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Early Maine Silver

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EARLY MAINE SILVER

Some seeds of the early silversmith's craft were sown in Maine before the district achieved statehood. Several sprouted but none ever reached maturity. As a result, the relatively few examples of Maine's pre-1820 hand-wrought silver are of more than usual interest.

The Maine frontier was not conducive to the business of the silversmith, which was dependent upon accumulated wealth and a well-developed social structure. It is apparent from the surviving examples of both church and domestic silver that what little silver was desired came primarily from Boston or abroad.

Among the first silversmiths to reside in the Portland area whose work is known today was John Andrew (1747-1791) who came from Salem, Massachusetts, to New Marblehead, now South Windham, about 1782. The canns, porringers, and church flagon which he produced while in Salem indicate that he was a very capable craftsman. However, John Andrew apparently had delusions of grandeur and, according to the Reverend William Bentley, squandered an inherited fortune before retiring to Maine.¹ It is doubtful that he continued his work as a silversmith in South Windham. No examples bearing his mark can be dated to this period of his life.

Like many of the settlers of Maine, the silversmiths who came here were often born and trained to their craft in Essex County, Massachusetts. Paul Little (1740-1818) and his partner John Butler (1734-1827) were natives of Newbury who settled in Portland in 1761. In 1765 their partnership was dissolved. Paul Little seems to have depended more on his grocery business than on his anvil, even prior to the destruction of his buildings during the British bombardment of Portland in 1775. He too moved to Windham about 1776.

His partner, John Butler, is somewhat more memorable. He was described by Portland historian William Willis as "originally a jeweller, but afterwards engaged in trade ... a handsome, gay, and accomplished man, but his misfortunes by

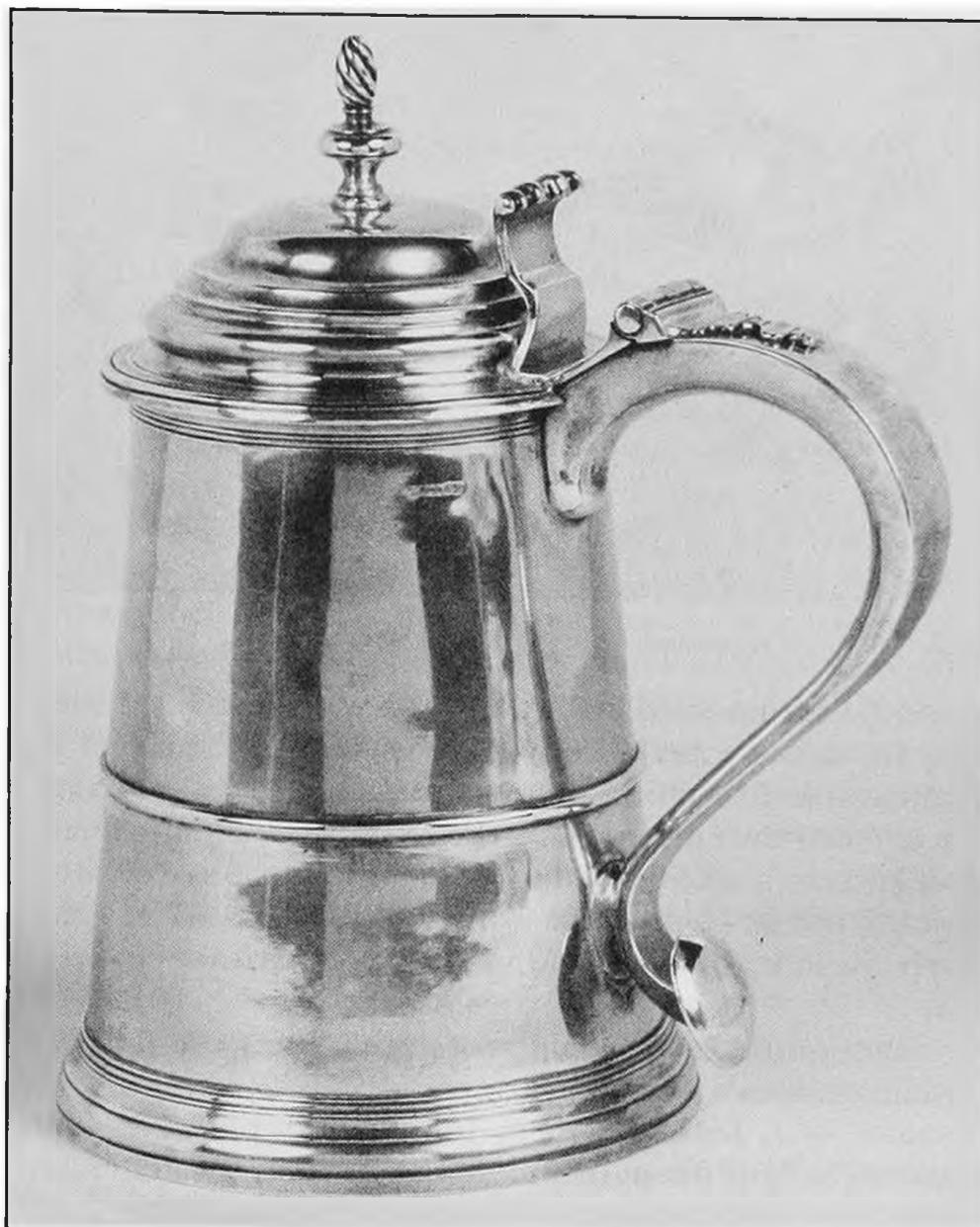


Fig. 1. Butler Tankard. Courtesy Maine Historical Society.

losses of property and children, unthroned reason from her seat," thus explaining his nickname, "Crazy Butler."²

It was John Butler who was chosen by the Falmouth schoolmaster Stephen Longfellow to make a tankard from his father's legacy. [Fig. 1] Longfellow, like Butler, had come from Newbury. His father, Stephen, died in 1764, and it was shortly thereafter that the tankard was made. Stylistically similar to Boston examples of the 1760s, the Longfellow tankard has a

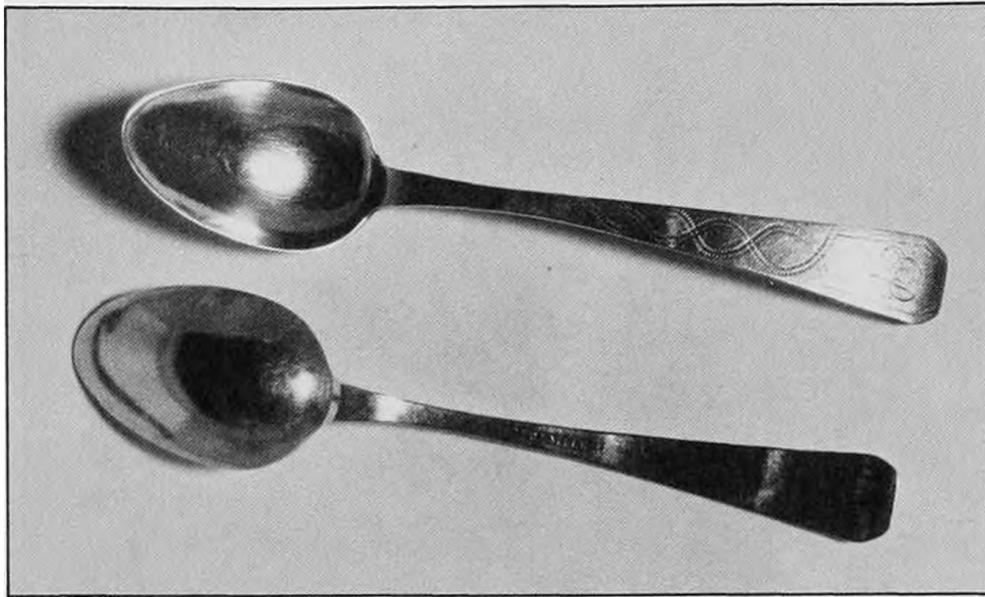


Fig. 2. Dalrymple teaspoons. Courtesy Maine State Museum.

domed lid surmounted by a cast corkscrew finial and a mid-band around its tapered body. To the right of the top of its handle is the silversmith's mark, *J. BUTLER*, in a rectangle, which makes the tankard the earliest example of Maine-made silver known today.³ To add to its interest, this piece of silver was inherited by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and was ultimately given by his heirs to the Maine Historical Society in 1980.

Among other early examples of silver bearing the mark of a Portland shop is a set of four teaspoons [Fig. 2] stamped with the name of *J. DALRYMPLE*. John Dalrymple came from Salem to Portland about 1810 and was primarily a watchmaker and jeweler; he advertised his shop at the Sign of the Time Piece, where he sold watches, chains, seals, jewelry, and hardware. In 1811 he unabashedly pointed out to the public that he employed one of the best goldsmiths in the United States, and it is likely that these little teaspoons were made by this anonymous employee.⁴ Fashioned with oval bowls and turned-back handles cut off on the corners like the end of a coffin, the spoons are engraved on top with a delicately stippled, interlaced pattern and the initials *E.P.* While in keeping with the neoclassical design of the Federal period, the spoons have a charming individuality.

If anything survives of a silversmith's work it is usually a spoon. Rarer are examples of hollow ware, such as the small cup and creamer [see cover] bearing the marks of Eleazer Wyer, Jr., and Charles Farley, who worked in partnership in Portland from 1814 to 1818. While Wyer was the son of a Boston silversmith, Farley was from Essex County and came to Portland after completing his apprenticeship with Robert Brookhouse in Salem. Like the Massachusetts silversmiths who used an additional mark in the form of an Indian, which is that state's seal, Wyer and Farley added to their name touch an eagle stamp derived from the United States seal as a pseudo-hallmark.⁵

Both the cup and the creamer have D-shaped handles, although the larger handle on the creamer is modified by a canted corner on the top, and both handles terminate in what can only be characterized as the most tentative of furls. The creamer is more stylish with its helmet shape, first popularized in the Adam period in England and in the last twenty years of the eighteenth century in this country. The rudimentary reeding of the body adds a further element of style. One has only to look at the illustration in the Wyer and Farley advertisement in the *Portland Gazette*, July 24, 1815, which shows "Elegant plated Tea Setts" from England, to see that fashions had progressed to more Grecian forms and more elaborate ornamentation than the local products exhibit. [Fig. 8, "Crafts in Transition," this issue, p. 308].

Nevertheless, there is a simplicity and forthrightness about the design of the Wyer and Farley pieces that undoubtedly appealed to the Maine clients who bought them.

In addition to these marked examples of early Portland silver and those illustrated in Churchill's study of "Crafts in Transition," (this issue), there are several examples of unmarked silver that may be safely attributed to a Portland shop of this period. These are little presentation medals [Fig. 3] awarded to students in Portland schools in 1818. The simplest in design were given by the Portland Academy for excellence in studies. Portland Academy was incorporated in 1794 and may well have purchased blank medals which could be engraved

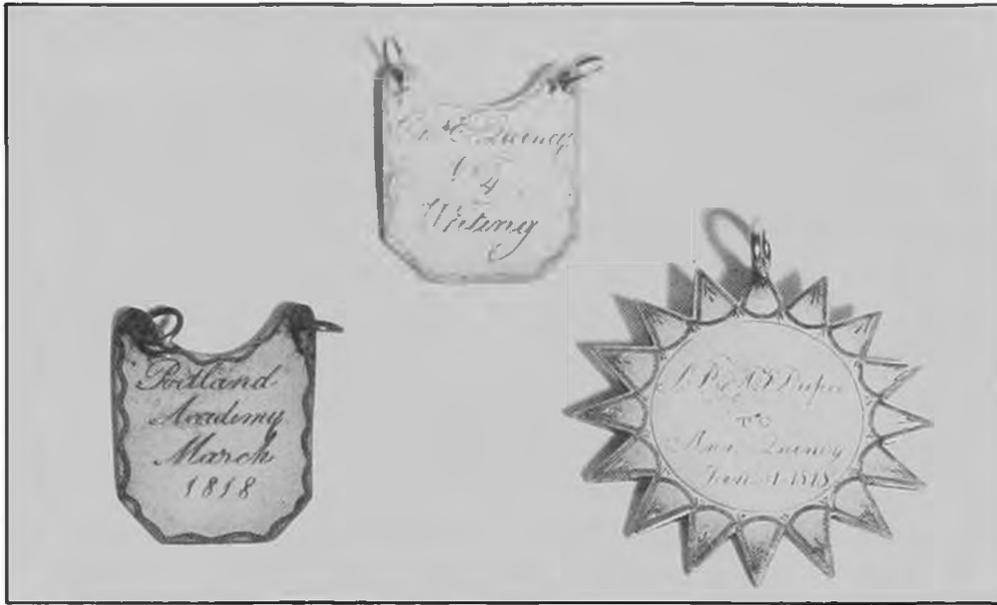


Fig. 3. Farley (?) medals. Courtesy Maine State Museum.

each year with the recipient's name, distinction, and date. The bib-shaped medal with two points of attachment has a kind of wriggle-work engraved wavy border such as appears on an armband believed to have been made about this time by Zebulon Smith of Bangor for a Penobscot Indian.⁶

The startling sunburst medal is similarly engraved with wriggle-work swags and wavy borders but is enhanced on every point with additional flourishes. This was awarded for achievement in geography by the Misses Dupee, who provided private schooling in Portland in 1818.⁷ In the absence of documentation, Charles Farley is the most likely of the few silversmiths working in the city at the time to have made these medals. It was he who was later selected by the Maine Charitable Mechanic Association to make the medals to be awarded at their first exhibition in 1826. [Fig. 3, "Crafts in Transition," p. 303] Farley made a circular medal with a ribbon cutout at the top to provide the loop whereby it could be worn.⁸ The medals were then engraved by David G. Johnson, who worked in Portland from 1824 to 1830 or 1831.⁹

Just as silversmiths were beginning to get a foothold in Maine, industrialization of their craft in England and America was beginning to make these remaining examples of the handi-craft relics of the past.

FOOTNOTES

¹*The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.*, vol. 1 (Salem: Essex Institute, 1914), p. 299. For examples of his work, see Kathryn C. Buhler, *American Silver, 1655-1825, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, vol. 2 (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1972), pp. 498-99; Martha G. Fales, *Early American Silver* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1973), pp. 117, 155, 157; and *Silver at the Essex Institute* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1983), p. 18.

²William Willis, *History of Portland*, vol. 2 (Portland: Day, Fraser & Co., 1831), pp. 100, 291; *Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith, and the Rev. Samuel Deane* (Portland: Joseph S. Bailey, 1849), pp. 191, 207, 401; Henry N. Flynt and Martha G. Fales, *The Heritage Foundation Collection of Silver* (Deerfield, Massachusetts: Heritage Foundation, 1968), pp. 175, 267.

³This tankard was given to the Maine Historical Society in 1980 by direct descendants of Stephen Longfellow and was called to my attention by Laura F. Sprague.

⁴[Portland] *Eastern Argus*, December 12, 1811; Flynt and Fales, *Heritage Foundation*, p. 196.

⁵Flynt and Fales, *Heritage Foundation*, pp. 216, 363.

⁶Kathryn C. Buhler and Graham Hood, *American Silver Garvan and Other Collections in the Yale University Art Gallery*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 303-04.

⁷*Eastern Argus*, October 28, 1818.

⁸Buhler and Hood, *American Silver Garvan*, p. 304. Two of these medals are preserved at Yale and at the Maine Historical Society.

⁹Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., "Portland, Maine, Engravers of the 1820s," *Old-Time New England* 61 (1970-1971): 105-08.

Martha Gandy Fales (Mrs. Dean A. Fales, Jr.) is a native of Clarksburg, West Virginia. She received her Master's degree from the University of Delaware in the first class of graduate students in the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture. Mrs. Fales served on the staff of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Wilmington and has published several books, including EARLY AMERICAN SILVER (1970, with later editions) and THE RICHARDSONS: PHILADELPHIA SILVERSMITHS (1974), along with articles on decorative arts in magazines and scholarly journals. Honorary Curator of Silver at the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts, Mrs. Fales lives in Brunswick, where she and her husband serve as consultants for local historical societies and museums primarily in northern New England.