

Three flagons attributed to John Will

BY CHARLES V. SWAIN

IT IS RARE TODAY for an unknown shape in eighteenth-century American pewter to make an appearance, especially since this field of the decorative arts has been so thoroughly documented; it is even more unexpected to find three similar examples of that design within a few weeks, but that is the case with the three bulbous flagons illustrated in Figures 1, 3, and 6. At first glance the shape of these flagons suggests that they are of Dutch or Germanic origin but a closer examination of their thumb-pieces, handles, lids, and spouts identifies them as unmistakably American and, as I will attempt to prove, attributable to John Will.

The flagon and accompanying chalice illustrated in Figure 1, both unmarked, originally belonged to the Round Top Lutheran Church in Bethel, New York, which was founded by German Palatines about 1742. In his *History of Little Nine Partners* (Amenia, New York, 1897) Isaac Hunting wrote that the communion set was purchased for the church in 1760, some fifty or sixty miles

away in Albany. The buyer was Alexander McIntosh, husband of Clara Younkans.

The style of the flagon is consistent with its traditional date of purchase and I feel that the piece itself is attributable to John Will. After emigrating to the American Colonies from Germany in 1752, John Will in all probability continued to make those shapes with which he had become familiar on the Continent. Although the distinctive handle of the bulbous flagon is remarkably like that on the flagon marked by John Will's son Philip (Fig. 2), I do not believe that Philip made them both. In the opinion of Ledlie I. Laughlin (*Pewter in America*, Barre, Massachusetts, 1969, Vol. II, p. 14), Philip "served his apprenticeship in New York [and] moved to Philadelphia in 1763" to set himself up independently three years after the Round Top Lutheran Church had acquired its flagon and chalice. Moreover, in Volume III (Barre, 1971, p. 104) Laughlin has written: "Because Philip Will is believed to have been a journeyman working for his

Fig. 1. Flagon and chalice attributed to John Will (w. New York 1752-1774). Collection of Deuel Richardson.



Fig. 2. Flagon by Philip Will
(w. Philadelphia 1763 and later),
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Deming.

Fig. 3. Flagon attributed to John Will,
Art Institute of Chicago;
gift of Mrs. William O. Goodman.



an identical lid and thumbpiece, with the addition of a foliate finial, on his flacon in Figure 2. (William Will—Philip's brother—also used this foliate finial on the flacon he made for the Oxford Presbyterian Church, and that is pictured in Laughlin, Vol. III, Pl. XCVII, Fig. 792).

The flacon and chalice illustrated in Figure 1 were given to Samuel and Catharine Bockee Deuel, great-grandparents of the present owner, when the Round Top Lutheran Church ceased to exist in 1827. Catharine Bockee's father, Jacob, was a second cousin of Rebecca Bockee who married John Will's son Christian.

father, John, for a number of years after completing his apprenticeship, and because it is also thought that Philip may have inherited some of his father's moulds, it seems highly probable that if any of John Will's flagons should have survived and may come to light later, they may be expected to resemble closely Philip Will's masterpiece." Thus, it appears to me reasonable to credit John Will with the flacon illustrated in Figure 1.

Corroborating such an attribution is the pierced chair-back thumbpiece, which is identical to that used on the marked John Will tulip-shape tankard shown in Figures 4 and 5. Moreover, the lid of the flacon of Figure 1 is from the same mold as the lid of the marked John Will cylindrical tankard illustrated in Figure 7. Philip used

The second of the three bulbous flagons under discussion is illustrated in Figure 3. Unfortunately, there are no records to indicate when or from whom it was purchased, but it is known to have been used in the Congregational Church at Farmington, Trumbull County, Ohio. Its most striking feature is the distinctive handle which appears to be from the same mold as that of the marked John Will tulip-shape tankard illustrated in Figures 4 and 5. William Will either copied or inherited this mold from his father, for he also is known to have used it on the Aaronsburg tall pitcher, a pair of two-handled communion cups, and a quart pot, all of which are pictured in Volumes I (1969) and III of *Pewter in America*.

The bulbous flagons shown in Figures 1 and 3 not only have the same lid and pierced chair-back thumbpiece but their measurements are almost identical: over-all height, 9 1/4 inches; height to top of body without lid, 9 3/8 inches; least diameter inside dome of lid, 3 15/16 inches; diameter at bottom, 4 3/4 inches; the diameter of the belly of the first flagon is 6 3/16 inches, while that of the second is only 5 1/8 inches because it has no raised band. Similarly, at the narrowest point the neck of the first flagon is 3 1/8 inches in diameter whereas the corresponding measurement on the second is 3 inches because its band is made of thinner metal.

Significantly, the irregular cutout in the thumbpieces of the bulbous flacons matches that in John Will's tulip-shaped tankard (Figs. 4, 5). This piercing, usually used by John Will, was never, to my knowledge, used by his son William. I have examined three pear-shaped tankards, three cylindrical tankards, and one cylindrical flagon by William Will, and in all cases the piercings in the thumbpieces were of some shape other than that in the bulbous flacons under examination.

The third of these bulbous flacons (Fig. 6), like its counterparts, looks Flemish or German, except for its peculiarly English bud-terminal handle which was so often used in the American Colonies. The flagon is practically identical to the two previously discussed in the shape of its body and banded decoration. In fact, the height of its body and the diameters of the neck at its narrowest point and the belly at its widest are identical to the corresponding dimensions on the other two flacons. However, over all the flagon in Figure 6 is one inch taller than the other two because of a higher foot and the elaborate, high, dome lid. The handle and solid chair-back

thumbpiece of this flagon are exactly like those on the marked John Will tankard in Figure 7.

Another important detail consistent on all three flacons I attribute to John Will is the uniform application of two beads at the base of the spout. William Will, on the other hand, used three beads of graduated sizes on his early cylindrical flacons and one large flat bead on his later, urn-shaped examples.

A most interesting feature of the flagon in Figure 6, and one which sets it apart from the other two, is the presence on the inside bottom of an armorial touch which incorporates the initials IW within its design (Fig. 8). John Carl Thomas, past president of the Pewter Collectors Club of America and discoverer of this flagon, feels confident that this touch was used by John Will before those known to have been used by him. Evidence is strongly in favor of this theory, for in all likelihood John Will would have continued to use his German touch immediately after his arrival in the American Colonies. It is possible that the arms in the touch are those of Nieuwied or Herborn, cities in which he worked as a pewterer. Proof, of course, awaits a thorough search of those cities' archives.

There is little doubt that the chalice and flagon shown in Figure 1 were made by the same man. The base of the chalice and the flagon's lid have identical measurements and are interchangeable, as is evident in Figure 9. When this chalice is compared to those known to have been made by the Wills and to one by Peter Young, who is thought to have been associated with Henry Will, it complements an already compatible group (Figure 10). If indeed this chalice was made by John Will, it could very well have been the inspiration for the other four.



Fig. 4. Tankard by John Will. *Author's collection.*



Fig. 5. Another view of Fig. 4 showing the pierced thumbpiece.

Fig. 6. Flagon attributed to John Will.
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Melvyn D. Wolf.



Fig. 7. Tankard by John Will.
Author's collection.

Fig. 8. Touch on the flagon
illustrated in Fig. 6.
Attributed to John Will.



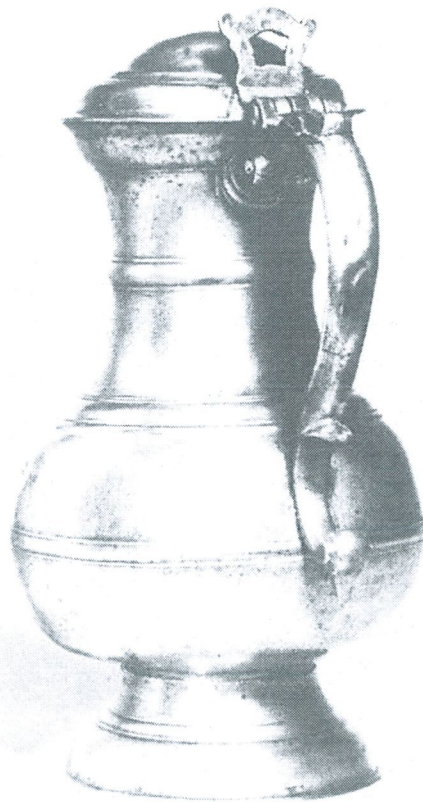
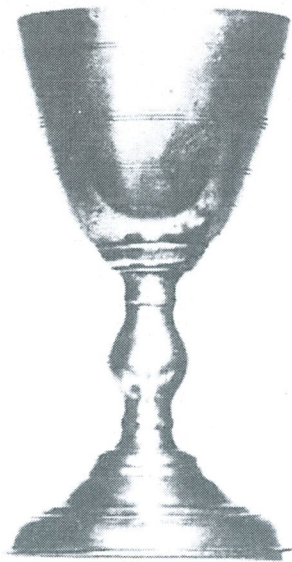


Fig. 9. View illustrating the interchangeability of the chalice base and the flagon lid in Fig. 1, which are identical.

Fig. 10. *Left to right.* Chalices attributed to Henry Will, William Will, William Will, John Will; and a marked example by Peter Young. *All from the author's collection except that attributed to John Will.*

