

Some New England Pewter

By PERCY E. RAYMOND

THE spirit of curiosity led me, in the autumn of 1949, to volunteer to catalogue the pewter at the Harrison Gray Otis House. I found the collection lamentably deficient in early American specimens, but while I was at work, news came of a gift of forty-two pieces from Mr. Charles K. Davis, the well-known collector and connoisseur of Winton Park, Fairfield, Connecticut.

This collection is so nicely balanced a representation of the pewter made in New England that it may be worth-while to offer some notes on it that may be helpful to beginning collectors. Experienced ones will find nothing new, and will readily recognize the fact that I am indebted to Mr. Ledlie I. Laughlin and his splendid *Pewter in America* for most of the information.

So far as we know, pewter making in America began in Salem, Massachusetts, for the scapegrace Richard Graves, who kissed Goody Gent twice and did the crying himself, is known to have had the molds and tools of his trade. He was at Salem in 1635, and by 1640 there were three pewterers working in Boston. Boston seems to have been the pewter-making hub of the colonies, for by 1700 there had been fifteen men there who were known as pewterers, and one at Dedham. Virginia is the only other colony to have as yet produced a seventeenth-century name—but no piece made in Boston during that century has yet been found.

This is not particularly surprising. Pewter has been made in England since the time of the Roman occupation. Even so, collectors of English pewter are extremely proud if they own anything made before 1650. Few of them do. In this country, the prizes are the pre-Revolu-

tion pieces, and there are, so far, comparatively few known which were made in Massachusetts. The oldest specimens in many a collection are those made by John Skinner, who worked in Boston from 1746 to 1786. Our 8½ inch plate is a good example of his work. He is noteworthy for Boston, in that, like some other early Colonial pewterers, he followed the London custom of hammering the bouge, thus adding strength and attractiveness to his plates and platters. Like many of our early pewterers, particularly those who had their touch dies cut before the Revolutionary War, his symbol is the lion rampant. Our example came from the Dudley family of Duxbury, and scratched on the back is the name of Richard Dudley Child.

Next in order is Nathaniel Austin of Charlestown, who was in business from 1763 until 1807, except for a brief period during the war. In 1776 his house and shop were destroyed by the English bombardment and he fled with his family and apprentice to Lunenburg, where he remained until the evacuation of Boston. He, too, used the rampant lion in gateway for his first touch, but at the end of the war, promptly adopted the eagle of the United States. He had another touch, possibly used during the years of the conflict. This bears the name AUSTIN in a scroll, and is accompanied by his hallmarks, the first of which shows his initials. We have a 9½ inch plate and a 13 inch platter so marked. This 9½ inch plate is unusual, in that it has a smooth brim. Most American pewterers made their sadware with a single reed on the brim, a style that became popular in England about 1705-1710. But a few, John Skinner and Nathaniel Austin among

them, had molds for producing plates with a smooth brim. This style first appeared in England about 1720, but was most popular from 1740-1775. The specimen donated by Mr. Davis is peculiar, possibly unique, in that there is a deep concentric groove within the margin, thus producing a false reed. This was

tween 1792 and 1817. He produced what is known as the typical Boston plate, very shallow, and with a narrow brim. Although considerably post-Revolution, he adopted an old English type of touch, a flying bird above a lamb. Since the bird bears a twig in its beak, it may be the dove which brought the good news to



TOY TEA-POT BY ROSWELL GLEASON
PLATE BY JOHN SKINNER

done when the plate was being finished on the lathe. Two of the four American pieces which were in the collection before the Davis gift are smooth-brimmed plates with the N. Austin eagle touch. The third is a $7\frac{7}{8}$ inch basin, also bearing the eagle touch.

Our fourth original piece was made by Thomas Badger, the most prolific of Boston pewterers. He worked from 1786 until 1815, and used an eagle for his touch. Our original piece was a 15 inch platter, and Mr. Davis has given us another. This is the largest size made by New England pewterers.

Richard Austin, who may or may not have been a distant cousin of Nathaniel, made a good deal of pewter in Boston be-

Noah. This touch is almost identical with that of John Townsend, a London pewterer who worked from 1748 till about 1800, and sent much of his pewter to this country. This mark was his usual touch, but he had another rarely seen. He demonstrated his loyalty to Massachusetts, perhaps because he was a Captain in the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, by using the coat of arms of the state. However, our $7\frac{1}{8}$ inch plate has only his locality label, R. A. BOSTON.

Pewter making in Rhode Island started in the small but opulent city of Newport in 1711, and five men are known to have been working there before the Revolution. Three of the five are represented in collections today; but by only a few

pieces. Our single Newport piece was not made by one of them, but by David Melville, who served as an Ensign in Capt. Bailey's Regiment during the war, and settled down to pewter making in 1776. It is a 14 inch platter, a nice piece to have, for Melville is the only American pewterer known to have produced dishes of this size. It bears his "Made in Newport" touch, struck twice.

The greater part of the surviving Rhode Island pewter was made in Providence. The pewterers there had a late start, but made it up in productivity. Samuel Hamlin started in 1771, but lost a lot of time by serving in the army in 1778 and 1779 as a Lieutenant in Capt. Peck's Company of the First Rhode Island Regiment. We have three pieces by him, a 9¼ inch plate, a 13½ inch semi-deep dish, and a 9 inch basin. The plate is of the rare smooth-brim type. He had a variety of touches. Before the declaration of peace, he had a hard-metal touch bearing a somewhat agonized suspended sheep, and a small circular one with the initials S H on opposite sides of a Tudor rose. About 1790 he adopted an eagle with thirteen stars above it in a single line. A few years later, probably about 1794-1795, he used another eagle with shorter neck, smaller head, and with dots instead of stars in a group above the head. Much more common is his Samuel Hamlin touch in a scroll, as on our sadware pieces.

This Samuel Hamlin was succeeded by his son, Samuel E. Hamlin, who worked with his father till the death of the latter in 1801. He continued to work by himself in his shop on Main Street for over fifty years. He early adopted the newer and harder metal britannia, but for a time continued using his father's molds and touch marks.

Porringers were a Rhode Island specialty, and the Hamlins, father and son,

made more than all others together. A porringer, in the old days, was a general utility vessel. It could be used for porridge, for soups, or as a side dish for any food containing liquid. The shallow plates of the day were adapted only for use with the dryer foods. Porringers were also used extensively as drinking cups, especially the smaller ones. This is made evident by the names often seen in old inventories; such as, "beare pint," "wine pint," and "gill" porringers. Our Hamlin specimen is 4½ inches in diameter (half-pint size), and has the Hamlin adaptation of the "Old English" type of ear. It bears the younger Hamlin's characteristic touch, an eagle combined with the anchor of the Rhode Island coat of arms. A 3 inch beaker is an example of his work in britannia. Curiously, the touch is close to the lip, way out of the usual position.

Gershom Jones was practically contemporaneous with the elder Hamlin. They married sisters, the Ely girls of Middletown, Connecticut, and were in partnership from 1774 till their grand row in 1781. When Hamlin came back from the war in 1780, Jones took his turn, and became a Captain the next year. He set up in business for himself in 1784. Our representation of his work consists of a 15 inch deep dish with the lion-in-gateway touch and a 5⅜ inch flowered-handled porringer with the circular lion touch. The large deep dish is most unusual. It should be compared with the 13 inch ones of the Connecticut makers and our semi-deep, 11 inch one by William Billings. Billings did not begin work until 1791, and continued until 1806 as a pewterer, brazier, and copper-smith. He had a habit of placing his scroll name-touch three times on each piece of his sadware.

Our last Rhode Island man, William Calder, belongs to the britannia, rather

than the soft pewter period. He began working in Providence in 1817, and continued until 1856. By his time, the demand for pewter plates was almost nonexistent. Our $7\frac{7}{8}$ inch specimen must be one of his earliest pieces, and bears his eagle touch. The other, diameter $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches, is more typical of his line, for he

began in Connecticut when Thomas Danforth moved to Norwich in 1733. Thomas was the son of the Samuel Danforth who graduated at Harvard in 1683, and became minister at Taunton, where Thomas was born in 1703. Samuel was the son of Samuel, son of Nicholas Danforth, who came to Cambridge in 1634.



CANDLESTICK BY RUFUS DUNHAM, PORTLAND, MAINE
PLATE, WITH HAMMERED BOOGE, BY THOMAS DANFORTH II,
MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT
BRITANNIA SOAP-BOX BY ASHBIL GRISWOLD, ALSO MIDDLETOWN
BEAKER BY SAMUEL E. HAMLIN, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

made a great many sets for church use. This size could be used in the communion service, or as an offertory plate. The $5\frac{1}{8}$ inch porringer has the typical flowered handle.

One notes that Calder's pewter pieces have his eagle touch, whereas the britannia ones have only the name, CALDER or C. CALDER. The britannia is so hard, and the pieces so thin, that they do not readily take impressions of large touches. This in itself enables one to distinguish the two alloys.

So far as is now known, pewter making

This first Samuel graduated at Harvard in 1647 and became a distinguished mathematician and theologian. His older brother Thomas was treasurer of Harvard College from 1650 till 1669, and was a great landholder. In fact, it was he who struck the first of the familiar T D touches. He owned ten thousand acres in Framingham, and had his initials cut on trees along the boundaries. Some of these were still visible almost two centuries later.

Thomas Danforth is reputed to have been making pewter in Taunton from

the year of his father's death, 1727. He removed to Norwich in 1733 and made pewter there until 1786. His product is not as yet fully identified, because of the difficulty of telling which T D touches belonged to him, and which to his son Thomas who began making pewter in Middletown in 1755. It is now definitely known, however, that the T D touch with the lion rampant in a scrolled oval belonged to the first Thomas, for a platter has been found on which it is accompanied by the Norwich locality label. We have a $7\frac{7}{8}$ inch plate with the lion touch.

As was said, the son Thomas established himself in Middletown in 1755 and produced great amounts of pewter before his death in 1782. We have his lion rampant-in-gateway touch on a $7\frac{7}{8}$ inch plate and a 12 inch platter.

The second Thomas' youngest son, Samuel, started work in Hartford in 1795 and continued there until 1816. He, of course, abandoned the traditional Danforth lions, and used several eagles. One of them is on our 13 inch deep dish. Dishes of this sort, 13 or $13\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, are a specialty of the Connecticut pewterers.

We have seen the work of three generations of Danforth pewterers. Now we come to a fourth, Thomas Danforth Boardman, named for his grandfather, the second Thomas. He worked at Hartford from 1805 to 1850, and with his brother Sherman developed a factory system with large branches in New York and Philadelphia. Although a large part of their production was during the britannia period (1820 onward) they stuck to many of the good old Danforth methods and most of their pewter is of high quality. We have here a $9\frac{3}{8}$ inch deep plate, a $5\frac{1}{2}$ inch basin, and a tall beaker, marked by Thomas alone; an 11 inch deep dish, a porringer, and a quart mug marked by the partners. The T D and

S B became a familiar set of initials. There is also a pint mug, doubtless made by them, but bearing the touch of Boardman and Hart, their New York branch from 1827-1850.

There were other Danforths of the second, third and fourth generations who were pewterers in Connecticut, Philadelphia, Richmond, and even in Georgia, but this is not an account of this pewtering dynasty. Their influence went far beyond the work of actual members of the family. Gershom Jones of Providence was taught by John Danforth of Norwich. An even more prominent pewterer and business man was Ashbil Griswold, who was an apprentice to the third Thomas Danforth at Rocky Hill, near Weathersfield. In 1807 he established himself in the pewter business in the outskirts of Meriden, Connecticut. In the course of time he turned to the manufacture of britannia ware, which he sold to peddlers who carried it all over the East and South. He retired from active business in 1842, but retained interest in some of the britannia companies which united to form the Meriden Britannia Company in 1852. By this time electro-plating had reached a sound basis in this country and the new company plated a large part of its wares. This led to its becoming the nucleus, with the Rogers Brothers and others, of the International Silver Company. They have a large collection of Ashbil Griswold pewter and britannia on exhibition in Meriden. Our britannia soap box is one of his typical products.

H. H. Graves was a rather unimportant britannia maker in Middletown, Connecticut. We know that he was working in 1849 and 1852, and little else. He is represented here by a pair of 10 inch candlesticks. They are of interest chiefly because they still have the bobèche, a part easily lost.

Let us now return to Massachusetts.

Roswell Gleason flourished in Dorchester in the britannia-silver-plating period. He began by making some of the old fashioned pewter between 1822 and 1830, then turned almost entirely to britannia. After 1850 most of his ware was electro-plated. He gave up business in 1871, but lived until 1887. Most of his marks are plain name-touches, but he also used a small eagle and the Massachusetts coat of arms. We have a pair of his whale-oil lamps, a round teapot, and most interesting, one of his toy teapots. These are supposed to have been made for his daughter Mary in the 1830's. They are of the form to which J. B. Kerfoot, who made American pewter popular, gave the name "pigeon-breasted."

Roswell Gleason in Massachusetts and Ashbil Griswold in Connecticut are good examples of the men who worked in the transition period from the old pewter to the new britannia metal. The former had to be cast in molds and finished by skimming on the lathe. The newer alloy was more ductile. Instead of cracking under pressure, the particles flow and rearrange themselves as they do in gold or copper. Hence it was possible to spin britannia. To make a bowl, one first turned a wooden block to the desired size and shape of the inside of finished article. This now became what is called a chuck, and was screwed onto the mandril of the lathe. Then a circular sheet of britannia, of the proper size, was fixed against the chuck by a piece of wood on the other arm of the lathe. When firmly fixed and cen-

tered, the lathe was started and the spinner, using a long steel tool with a highly polished curved end, pushed the metal into contact with the surface of the wood. It requires skill and experience to keep the metal bending and flowing so that the walls of the bowl retain a uniform thickness and do not crack. To make a teapot it is necessary to spin various parts separately and then solder them together. Handles, hinges and spouts are cast in the old-fashioned way. With power lathes, production was rapid, and the lighter weight made the new vessels highly popular. Teapots, oil lamps, and candlesticks flowed from the factories of Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, and the peddlers spread them all over the eastern United States. Very little was made south of Meriden, Connecticut. The Midwest had other sources of supply in Cincinnati and St. Louis.

The country is still flooded with britannia teapots, some good, some middling, some atrocious in design. We have already mentioned two made by Gleason, and will now look at two made "down in Maine" at Westbrook, near Portland. Rufus Dunham (1837-1860) made relatively good tall teapots, but is more deservedly well-known for his cider pitchers. His candlesticks are also good. Freeman Porter (1835-1860+), also at Westbrook, made good cider pitchers. All these tall pots were long called coffee pots, but I think I have convinced most people that they are not.