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Latten Spoons of the Pilgrims

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AMONG the actual possessions of the original Pilgrim settlers which have been unearthed by the restoration work now being carried on at Plymouth are latten spoons. Examination of the specimens discovered sheds new light on some rare early utensils.

Latten, also written in old records as lattin, lattyn, laton, or laiton, is sheet brass. Brass as a compound of copper and zinc was not made in England until the latter part of the sixteenth century. Before that time it had been imported in sheets from Germany and from the Netherlands, chiefly for use in the monumental brasses of churches and cathedrals.

Spoons made from it on the Continent were imported to England as early as the fourteenth century. So far as is known, John God was the first to make them in that country, in 1578, thereby bringing upon himself the wrath of the Court of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, who ordered that there "should Be no spones made of Bras or latten or any yelow metall." Nevertheless, God seems to have continued to make them, and during the next century many other spoonmakers joined in the nefarious occupation.

"Alkemie" spoons, as they were also called, were highly prized by the American colonists, and are rated in many inventories as of greater value than pewter ones. Henry Shrimpton of Boston, "Brayser" and pewterer, had them on sale before his death in 1666. It would be interesting to know whether he made any.

Nearly all spoons, whether of silver or base metal, made between the mid-fourteenth and the mid-seven-

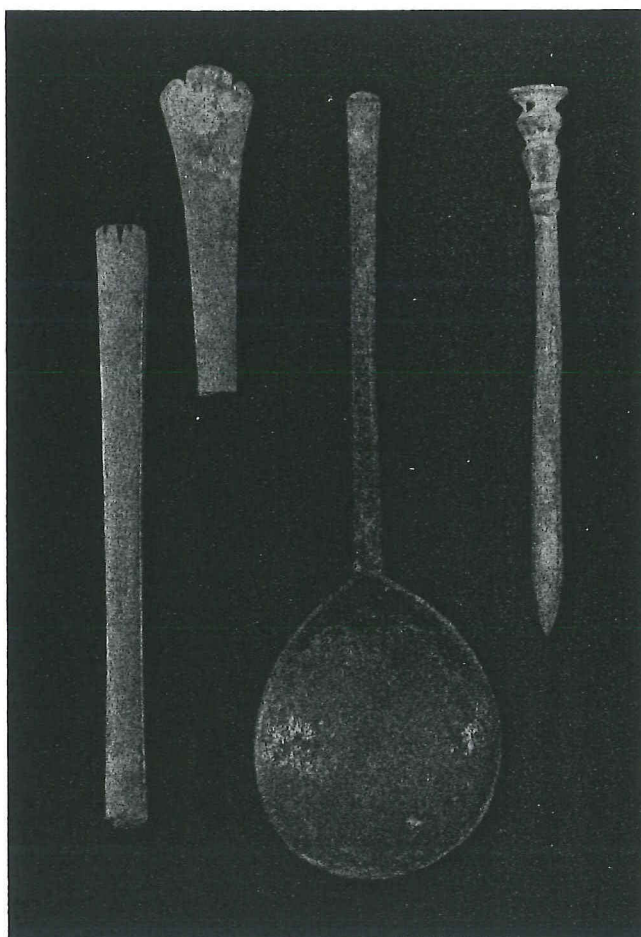


Fig. 2—Left to right: (a) The stalk of a Puritan spoon, showing the typical nicks at the end. (b) The upper end of a primitive trifold spoon. (c) A slip-top spoon with flattened handle. (d) An implement made from a broken stalk. All from the Josiah Winslow site.

Fig. 1—Two tinned seal-tops from the Josiah Winslow site, with an older, untinned one between them.

teenth centuries had fig-shaped bowls, shallow, rather flat, wide at the front, and narrow where they joined the stalk. During their evolution, the bowl tended to become more and more oblong, till an oval shape was reached which had the greatest width in the middle rather than near the front. The stalk was slender, hexagonal in section and, in most cases, had a knob of some sort at the upper end. Spoons with a flat, circular knob are called seal-top.

Seal-top spoons show numerous variations, identified by technical terms. At the top of the stalk is the flat seal, in most cases circular. Below it is a knob, which may be definitely lobate, melon-shaped, incised by vertical grooves; or be a smooth sphere. Below this is the upper annulus, a narrow button-like ring. Below this some specimens have a four-faced ornamental knob, with a stemmed rose on each side. This may be called the flowered support. Beneath it is the lower annulus, or, more rarely, two lower annuli. The specimens without the flowered support have slenderer stalks than those with it, and seem not to have been made after about 1650. These are called the short type by F. G. Hilton Price in his *Old Base Metal Spoons* (London, 1908), the best source of information on the subject. Spoons with the flowered support he calls the long type.

The seal-top was popular from the mid-1500's till the reign of Charles II. The early seal-tops, mostly pewter, had hexagonal stalks, but a tendency toward flattening developed rapidly during the seventeenth century, and those made after about 1650 have flat handles. Some are six-sided, some almost rectangular, and a few oval in section (see Fig. 1).

The only early spoon without a knob is the "slipped-in-the-stalk," or "slip-top," which first appeared early in the sixteenth century. The upper end of the stalk is obliquely truncated—slipped in the horticultural sense (Fig. 3, left). This produced a handle difficult to grip, yet the type was popular for two hundred years. Those happen to have been years before forks came into common table use; is it possible that the owners of slip-tops brought both ends into service?

A probable derivative of this type was the Puritan spoon, made in silver as early as 1651. This was the first in which the greatest width was in the middle of the bowl, and the first to have a wide, strong handle.

It was succeeded by the trifold or *pied-de-biche* spoon, whose handle end was notched to form three lobes. The trifold came from France with Charles II, and was not of British descent. Records of 1663 mention the "new-fashioned" spoons. They were stronger than the older ones, for the handle was broader, and the back of the bowl was stiffened by a rat-tail.

Two sorts of spoons, the seal-top and the slip-top, seem to have been favored by the Pilgrims and their descendants. Since both were made over a long period of years, it is difficult to date individual specimens. The worn condition of the bowls of most of the seal-tops found on the Winslow site at Marshfield gives evidence of hard usage: the Pilgrims scraped the iron pot as well as the wooden trencher. These specimens show too that the slender stalks were easily broken. One long fragment (Fig. 2, right) had been converted into another implement, possibly a fork or skewer, by filing the sides and end.

It will be noted that this latten handle has two

annuli beneath the flowered support, an unusual feature. At Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth there is a complete specimen of this sort (Fig. 3, right). It now shows no tin, but the touch says "Double Whited."

Plating latten spoons with tin, presumably to make them more like silver, became customary some time during the seventeenth century. The words *Double Whited* or *Double Tinned* were included in many touches. Probably the spoons so marked were plated by dipping twice into molten tin. We need more definite information as to when the tinning of latten spoons was adopted. Price says "about the middle of the seventeenth century." Only one tinned fragment was found at the Pilgrim Eel River site, which, so far as other evidence goes, was abandoned before 1660. This is part of a seal-top, with flattened handle (Fig. 5). It bears a touch, RT below a rose, previously noted by Price on pewter slip-tops which he assigned to the sixteenth century.

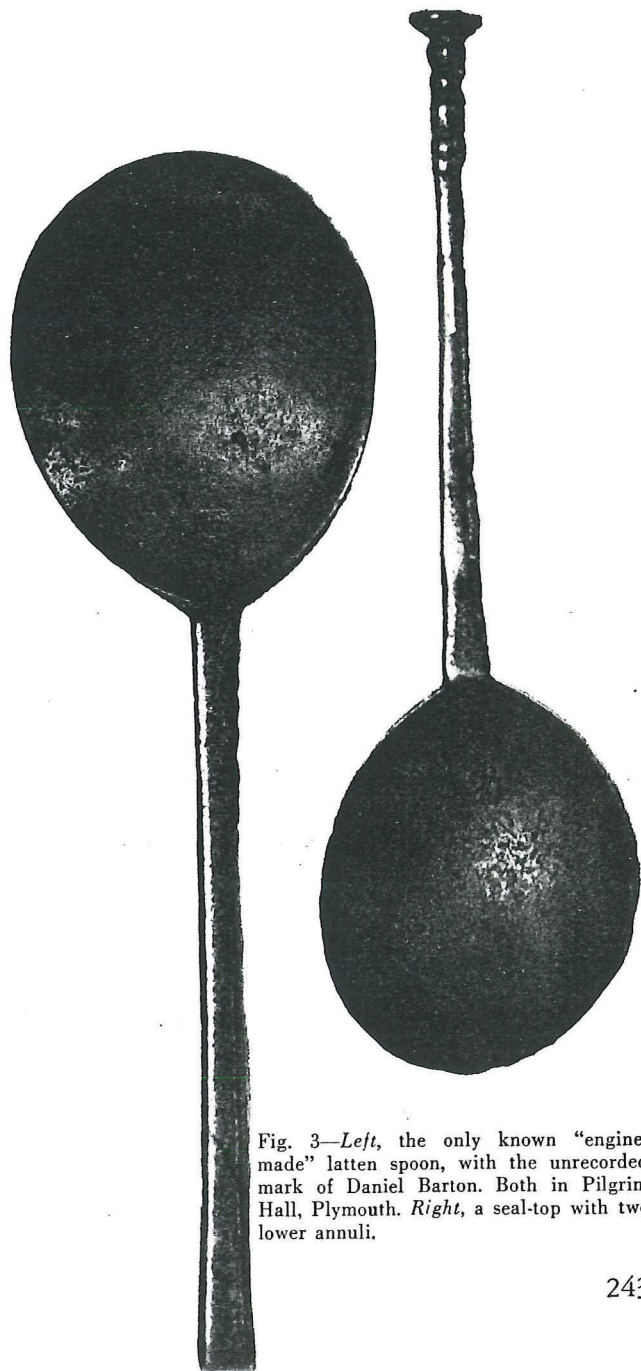


Fig. 3—Left, the only known "engine-made" latten spoon, with the unrecorded mark of Daniel Barton. Both in Pilgrim Hall, Plymouth. Right, a seal-top with two lower annuli.

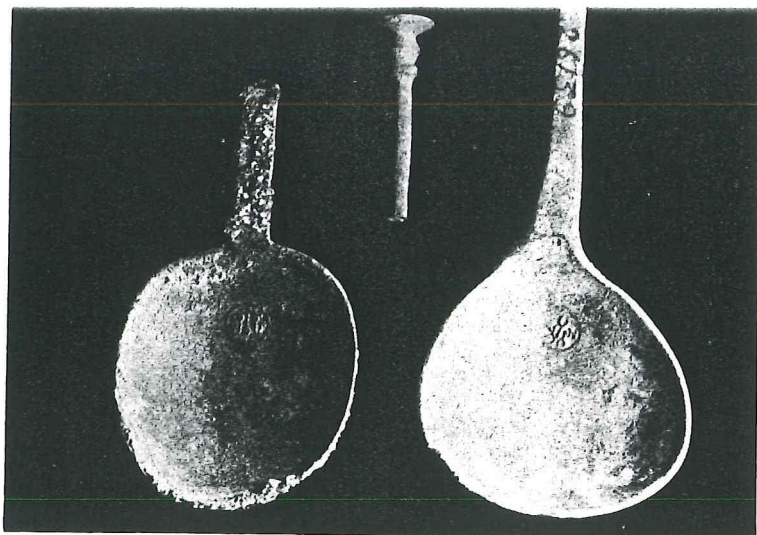


Fig. 4—*Left*, the bowl of a Puritan spoon, from the Winslow site. *Center*, terminal of a “short” seal-top from Eel River. *Right*, the bowl of a seal-top from the Indian burial ground at Kingston, Massachusetts (Peabody Museum, Harvard University). Note the typical “three-spoon” touches.

The Eel River site yielded a fragment of the upper end of one of the “short” seal-tops (Fig. 4). Beneath the seal there are a plain ball and single annulus. Since the stalk is very slender, rounded-hexagonal, and not tinned, this fragment is definitely older than any of the “long” specimens. It was probably extant in 1620, although there is no indication that it came on the *Mayflower*.

An entire spoon of this type is in Pilgrim Hall. It is $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches long, and has an unusually narrow fig-shaped bowl. The Worcester Historical Society has a splendid bright yellow example, marked with a fleur-de-lis, the Paris touch. It is exactly like one with the same touch figured by Price, which he considered to be late sixteenth or early seventeenth century.

A complete, little-worn, tinned specimen of a slipped-in-the-stalk spoon was found at the Winslow site (Fig. 2c). It has a rounded fig-shaped bowl, and a flattened, but six-sided stalk. It shows one of the transition stages from slip-top to Puritan type, but had not yet acquired the oval bowl of the latter.

At Pilgrim Hall there is a yellow slip-top which was found in the subcellar of an old house in Kingston (Fig. 3, left). The bowl is typically fig-shaped, $2\frac{3}{4}$ by 2 inches, and the $4\frac{1}{4}$ -inch stalk is six-sided, flattened, with a uniform width of $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. The touch is shield-shaped, with the date 1687 above the initials DB.

This spoon is of particular interest, because of both its shape and its maker. It proves conclusively that slip-tops with fig-shaped bowls were made almost up to the end of the 1600's, whereas Mr. Price tells us that at about the middle of that century the bowl became oval. This statement has lured us into supposing that any

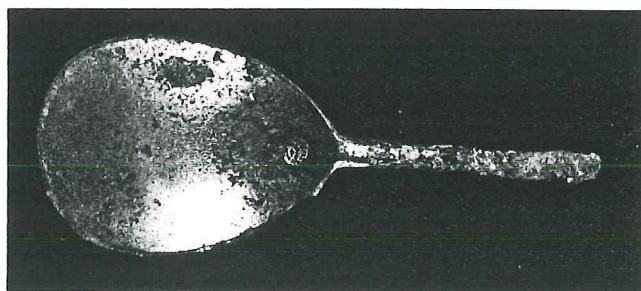
slip-top with a fig-shaped bowl was made before 1650. The DB of this hitherto unknown touch was doubtless Daniel Barton, pewterer and spoonmaker in London from 1670 to 1699 at least. He made silver and latten spoons, along with the usual run of pewter utensils. In 1687 he began making spoons with an “engine” (press?), and Welch tells us in his *History* that his fellow spoon-makers complained of him for the new practice. However, he convinced the Company's Court that his spoons were well finished, and he undertook not to sell them in the country for less than six shillings a gross, nor in London for less than four. Apparently he was allowed to continue on condition that he adopt a new touch for the engine-made product. This is the only specimen of the “engine-made” spoon so far recorded, and the only example known with this touch.

Puritan spoons are represented at the Winslow site only by fragments, and at the Eel River site not at all. A typical Puritan stalk, $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, $\frac{3}{8}$ inch wide at the top and $\frac{5}{16}$ inch wide where broken from the bowl, is rectangular in section, and bears the characteristic three grooves at the top (Fig. 2a). There is also an elliptical bowl with a part of the handle (Fig. 4, left). Both are tinned, and the touch in the bowl, three spoons between the initials GP, is listed by Price as occurring on latten Puritan spoons, but also on trifids.

The one fragment of a trifid spoon is the upper part of a handle, rounded at the end, with two shallow notches. The present length is $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and it is $\frac{3}{4}$ inch across at the top (Fig. 2b). It is unusually thin and flat, the stalk rectangular in section, and is one of the most primitive types of trifid known.

For permission to study the latten spoons so far found at Plymouth, I am grateful to Henry Hornblower II, President of the Plimoth Plantation, Inc., who excavated the site of the Governor Josiah Winslow House at Green Harbor, and that of an earlier Pilgrim at Eel River; Sidney Strickland, architect of the project, who excavated the foundations of the John Howland house at Rocky Nook; and Warren Strong, Keeper of the Cabinet at Pilgrim Hall.

Fig. 5—A fragmentary seal-top, with the RT touch. From the Eel River site.



Specimens from the Winslow and Eel River sites are in the collection of Henry Hornblower II. Photographs, except Figure 3, by Frederick P. Orchard.