

A Glimpse of Beekeeping in the 1830s

by WYATT A. MANGUM
N.C. State University, Box 7626
Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-7626

For those of you who are interested in beekeeping equipment as it developed in the U.S., plan to attend the 1991 EAS convention in New Bern, N. C. on July 24-26, 1991. Wyatt Mangum will have a display at the meeting from his large and impressive Beekeeping Museum. Beekeepers who are interested in learning more about the Mangum Beekeeping Museum or in donating equipment should contact Mr. Mangum directly. Details and registration information for the EAS convention will appear in later issues of this journal.

WHILE HUNTING for old beekeeping books, I had the good fortune to find a signed beehive patent from long ago. The patent was issued on Aug. 6, 1834 to Levi H. Parish of Monroe County, New York. This document lacks a patent number (it was not until about 1839 that patents were numbered). After looking through my patent files, I concluded that this was about the tenth beehive patent issued in the United States. The patent explains the construction and "management" of Mr. Parish's beehive.

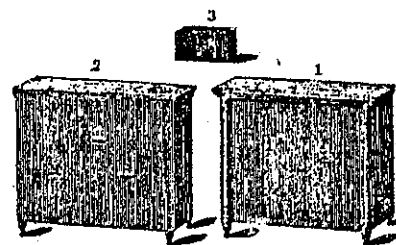
Viewed from the outside, the beehive looks like a piece of furniture (see Figure 1). In fact, Mr. Parish uses a furniture reference in suggesting the dimensions of his hive. "The hive should be made of boards, of size, say, three feet high, three feet eight inches long and one foot eight inches deep, (standing on legs like a bureau) or any other convenient size to suit the taste of the builder." A cabinet-type door with some locking device was on the front side of the hive. The top of the hive opened like a trunk and was also provided with a lock. The interior of the hive consisted of four close fitting wooden boxes with their bottom sides open to allow bee passage. These four boxes filled the upper one-third of the hive and rested on wood strips or slats

spaced about three-quarters of an inch apart. With another tier of slats about one foot below the first, the interior of the hive was complete. The bees placed surplus honey in the four boxes. Filling the space beneath the boxes were their combs containing brood and non surplus honey. In addition to supporting the honey boxes, the upper tier of slats provided the initial sites of comb construction. The bees were forced to build large combs through the lower tier of slats. Supposedly, the slats increase the structural strength of the

combs. (Their function is analogous to cross sticks in a log or box hive).

On the back of the hive were three entrances in a triangular arrangement. Mr. Parish advises that the hive should be "set in a room in the upper story of a house, or other building, with the back side against the wall of the building." Three tubes extended through the wall of the house to the outside, thus allowing free flight of the bees. (I wonder if Mr. Parish was married).

With the beehive located in the



LETTERS PATENT.

The Schedule referred to in these Letters Patent, and making part of the same, containing a description in the words of the said Levi H. Parish, himself, of his improvement in the construction of Bee Hives, and in the management and preservation of Bees.

Figure 1 — Mr. Parish's beehive which was patented on Aug. 6, 1834. His hive resembles a piece of furniture. This sketch accompanied the original signed patent.

upper story of the house, Mr. Parish claims the following advantages.

"... the bee master may exercise absolute control over his property, and instead of having it wrested from his hands improperly... The bees would be secure from the inclemencies of the weather... The hive should be so perfectly tight within the house that nothing could molest them; and the tubes being the only entrance from without, it is believed that they will be too high and too much scented for insects, especially the bee which had left destroyed the honey bee to enter."

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Lastly, here are two more eye-catching claims:

"The owner should be careful to leave honey sufficient in the hive for the use of the bees through the winter, which he may well afford to do, as it is well known that 10 or 12 lbs. will winter a swarm of common size, even as far north as latitude 42 or 43 degrees (approximately upstate New York)... As a matter of profit, it is confidently believed that bees kept in this manner will pay some hundred percent more on the capital invested, than any other stock our country will produce; yet instead of producing our own, we impact a great quantity of honey every year."

As a student of apicultural history, I was pleased with obtaining such rare documents; but this was not the whole story. In my beekeeping museum was a beehive, which from the outside resembled Mr. Parish's beehive (see Figure 2). I had heard of this hive about 3 years ago from an antique dealer. After deciding to pursue the lead, I finally tracked the hive down about one year later. Patience and persistence finally paid off.

From the outside, the beehive looks like an antique cabinet. In fact, with its door closed, visitors to my beekeeping museum find it difficult to believe that this "piece of furniture" is actually a beehive! One entrance is located on the back of the hive. (Mr. Parish's hive had three). Since there is no alighting board to this entrance, the hive could have been placed against a wall with the tubes that Mr. Parish described; or the hive could have simply been set before an open window in a barn.

Although externally this beehive resembles Mr. Parish's hive, internally it has a different design. With the doors open one sees six compartments (see Figure 3). Gaps (about one-quarter inch) were left between the vertical partitions and the top and bottom of the hive. Similar gaps were in vertical partitions at the junction with the horizontal partition (see Figure 4). The gaps allow bee movement between the compartments. To further increase bee movement, circular holes were cut in the partitions (see Figure 4). Originally, glass panes covered the compartment openings allowing one to observe the inner workings of a colony of bees. This would be a rare treat for most people in a time before single frame observations hives. In addition, the windows allowed the beekeeper to ascertain when the hive was filled with honey. Since this hive design lacks honey storage boxes, the harvest consisted of directly cutting the honey combs from the hive.

When I show an observation hive at the local elementary school and see



Figure 2 — Externally my "cabinet hive" resembles Mr. Parish's hive. This hive was secured for my beekeeping museum after a year-long search.

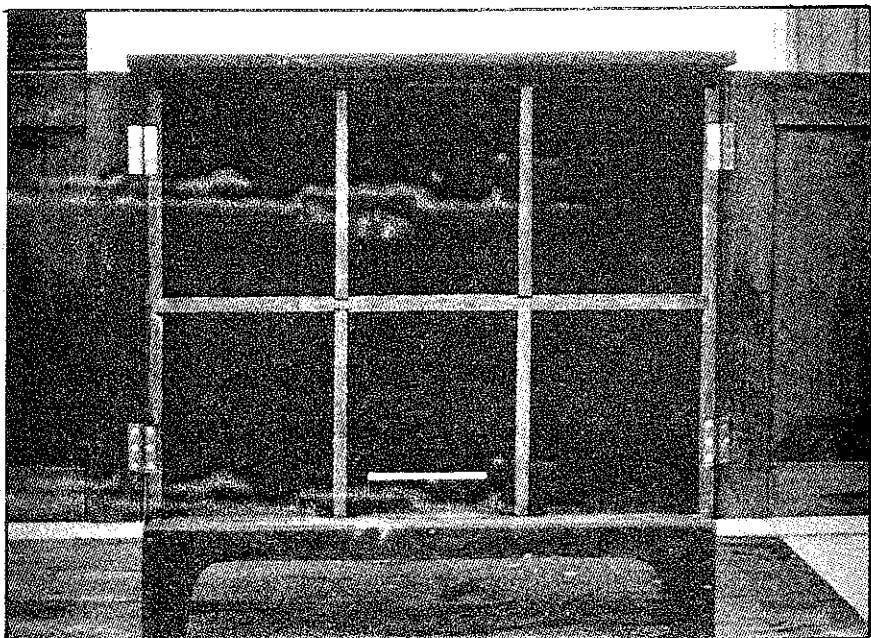


Figure 3 — The cabinet hive with the doors open. The bees resided in some or all of these chambers. Light from the entrance is seen from the lower middle chamber.

the fascination of the children (even among some of their teachers), I wonder about the fascination my cabinet hive may have generated about 150 years ago. Today this hive is on display in my beekeeping museum and still generates fascination. This time it is our beekeepers who find it hard to believe this cabinet is actually a beehive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks John Ambrose for his helpful comments in revising the manuscript and to Grace Haven for typing.

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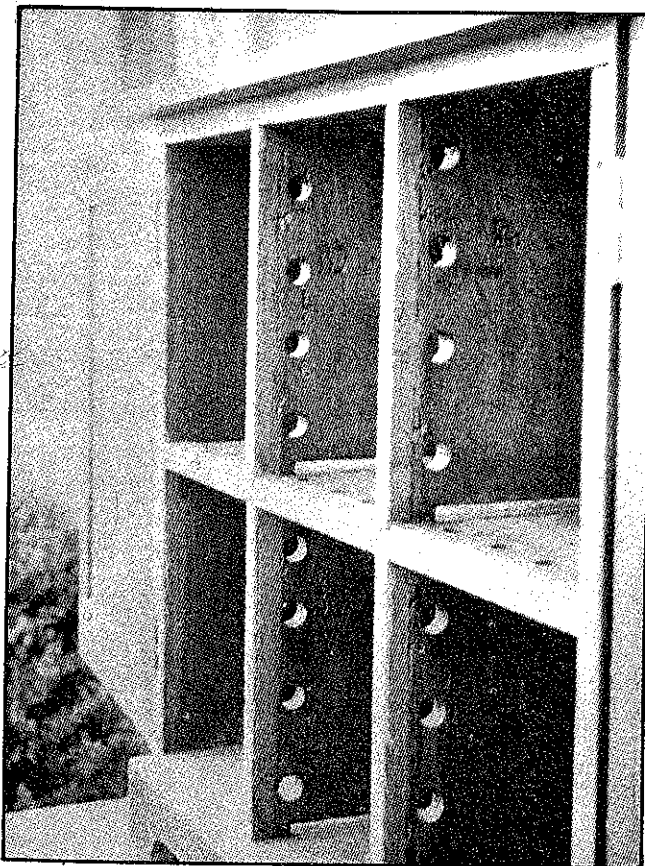


Figure 4 — Bees circulate freely among the chambers by using the gaps at the partition junctions and by holes cut into the partition.

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