

Early Pewter Tableware

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

One of pewter's blessings was also its curse and the reason so little early American pewter tableware managed to survive the 18th Century. This metal so popular for colonial tableware could be easily melted down and recast into new tableware—a necessity because England's draconian trade laws banned production of new pewter in the colonies.

Over time Americans reconstituted so much early tableware that they destroyed most of it to accommodate changing styles. Most of what little remained simply wore out, usually within ten years. When the Revolution erupted in the 1770s, many an angry colonist willingly donated the family's valued pewter pieces to be recast into musket balls to help General Washington's ill-equipped army shoot its way to independence.

As with so many other colonial-era items, pewter tableware eventually disappeared from use by the mid-1800s after being eclipsed by more modern materials. Yet historic house owners and curators regard pewter tableware as a signature of the early American look, reflecting the character we typically associate with households of the period.

Today it is again widely available, either mass-produced in factories or created by a handful of dedicated artisans, including the four we profile here, who use traditional methods to create the style of tableware that has been with America since the first European settlers landed here.

THE BRITISH CROWN PROHIBITED IMMIGRANT PEWTERERS FROM WORKING RAW MATERIALS, SO THEY MELTED ENGLISH PEWTER FOR PLATES TO SET THE TABLE AND MUSKET BALLS TO HELP SETTLE THE REVOLUTION. TODAY'S TRADITIONAL MAKERS FACE NO SUCH RESTRICTIONS.



In the portrait *Mrs. Reuben Humphreys*, the size and position of the Chippendale looking-glass and table set with a flowered china tea service suggests the importance of these objects in the subject's life. Also shown on the table is a pewter plate that holds slices of lemon. The painting, in which Anna Humphreys holds her daughter, Eliza, is attributed to Richard Brunton. An artist turned counterfeiter, Brunton likely painted *Mrs. Humphreys* and the companion portrait of her husband about 1800 while he was incarcerated at Newgate Prison in Connecticut, where Reuben Humphreys was superintendent.

COURTESY OF THE CONNECTICUT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, GIFT OF THE JOSLYN ART MUSEUM THROUGH MRS. FRANK WILLIS

SURROUNDED BY PEWTER

Pewter, from the middle ages to the onset of the Industrial Revolution, was regarded as simply the best material available for a variety of domestic items, far more durable than wood and far less expensive than silver.

Domestic use of tin—the world's most precious metal after platinum, gold, and silver—dates back 5,000 years to when Sumerians smelted it to inaugurate the Bronze Age. Another 1,500 years passed before the Egyptians added lead to create the first pewter, followed a thousand years later by pewter's use in China and then Japan. Romans introduced pewter into Britain in the Second

Century, and some historians believe rich deposits of tin and lead in the Cornish countryside factored into Rome's decision to invade the isles.

Pewter is predominately tin alloyed with other metals—copper, antimony, bismuth, and lead—for greater strength and durability, which is why it far surpassed tin alone in utilization around the world. The tin-to-lead proportion has been pivotal in the history of pewter. The addition of significant proportions of lead enabled the production of pewter in lands where tin was not plentiful and kept pewter's price reasonable, but it also softened the metal and made it more prone to damage.

In 1348, England began regulating the quality of pewter, and in 1473 King Edward IV chartered the Worshipful Company of Pewterers to oversee pewter's creation and merchandising in his kingdom, with the goal of ensuring it would remain the world's finest.

For the next 300 years, Europeans were surrounded by pewter—plates and porringers, spoons and chalices, baptismal fonts and bedpans, snuffboxes and bleeding bowls—literally from birth to death.

Pewter tableware arrived in the New World with the Jamestown settlement in 1607. By the 1620s colonists settling New England's coasts also were unpacking pewter tableware they had lugged from the mother country, and by 1640 pewterers were working in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

But in coming to America those early pewterers, trained and licensed by the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, sacrificed much of their experience and earning power. The guild forbade immigrant pewterers from creating new pewter pieces on American soil. Instead they were relegated to repairing broken items or melting down old pewter to recast it.

British trade laws mandated that only finished pewter products be exported to the colonies and any unworked pewter be heavily taxed. Even exporting pure tin—pewter's main ingredient—to the colonies was prohibited. Put simply, England's monarchs and guild recognized the potentially huge Continental market for pewter and determined that only England would reap the profit.

Often called English export pewter, the phrase refers to English pewter shipped to America from the late 17th Century through the first quarter of the 19th Century.

"Several forms—such as pear-shaped teapots and creamers,

This coffee pot exhibits the latest British neoclassical style, although maker William Will was German born. He worked in Philadelphia in the late 18th Century, and this pot dates to c. 1785-98. In addition to Will's mark, the pot is stamped with a corrupted mark "LONDON," indicating Will's use of finer grade pewter.





By the time this pewter porringer was made in the late 1700s, the English had ceased using them. They remained extremely popular in certain parts of America, especially in New England and to a lesser extent in New York well into the 19th Century. This handsome example is the work of Frederick Bassett, the last and most prolific of the Bassetts, the most prominent pewtering family in 18th-Century New York.

drum-shaped teapots, and sugar bowls—were made specifically for the American market and are rarely found in England,” according to the Pewter Collectors’ Club of America (PCCA). “At the time of the American Revolution as well as today, there are more pieces of English export pewter to be found in this country than pieces made by American pewterers.”

The rationale for England’s strict trade laws had proved correct. As the American colonies expanded, so did the demand for imported English pewter. By 1720 pewter imports exceeded the combined value of imported English silverware, furniture, bedding, curtains, carpets, hangings, and upholstered furniture. By 1760, England was shipping more than 300 tons of pewter to the colonies annually.

British trade laws, coupled with some apparent British disdain toward the colonies, resulted in many colonists eating from pewter tableware of distinctly inferior quality. Recent research conducted at the Winterthur Museum’s analytical laboratory revealed that pewter tableware both imported and reconstituted often had higher proportions of lead to tin than was allowed in English pewter.

“British pewterers found ways around the standards set by guilds and varied the alloy composition, even in the finest grade,” said Ann K. Wagner, Winterthur’s assistant curator of decorative arts. “They are known to have exported poorer grade pewter to their colonial markets. American pewter of the 18th to early 19th Centuries has much more variance in the alloy, with evidence of more lead and less tin—thus poorer quality—particularly near the end of the 1700s.”

The lack of tin mines in the colonies exacerbated the situation. The only source for tin in 18th-Century America was scrap English pewter, melted down and adulterated with lead. “This is why, generally, most American cast pewter will contain more lead than comparable English pewter,” according to the PCCA.

In Europe, however, the proportion of lead in pewter had been dramatically declining since the 1500s in favor of the harder and more durable alloy produced by 85 to 99 percent tin and up to 15 percent copper as the hardener, with the addition of lead only for lower grades of pewter.

Going into the colonial period, English pewterers created three grades: *fine*, for tableware, with 96

to 99 percent tin and the rest copper; *trifle*, tableware and drinking vessels, with 92 percent tin, up to 4 percent lead, and the rest copper (also producing a duller finish); and *ley*, for non-food use, with up to 15 percent lead.

ON AMERICAN TABLES

Pewter tableware became a symbol of gentility in early American homes. It demonstrated that the owner could afford better than wooden tableware at a time when a single pewter plate might cost what a skilled craftsman earned in a day. Like many imports, pewter reflected the tastes of the mother country.

“Early American pewter tablewares, especially those dating before 1750, tend to have a greater sense of their English origins than those dating after 1750,” said John Davis, senior metals curator at Colonial Williamsburg, a noted authority on pewter and author of *Pewter at Colonial Williamsburg*.

“The fundamental component is the plate and the companion dishes of larger size,” he said. “Primarily for reasons of economy, Americans favored plates with a single-bead edge and of modest



Pewter plates with single-bead edges were popular in America for 200 years, well into the 19th Century, and helped shape the distinctive character of American pewter. English pewter plates made for the American market are usually of this pattern but in a smaller size. This plate, from a set of 6 made by George Lightner in Baltimore c. 1806, is unusually generous in diameter at nearly 9 inches and midway in depth between a dinner and soup plate. Sets of early plates made in the South are extremely rare.

diameter. If you've ever lifted a stack of a dozen dinner plates, there's quite a difference between a stack of American single-beads and a corresponding one of English plain or fancy rims."

Plates with a single-bead—a narrow decorative molding formed by a beading tool, similar to a pie crimper—remained the plate style of choice in America into the 19th Century.

"Pervasive choices of this type helped shape the distinctive character of American pewter," Davis said. "Because the majority of a plate's value was in its metal, Americans preferred this pattern, often rendered in a reduced size in order to save on metal and expense."

Independence from England in the 1780s created a surge in original American pewter tableware that lasted through the Georgian period and into the Industrial Revolution. American designs, which tend to be less ornate than their European counterparts, appeared from the late 1700s through the mid-1800s, many by recognized masters such as William Will, Robert Bonyngne, Samuel Danforth, Thomas Boardman, Peter Young, and Parks Boyd.

Pewterers had long identified their creations by stamping them with a design called a touchmark. They used English designs, such as a lion, before the Revolution, later substituting the American eagle.

Other factors muddy the waters in identifying American pewter: some creators did not mark their pieces; some customers stamped their own mark onto their tableware; many marks became illegible through wear; and some were intentionally misleading, as in the case of a few American pewterers who allegedly stamped "London" on their pieces in an attempt to hide the higher proportion of lead and get better prices.

HAIL BRITANNIA

Much of the lead-proportion issue melted away in the late 18th Century when a new pewter alloy was introduced under the name



COURTESY OF THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION

Economy aside, social status also influenced the style of one's pewter tableware. Curator John Davis noted: "George Washington in 1759 purchased from Richard Cleeve of London a pewter dinner service consisting of '2 dozen assorted Superfine hard mettles dishes and 6 dozen of the very best Plates.' They weighed 183 pounds at a cost of 13 pence a pound. Washington, in gentry manner, had each of the plates and dishes engraved with his crest at threepence each." This is one of the surviving plates, now in the Mount Vernon collection.

britannia, based on tin, copper, and antimony but no lead. French pewterer James Taudin introduced antimony to harden his pewter and increase its shine in about 1650.

English pewterers followed about eighty years later, and britannia's popularity soared in the late 1700s when Sheffield manufacturers rolled it into sheets. The predominant proportions for britannia are 5 to 7 percent antimony and about 3 percent copper added to tin.

American pewterers discovered the formula for lead-free britannia around 1800. The new alloy sparked a creative breakthrough in an American pewterer, William Porter of Taunton, Massachusetts, who in 1834 patented a method of spinning sheets of britannia on a fast-turning lathe, vastly expanding the variety of items available in pewter.

Spinning is a metal-forming technique in which a flat sheet of pewter is formed into hollow vessels

by mounting the sheet on a chuck, or form, and forcing it into the chuck's shape while rotating it on the lathe.

Spinning added a new dimension to pewter manufacturing, which previously had been done by casting the pieces in molds. Even after the invention of britannia and spinning, casting continued for many pewter articles such as knobs, handles, and feet of articles whose bodies were made from sheets of pewter.

But within three decades, tastes in American tableware changed dramatically. The introduction of electroplating in the 1850s enabled metalworkers to apply a thin coat of silver over britannia or a similarly hard metal to create silver plating, which most people preferred to the pewter finish. About the same time, porcelain and china tableware reached their tipping point to become ubiquitous. Pewter all but disappeared from use.

REVIVING A TRADITION

During the Arts & Crafts movement in the early 1900s, artisans who searched for authenticity and rejected highly industrialized lifestyles revived an appreciation for pewter's unpretentious charm.

Ironically, that revival plus modern manufacturing technologies resulted in pewter being mass-produced around the world. The largest factory today is Royal Selangor, founded in 1885 in Malaysia by British colonials and now employing 600 workers producing more than 1,000 different items.

Today's traditional pewterers rely on a blend of historical methods—casting, spinning, and stamping—to create their tableware, but with a different emphasis. “Although some late-18th-Century makers used stamped or hand-formed sheet metal to make their products, spinning was of limited use by only a few of the 19th-Century firms,” according to antiques dealer Wayne Hilt, editor of the PCCA's authoritative volume, *Collecting Antique Pewter: What to Look For*

and *What to Avoid*. “Today people use spinning to form many of the major parts of their pieces.”

We feature four businesses here: ASL Pewter, Gibson Pewter, Pewter by Graver, and Three Feathers Pewter, all of whom make pewter suitable for homes decorated in 18th- and 19th-Century style. All four create lead-free pewter safe for eating and drinking.

“Around 1850, when they dropped lead from the alloy, the antimony content was raised to create a harder metal that could also be polished as bright as silver or silverplate,” Jonathan Gibson said. “Some English pewterers though were experimenting with lead-free alloys as early as the first half of the 18th Century.”

The natural surface of modern pewter is bluish white and can have either a bright finish or a satin sheen. “There is no difference in the pewter's composition, only in how the individual piece is finished,” explained master pewterer Richard Graver. “Bright or shiny pewter is polished or buffed with special



Touchmark of pewterer Samuel Hamlin on the quart basin shown below.

jewelers' rouges to produce the mirror-like surface. The satin finish is a softer, mellower patina often associated with antique pewter. The choice of finish is truly a matter of personal taste.”

ASL PEWTER

Thomas and Patricia Hooper are husband and wife who—in tapping a seemingly endless flow of creativity, energy, and old-fashioned hustle—produce the largest variety of traditional, handcrafted pewter available today.

“We both had grandfathers who worked in metal—silver, copper, aluminum, and gold for jewelry and for table use—so our desire to work with metal is hereditary,” said Patricia from their studio in Louisiana, Missouri, along the banks of the Mississippi River.

Thomas has worked in handcrafts for thirty years, but the couple only began with pewter in 1993, designing incense burners and perfume bottles while someone else did the casting. (The company name dates from this period, an acronym for Astral Sea, Ltd.) Within two years they learned how to cast and were producing the items themselves.

In 1998, Thomas learned to spin pieces on a lathe and substantially increased the scope of their offerings. “And in 2000,” Patricia recalled, “we were able to obtain a quantity of antique molds for tableware, which steered us toward doing mostly early American reproduction work.”

They both cast and spin pewter.



At left, the quart basin is the work of Samuel Hamlin, a renowned American pewterer who worked in Rhode Island between 1761 and 1790. The 8-inch pewter plate was made in London by Townsend & Compton between 1780 and 1811, specifically for export to America, where plates tended to be smaller and less ornate than their English counterparts. Both are part of the collection of Thomas and Patricia Hooper of ASL Pewter. The Hoopers reproduced the original mold for the basin, so their basins are cast like Hamlin's original. They create the reproduction plates by spinning them on a lathe, whereas the original was cast.



This 8-inch plate is Jonathan Gibson's adaptation of a typical 18th-Century single-bead plate. Beading refers to the plate's single, thicker outer edge. Although plates in the 1700s were cast, he spins his on a lathe to give them greater strength while maintaining the look of the bead edge. The goblet, by ASL Pewter, is a port cup, typical of the smaller size from which colonists would have drunk fortified wine.

"Yes, and we solder, hammer, form, fabricate, and engrave," Patricia added. "Pretty much anything you can do to the metal, we do. Having husband and wife working together as equal partners in the creative process makes us different from most traditional handcrafters. Our ability to work with the public to create custom pieces also sets us apart. Tom's skill in metal spinning—his being able to work with the larger

pieces of metal some pewterers find intimidating—makes him different from other spinners."

The quality of their work plus a knack for marketing has earned the Hoopers extensive exposure. Their pieces are in thirty museums, including the permanent collections of the American Folk Art Museum in New York, George Washington's Mount Vernon, Gunston Hall in Alexandria, Virginia, and the Smithsonian Institution. Their pieces have appeared in television programs, and they recently supplied more than 500 period pewter pieces for the upcoming HBO miniseries on the life of John Adams.

The Hoopers sell to galleries, stores, decorators, and the general public. They do about fifteen shows and two large wholesale shows annually plus maintain their gallery in Missouri. Their web site is primarily informational. They offer several items for under \$20, while

pewter plates cost from \$20 to \$149, serving dishes from \$59 to \$399, and candlesticks from \$18 to \$189.

GIBSON PEWTER

It's safe to say that no one alive today has spent more of his or her lifetime devoted to traditional American pewter than Jonathan Gibson.

He may be the only second-generation pewterer practicing in America, and he still toils away in the 200-year-old barn where his late father, Raymond Gibson, taught him the craft, beginning in the 1960s when Jonathan was a child. The elder Gibson was a Congregational minister in Rhode Island who made pewter as a hobby during the family's summer vacations in picturesque Hillsborough, New Hampshire, eventually turning it into a summertime business as his skills improved.

"My dad established the business in 1966 when I was six, and my first responsibility back then was sweeping up bat dung in the barn," Gibson said, laughing. "But as time progressed, I quickly got more responsibilities related to the craft." After college and a couple of years in commercial real estate, Gibson made a business proposal to his father, who had retired from the ministry, and they formed a partnership.

Raymond Gibson taught his son well. Today Gibson Pewter is regarded as one of the premier traditional pewter businesses in America. As his father before him, Gibson specializes in 18th- and 19th-Century designs in tableware and drinking vessels, lamps and candleholders, vases and ornaments, in all more than 100 different items.

"I take a lot of time to really create a beautiful surface," Gibson said. "My father used to use the term 'factory finish'—you know, the wham-bam, knock-it-out type of stuff where they put a matte finish on it with a bristle brush and then they're done. Over the years we've always been very careful in the hand sanding, the burnishing, and the polishing. It's all very labor intensive, but worth it when you see the difference."



Gibson cast this Queen Anne spoon from an antique bronze mold that is nearly 300 years old. The detail of his porringer handle shows one of his many patterns.

He also believes his designs uphold the family tradition: "Even though the pieces are adaptations or reproductions of 18th- and early-19th-Century items, my designs are distinctive."

He cites his porringers, claiming to make more different styles of handles than any other pewterer working today. The long-standing emphasis on design is a Gibson trademark and has placed two pieces—a fruit bowl and a unique wood-grain beaker—in the Museum of Fine Art Boston's extensive pewter collection as the lone examples of 20th-Century American work.

You can buy Gibson pewter at his studio and at a number of outlets sponsored by the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen. He sells about 50 percent of his work from his web site. Plates run from about \$30 to \$60 and porringers from \$50 to \$85.

GRAVER PEWTER

Of all the traditional American pewterers working in the craft today, Richard Graver likely is the leading pewter scholar.

A teacher, he has studied pewter for the better part of forty years—including a stint as president of the influential Pewter Collectors' Club of America—all the while creating an extensive line of museum-quality pewter. "I've researched and read everything I could get my hands on pertaining to the manufacturing of pewter," he said.

His interest in pewter stems from his student days at Millersville (Pennsylvania) State College, where he obtained his master's degree in technology education. His instructor in advanced metalworking was Henry Kauffman, a widely published authority on early American metalwork and author of *The American Pewterer, His Technique and His Products*, who encouraged Graver to explore pewter.

"My interest grew as I looked into the history of pewter making and began working with it," he recalled.

"I began manufacturing and selling my pewter pieces in the early

1970s while I was teaching industrial arts in the public school system," he said. "My intent was to develop a business that I could retire into when my teaching career was over—and after thirty-two years of teaching, I did so." Graver has been creating early American pewter reproductions full time since 1997, working from his home in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Along the way he joined the PCCA. "I've been a member for seventeen years and served as president for two years so I could have hands-on experience and study the fabrication and construction of the early pewter pieces. This led to collecting my own study pieces, and today I have an extensive collection of antique pewter."

Graver is certified as a Master Pewterer by the PCCA. His specialty is 18th- and early-19th-Century reproductions including plates, porringers, basins, bowls, trays, teapots, candlesticks, mugs, spoons, and communion sets.



At left is Gibson's copy of one of the initialed crown-handle porringers scholars believe were made in Boston in the late 1700s. All of the handles on Gibson's porringers are replicas of 18th- and early-19th-Century porringers he has owned. Gibson creates his without the support bracket beneath the handle so they cannot be mistaken for the antiques. Richard Graver copied his crown-handled porringer, right, from a c. 1800 American example in his personal collection. Period porringers had a single handle, but Graver makes both single- and double-handled versions. The dome lid is his design.



Richard Graver reproduces all the accoutrements of a finely set tea table. His teapot is a reproduction of a c. 1760 Queen Anne pot made by Henry Joseph, an English pewterer. The original teapot has a ring base, and Graver makes two versions, one with the ring base and another with ball-and-claw feet. The creamer replicates the style of creamers created in Philadelphia about 1780. The originals bear no hallmarks but are attributed to either Cornelius Bradford or John Brunstron, both American pewterers who were working in Philadelphia in the late 1700s. Graver's original designs for this sugar bowl and shell spoon are patterned after 18th-Century originals. Graver owns 200 antique spoon molds dating from 1650 to 1860, which he uses to create some of the spoons in his line.

THE SEARCH FOR ANTIQUE MOLDS

If there's anything resembling a holy grail among today's traditional pewterers, it's antique pewter molds. They troll estate sales, auctions, antiques shops—as New Hampshire pewterer Jonathan Gibson says, “I’ll go to the ends of the earth”—to find them.

Today's skilled pewterers who create reproduction 18th- and early-19th-Century pewter pieces often use the heavy bronze antique molds to authentically re-create early styles.

“It's well to remember that virtually all pewter prior to 1800 was cast in molds,” said John Davis, senior curator at Colonial Williamsburg.

Pewter makers from England and Germany brought many of the earliest molds, but colonial makers eventually began creating their own molds in distinctive American styles.

“Regional and individual preferences became embedded in molds and thus in their products,” Davis said, “and it is these regional and individual choices which give American pewter in broad and local terms its distinctive flavor.”

Pewter molds are especially rare because,



being made mostly of bronze and some of brass, many were melted down during the Civil War and recast for armaments.

“There are very few of them out there, but every time I run across one, I scoop it up,” Gibson said.

Patricia Hooper at ASL Pewter said, “We have more than 200 antique molds we use regularly. We've purchased them through the years from estate sales,

auctions, antiques dealers—anywhere we can find them. Our oldest is a spoon mold from about 1650, and the majority date from 1780 to 1840.”

Richard Graver also casts many of his pewter creations from antique molds found at auctions and antiques shops. “Over the years, I've collected the tools of the trade,” he said. “At this point, I have more than 200 original bronze molds dating from the 1600s up to the 1860s, and I do use them.”

Striking a more sentimental note, David Three Feathers Jones said he was fortunate to acquire a number of molds from the estate of his late mentor, Carl Steen. “But we don't use them,” Jones said. “They're rare and they're special.”

Photographs courtesy of ASL Pewter



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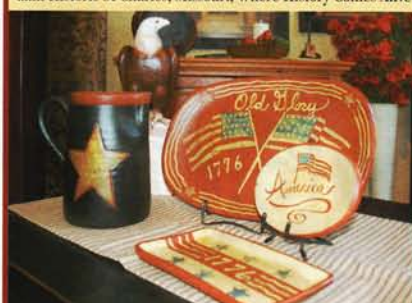
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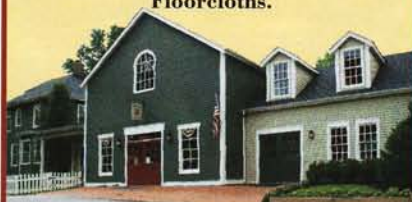


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Three Feathers Pewter originally created this 10-inch charger to protect an antique set of Spode china plates. David Three Feathers Jones and Willa Hollingsworth call it the Berna charger because the Spode plates were owned by the Berna family of Chicago. Mrs. Berna gave the couple permission to continue making the chargers after her set was completed. The 6-inch, self-footed bowl, patterned after a c. 1650 example, is the oldest piece they reproduce at Three Feathers Pewter. The pattern for the tulip vase is common to the late 18th Century and, according to Jones, is also used for pewter mugs and tankards.

He also restores pewter pieces, conducts workshops, and demonstrates pewtering at living-history sites and museums. He has produced pieces for the Chester County (Pennsylvania) Historical Society and several museum shops, created tableware for living-history sites, made numerous communion sets for churches, and even trophies for the U. S. Open of Sporting Clays.

You can buy Graver's pewter at the annual Designer Craftsmen Show at the Valley Forge Convention Center near Philadelphia, from his West Chester home by appointment, and view a number of his creations on his web site. Examples of prices are a wavy-edged basin for \$125, crown-handled porringer for \$85, Philadelphia creamer for \$135, and a Queen Anne teapot for \$450.

THREE FEATHERS PEWTER

David Three Feathers Jones came to traditional pewtering in a roundabout way—by casting miniature metal soldiers.

A Vietnam War veteran, he had earned his bachelor's degree

from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, taught in Florida and Pennsylvania and was director of the historic David Bradford House in Washington, Pennsylvania, when he got involved with war gaming—a hobby using miniature military pieces to simulate battles—at its height in the late 1970s.

"I was war gaming with 30mm cast soldiers and learned through books how to make my own molds," Jones explained. "The best casting alloy for what I needed was high-speed Babbitt (an alloy with high tin and low lead content) and, through research, I discovered it also was a 1700s formula for casting pewter."

Jones—the "Three Feathers" name results from his adoption by a Shawnee family—began casting pewter buttons and jewelry for reenactors and founded Three Feathers Pewter in 1984.

He apprenticed with master pewterer Carl Steen, who taught Jones how to spin pewter, and Jones later purchased pewtering tools, equipment, and patterns from the Steen estate. He went on to study

with another master pewterer, William Melchior of North Wales, Pennsylvania, and remains dedicated to continuing his studies.

Accompanying Jones in his venture is his wife, Willa Hollingsworth, herself a journeyman pewterer. She has owned Three Feathers Pewter since 2006.

"I met David at a show and afterwards decided to pay a visit at his shop," she recalled. "When he showed me around I fell in love with pewter and its workings. Some months later, after many communications, David took me on as his apprentice."

She completed her seven-year apprenticeship in 1997. "Just about anything that can be done with metal, we do with pewter," she said. "That includes spinning, casting, cutting, fusing, hammering, and finishing."

Today, Three Feathers Pewter specializes in pewter tableware—most of it patterned after traditional early American designs—buttons, and jewelry. "We still have a sideline of the little figures I started making so many years ago," Jones added.

Combined, the couple has forty-two years' experience working with pewter. They make their own casting molds and spinning forms. "We traditionally use a satin finish rather than the silver-like shine," Jones noted. "Pewter is not a silver look-alike."

Today Three Feathers pewter can be found at Colonial Williamsburg, and their pewter ornaments have adorned the 1999 White House Christmas tree and one in the Ohio Governor's Mansion.

Jones and Hollingsworth retail and wholesale their pewter. Their shop and gallery in Millersburg, Ohio, has been operating since 1995. Their web site shows a selection of items, such as tableware ranging from \$7 to \$200 per piece, a fancy quaiche (ceremonial cup) for \$55, and a Berna charger for \$75. *

Gregory LeFever is an Oregon writer and contributing editor of *Early American Life*.

Photographs of artisans' pewter by Jerry Tempfli, Design Photography, Inc., Cleveland, Ohio.

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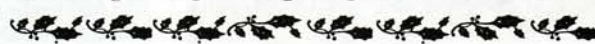
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WHAT ABOUT LEAD?

Lead is a hidden toxin that invisibly poisons our nervous, digestive, and renal systems, that makes adults sick and silently steals I. Q. points from our children. Lead is also a known contaminant in pewter alloys, so many people fear using pewter even though many modern pewter makers claim their products are lead free. Are they? Is pewter tableware safe for you and your children?

To find the answer, we sent a random sampling of old and new pewter items to a metals testing laboratory. Using the relatively new Niton XLt 797 X-ray analyzer—a machine about as small and portable as the familiar UPC scanner—a licensed professional metallurgist quickly (and non-destructively) analyzed each piece.

Although we were not surprised to find that antique pewter does indeed contain lead, the extent of the contamination astounded us. One small tankard proved to be one-third lead. Scientifically speaking, its lead content was 331,400 parts per million. The current federal standard sets an upper limit at 500 parts per million. Fortunately this piece proved the extreme exception. Another antique sample assayed at a more modest 98,600 ppm—but still far above today's federal standard. In short, we would advise that you be wary of using any antique pewter for anything other than display.

Modern pewter also varied, but few of the modern makers' pieces meant to come in contact with food proved above the federal standard. Some did, in fact, measure lead-free within the limits of the test equipment. Higher lead levels, straddling the federal limit, occurred primarily in the molded handles and bases of composite items, not areas that would come in contact with food.

The small amount of lead present in some reproduction pieces presents much less of a hazard than that of antiques for food

use. The molecular bond between lead and tin is quite strong, so the small amount of lead that may be present is not likely to be casually ingested. In other words, you can eat and drink from modern reproduction pewter tableware without worrying about lead poisoning.

Authorities agree that the britannia formula—what nearly all pewter uses today—does not pose a health risk related to lead poisoning. This even holds true for most antique pewter, according to Wayne Hilt, editor of the Pewter Collectors' Club of America's authoritative volume, *Collecting Antique Pewter: What to Look For and What to Avoid*.

"Most modern pewterers use britannia metal alloy rather than true pewter," Hilt said. "This alloy is quite close to what the English 18th-Century makers termed superfine hard metal. Most pewter used in the 18th Century contained relatively high amounts of tin, small amounts of copper, perhaps a little antimony and/or bismuth, and frequently a little lead."

"No, you are not going to get lead poisoning unless you eat the piece of pewter," Hilt added. "Alloyed metals are reluctant to give up any component."

Lead is a particular hazard to children because their fast-growing bodies quickly absorb it into their bones where it accumulates. Caution should be taken with their exposure to antique pieces, particularly with food. Enjoy their lovely patina. If you want to know its content for sure, get it tested.

We also tested two pewter-like items under the "Armetale" brand, one manufactured in Canada, and one from China. Neither proved to be pewter at all. Both were nearly pure cast aluminum.

SOURCES

ASL Pewter
Thomas and Patricia Hooper
123 South Third Street
Louisiana, MO 63353
573.754.3435
www.aslpewter.com

Gibson Pewter
Jonathan Gibson
18 East Washington Road
Hillsborough, NH 03244
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www.gibsonpewter.com

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