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Some American britannia ware in the Winterthur collection

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DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN objects of pewter and britannia metal baffles many a beginning collector or curator. Even to knowledgeable individuals there are numerous borderline cases that defy precise identification. There are, however, a few general guidelines that can be helpful in making distinctions. Britannia and pewter are variable alloys composed principally of tin. Lead is an ingredient in most pewter, whereas true britannia metal contains instead small amounts of antimony and copper which contribute to its relatively greater hardness and luster. Compared to pewter, britannia has a silvery sheen. Important, too, is the shape of the object in question. By spinning and stamping his wares the britannia manufacturer could produce objects with pronounced angles and curves or fluted and paneled effects, which were impossible for the pewterer to achieve with his limited number of molds in conventional shapes. The greater hardness of britannia metal and the new manufacturing methods made it possible to produce objects that have much thinner walls than do objects made of pewter.

Britannia ware was first produced in America during the nineteenth century. By 1806 Thomas Danforth Boardman of Hartford had perfected a britannia metal for use in casting teapots, as described in the brief, oft-quoted autobiographical sketch now in the Connecticut State Library. Of particular interest because of its hypothetical relationship to a britannia teapot in the Winterthur collection (Fig. 1) is a statement from this account relating to the year 1806: "I recivd a lot of English tin from a pewter[er] in Philadelphia with orders to make it into teapots just as it was." The tone of Boardman's statement captures the urgency of the request, as though his correspondent were saying, "Philadelphia is a ready market; send the pots as quickly as possible." Undoubtedly, the timing was right. The prolific William Will was dead, and aside from importers there remained only a few craftsmen to supply this extensive regional market.

It is entirely possible that Boardman's correspondent was his uncle, the pewterer Thomas Danforth III. Although Danforth's name does not appear in a Philadelphia city directory prior to 1807, it is likely that he was in that city as early as 1806 setting up the companion shop to his Rocky Hill, Connecticut, establishment.

Boardman cast the tin according to the order, but he found the metal so soft that the teapots chipped when they were skimmed on the lathe to finish them. This induced him to melt up the teapots and continue the experiments he had been making with copper and antimony as additives to tin in order to impart hardness to the body of the metal and a shiny appearance to its surface. At about this time he sucessfully produced a suitable britannia metal and could boast with satisfaction, "The pots were the bestt I had ever made—from what I could learn verry few teapots had ben made in New England & those verry clumsey . . . ."

Boardman's statement leaves little doubt that he was a pioneer in the American britannia industry. It is even possible that the pear-shape teapot (Fig. 1) bearing the small eagle touch of his uncle was actually produced by Boardman in his Hartford shop in 1806 or later: its britannia-metal body is formed entirely by casting and soldering, the pewtering technique employed by early britannia makers; its handle is fashioned of metal rather than of wood, a nineteenth-century characteristic; and the touch, though infrequently associated with Danforth's Philadelphia production of 1807-1813, might have been readily accessible to Boardman in Danforth's Rocky Hill shop not far from Hartford. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that Boardman's own mark appears on pieces similar to the teapot illustrated.

The theory that Danforth himself produced the teapot sometime after 1806 seems open to question in the light of Boardman's further statement that until 1821 he shared the formula for britannia metal only with his brother Sherman. If other pewterers in the area had perfected britannia metal, there would have been no reason for secrecy.

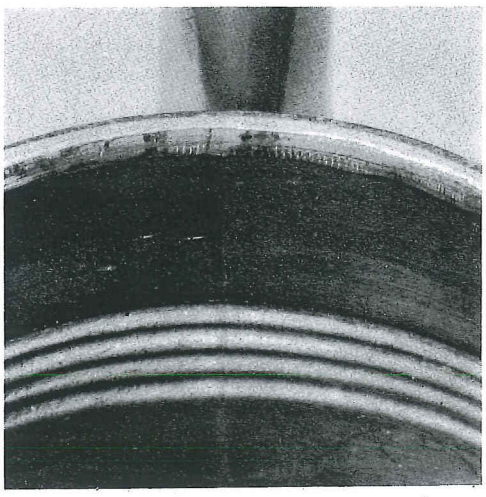
Significant because of its shape and method of fabrication is a tall, tapered "lighthouse" teapot (Figs. 2, 2a) made in the shop of Israel Trask of Beverly, Massachusetts, probably during the second decade of the nineteenth century. To make it, a sheet of britannia metal was repeatedly passed through steel rollers until it was of the proper gauge. The craftsman then scribed out his pattern and cut a blank to form the body. After running the blank through a grooving machine to produce the decorative bands at the neck, he looped the ends around and soldered them together in a vertical seam at the point where he later added a spout. This method of forming wares, probably borrowed from the silversmith's trade, was a logical approach to working a new metal by a former silversmith's apprentice. Also related to this training is Trask's use of engraved decoration on his early wares, as around the neck of this teapot.

Typical of an apparently popular design of the 1820's that was produced with slight variations in several areas

Fig. 1. Teapot with the touch of Thomas Danforth III, Connecticut or Philadelphia, c. 1806-1818; small eagle mark. This early pear-shape teapot of britannia metal is based in form on eighteenth-century pewter models but differs significantly in the slope of its body curve and the shaping and size of its appendages. Finial button of wood. Height 7 inches. *All illustrations are from the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.*

Fig. 2. Teapot by Israel Trask, Beverly, Massachusetts, c. 1812-1825; mark I·TRASK in rectangle. The wooden handle and finial button bear traces of black paint. Height 11½ inches.

Fig. 2a. Detail showing the interior of the Trask teapot. Note the vertical seam at the front of the body.



is a teapot bearing the mark of George Richardson of Boston (Fig. 3). Richardson emigrated from England about 1818 and within a few years formed an association with the entrepreneurs Charles and Hiram Yale of Wallingford, Connecticut, according to Thomas Danforth Boardman. Boardman describes how the Yales acquired the secret of his britannia metal formula. He relates that about 1821 he gave the formula to his young cousin Josiah Danforth, and that Josiah foolishly passed it along to his journeyman, Thomas Derby. In short order Derby was wooed away by the Yales, who then claimed that they had discovered the alloy. Worse yet, in Boardman's estimation, the Yales "very soon run the bissness down by sending more in the market than was demand[ed], & Seling at 25 to 40 p ct less than fair prices in Boston to a foreigner [who] came with 3 sons." This foreigner was George Richardson.

It is interesting to compare Richardson's teapot with another bearing the mark of Charles Yale (Nancy A. Goyne, "Britannia in America," *Winterthur Portfolio II,* 1965, p. 186), and with a crude woodcut of a teapot that appeared in Richardson's advertisement in the *Columbian Centinel* of Boston on March 28, 1821 (as illustrated by Lura Woodside Watkins in *George Richardson, Pewterer,* ANTIQUES, April 1937, p. 194). They are basically all of the same design. Their bulbous bodies have been formed by spinning the two halves on a lathe and then soldering them together around the center. The particular importance of these teapots lies in the fact that they probably represent the earliest britannia design shaped by spinning in this country. But to whom should the credit go? To the versatile Yales, who had a knack for finding out what they did not know and who are reputed to have imported English workmen, or to Richardson, trained in England where spinning probably was already in some use before he left for America?

Closely related to Richardson's teapot in design is his covered sugar bowl (Fig. 4) made slightly later, after he moved to Rhode Island. The body and foot of the bowl and the lower half of the teapot were formed over the same wooden chuck, or lathe mold. Richardson used this particular chuck once again when he designed a pitcher (Ledlie I. Laughlin, *Pewter in America,* Barre, Massachusetts, 1969, Vol. II, Fig. 617). In this case he combined the familiar base with a tall, incurving neck. Such ingenious use and reuse of molds was not uncommon in either the pewtering or the britannia trade.

The interchangeable nature of many britannia molds is also illustrated by a small covered pitcher (Fig. 5) made in St. Louis in the shop of Timothy Sage. In this piece the body is that of a small beaker formed by spinning. Although Sage was a late-comer to the industry, he demonstrated an eye for good form and competence in

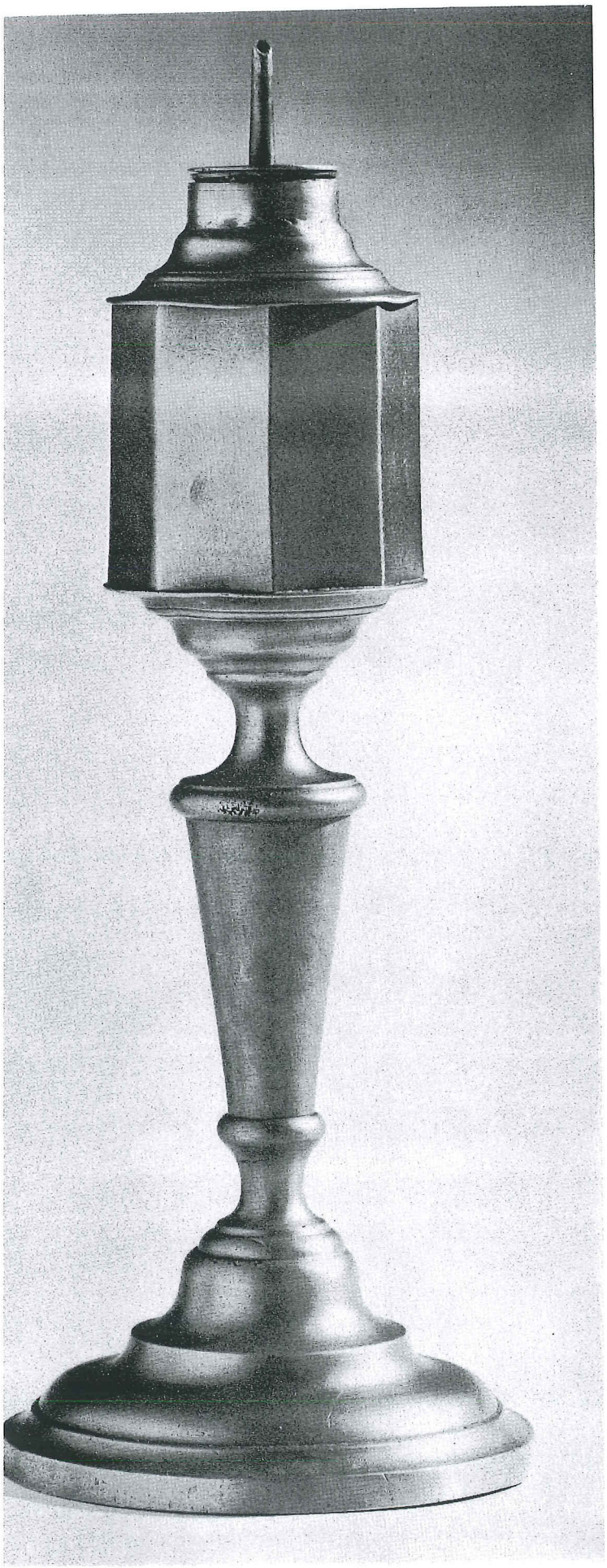
Fig. 3. Teapot by George Richardson, Boston, Massachusetts, c. 1821-1828; mark G. RICHARDSON in serrated rectangle. The spout and handle were formed in metal molds by hollow, or slush, casting: a mold, open at one end, was filled with molten metal and almost immediately emptied, leaving a hollow casting with moderately thin walls. The handle originally was japanned to simulate wood. This layer of black paint, now almost entirely worn away, has preserved most of the original shiny surface of the handle. Height 7 inches.

Fig. 4. Covered sugar bowl by George Richardson, Cranston, Rhode Island, c. 1828-1835; marks G. RICHARDSON in serrated rectangle in combination with CRANSTON. R.I. and GLENNORE C° in serrated, curved banners with an incised *2* preceded by the word *N°* in serrated rectangle. This sugar bowl design was singled out by J. B. Kerfoot for illustration as the frontispiece of his pioneering volume *American Pewter* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1924). He considered the form to be of exceptional merit and beauty in view of its nineteenth-century origin. Height 5⅛ inches.

Fig. 5. Covered pitcher by Timothy Sage, St. Louis, Missouri, c. 1847-1848; mark T. SAGE incised. Height 5¾ inches.

Fig. 6. Footed bowl by William Crossman, William West, and Zephaniah Leonard, Taunton, Massachusetts, February 1829-August 1830; mark CROSSMAN/WEST & LEONARD in incised letters. Aside from its unusual shape this piece is interesting because of its original surface treatment. Visible still are traces of gilding and blue and green paint, indications that the bowl was "japanned," that is, coated with special paints and varnishes and then heated in a low-temperature oven to harden and set the finish. Height 4¼ inches.

Fig. 7. Tea or coffee set by Roswell Gleason, Dorchester, Massachusetts, c. 1840-1855; marks ROSWELL GLEASON and *4800*, both incised on all pieces with an additional incised number *10* on the pot. The bodies and lids are eight-sided and formed by stamping; the grape-cluster finials are cast. Height of pot, 11⅛ inches; height of sugar bowl, 7⅞; height of creamer, 6⅞.



his work. The graceful flare at the rim of this vessel is repeated in the curve of the spout.

Stamping was a fourth manufacturing process that was widely used in the britannia ware industry in both England and America from as early as the 1820's. An excellent example is a footed bowl (Fig. 6) made by the firm of Crossman, West and Leonard in Taunton, Massachusetts, between 1829 and 1830. Its low, curving body is deeply indented with continuous vertical flutes formed by stamping in a screw or drop press. The firm (then Babbitt, Crossman and Company) first began stamping hollow ware in 1827. At that time it was a tedious process requiring a series of dies to produce one shell of the proper depth and sharpness of pattern. If a single die were used, wrinkles or tears would develop in the metal. Two years later the company overcame the difficulty by holding the metal sheet tightly in place between two ring dies during stamping (George Sweet Gibb, *The Whitesmiths of Taunton,* Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1943). The body of the bowl in Figure 6 is closely related to tea ware patterns produced by the company. This particular form may have served a dual purpose—as an individual footed bowl and as a slop bowl in a tea service. The pattern is English in derivation for American britannia makers had little time and capital and almost no trained personnel to initiate their own designs before the middle of the century.

Stamping proved to be an economical manufacturing method, and it was used extensively throughout the productive decades of the 1840's and 1850's. Roswell Gleason of Dorchester, Massachusetts, successfully employed this process in forming the paneled bodies of a pot, sugar bowl, and creamer in a three-piece tea or coffee set (Fig. 7) that he marketed during this period. The dies used to shape these vessels differ from those previously used in Taunton, for the body components here are not bowls but vertical strips soldered together. The frivolity of the cast finials and the simplicity of the body lines form an interesting contrast.

During the 1830's the Taunton Britannia Manufacturing Company (successors to Crossman, West and Leonard) incorporated a hexagonal font composed of vertical panels into their tall lamp (Fig. 8). The primary manufacturing process here was casting: the hollow shaft and the foot were joined at the top of the dome; the crown and base of the font were cast of thin-gauge metal in the same mold, and one of the elements was simply inverted. Nor did the manufacturers stop here in their ingenious reuse of molds. They took the pattern for the lamp's shaft, added another spool-shape element at the top and bottom, set the whole thing on the same foot, put a candle cup at the top, and produced a tall candlestick.

A lamp of diminutive size with a graceful urn-shape font (Fig. 9) from the shop of James Putnam in Malden, Massachusetts, was one of many designs referred to as a bed or night lamp by the 1840's. The small capacity of

Fig. 8. Lamp by Taunton Britannia Manufacturing Company, Taunton, Massachusetts, 1830-1836; mark T. B. M. Co in incised letters above an incised number *1*. Almost without exception the britannia metal used by this firm and its predecessors and successors is of exceptional quality, regardless of the method of manufacture. Height 14⅝ inches.

Fig. 9. Dish lamp by James H. Putnam, Malden, Massachusetts, 1835-1855; mark PUTNAM in serrated rectangle. The burner cap is made of brass. The short wick tube indicates the use of whale oil as a fuel. Height 4 inches.

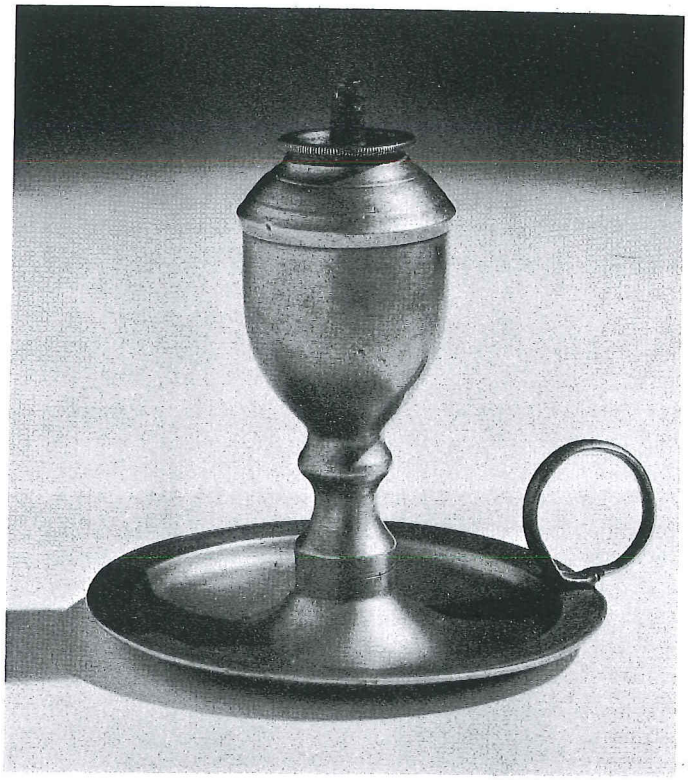


Fig. 10. Candlestick by Henry Hopper, New York City, 1842-1847; mark H·HOPPER in serrated rectangle. The thumb rest on the ring assures a firm, secure grip when the stick is being carried. Height 5 inches.

Fig. 11. Caster frame by Eben Smith, Beverly, Massachusetts, c. 1830-1856; mark E.SMITH in serrated rectangle. Height 8½ inches.

the font permitted no more than a short period of illumination. As is the case for most britannia lamps, this piece was cast. The interior is hollow to the base of the shaft where it joins the dish. The components are simple and well co-ordinated, and the relationship of height to diameter of dish is pleasing to the eye.

Britannia craftsmen relied almost entirely upon casting in the production of candlesticks. The size and nature of the parts dictated this method of fabrication. In a New York City example made by Henry Hopper (Fig. 10) the bold baluster of the shaft and the broad sweep of the dish lend a distinctive note to the styling. Small as it is, the candlestick has been assembled from six separate parts. The craftsman cast the socket and probably fashioned the rim from a piece of sheet metal shaped over a form. He mounted the hollow shaft on a thin disk and joined it to the dome of the dish. A narrow reed around the rim, formed as a unit with the dish, lends

the dish sufficient rigidity to prevent loss of shape and serves as a reinforcement at the point where the ring is attached.

Casting lent itself equally well to the fabrication of caster frames which American craftsmen apparently first produced during the early 1830's. Before the end of the decade they had become a popular and profitable item. Frames of the early period have simple lines and plain surfaces, such as the one illustrated here (Fig. 11) from the Beverly shop of Eben Smith. Noteworthy in this example is the four-bottle rack that revolves. Frequently, the customer could choose from a selection of bottle patterns. Britannia manufacturers ordered these accessories from any of several large glasshouses that flourished at the time—the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company, the New England Glass Company, and the Providence Flint Glass Company. Sometimes the orders were reversed, and the glass manufacturers purchased frames to sell with their bottles.

Drinking vessels in a variety of shapes and sizes were available on the consumer market from the early period through the later stages of britannia production. Fabrication techniques include both casting and spinning. Usually only slight differences in form exist between the various types designated as beakers, cups, mugs, and tumblers. A small cup (Fig. 12) with slightly rounded, tapering sides and a delicate S-scroll handle made by William Calder of Providence is distinctive in design. It owes more to the silversmith's craft than to the pewterer's. The walls of the vessel are unusually thin. The two narrow, reeded bands serve both to strengthen weak points on the body and to relieve the otherwise plain surface.

The profile of a large sugar bowl (Fig. 13) spun by the Boardmans of Hartford in the mid-1820's contrasts bold, heavy body lines with light, airy, reverse-scroll handles. Originally the bowl had a lid, probably of low conical form with a button finial. The Taunton Britannia Manufacturing Company began to produce a similar sugar bowl in the early 1830's as part of a four-piece tea service (Laughlin, Vol. II, Figs. 618-621). Although the Taunton manufacturers added a scalloped rim and refined the body curves, they selected a plain, curved handle design that lacks the sprightliness and vigor of the Boardmans'.

From its founding in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the American britannia industry flourished. Some shops were small and their products limited to a few forms, while others employed dozens of skilled craftsmen and turned out a full line of wares. At first teapots and small articles such as boxes were made; soon tea services and lighting devices were added. By the close of the 1830's many items of britannia ware were available on the consumer market, ranging in form from water pitchers to communion services, from cuspidors to cake baskets. Most population centers along the East Coast from Baltimore northward supported one or more shops, but the greatest concentration of craftsmen was in New England. There britannia artisans established themselves in towns and villages as well as in metropolitan areas. It was they who laid the foundations of the modern domestic metalware industry, which in the late nineteenth century underwent large-scale expansion and diversification. Today most reproduction and contemporary "pewter" forms are produced from britannia metal, and the methods of fabrication, with only minor modifications, are those developed in the nineteenth century.

Fig. 12. Cup by William Calder, Providence, Rhode Island, 1830-1856; mark CALDER in serrated rectangle. Height $2\frac{13}{16}$ inches.

Fig. 13. Sugar bowl by Thomas D. and Sherman Boardman, Hartford, Connecticut, and New York City, 1825-1827; mark · BOARDMAN & Cº · NEW YORK · in a circle surrounding an eagle. Height $6\frac{7}{8}$ inches.