

Hartford in an Old Account Book

By ELIZABETH B. POTWINE

WHERE did the Honorable George Wyllys, colonial secretary and town clerk of Hartford for sixty-six years, buy his sealing wax? How much did the Reverend Nathan Strong pay for his rum? What was the favorite beverage of the Reverend Hezekiah Bissell when he sought respite from the bitter controversy which waged in his parish of Wintonbury? What was the price of a suit of clothes in 1752? How was Connecticut's depreciated currency valued in Massachusetts old tenor?

All this, and more, concerning the domestic and economic life of our forefathers can be learned from the daybook of John Potwine, a silversmith and merchant, who came from Boston to Hartford about 1737. Although most of Mr. Potwine's silver work was done in Boston, a number of pieces are owned in Hartford and its vicinity. Perhaps the Connecticut colonists, burdened by the expenses of the early colonial wars, could not afford the luxury of silver. At any rate, the silversmith combined with his craft the more lucrative business of merchandising. The daybook, kept in the last year of his stay in Hartford, is a quaint old book, homemade, perhaps of that paper which it records sold for twelve shillings a quire, bound in a heavier paper upon which is the great seal of England. The cover bears the legend

John Potwines Book
Day Book Begon
March 6, 1752.

In order to interpret the entries intel-

ligently the modern reader finds it necessary to adjust his mind to the currency and measures of the eighteenth century. In the quotations cited below prices indicated by three figures are in pounds, shillings, and pence; by one, in shillings unless otherwise stated. The spelling, highly individualistic even for those pre-Websterian days, is, for the most part, preserved. Obsolete and unusual measures appear. Who now knows the equivalent of "20 tarsis [tierces?] of flaxseed" or purchases a "nail of plush?" Pins were bought by the thousand, as,

"Elisha Seymour Dr. to $\frac{1}{2}$ M pins at 8/."

One of these pins, handforged, with head and shank in two pieces, remains in the book to fasten a memorandum to the page. The entry 1 S:S hair is frequent, for silk hair was used in tailoring and was sold wound on a stick. The frugal purchaser permitted no waste and bought in small quantities, as the following items show,

"4 nedlefuls of silk 0-0-8,"

"Velvit better than a Nail 0-16-0,"

" $\frac{3}{4}$ yd. and almost 3 Nails of Long loan [lawn] 3-8-0,"

"Benj. Lamb Dr. to a Cake of Sope 0-7-0,"

"Samuel Parker Dr. to $\frac{1}{2}$ Cake of Sope 0-3-6,"

"John Egleston Dr. to 2 Nutmegs 0-6-6."

But, in this last case, the buyer was over-careful, for he returned at once and purchased "a Dito."

Connecticut currency, issued to finance the Spanish war of Queen Anne's day, was at this time greatly depreciated. John Potwine himself was one of the Hartford merchants who, in 1751, memorialized the General Assembly for a stabilization of the paper money, stating that it had then lost "seven parts in eight" of its face value. In 1753 the value is shown by the following item,

"Daniel Henchman Esq. Dr. to your order to John and Samuel Phillips for 26-13-4 Lawful Money it being in Massachusetts Old Tenor, 200-0-0." This depreciation must be borne in mind in reading the prices of commodities. One must also consider that, while John Potwine's shop was an incipient department store where one could purchase anything from a "fiel" to "colored taffety," most of the merchandise were luxuries. He dealt apparently in the finer fabrics, broadcloths and silks, in delicacies which the farms could not supply, as sugar, tea and spices, in pewter, and in hardware which, at that time, had to be brought from England. The settlement of an account receipted by Peter Faneuil, shows that he had purchased some of his callimancoes and silk handkerchiefs from that famous importer. It is quite evident, too, that the merchant's patrons were the aristocracy of Hartford, those whom Mr. James Truslow Adams in his *Revolutionary New England* delights to call "the wise, the rich and the good." It is not likely that one should judge the standard of living of the rank and file of the people by the prices quoted in this book.

In these pages we meet the fathers of Hartford in terms of unwonted familiarity. Hither the Hon. George Wyllys, who moves with so stately a tread across our colonial records, comes to buy a stick of sealing wax at three and six and a yard

and a half of buckram to be "delivered Lord ye Taylor." As brothers in the legal profession appear John Williams Esq., also after sealing wax, and Daniel Bissell, then the King's Attorney, who maintained the dignity of his office in scarlet broadcloth at ten pounds per yard. A number of physicians appear. Here is Dr. Bull, called in the *Memorial History of Hartford County* "the physician of the county," buying "gluem and Shott." Dr. Timothy Kimball extravagantly purchased eleven yards of Crimson Callimanco at 30/, a felt hat, and three yards of black bone lace at 45/ making a total of £25-10-0. Callimanco was a fashionable woolen cloth, finely ribbed and with a glossy finish. Bone lace was so called because made on bone bobbins. Evidently Mistress Kimball had reason to be a proud dame when she came out in her new crimson gown. That Dr. Neal McLean had a thriving practice is evidenced by his frequent purchase of "one half pint botels." This prosperity must have waned if he is the same person for whom, in 1782, the selectmen were directed to build a small house "for the use of Neal McLean, the old Soldier, as long as he shall live . . . to remain to the town for a poorhouse." Perhaps the "old soldier" squandered too many fees on paper and pipes, his pet extravagances. Besides supplying bottles the store also provided a few medicines. Dr. McLean himself bought Bachman's Drops at £1-5-0. Thomas Seymour resorted to his apparently favorite haunt, so frequent a customer is he, for one and one half ounces "lixir Propratis," while John Grover tried the cheaper remedy of "apsom salt."

There are eleven different Seymours mentioned in the book, their names scattered through the alphabet from Allin to Zebulon. The most frequent name is

Thomas. This was probably Thomas, the fourth of the Seymour line, an influential citizen of Hartford, a King's Attorney, and the father of the first mayor of the city. Records show a close association between him and the merchant. The latter's son, John, married Mr. Seymour's daughter Eunice; their names appear together on deeds and wills, and either they, or their sons of the same names, owned lots side by side in the "33rd and last tear which lyes South of the Symbrey road Bounding east on River. . . ." Perhaps the young future mayor was concerned in the purchase of such frivolities as the silk handkerchiefs and gold beads charged to Thomas Seymour, and, a little later, in the following bill:

Thomas Seymour Dr.	
To 2 Iron Skilits	2-10-0
To 3 Putor Dishes wt 5lbs. 6oz.	4-2-6
To a Iron Pot 64/ To 2 Punch	
Boels 30/	4-14-0
To Sundries of Earthenwhear	2-5-0
To 5 Wine Glasses 30/ To a frying	
pan 55/	4-5-0

Evidently some one in the Seymour family was setting up housekeeping or furnishing a tavern.

Other romances are suggested in the following items,

Timothy Stanley Dr.	
To 2 fans	0-12-0
To 1/2 M pins 8/ to 2 strings	
beads	0-9-6
Delivered your Son	

and in

John Benten Dr.	
To 2 fans	0-10-0
delivered to Hannah White's daughter.	

The Goodwin and Hooker families are well represented. Of the three members of the former who are named, Ozias had various business transactions with the

merchant which ranged from buying "5 Nails of Cambrick" to carrying for him "twenty Spanish dolers to Dec'n Daniel Henchman of Boston." As Deacon Henchman was a silversmith, and Spanish dollars were the coin from which colonial silverware was fashioned, this item may indicate that John Potwine found little demand for his silversmithing in Hartford at this time.

John, Thomas, Nathaniel, Dr. Daniel, and Daniel junior are the representatives of the Hooker family. Dr. Daniel, a graduate of Harvard and the first tutor of Yale, was a surgeon in the old Spanish War. He bought, among other things, an humble "earthen porringer." Daniel Jr. is one of the few credited with farm produce "3 1/2 bu Indian Corn 3-10-0." Other names prominent in the annals of Hartford occur on every page. Jacob Bunce bought a "fiel, 7/" and a "bar of steel wt. 12 lbs. at 6/ per pound." Benjamin Cheney Jun. bought a dozen and a half Coat "butens." Stephen Hosmer was a young dandy, making frequent purchases of silk or "gauze hankerchifes," ribbon and ferit, gloves, a beaver hat, and a snuff box. The names of James and Joseph Church occur with great frequency on Hartford records of that period. James Church was on many important committees. From the items in this book we can almost see him in his suit of German Serge, his felt hat and thread hose, his shirt of holland linen frilled with cambric, carrying a cloak of warm camblet. Again it is interesting to note that there is a family connection and the land and probate records preserve a friendship which the years have forgotten. Joseph Church married the merchant's daughter Elizabeth, and the names John Potwine and James Church stand as witnesses of the wills of Dr. John Austin and

of his son-in-law, John Ellery, Thomas Seymour being the Executor.

The name Pantry Jones is reminiscent of the original proprietors of Hartford. Ezekiel Webster's purchase of an "almanick" indicates a taste for letters which cropped out later in Hartford's great lexicographer. John Ledyard Esq., a founder of Dartmouth College, father of the famous traveler, showed meticulous care in choosing his "four yds. Holland No. 2006 and one ounce thread No. 20." Holland, a kind of linen used for shirts, was expensive, th's costing £8-8-0. John Haynes Lord used a slightly coarser quality at 35/, but he had other costly purchases to make, notably "chocklot."

Chocolate was then a favorite beverage of the gentry. One of its most extravagant users was the Rev. Hezekiah Bissell of Wintonbury, whose purchases of the luxury are so frequent as to indicate a large household or a good digestion.

A nearly contemporaneous note on the life of John Potwine mentions his hospitality and states that his house was a resort of the clergy visiting the city. Their names appear with great frequency and always with the full title "the Rev'd Mr." So-and-so. In the little flourish at the end of the Rev'd one can almost see the obsequious bow of the old merchant as he greeted his bewigged patron. Sometimes the hospitality extended further than the bow, to the item "to Cash lent." The Rev. Hezekiah Bissell was not the only clergyman who indulged his palate. The Rev. Nathan Strong of Coventry, father of the Dr. Strong who later was pastor of the Center¹ Church, was an epicure in taste, however grim his theology. The finest of raiment and the choicest of delicacies are charged to him, and on one occasion we

find,

The Rev'd. Mr. Nathan Strong Dr.	
To 15 lbs. Sugar	3-15-0
To 3 Galons Rum	6-13-0
To ¼oz. Mace, to 1 oz. Cinne- mon, to 1 oz Nutmeg	0-14-0

Then, perhaps to placate Mistress Strong while he sipped his flip, he added ½ lb Tea 1-15-0.

The proximity of the names of Mr. Strong and of the Rev. Benjamin Colton reminds us of an anecdote told of their sons, both ministers. Dr. Strong, presiding at a conference, invited Mr. Colton to the desk, inadvertently using the words, "Will Brother Colton of Bolton step this way and pray?" Whereupon Mr. Colton, noted for his eccentric wit, replied, "Dr. Strong, you do wrong to address me in rhyme at so solemn a time."

The Rev. Jonathan Lee of Salisbury, Rev. Gideon Mills, "now prechor at Simsbery," Rev. Jonathan Marsh, Rev. Elnathan Whitman, the merchant's pastor at the Second church, the Rev. James Lockwood, who had the honor of declining the presidencies of both Yale and Princeton, are a few of the many of the Connecticut clergy whose long-forgotten tastes and foibles recorded here make them seem a bit more human. With them we include Mistress Abigail Woodbridge, widow of the former minister of the First Church, and her son, the Rev. Ashbel Woodbridge of Glastonbury. Mrs. Woodbridge was then living on land leased in the corner of the churchyard. She is one of the few women having accounts in their own names. Her many purchases of paper and penknives suggest a voluminous diary, or did she keep a dame school? On one occasion her son, a frequent visitor to the store, made the

¹ Of Hartford; the Thos. Hooker church.

following purchase which looks strange enough to our unlaced generation,

The Rev'd Mr. Ashbel Woodbridge Dr.
to 1 lb. 7 oz & 1/4 of Whale Boon 3-9-0.

That this was the regulation amount of whalebone used in some mysterious process of tailoring is shown by the fact that the same quantity was sold to Capt. Abner Moseley, also of Glastonbury, who was not to be outdone by his minister in such dignity as whalebone proclaims.

Hartford, then as now, was the center of a metropolitan shopping district. Perhaps the Rev. Jonathan Lee of Salisbury, who paid thirty-four pounds for a "brass kittle," was a little out of its bounds, yet names appear from Canaan, New Hartford, Mansfield and Enfield. James Hopkins of "Waterbrey" was debtor to "6yds and 1/2 blue Taffety at £6-15-0 per yd. and 3/4 & 1/2 qr. of yd. flowered lawn at £7-0-0 per yd." Appended to this entry is the note, "he is now studying with his brother at Stockbridge." David Sage came up the river from Middletown for a warming pan which cost seven pounds and five shillings. Capt. Nathaniel Holcomb of Simsbury had to hurry into the city in the midst of an August harvest to get "3 sicths" at fifty-five shillings each. From up the river came Ellsworths and Stoughtons for sagathe, taffety, a bit of "brade," a comb and a Jack-knife. John Ellsworth is one of the few credited by "Cash £15." The names of those who came from the territory of ancient Windsor and from East Hartford and Glastonbury are like a catalogue of the original settlers. There are Pitkins, Olmsteads, Burnhams, Bissells, Gaylords, and Hollisters.

When a twentieth-century girl whirls into Hartford for a morning's shopping, her memorandum is likely to be a formi-

dable affair. No less so was that which the suburban maiden of 1750 sent when her father visited the city. We say "sent" for it is quite evident that the men did the shopping. To be sure, Ann Wilson, "darter of Stebbin," bought in person five yards of calico at forty-five shillings per yard, but she must have felt rather out of place beside William Andross who was buying a skein of thread, and John Nichols, who wanted a yard of goloon. How queer those old memoranda must have read, or didn't they waste so expensive an article as paper on written memoranda? Buckram, holland, silk crape, taffety, cambrick, calico, ribbed drugget, long lawn and German serge are all comprehensible to a modern mind, but what of samcy "red" or "blew," shulen, Sagathe, chence, duffils, calaminco? How did the daughter of Rev. Benjamin Colton use "2 3/4 yds. gluem" and why did Thebe Wilson pay eleven pounds for five yards of Panesaskeon "wanting three nails?"

It is no wonder that the dresses of the colonial dames were carefully preserved and handed down as heirlooms, for the bills ran to impressive figures. On September 1, 1752 the Rev. Nathaniel Roberts bought the following,

To 5 yds. and near 1/2 qr. of Sarcy at 7-0-0	36-17-0
To 2 yds. 1/4 Russell at 25/	2-16-3
To 2 yds. Samcy at 18/	1-16-0
To 1/4 yd. and 1/4 of Shulen at 28/	0-10-6
To 1/2 yd. Cambrick at 7/	3-10-0
To 1/4 yd. of flowered lawn at 7-10-0	1-17-6
To 4 quires of paper at 12/	2-8-0
To 2 Doz. butens at 12/ and to S Dito	1-6-0
To a Scan Silk 8-6 to 2 S:S hair 12/	1-0-6
To 1/2 M pins 8/ and a S: Thred 3-9	0-11-6
	<hr/> 54-19-6

Clothing for men was no less costly. Here is the bill for materials of a suit bought by Phillip Smith of Windsor,

To 4 yds. and $\frac{1}{4}$ of Brodcloth at 8-0-0	34-0-0
To 5 yds of Shulen at 29/	7-5-0
To 1 yd. of Buckrom at 16/	0-16-0
To 2 Doz. butens at 24/ & 1 dito small	1-10-6
To 3 Sticks S: hair	0-15-0
To a hank of Silk	0-9-0
To a Linin hankchefe at 22/	1-2-0
	<hr/> 45-17-0

This is only the beginning. To complete his costume the gentleman needed for his linen shirt holland at thirty-five shillings per yard with a frill of cambric at one-hundred thirty shillings a yard, a pair of black worsted hose at 4-0-0, "glovse" at 1-0-0, a "Pr. Gartors" at 6 shillings, a felt hat at thirty shillings or a "bever, £14-10-0." If his frill were edged with bone lace it cost him forty-five shillings per yard. Facings of scarlet broadcloth cost eleven pounds per yard. For everyday wear John Hooker bought "8 yd.

cloth Fusteon at 37/" totalling £14-16-0. German serge, spelled and probably pronounced "sarge" was a common material for men's suits and cost seventy shillings. Camblet lined with "shulen" (probably shaloon, a light woolen made at Chalons) was made into long cape-like cloaks. Daniel Hinsdale got material for such a cloak, two and one half yards of the camblet, and two of the lining. In this he was inexpensively protected against the winter's cold and undoubtedly looked like St. Gauden's "Puritan."

The days of the sternest pioneering were past. Life in mid-eighteenth-century Hartford was not without its amenities. These glimpses from an account book of that time show us the fourth generation from the founders leading fairly comfortable lives. The eighteenth has been called the "civilized century"; Hartford, sipping its chocolate, spicing its toddy, and making history on the City Square where Queen Street met King, was a part of it.