

# RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS

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RHODE ISLAND PEWTER

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## COLLECTIONS

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### Rhode Island Pewterers

By MADELAINE R. BROWN, M.D.\*

During the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century the pewter in this country was of English make, and as long as it was in use, large quantities of pewter were imported. The American craftsmen were dependent upon importation of the raw materials or on melting up old pewter, for there was no available supply of lead and tin. This fact limited the number of workers and destroyed a great deal of the older pewter. We have records of two hundred American pewterers and pieces by only half of these, so that marked American pewter of the eighteenth century is a scarce article. That there were seventeenth century pewterers in this country is shown by early deeds and records, but these men were doubtless largely dealers in English pewter or menders of old plates. No pewterers came over on the Mayflower but four Massachusetts men are so mentioned in the next twenty years, one from Salem and three from Boston.

\*Delivered before the R. I. Hist. Soc., Nov. 15, 1937.

The principal centers of pewter manufacture in the eighteenth century were Boston, Newport, New York and Philadelphia. Rhode Island, however, can well be proud of her early workers in Newport, and later in Providence. No other state boasts two such centers, and in the smallest state in the union at that. The first recorded Rhode Island pewterer is Thomas Byles of Newport, who completed his apprenticeship in 1711. In 1738 he moved to Philadelphia and remained there until 1771.<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Langworthy was an English maker who came to Newport between 1719 and 1732. He died in 1739 and on his tombstone in City Cemetery, Newport, may be seen what is said to be the only impaled coat of arms on a tombstone in colonial Rhode Island. Unfortunately we have no pewter by these makers, although there is in existence a three legged iron pot with L. Langworthy 1730 on the handle.

The late Mr. Charles Calder of this city is responsible for most of our knowledge concerning Rhode Island pewterers and, as you know, his remarkable collection is in this room. His two articles printed in this Society's collections 1924<sup>2</sup> and 1926<sup>3</sup> are shining examples of excellent illustrations and of a tremendous amount of information packed into a few pages. In fact, no author in my experience has practised quite such self restraint. Benjamin Day is his earliest listed name unearthed in the 1749 Newport Town Records. Mr. Calder knew of no pewter made by this man, but in the last few years a solid handled porringer and two very well designed squat, lidless tankards or mugs marked B.D. have been found. I shall be able to show you a picture only, of one of these as, unfortunately, they are closely guarded by their proud New York owners.

The second name mentioned by Calder was John Fryers, found in Newport Land Evidence 1759. A mug marked I.F. has been attributed to this maker by Myers in his "Notes on American Pewter".<sup>4</sup>

Finally we come to those makers with whom we have a more personal touch and some unquestioned examples of

their work. In the Newport Mercury, November 14, 1763, Joseph Belcher "Hereby informes his Customers and others that he has removed from the House and Shop he lately improved on Eastern Point, in Newport, to the House lately improved by Mr. Lake Babcock in Thames St. next door to the Collectors; where he has to sell Brazieri and Founders-Ware, cheap for cash.

"He gives Money for old Brass, Copper and Pewter."

In the Providence Gazette, March 4, 1769. "Joseph Belcher of Newport, Takes this Method to inform his Customers and others, that he Makes and Sells Pewter-Ware, Wholesale and Retail, as cheap as can be bought in Boston or elsewhere; those who please to favor him with their Custom May depend on being as well used by Letter as if present."<sup>2</sup>

From this evidence one would surmise that there were no pewterers in Providence in 1769 and that he was competing with Boston in a laudable campaign of "Buy Rhode Island". He may have worked as early as 1751 as his marriage to Hannah Gladding is recorded in that year. There are a few porringers and plates of his in the hands of collectors and we have here one of his eight inch plates bearing three of his unusual touchmarks, a dove surrounded by the letters of his name. His son, Joseph, Jr., continued the business in 1776 and moved to New London in 1784.<sup>3</sup>

Last of the Newport makers is the Melville family — six in number though we have no pewter by two of them. David Melville, his son, Thomas, and his nephews, Thomas and Samuel, covered a period from 1776 to 1824. Their solid handled porringers are beautiful for their simplicity and are one of the most sought after items in American Pewter. I shall show you some of these and also one with the Rhode Island open work handle bearing the state seal. This type handle is peculiar to the Melvilles with two exceptions, one illustrated in Mr. Kerfoot's book by Joseph Belcher,<sup>5</sup> and one in Mr. Pratt's article in "Antiques" by Thomas Danforth, 3rd.<sup>6</sup> Several Rhode Island makers used the



anchor on a shield but this also bears the surrounding motto "We hope in God".

The first Providence workers sprang from Middletown, Connecticut. Samuel Hamlin and Gershom Jones were brothers-in-law, having married Thankful and Desire Ely of Middletown, and shortly thereafter Hamlin moved to Providence and set up business in 1771. Three years later Jones joined him and a partnership was formed. Due to family disagreements the firm of Hamlin and Jones was destined to last only seven years and in 1781 Hamlin announced in the Providence Gazette that he carried on at his shop West Side of the Great Bridge. Much of the Rhode Island pewter to-day in the possession of collectors and museums was made by these two men and Samuel junior, who worked as late as 1856. Half the American porringers in existence bear the name Hamlin. Hamlin and Jones both made large fifteen inch chargers of excellent quality, extremely rare items in American pewter and practically limited to Rhode Island makers. One strange fact is that while there are a hundred Hamlin basins about, no one has ever found one by Jones and while there are many eight inch plates bearing either Jones' earlier touch mark, the rampant lion, or the later eagle and Rhode Island state seal, Hamlin's eight inch plates are extremely rare. It may be that specialists existed in pewter manufacture long before they came into fashion in other professions. Aside from pewter, the Weather Vane on the first Baptist Church was made in Hamlin's shop.

Both Hamlin and Jones learned their trade from a member of the great family of Connecticut pewterers, the Danforths, and from the partner of Thomas Danforth, 2nd, Jacob Whitmore of Middletown. The dolphin handled porringer found in the grave of the Indian princess Ninigret and now in the possession of this Society is similar to those made by Joseph Danforth, son of the man who taught the first Providence pewterers their trade. The early touch mark of Gershom Jones is the same as that used by

many of the Danforths, a rampant lion in gateway and his hall marks are similar to those of Thomas Danforth, 2nd.

William Billings 1791-1813 was evidently an ingenuous young man. His ad in the Providence Gazette November 5th, 1791: "Pewterer, Coppersmith, and Brazier, In the Main Street, Providence, near Messieurs Joseph and William Russell Store, and directly opposite Col. Knight Dexter. Makes and sell all kinds of Pewter Ware warranted good as any made in town or country.

"Young in life and having a desire to be employed as well as to please, he flatters himself that those gentlemen who wish to promote industry and the young, will honor him with their commands, which will be gratefully acknowledged and attended with dispatch and fidelity."

We have many excellent plates of different sizes and a few porringers made by Mr. Billings. These last named have a large anchor on the handle and the initials W. B.

And now we come to a man who puzzled Mr. Calder greatly. Records and advertisements showed him to be a pewterer and even a bill of sale of pewter moulds from this maker to his own grandfather was in Mr. Calder's possession. Yet no pewter by this maker had come to light. This man was Josiah Keene. In 1926 Mr. Myers illustrated in his book a porringer with the Rhode Island type handle bearing the letter I. K.<sup>4</sup> There is very little doubt that this porringer was made by Keene. It is now in the Yale museum since Mr. Garvan bought the Myers collection and presented it to the college.

Of course, there is no wine that goes to the head of a collector like the idea of possession of the only one. In the autumn of 1932 when my interest in Rhode Island pewter was only some two months old I found an eight inch plate bearing the letters A H and underneath them E N E. I had read Mr. Calder's articles and the name Josiah Keene came to me. In comparing this plate with one of William Calder's (the purchaser of his moulds) it was found to be identical. The reasons for the scarcity of Keene pewter may

be, first that he worked for a very short time, and second that he may have struck all his touch marks as carelessly as this one. Although Keene's mark is very similar to that of Samuel Hamlin's it is believed that he was apprenticed to Gershom Jones and in proof of this the Keene plate is identical with an early Jones plate.<sup>7</sup>

William Calder started his career in 1817 with the trade of a plot of land valued at \$109.00 for Josiah Keene's moulds. He worked until 1856 and made a great variety of excellent pewter.

Mr. Calder was told by his father that William Calder was apprenticed to Samuel Hamlin. From the dates this must have been the son of the original Samuel, who was said to have learned his trade in Newport. It seems unlikely that Hamlin would have sent his son away to learn the trade but perhaps even in those days young men wanted to go away to school. At any rate, the marks of the Hamlins and Melvilles are similar and it is possible that the first Melville was apprenticed to the elder Hamlin in Providence.

In the early days of Calder's career styles began to change. Pewter flatware was going out and china was coming in, Britannia was superseding pewter for hollow-ware. His daybook for the years 1826 to 1838 is in the possession of Mrs. Charles Calder and just a year ago Professor Percy Raymond, President of the Pewter Collectors Society, published an article on this book in "Antiques".<sup>8</sup> During this period Calder sold 3,103 tea pots while plates were about tied with coffee pots 24 to 84 per year. These entries do not involve cash sales so that when we see the entries, Nich. Sheldon — 1 Gallon Coffee Pot (he must have had a large family) and Jesse Metcalf — 1 Warming Pan, we may be sure that they charged their purchases.

As proof of the approaching machine age Calder sold 2,454 spindle caps to cotton mills during 1838. Has anyone ever seen a pewter or Britannia spindle cap?

Church business also expanded rapidly from 1830 to

1838, flagons, communion cups and plates, and christening bowls appeared with increasing frequency in the daybook.

The last Rhode Island pewterer is no more than the words "Glennore Cranston, Rhode Island." George Richardson's name appears on articles so marked but no trace of him or the Glennore Company can be found in Providence County records. He worked in Boston from 1818 to 1828 and died in 1830 at the age of 83. Therefore, he would have been in Cranston before 1818. Since the articles bearing his Rhode Island mark are tea pots, sugar bowls, a pint pot and a pitcher, it seems unlikely that they were made before 1818. In 1817 Keene owned no moulds for such hollow-ware and none of the Rhode Island pewterers, Hamlin, Jones and Billings working until about 1813 made any tea pots. It may be that Richardson manufactured the pieces for the Glennore Company of Cranston, though Mrs. Laura Woodside Watkins in her article on Richardson believed that he worked in Cranston before moving to Boston. The data on Richardson were collected by her father, the late Charles L. Woodside, famous collector of antiques, and printed by Mrs. Watkins, with some additions in "Antiques" last April. One of Richardson's sugar bowls bearing the Cranston mark was used by Kerfoot as a frontispiece for his book, the only comprehensive work on American pewter to date, and was considered by him one of the finest pieces made in this country.

Now that we have come to the end of the list of the Rhode Island workers in a vanished craft, I should like to show some pictures of their work in comparison with that of other regions.

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<sup>4</sup> Myers, L. G. "Notes on American Pewterers" Country Life Press, Garden City, N. Y., 1926.

<sup>5</sup> Kerfoot, G. B., American Pewter Houghton Mifflin, Cambridge, Mass., 1924.

<sup>6</sup> Pratt, P. G., "American Pewter as a Collectible "Antiques", 18:399, 1930.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, M., "Josiah Keene, Rhode Island Pewterer" Rhode Island Historical Collections, 26:69, July 1933.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond P. "Wm. Calder a Transition Pewterer "Antiques", 30:109, November, 1936.

<sup>9</sup> Watkins, L. W. "George Richardson, Pewterer" "Antiques", 31:194, April 1937.

## Volumes from Book Shelves in Old South County

By WILLIAM DAVIS MILLER

With one or two possible exceptions even the most fervent admirer of his forebears cannot claim that any early settler in the broad Narragansett lands could boast of the possession of a library. This statement can, with safety, be extended to include the majority of the Narragansett Planters, rich in lands, cattle, slaves and all that were part of that exceptional social community of the northern colonies. Books they owned, it is true, but their paucity, as recorded by tradition, and by that less exciting but more exacting evidence, the inventory, waives even the possibility of the consideration of the mooted question "when does a collection of books become a library". The title of this short account, therefore, is chosen advisedly despite the fact that our ancestors sometimes, according to the inventories, stored their books in attic, cellar and outbuildings. Later, after the commencement of the nineteenth century, large collections were formed to which the term

library is justly applicable, and it is from one such library that the following books, and their owners, are to be considered.

Early in the second quarter of the last century a young man, recently graduated from Harvard University, began, because of his love of books, to build up a library which, at the time of his death, became the largest private library in the South County — and it is to be questioned if its size is to be exceeded today in Washington County. Judge Elisha R. Potter, antiquary, historian, educator and jurist of Kingston, was a student rather than a collector. No exact enumeration of his library has ever been made, but the number of volumes, pamphlets, maps, and manuscripts can, from the writer's personal acquaintance with the collection, safely be set at over five thousand volumes. It was a general library, although four classifications, which were his principal interests, predominated; the classics (Judge Potter was one time instructor in the classics at the Kingston Academy), history, law and agriculture. It is not, however, the library itself that is to be considered at this time but only such books that came to its shelves bearing evidence of former ownership by the early settlers of the Narragansett County, the Planters who followed them and the merchants and professional men who made up the growing community in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It may be therefore regretted that a little sixteenth century volume, *Vetustissimorum Authorum Georgica, Bucolica et Gnomica Poemata*, which at the index bears the inscription of ownership, "Ronsardus", with a now illegible Greek inscription<sup>1</sup>, must not be discussed; nor can we search for the identity of a gentleman whose armorial book plate proclaims him as one Henricus Fly, e Coll. En. Nas Oxon; and whose seemingly explanatory motto was *Homo Sum*. In-

<sup>1</sup> Monsieur Champion of Paris who examined a photograph of this signature states that it was not written by Ronsard but by his secretary Amadis Jamyn.