

FURNITURE *and* FAMILIES



SEBASTOPOL HOUSE STATE HISTORIC SITE

Seguin, Texas



Life's better outside.®



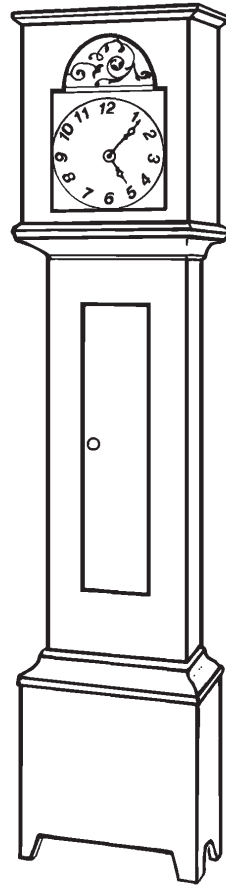
North Elevation, H.A.B.S. drawing, 1934

The furniture on display represents a collection that spans many years — from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. The families who lived at Sebastopol, primarily the Zorns, acquired, used and maintained these pieces, which in turn, tell us about the lives of the people who lived in this home.

WELCOME TO SEBASTOPOL

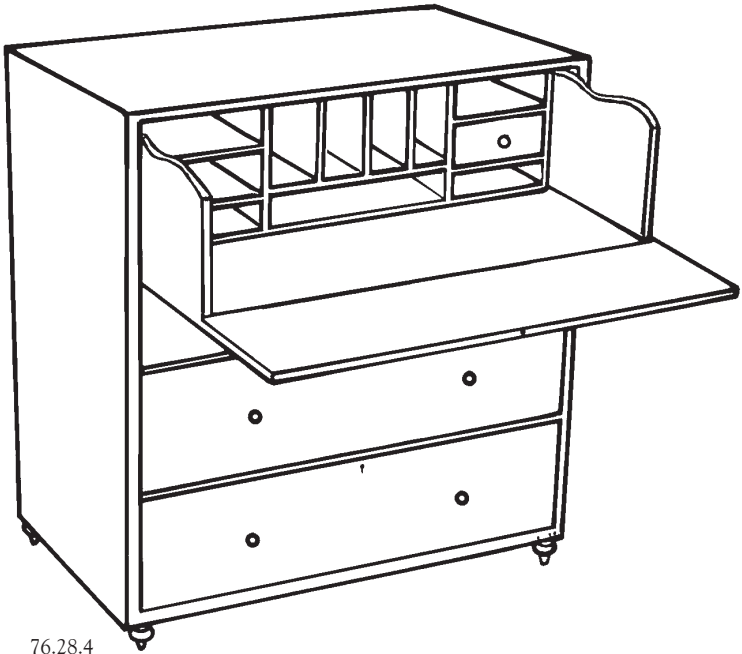
Sebastopol House was constructed, course upon course, of cast-in-place unreinforced limecrete, an early form of concrete consisting of lime, sand, gravel and stone – materials that were locally available in abundant quantities. The walls were cast in wooden forms and finished, inside and out, with lime plaster. The floors consist of pine boards and ceiling treatments range from plaster to canvas. Walnut was used for interior door and window casings while other woods, notably cypress, pine, oak, box elder, elm and willow, formed structural support and exterior trim. All materials used in the original construction were obtained either from the site or from the general vicinity. A sizeable amount of the original material remains incorporated within the house.

As you look at the individual pieces of furniture, notice how they have been repaired: joints have been strengthened and missing or damaged elements have been replaced. The Zorns sought to extend the service life of their furnishings for several reasons. First of all, the family had a practical financial reason for saving the items – repair was less expensive than purchase. Moreover, in late nineteenth-century Seguin, new consumer goods were not as readily available as they are today. Finally, the tendency to retain one's household possessions was part of the ethic of the day. Because of these personal and cultural motives, these furnishings have survived.



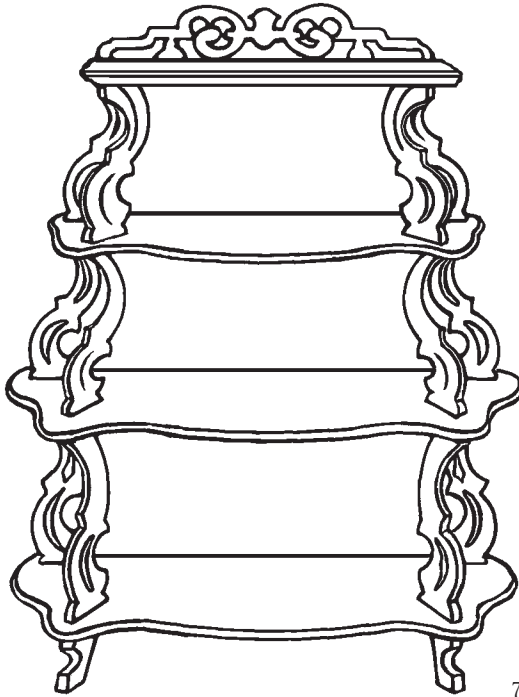
76.30.1

One of the oldest pieces in the collection, the tall case clock, had a long history with the Zorn family. Although tradition maintains that Mayor Joseph Zorn's father brought the clock from France, it is more likely the timepiece was constructed in the United States. In fact, the clock so strongly resembles one made by Ephraim Downs of Cincinnati in 1818 that it may very well be the work of that clockmaker. The Zorn household was one of relatively few at mid-century that could afford such a luxury.



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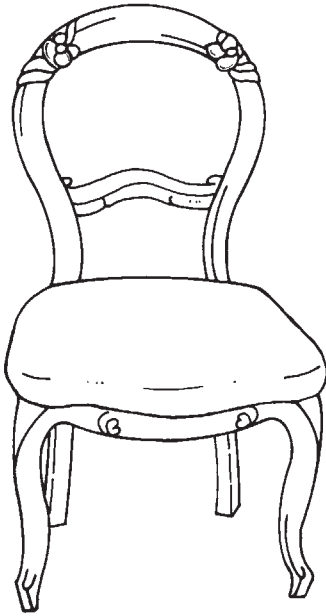
Catharine Young LeGette owned this desk. She probably organized the business of her large household here. Along with the Zorn family's tall case clock, her desk is one of the oldest pieces in the collection. The hinged top drawer hides desk compartments inside and falls forward to provide a writing surface. An unknown cabinetmaker used walnut and pine to fashion the piece and joined the drawers with fine dovetails.



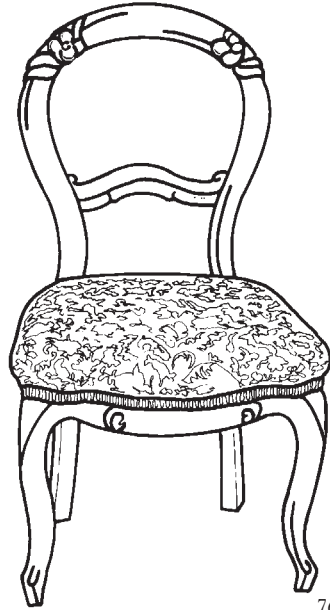
76.30.20

The term “whatnot” was first applied to furniture in 1808 and it referred to a new type of open stand with shelves for displaying ornaments. As the nineteenth century progressed, whatnots became increasingly popular. People relished buying newly available ceramics, glass, statuary and other manufactured adornments. To own them meant you had money and taste; whatnots enabled you to show others that you did.

Like this one belonging to the Zorn family, whatnots remained fashionable until the early twentieth century when style changed. At that time, reform taste, a reaction to Victorian decorative principles, demanded that objects be useful, not just ornamental.



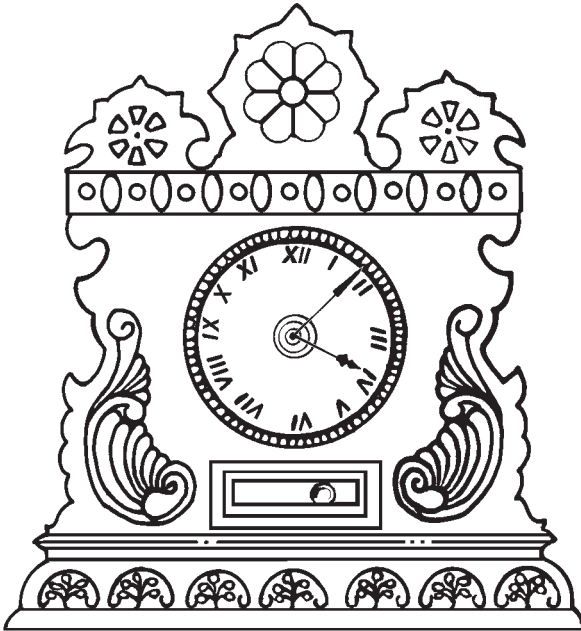
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76.30.40

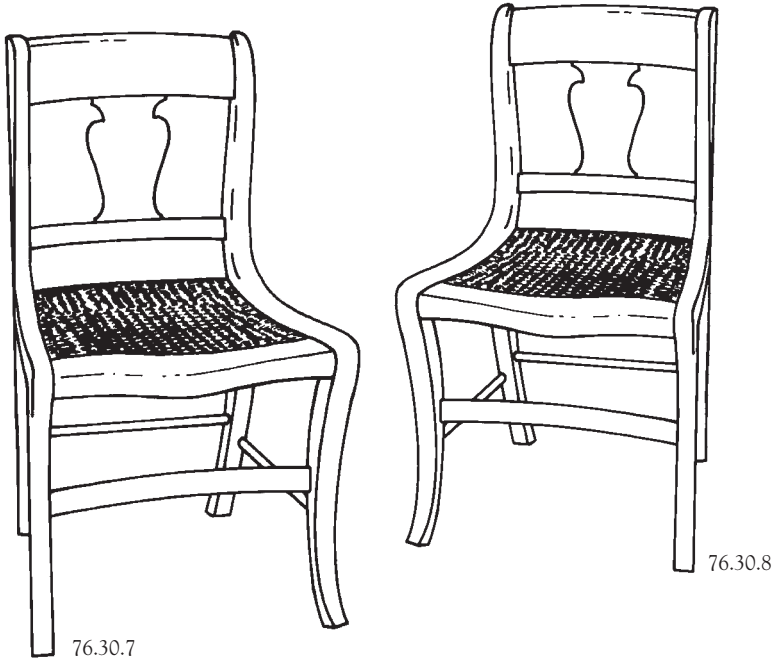
Adorning many parlors in America during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, chairs of this style accommodated the ladies' fashionable wide skirts and ensured "correct" posture for both men and women. Although they may appear uncomfortable to us today, the chairs reinforced the etiquette of the day – the rather stiff seating pieces demanded a formality that many modern chairs do not.

In the rococo revival style, they are commonly referred to as balloon-back chairs because of the distinctive shape of their backs, which flair in a rounded fashion and then taper down to intersect the seat. But the dramatic form weakened the structure and chairs thus designed were easily broken. Joints made by dowels and glue weakened over time, and the chairs often came apart at stress points. The Zorn's chairs were no exception.



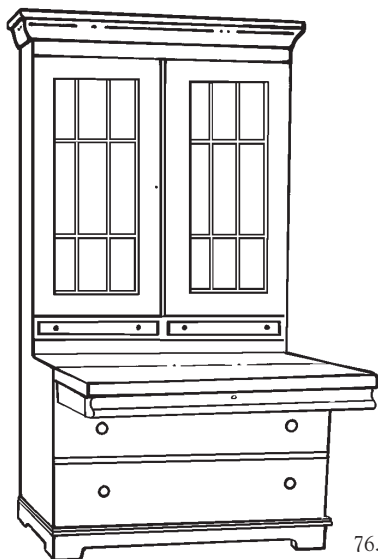
76.30.5

This oak mantel clock was made by E. Ingraham & Co. of Bristol, Connecticut. Named for cabinetmaker and clockmaker Elias Ingraham, the company became one of the world's largest clock producers by the middle of the century. Decorative arts historians have noted that circa 1900 almost every house in the country had a similar clock. People could buy them in jewelry stores and in general stores. In 1898, this one sold for \$6.25, or \$6.88 with an alarm. The price may seem low, but considering that many late nineteenth-century Texans only earned about \$3.00 per day, it cost more than two day's wages.



Oral tradition maintains that this pair of chairs belonged to John Ireland, Seguinite and Governor of Texas from 1883 to 1887, who used them in the Governor's Mansion in Austin and later gave them to his friend, Mayor Joe Zorn. Although no written or photographic documentation confirms the story, it is possible since the chairs appear to date to the 1870-1890 period.

During this period, furniture makers routinely borrowed earlier designs. These cane-seat chairs represent a variation of the klismos form, a chair design of ancient Greece with curved legs slightly splayed to front and rear and a concave back rail. Above the seat frame, the vase-shape splat recalls the same motif used in Queen Anne furniture of the eighteenth century.

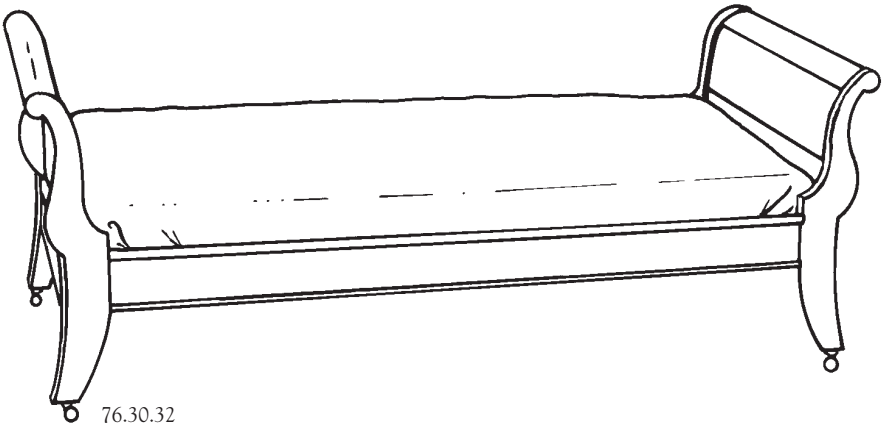


76.30.16

This desk and bookcase was said to have been a wedding gift to Joseph and Antoinette “Nettie” Zorn from the Guadalupe Methodist College, but the Zorns married in 1871 and the school did not open until 1878. Nevertheless, the large piece may very well have been a gift to the Zorns on another occasion. The story and likely the case piece itself signify gratitude toward and appreciation for Zorn, who was an active proponent of education in Seguin.

Desks like this one were among the most expensive pieces of furniture available to households in middle and late nineteenth-century Texas, selling for about \$45 in the 1850s and later. One historian of Texas furniture notes that “the desk was the sanctuary of the male head of household; its locked drawers contained the family’s deed records, notes, mortgages and sometimes a bottle of medicinal whiskey or a pistol carefully wrapped in oiled rags.”

Although much of our business is conducted by telephone, Zorn and other men of his day sat for long hours at desks like this one to write letters and conduct household business.



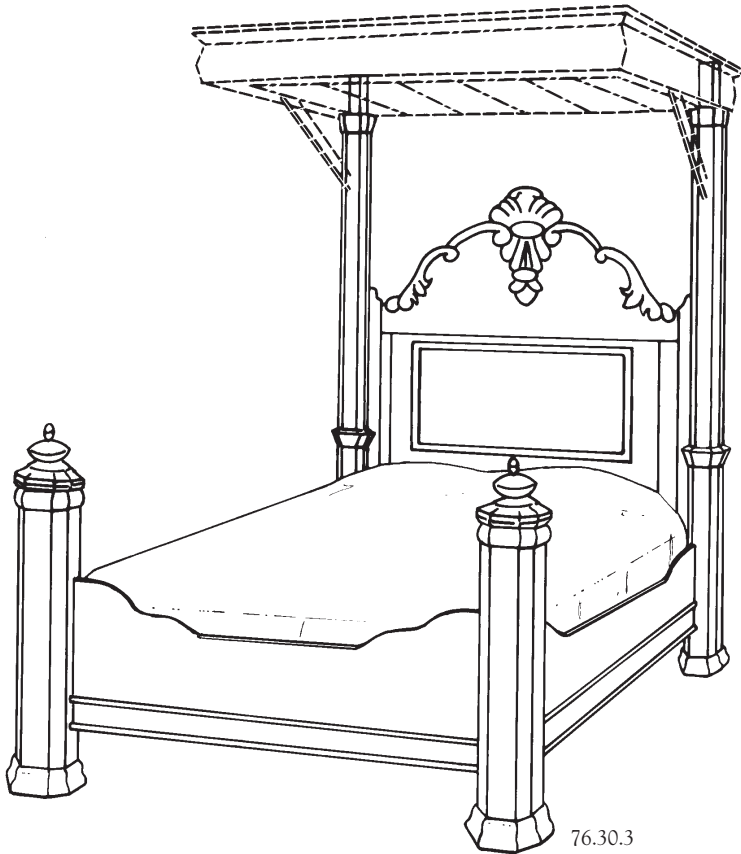
76.30.32

Like the two cane-seat chairs, the daybed may have been used by the Ireland family at the Governor's Mansion and later given to the Zorns. Daybeds such as this one were used for daytime reclining and "dinner naps" and were placed in bedrooms and entry halls. A form favored by Texas cabinetmakers, the daybed features a headboard and a footboard of the same height. Wooden slats would have supported a narrow mattress – a bag of ticking filled with cotton, wool or horsehair.



76.30.24

Families needed chests, wardrobes, trunks and boxes to store clothing and household items. A cabinetmaker fashioned this four-drawer chest of walnut and pine. The case and drawer fronts are solid walnut.

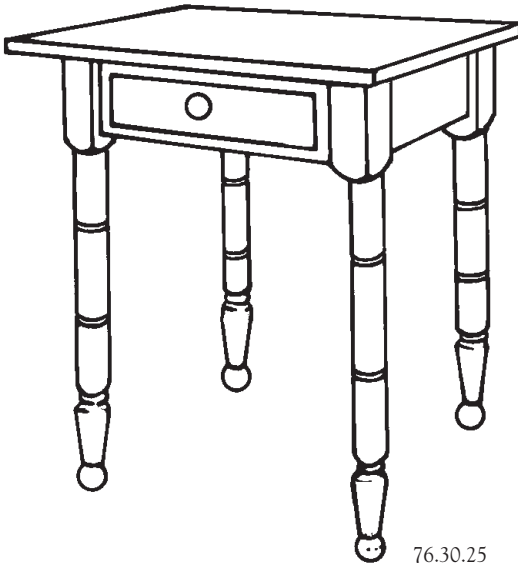


When assembled, this bedstead extends seven feet. Originally it sported a half-teaster, or canopy, from which may have draped mosquito netting. This gauze material blocked troublesome insects from people as they slept. The window and door screens that accomplish this today were not widely available until the 1890s. Joe and Nettie Zorn's bed was fashioned of mahogany and pine and decorated with features of the renaissance revival style. Family tradition reports that all six of the couple's children were born in this bed.

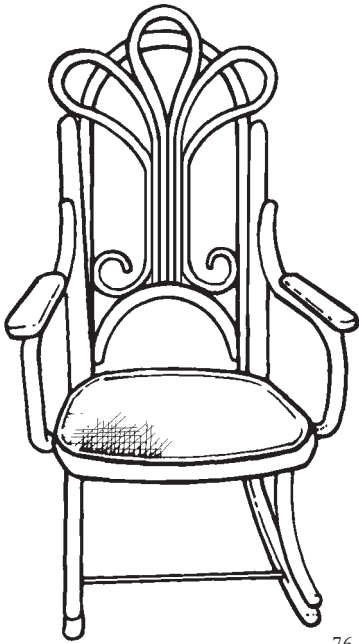


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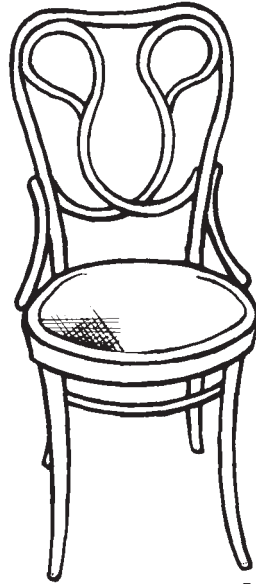
This chest of drawers resembles others made by some of the 874 furniture makers working in Texas before 1875 and may be the work of one of them. At the time when this piece was made, circa 1860-1870, at least ten furniture makers were active in Seguin. The Zorn family had a special connection to the cabinetmaking tradition since Josephine, Joe's sister, married Joseph Wassenich, a Seguin cabinetmaker and furniture importer during the 1870s.



Ink stains in the drawer indicate that this small table once served as a writing desk. Tables of this type were frequent products of Texas cabinetmakers. Pine was often used because it was available and cheap. Made of solid pine, the table was stained a darker color to suggest some rich material, possibly walnut, a common practice especially during the second half of the nineteenth century.

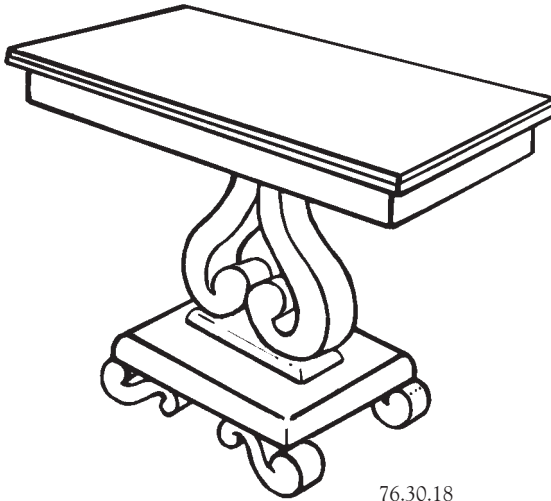


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76.30.38

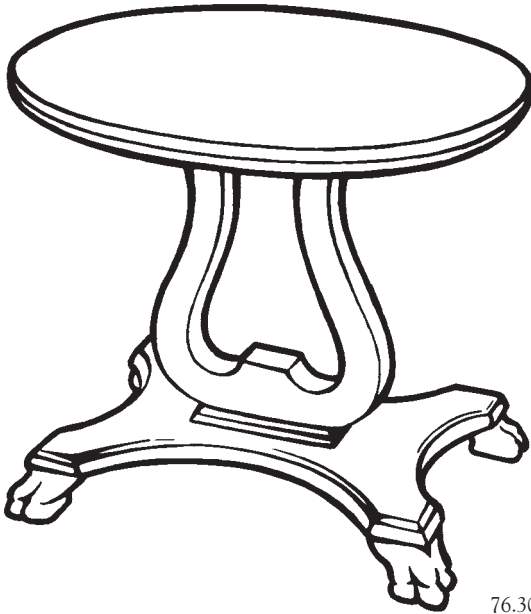
Pre-dating 1900, these bentwood chairs were part of the Zorn household. They were fashioned after the innovative prototypes of Michael Thonet, an Austrian furniture maker, who at mid-century began producing a variety of chairs made from wood bent by heat or moisture and pressure. The side chair is marked "Austria," and the rocker holds the remnants of a paper label indicating that it came from Furniture Manufacturers, Thonet Brothers, who had a store in New York City at the end of the nineteenth century. Joe Zorn may have purchased the chairs in New Orleans where he often went to buy goods for his mercantile business.



76.30.18

Like other families in Victorian America, the Zorns probably played checkers, chess, dominoes and cards at a game table. Archeologists found dice during their excavations of the house, so we know that some game of chance was played here, possibly on this very table. Board games were also enormously popular during the nineteenth century. One manufacturer alone listed over 250 different games that it sold before 1900.

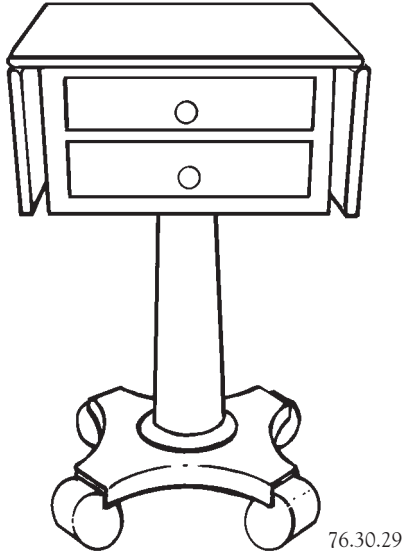
The Zorn's fashionable Empire style table, possibly purchased circa 1830, may have been manufactured in New Orleans where Joseph Zorn, Sr., may have lived upon arriving in the United States. In an effort to continue using the piece, the family attached a new top to the walnut veneer, scroll-shaped base. Apparently, the Zorn family favored the classic style long after its heyday (1830-1850) because they later bought similar tables that revived the Empire style.



76.30.19

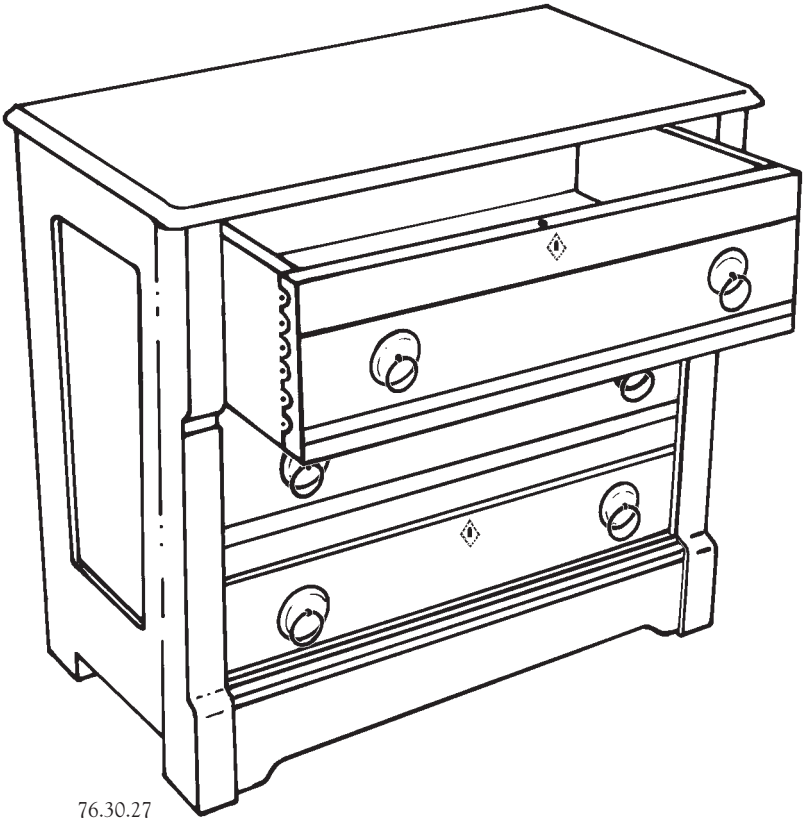
Like the game table, this table also sports the classic Empire S-scroll on its base, but it dates to a later period (circa 1890-1920) and thus demonstrates the ongoing strategy of turn-of-the-century furniture manufacturers to revive earlier styles. Part of this revivalism was a result of the growing interest in the past which had begun in earnest at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. This enthusiasm for history prompted people to hunt for antiques, but many more turned to furniture companies who were manufacturing “antiques.”

Sometime after being in the Zorn household, the base received a new top and the whole table was covered with a thick, clear varnish that is now cracking. The fact that the furniture has been repaired so that the family could continue using it is a common thread that unites the pieces in this collection.



76.30.29

Dating to the early twentieth century, this sewing table was one of the newer pieces belonging to the Zorn family. An inset inside the top drawer provides compartments for sewing supplies. Joe and Nettie's daughters, Nell and Kate, probably used the table since they earned their livings as seamstresses.



76.30.27

The drawers of this chest display an innovative method of joinery – the work of the Knapp dovetailing machine. Patented in 1872 by Charles B. Knapp of Waterloo, Wisconsin, and Nathan S. Clement of Northampton, Massachusetts, the machine produced dowel-secured joints that replaced traditional dovetail construction. This new technique characterized a limited amount of furniture produced from approximately 1870-1900.

Sebastopol House Furniture and Families

Points for our young visitors to ponder

After you look at the furniture in the house, see what you think about some of the questions below.

Catherine Young LeGette had a **desk** that looked a lot like a dresser. She probably kept the household accounts and paid her bills while sitting at this desk—did you notice the stains on top of the desk made by an ink well?

In which room of the house do you suppose she kept the desk?

Do you have furniture in your house that serves more than one purpose?

If this desk belonged to you, what would you put in the compartments?

Whose desk would fill up faster—yours or hers? Why?

Nettie Watkins Zorn owned a “**whatnot**” shelf. She collected ceramics with different china patterns. She may have displayed her favorites here to enjoy the collection.

Do you collect certain things?

If so, what kinds of things?

How do you display them?

Mantle clocks were very popular in the nineteenth century.

Before clocks were invented how did people know what time it was?

Before everyone had a watch or clock, was it important to know the exact hour and minutes?

How do you suppose people kept appointments or got to school or work on time without a timepiece?

Remember the big **bed** in the master bedroom? At one time it would have had mosquito netting hanging from a canopy over it. Before the 1890s, Texans did not have screens to put on their doors and windows. Insects were part of everyone's life.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to have your house open to bugs all the time?

How would you have kept bugs off of your food?

Black Walnut and Cypress trees grew along the banks of Walnut Creek. Both are slow-growing, hardy wood that can last a long time when it is taken care of. In the mid-1800s, there were about 10 furniture makers in Seguin.

What kind of wood do you think the furniture makers looked for?

Explore which other types of wood are found in our part of Texas that would have made good **furniture**.

After some use, furniture often needs to be repaired or replaced. The Zorn's furniture was no exception.

Does your house have some old furniture you use everyday?

What is the oldest piece of furniture in your house?

What was the last piece of furniture in your house that was replaced or repaired?

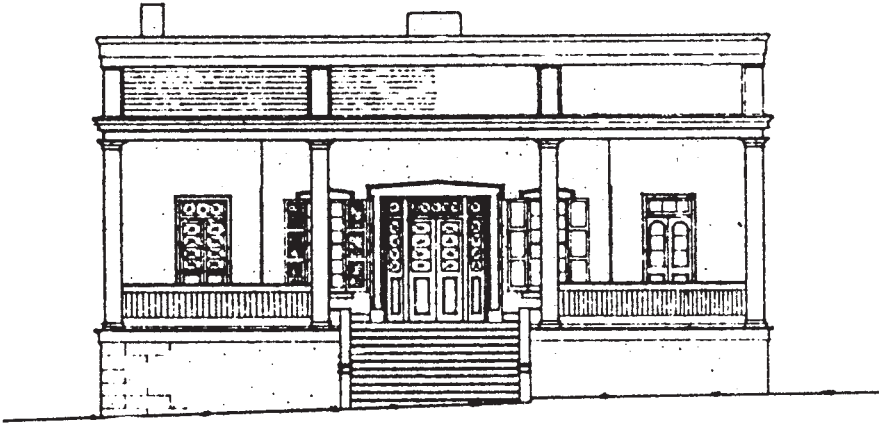
These questions are designed to help you think and talk about what life was like for the families who lived here. Have fun imagining and talking about them because there are no wrong answers!

Thank you for visiting Sebastopol House!



The lives and the circumstances of the Zorn family, and the LeGettes to a lesser extent, are reflected by the furniture on display. For example, Joe Zorn's desk and bookcase commemorate his participation in Seguin's civic life; the daybed and cane-seat chairs suggest a connection to other people in the community; the game and sewing tables evoke family members' pastimes and livelihoods; a trio of tables indicates consistent personal preference and recurring furniture designs; and the what-not and balloon-back and bentwood chairs document that the Zorns embraced popular taste. Furthermore, the repairs and modifications to many of the pieces show a concerted effort to maintain household possessions in good order during the course of a century.





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