

Three Maine Pewterers

By CHARLES L. WOODSIDE AND LURA WOODSIDE WATKINS

Illustrations, with the exception noted, from the Woodside collections

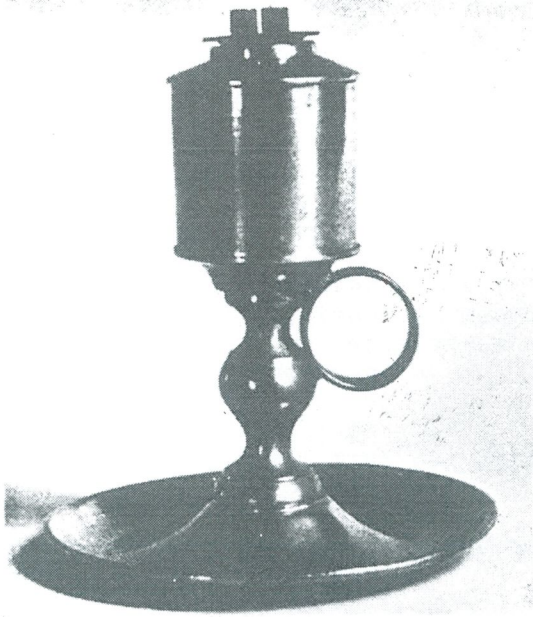


Fig. 1 (above) — LAMP MARKED "A. PORTER" (1830-1835)
Of pewter, for burning whale oil. Mark reproduced at right below.
Height: 5 inches

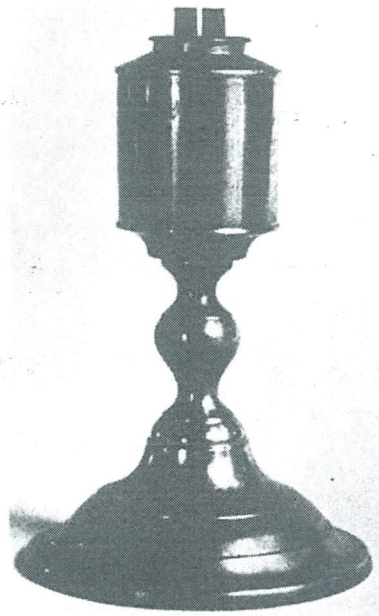


Fig. 2 (right) — LAMP MARKED "A. PORTER" (1830-1835)
Of pewter, for burning whale oil.
Height: 6 inches

THE story of American pewter-making is still so far from complete that nothing more is known of many of the pewterers than the names of the towns where they worked; and, in some instances, even those locations have been wrongly assigned. The three men whose histories we here bring to light are Allen Porter, Freeman Porter, and Rufus Dunham. Information concerning them comes, for the most part, from Frederick Dunham, one of the sons in the old-time firm of Rufus Dunham & Sons, of Portland, Maine. Mr. Dunham has further given us a picturesque tale of a group of pewterers, tinsmiths, brush and comb-makers, and tin peddlers — not in Southington, Connecticut, or in Westbrook, Connecticut, where the Porters are supposed to have worked, but in Westbrook, Maine, now a part of the city of Portland.

Because the story of Allen Porter and his brother Freeman antedates that of Rufus Dunham, it is important to relate first the few facts we have been able to obtain about this earlier pair. It is thought that Allen Porter came from Connecticut to Westbrook, Maine, a township about three miles west of Portland, incorporated in 1815. At that time the place included a district — later set off as the city of Deering — that was annexed to Portland some thirty years ago. In this Deering section of Westbrook, in a village known as Stevens Plains, Allen Porter settled about 1830. It is possible that he manufactured pewter somewhere in the Nutmeg State before his departure for Maine, but we have been unable to find any evidence to that effect. Mr. Dunham further assures us that, though he has consulted records in Southington, Connecticut, he has found no reference to Porter or to any other pewterer.

Fig. 3 — PEWTER PITCHER BEARING F. PORTER'S MARK
Height: 6 1/2 inches.
In the collection of Mrs. Watkins



Freeman Porter first appears as his brother's bookkeeper at Westbrook in 1832 or 1833. From an article on Westbrook by Leonard B. Chapman in the *Deering News* of July 25-28, 1900, we learn that this younger man was born in Colebrook, New Hampshire, July 1, 1808 — though because of the lack of early records in Colebrook the date cannot be verified. Freeman was only twenty-four or twenty-five years old when his connection with the pewtering business began. Two years later — March 16, 1835 — a partnership between the brothers was announced, and in the *Eastern Argus* of Portland on April 20, 1835, appeared the following notice (Fig. 11):

"Allen Porter has associated himself with his brother Freeman Porter, under the firm of A. & F. Porter, for transacting Mercantile and Manufacturing Business, at his old stand on Stevens' Plains, Me."

On July 1, 1835, Freeman Porter married Mary Ann (Buckley) Partridge. The couple began housekeeping in a dwelling on Stevens Avenue, where they remained until their is still standing. a ripe old age, dying Allen Porter and ship with the firm known. In the late Hartford, where he a certain Elizur B.



deaths. The place Mrs. Porter lived to just before 1900. Of his further relation — nothing more is thirties he was in met and talked with Forbes, whom he persuaded to go to Westbrook as a foreman in Freeman Porter's factory. The daughter of Mr. Forbes believes that Allen never thereafter returned to Westbrook. According to Mr. Dunham, he sold out to his brother, and probably returned to Connecticut. Freeman Porter continued the business until the Civil War. During his later years he suffered ill health, a circumstance that may account for his abandonment of pewter-making. In 1868 he was a town selectman.

Rufus Dunham

The account of Rufus Dunham begins with his birth in Saco, Maine May 30, 1815. He was of the ninth generation in descent from John Dunham, who came to Plymouth in 1630. At the age of nine, compelled to earn his own way, he went to live with a farmer, who beat and otherwise ill-treated him. One day, in a drunken frenzy, the man gave the boy an unusually hard flogging with a harness strap; whereupon the lad ran away to Portland. There he found a job in the United States Hotel as handy boy about the billiard room and bar. Young Dunham had something fine about his make-up. The atmosphere of drinking and gambling that surrounded him made no unfortunate impression on his character. He was always looking forward to better circumstances. Meanwhile he attended night school and in that way managed to obtain a rudimentary education.

concerning his father, Frederick Dunham says: "One Sunday with a companion he led in the country to Stevens Plains, Westbrook, three miles from Portland. At that place was very much alive, since it was the headquarters for one hundred or more peddlers whose markets were in northern New England, Canada, and along the coast of Maine, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. The windows of the different factories where they made high-back horn combs, brooms, tinware, decorated japan ware, brushes, and other ware so fascinated him that, in the following week, he asked for time off so that he might see the works in operation.

On this second visit he bound himself as an apprentice for three years to Allen Porter. His wages were to be two suits of clothes per annum, his board, and fifty dollars in cash. This was in 1831. At the end of two years, he broke his contract on the ground that he had not received the pay due him for overtime work."

Boston was his next goal. Since there were no railroads or steamboats, he made his way by sailing packet. Once in the city, he secured work in Dorchester with the pewterer Roswell Gleason. Here, and in Poughkeepsie, he spent the time between 1833 and 1837. By the latter year he was making plans for a business of his own, and the attraction of Westbrook drew him once more. He had saved about a hundred dollars and had secured molds and tools in Poughkeepsie. In 1837 he opened a shop in Stevens Plains with his brother John Elmer. The following year he exhibited his specimens at the Mechanics' Fair in Portland, and received a silver medal for the best specimen of pewter in ware, as pewter was sometimes used at that time. The *Portland Transcript* of September 29 thus briefly mentioned him:

Dunham of Westbrook presented some of the most beautiful Britannia ware."

For power he at first used a foot power. Later, as business warranted, a steam engine, walking in a line, replaced the foot power. Still later Dunham installed a steam engine that he had the distinction of being the second man in Maine to use steam for motive power.

He sold his first product to Eben Steel, a crockery dealer in Portland, and he was very much elated to find that he could sell as well as make his wares. The winters were long and the highways impassable, and the road to Montreal via Crawford Notch, Lyndonville, Derby, and Coaticook, Quebec, which was kept open by a long line of four-to-six-horse vans transporting freight from Canada to Portland, for shipment by water to Boston. Consequently, the peddlers could do no business, and most of the Westbrook shops shut down for want of trade.

Rufus Dunham, however, filled his wagon with his goods and went forth to barter pewter wares for furs, sheep pelts, yarns, stockings, mittens, oxtails, hogs' tines, and cattle horns. The hides and sheep pelts he forwarded to Portland as a welcome cargo for the teams to spread over their winter quarters while on their way to the coast. On arrival these articles were taken to local tanners and woolers, the bristles and oxtails to comb-makers, the horns to comb-makers. The furs, yarns, stockings, and mittens were taken to Boston and turned into cash among various merchants of the Hub.

By thus opening a winter market, Dunham was able to give

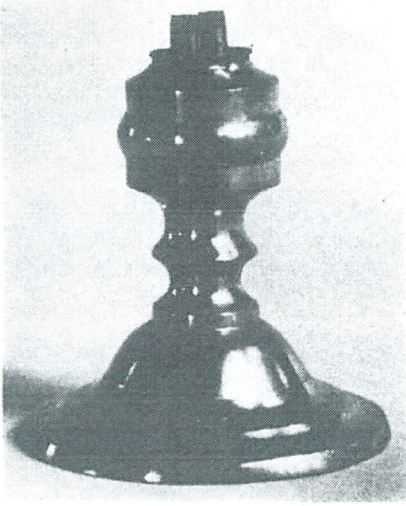


Fig. 4 (above) — LAMP MARKED "F. PORTER WESTBROOK NO. 1." (after 1835) Except for the reservoir, similar to the lamp of Figure 1. Mark reproduced at the left. Height: 6 inches

Fig. 5 (left) — LAMP ASCRIBED TO F. PORTER (after 1835) Though unmarked, this pewter whale-oil lamp is the same as a known F. Porter specimen. Height: 3 1/2 inches

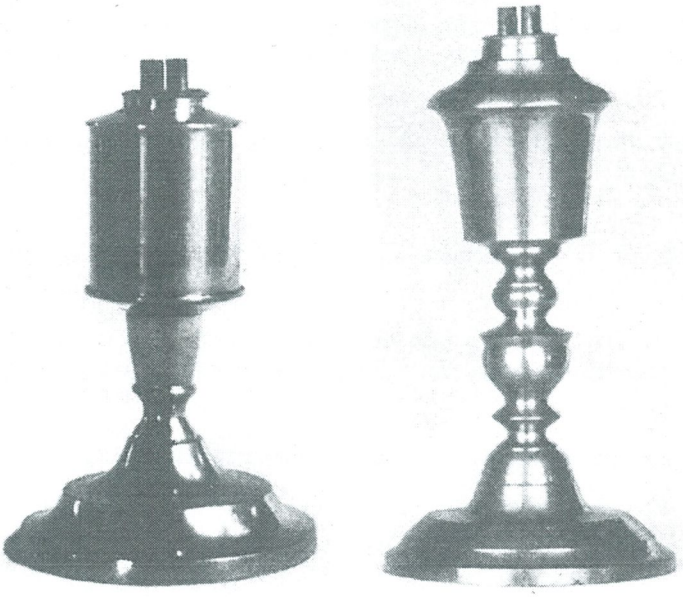
his men year-round work. As he usually paid cash wages, the best workmen were attracted to his shop. He employed from twenty-five to thirty helpers, many of whom worked for him during their whole lives."

Dunham continued his business in Stevens Plains until 1861, when his buildings were burned and he leased new quarters in Portland. In 1876 his sons Joseph S. and Frederick were taken into the firm, which remained as Rufus Dunham & Sons until 1882, when it was dissolved.

Mr. Dunham was twice married; first, to Emeline Stevens of Westbrook, by whom he had two children; second, to Emma B. Sargent of Portland, who became the mother of nine little Dunhams. His home was on Stevens Avenue, almost directly opposite that of Freeman Porter. After the second Mrs. Dunham's death, the house was purchased by the Bishop of Portland, and is now used as the rectory of Saint Joseph's Church. Rufus Dunham was always a highly respected citizen in his community, and one who was accustomed to extend lavish hospitality to his friends and to notables who passed through the town. It is said that, on one occasion, he entertained thirty-two persons in his home overnight. For many years he was a trustee of Westbrook Seminary. The All Souls Universalist Church of Portland is a memorial to him and to his wife.

Stevens Plains

The statement that one hundred or more tin peddlers were congregated in Stevens Plains suggests to the imagination a scene of



Figs. 6 and 7 — WHALE-OIL LAMPS MARKED "R. DUNHAM" The mark is shown at left. Height: 6 inches and 8 inches

ormous activity. What with the shops turning out the useful and corative articles that filled the peddlers' carts, the arrival and de-rture of the vans, and the sorting of the goods taken in exchange, was the centre of a varied and lortful life.

The decoration of tinware was in elf an industry. This work was done most entirely by women. Trays, pots, matchboxes — all the many jets japanned and painted in gay borings — came forth from the ops of Westbrook. The tin box il- lustrated in Figure 8 was purchased om Mrs. O. H. Perry, granddaughter Zachariah B. Stevens, a tinsmith, o sent out many cartloads of uly tin to be bartered for rags. e long building where these rags re sorted remained standing until arly 1900, when it was pulled down id its only remaining cart was de-royed. Thus vanished the last ves- ges of the once-flourishing industries he Plains.

A note in the *Deering News* men- ms Thomas Brisco as another corator of tinware. "He was a dler and the driver of his own rse and cart. His goods consisted of japanned tin ware, japanned and namented by his wife, aided later by five orphaned nieces. Undoubt- ly, he was the first tin ware manufacturer and peddler of the Plains." ufus Dunham bought a share of Brisco's property.

Walter B. Goodrich and his son Walter F. Goodrich are named as smiths by Miss H. A. Forbes. The term is applied indiscriminately to akers of pewter, britannia ware, and tin. It would be interesting to ow whether any real pewter, other than the products of the Porters id Rufus Dunham, came from Stevens Plains. Further research might veal the names of additional makers. At least one clockmaker — noch Burnham — belonged to the community.

Wares of the Porters

Mr. Kerfoot briefly dismisses Allen Porter, saying that the only speci- en of this pewterer's work that he has seen is a lamp belonging to ouis G. Myers of New York. This is presumably one of the two shown Mr. Myers' *Some Notes on American Pewterers*, opposite page 46. No mment concerning them eurs in the text. It will e observed that these mpms have flat wicks, such e were used for lard oil. lis Forbes states that her ther — the Elizur B. Forbes ho came to work for Free- an Porter in the late thir- es — was the inventor of is type of burner, with its ttle toothed barrel wheel for rring up the wick.

The only known pieces of orter's pewter are lamps. is interesting to note that e three examples in the oodside collection have ems that must have been ade in the same mold. reeman Porter, no doubt, ntinued to use his brother's olds when he took over e business.

Mr. Kerfoot mentions mpms, candlesticks, water itchers, and coffee pots by reeman Porter, who "shares

with R. Dunham and William McQuilkin the task of keeping American collectors supplied with open-topped pitchers," of which he made at least a third of the number now in existence. A pitcher (*Fig. 3*) brought from Maine by Mr. Woodside's grandmother, bears the mark *F. Porter Westbrook No. 1*. It was always spoken of as the britannia pitcher, though it is of pewter. The significance of the *No. 1* and *No. 11* in Freeman Porter's marks is unknown.

Wares of Rufus Dunham

In a letter from Frederick Dunham to Mrs. Samuel G. Babcock, published in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Saturday, March 19, 1927, some interesting sidelights are thrown on nineteenth-century methods of pew- ter-making. Speaking of his father, Mr. Dunham says:

"He bought his first metal of James Ellerson of Boston — tin, copper, antimony, and bismuth. The mixture when melted was cast in molds — the body of the pot, cover and bottom, spout and handle. After being turned, using a hand lathe, the parts were sol- dered together, the handles japanned, and they were ready for market. So far as I know, all pewter was cast in molds. With the advent of rolled metal, the word pewter was dropped, and Britannia was the new name adopted.

"In the 1860's there was a revolution in the pewter business. Teapots and what is called 'hollow' ware were made from rolled metal and spun on lathes into shape and called 'white metal.' For the more particular trade such articles were electro-silver-plated. The unplated goods were known as Britannia ware. [The beginning of rolled britannia ware ante- dates 1860, however. The first sheet of such metal was produced with a pair of jeweler's hand rolls in Taunton, Massachusetts, as early as 1824.] "About 1870 there was a demand for copper bottom teapots, as . . . they were more serviceable than those made entirely of pewter. These wares were usually stamped *R. Dunham & Sons, Portland, Me.*"

Rufus Dunham manufactured Communion ware, coffee and tea urns, rolled and cast metal coffee and teapots, ale and water pitchers, ale mugs, both plain and with glass bottoms, soup tureens, soup ladles, teaspoons, tablespoons, castor frames, salts, peppers, and mustard cups, whale-oil and fluid lamps, candlesticks, and other small articles.

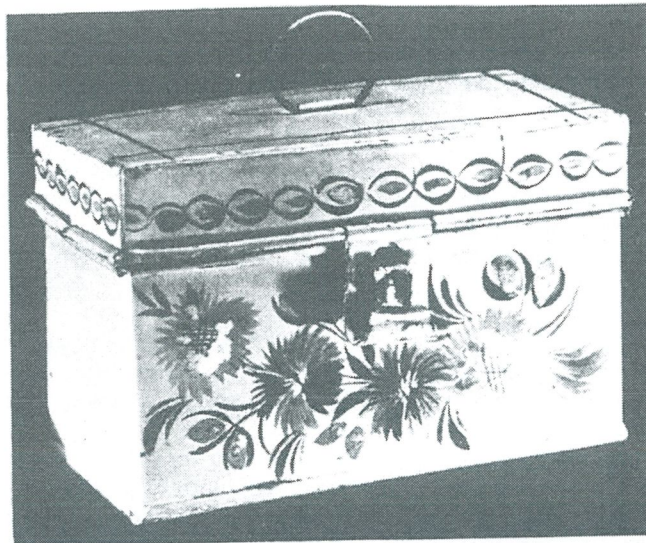


Fig. 8 — TIN BOX FROM WESTBROOK Made in the shop of Zachariah B. Stevens. Bright yellow, with red and green flowers

44 BUSINESS DIRECTORY.

Britannia Ware Manufactory.

RUFUS DUNHAM,
WESTBROOK, ME.
Manufactures

TEA POTS, WATER POTS,
COFFEE URNS, LAMPS,
COMMUNION WARE,
and every other variety of
BRITANNIA GOODS.

Merchants supplied with every descrip- tion of Ware, warranted to be of the first quality, on the most liberal terms.

All kinds of Britannia Ware mended so as to baffle detection.

RUFUS DUNHAM & Co.,
Manufacturers & Wholesale Dealers in
Britannia and Plated Ware,
No. 218 Fore Street.

Have constantly on hand a large assortment of all arti- cles in their line of business, among which may be found the following: Castor Frames, Rolled Metal Caf- fee Pots, Rolled Metal Tea Pots, Cast Metal Tea Pots, Stove Coffee Pots, Stove Tea Pots, Coffee Steepers, Tea Steepers, Hall's Patent Ale Pitchers (Brit.), ditto (No.), Water Pitchers, Soup Tureens, Soup Ladles, Ship Lamps, all sizes, Dish Lamps, Stand Lamps, Hand Fluid Lamps, Tin Fluid Lamps, Kerosene Lamps (Brit.), Dish Candlesticks, Stand Candlesticks, Ale Mugs, English Ale Mugs, glass bottoms, Liquor Steepers, Liquor Mixers, Table Spoons (Brit.), Tea Spoons (Brit.), Fluid Tubes, Mustard Tops, Pepper Tops, Bitter Caps, Syrup Caps, Plated Casters, various patterns.

Copartnership Notice.
A LLEN PORTER has associated himself with his brother **FREEMAN PORTER**, under the firm of
A. & F. PORTER,
for transacting Mercantile and Manufacturing Business, at his old stand on Stevens' Plains, Me.
March 16, 1835.

Fig. 9 (left) — PORTLAND DIRECTORY ADVERTISEMENT (1844)
Fig. 10 — PORTLAND DIRECTORY ADVERTISEMENT (1866-1867)
Fig. 11 — PARTNERSHIP NOTICE, "EASTERN ARGUS" (April 20, 1835)