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Fig. 1 — FLAGON AND LAMPS  
Made by Israel Trask. From the author's collection.

## A Massachusetts Pewterer

By JOHN WHITING WEBBER

**B**EFORE the elaborate "elegancies" of the Victorian Era reached this country, the composition metal workers of America devoted themselves to making articles which should be useful and practical. Incidentally they created work which often had a certain beauty. Later, when "doyleys" and "whatnots" be-decked the parlor of every hooped lady, it was thought that the sombre surface of pewter must be embellished with decoration; and, from that time, the sturdy shapes characteristic of the ware lost their simple and unconscious grace.

Not only the lines of various objects changed, but the dead lustre of the old pewter plate was scorned, and alloys which would have more sheen were sought. In the eighteenth century, the English sometimes added antimony, copper and zinc to their composition, finding that a harder and more brilliant material resulted, which, to distinguish it from the other kinds of pewter, was called Britannia metal. This term, however, has since been used for alloys of appearance quite different from the original Britannia.

When we pick up the old volume called Stone's *History of Beverly* we wonder just what composition the author referred to, in 1843, when he wrote that

"the manufacture of Britannia ware in this country was commenced in 1812 by Mr. Israel Trask." Previous to that time, and subsequently as well, Trask worked in pewter; and, as pieces bearing his mark vary from whale-oil lamps and tankards of dull, leady alloy to shiny, ornate casters, it

is impossible to know just what his earliest Britannia resembled. Certain of his tools among the treasures of the Beverly Historical Society help us to discover the processes by which he worked at one period of his long life, but as to the exact proportions of metals used at different times, we are considerably in the dark.

The embargoes of the turbulent period of our second war with England changed the course of the industries of young America, and Trask's business was affected with the others. One day, while Trask was selling his spoons in Boston—according to an article in an old local newspaper\*—a lady entered and asked the proprietor of the store for a teapot. But there were none to be had, as the supply from England had been shut off. Trask, however, who had overheard the conversation, spoke up: "Mrs. Ball," said he, "if you will give me a sack full of old teapots, I will melt them up and will make you as fine a new tea-



Fig. 2 — ISRAEL TRASK, PEWTERER  
of Beverly, Massachusetts. Born October 21, 1786, died February 1, 1867.

\**Beverly Citizen*, February 7, 1897.

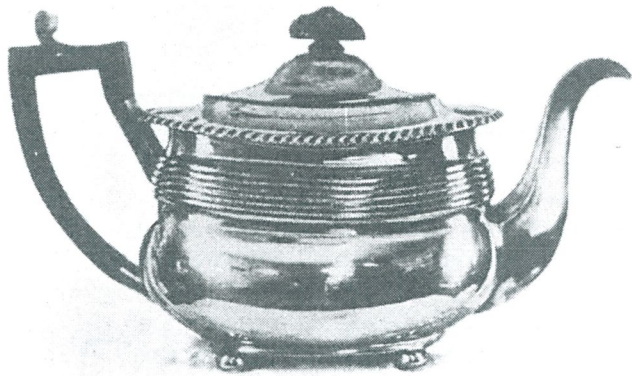


Fig. 3—SHEFFIELD TEAPOT

Used as a model by Israel Trask in making the pewter teapot illustrated in Figure 4. Owned by Mrs. Jesse Trask.



Fig. 4—PEWTER OR BRITANNIA TEAPOT

Made by Israel Trask and bearing the mark *I. Trask*. The pot was designed after the one illustrated in Figure 3. Owned by Mrs. Jesse Trask.

pot as ever came from old England." The metal was taken to Beverly, melted in the kiln, cooled on iron plates, rolled to the desired thickness and made into oval-shaped teapots. The result must have been satisfactory, as, at a later time, an order for one hundred dozen was given.

As this increase in business proved too much for Trask and his one helper, the services of his two brothers, George and Oliver, were required. George, though apparently enjoying his apprenticeship to his "saintly brother," as he later wrote,\* forsook this work for the ministry and the anti-tobacco cause. Oliver, however, kept to his trade, although leaving his brother and setting up a separate shop in Beverly. It was this brother, Oliver, who made the

handsome pewter flagon now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, although it appears to be identical with one in my own collection bearing Israel Trask's mark. After his brothers left him, Israel's business became of larger proportions; in fact, the Boston Art Museum's list of American pewterers gives the years 1825 to 1842 as the period during which Israel Trask was producing pewter.

By 1831 the business had become so large that Trask decided to invest \$325 of his savings in a lot of land on Cabot Street where he erected a stone shop, still standing, and behind it another stone building in which the metals were worked. In a document\* written the following year, he is referred to as a goldsmith, though it is doubtful that

\* *Autobiographical Sketch*, Rev. George Trask, Fitchburg, 1870.

\* Will of Edeth Wallis, March 16, 1832.



Fig. 5—COMMUNION SET

Made by Israel Trask. Owned by the author.

he carried on that craft to any great extent. During his later years he seems to have made mostly Britannia tableware. Casters were a specialty, the bottles probably being obtained either from Sandwich or from the glass works at East Cambridge. One of these casters is now in the collection of the Essex Institute at Salem.

Humble pewter whale-oil lamps made by Israel Trask, and teapots of good proportion and line, are occasionally seen in New England collections, and several specimens have remained in the hands of his descendants. At one time I came across a diminutive bedroom lamp with an ingenious false bottom. Being inspired by curiosity, I learned that there was a legend that this *objet d'art* had been turned out for his beloved by a love-sick youth at the Trask pewter shop. He had hidden his daguerreotype in the compartment within the metal, and given the lamp to the damsel. The story, however, fails to state whether this sentimental gift succeeded in its mission.

A novel way which Trask invented, or rather happened upon, for making teapot spouts, or *snouts* as they were then called, is also recounted in the newspaper article referred to above. Previously the pewter was molded separately for each half of the spout and later the pieces were soldered together, more or less securely.

One day while Israel Trask was engaged in heating the moulds by pouring into them molten metal, an alarm of fire was sounded. Putting the two moulds together in his haste, and grabbing the leather bucket which hung above his bench, he rushed off to the fire. When he returned and

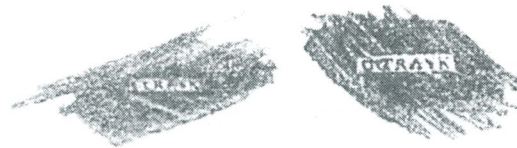


Fig. 6—RUBBINGS OF PEWTER MARKS  
That on the left is the mark of Israel Trask; that on the right, of his brother, Oliver Trask.

The pieces which Trask made during the latter part of his long life followed the tendency of the times towards over-decoration. He apparently used different recipes for mixing his alloy, although the appearance of the surface may have been altered by heating the articles in baths of cream of tartar, acids or oils. His grandson once told me that he believed the mixtures were made up each time according to the judgment of Mr. Trask rather than by definite weights and, consequently, that they varied considerably.

On most of this pewterer's work there appears a small indented rectangle reading *I. Trask*. The brother's stamp, *O. Trask*, was similar, though somewhat larger. It has been maintained\* that a composition worker named John Trask, who is listed in the Boston directories from 1822 to 1826 at various addresses, manufactured pewter articles, but, though I have examined large numbers of pieces, I have never been able to identify any of this man's work.

Among his contemporaries, Israel Trask was known as the maker of "improved" and "up-to-date" tableware. At present, how-

ever, there is little interest in these later examples. The present-day collector seeks out rather the sturdy and substantial earlier products of this Essex County pewterer, leaving his later work for later appreciation.

\* See *Pewter and the Amateur Collector*, Edwards J. Gale.



Fig. 7—BRITANNIA COFFEE-POT  
Made by Israel Trask and given to Mrs. Martha Trask in 1840. Owned by Miss Kate Studley



Fig. 8—BRITANNIA COFFEE-POTS  
The third from the left was made by Oliver Trask, the other three by Israel. Owned by the author.