

## COLONIAL AMERICAN SILVER\*

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**A**NY discussion of Colonial American Silver is so closely related to the history of the times that the subject would perhaps receive better treatment at the hands of an historian than at those of an amateur student and small scale collector of the silver itself.

The relationship of historical events with the progress of the silversmith's art has been continuous for many centuries in all parts of the civilized world; in America, however, it is much more sharply focused on a short period of time, to the extent that individual pieces can in many cases be directly related to the stirring events in the early life of the colonies, or to the careers of striking and important personalities, acting their parts on the great stage setting of Early America.

Please bear in mind these few dates: The Plymouth Colony (or Plantation, as it was then known) was founded as we all know in 1620. This was the very beginning of life in New England. The first American silver of consequence appeared about 1660, and the last of any great note was the work of Paul Revere who died in 1816. Thus we have, in New England at least, a term of only 150 years which includes the entire great period in the history of American silver—and incidentally American gold, since many of the best silversmiths were goldsmiths as well. Unhappily, almost all of the gold has disappeared, as it was doubtless too valuable to keep. It would be hard to find in all our history a period more stirring than that which commenced with the Mayflower and ended with the close of the Revolution. Before we leave this subject let me give you a few random illustrations of the close intertwining of events, personalities, and silver that characterized the period.

One of the finest inkstands in America was made by Philip Syng

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\* An illustrated address delivered at a meeting of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on Tuesday, November 12, 1957. Mr. Coney, a banker of Pittsburgh, is a collateral descendant of John Coney, one of America's greatest colonial silversmiths. His interest in the subject thus comes naturally and is based on both knowledge and tradition.—Ed.

in 1752 at a cost of L25 16s for the Philadelphia Assembly. It was used by the signers of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and of the Constitution in 1787, and it can now be seen in Independence Hall. It is worth a trip to Philadelphia just to see it, even if it had no historic significance.

The tray in this case is 10¼ inches long, and it supports three receptacles, one each for sand, ink and quill pens. The latter is tall, and bell shaped and all three are in the best tradition of the rococo style of the period.

In 1701 Lieutenant Governor William Stoughton of Massachusetts donated to Harvard College a grace cup just before he died. He had already given funds to Harvard to build the original Stoughton Hall. The cup is today one of the proudest possessions of the Harvard Museum. As an extra bit of seasoning, be it noted that Governor Stoughton was the presiding justice at the trial of the Salem witches in 1692 and had his part in the sentences which were later carried out.

This piece is 10 inches high, with quite expansive gadrooned and fluted ornament at the base, and on the cover. The handles are beautiful, delicate castings, and the cup is engraved with the Stoughton arms.

Paul Revere made in 1768 the Sons of Liberty Bowl which is now in the permanent possession of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Several years ago the cup was offered for sale by the executors of an estate which specified that it must be sold to a museum or other public institution, and not to a private collector. Interest in Boston was so great that a public subscription was carried on among rich and poor alike. School children's dimes along with larger donations bought the bowl for over \$50,000, and it, too, is worth going far to see. There is not space to recount all the circumstances of its making, but as I quote the inscription on one side, the event, I am sure, will come to mind:

To the memory of the glorious NINETY-TWO: Members of the Hon'ble House of Representatives of the Massachusetts Bay who, undaunted by the insolent Menaces of Villains in Power, from a strict regard to Conscience and the LIBERTIES of their constituents, on the 30th of June, 1768, Voted NOT TO RESCIND.

The Bowl is a large one, 11 inches in diameter, and there is no ornament whatever, except for the engraving, which is beautifully

done. It is characterized by perfect proportion, as are all Revere's pieces, rather than by striking decoration.

Colonial Silver may seem at first glance a narrow and limited topic for discussion. Actually it is enormous in scope, if only we relate our study of the pieces themselves to their historical significance. For this reason I am obliged to restrict myself to a small portion of the field, and will dwell chiefly on New York and New England work, principally the latter. Speaking broadly, New York represents Dutch influence, and New England, of course, the English, both groups, however, delightfully spiced with the work of French Huguenots, who were always in the forefront of design and workmanship. Such names as du Bois, Rene' Grignon, Le Roux both Charles and Bartholomew, Paul Revere, Senior and Junior, Simeon Sonmaine, Ghiselin, and de Nise, among the earliest in Philadelphia, Elias Pelletreau of Long Island and others, indicate the prominence of the French in this art.

As British immigrants settled Massachusetts, the Dutch settled New Amsterdam (later New York) and Scandinavians the Delaware colony. And so, at this point, I shall quote from the first chapter of the book by John Marshall Phillips on American Silver, after noting briefly that Mr. Phillips in his lifetime was generally acknowledged to be one of the leading authorities on American Silver. He was Curator of Art at Yale University for twenty years, and was perhaps the only American to be made a member of Goldsmiths Hall in London, the British Society which since the 14th Century has been the final arbiter, by law as well as by custom, of the validity of all pieces of silver and gold produced by British Artisans.

By the middle of the Seventeenth Century, determined and venturesome peoples, mainly of English and Dutch descent, had established permanent homes in the seaport villages which had sprung up along the Atlantic seaboard. The natural resources together with the geographic location of these villages and the heritage of their inhabitants largely determined their economic life. As the people of both nations had been bred in a seafaring tradition, it was natural that they should turn their attention to the pursuit of trade and commerce. The trade pattern established by Boston, the largest and most important colonial port during the seventeenth century, also characterized other ports. As early as 1670 merchant ships were to be found trading with the West Indies, the Portuguese island, English and English-known continental ports as well as with the neighboring coastal towns. The result of this active commercial expansion was an influx of English, Dutch, French, Mexican, Portuguese and Spanish coin, which in a day of no banks created a security problem. Theft of money and plate, as silverware was then commonly known, is one of the crimes most fre-

quently recorded in the surviving court records of that era. They continued despite such a harsh penalty as that imposed on Thomas Streatchley of Swansey who in 1681 was convicted of stealing plate valued at L3 18s. and was sentenced to fifteen stripes at the whipping post and a fine of L8. If the fine was not paid in one month, the complainant was free to sell the convicted man.

The difficulty of securing coins, and the even greater problem of proving ownership in the event of their being stolen or lost, created a place for the silversmith in the community. At a comparatively small cost he could melt the coins, forge and hammer them into objects for use or display which by means of form, size, engraved decoration or maker's mark, could be readily identified in event of loss or theft. How this worked is illustrated by the following advertisements in our early colonial newspapers:

"Stollen on Saturday the 4 currant, from Mrs. Susanna Campbell, Widow in Boston, A Silver Tankard that holds about two Wine Quarts, has Sir Robert Robinson's Coat of Arms engraven on the forepart of it, wherein are three ships, and the Motto in Latin. Whoever can give any true Intelligence of the same, so as that the Owner may have it again, shall be sufficiently rewarded."  
(*Boston News-Letter*, Nov. 6/13, 1/04)

"Taken out of the House of Mr. Edward Eastham who keeps the Fighting Cocks-Inn in New York, a Silver Quart Tankard, Marked on the Handle E/ES engraven, the Silversmith's Mark is WK/B Punch'd, and a cypher on the Lid of E.S. The Person who is suspected to have taken it is of middle Stature, wore his own dark coloured Hair or a natural Wig, and a brown Coat with a small Cape, very much worn, and out at the Elbows. Three Pounds as a Reward to anyone that shall bring the said Tankard home, and no Questions asked. If left in secure Hands the Reward shall be paid on Receipt of the Tankard. If offered to be sold or pawn'd pray stop it. N.B. He passes by the name of John Coffin."  
(*The New York Weekly Journal*, May 24, 1736)

The popularity of the silversmith's craft was further increased as a result of the inflation caused in the early eighteenth century in the colonies by the emission of Bills of Credit. The following prices of silver taken from a memorandum, from the books of the Boston goldsmiths, Jacob Hurd and Thomas Edwards, covering the period 1700-1753, made in the latter year by Ezra Stiles, while a tutor at Yale, are very enlightening. In 1700 silver was valued at 7 shillings per ounce; by 1710 it had advanced to 8s;

1714, 9s.  
1722, 14s.  
1733, 23s.  
1744, 34s.  
1749, 60s.  
1750, 56—50s.  
1751, 53—50s.

As a result of such price fluctuation, the rich and cautious merchant, who hoped to preserve and increase his estate, was more apt to patronize the local silversmith than to send his coin abroad. Sending it abroad also involved risk of capture by pirates and privateers who infested the waters.

The use of plate, both large and small, as pledge and even as payment for real estate is recorded in our colonial archives. In 1746 when Nathaniel Hempstead of New London sought to borrow money from his grandfather, the canny Joshua Hempstead records in his Diary that he lent him 'so much

Silver Money as his Silver Spoon weighs and took ye spoon for security.' Some years earlier, when the Deacons of the Reformed Church at Albany bought a piece of land adjoining the Church pasture, they paid the several grantors at the rate of 90 guilders each, in plate. This particular transaction affords an interesting commentary upon values as well as the source of raw material in 1700. Each grantor received a Silver cup made of 6 heavy pieces of eight valued at 81 guilders by the Albany silversmith, Koenraet Ten Eyck, who was paid at the rate of 9 guilders per cup for the fashioning, making a total of 90 guilders. As a result of this economically created demand for plate and the survival of the medieval apprenticeship system, silver became the first of the arts to flourish in the New World.

The skill of the silversmith was based upon the apprenticeship system established in England in the thirteenth century and subject to well-defined regulation, especially during Elizabeth's reign, by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths of the City of London; the Company was responsible, then as now, for maintaining the quality of manufactured wares of gold and silver as well as coin of the realm. Transplanted to the colonies, this system assured the artisan of successors and provided him with a supply of skilled labor. Under the terms of the indenture, made before a County Court, the apprentice was bound at the age of fourteen to serve a master craftsman for a period of seven years. In those days this was the only means of advancement in one's chosen craft. In 1660 the Selectmen of Boston voted that no person could open a shop who was not twenty-one years of age and could not present evidence from town records of a full seven years' service as an apprentice. The same ruling applied in New York City by 1675, following the taking-over of its government by the British. The indenture stipulated that the apprentice live in his Master's house, serve him faithfully, obey his lawful commands, keep his secrets (trade) and protect his interests, promise not to absent himself from the Master's house save with his permission, not to frequent ale houses, etc. The Master in turn was bound to provide sufficient meat, drink and washing in winter time fitting for an apprentice and to suffer the apprentice to attend the winter evening school, usually at his father's expense, and to teach him the art or mystery of a Goldsmith, the popular name for a worker in the precious metals.

For the average impressionable young apprentice, the mysteries of the craft became a part of his daily life. He became familiar with all the steps in the fashioning of an object from the melting of the coins, the forging of the sheet, the raising of the form, the casting of small separate parts, assembling and soldering them, to the chasing, polishing and engraving of the finished object. This familiarity developed in him a feeling for the metal, the forms into which it could be worked, its appropriateness to its use, and a sense of balance and proportion.<sup>1</sup>

It must be apparent at once that the work of early American craftsmen reflected in large measure the influence of the countries in Europe from which they sprang, and also, of course, the conditions prevailing in new environment. The Mayflower Pilgrims, for example, fighting for their very existence against disease, hostile climate, and even more hostile natives, were in no position to give

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from *American Silver*, by John Marshall Phillips, Chanticleer Press, New York, published in 1949.

time and thought to luxuries or to aesthetic values and hence produced no silver.

The wealthy Dutch on the other hand, carrying on their profitable commerce in New Amsterdam were able and in fact eager to enjoy the comforts and luxuries to which they had been accustomed. New York silver was, therefore, from the first far more ornate and elaborate than anything produced in contemporary New England.

The New Netherland Colony was established by the Dutch West India Company, and profit was the principal motive. In 1664 the town of New Amsterdam passed into the hands of the British with very little disturbance and for a variety of reasons its prosperity steadily increased. Among the sources of this prosperity was the practice of almost outright piracy, or at the very least extremely profitable traffic with the pirates themselves, together with a large influx of the silver coin from which their magnificent articles of silver were made. By no stretch of the imagination were the early Dutch colonists of New York activated by purely spiritual motives, nor did they immigrate, as did their English contemporaries, as a protest against injustice or religious coercion at home.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony was a much more substantial structure than had been the original Plymouth Plantation, and it is noteworthy that 26,000 colonists came to New England between 1629 and 1640, the years in which Charles I refused to summon Parliament. Unquestionably the motives behind the immigration were of the highest order, as had been the motives of the Mayflower settlers a few years before. Furthermore, the colonization was a carefully planned project, directed by men of great ability and integrity both in England and in America. Although these people suffered hardships and reverses, on the whole they grew in wealth and stability, and there is little wonder that New England Silver began to appear, fully equal in every way to the best that was being produced in England.

As noted above in the extract from John Phillips, silver plate was made almost entirely from coin, which was usually furnished by the purchaser. The silversmith's statement of account frequently consisted of a receipt for currency, followed by an itemized list of the silver plate produced, with the balance of the unused coin returned to the buyer. Some of the bills rendered are worth nothing as the debits and credits include other items aside from silver plate,

such as meat and rum, and even "captives"—probably meaning slaves.

The Massachusetts Colony was largely settled by men of strong conscience and conviction, who resented and resisted persecution at home, and faced the trials and hardships of immigration to an unsettled land in order to register those convictions. And, of course, their work shows it. In general it can be said that New England craftsmen relied on purity of form and essential line rather than on ornament and extravagant design for their effects. In England, at the same time, silversmiths were going almost to extremes, in the creation of highly decorated wares, some of them covered with the most complicated figures and designs, and some unquestionably beautiful in spite of the elaboration.

By way of illustration, one piece in particular is a kettle, stand, and tray made by Kandler in 1737. The stand consists principally of human figures and what appear to be mermaids, twisted into position to support the kettle. The spout in turn is another similar figure blowing a horn, which is of course the outlet; the handle is formed of the figures of two more mermaids, apparently dancing, and holding a scarf between them.

An ice-pail by John Bridge is decorated with complete forms of sea creatures, including serpents, nymphs, and nereids. There were no pieces of this kind made by American craftsmen in the colonies of the seventeenth, eighteenth or even nineteenth centuries.

An excellent analogy can be had with the architecture of the day in New England. Here we find homes of great simplicity of style, and yet pure in line and symmetry, and many of them designed not by professional architects but by the sea captains and merchants who occupied them.

The early New England silversmiths made their pieces usually for one of two purposes: the personal use of the purchaser, and for ecclesiastical use in the churches. It was not until about 1750 that silversmiths began to stock their shops with wares for sale to the carriage trade, with numbers of workmen regularly employed. For this reason the pieces created in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the first of the eighteenth are usually the work of the master craftsman himself, assisted by his one apprentice, and designated for one individual or church whose name may be inscribed on the article itself.

It is necessary here to turn briefly to the history of silver work in England, and to the beginning of the standards by which the craft has been governed for centuries. Unless we do this, we cannot understand the forces that influenced American silver work, nor can we note the striking contrast that prevailed between the colonies and the mother country.

Seymour B. Wyler in *The Book of Old Silver* states that,

The customs, practices and methods originating in England influenced all other silver producers as English culture and influence spread throughout the world. The "Sterling" standard is an indication of this, though this word owes its origin to a band of immigrant Germans. They called themselves the Easterlings because of the direction in which they lived, and they were first called by the King in approximately 1300 to refine some silver to purity for coinage purposes. In a statute of 1343 the first two letters were dropped from the word "Easterling" and the application of the word "Sterling" to silver commenced.

Silver design, like architecture, followed the great movements and influences of culture and domination. And the periods and styles of silver are on the whole the same as of architecture and furniture. At the time of the smithing of the first pieces in England, the Church reigned supreme, and the majority of the pieces made were for religious institutions.

Goldsmiths in the tenancy of the monasteries found they could no longer meet the increased demands for pieces in the precious metals. They wisely took the precaution of forming themselves into guilds or fraternities. The first mention of a goldsmith's company is in the year of 1180, but it appears that this was a voluntary association and carried but little power. As early as the year 1238, many inferior silversmiths immediately took advantage of the trade to make silver a very much lower standard than was used for government coins, and sold it for the same price as a piece of the correct alloy. With the formation of the first silver guilds in England, a Law of Parliament stated that no silver should be melted unless it had first been assayed by an appointed committee and proved to contain the correct amounts of silver and alloy. In 1335, a second "statutum de Moneta" decreed that each gold- or silversmith must punch on his wares a particular mark of his own, assigned to him by King John. In 1423, an act by Henry VI fixed the price of silver at a definite valuation of twenty-two shillings to the pound. In the succeeding years, this valuation was changed several times.

In 1477 a very important law was passed by the London goldsmiths' company, compelling stamping of the leopard's head or crowned leopard's head on every piece of silver of the accepted standard.

In the year 1479, the use of the date letter was first inaugurated. The year of manufacture was to be indicated by stamping a specified letter of the alphabet in a distinctive type of lettering. Thus in the following years we find silver pieces punched with a complete set of hallmarks; the leopard's head, the date letter, the maker's mark.

During the reign of Elizabeth, internal prosperity resulted in an era of far flung luxury. The stream of art diverted from the Reformation, and from the ecclesiastical channels turned toward domestic and civic comfort and splendor. Wealthy patrons of colleges and universities abundantly en-



dowed their respective Alma Maters with magnificent plate. But the destruction of the majority of this plate was caused by Charles I directly after the Civil War. He borrowed as much money and plate as he could obtain from the leading universities. He promised to repay them for these treasures but did not, and the money was dissipated by this luxury loving monarch. During the Cromwellian era, similar proceedings took place, but during the reign of Charles II the silver business flourished.

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In the year 1327 the Guild of London Goldsmiths became regularly incorporated by Royal Charter, under the title of "The Wardens and Commonalty of the Mystery of Goldsmiths of the City of London." The most important legislation enacted by this Congress was that requiring every silversmith to use a particular hallmark of his own.

The second "Statutum de Moneta" in 1335 declared that inasmuch as counterfeit money had been imported by foreigners, plate was not to be exported without official license in order to protect the coin within the realm of the people. It is interesting to note here that the only means of exit from England officially allowed was from Dover, at which place foreigners were searched and then permitted to depart from England.

A Statute passed in 1363 commanded that no goldsmith should work gold or silver into a wrought article unless it was of the alloy of good sterling. In the succeeding years, numerous by-laws were enacted in regard to the trade, all of varying importance.<sup>2</sup>

Of great interest also is the system of hallmarks which has been in effect, with some variations, since 1300. There is not the space to explain this system in detail, but it is sufficient to say that any properly authenticated piece of English silver can be correctly identified by three, four, or five marks. These include the leopard's head (indicating pure silver), the maker's mark, the date mark, the city of manufacture, and, for a period from 1784 to 1890 the profile of the reigning King or Queen. For this reason, the period or date is usually held to be more important than the individual silversmith himself, unless he (or she) happened to be an outstanding figure. Thus, a piece is described as a Queen Anne teapot, a George II punchbowl, etc. In America, on the other hand, the maker's mark is the sole means of identification, and the value and interest in the article becomes intensely personal.

And for this reason, the character and history of the maker himself is an integral part of our knowledge of any one piece. Some very vivid characters were included in the list of American Silver-smiths. The amazing Paul Revere, for one, needs no introduction to the reader. Samuel Casey, one of the best in New England, gave about half his time to the gentle art of counterfeiting money, and

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<sup>2</sup> The material above is quoted from Wyler's standard reference, *The Book of Old Silver*, published by the Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, in 1937.

seemed to prosper in the art for years. Finally, however, he was apprehended, tried, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged. On the night before his execution day, a group of his friends broke into the prison and released him. From that day to this no one has ever heard of his whereabouts. I could go on indefinitely, but I would like to tell you a little about John Hull, because he and his partner, Robert Sanderson, probably made the first silver to be fashioned in America. Sanderson was an accomplished artisan when he came from London, but Hull was a boy of ten, and he later became Sanderson's apprentice.

This pair produced much of the early silver in New England, and possibly the first American made piece of known date was a beaker dated 1659, given to the First Church of Boston.

Hull's distinction, however, goes far beyond his work as silversmith. He became ultimately the leading merchant in Boston, with dealings in all parts of the world. He was authorized by the Massachusetts legislature to make the earliest coinage of the colony (the famous pine tree shilling) which, as it turned out, was in complete violation of the laws of England. In his later life Hull devoted all of his time and most of his fortune to the public service of the colony. At the time of King Philip's war, when the colony was all but bankrupt and the devastations of the Indians threatened to wipe out whole sections of the population, Hull personally financed the only military resistance which could be effectively raised. He was never repaid.

No one knows for sure who was the first American born silversmith, since Sanderson and Hull were both English born. A group which included Jeremiah Dummer, William Rouse, John Coney, Edward Winslow and a few others were approximate contemporaries, and much of their work was produced long before 1700. A caudle cup by Coney, now in the Garvan collection at Yale, may be one of the earliest—possibly as early as 1676. This is a very large, handsome piece, and carries the Addington Arms.

Caudle cups were good sized bowls, which were generally used for serving caudle, a warm, spiced wine. In form, they are larger at the bottom than at the top, and they usually have artistically cast handles. This bowl had a cover, which was most unusual in caudle cups, and the handles are in the form of caryatids.

From this point on, the craft of silver smithing flourished

mightily in New York and New England, and somewhat later in other places, notably Philadelphia.

Paul Revere deserves a special paragraph of his own, and much more. It would take hours of time to dilate on his varied activities, and I can do no more than say a word about his silver. Revere went through several stages and styles in his work, but the earlier pieces in the rococo style of the time are almost matchless. His period, by the way, was much later than that of the great school of about 1700, and his later work changed to a more severe but much more dignified form of distinctly classic origin.

Among his many notable pieces in the rococo manner are a large coffee pot of almost perfect form and proportions ornamented with scrolls, shells, flowers and ribbons, but not to the point of overpowering the essential form, as so often happened with English pieces of the period. The handle of this pot, made of fruitwood, is beautifully carved, in contrast with the customary severe styles then prevailing. His later work may be exemplified by a teapot, cream pitcher, and sugar bowl, all in the Metropolitan museum, in what came to be known as the restrained and self-conscious Federal style, with simple contours and the familiar parallel fluting, together with exquisite engraving.

It is interesting to note that the first illustration in the booklet of the Metropolitan Museum on the subject of Revere is of an inkstand by John Coney. Apparently it is believed that the influence of the latter is found in Revere's work, even though Revere Senior and not junior was Coney's apprentice.

This inkwell is in the form of a triangular base, each corner supported by a cast figure of a lion. The stand also has the customary three containers for ink, wafer, and sand, and a carrying handle in the form of a post and ring. This piece, by the way, occupies a shelf all to itself in the Metropolitan, in order that it may be seen from all sides.

I wish more pictures of silver could be shown in color. Good silver catches and holds reflected colors as does no other metal. Some museums have arranged to show their pieces artfully placed beside glowing tapestries or paintings, and in this way they impart a peculiar richness to each article. But in most cases the silver is crammed into flat cases against a white wall. Two notable exceptions are the Yale Museum in New Haven, and the Museum of

Fine Arts in Boston. Mrs. Kathryn Buhler is curator of silver in the latter, and she is today one of the real authorities on the subject, besides being a person of exquisite taste. Her little book, *American Silver*, shows in realistic detail a number of pieces against a colorful background.

In closing I should like to call the attention of the reader to the booklet published by *Antiques* magazine, and written by the late John Marshall Phillips, mentioned earlier in this article, and entitled "The Hundred Masterpieces of American Silver." Please notice the word "The." Mr. Phillips spent several years in its preparation. He eliminated many, and those he kept represent, in his opinion, the best and the most representative in American museums or churches.