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# RANDOM NOTES ON PEWTER AND SILVER

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By EDWARD E. MINOR

COLLECTORS of early American pewter often find their joy in the acquisition of a piece from the past somewhat tempered by the uncertainties of identification. Pride of possession may, quite naturally, lead to wishful thinking. "Attributed to" is a phrase dear to collectors, and as necessary as it is, for one cannot be dogmatic regarding a dim past. Only by ordering new discoveries can our knowledge of the old craftsmen be correlated. "Where doubt there truth is—'tis her shadow." So present our attributions in the hope of eventually discerning the truth.

Pewter and silver are unique among products of early American craftsmanship in that custom dictated that they should be stamped with the maker's mark, following in a new country the practice of the old. For variety of design the marks of pewterers quite out-

these tentative notes are primarily dedicated by the author.

The tankards shown in Figure 1 are a trio from Debatable Land: though they possess merit in themselves, there remains uncertainty as to their makers. The center tankard is a noble two-quart piece, marked *FB* with lion rampant in dentated circle (Fig. 2). We might assume with some degree of safety that it is a Bassett tankard, but whether to attribute it to Frederick, to his brother Francis (2), or to his cousin Francis (1) who was an apprentice of Horsewell, is a problem still awaiting solution. I submit, however, that the characteristics of these initials are quite different from the rather crude block-lettering in the known marks of Frederick. These are more graceful and correspond more nearly to those of the Francis Bassett mark illustrated in Figure 44 of Kerfoot's *American Pewter*. This similarity, together with the lion associated with the earlier pewterers' marks, would lead one to think that the "lion rampant" tankards were probably made by one Francis or the other, though I cannot say which.

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FIG. 1 (left) — THREE PEWTER TANKARDS. *Left*, perhaps by Joseph Liddel of New York (c. 1686-1753). Height, 5 1/2 inches. *Center*, marked *FB*; probably by Francis Bassett (1) (c. 1690-1758), though possibly by Francis Bassett (2) (1729-1800). Height, 6 inches. *Right*, marked *SE*; by Simon Edgell (?) (1687-1742). Height, 5 3/4 inches

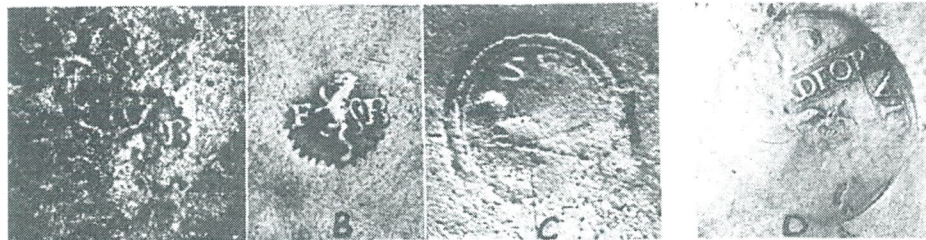


FIG. 2 — PEWTERERS' MARKS. *A*, *FB* with lion rampant, probably that of Francis Bassett (1). This mark is on the center tankard of Figure 1. *B*, the same mark, reproduced more clearly from a flat-top tankard. *C*, *SE* with dove, probably the mark of Simon Edgell. *D*, the mark of Cornelius Bradford, on the tankard of Figure 3.

FIG. 3 (right) — PEWTER TANKARD. By Cornelius Bradford of Philadelphia and New York (1729-1786). Compare thumbpiece and handle with those of Figure 1 (right)

Illustrations from the author's collection



tanced those of their fellow craftsmen in the more distinguished metal, but on the other hand the pewtersmith's comparatively simple marks have greatly facilitated the collector's task of identification. Silver was probably subject to less wear and usage than pewter and its marks have frequently retained legibility where those on pewter have long since been worn down.

Pewter hollow ware has always engendered doubts by its simple markings. The humble pewter plate, as recognized by Kerfoot, is the key to identification, for on plates the pewterers were lavish with marks, names, and even addresses. A collector knows the importance of examining plates, however uninteresting they appear at first glance, to see whether their marks supply one of the missing pieces. But the owner of an old, little-esteemed plate may have a great store of knowledge in his possession without realizing it. To such persons, who are potentially of invaluable assistance to collectors,

They would seem rather to belong to the first Francis, leaving the second Francis as a co-worker in Frederick's vineyard. Remember, too, that John Bassett left his tools and molds to Frederick and not to Francis, the eldest son. John Bassett (1696-1761) was pewtering in New York at the time of Francis Bassett (1). It is interesting to note that there have been reported in various collections about eight pieces by John Bassett and about the same number bearing the *FB* lion-rampant marks. These are all hollow ware, including tankards, beakers, a basin, and a porringer.

us it is at least reasonable that Francis (1) might have credit to them. Still the question remains, what did Francis (2), who is working at the same time as Frederick, do with his work? His being as pewterer must have been derived from association only. The tankard on the left is an exact duplicate of the one attributed to Joseph Liddel (*ANTIQUES*, September 1939, p. 119), with the exception of a low dome cover in place of the flat top. While the exterior surface is in prime condition, the interior, particularly the bottom, is corroded so that no mark is recognizable. It is shown, however, to illustrate the handsome handle with exceptionally broad spade terminal. The attribution to Liddel is not sensitive but one has only to see the piece to feel certain it was made by a master craftsman.

The tankard on the right was found in Pennsylvania in company with a nine and one-half inch plate with Simon Edgell's own mark. This fact may be of only superficial significance, yet I remember my nursery tales correctly, even good dog Tray was affected by the company he kept. To be more specific, however, the mark on the tankard undoubtedly shows the bird whose velike character Louis Guerineau Myers cited anyone to question, while above it are the initials *SE* (Fig. 2). As further evidence, Ledlie I. Laughlin has reported a tankard of earlier design with similar mark, owned by a Philadelphia family whose ancestors were contemporaries of Edgell. It seems permissible to attribute this mark to Simon Edgell and so add one more piece to the known products of this pewterer.

An early tankard of known origin is shown in Figure 3. This is by Cornelius Bradford (1729-1786), son of William Bradford, Jr., who worked in Philadelphia and New York. While the mark was struck irregularly, it is quite clear and conforms to one of the known Bradford marks. The tankard came down through the Hull family of Philadelphia and the mark on the handle, *EH*, probably refers to a member of that family. The piece is in prime condition and shows how well pewter of good quality can survive under favorable conditions. It is interesting to note that the handle and thumbpiece are identical with those of the Edgell tankard illustrated in Figure 1.

Pewter shapes followed — with a lag in time — the styles in silver, so that analogous pieces in the two metals are not hard to find. Now and then to have someone ask whether a fine old silver tankard is pewter is thrilling to the pewter collector, if shocking to the collector of silver. Because pewter cannot compete with silver in intrinsic worth, the pewter collector is perhaps more concerned with matters of attribution and less with quality of design and workmanship than the silver collector. Yet he too prizes his pieces first of all for their fine craftsmanship.

The late J. B. Kerfoot, to whom I gratefully acknowledge my early interest in pewter, spoke of brown eggs in Boston and white eggs in New York as exemplifying fundamental differences in taste between these two early American cities. Pewter tankards offer another example: in spite of thorough search, no pewter tankard has yet been found which could be definitely assigned to a Boston maker, though specimens occur in the pewter of New York and other localities. Silver tankards, however, were as popular in Boston as brown eggs. The piece by John Burt (Fig. 4) is simple in design and well proportioned. The finial on the cover is a typical feature of Boston and Newport silver and was copied by Benjamin Day, a Newport pewterer.

The small silver mug by James Butler is a fine example of early design by a Boston silversmith (Fig. 5). The strong moldings at top and base and the distinct taper of the barrel are of interest.

The pewter beakers (Fig. 8) are also of interest. The left one, by Thomas D. and Sherman Boardman of Hartford (1825-1854), is 5 inches high. The right one, by Boardman & Hart of New York (1828-1850), is 3 3/4 inches high.



FIG. 4 (above) — SILVER TANKARD. By John Burt of Boston (1691-1745). Finial on cover typical of Boston and Newport silver work

FIG. 5 (left) — SILVER MUG. By James Butler of Boston (1713-1776)

FIG. 6 — PEWTER TANKARD. By an unidentified maker, with Boston characteristics. Compare handle terminal with that of Figure 5. Note also cover finial, as in Figure 4

FIG. 7 — SILVER BOWL. By James Butler of Boston (1713-1776). Such a bowl knows no close analogue in pewter

