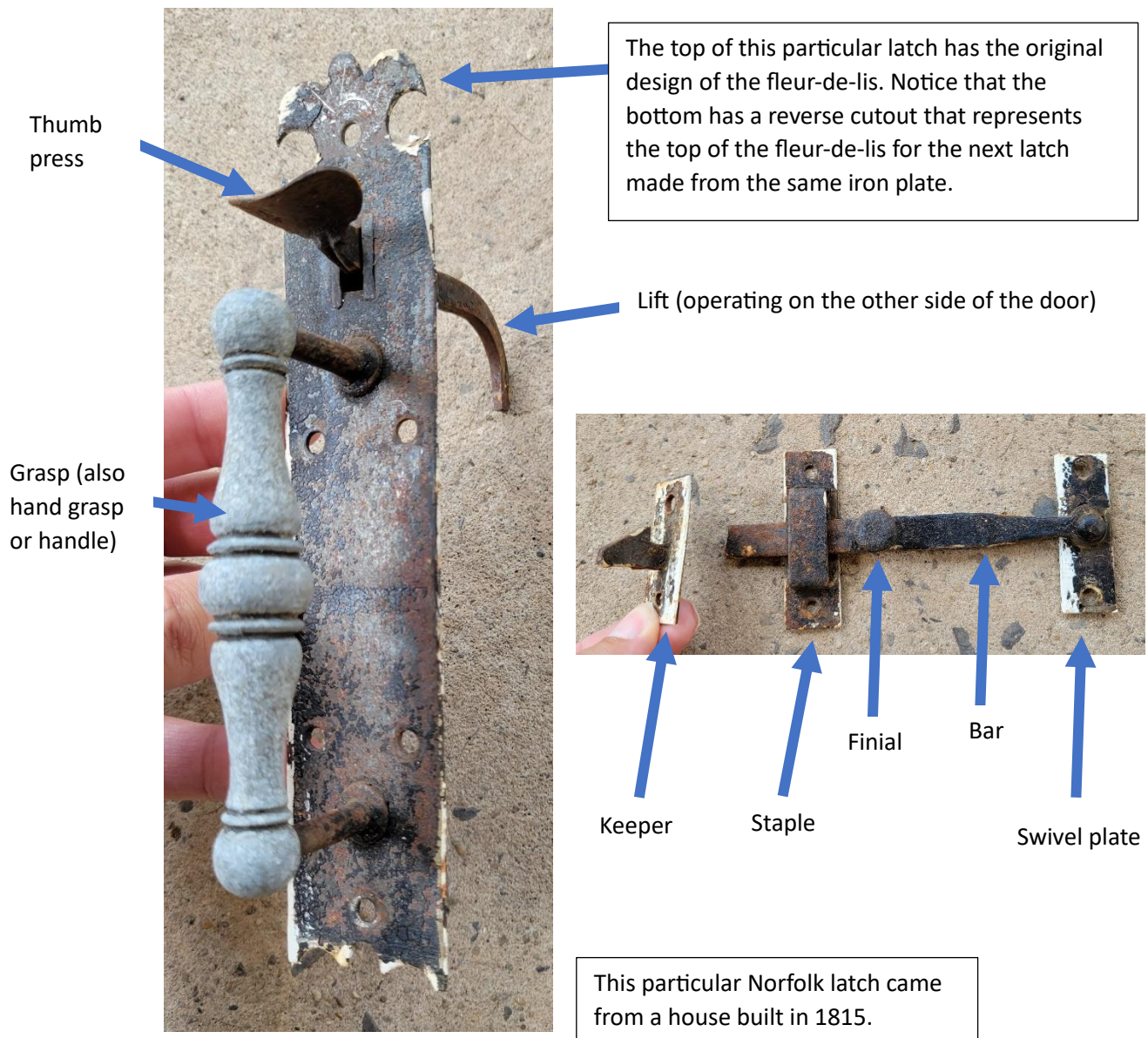


## What the Norfolk Latch Tells You

The Norfolk latch was the most popular type of hardware for operating doors in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although primarily an interior feature, the latch was sometimes used on exterior doors of houses and outbuildings. Its peak period of production in the United States was 1795 to 1845. Alternative hardware during this period included the box lock type of rim lock, plate latches, and the Carpenter lock. It is one of several examples of the refinement of building features during the Federal period.

### Parts of a Norfolk Latch



60-Second Refresher: The Norfolk latch



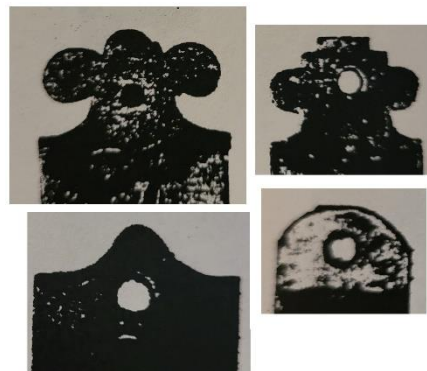
Norfolk latches had a long history before they became common in North America. The Norfolk and Suffolk latches were the two common latches in late medieval England. For some unknown reason, the Suffolk latch became the dominant type of door hardware in North America early in the eighteenth century, and Norfolk latches were rather rare then. Norfolk latches you find from the eighteenth century are larger than nineteenth century examples. The photo on the left shows one on the [Old] Kennett Friends Meeting House in southeastern Pennsylvania. Note especially the shape of the plate, which I have not found in any nineteenth century examples. It has a flat thumb press also, a design feature that was not continued during the primary years of Norfolk latch production.

The production of iron plate in slitting mills and rolling mills began in the US in the 1790s. The availability of iron plate opened the door to a group of new products including cut nails, Norfolk latches, and plate latches.

The design of the Norfolk latch remained stable during the half century of its primary production (1795 to 1845). Two items varied the most over time: the shape of the top and the shape of the grasp.



The shape of the top varied, although two shapes (fleur-de-lis and clipped corners) represent about 90% of Norfolk latches in my area. Latch A to the left demonstrates clipped corners. The latch on the first page shows the original version of the fleur-de-lis. Over time, the flower wilted, resulting in the shape found on Latch B to the left (Lizzie Borden House, 1847). The image below shows four other shapes of the top of a Norfolk latch. These are all fairly rare in eastern Pennsylvania.



The grasp is the other part of the Norfolk latch with some variation. Grasps are often divided into two categories. If the grasp is partially hollowed out or concave on the side facing the plate, it is said to be “half-round.” Half-round grasps often have the appearance of the grasp in Latch B, although sometimes they have a type of decoration in the center like a twisted rope or grain motif. If the grasp does not have the concave element, it is said to be “full-round.” The latch on the first page has a full-round grasp made of pewter. Full-round grasps could have similar decoration as the half-round grasps.

The other elements of the Norfolk latch have less variation. The thumb press of Norfolk latches was shaped in arc that represented a quarter of a circle. The latch that succeeded the Norfolk latch (the Blake latch) had a thumb press that represented about one tenth of a circle, and you will sometimes find these thumb presses inserted into a Norfolk latch to replace a broken thumb press. The thumb press was located on one end of the bar and attached by an iron pin onto D-shaped iron elements called “swivel cheeks” on the bar side of the door. Historically, the side of the door that had the grasp was the side that was pulled close, even if this meant that the grasp was inside a closet. The opposite end of the bar was angled downward on the other side of the door, so that it could be used to lift the bar. Many Norfolk latches included a finial on the bar (this was not used with the Suffolk latch), although I have seen Norfolk latches without the finial. The finial could also be used to lift the bar. The keeper was mounted on a plate, a change from the Suffolk latch which had the keeper on the end of a spike that was driven into the door frame. The staple didn't always have a plate like that shown on the first page, but the swivel almost always had a plate during the Norfolk latch period. Finally, the back side of the mounting plate sometimes has an identifying mark of its maker – you can only find this if the latch is removed from the door though.

Reproduction Norfolk latches are fairly rare. You may come across some made in the 1920s for Colonial Revival projects. These Norfolk latches during this period sometimes have japanned mounting plates. You can still get reproduction Norfolk latches today, although interestingly it is cheaper to purchase a historic one rather than the reproductions.

After half a century in production, the Norfolk latch had lost some of its original luster. In some cases, the hand grasp was not mounted well, meaning that it would wobble to the left and right until it broke off. Another problem was the thumb press. If the door was used with some frequency, the thumb press would begin to bend downwards, meaning that eventually it had bent to the degree that it was unable to lift the bar on the other side of the door. It is also somewhat common to find a Norfolk latch that survives, but the thumb latch has broken off. Once the Blake latch was introduced in the 1840s, production of the Norfolk latch declined precipitously. One of the latest uses of a Norfolk latch that I have come across was in a house built in 1847 in Fall River, Massachusetts, now known as the Lizzie Borden House. A Norfolk latch survives in the basement (Latch B on the previous page), although its grasp has broken off and the thumb press has been heavily damaged.

Finally, when would you expect to write about Norfolk latches? If I were completing a state survey form, I probably wouldn't mention them unless they played a role in helping to estimate the date of construction of the building. I would probably mention them in a National Register nomination, and I would definitely mention them in a historic structure report. The HABS guidelines for interior description includes point #7, which says "Describe original or notable hinges, knobs, locks, latches, window hardware, and fireplace hardware." This document gives you what you need to fulfill this guideline.

Key Reference:

Donald Streeter, "Early American Wrought Iron Hardware: Norfolk Latches," in *APT*, vol. III, No. 4 (1971), 12-30.