

# American Pewter in the Collections of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

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**I**n addition to its many fine houses, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities possesses several interesting and noteworthy collections. Among the most important of these is the Society's pewter and britannaware collection. This collection is significant in many respects. In size alone, it encompasses more than five hundred objects and represents one of the largest public holdings of pewter and britannaware in this country. The collection includes a variety of objects made by the American pewterer as well as many English-made examples. It is especially rich in pieces from the middle of the nineteenth-century. Some of these later britannia examples are unique to this collection, whereas many of the earlier American forms, which are perhaps of greater aesthetic appeal, are duplicated at other museums. An unusual feature of this collection is the number of objects with family histories which have come to the Society as part of intact family furnishings when individual houses were donated. Viewed in its entirety, the Society's collection can contribute much to our knowledge of pewter in New England.

The history and connoisseurship of American pewter and britannaware is discussed in several authoritative works, readily available to the interested reader. Ledlie I. Laughlin's *Pewter in America: Its Makers and Their Marks*, the definitive book on the subject, traces the biography of each pewterer, his marks, and his forms. The history of the pewter industry, the stylistic development and social context of individual forms is detailed in Charles F.

Montgomery's *A History of American Pewter*. Nancy A. Goyne's article, "Britannia in America: the Introduction of a New Alloy and a New Industry," focuses on the development of the new, stronger pewter alloy and the machining techniques used in its manufacture in the early nineteenth-century. Finally, in his recent, in-depth study, *Connecticut Pewter and Pewterers*, John Carl Thomas examines the nature of the pewter industry and the interactions among pewterers in one particular region. It is a superlative work, and it points to the need for more regional studies of pewter.<sup>1</sup>

Three articles published in previous bulletins of *Old-Time New England* explore specific aspects of the SPNEA pewter collection. Percy Raymond's "Pewter at the Harrison Gray Otis House" discusses the English pewter in that house. A second article by Raymond, entitled "Some New England Pewter," surveys the Charles K. Davis gift of American pewter. The last article, "Pewter Communion Service of the Rocky Hill Meeting House" by William Blaney, identifies the English communion pieces belonging to the Society's only ecclesiastic property.<sup>2</sup>

The Society's pewter collection reflects the wide range of objects typically found in the New England home. Table 1 summarizes the number and type of American

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examples in the collection. Considered as a random sampling, this large group of objects suggests the incidence of forms made in New England. The accompanying *Checklist* gives detailed information on the individual pieces.

Although the collection includes some of the more unusual objects fashioned by the American pewterer, such as miniature teasetts, a syringe, a shaving box, and so forth, it is dominated by eating utensils, drinking vessels, and lighting devices. Very little church pewter is represented in

the collection. Aside from the mid-nineteenth-century chalice once owned by the North Berwick Church in Maine, the communion pieces from the Rocky Hill Meeting House (Amesbury, Mass.), and an alms basin from the Third Church in Lynn, Mass., the Society possesses no other ecclesiastical pewter.<sup>3</sup>

Evidencing a general practice among American pewterers, much of the pewter is unmarked, although there are many fine marked examples. Consistant with the Society's policy of acquiring only those ob-

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF AMERICAN PEWTER AT THE SPNEA

Type of object	Marked examples	Unmarked examples	Total
Chalice		1	1
Flagon	1		1
Candlestick	6	5	11
Lamp	16	29	45
Teapot	23	9	32
Miniature teapot		1	1
Coffeepot	1		1
Sugar bowl	2		2
Creamer	2	2	4
Pitcher	4	2	6
Syrup pitcher		1	1
Miniature pitcher		1	1
Mug	3		3
Beaker w/handle	1	5	6
Beaker	2	19	21
Cup with handle		1	1
Porringer	6	10	16
Basin	6	10	16
Charger	5	2	7
Dish	6		6
Soup plate	1		1
Plate	13	6	19
Spoon	2	20	22
Spoon mold		3	3
Inkwell		3	3
Shaker or castor	1	3	4
Castor frame		1	1
Shaving box	1		1
Syringe		1	1
Bedpan		1	1
Totals	102	136	238

jects made by New England craftsmen or relevant to New England's heritage, most of the marked American pewter and britannaware is by New England makers. The Society has no pewter by Southern or Mid-western makers and only a few pieces by New York or Pennsylvania pewterers. Despite the concentration of marked New England pewter, it is surprising that some of the more frequently encountered examples of New England pewter are not represented in this collection. For example,

there are none from the large group of porringers with unidentified initials cast in relief into the handles, which are thought to have been made in the Boston area and have been found so often throughout New England. Likewise, there are no pieces by those itinerant and prolific New England pewterers, the Richard Lees.

Although English pewter is not included in either the table or the *Checklist*, it constitutes a large proportion of the overall collection. Most of the Society's houses with



FIG. 1. TEAPOT BY ALLEN PORTER. *Checklist*, 66; 1977.92. (Photograph by J. David Bohl, SPNEA Archives.)

pewter among their collections have both English and American pewter, and over half of these houses own substantially more English than American pewter. English flatware far outnumbers American flatware, with most of the pieces being made by the few firms which seem to have dominated the export market. Of 138 examples examined, almost a quarter were made by Samuel Ellis or his successors. The other names frequently encountered were Townsend & Compton; Yates and Birch; Edgar, Curtis & Co.; Robert Bush; and Richard King. Almost all of this marked English flatware dates from the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century and reflects the general decline in the importation of flatware which occurred thereafter.

Because families rarely noted the provenance of their pewter, in contrast to more highly valued pieces of family silver, the Society's collection is important because so many pieces have histories which are well documented. Several of the Society's houses contain pieces which are believed to have remained in the families and homes of their original owners. For example, Jonathan Hamilton's inventory, dated November 23, 1802, lists 102 pounds of pewter in the kitchen. Although the inventory does not detail individual pieces, the 102 pounds mentioned probably refers to those pieces still at the Hamilton House which were acquired with other Hamilton furnishings.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the Society's pieces can be traced to the original owner. Two such pieces are a teapot and a lamp from the Allen and Freeman Porter shop in Westbrook, Maine. The Allen Porter teapot (Fig. 1) belonged to the Fessenden family of Maine. According to the most recent owners, it was purchased by Ebenezer Fessenden, a farmer, for his wife while he was on one of his trips to market



FIG. 2. CAMPHENE LAMP ATTRIBUTED TO FREEMAN PORTER. *Checklist*, 91; 1928.679. (Photograph by J. David Bohl, SPNEA Archives.)

produce in Portland.<sup>5</sup> The unmarked camphine lamp, which is attributed to Freeman Porter (Fig. 2), descended in the Jewell family.<sup>6</sup> Family notes state that it was "made at the Porter shop after 1834 by one Elizur B. Forbes [who] died [in] 1884."<sup>7</sup> Although these two pieces have perhaps the most interesting histories, other pieces with known provenance are noted in the *Checklist*.

Many objects in the collection date from the middle of the nineteenth-century. From this period, the Society has several teaset by the successful firm of Leonard, Reed & Barton. Between 1837 and 1847 Leonard, Reed & Barton marketed three teaset patterns, identified as #2700, #2800, and #2900. Copied from popular British models manufactured by Dixon & Sons, these stylish new teaset were enthusiastically received by the American public.



FIG. 3. COFFEEPOT BY LEONARD, REED & BARTON. *Checklist*, 55; 125.1933. (Photograph by J. David Bohl, SPNEA Archives.)

They were a financial and design success for Leonard, Reed & Barton, later Reed & Barton, evidenced by the lengthy period of their production. The Society's octagonal coffeepot #2900 (Fig. 3) with its firm, sturdy profile is indicative of the high quality of britannia ware produced by this long-standing firm. It is unusual in that it still retains its original strainer or brew bag. The muslin bag is supported by a britannia ring fitted to the inside neck of the coffeepot. After brewing, it could be easily removed, or left in place as a strainer. Examples of the other series, #2700 and #2800, are also represented in this collection. Reed &

Barton discontinued all three of these models in the late 1840s because of the introduction of the electroplate process and increased demand for new patterns.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to its many fine mid-nineteenth-century teapots, the Society has an excellent collection of britannia lighting devices from the same period. An unusual pair of camphene burners with glass fonts attests to the ease with which the new pewter alloy combined with other new technological advances (Fig. 4). Because different parts of the lamps date from different times, the lamps may have originally been simple chambersticks which

were later altered and re-fitted as oil-burning lamps. The britannia bases, the earliest sections, can be dated by the touchmark of Smith & Co., a Boston firm in operation from 1847 to 1849, which is stamped into the base. The brass burners, a single wick on one lamp and two splayed wicks on the other, were probably added later since the fittings on the single wick lamp are stamped "Merrill's Patent, July 18 '65." Rufus Merrill of Boston developed a brass burner, which he claimed was safer

and could be better regulated than existing burners. His "Improvement in Lamp Burners" employed a sliding wick tube and annular collecting chambers so that the flame and wick height could be adjusted more easily. A ring around the middle of the wick tube, a safety feature, prevented burnt fingers.<sup>9</sup>

The adaptability of britannia to new technological advances and its responsiveness to the changing demand of nineteenth-century taste are demonstrated

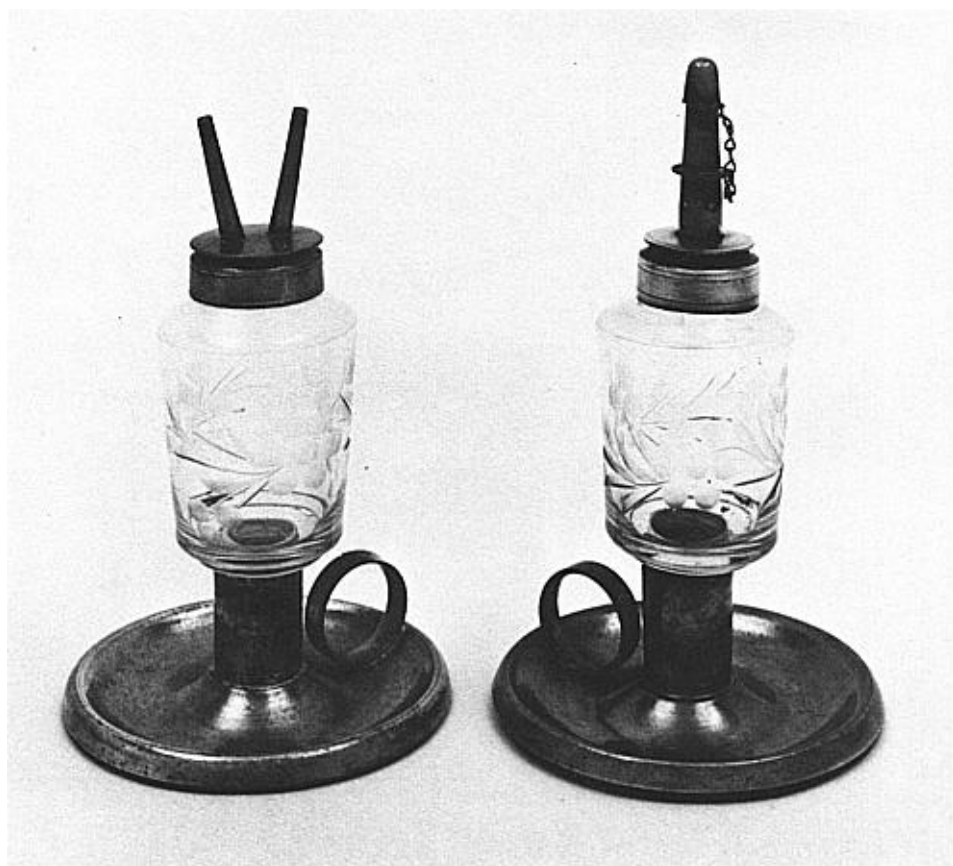


FIG. 4. CAMPHENE LAMPS BY SMITH & CO. (l.) *Checklist*, 78; 1976.374. (r.) *Checklist*, 77; 1976.375. (Photograph by J. David Bohl, SPNEA Archives.)

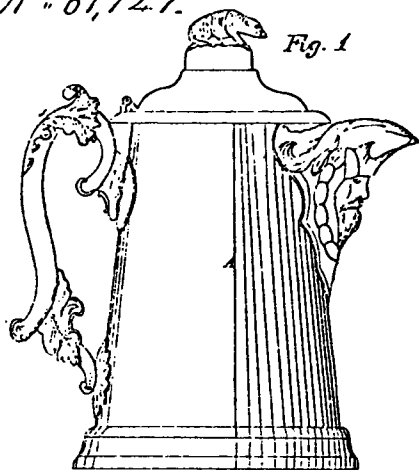


*E. B. Manning,*

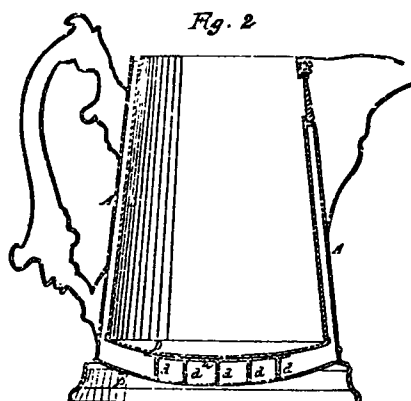
*Ice Pitcher,*

*N<sup>o</sup> 61,747.*

*Patented Feb. 5, 1867.*



*Fig. 1*



*Fig. 2*

FIG. 5. (a), (b) INSULATED PITCHER BY EDWARD MANNING. *Checklist*, 63; 1959.526. (Photographs by J. David Bohl, SPNEA Archives.) (c) DETAIL OF MANNING'S PATENT.

further in an ice pitcher made by Edward Manning (Fig. 5). Manning filed several patent applications for different pitchers and teapots from the early 1860s through 1900. The Society's pitcher, patented in 1867, is typical of nineteenth-century ingenuity. The pitcher is composed of two parts: an outer, larger case with a handle and a copper bottom; and a smaller, removable container fitted with a covered spout and lid which sits inside the outer case. The outer case could be filled with ice to keep the contents of the inner container chilled.

Though patented as an "improved" product, Manning's ice pitcher represents a dubious advance over contemporary examples. The difficulties with ordinary types of ice pitchers which Manning identified were probably only recognized by him. He states in his patent:

When pieces of ice are dropped into . . . [ordinary] ice pitchers, unless great care is exercised, they strike heavily upon and indent the bottom . . . which being frequently done, the bottom is soon pierced and the pitcher requires repairs . . . It may be proper to here remark, though it is well known, that the metal used in the manufacture of such pitchers is the common

Britannia, which is very soft and easily indented. This metal is used because it has no injurious effects upon the water, and does not rust.

Manning patented the reinforcement of the bottom of the inner container with a hard metal plate — the result being a stronger "improved" pitcher and a curious forerunner to our modern insulated pitcher or thermos.<sup>10</sup>

Unique to the Society's collection are some pieces of homemade pewter crafted by industrious housekeepers to fit their needs. These objects reflect the versatility of pewter and the ease with which it could be recycled into new forms. The crude bowl or rounded cup from the Pratt House was probably created from an old pewter basin and the handle from a second piece of salvaged pewter (Fig. 6). Another example is a set of three lead or heavily leaded pewter cylinders from the Howard House (Fig. 7). Lead was often added to pewter to lower its melting temperature and to make it more malleable. With melted down pieces of worn-out pewter and lead, such as these, a person could easily fashion bullets, spoons, or buttons with the appropriate molds at home.



FIG. 6. CUP WITH HANDLE. *Checklist*, 164; 1952.259. (Photograph by J. David Bohl, SPNEA Archives.)

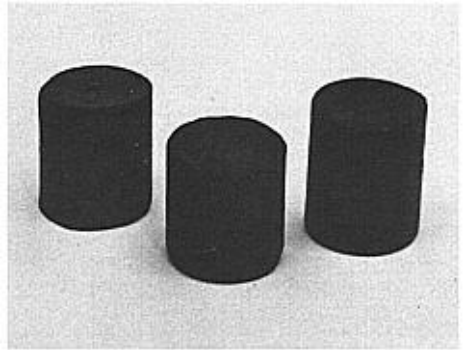


FIG. 7. THREE CYLINDERS. *Checklist*, 216; M1977.11-.13. (Photograph by J. David Bohl, SPNEA Archives.)



Amassed over a long period of time, the Society's pewter collection is the composite of the gifts from many donors. The largest and most important of these was the gift of Charles K. Davis presented to the Society in 1949, but the rest of the collection is an amalgam of pieces reflecting the tastes of many owners. The collection is located in twenty-four of the Society's houses and affords the viewer ample opportunity to study pewter first hand.

The *Checklist* covers all American pewter in the Society's collection. Pieces are arranged first by maker in alphabetical order, followed by attributed objects and examples with unidentified marks, and finally, unmarked pieces. If the origin of a piece is not clearly American or English, as is frequently the case with unmarked

spoons and flatware, this ambiguity is noted by a dagger (†). All examples of flatware have single beaded brims unless specifically designated as having smooth brims. Standard pewter mark references have been abbreviated as follows: LIL — Ledlie I. Laughlin, *Pewter in America, Its Makers and Their Marks*; CFM — Charles F. Montgomery, *A History of American Pewter*; PCCA — *Bulletin of the Pewter Collectors Club of America*. Dimensions are noted for overall height or length, diameter of the base, and diameter of the lip where applicable. Uneven measurements, caused by bending or damage to a piece, have been averaged and are identified by an asterisk (\*). Provenance is stated when known.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ledlie I. Laughlin, *Pewter in America: Its Makers and Their Marks*, Vols. I & II (1940; reprint ed., Barre, Mass: Barre Publishers, 1969), Vol. III (Barre, Mass: Barre Publishers, 1971); Charles F. Montgomery, *A History of American Pewter* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973); Nancy A. Goyne, "Britannia in America: the Introduction of a New Alloy and a New Industry," in *Winterthur Portfolio* 2, ed. Milo M. Naeve (Winterthur, Del: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1965), pp. 160-195; John Carl Thomas, *Connecticut Pewter and Pewterers* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Percy Raymond, "Pewter at the Harrison Gray Otis House," *Old-Time New England*, vol. XLI, no. 2 (Fall, 1950), pp. 46-52; Percy Raymond, "Some New England Pewter," *Old-Time New England*, vol. XLII, no. 2 (Fall, 1951), pp. 48-53; William Blaney, "Pewter Communion Service of the Rocky Hill Meeting House," *Old-Time New England*, vol. LVIII, no. 3 (Winter, 1968), pp. 82-84.

<sup>3</sup> The pewter from the Rocky Hill Meeting House consists of four cannns by Edgar, Curtis & Co., two cannns by Townsend & Compton, a paten by John Shorey, Jr., and an unmarked basin. The octagonal alms basin from the Third Church in Lynn is by John Newham.

<sup>4</sup> SPNEA Curatorial Files.

<sup>5</sup> SPNEA Curatorial Files.

<sup>6</sup> SPNEA Curatorial Files.

<sup>7</sup> When Allen Porter retired, around 1840, Elizur Forbes moved up from Hartford, Connecticut and replaced him as the foreman in Freeman Porter's shop (Laughlin, Vol. II, p. 109).

<sup>8</sup> George Gibb, *The Whitesmiths of Taunton* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1943), pp. 112-121.

<sup>9</sup> United States Patent #48,824, July 18, 1865.

<sup>10</sup> United States Patent #61,747, February 5, 1867.