

Gideon French of Boston, Tallow-Chandler, 1784 to 1819

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I HAVE been able to find but two printed records of the existence of Gideon French. The discovery of six manuscript ledgers with his accounts from 1784 to 1819 beg silently for further recognition. With the growing shortage of both funds and adequate room in our national, state and local historical organizations and libraries, I am reluctant to relegate them to storage without first placing this rather fascinating picture in modern type for future reference.

In the first Boston Directory for 1789 Mr. French appears on page 20. He is listed as a bricklayer and tallow-chandler on Water Street. Again, in the Boston Directory issued July 1813, he is listed as a tallow-chandler on Leverett Street. Perhaps bricklaying did not pay, or more likely the demand for soap and candles, rush lights and watch lights paid better. Whereas these two notices might provide a run of the mill epitaph on a gravestone, they do not seem to me a fair record for a successful Boston manufacturer and merchant in the post Revolutionary period.

Perhaps he was a personal friend of Paul Revere (see inventory for 1796), and perhaps he fought his way through the War for Independence, contributing his time and efforts to our present way of life. That he was not an officer and does not appear in the Dictionary of American Biography means nothing. Of his patriot activities we have no record. The least we can do is to print some small

account of his contributions to lighting the homes and scrubbing the hides of Bostonians in our kindergarten days.

The earliest ledger in the collection opens with an inventory dated November 20, 1784. It is a fine old American binding in sheep, or what some people call American vellum. There is no way of proving that this is the first book of accounts kept. It is possible that the business might have been started during the war, but from the figures I would guess the shop had not been running for very long. These figures are in pounds, shillings and pence.

Boston 20 nov: 1784.

To Stock in the Shoop			
1109 lb. of tallow @ 6	[£]	27	14 6
17½ lb. Cotton wick 3/		2	12 6
12 Baskets Coal 1/			12
6 lb. Cotton 2/			12
87 lb. Candles @ 7/2		2	14 5
1 half pound Rush			2
270 ½ lb. tallow @ 6/		6	15 3
12 Boxes 1/2			14
1 ¼ lb. Rush			5
1 ½ lb. Rush			6
9 Barrells @ 2/			18
851 Grees @ 4/		14	3 8
28 Bushel ashes 6			14
By Cash for the Shoop			10
. . .			
By Cash Recd Col. Wattars		1	13 5
By Cash Recd Govr. Bowdoin		3	2
To Cash to pay Brownsden		15	4
Spinning Wick			12
To 6 Syder Bbls.			9
Settled nov 1786		£137	15 1

The fact that this first inventory was

settled in 1786 indicates a possibility that Gideon French might have purchased the shop on November 20, 1784, stocked as listed. All such records are delightfully provocative but historically frustrating. Perhaps we had better take things as they were set down for us and not reason why. The figures do provide a rather good picture of a tallow-chandler's shop in Boston in 1784.

In the ledger for 1796 to 1802 we find a clearer description of the actual equipment and furnishings. We also discover that Mr. French had a partner, or at least a financial angel offstage, who as pages and years go by paid all his lighting and washing bills "by ballance rec'd. in his profits."

1796	Gideon Thayer Dr. to the Expences for the shop		1802 Jany. 22	to repairing the Cart	3.25
October 5th	To a box of candle moulds six dozen	\$42.83	March 25	To cash paid for repairing the cart	15.00
	To eleven stands for Ditto @ 4/6	8.25		To repairs made on the Soap kettle	49.90
1797				To bottom put to chopping troth	2.00
August	To building a shed & putting down three Leaches stuff and work	59.96	Decr. 8	To 1 pair cart wheels & ax'letree & Wheelbarrow	\$28.75
	To a small pump for lies	5.85			
	To one Iron Kettle	50.00			
	To setting Ditto	10.00			
	To 2 large tubs for soap	8.00			
[1798]					
May 23	To a cart saddle collar & haymes	8.25			
Octr. 25	To an ax'letree for the cart	1.75			
Novr. 8	To a Copper Ladle & Swimmer	6.17			
Decr. 21	To a horse Sled	8.00			
1800	To making a window over the soap kettle	2.00			
Jany. 28	To repairing the cart	2.50			
August 20th	1800 the above Settled in full	\$213.56			
	Errors excepted				
1800 Octr 4	To repairing the cart	\$4.00			

Such a page of tools of American craftsman of this period is very provocative. Did Paul Revere cast the huge kettle for \$50? Did he also create the copper ladle and swimmer—and what was the swimmer, a skimmer? Was the man who built the window over the soap kettle a member of the Associated Housewright Society that first met at the Green Dragon Tavern in 1804? Could it have been Benjamin, Bolter, Hearsey, Lincoln, Loring, Sumner or Todd of the first committee to set up the organization?

A man is known by the company he keeps, and quite often a merchant's clients are an indication of his reputation in a community. A list of Mr. French's customers might be headed by Governor James Bowdoin and end with William Scollay—of Scollay Square, shall we say. Also, a man who actively engages in a trade for nearly forty years is generally accepted as successful.

Now for a few amusing conjectures. Although Governor Bowdoin purchased page upon page of candles, both moulded and by the pound run of the barrel, there is little evidence of his bathing. Shall we give him a black eye or shall we assume that Mrs. Bowdoin had a Mrs. Tiggy-winkle in the kitchen who supplied the household? Although Proctor & Gamble began supplying Cincinnati with soap in 1837, thousands of Americans made their own soap right on through to 1940;

I had a neighbor in Bridgewater who give us a small box every Christmas.

Hannah Otis and Elizabeth Bowdoin both ran large accounts for rush and watch lights and also for moulded candles. Candles by the pound and moulded candles were two very different things. In this day and age the surest way to make a point is to put it in dollars and cents. Ordinary candles cost 18 cents *per pound* but moulded candles were figured at $22\frac{1}{4}$ cents *each*. Watch lights were about $20\frac{1}{2}$ cents each and rush lights roughly 25 cents a piece.

Caleb Bingham's *Young Lady's Accidence* was published in 1785. I will not lower myself to counting the number of candles he purchased during 1784 because some future biographer might misinterpret the reckoning and decide that he wrote all night and slept all day; too many biographies have been compiled just that way. His bathing record, on the other hand, is good, even though he did buy his soap by the pound and not the barrel, as did William Scollay!

With the details of this nineteenth-century shop before us we can summarize the cost of reading in bed and bathing, to a certain extent. The common soap of the day cost about \$4.00 a barrel. Cakes of soap brought about $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents each. It's a shame Mr. French does not mention soap moulds or their designs and cost. I think it probable that soap was soap from about 1784 to perhaps 1825 or later, although I do not claim to be a student of this trade or craft. The amazing thing about it is that our best

soaps today only run about 14 cents a cake, unless you count the very special perfumed varieties for special purposes. On the other hand, *think* of the milk, eggs, lamb and beef of 1784—and 1959.

I have already noted rush light, watch light and candle costs. Just what candles were 18 cents a pound it is difficult to say. It seems reasonable to assume they were dipped. Our museums have hundreds of examples of candle moulds of this period, running from one candle to four dozen. The moulds for two to four dozen are built in stands, as noted in the French inventory for 1796. It is difficult to determine from this ledger item just how many individual moulds went into one stand. It would seem that the box contained six dozen, or 72, individual candle moulds. A hasty local checkup finds that the best and fanciest candles of 1959 cost just about as much as those moulded in 1784.

I wish there were time to tally the tallow in candles and soap manufactured by Gideon French and sold to the good citizens of Boston from 1784 to 1819. On the other hand, with a good sound record of equipment, furnishings, tools and stock, perhaps such an accounting would not seem important. He served his community well. He lighted them to their baths, furnished fine moulded candles for their social activities and entertainments, allowed them to pay their accounts in ashes, "sewit" and "grees," and coöperated in every way he could to encourage reading, writing and cleanliness.