

ETC



## Samuel Pierce, Jr., and the small eagle die

BY MARION AND OLIVER DEMING



Small iron die marked with an eagle and the name SAMUEL PIERCE, found among the pewterer's tools and now on display at the Hall Tavern, Old Deerfield. This illustration shows the die much enlarged. Photograph by Taylor and Dull.

AS PEWTERERS GO, Samuel Pierce of Greenfield, Massachusetts (1767-1840) is somewhat more notable than many of his contemporaries—not so much for his pewter, however excellent in quality and form, as for his tools. These were discovered more than thirty years ago by Julia D. Sophronia Snow and reported on by her in an article (*ANTIQUES*, February 1927, p. 124) described by Ledlie I. Laughlin in *Pewter in America* as “the most absorbing article on American pewter that it has ever been my good fortune to read.” Mr. Laughlin purchased the tools (which include the only pewterer's eagle die known to exist) and presented them to Old Deerfield. Today they are displayed there in a replica of a pewterer's shop (*ANTIQUES*, September 1956, p. 256), not too far from the place where they were originally used.

The life and the pewter of Samuel Pierce were described by Miss Snow and Mr. Laughlin in the works cited. The three recorded Pierce touches are his initial (No. 407 in Laughlin), thought to be his earliest; a large and very scarce eagle with his name (L-405); and the small eagle of similar design (L-406) shown here. Both eagles have been found separately with the initial touch, but so far as is known never together on a single piece of pewter. Except for a pear-shape teapot which Charles F. Montgomery has seen and the six-inch plate illustrated here, both with the initial touch, no Pierce pewter has been found in forms other than those listed by Laughlin. But in recent research we have uncovered some facts about his sons, the youngest in particular, which we believe to be of real significance to the story of Pierce pewter.

Several years ago, while compiling material on the life of the primitive painter George Washington Mark of Greenfield (*ANTIQUES*, July 1952, p. 43), we came across some advertisements of Samuel Pierce, Jr., who seemed to be a son of the pewterer (one of these advertisements was dated after the known pewterer's death). These aroused our interest, since we had understood that though a son named Samuel Pierce, Jr., had been born to Anna and Samuel Pierce, he had died in infancy. A check of the town records revealed that, following a not unusual custom of their time, the parents gave another son, born on October 11, 1812, the same name.

Samuel Pierce, Jr., was one of ten children, six of them sons. Three children (one of them the first Samuel, Jr.) died of plague in the summer of 1802; two

sons died in their mid-twenties; and the three surviving sons, John Joyce, George, and Samuel, Jr., eventually became active in the business and community life of Greenfield and Northampton, Massachusetts, forming and dissolving partnerships with each other or with contemporary craftsmen which are recorded in advertisements and announcements in the *Franklin Gazette* and the *Northampton Gazette*.

When Samuel, Jr., was twenty-one he entered the business field as a partner of one G. W. Johnson; their specialty was tinware. After three months this firm was dissolved and Samuel joined his brother John. Their advertisement states "we manufacture and keep constantly for sale a general assortment of wares," pewter included. In the fall of 1835 John formed a partnership with William Wilson, and Samuel continued alone. An announcement in the spring of 1838 says that he "Keeps on hand a full assortment *and* manufactures to order (wholesale and retail) ware made of pewter, tin, brass, sheetiron, copper and zinc." In 1840 he makes it known that he has sold his tools and stock in connection with the sheetiron, copper, and tin business to his brother George. Rejoining John in 1844, he was once more by himself a year later and decided to seek greener pastures. He and his sister Phebe, both unmarried, had lived in their own residence not too far from the old family home, but patent records show that in 1846 Samuel was in Peekskill, New York, and in Troy, New York; in 1851, where he applied for patents for coal stoves. When he finally moved to Tabor, Iowa, Phebe followed him there and it is thought that his brother George did too. In 1855 Samuel and Phebe sold their Greenfield farm. Phebe died in Iowa in 1858, leaving all her property to Samuel. Records show that he was still living in 1860, but where or when he died and where he is buried are unknown.

Judged by the standards of their day, the Pierces were successful men. Primarily they were tinsmiths, sheetiron

workers, and coppersmiths. Their accomplishments varied considerably as did their stock. Even though pewter was supposedly a part-time trade for the elder Samuel, it undoubtedly proved worth while, and in most of his son's advertisements it heads the list of goods for sale. Because of this, one is led to believe that the father was a silent partner, serving in an advisory capacity and as financial backer for his sons' partnerships. The terms of the elder Pierce's will support this assumption.

Ledgers kept by the father and the son John for the years 1821-1825, which a surviving member of the family has kindly permitted us to examine, record pewter occasionally but mostly old pewter metal. Large quantities of this, possibly surplus or of inferior quality, were sold to others. Later diaries kept by the father mention making pewter for his son George, and another entry records the fact that he spent the day casting teapots.

If one takes the many advertisements literally, the sons made pewterware or had a hand in the making of it. Certainly they could have served apprenticeships to either the father or an elder brother. There is the likelihood, too, that the father after casting forms allowed his sons to finish the pieces. If this was the case it explains the lack of marked specimens, especially teapots, which required assembling and further lathe and burnishing work after the parts were cast.

A pewterer's die, with a few exceptions, is the equivalent of his personal signature; it is incontestable evidence that he made a particular piece of pewter. Yet when two men had the same initials or name in a family of pewter workers, there is likely to be some difficulty in making positive attributions. This confusion has been resolved to some extent in relation to the Richard Lees, the Francis Bassetts, and the Danforths, among others. But in some instances further proof is required—and this is the case with the two Samuel Pierces, father and son.

The records show that Samuel Pierce, Sr., helped to

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## Selected references to ANTIQUES

COVERS OR FRONTISPIECES showing American pewter, and editorial comment on the pieces shown, were published in *ANTIQUES* in January 1926, December 1926, March 1927, February 1928, April 1938, February 1939, June 1945, and October 1945.

Articles of particular interest to collectors of American pewter appeared in November 1922, p. 209; January 1923, p. 17; April 1923, p. 173; July 1923, p. 27; September 1923, p. 132; November 1923, p. 226; January 1924, p. 26; March 1924, p. 122; July 1924, p. 24; April 1925, p. 192; October 1925, p. 212; January 1926, p. 19; May 1926, p. 315; February 1927, p. 124; March 1927, p. 190; January 1928, p. 28; June 1928, p. 493; October 1928, p. 331; March 1930, p. 242; May 1930, p. 437; August 1930, p. 144; November

1930, p. 399; February 1931, p. 97; August 1931, p. 87; September 1931, p. 150; July 1932, p. 8; September 1932, p. 92; May 1934, p. 189; January 1935, p. 23; June 1936, p. 239; November 1936, p. 209; April 1938, p. 188; November 1938, p. 248; March 1939, p. 130; June 1940, p. 300; July 1940, p. 26; April 1941, p. 191; May 1942, p. 315; April 1943, p. 171; December 1943, p. 292; August 1944, p. 75; June 1945, p. 326; October 1945, p. 204; April 1947, p. 253; June 1947, p. 394; January 1948, p. 60; March 1948, p. 196; November 1948, p. 340; January 1949, p. 40; September 1949, p. 179; April 1950, p. 274; January 1951, p. 57; July 1951, p. 51; February 1952, p. 178; June 1953, p. 521; May 1954, p. 388 and 412; March 1955, p. 230; January 1956, p. 55; September 1956, p. 256.

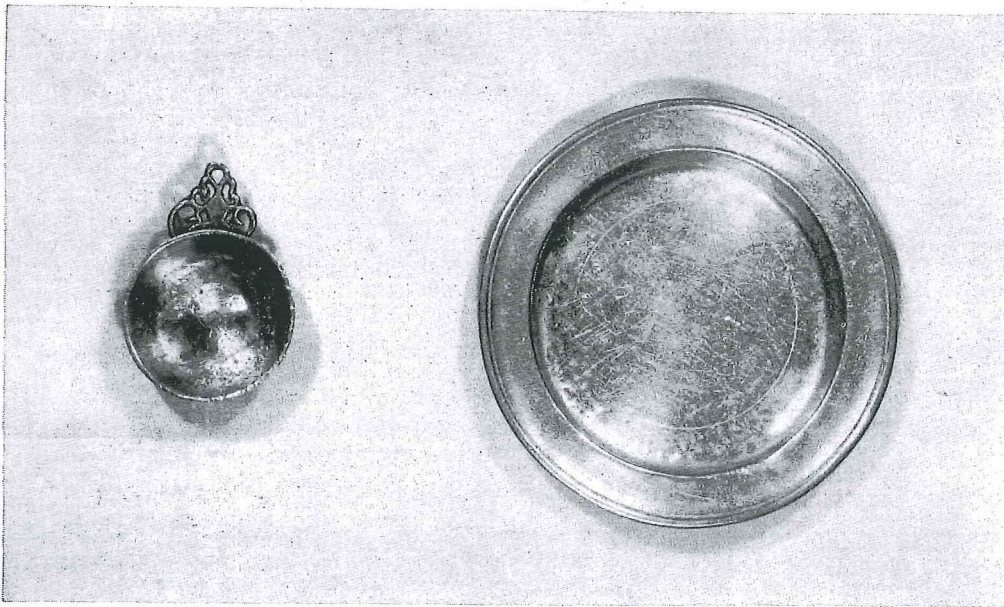
establish his sons in business. It seems natural that a father would particularly wish his namesake to learn a trade that he himself enjoyed, and that as an incentive he might have allowed the son to use the small eagle die. If such was the case, it is probable that the initial touch was used solely by the elder. Since neither that touch nor the larger eagle die was with the tools when they were discovered it is assumed that they had been removed some years earlier—or if the elder gave the tools to his namesake, he may have given him only the small eagle die.

In 1838, when Samuel, Jr., advertised that he manufactured pewter it was but two years before his father's death, a period when pewter, especially plates and basins, was declining in use. It is significant that many of the eight-inch plates and quart basins bearing the small eagle touch are found in virtually mint condition,

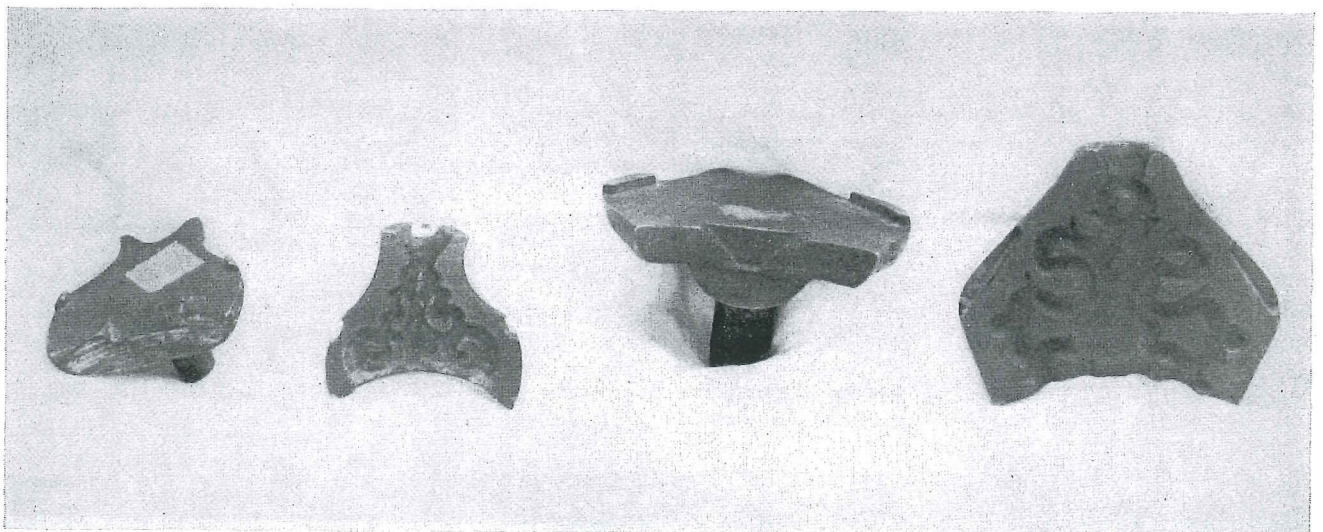
and that on these apparently later pieces the die was often struck off-center, as though by another hand.

The tools were found in a building belonging to John's descendants which had been erected some years after the elder Pierce's death, but they could have been given to Samuel, Jr., when he was active in business and when, according to advertisements, he manufactured pewter; and he may have entrusted or given them to John, with whom he seems to have kept in touch, when he went to Iowa. Legally, the tools were his if they were still the property of his father at the time of the latter's death, as Samuel, Sr., left certain lands and buildings to John and George, but to Phebe and Samuel, Jr., he left "all the rest and residue and remainder of my estate, both real and personal."

All in all, we believe the evidence is in favor of Samuel Jr.'s having used the small eagle die.



Unmarked 2¼-inch porringer whose handle fits one of the Pierce molds (no marked Pierce porringer is known), and a 6½-inch plate with Pierce's initial touch, formerly in the author's collection. Photograph by Robinson Photographic Laboratories.



Pierce porringer-handle molds. Old Deerfield; photograph by Robert Bliss.