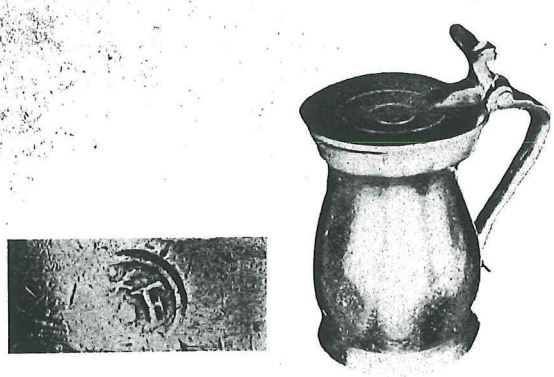
ELN

Antiques May, 1954

Collectors' Notes

A pewter discovery

At long last a baluster measure bearing a touch attributed to an American pewterer of the pre-Revolutionary period has been discovered. The find is important not only because such a piece has long been sought, but because it brings to light a second item from the hand of its maker. (The other is a small mug now in the Garvan collection at Yale University.) The fine little "pint pott" shown here bears the IF touch ascribed to John Fryers, who worked at Newport, Rhode Island, from 1749 to 1768. It was found in a Boston shop by Dr. Reginald F. French, professor of Romance languages at Amherst College; nothing else is known of its history.



Pewter baluster measure, five inches in height, made by John Fryers of Newport; and (inset) enlarged view of Fryers touch. A repair has been made at the point of attachment of the thumbpiece to the lid of the measure. *From the collection of Dr. Adelbert C. Abbott.*

The mystery of the disappearance of American baluster measures of the pre- and post-Revolutionary period has long intrigued students of American pewter. Ledlie I. Laughlin, when he wrote in 1940, did not know of a single existing marked American measure made before 1820. That such utensils were in common use is proved by the inventories of estates of early pewterers. The New Hampshire Historical Society owns a series of seven graded measures which, though unmarked, are attributed to an unidentified American pewterer of the period after 1730. I have recently been privileged to see an unmarked two-quart measure, part of a communion service the other items of which are a pair of chalices by Peter Young (saw-tooth touch) and a paten by Jacob Whitmore. While this association is no proof of its American origin, there may be evidence in the fact that the inside bottom of the measure was attached unfinished, rough-cast as it came from the mold. This oversight would hardly be expected in the work of the meticulous and well-supervised English pewterer.

Many theories have been offered to account for the almost complete disappearance of baluster measures from the American scene. It has been suggested that since some were of considerable size, they found their way to the molds of the ammunition maker during the War of Independence. But this view is hardly tenable if we consider that many of the colonists were Tory in allegiance and would surely have hidden their pewter, including measures, from the metal collector. And if only a small proportion had escaped his vigilance, many fine measures would now adorn our collections. No, there must be some other reason, possibly economic, for their disappearance. Could this be in any way related to the old expression, to watch your P's and Q's (pints and quarts)? Hoyt's *Cyclopedia of Practical Quotations* finds the origin of the phrase in the excellent advice to watch the ticks for pints and quarts charged in the taverns of the day. But may there not have been another meaning, particularly if it was suspected that the measures in common use did not deliver full value? In that case it is certain that the thrifty colonials would have given them short shrift, and they would soon have found their way to the pewterer for conversion to other forms. As a matter of fact, the Fryers measure pictured above lacks half an ounce of full measure, and that would have been of world-shaking importance to the tavern habitué if its content in commerce happened to be madeira, flip, or nutbrown ale.

—Adelbert C. Abbott