

Engraved Powder Horns

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

THESE UTILITARIAN CONTAINERS BECAME 18TH-CENTURY FASHION ACCESSORIES ON AMERICA'S BATTLEFIELDS AND FRONTIERS. A SURPRISING NUMBER OF THEM STILL CHANGE HANDS AMONG A GROWING NUMBER OF COLLECTORS.

Dozens of Continental Army troops during the brutal winter encampment of 1777 at Valley Forge lacked powder horns, and although camp butchers salvaged ten horns from the few cattle they could slaughter, no one had a plan for distributing them fairly.

Army regulations required soldiers to have personalized powder horns, yet the more serious concern was that, without powder horns, the soldiers could not load and fire their muskets, making the firearms no more useful than clubs.

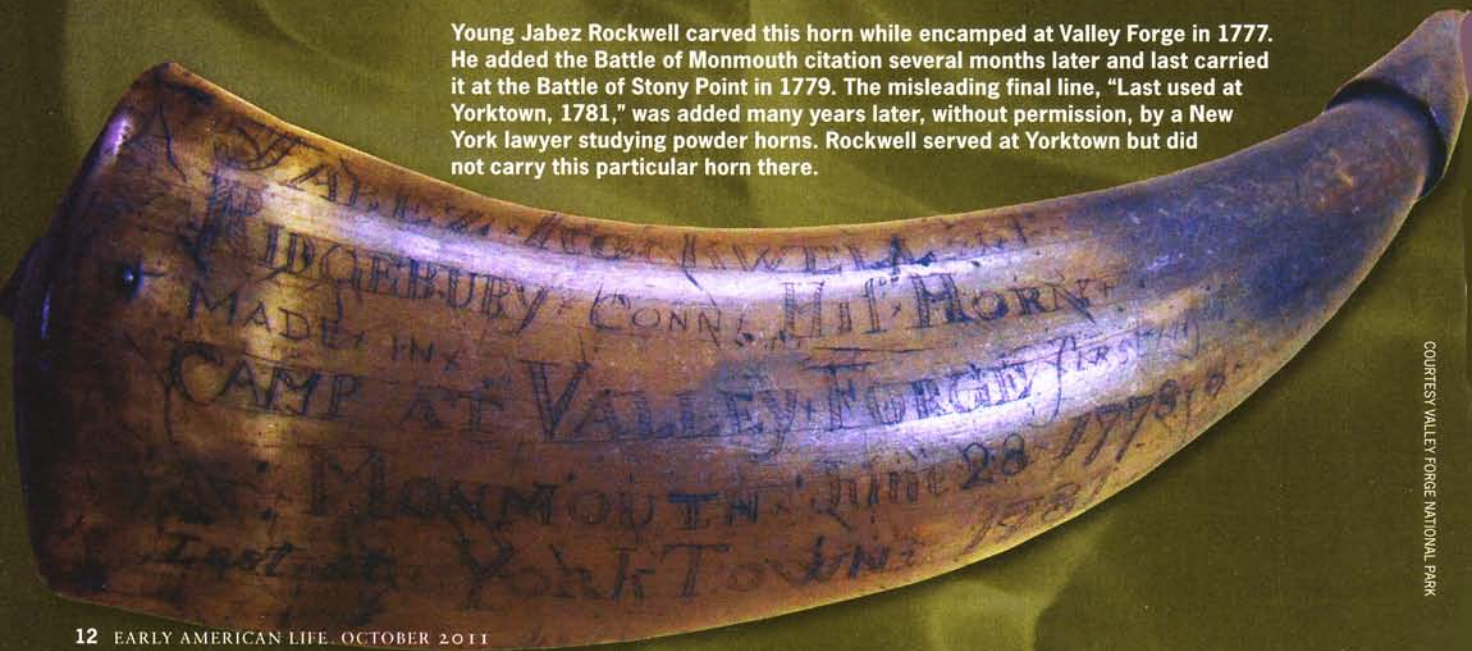
Word of the predicament finally reached General George Washington, who scratched a number on a blank piece of paper. He told the eligible soldiers that the number was between 1,500 and 2,000 and to write their own numbers on pieces of paper—the ten closest to his secret number would be awarded the cows' horns.

Washington penned the number "1776," and one of the winning ten with "1750" was sixteen-year-old Jabez Rockwell, who joined the army a year earlier and already had been wounded at the Battle of

Saratoga. "Young Rockwell lost no time in scraping, polishing, and preparing his horn to hold its allotment of powder and in inscribing his name upon the same," according to a family memoir written in 1901 by a grandson, Charles F. Rockwell of Honesdale, Pennsylvania.

The account of Jabez Rockwell's powder horn has survived these many years because it depicts three key aspects of this implement so vital in early America. The Valley Forge association clearly shows the military necessity of the powder horn.

Young Jabez Rockwell carved this horn while encamped at Valley Forge in 1777. He added the Battle of Monmouth citation several months later and last carried it at the Battle of Stony Point in 1779. The misleading final line, "Last used at Yorktown, 1781," was added many years later, without permission, by a New York lawyer studying powder horns. Rockwell served at Yorktown but did not carry this particular horn there.



COURTESY VALLEY FORGE NATIONAL PARK

The second aspect concerns the horn's engravings, which constitute a brief record of young Rockwell's military service. "Jabez Rockwell, of Ridgebury, Conn.," the young soldier carved in bold script. "His horn, made in camp at Valley Forge." A few months later he would add: "First used at Monmouth, June 28th, 1778."

Lastly, the Jabez Rockwell powder horn story illustrates the emotional value men placed on horns they had carried through dangerous wilderness and into the heat of battle. As Rockwell's grandson recalled, "Many times have I seen my grandfather take down this old horn, and as he told the story that connected it with Washington, fondle and exhibit it with pardonable pride, because of its, to him, almost sacred associations."

The heyday of American engraved powder horns spanned the French and Indian War, beginning in 1754, to the final battles of the Revolutionary War in 1783. Armies required soldiers and militiamen to carry powder horns with identifying markings to avoid confusion at the powder wagons.

"Sometimes only initials were used," wrote Jim Dressler in his *Folk Art of Early America: The Engraved Powder Horn* (1996). "If the owner was literate, or knew someone who could copy letters, dates, names, and places, those were engraved onto the horn. Eventually, they were decorated with animals, mythical creatures like mermaids or griffins, birds, snakes, various styles of flowers and vines, and all sorts of geometrics."

Although more than 200 years have passed since their peak of popularity, the durability of engraved powder horns is evident in the number of vintage horns still available for collectors. As with many other colonial-era collectibles, availability and quality are functions of how much a person is willing to pay.

"If the horn has a name and a date on it and it's from the Revolutionary War, they've been bringing about \$1,000," said historian and collector Tom Grinslade of Indianapolis. "If it has something special on it, it'll go up to \$2,000 or \$3,000. But the really good horns can easily bring \$30,000, \$40,000, or \$50,000."



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The name "Daniel Chaney" and date identify this horn from 1746. Other images include a church and stylized flowers with long leaves, which were a common graphic theme on powder horns of the early 18th Century. A list of militiamen who served with Chaney occupies another section of the horn.

FUNCTION AND FASHION

For two centuries European soldiers loaded their flintlock muskets with gunpowder from containers of wood, leather, bone, or metal. Colonial American troops were, first and foremost, farmers and frontiersmen—soldiering was a secondary role brought on by necessity—with a preference for the lightweight, waterproof, and nearly indestructible cow's horn.

Although powder horns in the early 1700s tended to be unadorned, by the time of the French and Indian War, the changing nature of war in America—longer military expeditions, more time spent in a growing number of forts, and a more strategic reliance on drawn-out sieges—gave soldiers considerably more time to embellish their horns.

"There was more opportunity to carve them as leisure time increased while soldiers were stationed at

forts," Grinslade wrote in his authoritative 2007 book, *Powder Horns: Documents of History*. "In fact, the greatest number of powder horns were carved in the French and Indian War during 1758 and 1759, and the second highest number were

"As a rule, each soldier decorated his own powder horn."

made during the Siege of Boston in the Revolutionary War."

Soon the humble, plain powder horn was transformed into a frontier fashion accessory to be proudly slung over the shoulder of soldier and huntsman alike.

"As a rule, each soldier decorated his own powder horn; but if one was not skilled in the art, he employed a



TOM GRINSLADE/COURTESY OF SCORLOCK PUBLISHING CO.

An amateur carver most certainly decorated this French and Indian War powder horn with an array of unusual folk art animals and phonetic misspellings of locations on its extensive map. The drawings show hounds chasing a rabbit, fox, deer, and wolf. Some of the decipherable spellings are “Snoschtedy” for Schenectady, “Seradok” for Saratoga, and “F Steiny” for Fort Stanwix. The heavy wooden base plug probably is not original to the horn but has seen service with it.

comrade to do it for him, perhaps in return for the favor of taking his friend’s tour of duty standing guard or doing some other service for him,” according to a Naval historian, J. L. Sticht, in an 1896 essay, *Historical Military Powder Horns*. “Only the crudest engraving could be done by means of a pocket knife, as the blunt blade was apt to slip and break the lines. The best work was done with the engraver’s tool.”

To give engraved horns a particularly pleasing appearance, engravers usually soaked them in yellow or orange dye to achieve an amber hue. After cutting the designs into the surface of the horns, they rubbed brown paint over them so the etched markings were more clearly defined. A final rubbing with oil and emery cloth provided a rich patina to the often elaborately illustrated horns.

Carving and engraving commemorative facts—a man’s name and presence at a notable battle or campaign, for example—had a two-fold purpose. “First, it was probably the most important event in the man’s life,” Dresslar noted, “and second, the engraved data was proof of his participation.”

(There are exceptions to this authenticity. For example, the last battle

in which Jabez Rockwell carried his Valley Forge powder horn was at Stony Point, New York, in 1779, yet the final line of script on the horn reads, “Last used at Yorktown, 1781.” After Rockwell’s grandson inherited the horn, “an author of prominence in New York” who was writing a history of powder horns borrowed it to be photographed. Knowing that Jabez Rockwell had been at Yorktown but heedless of the fact that the horn had not, the author himself had the Yorktown line added, the grandson sadly explained, “to make the powder horn more historical and interesting” before returning it.)

“A goodly portion of the men chose to carve their own horns, and were limited only by their talent and imagination.”

While professionally engraved powder horns could be objects of considerable beauty, amateur versions created by soldiers and hunters often reflected the quaint charm of folk art. “A goodly portion of the men chose to carve their own horns, and were limited only by their talent and imagination,” Dresslar wrote. “Many times the professionally engraved horn did not convey the personal qualities of those engraved by the individual

owner whose aura and personality can be felt even today when they are lovingly held and admired.”

MAPPING THE WILDERNESS

One adornment that contributed both beauty and functionality to powder horns originated during the French and Indian War when armies traversed the deep American wilderness, much of it previously uncharted.

“Fighting throughout this campaign took place in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York, the interior of these states being then a comparative wilderness, and the various routes being unknown except to fur traders,” Sticht explained. “This fact caused a new feature to appear on the horn of the soldier—a map of the route.”

At the time, few printed maps of areas such as the Hudson and Mohawk River Valleys existed. As Dresslar noted, “It was a unique way to keep track of one’s location in relation to forts, lakes, and rivers. This style of carved horn became so popular that, although still practical, the maps were fancily decorative and were produced in all the major cities in the colonies as well as Canada and Europe.”

Powder horns with engraved maps continue to appeal to a segment of today’s collectors and fetch some of the highest prices at auctions. For example, a French and Indian War horn in excellent condition, with an engraved map of forts from Philadelphia to Fort Pitt (present-day Pittsburgh), brought \$57,500 at Cowan’s Auctions in Cincinnati in 2009.

By the late 1700s, the new United States rapidly was becoming more industrial, with Philadelphia the center of manufacturing. Powder horns still were a necessity for the growing population of frontiersmen, hunters, and farmers, which made them eligible for new forms of mass production. Powder horns eventually appeared in general stores—sporting considerably less engraved decoration—as commodity items.

A POWDER HORN PRIMER

Don't trust the movie image of a battle-weary colonial soldier loading his flintlock musket by pouring gunpowder from his powder horn directly down the barrel.

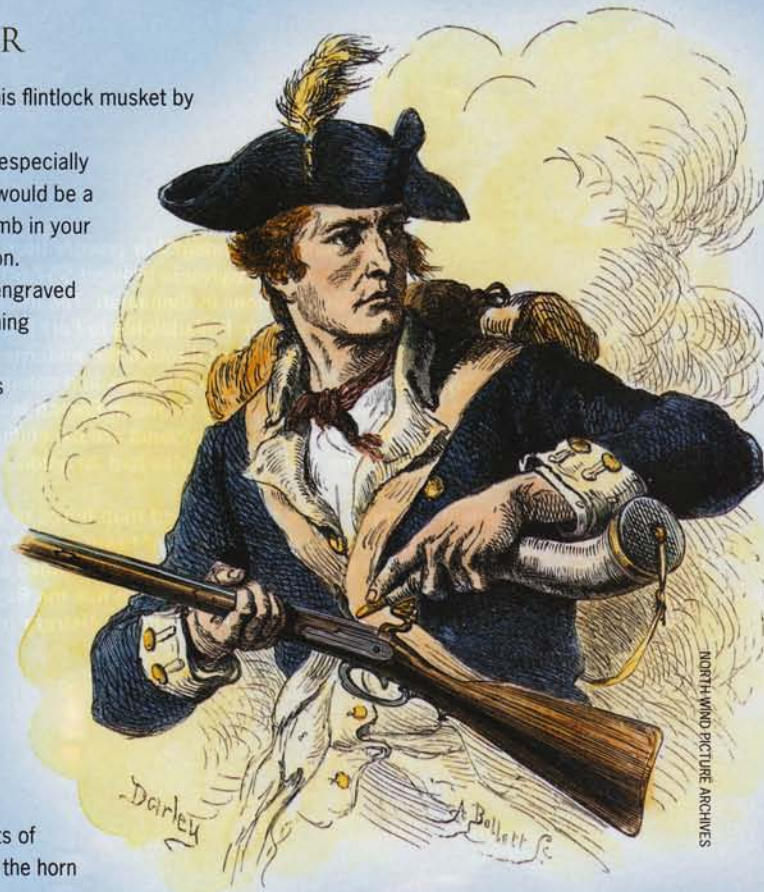
"It would be way too easy for there to be a spark left in the barrel—especially in any kind of warfare—and dumping powder directly down the barrel would be a problem because, with the horn filled with gunpowder, you've got a bomb in your hands," explained Mel Hankla of the Contemporary Longrifle Association.

"By the time of the French and Indian War, the vast majority of the engraved powder horns—the kind sought after by today's collectors—were priming horns for muskets," he said.

Firing a flintlock depended on gunpowder in two places. Powder was poured down the barrel, followed by the musket ball and a clump of wadding—all contained in a paper-wrapped cartridge—and all jammed tightly down the barrel with a ramrod. The other place was a small pile of gunpowder in the "flash pan" of the flintlock's firing mechanism. Pulling the trigger caused the firing mechanism's flint to strike steel and ignite the powder in the pan, sending sparks through a small hole into the breech and igniting the main charge, causing the rifle or pistol to fire.

Often on the eve of battle, Hankla explained, soldiers would hand off their powder horns to supply boys who would fill them at the encampment's powder wagon. Once filled, the horns were returned to the soldiers—which is why the horns had to be personalized—who used them to make the cartridges.

To fire the muzzle-loader during battle, the soldier emptied the contents of the cartridge down the barrel and tipped a small amount of powder from the horn onto the flash pan, thereby "priming" the gun for firing.



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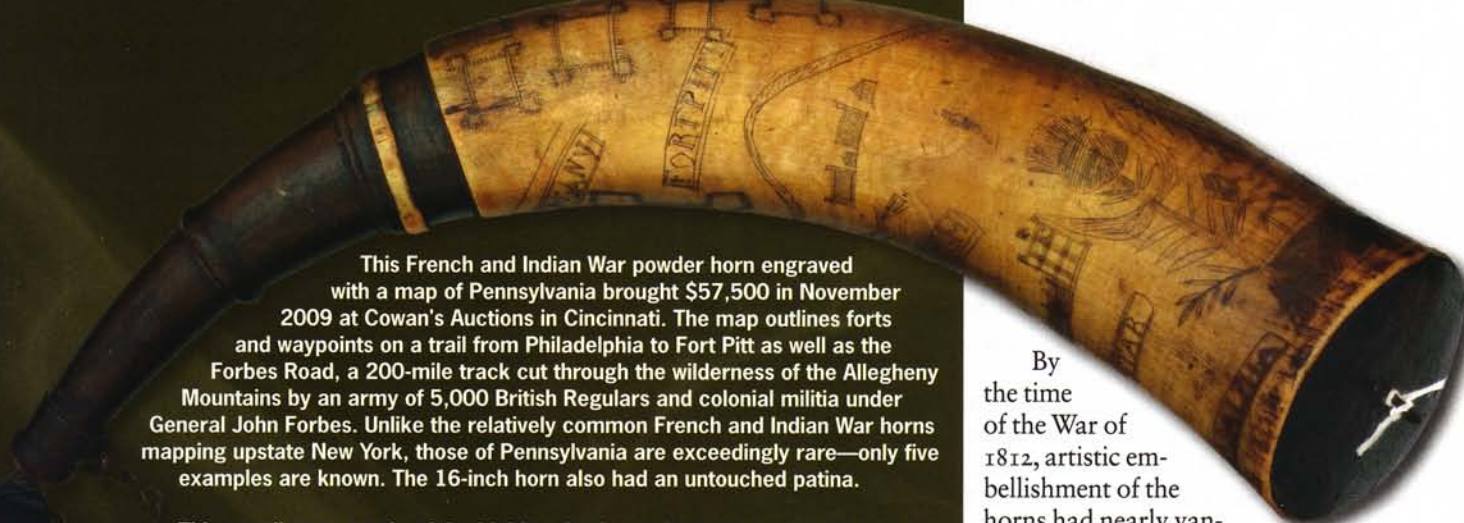
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This French and Indian War powder horn engraved with a map of Pennsylvania brought \$57,500 in November 2009 at Cowan's Auctions in Cincinnati. The map outlines forts and waypoints on a trail from Philadelphia to Fort Pitt as well as the Forbes Road, a 200-mile track cut through the wilderness of the Allegheny Mountains by an army of 5,000 British Regulars and colonial militia under General John Forbes. Unlike the relatively common French and Indian War horns mapping upstate New York, those of Pennsylvania are exceedingly rare—only five examples are known. The 16-inch horn also had an untouched patina.

This excellent example of the highly prized map horns of the French and Indian War displays a finely detailed map of towns and forts along the Hudson River from New York to Lake Champlain and those along the Mohawk River from Albany to Fort Niagara on Lake Ontario. It also has the Royal British coat of arms alongside "Rebбен Smith, 12 April, 1760." The brass charger on the spout was attached at a later date.

By the time of the War of 1812, artistic embellishment of the horns had nearly vanished while many of the lathe-turned spouts and butts became fancier than ever. The U. S. Army last used powder horns as a regular accessory in the Mexican War (1846-48), after which military adoption of metal powder flasks, cartridges, and percussion caps set the stage for Civil War armament.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

New and veteran collectors can still find engraved powder horns through dealers and auction houses, although both venues can be precarious. The biggest threats—especially to new collectors—are fake horns and horns being sold at artificially high prices.

"A beginning collector should work with a reputable dealer," urged author and collector Grinslade. "Unfortunately, there are fake horns and you need someone to help you determine what's good and what's bad."

"Be careful. That's the best advice I can give," warned Mel Hankla, head of American Historic Services of Jamestown, Kentucky, and also editor of *American Tradition*, the journal of the Contemporary Longrifle Association.

Both of these experts agreed that auctions provide a good venue for collectors who are knowledgeable about horns and their values. "Auctions aren't bad, but a lot are *caveat emptor*, meaning they won't take horns back," Grinslade noted. "So, yes, auctions can be good, but you need some knowledge before you bid."

Auctions also are subject to bidding wars, which appeared to be the case with the \$57,500 map horn, when two battling bidders drove the



TOM GRINSLADE/COURTESY OF SCURLOCK PUBLISHING CO.

final price well beyond the estimates for the piece. Echoing Grinslade's observation, Hankla said online auctions too can be problematic. "Places like eBay have been covered with a lot of fake horns lately. People who've invested money in these horns are now doing everything in their power to put them back onto the market. It's like 'buyer beware'."

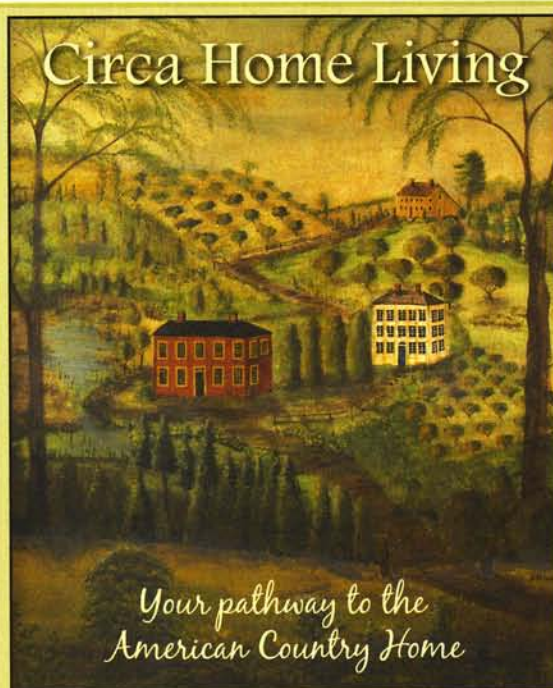
Some recent prices at various auction houses for engraved horns include \$3,824 for a 1755 horn with scenes of New York, Albany, and Schenectady; \$5,387 for a horn engraved with "William Richardson 1779" and other artwork; and \$4,183 for an early 1800s naval horn with images of two warships.

Higher priced examples are a horn with "James Garthwait, His Horn Made at Fort Edward, September the 15, 1759" that went at auction for \$25,875, and a very early horn (1724), heavily decorated and likely from southern Maine, that sold for \$24,150.

Personalized engraving on powder horns made them popular family heirlooms, and the passage of these heirlooms onto the open market provided an excellent source of horns for collectors for many years. "The horns today that come out of families are few and far between," Grinslade commented. "Every once in a while one does appear, but today I'd say one out of a hundred is from a family because, after 200 or 300 years, almost all of them have already hit the market."

Good sources of guidance for new collectors are organizations such as the Honourable Company of Horners—a guild of several hundred members, founded in the 1990s to educate people about powder horns and their history—as well as historic gun groups such as the Kentucky Rifle Association, Contemporary Longrifle Association, and National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association. ★

Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.



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EAL-10/11

The detail on this portrait of a Native American points to the horn having been engraved in America.



Although his name is unknown, the engraver of this 1761 horn displayed a skill equal to known horn engravers of the period. Evidence points to him being a professional engraver of metal because of his use of varying line widths and depths and sophisticated shading techniques. A member of the Scottish 1st Highland Battalion likely carried the horn, but it appears to have been engraved in America. The only name appearing on the horn is "George S."

REPRODUCTION HORNS CAN SPELL TROUBLE

With several associations dedicated to long-rifles and other early American firearms—plus the increasing popularity of colonial re-enactments—sales of new powder horns might be at their highest level since the 18th Century.

Some of today's horns easily match the most beautifully engraved powder horns colonial soldiers and frontiersmen carried—faithful reproductions that can spell trouble for collectors of early horns.

"People have been collecting powder horns for 150 years or more, and any time people are collecting something, there are other people out there ready to make the fast buck, which means people probably have been faking these things for a long time," said Art DeCamp of Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. "And it's getting harder and harder to tell because the natural aging on a horn that was faked around, say, 1920—and is now a ninety-year-old horn—is going to resemble the aging of a much older horn."

DeCamp reproduces muzzle-loading rifles and engraved powder horns, specializing in replicating screw-tip horns from early Pennsylvania and restoring the originals. He is a master horner with the Honourable Company of Horners, a guild of several hundred craftsmen, collectors, and history enthusiasts dedicated to the American powder horn.

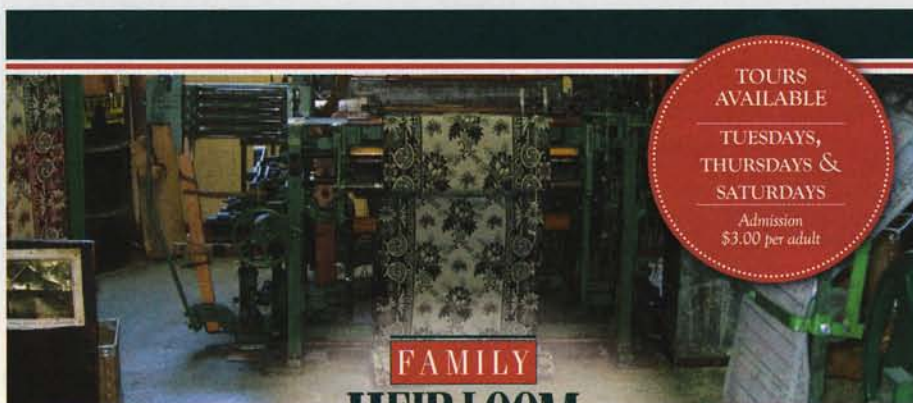
Historically faked powder horns come mostly in two forms. One is a new horn with new decoration but expertly aged to look early. The other, more challenging fakery, uses genuine old but plain horns that are newly engraved to substantially increase their value. When ascertaining authenticity of an engraved powder horn, DeCamp advised collectors to "think through the sequence of things you see on that horn" in terms of aging.

Surface color is a primary indicator. "There are ways a horn ages just through ultra-violet light and drying out," DeCamp said. "The surface will pick up a certain look and color over time, and those are things an experienced collector will look for."

"You also need to be knowledgeable of the engraving techniques for the period of time you're looking at," he continued. "And then you look at scratches and dents and wear on the horn to determine if they were there before the engraving or whether they were there after the horn was engraved. If the scratches and dents came after the engraving, it would indicate a true, original horn."

Because members of the Honourable Company of Horners are among the finest powder horn creators in the country today, they sign and date their horns as required by the guild's rules.

"The current artists making horns today, by and large, aren't trying to fake it and make somebody think they're old ones," DeCamp said. "We feel it's important for today's work so that it doesn't mislead anyone 100 years from now when the horns have aged."



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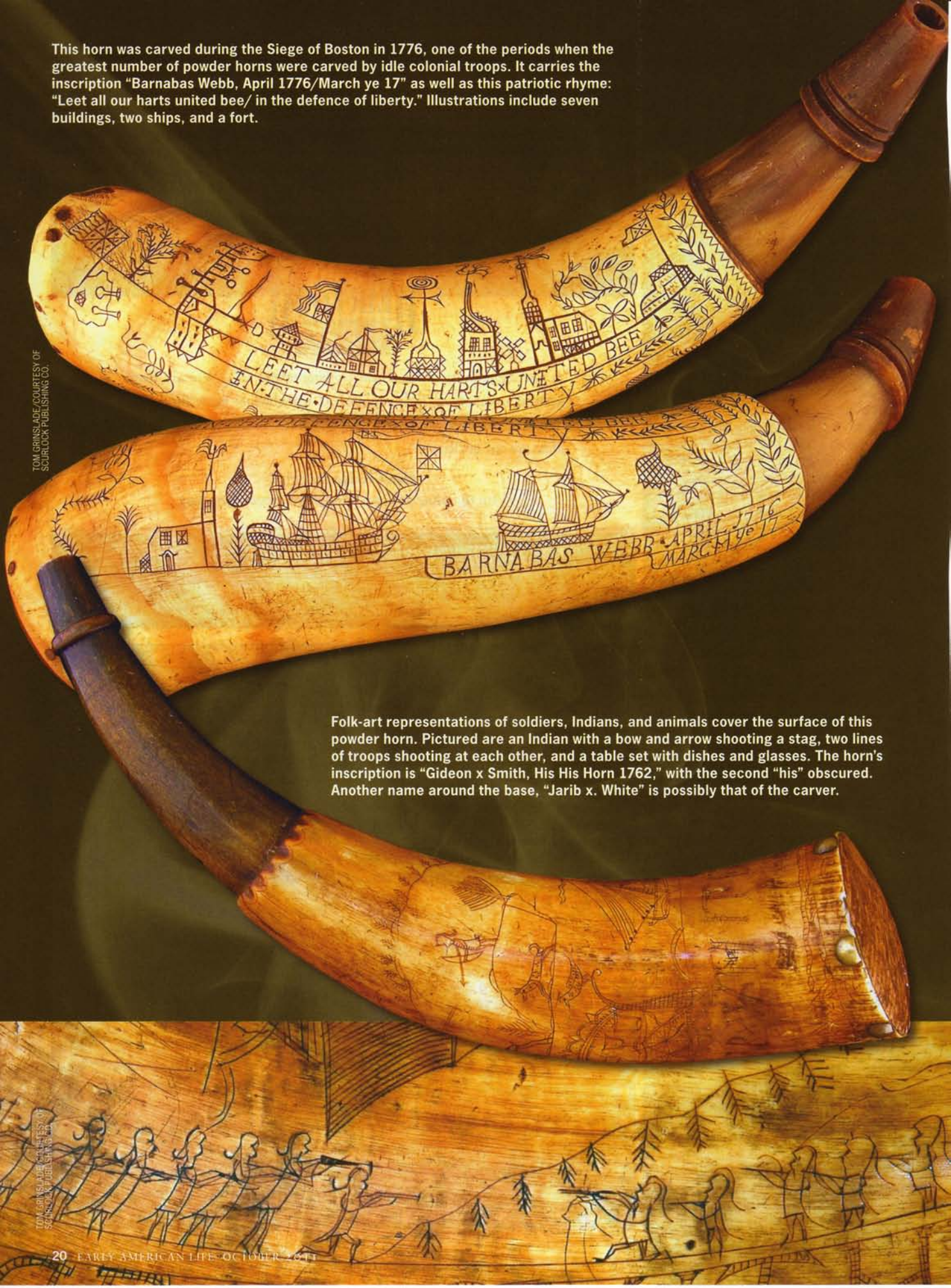
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EAL

This horn was carved during the Siege of Boston in 1776, one of the periods when the greatest number of powder horns were carved by idle colonial troops. It carries the inscription "Barnabas Webb, April 1776/March ye 17" as well as this patriotic rhyme: "Leet all our harts united bee/ in the defence of liberty." Illustrations include seven buildings, two ships, and a fort.

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Folk-art representations of soldiers, Indians, and animals cover the surface of this powder horn. Pictured are an Indian with a bow and arrow shooting a stag, two lines of troops shooting at each other, and a table set with dishes and glasses. The horn's inscription is "Gideon x Smith, His His Horn 1762," with the second "his" obscured. Another name around the base, "Jarib x. White" is possibly that of the carver.

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A Massachusetts militiaman named Spicer Millerd likely carried this powder horn beginning in late 1776. Engravings feature a soldier carrying a halberd and sword, an owl, horse, and stag, all done in a detailed folk art manner.



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