

Secret Spaces

Create hidden compartments to suit any style of furniture

BY MARK SCHOFIELD



FALSE DRAWER BOTTOM

One of the simplest hidden compartments is a shallow space below the main drawer. This trick, which has withstood the test of time, can conceal anything from a lover's letter to some rainy-day funds.

To lessen the chance of discovery, keep the hidden compartment shallow.



Most woodworkers associate hidden compartments exclusively with 18th-century furniture. At that time, growing wealth, a lack of banks and a reliance on custom furniture combined to spur innovation in secret compartments. While today's period furniture makers continue to build secret compartments into their pilasters and moldings, fans of Arts and Crafts or Shaker-style furniture have largely ignored this design element in their work.

Got something to hide? It really is possible to incorporate secret compartments into any style of furniture, taking advantage of dead space inherent in the design or subtly altering your plans to create a space and an entry mechanism that only you and those you trust will know about.

Three considerations when designing a hidden compartment

Before designing a piece of furniture that includes one or several secret locations,

there are a few things that you should consider: First, how large a space do you need and is it practical in the piece that you plan to build? You may have trouble concealing your prized shotgun inside that Shaker nightstand. Even if you decide to incorporate the hiding place into a larger piece, don't be greedy: Those 10-in.-deep drawers in that 20-in.-deep desk may arouse suspicion.

Second, how accessible do you want the secret space to be? Hollowing out the



A DRAWER BETWEEN DRAWERS

Built by Billy Sisson at the Oregon State Penitentiary's woodworking shop, this pie safe contains a hidden compartment attached to a drawer divider.

leg of a chest of drawers might have seemed like a good idea when you built the piece, but when you have to turn over the chest just to get at your horde of bon-bons, you may have second thoughts. On the other hand, that copy of *The New York Times* announcing your birth can probably lie undisturbed.

Third, how are you going to secure the compartment? Some hiding places rely on blending into the workpiece, and any kind of latch or lock would give them away. Other compartments may need these kinds of mechanisms to remain concealed, so think carefully about how best to incorporate them invisibly.

Your secret compartment is not a bank vault—When it comes to storing valuables, 18th-century Americans lacked the choices we enjoy today. Banks were often far away and none too secure, while domestic safes were unheard of. But before creating a hidden compartment to store your 21st-century stock certificates and rainy-day funds, remember that your “bank” is not FDIC insured. Neither is it theft-proof nor fireproof, and unfortunately, your insurance carrier is unlikely to cover items that should have been kept in a genuinely safe place.

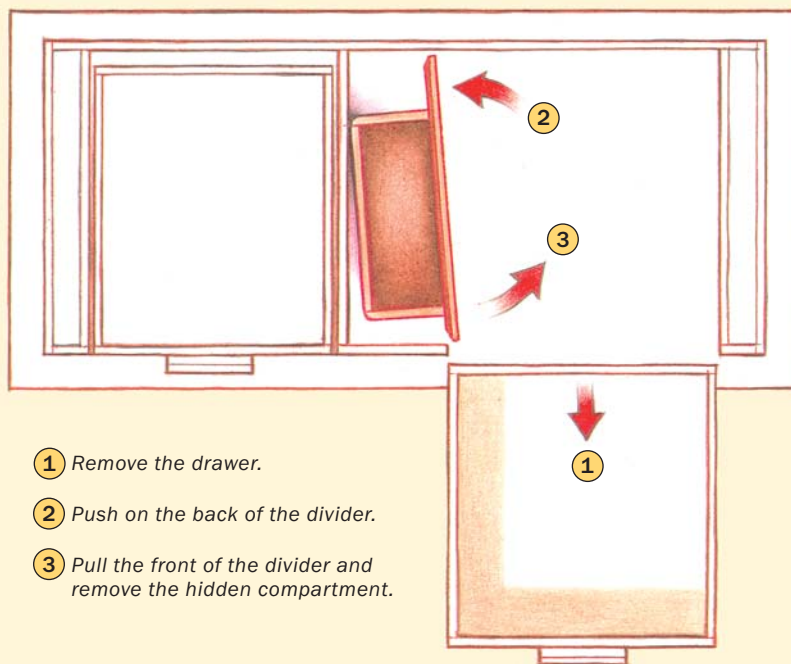
Hidden compartments in today's furniture are primarily a chance for the woodworker to demonstrate his or her ingenuity in design and construction. It is ironic that the better you are, the less likely your skills will be noticed.

Making use of available space

The simplest way to incorporate a hidden compartment into your piece is to make use of dead space inherent in the design. Examine your plans for likely areas, trying to think in three dimensions as much as possible and putting aside preconceived



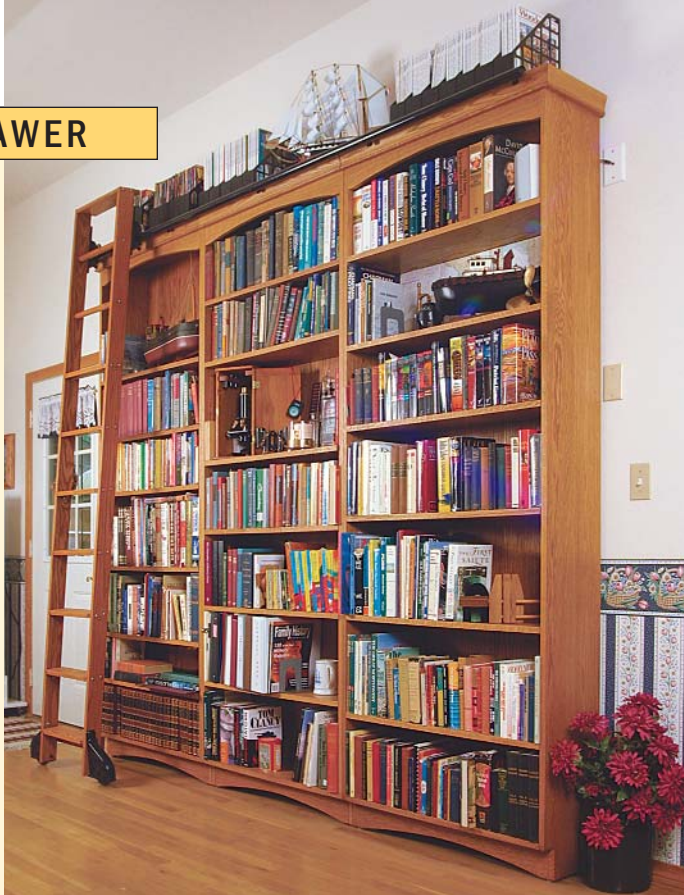
Nothing complicated here. After one drawer is removed, the hidden compartment, which rests in a dead space between two drawers, may be pulled out.



- ① Remove the drawer.
- ② Push on the back of the divider.
- ③ Pull the front of the divider and remove the hidden compartment.

TOE-KICK DRAWER

A novel place for a hidden compartment. Even in a piece as open as this bookshelf, it is possible to hide a compartment. Behind the center toe kick is a shallow but wide drawer.



ideas. It is this ability to think “inside the box” and to display cunning that is critical to creating good hiding places.

Andrew Parker, the woodworking instructor at the Oregon State Penitentiary, said he never ceases to be amazed by the creativity some inmates display when it comes to hiding contraband and weapons. Their skills have created a reputation for hidden compartments in furniture built by the penitentiary’s woodworking program. Now many customers ask to have hidden compartments built into their pieces.

Compartments hidden away—Secret compartments using dead space fall into two categories: those that are hidden from view and those that are in plain sight. An example of the former is a pie safe built at the Oregon State Penitentiary (see p. 91): Behind the facade between the two drawers is a lidless box with a divider attached to one side. To access the compartment it is necessary to remove the right-hand drawer, and then push on the rear of the di-





SLIDING BACK PANEL

The cornice molding on this cabinet surrounds a small compartment that is accessible via a sliding back panel.

vider to make the front of the divider protrude. The box is extracted by pulling on the leading edge of the divider. Although simple in design, the plan relies on tight-fitting joinery for its success.

Two more examples of hidden compartments using existing dead space come from period furniture maker Randall O'Donnell. His cherry secretary (see p. 95) incorporates a pair of drawers in the bonnet top, visible and accessible only when the top center drawer is removed.

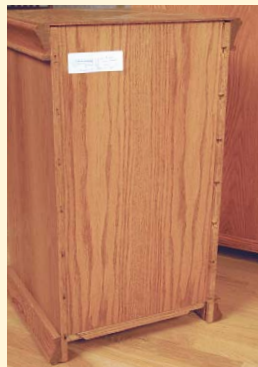
Hidden compartments in full view—

Other locations for compartments using existing dead space rely on what Parker describes as “creating a false sense of permanence.” In the large bookshelf that Parker designed (see the facing page), no one would think of checking the toe-kick boards. The center board, however, is the front of a drawer that slides out, revealing a shallow space for storing documents or, in this case, spare shelf supports.

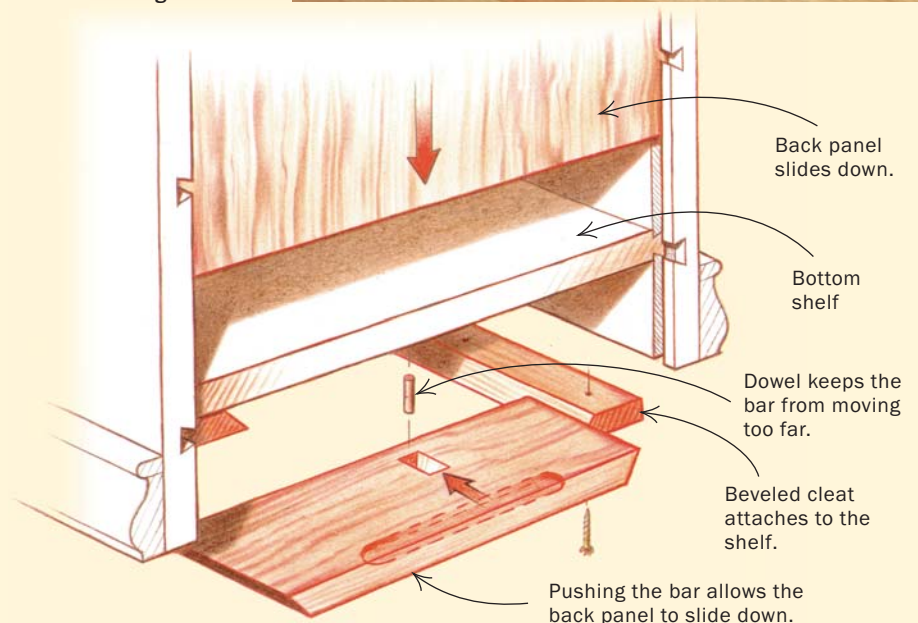
O'Donnell has hidden no less than six compartments in plain sight by using the pigeonhole valances in his secretary. Tight joinery makes the valances appear permanently fixed in the pigeonholes, but pulling on the valances reveals narrow yet deep drawers.

Creating space for compartments

When it comes to designing projects to accommodate hidden compartments, your imagination is the only limiting factor. Christian Becksvoort, renowned for his Shaker-style furniture, often employs hidden compartments. In the drop-front desk he recently built (featured on the cover of



A hidden catch. The rear of the spice cabinet has a bar on which the back panel rests. When pushed, the back panel slides down to reveal a compartment that's hidden behind the cornice molding.



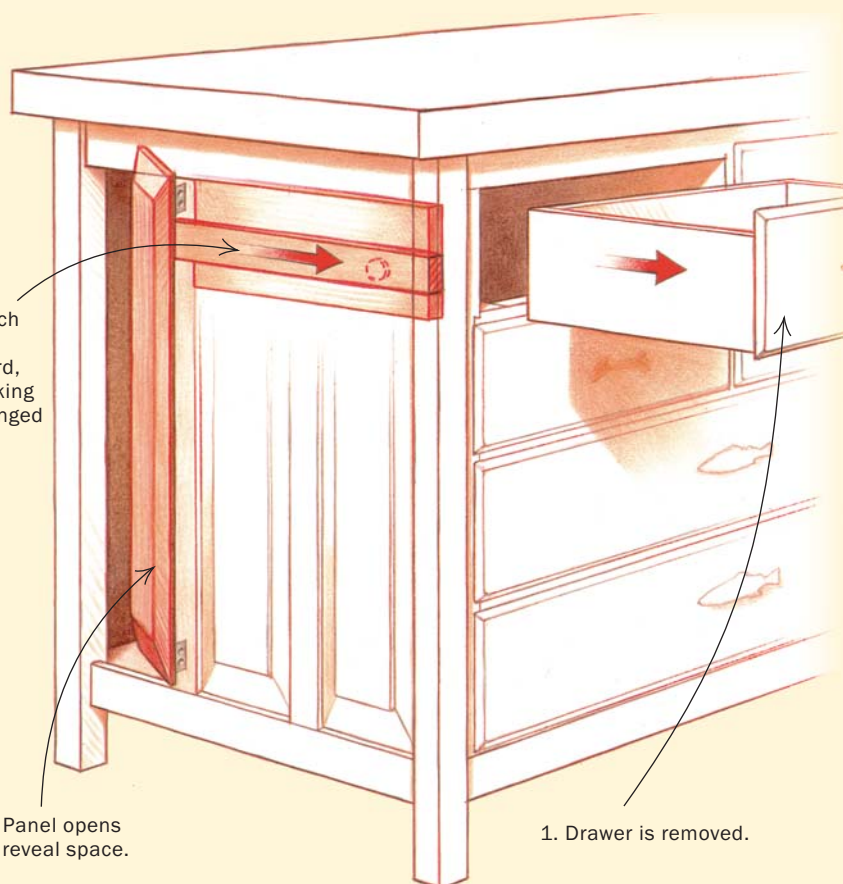


SECRET DOOR PANEL

This side table has a large secret compartment built into the rear of the piece.



Hidden latch. First remove the drawer to reveal the latch. Sliding the latch forward allows the rear panel to be swung open to access the hidden compartment behind all of the drawers.



2. Latch slides forward, unlocking the hinged panel.

3. Panel opens to reveal space.

1. Drawer is removed.

last year's *Tools & Shops* issue), Becksvoort hollowed out a space in the underside of a lid support to hide the key to the desk.

Becksvoort also employs perhaps the most common form of secret compartment: the double-bottomed drawer. In this example, he leaves a gap between the two bottoms large enough to hide some notes and coins (see the photos on p. 90).

A more elaborate variation on this theme, built at the Oregon State Penitentiary, hides a second drawer in the back of the large center drawer of a floor-standing spice chest. A second compartment is hidden behind the crown molding (see the photos on p. 93). Access is gained by pushing in a bar at the base of the rear, allowing the back panel to slide down.

The spaces you create can be small—In their version of Thomas Jefferson's writing desk, the Oregon inmates have created a tiny secret compartment. When a drawer divider is removed, a concave pencil tray can be lifted out to reveal a space underneath. Although it was not in the original desk, Jefferson might well have appreciated the secret space for keeping documents from prying eyes.

In the secretary that featured compartments hidden behind the pigeonhole valances, O'Donnell created several other hiding places (see the photos on the facing page). Behind each of the three drawers in the prospect box is another box, while the pilasters also slide out.

Larger spaces are harder to hide and access—An example of a large hidden compartment appears in a side table made by Parker (left). The drawers extend only two-thirds of the way to the back of the piece, leaving a large area of dead space. The real challenge was to design a concealed opening to match such a large space; after all, there is little point in having room for your prized collection of 78-rpm albums if the opening is only big enough for a CD. Parker's solution was to make a hinged rear panel on one side. The panel remains locked until you pull on a latch tucked in beside a drawer.

With a little thought and ingenuity, it is possible to create a hidden compartment in any piece of furniture. It's the woodworker's version of a magic trick. □

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A gallery of secrets

Hidden compartments reached their zenith in high-style 18th-century furniture, whose elaborate carvings and masses of drawers and cubbyholes made it relatively easy to conceal one, two or in some cases a dozen secret places.

There were practical reasons for making hiding places in furniture. Banks were few and far between, and even if they were convenient, the funds were neither secure nor insured. It therefore made sense to keep valuables hidden at home.

In this 18th-century highboy, Randall O'Donnell hid a pair of drawers in the bonnet top, and six drawers are cleverly concealed behind the pigeonhole valances. The three drawers in the prospect box each hides another drawer, and the pilasters slide out to reveal secret storage.

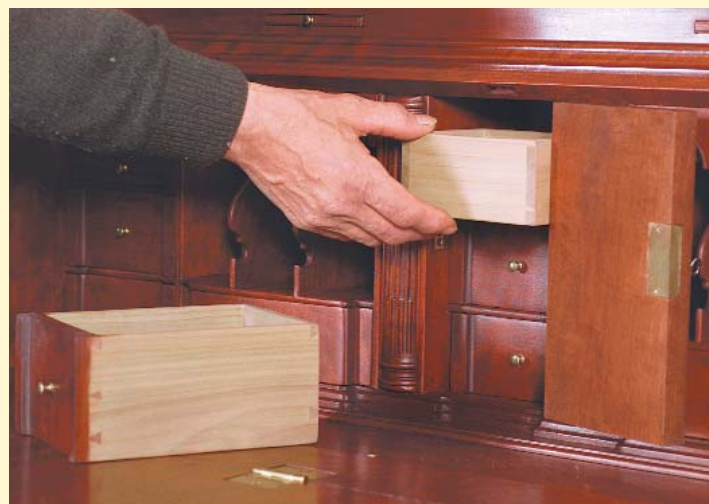


Unlocking the top drawer. First, screw in a small knob and slide back the well. Then reach in and move a pair of sliding bolts inside the top drawer.

Pigeonholed. The valance above each pigeonhole is the front of a hidden drawer. Tight joinery makes the valances appear permanently fixed in the pigeonholes. The drawers are narrow but deep.



A moving column. The pilasters in this secretary slide out to reveal themselves as hidden compartments.



Drawers behind drawers. Three drawers are hidden behind the three front drawers in the prospect box.