

# *The Early American Foot Warmer*

*By Inga Milbauer*

The use of foot warmers, or foot stoves, was one way to keep warm on cold winter days when homes and public spaces were poorly heated. In the seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century, foot warmers were commonly used in homes, meeting houses and churches. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, portable foot warmers were also used on carriages and sleighs.

These foot warmers from the collection of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum date back to the early 1800s.



**Foot Warmers (c. 1800)**

*BHSM Object Collection*



**Foot warmer- front view**

*BHSM Object Collection*



**Foot warmer- top view**

*BHSM Object Collection*

The vintage portable foot warmers in the three photographs above are examples of the most common types found in North America. The two wooden frames on the top and the bottom of each foot warmer, held together with square or rounded pillars, would enclose a perforated sheet iron box with a hinged door to hold a tin container with hot coals. [1] Other designs would have a solid wooden box in which a container filled with embers or hot coals was placed. The container was usually made of iron or tin, and in some cases earthenware. Both the container holding the hot coals and the wooden frame of foot warmers would have holes to release the heat. The holes would

usually appear in a pattern, such as circles, hearts, diamonds, and stars. A blanket or women's long skirts would be used to hang over the foot warmer to keep the heat inside.

The foot warmers initially used in colonial America were inspired by the Dutch style foot warmers which were widely used the Netherlands and Northern Germany. The English term "foot stove" (prior to 1800 spelled 'stow') is derived from the Dutch "stoof," meaning an object to keep something warm. A typical Dutch-style foot stove would be a wooden box with holes on the top and an opening on one side to hold a metal or earthenware pot with handles which would hold the hot coals. This type of foot stove did not have the wire handle as seen in the photographs above.

In colonial America, foot stoves were commonly used during long Sunday church services. In *Sabbath in Puritan New England* (1891), Alice Morse Earle describes the use in a Puritan New England meeting house:

*"In bitter winter weather women carried to meeting little foot-stoves,--metal boxes which stood on legs and were filled with hot coals at home, and a second time during the morning from the hearthstone of a neighboring farm-house or a noon-house. These foot-warmers helped to make endurable to the goodwives the icy chill of the meeting-house; and round their mother's foot-stove the shivering little children sat on their low crickets, warming their half-frozen fingers."* [2]

The use of foot stoves would sometimes prove dangerous as it could lead to fires. Therefore, some churches prohibited the use of foot stoves. In these communities, worshippers used other ways of keeping warm such as bringing a basket filled with straw and a heated stone, or using fur bags which were tied or nailed to the edges of the benches to warm their feet. In some communities it was customary for families to bring their dog to provide a source of warmth. The dogs, however, became such "abounding nuisance that dog-whippers had to be appointed to serve on Sundays to drive them out." [3] Other early churches would impose fines to discourage bringing dogs to church services.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, foot warmers were also used in unheated carriages and sleighs, and they were commonly used on trains. As traveling became more comfortable over time with heated carriages and cars; as cast-iron stoves improved the heating in homes and churches, the cozy warmth of foot stoves became a relic of the past.

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*Acknowledgements:*

[1] [https://www.colonialsense.com/Antiques/Other\\_Antiques/Foot\\_Warmers.php](https://www.colonialsense.com/Antiques/Other_Antiques/Foot_Warmers.php)

[2] *Sabbath in Puritan New England* by Alice Morse Earle, p.132

[3] *Sabbath in Puritan New England* by Alice Morse Earle, p.135

[4] *Sabbath in Puritan New England* by Alice Morse Earle, p.136

Editor, Nancy A. Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc., Boylston, Massachusetts

[https://www.colonialsense.com/Antiques/Other\\_Antiques/Foot\\_Warmers.php](https://www.colonialsense.com/Antiques/Other_Antiques/Foot_Warmers.php)

<https://www.frauncestavernmuseum.org/december2020-object-of-the-month>

<https://homethingspast.com/2012/04/25/foot-warmers/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot\\_stove](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_stove)

Photography by Carrie Crane

*Sabbath in Puritan New England* by Alice Morse Earle, 1891, E-book by Duke Classics, 2015