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AN ANTIQUES BOOK PREVIEW

A History of American Pewter

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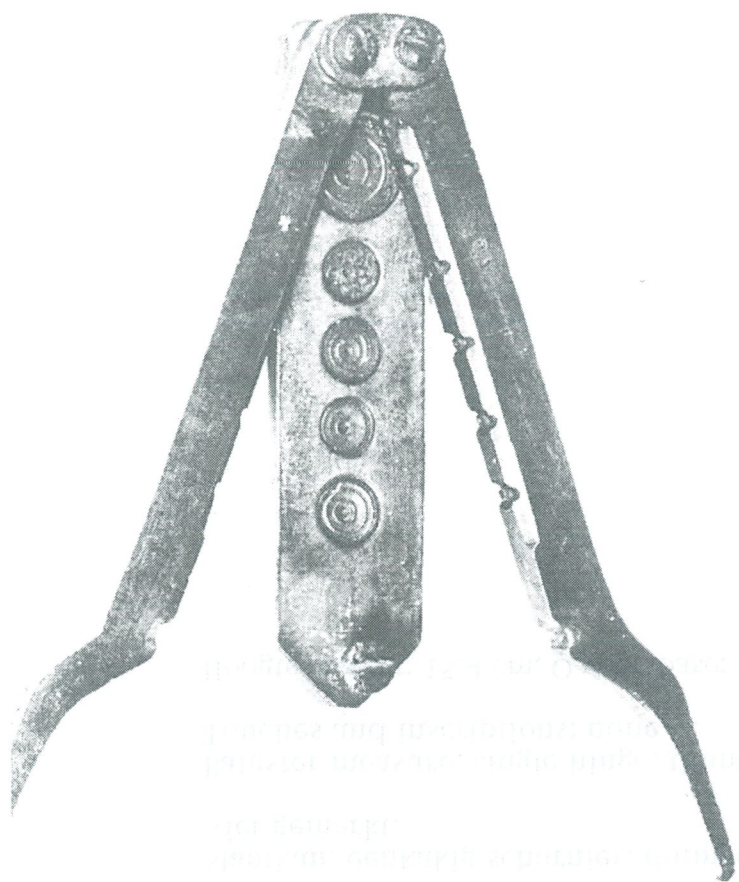


Fig. 1. American pewterers used molds to shape their wares. In one pour, five different sizes of buttons complete with raised ornamentation were cast simultaneously in this eighteenth-century brass button mold. Length of mold, 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches.

IN AMERICA prior to 1807, all pewter was shaped by casting in molds, usually made of brass, though occasionally of more easily fashioned and less durable materials, such as soapstone, plaster of Paris, or even a special grade of pewter for infrequently made forms (Fig. 1). Until recently the general assumption has been that American pewterers used molds acquired in England, but several discoveries of the past few years make it clear that American craftsmen not only had skills necessary to produce their own molds but to do so was in accord with Old World pewtermaking tradition. Near the beginning of chapter 12 in his celebrated work *L'Art du potier d'étain*, (Paris, 1788), Pierre Auguste Salmon states unequivocally: "It is . . . the pewterer who makes his molds."

The earliest known references to mold making in America appear in the records of William, Daniel, and Samuel Proud, Providence chairmakers and turners (w. 1773-1835), which list many transactions with pewterers. Beginning August 9, 1773, William Proud charged Samuel Hamlin "To making some molds," "To 2 molds, Turning for," "To altering 2 Molds," "To turning 2 partes for an Mold," "To a mold for a handl," and so forth. Hamlin's use of these wooden patterns is made clear in his November 23, 1773, *Connecticut Courant* advertisement, which informed the public that "the Pewterers and Braziers business is carried on . . . by Samuel Hamlin . . . near the Great Bridge in Providence," and that "He has nearly completed a set of moulds, of the newest and neatest fashions, and flatters himself that they will upon tryal give universal satisfaction."

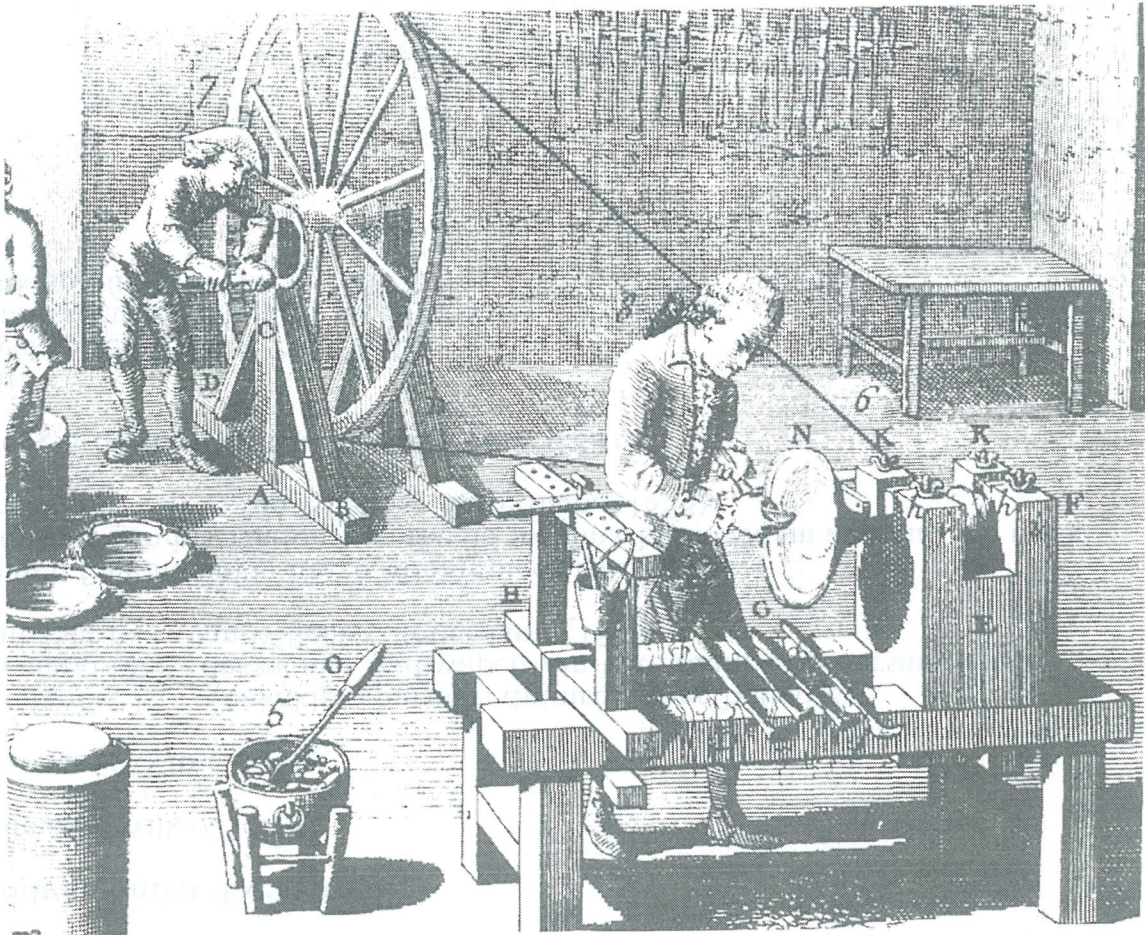
In brass and pewter making, similar tools and processes were employed. Both metals were finished on a lathe by skimming and burnishing or, in the case of irregularly shaped objects, by hand scraping or filing. Brass objects, like pewter ones, were shaped by casting, though the molds were different. The pewterer used brass molds over and over again. The brazier prepared a new sand mold for each casting by impressing three-dimensional wooden or lead patterns into flasks of sand. The impressions in the sand gave form to the molten brass poured into them. To fashion a new mold, the pewterer first made or had made a model of wood or lead to his specifications. From this model the brazier, usually the pewterer himself, produced a brass casting that was a facsimile of the wooden pattern.

For the brazier this was neither a difficult nor a costly task. But the finishing—that is, the smoothing of the inner



2. Detail from Pl. 27 of Pierre Juste Salmon's *L'Art du potier en terre* (Paris, 1788). After being cast, pewter objects were skimmed to make them smooth and ready for use. Spoons, handles for mugs and porringers were scraped by hand.

3. Detail from Pl. 4 of *L'Art du potier en terre*. Master pewterers or neymen skimmed or smoothed pewter objects by holding a tool and a hook against them as they turned on a lathe turned by a helper.





height 6 1/2 inches. Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.

Pewter quart tankard attributed to William Bradford Jr. (w. 1719-1758), New York City. Height 6½ inches. Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.

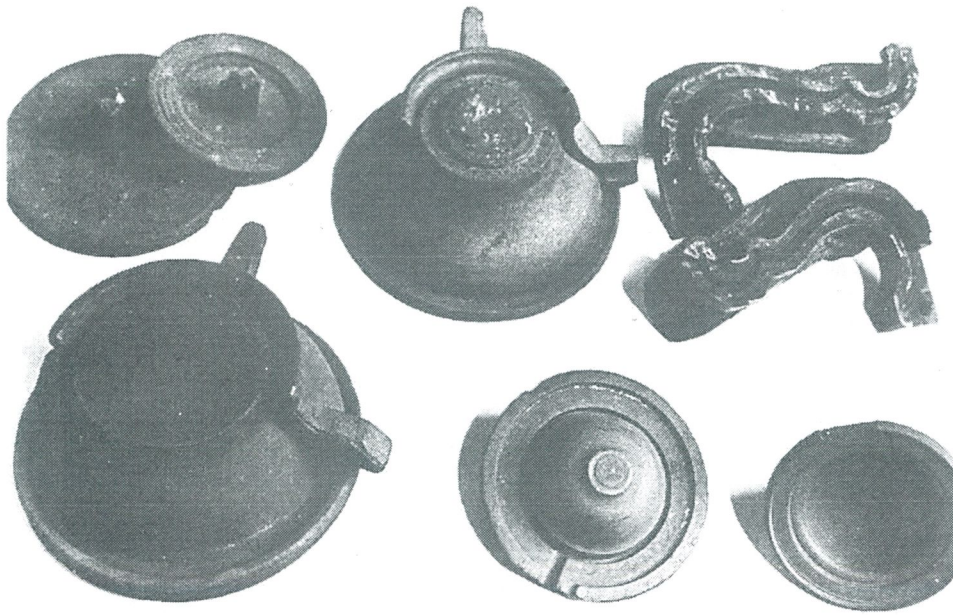
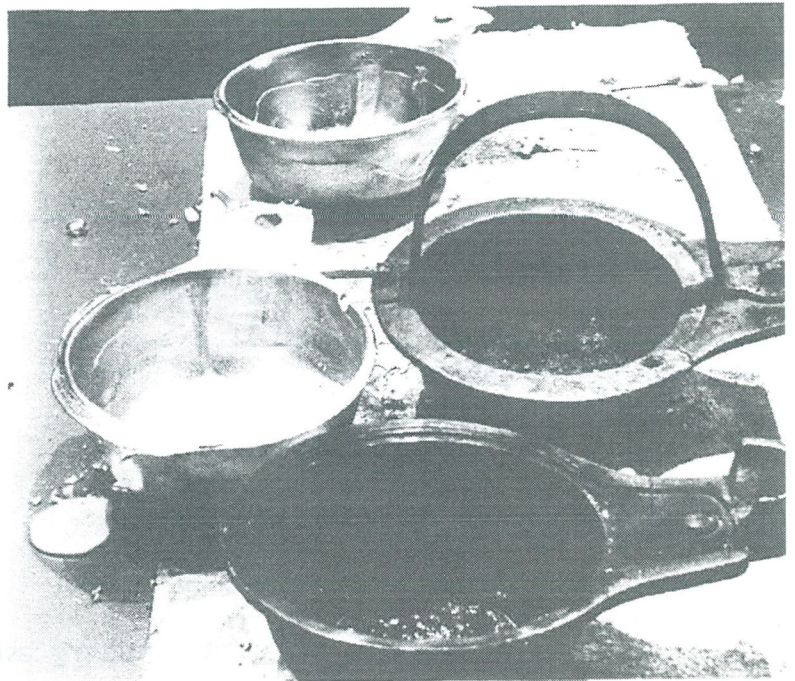


Fig. 4. Casting molds for a teapot. Unsigned; nineteenth century.

Fig. 5. Pennsylvania-type tab-handle porringer mold and castings. The mold was used about 1800 by Samuel or Simon Pennock, Chester County, Pennsylvania.



curved surfaces of the mold parts so that they would fit tightly together to prevent leakage—was a laborious task unless it could be done on a lathe. To design a mold and vent it to make perfect pewter castings required skill, and it is now clear that American braziers had that skill.

Information on the cost of new brass molds for making pewter is yet to be found; however, the price placed on used molds in pewterers' inventories is surprisingly modest—usually about the same price per pound as new pewter. In the 1696 inventory of the Boston pewterer John Baker, two lots of fine pewter (120 and 820 pounds) were valued at sixteen pence per pound—two pence more per pound than 1280 pounds of molds. Slightly more than a century later, Richard Austin's 395 pounds of brass molds were valued at twenty-five cents per pound, exactly the same price per pound as the new pewter basins and porringers in his inventory.

Before use, pewterers' molds were customarily coated, according to Salmon and others, with "a light layer of earthy materials." Some pewterers used calcinated pumice stone or soot; others employed yellow ochre. To apply any one of these, Salmon says:

One heats the mold, and as soon as it is a little warm, one takes aqua fortis [nitric acid], spreads it with a feather, and after effervescence, there is left a coating . . . on which one puts the dust or powder.

A pewterer with good molds could make many castings in an hour. Poor castings were thrown back into the melting pot. As the first step in the finishing process, rough edges or excrescences were clipped or rasped off and small holes filled with a soldering iron.

Then such items as spoons (Fig. 2) and the handles of porringers and mugs were scraped and burnished by hand. Round forms were finished on a lathe (Fig. 3). Ingenious blocks and fittings enabled the pewterer to mount plates, basins, dishes, mugs, tankards, and other hollowwares on his lathe and skim them with a "hook" or other cutting or scraping tool as they revolved before him.

Plates, basins, and dishes, now called flatware, as well as buttons, spoons, and sundials, were known in the eight-

eenth century as "sadware" (one-piece objects cast in two-part molds). Mugs, tankards, and teapots were called hollowware and were made up of several individually cast parts (Fig. 4) that, after skimming, were assembled and soldered together. Inasmuch as the solder was of the same composition as the parts, the joints were invisible after the final polishing. Skimming marks, however, are usually still found on the bottoms of round objects, where they appear as shallow, concentric ridges and grooves. Looking across the skimming marks on the bottom of a mug, tankard, or plate, one can see coarse radial lines extending from the center toward the circumference. These are "chatter" marks caused by the vibration of the skimming tool. Those on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pewter, skimmed on primitive lathes with wooden bearings, are coarser than

the chatter marks on modern pewter fashioned on lathes with precision metal mounts.

Although most handles were slush cast and soldered in place after the drums of mugs, tankards, and flagons had been skimmed and polished, some handles were cast in place like porringer handles. This appears to be the method usually followed in making New England strap-handle mugs. As early as 1690, the English Pewterers' Company stipulated that porringer handles must be "burned on," i.e., cast into place, because this practice ensured a stronger bond between the handle and the bowl than that achieved by soldering. With the exception of Pennsylvania tab-handle porringers, with bowl and handle cast as one piece in Continental fashion (Fig. 5), the handles of all other early American porringers were cast in place after the bowl had been finished and skimmed.

To make this delicate operation possible, the base of the handle mold was shaped to *exactly* fit the bowl (Fig. 6). In the drawing, a porringer bowl is held by metal tongs with curved ends wrapped in cloth that perfectly conform to the inner contours of the bowl. The cloth, serving as a tinker's dam, prevents the hot metal poured into the handle mold from melting a hole in the bowl and impresses its pattern on the softened metal of the bowl's inner surface (Fig. 7). This impression, called a linen mark, is invariably found in antique American pewter porringers. Modern and reproduction porringers, whose handles are soldered on, do not have linen marks.

Hollow mug and tankard handles are believed to have come into vogue about 1700 in America, but as late as 1721 quart and pint pots with "hollow handles" were singled out in separate listings. These handles were made by slush casting. In this process, the pewterer takes advantage of the fact that molten pewter congeals first where it is in contact with the mold. As soon as an outer surface has hardened, the pewterer up-ends the mold and pours out the remaining molten metal, leaving the casting hollow.

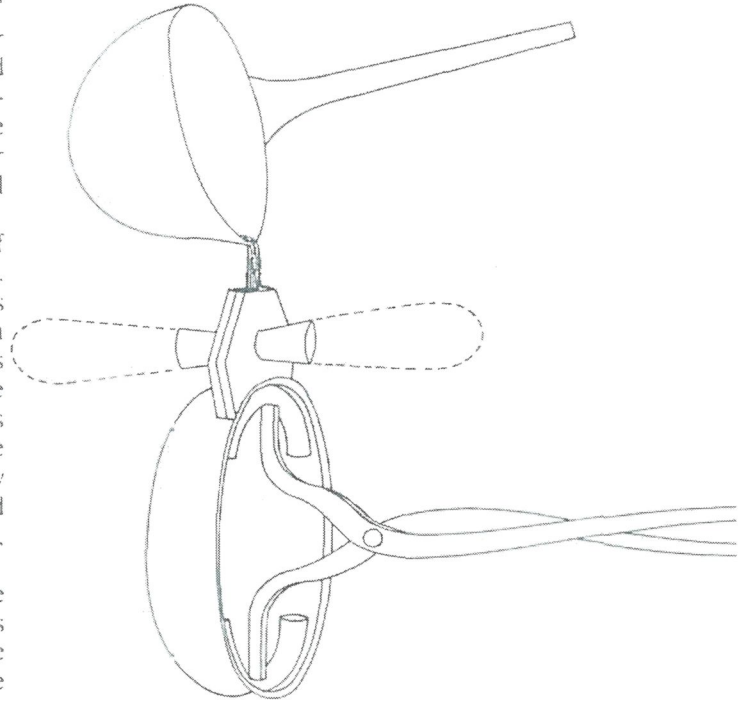


Fig. 6. Casting a handle on the bowl of a porringer. In America, pewterers cast the handles of their porringers in place on the bowl held by cloth-covered tongs. Drawings by James L. Garvin.

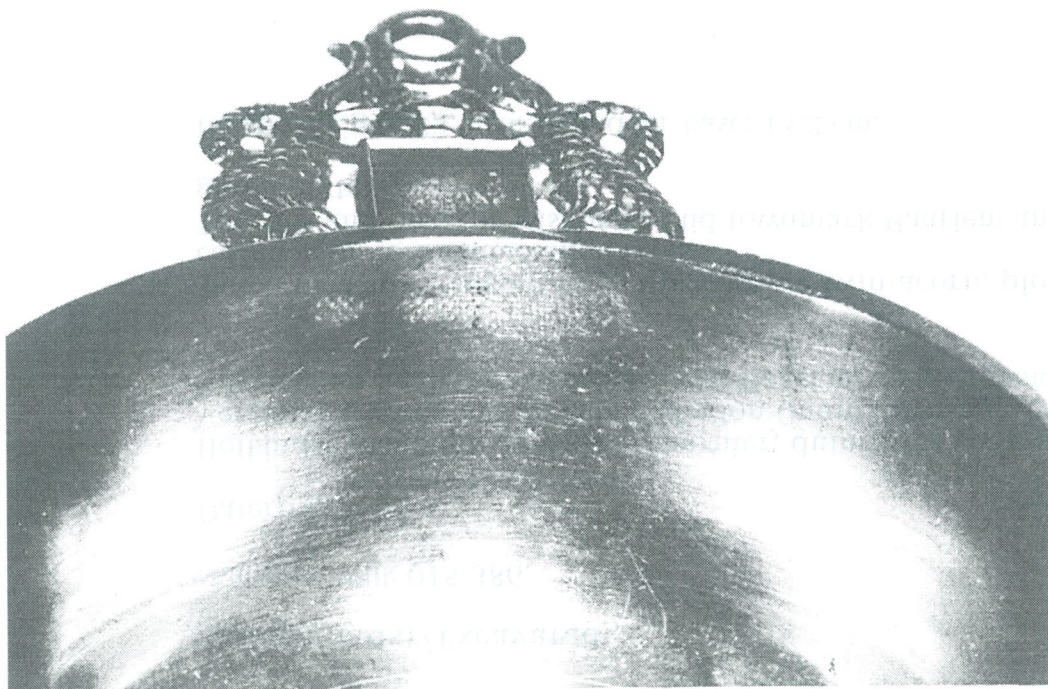


Fig. 7. A "linen mark" impression of the cloth-covered tongs made in the hot pewter when the handle of a porringer was cast on the bowl.