

# Heritage Matters...in Markham

## Markham Heritage Hardware

If you subscribe to the maxim of the late great 20<sup>th</sup> century architect Mies van der Rohe that “God is in the Details”, your heritage house is not complete without the appropriate period hardware. If you’re lucky, the original hardware is still in place quietly doing its job without anyone taking much notice. However, period hardware is definitely worth a second look, and worth replacing if it has gone missing. Think of hardware as jewellery for your home and you will have no problem seeing it as an investment. Period hardware adds to the character and value of a heritage home and modern manufacturers have responded to the demand by reproducing the more popular patterns of the past. The most obvious piece of hardware that we use daily is the humble doorknob. However, the hardware that was found on the early houses of Markham isn’t what we’re used to seeing today. Heritage houses of Markham that retain their original hardware are likely to have four different kinds of locking mechanisms ranging from thumb latches, plate latches, box locks and mortised locks.

The thumb latch replaced the most basic of locking devices which was a simple wooden bar dropped between two brackets on the interior of the door. Thumb latches were made as early as the 1700’s, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and are still being produced today. The first thumb latches were hand forged by local blacksmiths or imported from Great Britain or the United States. They are simple in design but nonetheless representative of the blacksmith’s art. Thumb latches can be divided into two types; the “Suffolk” and the “Norfolk” latch, the later being distinguished by the presence of a back plate. By the 1840’s, thumb latches were beginning produced from cast iron which allowed mass production and detail which was not easily produced in wrought iron. As the nineteenth century progressed, thumb latches slowly gave way to the use of doorknobs and thumb latches were relegated to utility buildings. Today early thumb latches can sometimes be found on barn doors or on the cellar doors of old houses where they were recycled for continued use.

The plate latch is kind of a combination between a doorknob and a thumb latch whereby the latch is raised by turning a knob and returned to place by the action of a spring. The advantage of the plate lock over the thumb latch was that the whole mechanism could be installed on the door as one piece instead of the multiple components of a thumb latch. The plate was screwed to the surface of the door and the spring and bar were exposed to view. Thus these locks were also called spring latches, or wishbone latches due to the shape of the spring.

The next logical progression in the development of door hardware was the box lock or rim lock, which enclosed the latch and spring mechanism of the plate latch in an iron box. The most commonly found of the early box locks are those patented by an Englishman by the name of John Carpenter in 1820 and called The Carpenter Box Lock. These locks still operate on the principal of a latch bar that moves up and down with the turn of the knob and are distinguished by brass fittings and a smaller than usual brass doorknob.

By 1840’s the first cast iron box locks were patented. The use of cast iron allowed these locks to be mass produced to satisfy the needs of North America’s swelling population. Cast iron box or rim locks are by far the most commonly found locks on heritage homes in Markham and there are still hundreds in service to this day. These locks were produced in the thousands by familiar names like Linus Yale, Phillip Corbin, Walter Schlage and Sargent & Co. The cases of these locks could be relatively plain or in some cases highly decorated. These locks are often found in conjunction with the familiar white porcelain knobs referred to as mineral knobs. Mineral knobs also came in black and rich brown flecked or swirled designs referred to as Bennington knobs due to their resemblance to the pottery produced at by the famous Vermont pottery. Some of these mineral knobs even featured pressed designs in the knob.

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By the 1870's there was an explosion in decorative hardware reflecting the rapid succession of revival styles that swept North America in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Doorknobs and hardware of all sorts was decorated so that no surface was left unadorned. The styles reflected included Neo-Grec, popular around the United States Centennial in 1876, Eastlake, Aesthetic Movement, Romanesque, Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts. The doorknobs produced in this period often featured designs and casting of exquisite detail and quality that hasn't been surpassed to this day. Cast iron was still the every day material with high end products being cast in brass or bronze. The most valuable of these doorknob sets were those produced by the Russell Erwin Company of Boston Massachusetts. Their so called Doggie doorknob now sells at auction for over \$8000.00 U.S., but you are not too likely to stumble upon one in Markham.

Gradually surface mounted box locks began to be replaced with mortised locks where a portion of the door is chiselled out to accept the mechanism of the lock. This is the type of locking mechanism we are most familiar with today. These types of locks require more skill to install but they provide a cleaner less clunky appearance.

By the turn of the last century the so called golden age of hardware was coming to a close. The need to produce greater and greater quantities led to most companies sacrificing quality. Gradually hardware became less decorative and stamped from cheaper thinner pieces of metal. The familiar pressed glass or crystal doorknobs with thin metal back plates were produced from the early 1900's up until World War II but after that designs became much less imaginative.

If your home has been stripped of its original hardware you might be able to buy it back from a dealer who specializes in Architectural Antiques. They should be able to guide you in selecting hardware appropriate to the age and design of your home, give you tips on how to install it or help you recondition or maintain your existing period hardware. If you can't find what you're looking for there, head to your computer and search for dealers on-line that specialize in period hardware. On-line auction sites like Ebay have hundreds of listings of antique hardware every day that will satisfy the needs of the homeowner who wants to replace some basic period hardware to the passionate collector who prefers to put their hardware in display cases.

Local Sources for Antique Hardware:

The Door Store  
1260 Castlefield Ave.  
Toronto, ON  
(416) 863-1590  
[www.thedoorstore.ca](http://www.thedoorstore.ca)

Artefacts  
46 Isabella St.  
St. Jacobs, ON  
(519) 863-1590  
[www.artefacts.ca](http://www.artefacts.ca)

Reproduction Hardware  
Lee Valley  
[www.leevalley.com](http://www.leevalley.com)

Legacy Vintage Building Supply  
540 Division St.  
Cobourg, ON  
(905) 373-0796  
[info@legacyvintage.ca](mailto:info@legacyvintage.ca)

Balleycanoe & Co.  
150 Rockfield Rd  
Mallorytown, ON  
(613-659-3874  
[www.balleycanoeco.com](http://www.balleycanoeco.com)

"Heritage Matters...in Markham"  
is a series of information brochures  
on heritage planning topics.

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