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OLD PEWTER PLATE. BY MARY L. RILEY



WITHIN a few years there has been a revival of interest in pewter plate and a growing revival among collectors as individuals, museums, historical societies and clubs. While the attraction held by pewter lies largely in its color, the design and workmanship always lend additional interest and value.

In the centuries when pewter was so popular, several alloys were employed in making different grades, but the composition of tin and lead was most commonly used. Old pewter was largely combined with new lead and tin, giving a fine alloy. Brass and copper were sometimes incorporated into the composition and in India the pewterers hammered silver into the surface.

In the country districts of England, and on the continent, traveling pewterers went from house to house with a few molds and crude implements, recasting the damaged and worn vessels: in this way, destroying a quantity of pewter that would have been of great interest to collectors. Casting, hammering and spinning were some of the ways by which the world was supplied with pewter plate. The finishing was very largely done by hand. Molds always played an important part. They were usually made of gun metal, and were held at high value. These molds belonged to a craft or guild, and were loaned to the members. To any one interested in this metal the name of Townsend and Compton, found so frequently on pewter plates and vessels, suggests one of the largest firms in London in those times. Additional marks, small and frequently fac-similes of portions of silver hall marks, were repeated as many as four times on much of the plate. Any piece, with a cross surmounted with a crown, was considered rare. Many of the plates that we find in the old homes all through New England are punched with small, plain letters. Through these mediums a collector has many tests for genuineness—beside those of weight, color, and form.

The makers of pewter plate were known by the special branch of the craft in which they worked. Those who made heavy articles only were sad-ware men. Hollow-ware men turned out pots, flagons, and tankards. Spoons, forks, buckles, buttons and toys were made by triflers.

From the fifteenth to the early part of the seventeenth century, pewter plate was extensively used in the houses of the gentry, and an

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official known as "the yeoman of the liverie," was appointed to take charge of the household pewter. In Lord Northumberland's kitchen there were pewter vessels to the amount of three hundred weight.

English pewter has always been held as superior to that of other countries, chiefly for the fine quality of tin found in Cornwall. Germany made some fine pewter, and in France, François Birot was a celebrated modeler and worker. In Paris, the pewterers were not allowed to ply their trade at night, as an artificial light was understood to injure the quality of the work.

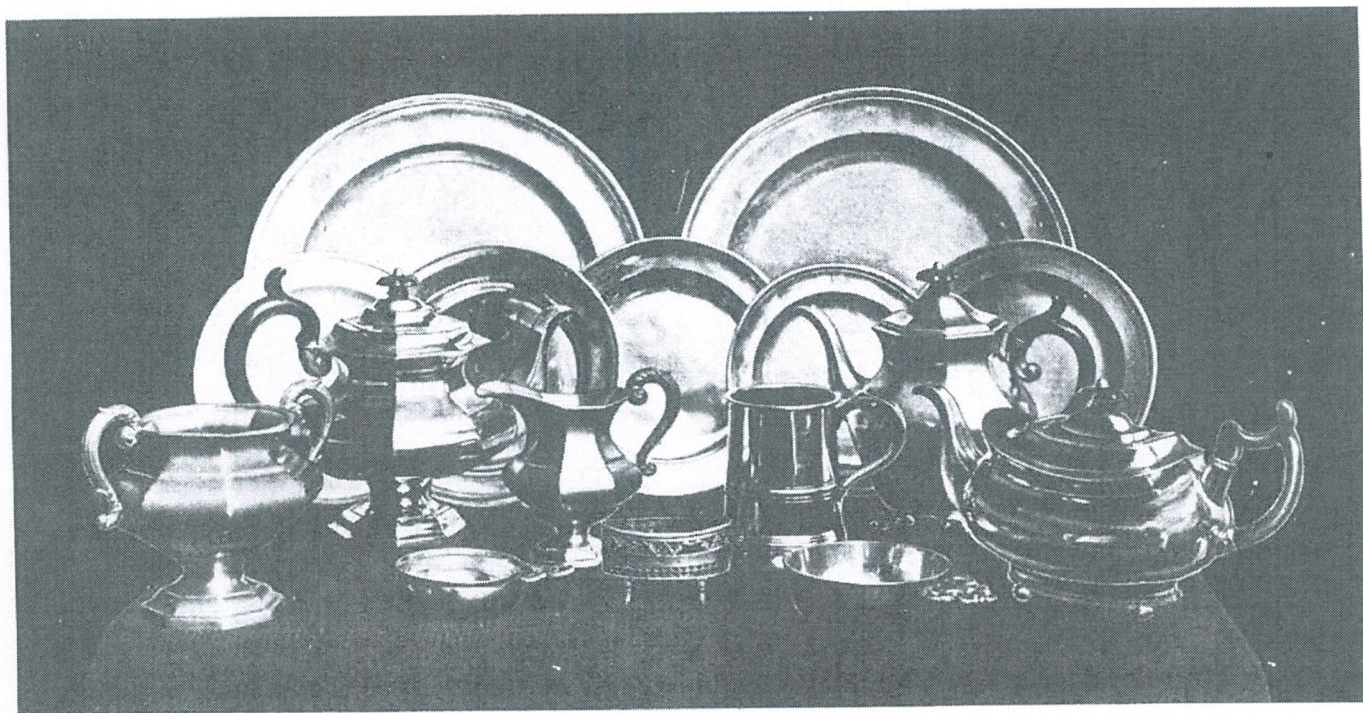
In 1395, Isabelle Marcel, a French woman, manufactured in this alloy, and is the only woman known to have carried on this trade; although many women had shops for the sale of pewter plate.

WHAT the Japanese and Chinese have accomplished with this beautiful and fascinating metal is shown in the Oriental Department of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, in which a collection of Chinese and Japanese pewter, of much interest, has very recently been arranged. It is the first collection ever brought to this country, and some of the specimens date from the Ling and the Ming dynasties. This exhibition makes evident what skilled workmen have been able to do with this metal, and also its possibilities by introducing silver, gold, or brass into the composition.

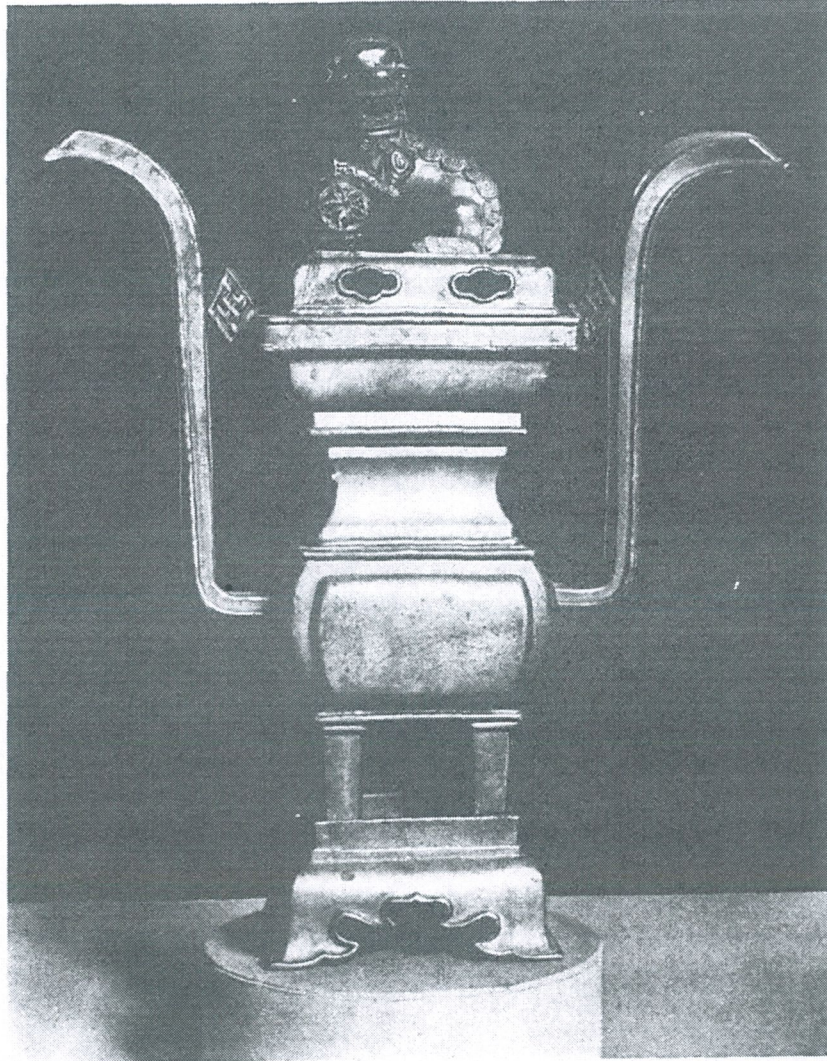
During colonial times in America, pewter was an important furnishing in every household. It was manufactured to a large extent in Boston, and from that point much of the English pewter was distributed.

The history of pewter used for ecclesiastical purposes is full of interest, both abroad and in our own country. The metal in its coloring and simplicity of design seemed especially appropriate for canonical uses. In Northamptonshire, England, both dishes and flagons were in great favor. The alms dishes were most attractive, and it is a lasting regret that very few of them are to be found in any of the old churches, or among collections.

It was the good fortune of the writer to find at Grafton, one of the most beautiful hill towns of Massachusetts, a pewter communion service that has much of historic interest connected with it. There are two flagons, two bread plates, and a tankard. One of the flagons bears the following inscription:



COLONIAL PEWTER; FROM THE COLLECTION OF MRS. CHARLES A. PRATT, LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS



CHINESE PEWTER

BY COURTESY BOSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS



CHINESE PEWTER

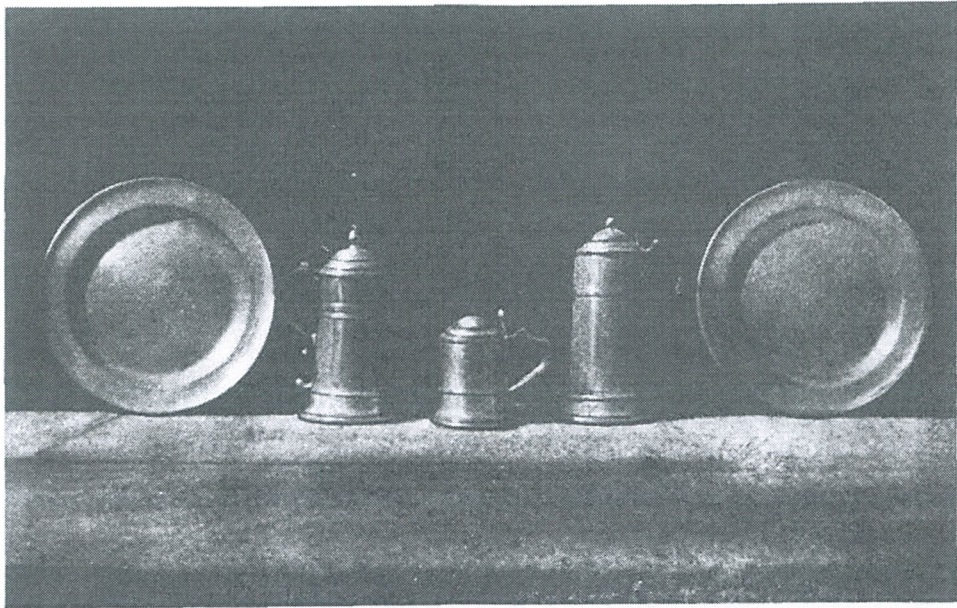
BY COURTESY BOSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS



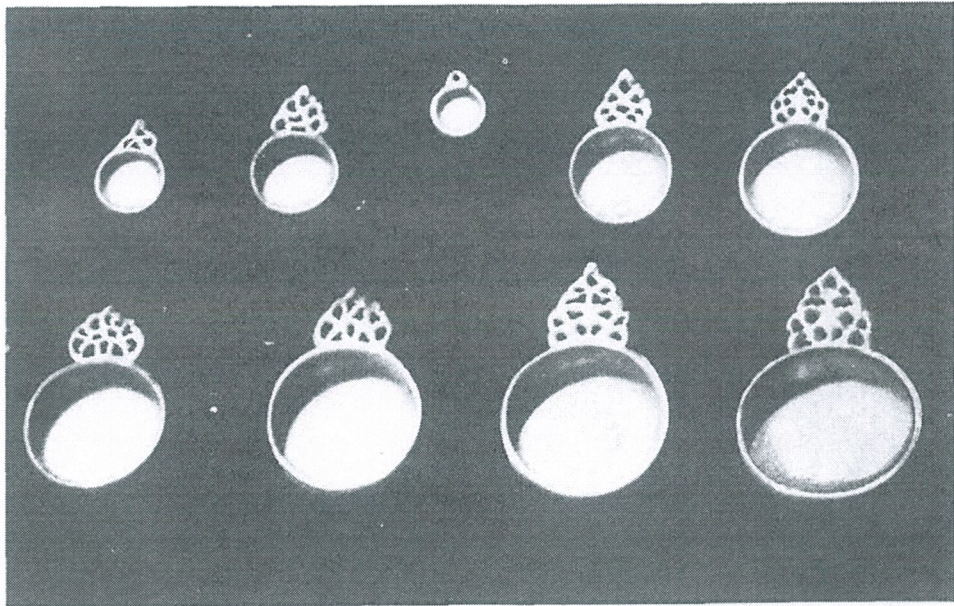
FROM THE COLLECTION OF MRS. CHARLES A. PRATT, LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS



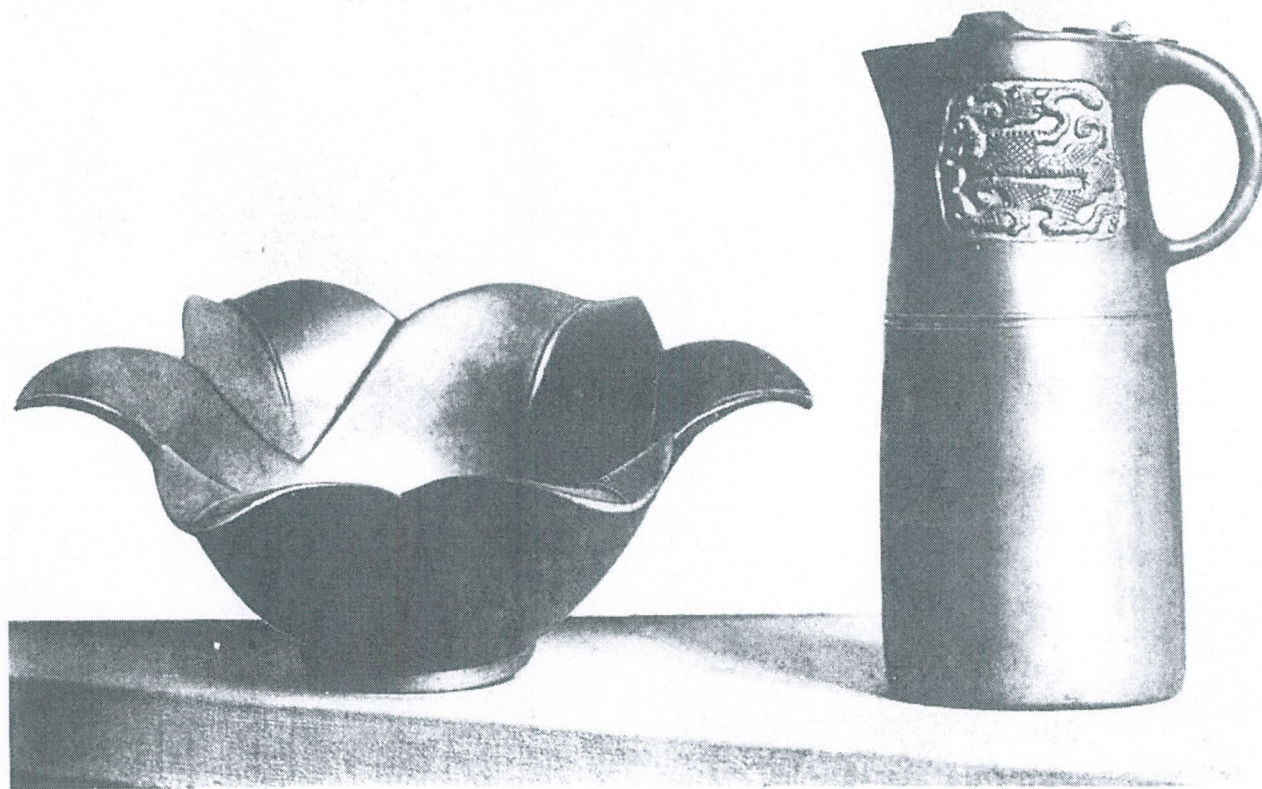
FROM THE COLLECTION OF MRS. CHARLES A. PRATT, LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS



COMMUNION SERVICE. 1742. GRAFTON, MASSACHUSETTS



PORRINGERS BELONGING TO MR. HENRY CLEMENCE, WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS



JAPANESE AND CHINESE PEWTER

By courtesy Boston Museum of Fine Arts

OLD PEWTER PLATE

"The Gift of
Deaⁿ James Whipple
To the Church of
Christ in Grafton.
1742"

In looking through the time stained and time worn records of this same church, we read, with unusual pleasure, where "the Church gratefully acknowledged and voted their thanks to Dean Whipple." In later years, where, instead of one church, there became two, the question rose as to the disposal of the old pewter service and the church records, and consequently, for many years, both were in hiding.

In these days of spurious antiques, the most interesting, as well as the surest way of securing genuine old pewter is to visit the farm-houses in districts well known either to one's self or to one's friends. One is quite certain to have a very delightful experience, as well as to get a bit of this fascinating metal. The ways of the collector are not only strange, but many times ludicrous. Not very long since, an enthusiast invaded a New England farm kitchen, and, in her eagerness, took a pewter porringer from a dish of hot water, leaving a piece of money in its place.

THERE are now in our own country quite a number of private collections of fine specimens; many of them with an unusual history. At "Indian Hill," Newburyport, once the home of Major Ben Perley Poore, the noted journalist, is a famous and very complete collection of pewter plate. Mrs. Charles A. Pratt of Little Rock, Arkansas, has also a quite remarkable collection. Mr. Henry Clemence of Worcester, Massachusetts, possesses one equally notable, and the Larchmont Yacht Club, of Larchmont, New York, owns the largest collection of pewter plate in the country.

Any legacies of old pewter are valued as highly as old silver, treasured quite as carefully, and displayed with equal pleasure.

While some of the old Staffordshire ware is attractive, we can scarcely be reconciled to its invasion, and the final overthrow of the manufacture of pewter plate. To the taverns, inns, and chop houses of London we are indebted for the most lasting loyalty to this beautiful and artistic metal.

Source unknown. Copied in the
Art Gallery library in New South Wales, Australia
note from Frank Pender