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John Somers an Englishman making good Pewterware in Brazil c1968-1990 - his own story. With later comment from his son Gregory Somers still working with Pewterware and design in 2012.

This is a draft of this writer's understanding of an interview John Summers gave to Guimarães Lucinha
- in his home at Ritópolis, Minas Gerais, Brazil in September 1999.
The resulting article was called -

John Somers. Art and tradition of tin in São João del Rei

- My name is John Somers, I was born in England on March 30, 1930 My family had metal industry forges in the town of Halesowen, near Birmingham.
- I never worked in the firm. Leaving school at age 18 I enlisted in the British Army, where I served for eight years. My last placement was in the "Intelligence Section" whom as always in the armies of the world, had very little to do with intelligence.
- In 1954 I married an English girl born in Brazil. After very little experience with military life, she wanted to return to Brazil and in 1956we did.
- We lived in Rio, which was still the capital of the country. I lived first in Pond, Santa Teresa, and worked six years in jobs in the city beginning to understand a little of Brazil and Portuguese.
- In my work in England I had learned Czech and consequently had made many Czechs friends when I arrived in Brazil. One friend travelled inland selling steel bits for miners.
- I suggested he look for some antiques around the Mines, having read that some were cities of gold in the eighteenth century. He agreed to this, he brought me some great photos of the possessions of 'knight' Galhego Venerando Garcia.

- The same night I travelled to Sao Joao del Rei, and the next day, I was able to buy a lot of antiques. I spent all my free time in the basement of the house at Santa Teresa. It took me two years to classify and identify my purchases.
- I had a lot to learn. After two years I knew much of Brazil's past. In 1960 I had the opportunity to rent a home in the Largo of the Apothecary, and decided to sell my antiques there.
- I spent a few happy years as a slightly bohemian antiquarian. The store reached prospered moderately. But eventually I realized that the Mines were diminishing as useful sources for antiques. At first there was a truck a week to buy, then each month, then every six months and in the end, one per year.
- I had set up a repair shop in Sao Joao del Rei, employing three excellent workmen who as carpenters and blacksmiths were also able to make fittings for the antique furniture.
- These people were very skilled, and they had a great desire to learn, work. We learnt together. My aim was always to renovate the furniture back to its original state.
- Soon I had to be interested in quicker turnover. The furniture of the region was very cute, today it is widely rare to find a good piece in its place of origin.
- Even at that time was rare to find a piece in its original state. Furniture Style Dom Joao V I have not found, as that even then had already been sold off.
- But I did not worry, because I preferred the country furniture style of the miner, I admired its straight lines.
- My experiences in antiques were formative in my future life. Why someone takes an interest in the past is a mystery. Is it an escape mechanism? Even more mysterious is why a person, I in this case, comes to appreciate the past of a people or a country other than their own.

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- One possible explanation is that Brazil I've seen in 60 years, was like a living laboratory of facts already forgotten in Europe.
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- Brazil is a Portuguese style of country, and in being so it preserves the legacies of the Moors, the Romans, and the pre-Roman and Lusitani Brigantes. The ox cart, to this day with massive wheels, was made by Lusitani (early Portuguese peoples).
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- Silver in Brazil is not handled with care, it should be polished and stored in a cloth when not in use. Here silver was a metal tool, and was rubbed clean with sand and lime., As the Romans did, and this soon reduces it to a matte, dull surface.
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- Often silverware was painted white to avoid the work of cleaning it. I remember furniture with silver handles and candlesticks of tin, painted white. Strangely there were materials to clean metals in the interior.
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- There are other examples of the remote past, which were still used in 1960:
 - · the use of childbirth chairs, with a hole in the middle.
 - . the use of manufactured wire to manually make "jewellery", now known as jewellery, (the same procedure was described by Theophilus, c. 1140) · . the isolation of farms around the world or European metropolitan: watches, sometimes in archaic Portuguese had instructions on how to tell the time if unable to see the movement of the sun (guessed).
 - . the farm could have one cabinetmaker / carpenter, able to make without instruction simple furniture of great beauty.
 - . and if the farm had no blacksmith, then the drawers might be without handles.
 - . the furniture, sometimes continued from century to century even until our time, without handles, or maybe waiting 50 or 100 years after being made to be completed with knobs or locks. This state of affairs lasted until the late nineteenth century.
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- The proof is in the casting of the farm's flatware, silver low, very low, using English or French models of age. One of the antiques was the common "boxes" to melt spoons and forks, and larger pieces to make stirrups.

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- I remember seeing farmers coming to town to deposit money in the bank, wearing faded suits, made from their farms cotton, walking barefoot, and carrying the money in cotton bags. ·
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- The term 'farm', an autarchic economic unit, as old as the time of Charlemagne. The builders of farms drew one construction that externally had the appearance of a house. Upon entering the home, however, were large rooms occupied for storing rice, coffee, beans.
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- Other rooms used for the production of saddlery, bridles, or stirrups, and rooms for spinning and weaving the clothes of the family.
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- Kubitschek (who was a prominent Brazilian politician of gypsy Czech origin who was President of Brazil from 1956 to 1961. He was born in Diamantina, Minas Gerais, and died in 1976. His term was marked by economic prosperity and political stability, being most known by the construction of a new capital, Brasília).
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- He wanted to make new roads and open up the Brazilian countryside, but the result was to make money, laboriously carried in bags for banks, flowing to Sao Paulo and the Cobbler. ·
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- In the house of my cousin, a farmer in the country of Wales, had an outside toilet which was very sociable, raised upon a brook, with two seats side by side, now no longer used.
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- I saw one like it in Bavaria, but still in use in 1950. In Ouro Preto one day I saw a house being remodelled, modernized. One of the pieces of junk coming out of the house was a plank with three seats. ·
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- Musical instruments were rare, probably because of their delicacy and fragility, but I remember a bass made of galvanized tinsplate (For some time I had a native secretary, descended from a long line of luteiros). Of course there were also hundreds of Bohemian Stradivarius. ·
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- I remember discovering amid the disposal of Sgnr. Venerando's possessions a lamp or candle holder, of iron made in Germany, c. 1450. Why had this been in Minas Gerais from 1700?
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- I remember a clip of three fingers threw it away, thinking it was a trinket modern ice pick or olives. Many years later I realized it was very rare tool a surgeon to remove a bullet round from the wounded.
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- The weapons of the militia in the interior were very diverse. I remember a sword straightened out, which bore the inscription Henry Espadero en Colonia del Rey, which presumably was used against the Dutch in their war of independence of the fifteenth century. When I saw it in Minas, it had already been there for 200 years.
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- The phrase "backfire" is significant: no one knew better than poor old owner of a rifle that I saw, which had exploded in the breech in the face of the shooter. ·
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- With little income for window curtains, the windows had painted beautiful wood moldings. I had a similar mold, whose only explanation was to decorate the streets during Holy Week with flower petals. ·
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- Locks and secrets were a constant concern of those who had something to hide. I had a closet that had been assaulted with heavy tools around and above the frame, which had been very beautiful. Presumably the father died without telling both sons the secret of how to open the hidden or locked compartments. The secret was hidden in a lower drawer.
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- One day someone came to the door of my shop and offered me a pretty box, or case, but the lock was missing. It looked like the lock had been cut out, it was not a simple rectangle. I bought the box and I found that my hardware stock did not have a lock any such size.
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- The principle farms of the eighteenth century were painted, inside and out, with colours and paintings of enormous charm and grace. I remember a farm where the chapel had been decorated and sculpted by patron Aleijadinho.
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- I remember another farm from which the dining table was so large that it had been made in the room. Years later a friend told me that he was born on that farm.
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- I remember a closet, reduced to a skeleton, no doors, no drawers, of a design I had never before seen. Wood was Brazilian, but not from Minas Gerais. I suspected that it was made in Portugal of imported Brazilian woods, and brought to Brazil. Years later I discovered that the type was common in the region of Porto in Portugal.
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- I remember a type of mirror lock, and also handle plate, which was stamped brass but with a flow in the centre. I later discovered that these handles were English, of the century. XVIII and had pictures of Battersea enamelled in the centre.
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- Meanwhile, my workshop had expanded to include the repair of copper and brass, most of which I bought in England. When I noticed that my purchases of pewterware sold first, the idea occurred to me to buy new pewter in Europe to sell in Brazil.
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- But in Europe there was only one manufacturer producing pewter in ancient styles and quality appropriate to the quality of my vernacular furniture of the region. I thought then of making the pewterware, here.
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- It took me six months of reading the few books that existed at the time about it. I found little information. Finally I took courage and began to experiment with simple items such as plates and cups.
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- At the time I had a worker, Carlos Adilson, who was a blacksmith genius and solved any problem, he understood everything I wanted to know, he knew about electricity, turning, casting, copper, brass, iron, polishing, welding, whatever.
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- Then I decided try something more ambitious. In 1968, the Church of the Rosary of Tiradentes functioned as a museum. There were in the Church three baroque candlesticks.
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- I do not have much luck with Catholic priests, and asked Carlos, the blacksmith genius, and one other worker who was wonderful with design, despite never having taken classes in industrial design to copy the candlestick which I managed to have on loan from the parish priest.
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- In return, I promised the first pair we made would be given to the priest. The experiment was a success, but imagine my disappointment to learn

that the same day we gave them to him, the priest put the candlesticks under his arm and went knocking door to door in Tiradentes trying to sell them.

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- With a collection of photographs of our production of not more than seven or ten pieces, including candlesticks, I then went to England to seek a firm with whom we could associate. They were very impressed with the picture of the candlesticks, and we started talking.
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- Whilst there, I had been learning in their workshop. After three weeks, their proposal was not viable, but I had already learned everything we needed.
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- This great man, Carlos, then disagreed with me for no good reason because of some metalwork that was missing. He left the firm and soon, he opened his own factory, fully assembled! It was a great loss to the craftsmanship of São João del Rei when he suffered an accident that left him unable to work.
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- In 1970 I separated from my first wife, who died in 1974. Our son Gregory lives in St. John near us, with his wife and two beautiful children.
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- Over the years I collected old pewter, mainly from pewter that existed in Brazil, but also from pewterware bought in Europe. Each wave of immigrants brought their belongings, refugees from Hitler's Germany brought pewter; PIEDS-NOIRES brought French pieces from Algeria, and there were Hungarian as 1956 brought immigrants from the countries now called Slovakia, Hungary, Romania. I bought when nice pieces of quality or of interest. I also bought old pewter from Portugal.
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- As our house was getting too full, I opened a museum, one of only two museums in the world dedicated to the tin. The museum was opened a second time by the late and beloved Joanense-Tancredo Neves.
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- Since then the great collector and our Scottish friend Alex Neish, opened another museum, he had formed his collection whilst living in Brazil, and donated it to Stratford-on-Avon, the region of England where I lived until coming to Brazil . (now transferred to the Smith Stirling Museum at Stirling not far from Glasgow in Scotland)
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- The purpose of our museum was in part establishing quality criteria for me and for my employees. Secondly, to demonstrate to the public that the quality of our product was comparable to that of the ancients, and thirdly, to inspire us with drawing pieces to copy. In fact the latter was the weakest of reasons.
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- Little tableware of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have any purpose on a modern table. The collection produced by the factory followed a single stylistic line, supervised by one person, - me.
-
- The museum comprised a variety of unrelated items. Today my firm is in other hands, self-titled professionals, who struggle to find the criteria to guide them. I heard that this team does not include any connoisseur of the history of pewterware. A fourth purpose of the museum was to demonstrate to visitors that pewter formed an important part of day-to-day Brazil in the past.
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- Few know that tin was manufactured in Colonial Brazil. The inventories saved in the Museum Regional Heritage of São João del-Rei include many references to pewter, and always in first place, in Part that relates Inventories.
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- In 1972 I married my beautiful Brazilian Betinha, whom many friends and patrons remember, from the good years of the firm. Betinha and I have two daughters with the help of which we have one granddaughter and one grandson, both also beautiful.
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- We keep our house as shown in the photo (no copy yet), this was an inn where the beauty of the colonial style is combined, with comfort and cuisine in the style of Anglo-miner.
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- I am now disconnected from pewterware, it is brass metal that now interests me. I used to buy antique brass from Portugal and Spain. But I never found any signs of brass manufacturing in Portugal.
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- Both Spain and Portugal, have large quantities of old brass. In an antique store in Lisbon, for example, you can find half a dozen objects from the fifteenth century, and dozens from the XVII and XVIII centuries. In another, more than 70 lamps from the eighteenth century.
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- I'm currently writing a history book of bronze and brass in Iberia. There are currently no book on the subject. There are reference books in Germany, Holland, England, but in the two countries with the largest known numbers of antique pieces - nothing.
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- My research reveals the economics of the period which were unknown in the businesses of metalware or trade of antiques. For example, Al Andalus brass sheet was exported throughout Europe, Morocco and Egypt for at least 300 years.
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- Many quotations from the XIV and XV century are in fact 200 or even 400 years older. The book, originally planned to have only one volume of 300 pages, covering the years 711 to 1900, has taken 400 pages already to cover 711 to 1090, which is precisely the most interesting period.
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- Two more volumes will be needed to reach the end. Ideally I still wanted to visit museums in Cairo, Morocco and more than a dozen other major museums in Europe. The biggest problems are, as always, money and time, since, like most of us, I too am mortal.
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- **Interview with Gregory Somers - Who is Gregory Somers?**
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- I, Gregory Somers, worked many years with my father. I studied in England and my training has always been in the business of art and culture. Since 2002, I along with my wife Cida Somers, introduced the new face of pewter tableware and we are owners of Design by Gregory Somers.
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- This is the only company of our family "Somers, as the only working ones of that family name working with pewter in Brazil today.
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- Somers Family: My father, John Somers, was the forerunner of the tin industry - Pewter in Brazil, he started production in 1968.
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- There is still a company called John Somers, who no longer belong to any family member Somers.
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- We continue, father and son, and are great friends. John is retired and devotes himself to more reading and study, and taking care of his health.
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- What is tin? Pewter is an alloy that we use. It contains more than 90% tin and the other metals which make the metal nice and pleasant to work.
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- Tin is a noble metal, which justifies its price. What is Pewter: Pewter is the English word given to the tin alloy. Currently there is a league incorrectly called Pewter, which is nothing more than aluminum. This nomenclature comes from a North American trade that was created in the 80's where a lot of material was cast in Mexico. This aluminum was placed on the market competing with the true American producers Pewter (tin).
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- What is your perspective on the tin: Tin (Pewter) has a wonderful future, even the traditional designs. The beauty of the metal will keep it in the forefront, even with changes of taste.
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- My vision is slowly changing for the area of design, so that I'll always be ahead with new ideas, using the materials that nature can deliver us. This direction complements my artistic curiosity and give me new challenges.
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- Estanhos. Somers Family industry. Design by Gregory Somers
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- Note from Wikipedia -
- Minas Gerais was settled during the late 17th and early 18th centuries by a mix of recent Portuguese immigrants (*reinóis* or "emboabas") and earlier colonists that came from São Paulo (*paulistas*). There was an intense rivalry between the two groups, fighting over the gold mines (from which the name of the province was taken, *Minas Gerais* means "General Mines"). These conflicts required the intervention of the Portuguese Crown after a serious uprising developed into civil war (Guerra dos Emboabas) with the final defeat of the "paulistas" in 1708. See the article "[Guerra dos Emboabas](#)" in the [Portuguese language Wikipedia](#).
- In the 19th century, the state was being forgotten due the decline of gold mining. Due to this isolation, the state was influenced by the dialect of Rio de Janeiro in the southeast, while the south and the "[Triangulo Mineiro](#)" region, began to speak the rustic dialect of São Paulo ([caipira](#)). The central region of Minas Gerais, however, developed their own dialect, which is known as Mineiro or mountain dialect. This dialect is also present in cities of the centre and southeast of the state, which is surrounded by mountains and mines

Extracts of interest from Various Internet articles -

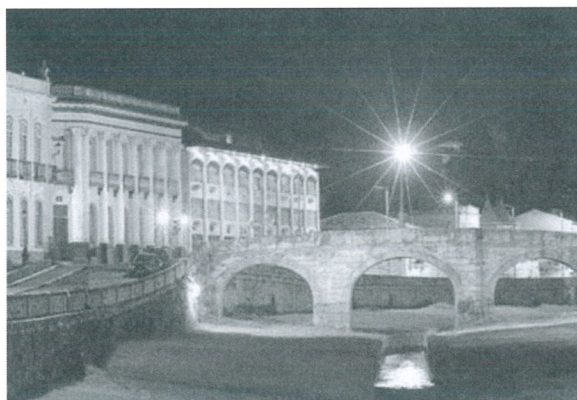
São João Del Rei e Tiradentes

São João Del Rei is located in a predominately mountainous region, around 186 km from Belo Horizonte, São João is marked by several waterfalls, as the Bride's Veil Waterfall. It is also worth mentioning several churches including the beautiful St. Francis of Assisi Church and Our Lady of Rosary, dated 1774 and 1732, respectively.

The local pewter handicrafts are beautiful. The John Somers Museum of Estanhos (pewter, tin) has utilitarian objects in pewter from Brazil and European countries. In the collection, there are pieces that were collected from two ships that wrecked on the coast of Brazil in the 17th century.

São João Del Rei e Tiradentes

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São João del Rei



Our Lady of Rosary Church, São João del Rei

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Shopping in São João del Rei

Tin and Pewter

one of the Brazilians recommended to me the artist John Somers, at Av. Leite de Castro, 1150, Apparently, on certain weekdays it is possible to visit the production area as well as a museum of tin production.

Brand

This is a brand page for the **JS-X-MG** trademark by **JOHN SOMERS ESTANHOS LTDA** in **SAO JOAO DEL REI, MINAS GERAIS, BRAZIL**, . Write a review about a product or service associated with this JS-X-MG trademark. Or, contact the owner **JOHN SOMERS ESTANHOS LTDA** of the JS-X-MG trademark by filing a request to communicate with [the Legal Correspondent](#) for licensing, use, and/or questions related to the JS-X-MG trademark.

On Wednesday, June 25, 1975, a U.S. federal trademark registration was filed for **JS-X-MG** by **JOHN SOMERS ESTANHOS LTDA**, SAO JOAO DEL REI, MINAS GERAIS, BRAZIL. The USPTO has given the **JS-X-MG** trademark serial number of **73056163**. The current federal status of this trademark filing is **REGISTERED AND RENEWED**. The correspondent listed for **JS-X-MG** is **ARTHUR S GARRETT** of FINNEGAN HENDERSON FARABOW GARRETT ET AL, 901 NEW YORK AVE NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20001-4432 . The **JS-X-MG** trademark is filed in the category of [Houseware and Glass Products](#) . The description provided to the USPTO for **JS-X-MG** is ANTIQUE AND DECORATED DISHES, TANKARDS, PITCHERS, CANDLESTICKS, SUGAR BOWLS, BOWLS, SOUP TUREENS, TRAYS, DRINKING GLASSES, CUPS, WINE GLASSES, PLATTERS, SAUCERS, AMPHORAS, FLOWER POTS, ALL MADE OF PEWTER

JOHN SOMERS CLASSIC HANDCAST PEWTER

Lot of sixteen wine goblets. Eight are 8 ounce and stand 6 1/2 inches tall. Eight are six ounce and stand 6 inches tall. Has the JS. X. and MG markings. JS for John Somers. X is a symbol used of quality. MG for lead free. Original owner is selling and has been well cared for. Minor signs of use. Overall, wonderful condition.

Some of the world's finest pewter is made in Brazil by John Somers in the town of Sao Joao del Rey, Minas Gerais. John Somers' factory opened in 1968 and the unique quality of his work has already been recognized by connoisseurs all over the world.

The city of São João del-Rei produces the only pewter in Brazil. Its quality is recognized worldwide. The largest number of shops is concentrated here, and the most highly skilled pewter artisans in all of Latin America are trained locally. There are ancient records of metal mines in the region and of incipient pewter artifacts back to the 19th century. However, it was the vision of pioneer John Somers that definitely put the name of São João del-Rei on the pewter map as of 1968, as well as in international pewter artistry catalogues. In the beginning, his production was inspired in original English and Portuguese pewter models, replicas of models that the antique collector gathered from all over the world, which today make up a magnificent museum in his namesake. It was in this true school of arts and crafts that the vast majority of artists and artisans were trained, which today produces the world-famous pewter of São João del-Rei.

The following trade advert is unlikely to be an advert produced by John Somers as his knowledge of history is good and 1688 found William III invading England about November 5th with matters not entirely settled by December 30th. The piece in the V&A also shows clearly a date of 1698.

**William and Mary Coronation Vessels
Circa 1688.**



Reproduction tankard and beaker beautifully decorated in a style of engraving called wriggle work. Features portrait of King William the III and Queen Mary with the lion and unicorn of the British coat of arms. Based on artifacts in the Victoria and Albert Museum of London.

VA7 W&M Coronation Tankard, 6.5" tall.

VA3 W&M Coronation Beaker, 6.75" tall.



JOHN SOMERS & CIA. LTDA.

AV. LEITE DE CASTRO N.º 1.150
SÃO JOÃO DEL REI
MINAS GERAIS

This cup, sold on 19 Feb. 1981 by Sotheby's, Lot 146, was repaired by our factory 13 to 20 March 1981. Damage found and repaired was as follows:-

Cup.

The cup was crushed down on the stem, and that part of the stem driven into the cup was covered in white scale, containing also traces of rust. The cup was straightened, and the scale scraped off the top of the stem. Comparison with the catalogue photograph shows that one whole spool of the stem has been revealed and about 1 cm. of height has thus been regained. This also accords very much better with other extant cups of the period than the sale photograph. There was also extensive pewter disease and scale on the cup.

Foot.

The Sotheby's photo shows that the foot had been crushed and flattened. The original domed shape of the foot has been restored as far as possible without threat to the structure of the metal. There was a large hole of pewter disease in the foot which was repaired. The cup suffered severe crushing after the sale photograph. The foot was buckled up, and had to be flattened, and the cracks soldered.

Engraving.

In order not to loose the original design, the engraving was restored in stages. First the obvious holes caused by pewter disease were soldered. Next the whole cup was washed in washing soda to reveal the remaining holes, and show the engraving better. Then the freshly soldered parts were re-engraved. At this stage we had two choices open:-

either:- To solder all the remaining pustules of pewter disease, and re-engrave them,

or:- to leave the cup as it was revealed after washing and re-engraving of the first soldering, leaving all the smaller pustules unrepaired.

We decided in favour of the second of these, in the hopes that the progress of the pewter disease will be arrested by the better care the cup will now be receiving, and in order to leave the cup as long as possible in its original state.

Patination.

No artificial patination has been re-applied. Most of the old natural patination has been removed by the act of washing. The piece leaves our hands much as it must have looked after its first fifty years. I recognize that the treatment has been sadly radical, but the condition of the piece left us few alternatives.

I recommend that the cup be re-examined by us after about 6 months. It should from now on be protected from atmospheric pollution. In the event of the remaining pewter disease needing more treatment over the next 2 years, we undertake to carry this out without further charge. Any spots caused by latent moisture in the crevices which may appear in the next few weeks should be rubbed off immediately they appear.

John Jones
20. Mar 1981



JOHN SOMERS & CIA. LTDA.

AV. LEITE DE CASTRO N.º 1.150
SÃO JOÃO DEL REI
MINAS GERAIS

Two Communion Cups inscribed:- Belonging to the Associate Congregation of Sanguhar 1777. Sold under Lot 124, by Sotheby's, 19 Feb 1981.

These two were crushed in transit after the sale; but their previous condition would in any case have demanded our attention, since they were covered in scale which was peeling off fast. It was necessary to take off the bottoms to release the water trapped in the washing process. It was then found that the bottoms are not filled as was at first thought. The weight probably comes from the central knob which appears to be solid. The cups appear to be spun or perhaps pressed from sheet. The bases are cast; the sheets which close off the bottoms are indeed very roughly rolled. If the date 1777 is indeed the date of acquisition by the ACS, and not the founding date of the congregation, these pieces are very early examples of the use of pewter in sheet. They probably are made in Sheffield.

Caution.

The junction between the cups and the stems is very weak. The one which we repaired was repaired twice over. Neither cup should be submitted to any leverage or pressure at this point.

John Somers
20.3.81.

John Somers – The Somers Saga - as written by Gregory Somers

John Somers was born in 1930 in Birmingham and lived near the family works, a specialty die forging company, in Halesowen. Having gone through Eton, he went into the army and Sandhurst. At the time the family lived in Stratford on Avon. He came out an officer and ended up, after the crisis in Aden, in the intelligence section in Cheltenham, where he specialized in foreign languages, specifically German and Czech.

In 1954, he married Rosanne, daughter of an Anglo Irish couple who lived in Brazil. She had been to school in Ireland and then moved to London to find a job. In 1956, Rosanne wanted to return to Brazil. They moved to Rio de Janeiro and lived in a large house in Santa Teresa, a part of Rio where the climate was very comfortable, and which had a large basement. He worked as an insurance broker for an English company, and thus was well linked to the ex-patriot community. In those days the ex-patriot community of Rio was small and concentrated. One of his friends, a Czech, who sold drill bits went in to the interior of the state of Minas Gerais, famous for its mining activities. He showed JS some pictures of his travels and in these pictures JS found some interesting antique objects and furniture.

This was the beginning of JS's visits to São João del Rei, which in the future became his center of activities. He went to Tiradentes, a small town only 8 miles from São João del Rei, and bought four truckloads of antiques from a gentleman by the name of Venerando Garcia. He took these antiques to Rio where he began to restore them in the basement, and used them to decorate his house in Rio. The expats who visited the house began to show interest in these beautiful objects, which showed JS that this might become a promising business. Over the next two years JS became an expert in Brazilian antiques. He rented a small property in São João del Rei where he began to do the restoration.

In 1960 he moved to a very charming house in a square called Largo do Boticário, where he set up shop as a professional antique dealer. In the interior he formed a team of very skilled craftsmen, whose skills covered woodworking and various metals. Finding good antiques became harder, and so JS started buying goods in Europe. He would bring these back to Brazil to restore them. Surprisingly he found that the pewter would always sell well. The workers had tremendous skills, which the locals still have to this day, and quickly learnt how to forge iron, shape brass and copper and fix pewter and silver. But, since the purchase of antiques was and continues to be an erratic business, JS researched the possibility of introducing a more stable line of products. JS experimented working with pewter and made a few reproductions of religious objects and mugs, found locally. He took pictures of these objects and went to the UK, and after having visited me at school he returned to London, where he met the factory manager of Englefields.

In those days there was no such speedy method of communication such as e-mail etc. There were only airmail letters, which were expensive and took a fairly long time to get from one place to another. This resulted in a long drawn out period of negotiation, during which time the Brazilian government closed the country to imports. This put the kibosh on the project, but by then JS had already learnt most of what was necessary to manufacture pewter in Brazil.

Coincidentally the geographical area of Sao Joao del Rei, was the center of tin mining in Brazil up to 1982. There was also a tin refining company in town. Remembering the famous saying of “the right man, in the right place at the right time” JS used his very capable artisans and the ease of supply to begin working with pewter on a semi industrial scale.

He sold the products at the antique shop in Rio. In 1970, JS separated from his wife (my mother) and began selling the pewter through another shop in Rio. The prohibition on imports was actually an advantage, because there was no fine product on the Brazilian market that could be used to give as presents. Porcelain, crystal and such products were not freely available. This made the pewter making activity a huge success and made the Brazilian market very interesting. Pewter became a household gift product. In 1972 JS set up his own shop in Sao Paulo, and the 1970's was a decade of furious sales. The product was also perceived as being of a quality level that permitted JS to adventure abroad. This took JS to discuss a program of reproductions for the Victoria and Albert Museum. Unfortunately, at the end of the 70's, the Brazilian economy became very unstable. Maintaining a fixed export price during rocketing inflation was almost impossible. At the end of the decade, JS was offered a collection of pewter and other objects that had been raised from two ships, one a Dutch frigate, Utrecht, and the other a Portuguese merchantman, Santissimo Sacramento. This provoked a line of very beautiful reproductions.

The financial chaos in Brazil caused the company to go through difficulties, and JS associated himself to a Canadian Brazilian company, called Brascan that had just diversified into the tin business. They had bought a tin mine in the north of Brazil and a tin smelting company in the state of Rio de Janeiro. JS' company was the attractive side of pewter making. Exports almost dried up, and in 1985 the company set up a second shop in Sao Paulo. In 1988 the company set up a shop in Martinsburg WV, trying to break into the North American market. During this period the company did a lot of work in reproductions, and the company also did a tremendous amount of corporate business. The product line was seen as ideal for giving as a corporate gift, rather than the common cloth cap and so on. The shop in WV closed in 1990.

In 1990 Brascan decided that JS' little company was hugely detailed and was more trouble than it was worth, so they set out to sell their participation in it. From March, 1990 until May 1992 JS and Gregory traveled around Brazil trying to find new partners. In 1992 they finally found 2 partners who bought into the company. The project included setting up a shop in Boston Ma. This shop was superb, but the whole project was not well thought through and the new partners were not professional businessmen. The result was a very low sales level and a resulting shambles. This partnership lasted until May 1994, when John and Gregory left. John retired to write a book about the metals trade in the Iberian Peninsula, from 750 to 1492, roughly the period in time when the Moors were dominant. Unfortunately this book has never been finished, but the information garnered was enormous and very useful to Gregory in the near future.

In 2006 John Somers had a stroke which left him paralyzed on his right side. Today he continues to live in the house he built in Sao Joao del Rei, Minas Gerais. The house was built from old demolition materials and looks very much like a large Brazilian farmhouse.

In 2010, after 12 years in the Brazilian judicial treadmill, John and Gregory won an almost pyrrhic victory against the other partners and were paid a certain amount of money for their part in the company that John had founded in 1968. A very sad end to a very interesting story. Today John lives in his house with his wife Betinha. His elder daughter, Joanna works in Bel Horizonte and Jenny lives in London.

Gregory's story splits and returns to John's story often over the years. Gregory went to school in England from 1968 to 1974. His mother died in 1974, so when he returned to Brazil, he spent a few months deciding what to do. He joined the family company, and for the next 3 years Gregory worked in every place on the factory floor, which he found gave a basic training in a large number of fields.

In 1977 Gregory went to Rio and worked as a tour guide, then he organized an international nutrition congress, and finally ended up working on a desert island 90 kms south of Rio, managing a restaurant. The experience on this island was superb and there were many amusing stories. But after 15 months, some acquaintances told Gregory that it would be useful for him to go visit his father. It was at this time that his father had financial problems and Gregory returned to help out.

From 1981 to Dec 1984, Gregory worked at the family company again. On December 31st, Gregory married Cida and began his own furniture manufacturing company. This was the first company to produce English reproduction furniture in Brazil. For 3 years the business was superb, and then Gregory returned to the family company when the multinational needed someone to replace his father. As mentioned above John and Gregory worked together in and out of the company until 1994.

In 1995 Gregory set up another pewter company, but this was not where his heart was and in late 1996 the new owners of the family company asked him to return to rebuild the sales. Then followed two years of very hard work, with tremendous business generation and learning for Gregory. The partnership changed again, and Gregory was asked to leave for a second time.

In 1999 the other pewter manufacturers and the local authorities set up an association to export pewter. Gregory was invited to work for this group. The association whittled away and with 3 months Gregory moved to the US to represent the four main manufacturers. For two years Gregory worked the US market, participating in the major gift shows across the country, and generally drumming up business. Living away from his family ended up taking its toll and Gregory returned to Brazil. In 2003 he set up a company with two Americans, which was a tremendous success. Unfortunately, the partnership did not work due to conflicts of interest and Cida and Gregory left the partnership.

In February 2006, Gregory and Cida set up Design by Somers, which has also become a success in Brazil. Due to Brazilian tax chaos, the product is too expensive to sell abroad.

There are many more side stories that would fill pages and can be told over a period of time....

Information taken from Correspondence between John Somers and Dr Ron Homer of the UK Pewter Society with thanks to the Pewter Society for use of this information here -

...mostly an exchange of letters between the two regarding matters of history and various metals....

March 16 1993

What little he learnt of Pewter making he learnt from Howard Hopkins at that time working for G& C. He showed him the trays of old punches, invited him to help himself - all of which are on display in his museum. (oldest being one Johannes Devand 1689 - of "Etain Sonnant" claim)

describes a Syringe with a long spout no 13 in the article - a urethral clyster for the treatment of VD. (administered a mercury based compound). Still used in Brazil in 20th C.

Syphilis identified in Naples at beginning of 1500s so Mary Rose instrument was very up to date.

May 31st 1993

His interest in zinc and the words for zinc in different languages stems from Michaelis showing mysterious candlesticks in Figs 62 - 67

1962 - 1970 - he says he was a very active, if not high earning, antiques dealer going to Portugal once or twice a year and taking the purchases back to Brazil.

Reports meeting an unnamed dealer in Lewisham who brought vanloads back from London to sell in London as Spanish - (Portuguese doesn't sell in London) - suggests this is the source of Michaelis mistaking Portuguese for Spanish (from recently electrified convents)(Unhappy with this dishonesty of Lewisham dealer).

describes Michaelis as "comically ethnocentric" - his p 57 quote - "it would be wrong to assume they (*hundreds being found*) are unquestionably products of the Latin countries" against his page 66 quote that 3 different candlesticks found in England make them an English Type.....

He suggests the squat Portuguese candlesticks have no precedent or developing style and that as they stand alone maybe they came from CEUTA.

Cleaning Pewter - Caustic soda disintegrates (almost) Brazilian lead free pewter. he uses washing soda and careful use of wire wool.

Sept 27 1993

Mentions he visited (August) Weygang factory in about 1987 - there is a little book about the firm - there is a museum connected in Ohringen near Heilbronn.

He says he is half Welsh (to quote his letter -

He mentions a Nant Collection (??)

His interest in this letter is the price of zinc used with copper in casting brass. he says only 5-10% of zinc is needed in the mix and one ton of zinc can be got from 3 tons of calamine(?). When the mix smokes the smoke is zinc that it is losing and the work needs speed. If it doesn't run well - chuck some lead in. (in 1740 zinc was £60 a ton - 4000 today - 1993)

Crux of his interest is the movement of Zinc from country to country as used in the casting of brass his interest starts at 1495 - but in later correspondence his studies work backwards from 1495 to 900.

How did Spain and Portugal and Morocco produce brass for centuries without native zinc ores. The question takes his questions throughout South America/Cuba. Considers Alexander the Great's conquests were in pursuit of metals.

He has a collection of Old Brass.

He thought Peter Hornsby was unaware of Brazilian pewter and quotes instance of PH calling Brazilian candlesticks - Austro-Hungarian.

"Someone should rewrite history from the metallurgical point of view" - ie - who was wanting to take hold of which metal.

Attaches importance to a Copper Saucepan on the Utrecht (1648) having turning marks on it - would this be the earliest known spun object?

October 2nd 1993

Homer to Somers....

Nant Col (Collection) is at Llanbedr, Monmouth - speculative provenance of German French and Dutch pieces.

November 6th 1993

He mentions his son

He mentions his father who is 90 in January 1994 and says he will return to Europe soon and (will attend) the party. he intend to go to Morocco (to visit museums) and Freiberg as well.

He mentions that various of his Aunts and Uncles used to retire to Barmouth and Llanbedr.

His Welsh family he says is from Flint (lead miners) and the Wye Valley Aberedw.

The V&A have a dumpy candlestick labelled as Dutch (North did not agree)

He attended a PS meeting when Roger Brownsword might have spoken on the Mary Rose.

He has carried out his first electrolytic cleaning as per Homer's article for Alex Neish

8th November 1993

Alex Neish to John Somers

This letter sets out to firmly disabuse John Somers of many of his theories - as "speculative embroidery unwilling to accept the reality of the slave trade"

Clearly they knew each other well.

November 12th 1993

To Ron Homer

Discussion of HM Jug (??) and Guinea Jug (*see John Grey for Guinea Plates*)

Says Screw top Jug not English - as no others

Asks if there were WIII spoons as against W&M spoons

Mention 1921 trade catalogue where Gaskell & Chambers sell "African Jug" with two handles, and a clipper lid, hinge on one of the handles not symmetrical (?)

Price of G&C 1921 factory pint mug was 6/- it was called a "tankard" and not a mug.

November 30 1993

Homer to Somers

HM Jug - Henrietta Maria 'jug' stands 32 cms high and hold 252 fl ozs

WIII spoons exist but are rare.

Removed ocean bed crust with nitric acid (Homer did) rain on pewter for two months and no more white salts (stannous oxide) bleed out. Offered instruction to three museums in Morocco - Rabat fez Marrakech.

December 10th 1993

Pewter trade bad in Brazil. Corporate gift ware stopped as a result of corruption investigations.

March 15 1994

Homer to Somers

Confirms India Tin going to Portugal in 1513 - but was it zinc?

28th June 1994 from Army & Navy Club Pall Mall - Somers to Homer

discusses above

Gives address in Brazil as now (?) -

Caixa Postal 211

Sao Joai Del Rey

Minas Gerais

36.300-000 Brazil

Further correspondence on 15th December 1996

Somers to Homer

Steel candlesticks....an enigma.

Book makes slow progress.

Refers to his military schooling and non-war experience

.....

Details of John Somers notable ancestor

Walter Somers - taken from Wikipedia -

Sandvik's UK headquarters are based here as well as Somers Forge, SomersTotalKare and the Mucklow Group

Walter Somers

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Walter Somers (born in Repton, Derbyshire in 1839, died 1917) was an English engineer and businessman who established a forge company, later known as Walter Somers Limited, producing a range of steel products including items for military use by the British Admiralty during World War I.

In 1866 Somers was given a loan of £100 by his father and took on a short lease on an ironworks complex at Mucklow Hill, Halesowen, establishing a forgemaster business. Initially focused on production of chains and anchors, the business later also produced axles and railway buffers. By the last decade of the 19th century, it was delivering forgings to Admiralty specifications - a customer relationship that continued throughout World War I. Somers' company also produced parts of the anchors used on the RMS *Titanic*.

In 1907 Somers bought Belle Vue House on Mucklow Hill, installing electricity in the house. Overhead lines from a generator at Somers' works supplied current for the house until the 1920s when it connected to public services.

Somers died in 1917, leaving the company under the direction of his two sons, Seth and Frank. Frank Somers was managing director until 1954.

Legacy

Walter Somers Limited was incorporated in 1919. However, it became embroiled in the 'Arms-for-Iraq' scandal in the 1980s, and no longer trades. However, subsidiaries

Somers Handling, Somers Forge and Somers Vehicle Lifts survive and still trade in the Halesowen area.

Walter Somers - (a key ancestor to John Somers)-

Sandvik's UK headquarters are based here as well as Somers Forge, SomersTotalKare and the Mucklow Group

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