

# Antique Trunk Restorations: The Manual



[www.TrunkRestorers.com](http://www.TrunkRestorers.com)



## Introduction

Antique Trunk Restoration can be very rewarding and therapeutic. There is nothing quite like the satisfaction one receives when they reach the end of the process and can stand back and admire their work. The only thing that comes close to your own admiration will be the compliments you receive from others on your trunk's appearance.

One of the most important tips I can give you is to "take your time". Rushing any part of the restoration process will make your trunk look like you rushed. Slow, steady, and careful are the rules to be followed.

Another very important part of the process is research. Read everything you can on the internet, in the library, etc. Visit any local artisans or antique restorer in your area and ask for advice. You'll find many of them are more than happy to share their wisdom with you.

The most important part is to:

### **Have Fun!**

Trunks can be found relatively inexpensively all over; garage sales, EBay, the trash, etc. I found a beautiful tin covered humpback trunk being thrown away. I rang the bell to make sure it was trash before I took it because I couldn't believe my eyes. It was in near-perfect original condition with only minor repairs needed. I picked up another trunk at a Tag sale for \$5.00. It was in fair condition and was quite easily restored to beautiful condition.

I enjoy every step of the restoration process as I hope you will as well.

## **Dedication:**

**This manual is dedicated to my wife, Pat, who has tolerated my turning our home into a warehouse, workshop, and showroom. She is my number one assistant and has given me great inspiration. All My Love Always!**

**and**

**To my kids, David and Erin, for becoming the kind of offspring that make all parents proud. You are the Greatest. Live your lives to the fullest! Love, Dad**

**To my Dad for teaching me all his woodworking skills and for making me use my mind to solve the unsolvable... Thanks Dad. Your Loving Son**

**and of course,**

**"Mom" for all your support, love and affection, and Food!**

**I Love You Too Mom!**

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## Acquiring a Trunk for Restoration

### *Finding that Treasure*

Trunks can be found everywhere if you know who to ask and where to look.....

**Visit local Yard, Garage, Tag sales:** When you're there, if you don't see your quarry, ASK! "Hey, do you happen to have any old trunks"? Sometimes, you'll get that famous comical response that they'll have to check by the pool...., but sometimes they'll remember grandma's old trunk in the attic and ask you to carry it down.

**Craft Fairs and Flea Markets:** You may even bump into a fellow restorer who has some "project" trunks he doesn't have time to work on or store. That's how I acquired my first trunk back in 1985. It came complete with the interior tray with its fabric covered lid and a working lock with key; \$40.00, more about this trunk later.

**Antique Dealers:** You'll usually pay a lot here.

**Salvation Army/Thrift Stores:** Sometimes really great finds.

**EBay:** Learn how to search! Try Antiques Trunks, Antique Chest, Antique Boxes, Old Trunks, Old Chests, Old Boxes, etc, etc. Also, because trunks tend to be expensive to ship, send off emails to the sellers of recently ended auctions and let them know you're interested if the purchaser fails to complete the transaction. I picked up a really old trunk Humpback with a patent date right on the cover from November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1864 for \$25.00.

**Junk dealers and your local "clean out" company:** there are usually local business establishments that specialize in cleaning out basements, attics, old homes, garages, etc. Call them and ASK. Many are happy to get rid of their finds.

**Your Realtor:** may find trunks for you in homes that are being sold. You may wind up with the inside track before they have the clean out and up sale.

**Local newspapers:** Check the classifieds.

**On the internet:** There are plenty of outlets for antiques of all kinds. Search! You will also find many restorers online who sometimes will offer trunks that are un-restored for sale.

## Tools you'll need:

I have probably used almost every single tool in my workshop at one time or another to refinish a trunk, but here is a list of necessary tools:

- Hammer
- Needle Nose Pliers
- Vice Grips
- Channel Locks
- Nippers
- Screwdrivers
- 10" Nail Claw/Puller (I like the ones that have almost a 90° curve)
- Assortment of Wire Brushes (soft brass, hard steel, power and hand)
- Drill and bits
- Putty Knife
- Utility Knife
- Sanders
- Iron Heal
- Paint Scraper
- Dremel
- Clamps (you can never have enough of these)
- Paint Brushes
- Work Glove
- Rubber Gloves
- Safety Glasses
- Dust Mask/Respirator
- Hearing Protection (this is for when your wife yells)
- Awl
- Leather Punch
- Glue, Epoxy
- Sand Paper
- Masking Tape
- Saws (both power and hand)
- Steel wool

# Cleaning your old Trunk

## *First Things First*

Where do I start?

At the beginning! The first thing you want to do is inspect your trunk **THOROUGHLY** for any insect infestation before bringing it into your home! I have found many interesting things in the cracks and crevasse of old trunks; jewelry, coins, old papers, bugs, etc. It's important to document what you find. Any scrap of paper or fabric could be a clue to what originally covered the inside of the trunk in it's hey day. Older trunks had fabric stays to hold the lid from falling backwards. Usually there was one stay on each side. You may find remnants of them and be able to find a close match at your local fabric store. Now vacuum the inside and outside. If possible leave it open, outside in the sun for a day or two.

While your trunk is airing out, you'll have to decide how you want to restore it. You may have a trunk that needs to be completely stripped or you may have a trunk that was kept as a family air loom and just needs some gentle cleaning and restoration. You'll have to make those choices. What we're going to discuss in this manual is more along the lines of a complete, middle of the road restoration.

**Time to strip!** But first!!! **A WARNING!** Many products used around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are not healthy to handle or inhale..... like LEAD PAINT. If your trunk was painted on the interior or exterior prior to 1978, it probably contains lead and should be handled by a professional restorer or stripper. Regardless of what's in or on your trunk, if you're not sure, let a pro handle the removal of any paint, paper, or varnish. Visit <http://www.epa.gov/lead/> for more information.

If you do it; peel any loose paper or fabric from the inside of the trunk. What remains should come off easily with either a light spraying with warm water, or any store bought wall paper remover and some scraping with a putty knife and a paint scraper. This process will work on either paper or fabric. If some past owner tried to restore your trunk's interior with vinyl wall paper before you received it, you'll definitely need the store bought material and a "Paper Tiger" which will gently poke holes in the vinyl paper to allow the solvent to penetrate through the vinyl to the glue. Use a paint scrapper or a putty knife to complete this process. If any small pieces remain, they will be removed

when you sand the entire interior. Your local home center will have a great selection of orbital sanders in many shapes; round, square, Mouse shaped for getting into corners, etc. Expect to do some of the sanding by hand. After sanding, vacuum the insides again to remove any small paper scraps and dust. Take your time and do a thorough job.

AT this point, your trunk's interior should look "old", but clean. We'll discuss cracks, holes, repairs, etc. later in this manual.

If the interior of your trunk has been painted, again, I urge you to go to a profession. You probably don't know when it was painted or with what, so you have to assume it contains lead. If you decide to ignore my warnings and are going to continue on your own, go to your local home center, buy a respirator that will protect you properly and also purchase some paint stripper and follow the manufacturer's directions.

Now on to the outside!

## **Removing rust, paint, old canvas, leather, tin, etc.**

Old trunks can be covered with almost anything. I've seen most of them, but you never know what you'll come across. Most trunk construction started with the making of the "box". Then the box, usually made of pine, was covered with canvas, paper, fabric, leather, etc. Depending on the material, it was painted or coated to make it more waterproof. The slats, usually oak, metal corners and trim, wheels, dowels, handles, etc. were then added over the top of the covering. So depending on how detailed you want to get with your restoration, you may have to disassemble the entire trunk down to the initial "box" to do your restoration. This is rare, but occasionally, it's necessary. This manual will cover a "middle of the road" type of restoration. You will be giving the knowledge on how to remove all the parts on your trunk, but we are not going to go into that much detail right now.

I like to start on the metal surfaces first. That way any dust from rust will not be ground into the exposed wood as it might if you remove the covering from the trunk first, staining the wood. You will need a selection of wire brushes, steel wool and sandpaper. You can find a great selection of wire brushes at any home center. Brass ones, steel ones, small ones, large ones, stiff ones, soft ones, fine ones, course ones. You can also use wire wheels that attach to a power drill or grinder but BE CAREFUL! If you slip, you might ruin a delicate part, like a rosette. Again, taking your time and working slowly will give you the best results. Clean all the metal of any rust or gunk from the last century of wear and tear. There are some fantastic commercial products available to remove rust, like Navel Jelly. Use them in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. If you have some loose parts on your trunk, clean them by hand while they are still on the trunk. We'll be going over removal, replacement, and reattaching later on in the manual. Again, it's important to remember that some of these parts might have been painted. You may also need to use a paint stripper on painted parts. Once this is finished, we can move on to removing the exterior covering.

Usually, the glue that was used to hold the covering on has deteriorated by now. Use a utility knife to score around the slats and any other metal or wood that is covering it. Lift one of the corners and the covering should peel off. You may have to do some light scraping to remove all of the covering. Remember that the Canvas and other coverings may have been painted. Do this on the entire exterior. Remove as much of the covering as you can. Use tweezers, small

needle nose pliers, etc. for corners, around locks, hasps, etc. to complete the process. Take your time!

You will have glue left on the surface after you remove the covering that must be removed. Just sanding the surface will not do. Again, go back to the warm water and or the wall paper stripper to remove any remaining glue that's in the pours or cracks in the wood. Use the same procedure as described in the interior stripping above remembering not to use too much liquid. Wood does not like water most of the time..... It warps.....

Now you can start the sanding process. Use the same process described in the interior section previously to sand all the wood surfaces. Take your time and realize that you'll have to do a lot of hand sanding around any metal parts to get into any little crevasses. Protect yourself by using a dust mask please.

Now vacuum the entire trunk again, inside and out. This will give your bare bones starting point to bringing your trunk back to what it should look like..... A Beautifully Restored Antique!

## Getting Rid of Musty Odors

Your trunk may still have a musty odor. Don't worry. I'm sure that it smells better than it did when you first opened it. Removing any remaining odor is relatively easy. Fill a spray bottle with 10% bleach to water solution. LIGHTLY spray the entire interior of the trunk. You don't want to make it soaking wet! Just lightly spray everywhere and don't let any puddles sit for too long. Again, if you can, let your trunk dry outside in the sun. You may have to repeat this process a few times, but make sure you let the trunk dry completely before repeating the spraying process.

I do not recommend spraying any perfumed cleaners, odor eaters, odor hidings, etc. In other words, no 'Febreze' I love the product, but don't recommend it for any antique trunk restoration. If you have a different type of odor or smell coming from the trunk and the bleach did not remove it, you'll need to seal the entire interior of the trunk with varnish. I would use a satin finish, but it's up to you. I usually varnish all of my trunk interiors when I have to remove the original interior coverings. If you're going to leave the interior wood exposed, you could also stain the interior now before applying the varnish. Follow all manufacturers' directions.

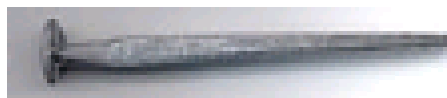
## Removing and replace hardware, locks, handles, etc.

Now it's time to inspect all the parts that are attached to your trunk and get some basics on how all these parts were attached so many years ago. Most trunks were only constructed with NAILS. These nails were driven through the part, into the wood and then "clinched" over to make a permanent attachment. Clinching a nail is the process of bending it over in the shape of the letter "J" or like a fish hook after the nail passes through the wood. Not a 90° bend like this: L ! The nail is intended to re enter the wood on the back side, not lay flat against the inside.

Inspect all of the parts on the trunk and determine if they need replacing or retightening.

Retightening is not a big deal but you may need a second set of hands. The original nails were installed using an "Iron Heal" on the point side of the nail. As the nail was driven in, it would strike the iron and curl over and go back into the wood. What has happened with age, wear, and use is that the nails loosen and the wood shrinks. You'll need an iron heal and a hammer to tighten any loose nails. O.K., O.K. I know, "What's an Iron Heal?" You probably have the next best thing somewhere around your house..... An old sledge hammer head is ideal. Find your old "persuader" and hold the head against the point side of the nail you want to tighten. Now use your hammer to drive the head side of the nail back in where it belongs. Walla, you've done it! Oh that feeling of satisfaction is coming over you isn't it..... Depending on where the nail is located, you may have to "hold" the "Head side" of the nail with your Iron Heal and reset the point side by striking the bend with your hammer. The later is the preferred way if you don't want to damage any delicate pieces by hammering on or near them.

**Check EVERY NAIL.** Tighten each one..... If you have missing nails, you'll need to purchase new antique nails. They come in all different sizes and shapes. Check your local hardware store. Find the owner or the oldest person working there and tell them what you need. If they have them, they'll probably be in the stock room way in the back covered with dust. You'll probably have to purchase them for the internet. Here's a good site: [www.tremontnail.com](http://www.tremontnail.com), or at: 1-800-842-0560.



You will need different sizes depending on what you're attaching or replacing so, to save money in shipping costs, do a complete inventory of what you'll need. The nails you're replacing will have to be a ¼ to a ½ inch longer than the thickness of the wood and whatever you're attaching. Remember that the nail has to be "clinched" over and then force back into the wood. The nail should not be too long or it will come back out on the other side and you don't want that.

90% of the nails on a trunk go from the outside to the inside. The most common exceptions are for metal stay attachment and tray support rails. Many tray support rails are difficult to tighten because they are installed during the "box construction" phase of the trunk's manufacturing process. So when the tray support was installed, the nails were clinched over on the outside of the trunk and when the outside slats or canvas, etc. were installed, that usually went over the nails for the tray supports and stays. Depending on how loose the tray supports are, you may have to start removing outside slats and hardware.

**The Process:** Removing clinched nails must be done as delicately as possible to avoid damaging the wood and the part.  
**NOTE:** The nails you remove will not be reusable! You can try, but I've never had success straightening one without it breaking during straightening or re-clinching. You'll need a pair of nippers, needle nose pliers, vise grips, channel locks, nail set, and a hammer. First, make sure the nail head is completely seated. If you're lucky, tapping it in will give you something to grab on the other side. The object is to pull the clinched side out of the wood as far as possible and cut off the curl with the nippers. I have also had success using a Dremel with a cutting disk attached to do this. If the nail is tight on both sides, you'll have to do some work. As carefully as possible, you have to pull the curled nail point out of the wood. Use anything you can think of, your best bet is going to be a good set of different sized needle nose pliers. Work it out of the wood slowly. You don't want to do any damage to the wood or at least as little as possible anyway. Once this is done, cut off the curl with the nippers. Now you can drive the nail back through the wood with the nail set far enough to grab the head of the nail and pull it out. It may break and if it does don't panic. Use a SMALLER nail and tap the broken piece out.

Installing new nails is not difficult. I, however, do not rely on the old iron heal method completely. I normally drive the nail in and then start the bend with a pair of needle nose pliers. Now you can place your "iron heal" or sledge hammer head on the head of the nail

and then drive the curled point side back into the wood with your hammer. Perfect! This process can be used on all the pieces being replaced or repaired on your trunk.

Avoid screws, bolts, modern round nails, etc. completely. If you're restoring, then restore. Don't compromise your finished truck by taking shortcuts.

The only exception is rivets! The first trunk I restored back in 1985 has about 100 rivets. The other interesting thing is that it's old and pre-dates 1900. It's a flat top with leather trim, brass plated hasps, dowels, heavy corners, and trim pieces. The slat end caps are steel. The wheels and lock are original as is the key. It's a great old piece that I still have. I made some mistakes restoring that trunk, but that's how we all learn. Here's a picture.

Working with rivets is really easy if you have the right tools. The important tool here is a Rivet Set. This is a heavy piece of metal with different sized dimples in it to accommodate the rounded head of the rivet. Rivets need washers when they are being placed in wood, one on each side. Place the Rivet Set over the installed rivet and washer, then install the washer on the tail side of the rivet and hammer the tail end to pancake or round it over until the rivet is tight.

## Wood Repairs

These are very common repairs on old trunks simple because of their age and construction. I have seen many trunks with large long cracks virtually everywhere. Most often these cracks will occur at a stress point, but sometimes you may have a crack where the trunk was damaged by a collision with either another trunk or someone foot.... Most cracks can be easily repaired. If the crack is in someway connected to, or the product of either a hinge, handle, stay, etc., remove that item first before doing your repair. This will insure that the crack in the wood is completely sealed when clamped and not held apart by a nail. You'll need some wood glue, clamps, and something to gently pry the crack open with. First plan where and how you are going to clamp the pieces together. There is nothing more frustrating than gluing everything up and then trying to figure out where the clamps are going to be placed. Plan ahead. Spread the crack open as far as you SAFELY can and squeeze a generous amount of glue into and along the crack. Work it in with your fingers, a tooth pick or a thin piece of plastic. Now let the crack close and clamp the area until dry. Make sure that the face of the wood is flat, meaning that you don't want one side of the crack to be higher than the other, or sticking up when clamped. Sometimes you'll need to clamp the wood on the surface as well to prevent this from happening. Clamping trunk surfaces can be tricky, so have a good supply of all types of clamps on hand.

Knot holes: it is quite common for there to be a hole in your trunk where either a knot used to exist or a loose knot that is still in place. Either can be repaired quite easily. If you have a missing knot, find a piece of dowel that is the same approximate size as the hole left by the missing knot. Usually a slightly larger size is better in that the remaining wood around the missing knot is usually compromised as well and will crumble slightly when inserting the dowel. Insert the dowel so that it is slightly proud of the surface of the wood. Mark the other side with a pencil and cut the dowel to length. Coat with wood glue and insert back in the hole with a slight twisting motion. Sand the dowel flush on both the inside and outside surfaces. I recommend staining the end grain of the dowel a darker color than the rest of the wood so that it blends in with the color of the other knots.

Sometimes you'll come across a very large knot hole, 3, maybe 4 inches plus. If you have a hole that size, you won't be able to use any dowel. Simply trace the hole on to a piece of pine that is the same thickness as the wood the trunk is made of. Then, work the piece of wood into place by sanding the edges to make it fit. Then glue it in place. This kind of repair will not look realistic because you won't have the end grain exposed like when you can use a dowel. Sometimes it's just easier to replace the entire board.

If you have a knot that is just loose, simply wiggle it around while you squeeze glue over both the inside and outside of the loose area. Wipe away any excess glue with a damp sponge, clamp the surfaces and let the knot dry.

On rare occasion, you'll have to replace a piece of wood that is damaged beyond repair. Normally I'll replace the entire section of that part of the trunk. In other words, if part of the lower board on the back of the trunk needs to be replaced, I replace that entire board completely, from one corner to the other, not just the damaged part. This normally involves removing a lot of trim and sometimes slats so take your time and do this carefully. It really isn't all that difficult. Try it. You'll see.

## Metal Repairs

Repairing metal isn't hard either. The metal trim used to cover corners and decorative banding is very thin. Pieces may have been damaged during the use of the trunk. Holes, shape tears, etc may exist. Some distressed pieces may be left alone as long as they don't present a danger. It's called character.... Some hole or tears may be in a bad location and also be unsightly. You again will have to decide whether to repair or replace. Either is acceptable and will look fine when completed. Replacing is a matter of removing the existing and cutting and shaping a new piece of metal to match the old and installing it. Repairing can be handled with any number of different materials. Bondo works great. It's used for repairing dents and dings in cars and will work fine for your trunk as well. All you have to do is follow the manufacturer's directions, sand and paint the area to match. If done correctly, you'll never even see where the repair was made.

Thicker banding, hinges, etc. that need repair also is not difficult to accomplish. If you have a "sprung" hinge that is bent out of position, simply remove the hinge completely, put it in a vise and squeeze the bend out. This will only remove about 90% of the bend. To make the hinge perfectly straight again it will take some additional bending and manipulating on your part. Then simply re-install the hinge. The metal banding that wraps the trunk lid may need to be replaced if it's too badly damaged. Since this part is the demarcation between the lid and the base, it is quite noticeable and will need special attention. The metal band was usually made by creating the appropriate shape and then connecting the 2 ends with rivets. The band was then nailed to the trunk lid. These take a lot of time to remove so TAKE YOUR TIME if this is what you have to do. If you're going to the trouble of removing the banding, I'd replace it instead of trying to repair, re-bend, etc. You can do as you see fit, but I'd still replace it. You'll probably decide to do the same after going through the process.

If other metal parts need to be repaired, you'll need to find a metal artisan to help you if the repairs are out of the ordinary. Many times if this is the case, you're probably better off replacing broken parts with new restoration reproductions.

## Lining Your Trunk

The choice is yours. Many restored trunks are left natural on the inside with just a stain and finish applied to the wood. A polyurethane finish should be applied regardless of whether or not you're going to cover the interior with something. This will help to prevent future 'smells' from entering the wood and giving you the same problems you may have started with, and acts as a "sizing" medium.

If you decide to paper the interior, find an old Victorian era pattern to use. Make sure its PAPER and not vinyl. The back room of your local Paint or Wall paper store will usually have some old discontinued rolls.

To paper the interior, start with the 2 sides of the trunk. The best way to do the sides is to first cut a separate piece to do the tray support rails, overlapping above and below the rail. Now do the portion that's under the tray support rail. Then do the part about the support rail. So, each side will use 3 cut pieces of paper. Leave about a ½ inch overlap onto the back, bottom and front for the bottom part butting the paper under the tray support rail. The top piece will also butt up to the tray support rail, and overlap the front and back. Then do the front and back walls leaving an overlap only on the bottom of the trunk. No do the bottom using the exact measurements without any overlapping. This always comes out looking great. Of course, the paper is applied with wall paper paste. I don't advise using "pre-pasted paper" or if you do, use additional pre mixed paste to make sure the paper sticks to the porous wood surface. Remember you have knots, splits, and seems between boards to deal with.

Fabric lining: There are a few different ways to achieve this finish. One way to do this is to use the same process as described above for paper but using fabric instead of the paper. You paste it in the same way. Make sure you're using a fabric that will not stretch much after the paste is applied. Another way is to place batting under the material to get that puffy softer look and feel. You would only glue down the edges then. I've found that the best way to do this is to use separate precut panels of either luan plywood or foam board that would be lined by placing the batting on the face side of the panel and the fabric can be glued to the back of the panel. The individual panels are then wedged into the sides above and below the tray support rail, front, back and bottom of the trunk. The support rails should be covered first with the fabric overlapping above and below the rail. No

batting on the rails. This system also makes it easy to change patterns if you want to later on.

Fabric linings, while they look nice, will defeat the sealing process of the wood, as the fabric and batting will absorb odors. Here's another way around that possible problem. If you're going to use fabric, then go all the way. You can add pockets into the fabric on the sides, back and front they should all close with either a draw string or buttons. Never use a zipper. If you add pockets, you can fill them with potpourri to help eliminate potential future undesirable odors. The other way around this is to leave your beautifully restored trunk open all the time to show off both the inside and outside together. Open trunks rarely smell.

Cedar lining is another option. Most home center's carry tongue and groove cedar for lining cedar closets. It's reasonably priced and can be easily installed. I like using the cedar just on the bottom of my trunk restorations. Just cut the wood to length and lay them in place. You will probably have to cut one of the boards down its length in order to achieve the proper width. You can also do the walls of the interior below the tray support rail if you like the look but it isn't necessary to do all that if you just want that cedar smell or protection against bugs. If you do the walls, you'll have to make some installation choices as to how you're going to attach the wood so that it is secure. Normally, you would install this by nailing through the tongue into the sidewalls with brads that will not penetrate to the outside. If you're going this route, use a pneumatic brad nailer for the best results. If you don't have one, you can rent them for under \$50 a day which would be more than enough time to finish installing all the cedar. You could also use a glue gun to attach the boards by applying the glue to the back of each board and then putting it in place. Don't try to put this glue in the tongue and grooves. Here's a little helpful hint about cedar. In years to come, if you ever feel the cedar sent is weakening, just give it a light sanding and it'll smell stronger again.

## How to finish the outside

O.K. we are moving along just fine. The outside is every bit as important as the inside of your trunk. There are many different ways to finish the outside of your trunk. Be careful! Many people finish their trunks so they look BETTER than how they looked when they left the original manufacturer. So here we go:

If you've stripped of the exterior covering, whether it was canvas, paper, leather, etc. you're now looking at wood. It should have been stripped of all glue and sanded. You now have to decide what "look" you want. Do you want a glossy finish, satin finish, oiled finish, etc? If you want to stain the wood, do it now. This is your chance to really make the trunk "Pop". Staining the oak slats a nice contrasting color really looks beautiful....Cherry slats next to the natural pine is nice! Of course you can leave it exactly how it looks without stain as well. Do all your staining and then decide how much or little shine you want and apply that finish to all the wood surfaces. If you've left the original covering on, you'll just be refinishing all the slats. Paper coverings can be sealed with a satin finish. Canvas was normally painted and you can paint it again with any dark muted paint either matching the old color or changing it to something you like. Remember to try to use original colors like brown, black, green, maroon, dark red, etc.

While some painting of trim pieces may be acceptable, avoid it at all costs. Especially "gold" paint. Brass is Brass, not gold. Painting locks, dowels, hasps, hinges, etc gold, looks horrible. It is not an original finish and just cheapens the look of your antique trunk. If you are going to do anything to the brass, just lightly polish it. Remember, it's probably just brass plated steel, so clean and polish it gently. You don't want to remove the brass. Oh yeah, and don't use "brass" colored paint either. I have yet to see any brass paint that looked like antique brass..... The trim pieces that were originally installed on trunks usually had a brass, black or silver colors finishes.

The metal banding on trunks was usually black. This can be painted and will look great. Some trunks have leather banding at the edges. I've had success painting the leather as well. Of course it all depends on the condition of the leather. The same goes for any latches and locks, etc. as long as they were black originally. If they're brass don't paint them. If the existing paint looks good, leave it alone. Remember it's an antique. It's really not supposed to look showroom new. If you have to replace any of the trim pieces, realize that the

new pieces will look new. So take that into consideration and think about replacing all of the same pieces with new or make your new piece look like it has 100 years plus or minus of use. This isn't that hard to do with a hammer, a screw driver, some sandpaper, you'll be able to duplicate the wear you see on existing pieces. Duplicating "Rust" isn't hard either. Once you've worked the new part to old condition, put it in a glass of water and wait for the rust to appear. Look at that, your becoming a professional restorer....

When you originally cleaned the metal parts with the wire brush, most of the rust will come off, but you'll still have a little of that reddish hue left. Some people like how that looks with a finish applied over it. Again that nice red patina is part of being antique. So once everything is cleaned & polished you can apply a finish to the luster you want.

## Installing new stays

Trunks had either metal stays or woven fabric stays. Hopefully, you'll be able to determine which if they are missing by inspecting your trunk. Metal stays were attached close to the hinge side of the trunk lid and body while woven fabric stays were attached about ½ way out towards the front edges of the trunk. Both types of stays are fairly easy to replace.

The fabric stays were usually paired, one on each side of the trunk. If they are missing, you should be able to find some small nail holes or maybe even the nails with scraps of fabric still attached in the trunk. The fabric stays were usually held in with tacks instead of nails. More like a carpet tack which wouldn't go all the way through the wood. Open the trunk to just slightly past its balancing point so that the lid wants to fall further open than closed and measure from one attachment point to the other. It should be somewhere between 1 foot and 18 inches long, depending on the size of your trunk. Mark the lid and base with a pencil so you'll know where to attach your new stays. An important part about attaching new fabric stays is to find a strong material that won't stretch much. It should be about a ½ inch wide and cut to a length about ½ longer than your measurement. Lay your trunk on its side and open it so you have the same initial measurement to your attachment points. Fold over about a ¼ of an inch and drive the 2 tacks through the folded fabric and hammer into the sides of the trunk at your measurement marks on the lid and base. It's much easier to hammer the tacks in with the trunk on its side for support. Repeat this procedure on the other side.

Metal stays were attached with 2 nails that were clinched over on the outside of your trunk. Because trunks had canvas, paper, leather, etc., coverings, you wouldn't normally see this clinched over nail. Hopefully, you had plenty of practice installing new nails when you tightened your trunk and installed new parts. This clinched nail will be seen and must be done neatly. Usually there would only be one metal stay on a trunk on either the left or right side. This was an early improvement on stays because the metal stay has a kind of locking effect. You had to pull the stay forward to close the trunk. It is usually quite obvious where the old stay was because the nail hole may be elongated and the wood may also be cracked. We've already talked about wood repairs earlier in this manual, but I've always changed sides when the wood has been compromised. In other words, if it was on the left side, install your new stay on the right side. If you do move it to a new side, I recommend drilling a small pilot hole for

the nail so you don't crack the wood on the new virgin side wood. Then install the nail through the hole in the metal stay and drive it from the inside to the outside and clinch it over as described before. Now repeat the process for the second nail.

I have been asked to add metal stays to trunks with fabric stays for safety reason and I find this to be an acceptable practice, especially if you have small children around. The metal edges of trunk lids can be just like a guillotine to small fingers. The choice is yours, however, if you intend on using your Trunk as a **toy box**, then you **must** change out the old style stays and add the stays that are **specially made for toy boxes**. This way the lid can not be closed quickly or fall. These lid supports act like the struts that your car trunk may have. You have to physical close the lid. It will not close by itself or fall, hurting a child.

## Installing new Handles and straps

Since we are this far along, you're probably an expert at removing and clinching nails by now. If your trunk is missing leather handles, or the leather ones you have need replacing, you'll need to remove the end caps that hold the handles in place. This is done by removing the nails as described previously. If you're missing end caps, you'll have to purchase replacements caps along with your new leather handles if needed. If all the caps are missing, you'll have to do some measuring and some detective work. Look for the hole in the wood where the handles would have been. You will probably be able to see an outline of the old handle end cap as well. Measure it all thoroughly and then find new ones that match what you're missing. There are all different types of end caps styles and designs, so be careful about your choice. I have had to do some custom work with some replacement end caps; many don't have the required "post or pin" to fit into the slot on some handles. Yes, there are different handle styles as well, all readily available. End caps are normally used with slotted leather handles. The leather handle is held in place by the end cap which should have an attached or separate pin that need to be installed, which allows the handle to move in and out of the end caps. The handle should lay flat against the trunk when not in use, and will slide out when needed. Handle brackets or loops are used with either wide end handles without pins or with the slotted handles if they have pins. You should be able to determine which you had if they are missing by looking for a hole in the trunk that would be where the pin held the handle in place. This hole may or may not go all the way though the wood. If the hole exists, your trunk had slotted handles. If not, it probably had loops or brackets with wide end handles. These handle slide back and forth under the loops and the wider leather at each end prevents the handle from coming off. Some trunks just had leather handles that were just nailed directly to the trunks. If this is the case, you will usually have a very narrow nailing pattern on the trunk which would indicate no end cap or bracket. Also, there would be not center "pin" hole.

So, after you determine what you had, order your parts and go to work installing the new end caps and handles. If your new end caps need a pin but don't have one, (sometimes there's a hole in the end cap where you need the to add a pin and sometimes there's a fake pin head where the pin should be), you have 2 choices; make the pin out of a 8 or 10 penny nail if you don't want to modify the new end cap by drilling out the fake pin or, drill out the fake pin head and use a nail though the hole and through the wood, clinched inside the trunk. If

you want to make your pin and leave the fake nail head, here's what you do: First place the nail in the existing "pin" hole in your trunk. Now place the end cap against the trunk and along side of the nail. Mark the length on the nail and cut it. Epoxy your homemade pin to the end cap first into the dimple on the inside of the end cap. Let it dry thoroughly and then install your handles and end caps by nailing the end caps and clinching the nails in place. I always epoxy the pin into the hole in the wood as well. Having to replace, add, or improvise pins is always a last resort. Search, you should be able to find exactly what you need without having to modify it.

Leather Straps were original equipment on a lot of trunks and it really hurts to see when someone has done a restoration and not replaced them. I can't tell you how many times I see this. It is always quite obvious when a trunk had these. Even if they've sanded the hell out of the exterior, there will always be the tell tale nail hole where the leather tabs, metal brackets, or end caps once resided. It is not expensive or hard to find the parts you need or to replace them. That's why I don't understand why I see them missing so often. If you have a trunk that needs replacement straps, measure the length you need. Include the top side added to the front side. The front side would normally have the buckle and the top side has the holes to accept the buckle pin. You could have a measurement in excess of 50 inches, and remember to add some extra length so that you have enough length to close the buckle. The absolute best place to find replacement straps is a one of the "Big and Tall Man" stores. They have belts in all different colors, designs, and lengths that your eyes will not believe. (Yes, there are people out there that who could fit one of our trunks inside of themselves. I don't mean any disrespect here if you are one of those people, it just amazes me). Remember, you've added your front and top lengths together, so you can now cut the belt where needed so you have your new front piece with the buckle, and your top piece with the holes to attach to the buckle. Pretty cool huh! You will once again be able to determine what kind of brackets or leather tabs you'll need by the outline of the old piece on your trunk. If it has any curved design to it you probably had leather tabs. Otherwise you had metal brackets or loops to hold down the straps. The same applies for the end caps for straps as with the handles. All are readily available. If you need leather tabs, you'll have to decide whether you want to make them or you want to have them made.

Leather is easy to find in virtually any shape or thickness needed. Local Shoe Makers (if you still have one in your town, I do), are a great place to go. Just bring them a pattern of what you need and they'll probably be able to give you your 8 or so tabs in a few hours. You can also buy sheet leather and do this yourself if you want to. Leather tabs were held on with large headed tacks which look fancier than just a nail head. Metal brackets were held on with nails and you know how to install them.

## How to make a Trunk Tray

This is a fun easy project for any woodworker. The hard part is determining what kind of tray your trunk originally had if you don't have the original to copy from. Again if you have a police background, it will be helpful since some detective work is needed. Flat top steamers are the easiest, but, humpbacks with hat boxes are a different matter all together. I see many humpbacks with the interior completely gutted. No tray support rails, now divider in the lid section, etc. You have to look for signs of those dividers in the lid if they are missing. The divider determines which side, and how big the hat box has to be. Searching the web or your local library will give you some examples of what trays looked like and their designs. The reason so many trunks are missing their trays is because they were not made to the same construction standards as the trunk itself. This amazes me. It's like the trays were almost an afterthought. Anyway, first, we are going to talk about flat tops since the basic construction is the same for all trays and this is the simplest to build. The first step is measuring. Remember that you don't want to make the tray the exact same size as the interior of our trunk. Wood moves and new wood moves a lot more than old wood. I leave about a ¼ inch clearance to each side, front and back. This way the tray will not get stuck in your trunk. You have some discretion as to the height of the box. Usually, at least part of the tray was the same height as the open box. About 5 to 8 inches, but the tray can extend all the way to the top of the closed box, in other words, up above the bottom part of your trunk into the lid section. Again, carefully measure so that the box won't prevent the trunk from closing.

The reason part of the lid of the tray was the same height as the bottom is that when people were traveling at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and before, the most common form of communication was writing letters and the lid of the tray made for an excellent impromptu desk. Some trunks had an area specifically designed just for this purpose. Use your creativity. Adding a 16 to 18 inch square piece of leather to the lid of the tray makes an excellent hinge and also a great writing surface. Early trunk trays were made of thin wood usually less than a ½ inch thick on the sides. When I make my replacement trays, I use pine that has been planed to ½ inch thickness. It's stronger and will hold up for the next 100 years +. Basic construction skills are all that is needed for most trays. Cut your boards to length. Drill a large "finger" hole in the middle of each end board just down from the top. This is optional and depends again if you're duplicating something you

have. Some trays had leather pulls to remove the tray. Build the rest of the box; add any interior partitions you might like. Usually there was at least one partition down the middle of trays running from front to back. Attach a thin plywood bottom. All of your construction should be done with antique nails. Since we are dealing with thinner lumber, (½ Inch), drill a small pilot hole for each nail. The nails should be about 1 inch in length. USE GLUE at each joint. Don't want it to last? Skip the glue..... Another trick is to use the cedar tongue and groove as the bottom of the tray. This will give that aromatic scent to the entire trunk instead of just the bottom below the tray.

Trunk trays usually had lids, but you don't see them much in restorations. The lid was very thin wood, about 1/8 of an inch thick and was split down the middle long ways to flip back to access the contents of the tray. There was a hinge at the back of the tray lid, but the middle fold was usually hinged by the fabric or leather covering. This is way you don't often see lids on new replacement trays because people don't cover them; they are usually plain wood now. **One other important note: if you extend the tray up into the lid is that the front of the try must be beveled back so that the lid does not it the tray before it closes all the way.**

Now for a humpback tray: Most humpback lids also had a built in compartment to one side of the hat box area. Listen carefully; this is a compartment that's built into the lid, above the tray. This is the other reason that the whole tray doesn't always extend into the lid area. The lid compartment blocks any extension into the lid area for the tray. The only difference between this tray and the other is the hat box or hat boxes areas. Sometimes the tray would have an area for 2 hat boxes. What ever the design, you will have to carefully measure the area in the lid of the trunk where the hat box compartment of the tray is going to be. Use the **smallest** or **lowest** measurement from the lid interior as the highest point of the tray. Because of their design, humpback trunks have different interior heights. The middle of the lid is higher than the sides. That's why you will be using the side measurement. That's the **smallest** or **lowest** height. I hope you understand this. I know you're not ignorant, but if you try to may the tray height to the maximum height, the trunk will not close.... The width of the hat box will need to fit into the partition on the lid (if one exists). So when you're making a tray for a humpback trunk, you'll be cutting one side panel that is rectangular and at least 2 pieces that are higher and have curved tops. You will also need to bend a piece of either plywood, or masonite to match the bend on the side pieces to make the hat box lid. To correctly bend the lid piece, you'll need to make a jig out of some scrap wood with a

curve that is slightly greater than the actual hat box lid. This is because the wood will not form exactly to your jig. When you take your lid piece out of the jig, it will spring back a little. That's why the curve on the jig has to be greater than the lid. I hope this makes sense. Since this isn't a wood working manual, if you don't know how to make a jig or bend wood. You are on your own other than what I've described here. It is important to remember that the front of the hat box must be beveled so that the trunk lid will close. Again, the lid to the hat box was hinged with either metal, leather or fabric hinges. In my opinion, if you are doing an accurate reproduction, you should cover your tray with fabric the same way we described covering the interior of the trunk. The creativity part is up to you. Leather writing area, letter pouch, etc. are all viable options for your tray. Look around and see what you like.

## Building a Trunk Dolly

This is another great easy woodworking project to give your trunk even more personality. A Trunk Dolly is just an elaborate furniture movers dolly. Most trunks that have wheels only roll in one direction: Left to Right. With a trunk dolly, your trunk can be easily moved in any direction. It can also be raised to any desired height. Lets say your using you trunk at the foot of you bed as a TV stand. You might need the trunk to be a little higher than it is when it is just sitting directly on the floor. With a Trunk Dolly, you can make it almost any height you need.

First, you'll need 4 good quality casters that are rated for about 50 to 100 lbs each. Yes, the home center again is your best bet. Cut a piece of  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch plywood  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch larger than the base of your trunk. So, if your trunk is 22" x 36", the plywood needs to be 22 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches by 36 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Attach the 4 casters far enough in from the sides of the plywood so that when they spin, the wheel does not go past the side of the plywood. This is so the decorative "skirt" you'll be making for the sides of the plywood don't interfere with the operation of the casters. Now determine the height you want and build a wood box the same size as the plywood but to the height you want to raise the trunk. So, to clarify, lets say you want your trunk to be 6 inches higher than it is now. Measures from the floor to the top of the plywood after you've installed the casters. Let's say that measurement is 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches high. Build the box that fits on the plywood 3 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches high. A 2" x 4" will work great for this. So now we have our plywood with casters and a box that has the same 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ " dimensions as the plywood built out of 2" x 4"s on end. Got the picture so far? Now flip the plywood onto the 2" x 4" box so that the casters are facing up. Screw the plywood to the box. Now for the Skirt: Depending on your taste, get some pine, oak, cherry, whatever wood that, in this case, is  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 8". Stain it, varnish it, cut some scallops or other design work along the top edge, etc. What ever you want it to look like. This is entirely up to you. Cut the boards to length. (I would miter the corners) and attach the skirt to the outside of the box leaving about  $\frac{1}{2}$ " clearance above the floor. Now you have a beautiful functional accent piece to help show off your trunk. The casters are hidden for the most part and the top of the skirt keeps the trunk in place on the Dolly.

## Where to find the parts that you'll need

We have just about everything you could possible need. Just send us an email with what you're looking for and while send you back a quote including shipping and tax if applicable. This is usually all done with-in hours.

[info@TrunkRestorers.com](mailto:info@TrunkRestorers.com)

So you've read the manual and don't want anything to do with your trunk's restoration.....

[estimates@TrunkRestorers.com](mailto:estimates@TrunkRestorers.com)

Much of what you'll need can be found locally. Of course, there are some parts that you will have to buy from a trunk restorer or antique dealer. The best advice I can give is to make a list of EVERYTHING your trunk will possible need. Get these items at the least number of locations possible. This will keep your shipping costs down even if some of the items you're purchasing are slightly higher in price than at other sites. Dollar cost averaging..... One place, one price, one shipping charge. It just makes sense

[www.TrunkRestorers.com](http://www.TrunkRestorers.com)

**I have tried to make these directions as comprehensive as possible. I hope they are useful to you. I do not charge \$25 or \$30 for this information like others do because I believe in helping YOU! Now please help me, if this information was helpful, send me a \$10 donation towards the upkeep of my website through [www.Paypal.com](http://www.Paypal.com). Of course any amount is acceptable. For donation of \$15 or more I will send you a bound copy of this manual. The bound copy will lay flat on your work bench for easy reference to pages while restoring.**

Thanks,

Dave Anthony

## Other Recourses

Here are some other fine places to get what you need in no particular order:

[Lowe's](#)

[Home Depot](#)

[Your local hardware store](#)

[Your local shoe maker/auto upholstery shop](#) (leather)

[Your local welding shop](#) (any metal repairs or steel banding)

[www.tremontnail.com](http://www.tremontnail.com)

[www.oldtrunks.com](http://www.oldtrunks.com)

[www.trunk.com](http://www.trunk.com)

[www.shenandoahrestoration.com](http://www.shenandoahrestoration.com)

[www.thisoldtrunk.com](http://www.thisoldtrunk.com)

[www.brettunsvillage.com](http://www.brettunsvillage.com)

[www.charolettefordtrunks.com](http://www.charolettefordtrunks.com)

[www.furnitureknowledge.com](http://www.furnitureknowledge.com)

[www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)

[www.rubylane.com](http://www.rubylane.com)

[www.epa.gov/lead](http://www.epa.gov/lead) (Lead Paint Information)

[www.TrunkRestorers.com](http://www.TrunkRestorers.com)  
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