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# The American Connoisseur

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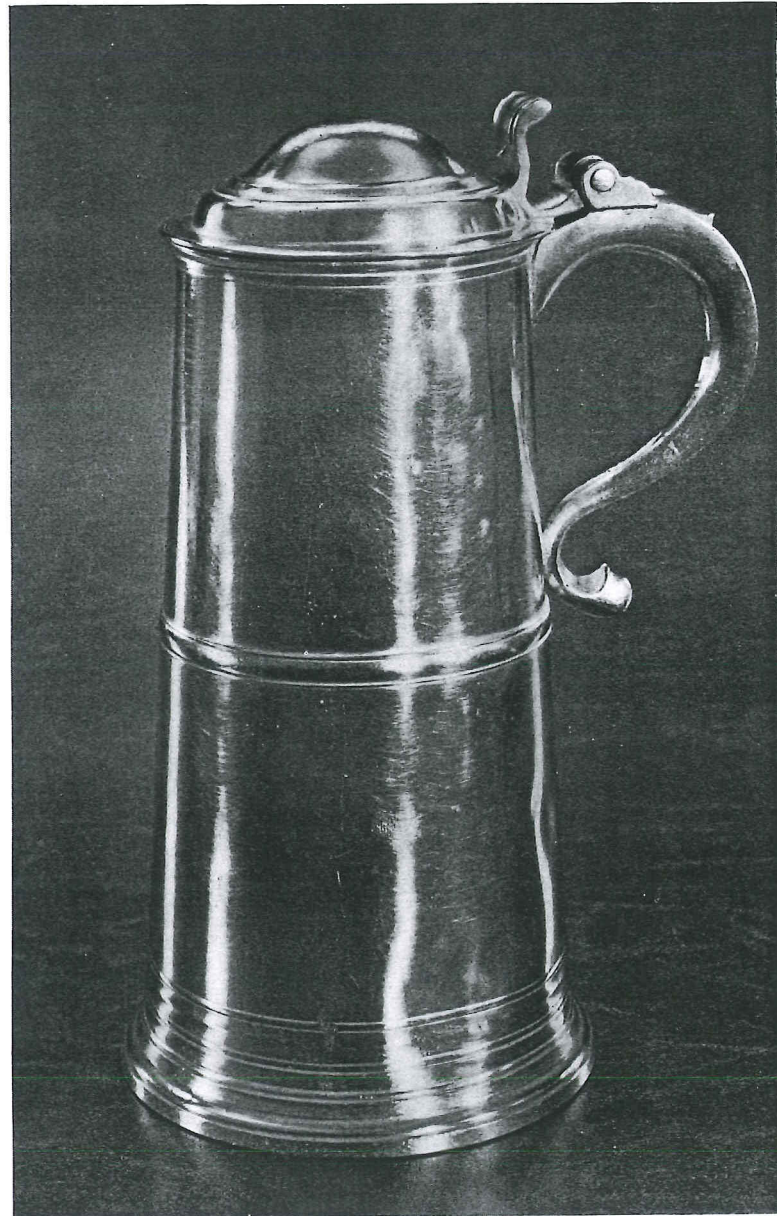
## How to study American pewter

GRAHAM HOOD

PEWTER was profusely used in Europe from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century. Its range extended from humble kitchen implements to the more fashionable tablewares, and encompassed an enormous variety of almost all other household utensils. In America pewter was certainly in use by the 1630's, probably even earlier, and its popularity remained undiminished until the middle of the nineteenth century. Consonant with other American decorative arts pewter forms are not so varied as those of Europe, particularly England, for there was no highly sophisticated aristocratic art to set the fashion and dominate taste. The whole temper of the country and the people who thrived here often gave rise to a formal directness and relative simplicity in art. Objects with the chasing or elaborate ornamentation often prevalent in European pewter are therefore extremely rare. The process of making pewter (i.e. casting in moulds) contributed to this straightforwardness and the material itself was intractable. As a result directness and restraint, and a resonant surface quality, are the notable virtues of American pewter.

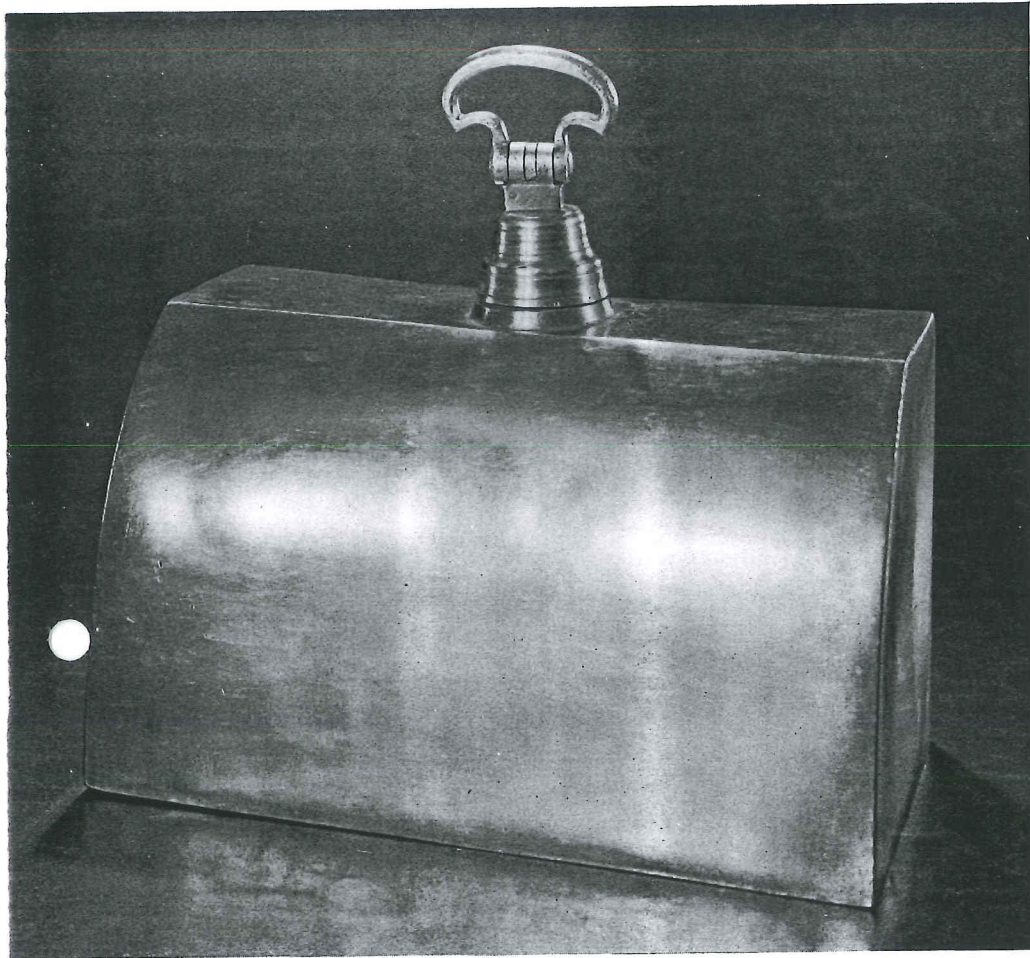
1629 Thomas Graves, 'engynere', wrote a report to the Massachusetts Bay Company on 'such needfull things as every Planter doth or ought to provide to go to New England'. He entirely omitted pewter and listed instead 'wooden platters, dishes, spoons and trenchers', the treenware extensively used since mediaeval times. Yet the wills and inventories of the 1630's and 1640's often contain long lists of pewter; by 1635 Richard Graves had a pewterer's shop in Salem, and by 1640 at least four more pewterers were established in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The first pewterers to work in New England had almost certainly received their training in England under the aegis of the Pewterers' Company. Yet the company did not seek to extend its authority to America because pewterers in the colony were regarded as necessary only for repair services to damaged or worn pewter which had been imported from England. This was standard English mercantile policy, to promulgate the suppression



1. Flagon by Henry Will, New York and Albany, circa 1761-93. The most monumental piece of American pewter, and extremely rare. The body is similar to an English type of the mid-eighteenth century, while the handle, from a normal tankard handle mould, reflects the craftsman's German training in its proportions. Yale University Art Gallery.

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2. *Left.* Footwarmer by Henry Will. Unique in American pewter and one of the few pieces of eighteenth-century pewter which was not cast. It was made from sheet pewter soldered at the edges. It reflects no particular style but is impressive in size and proportion. The craftsman had more flexibility, supplies and equipment than has often been recognised. *Yale University Art Gallery.*

3. *Near right.* Flagon by Johann Christopher Heyne, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, circa 1754-81. This German trained immigrant made flagons earlier than this to match an existing German flagon in Trinity Church, Lancaster. The change in his work towards more English forms is partially seen here in the handle and cover. It was a key piece in the discovery of this gifted pewterer. *Yale University Art Gallery.*



4. *Far right.* Chalice by Johann Christopher Heyne. A superb rare form in the English manner by one of the most fastidious eighteenth-century pewterers. The repetition of motifs, so important a part in the harmony of the whole, is here achieved by a similar base and cover, both from the same mould. *Yale University Art Gallery.*





5. *Above left.* Cream jug attributed to John Will, New York, circa 1753-66. A Queen Anne pear-shaped form by a rare maker, the solid base probably being earlier than similar forms with cabriole legs. *Yale University Art Gallery.*



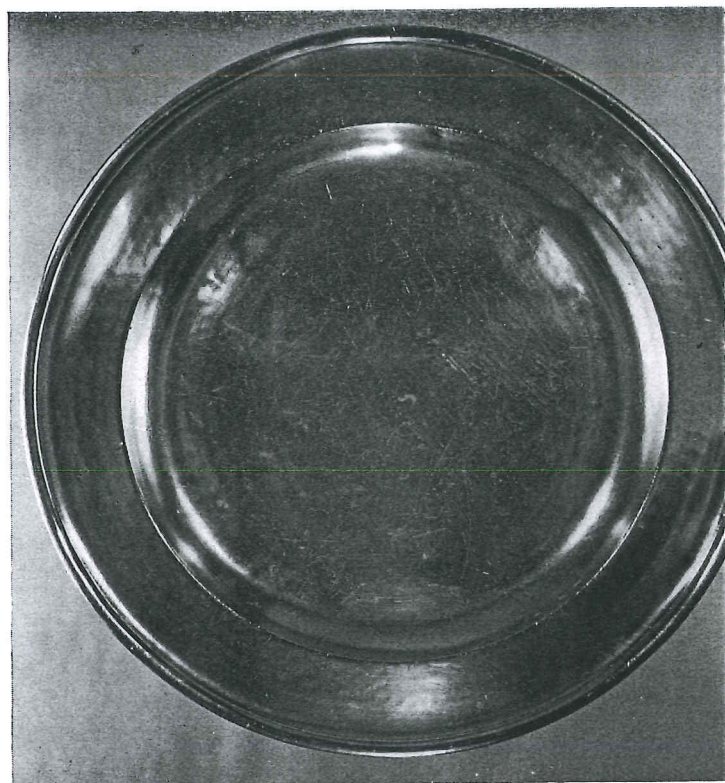
6. *Above right.* Three-and-one-half-pint tankard by John Bassett, New York, circa 1720-61. This tankard is fully contemporary with the Queen Anne style, with sophisticated scrolled thumbpiece, dolphin tail terminal, high double dome and fillet. Its large size, up-to-date style and rare maker are most notable. *Yale University Art Gallery.*

7. *Below right.* Quart tankard by Frederick Bassett, New York and Hartford, Connecticut, circa 1761-1800. A superb form and a good example of the use of early styles throughout the century. The flat cover, crenate lip, scrolled thumbpiece, and dolphin tail terminal all indicate the stylistic date of late seventeenth century to early eighteenth century. This maker probably used moulds inherited from his father, John Bassett. *Yale University Art Gallery.*



of colonial industry in favour of increasing export trade to that colony. So assiduously did the Pewterers' Company pursue this course that there is record of only about ten pewterers in the Boston area prior to 1700 and only five elsewhere in the colonies. But pewter had a limited durability and there developed in America the practice of trading used pewter for new. It was inevitable therefore that pewterers here should turn to the making of new articles themselves which they did increasingly as the colonies expanded. Richard Graves of Salem owned brass moulds, while a spoon survives from the 1670's made by Joseph Copeland in Virginia, and several extant plates and dishes are attributed to the Dolbearre Family of Boston before 1700.

In the later seventeenth century the annual value of recorded shipments of pewter from England varied between £1,000 and £4,000, which represented a great amount of pewter. In 1760



8. *Above left.* Tulip-shaped quart tankard by William Will, Philadelphia, circa 1764-98. The Rococo form of tankard by a pewterer working in the fashion conscious and rich city of Philadelphia, whose work illustrates a wide range of form and completely contemporary styles. *Yale University Art Gallery.*

9. *Above right.* Dish by Simon Edgell, Philadelphia, circa 1713-42. A rare and early dish or large plate, hammered all over in the fashion of the finest English pieces, so that its grand size and richness of texture belie its simple form. *Yale University Art Gallery.*

shipments of pewter were valued at £38,000, an extraordinary figure far in excess of the value of all English furniture, silver-plate and tinware sent to America. Even this failed to satisfy the demand. By 1725 there were at least ten shops in Boston and about six each in New York and Philadelphia, with pewterers working in many rural areas in the colonies. From the first half of the century surviving objects are unfortunately extremely few. But from the middle of the century there was a great increase in the number of pewterers and much more of their work remains. Some of the finest and most varied objects come from New York and Philadelphia, and to a lesser extent from Boston, but notable work was also done in Connecticut, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. At this time, too, in sharp contrast to previous beliefs, American pewterers were able to draw upon supplies of raw tin

10. Porringer by R. B. (Richard Bonyng?), New England, circa 1740-75. Most porringers have pierced handles which are variants of English types. This handle has a simplicity which accords perfectly with the form. Of splendid weight and texture. The maker is rare and early. *Yale University Art Gallery.*



11. Pint mug by R.B. An early style with high fillet, solid handle and sunburst pattern on the terminal. Yale University Art Gallery.

from Cornwall. The previous high export duty on this product, an extension of the Pewterers' Company's monopoly, was bitterly attacked in Parliament by the Cornish suppliers and there rescinded. Even English pewterers' moulds were sent to America.

The pewter industry in England suffered heavily from the growing fashion for glazed earthenware, porcelain and glass from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards. There was not nearly such a decline in America, as the number of pewterers indicates, although even rural household inventories of this time contained frequent references to the 'Cheney, Delph and Stone Ware' and glass 'in the Bofatt', indicating that most people who cared about fashion bought ceramics and glass to be up to date and regarded a pewter object merely as a utensil. To combat this threat a type of pewter called Britannia appeared increasingly in America from about 1800, the name having been coined in England in the second half of the eighteenth century. It was in fact a purer metal than had been previously used, with a much higher proportion of tin. Because of its increased hardness it could be cast thinner, and later spun on a lathe. This substantially increased the speed of manufacture, for objects could be rapidly spun around a shaped wooden chuck. It also relieved the design of forms from the limitations of the mould so that a greater emphasis on curved surfaces was possible than before. The process substantially increased the metal's hardness, unfortunately at the expense of much of its surface quality.

In style and form pewter closely emulated silver. The latter was a precious metal and a conscious investment, whereas pewter was often a mere commodity. Pewter was cast in moulds which were of heavy brass and so costly they sometimes passed through

three generations of pewterers, while each piece of silver individually wrought by craftsmen highly responsive to currents. Silver forms changed with, and are revealing successive styles, while pewter forms often described an in vogue style or an outmoded one. With the American practice of returning worn pewter to the craftsman for recasting, and metal's limited life, only a very small amount of early pewter survives. More remains from the second half of the eighteenth century when pewterers were often using outmoded forms because the market had shifted from the fashion conscious to those who were interested in keeping up with contemporary styles. Among an enormous number of Britannia objects made throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, late Rococo forms were popular, as well as watered down Classical Revival and the distinctive 'Empire' forms.



12. Half gallon measure by Timothy Boardman & Co., New York, 1840. English measures seem to have been exported to America in great quantities and marked American examples are rare. A fine bold form despite its late date. Yale University Art Gallery.