

Setting the Table: Coin Silver Tableware in Early America

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Taking a Look Back

My fascination with Antiques goes back to my childhood when I rummaged through antique shops with my Grandmother in northern Virginia. The addiction to Coin Silver tableware began in 1984 when my friend and neighbor, now Lodge Brother Kenneth Coker explained that Coin Silver Flatware held the value of silver, the collectability of art and the history of the silversmith. Best of all it was still affordable as most collectors of silver wanted sterling, Also, when you drop it, it doesn't break. Armed with this knowledge, I purchased my first piece of Coin Silver tableware/flatware, which was a simple teaspoon without a maker's mark and engraved with the name "Amos Stanton". I was also fortunate to become acquainted with James Willcox, an avid collector of Virginia Coin Silver and for whom the Silver Gallery at the Virginia Historical Society is named and from whose work much of this paper is written. As with any hobby, one not only accumulates the collectable but also talks with other collectors, reads and researches, purchases books, clips articles and with modern technology the internet provides a wealth of knowledge on many subjects. Now I share with you my passion, "Coin Silver Tableware".

Silver in Colonial Virginia

Early English colonists arrived in Virginia with a love of all things silver. It has played a major role in life in Virginia since the earliest days of exploration. Many of the early explorers, even prior to the settlement of Jamestown in 1607, were searching for great

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treasures of silver and gold; they were not looking for land on which to grow tobacco or forests in which to trap animals. In 1608, just one year after the settlement of Jamestown, there were two goldsmiths, two refiners, and one jeweler in the Colony. These men were sent in search of riches similar to those that were being found by the Spanish in Central and South America.

It is written that in the middle of the seventeenth century that there was a good store of silver in the houses of many English planters. This had either been inherited from English relations or been purchased in England. Much of the early silver did not survive in its original form due to the desire of the colonists to have items of the latest fashion. In 1655 Colonel Richard Lee took some of his (silver) plate to London to have its fashion changed. The loss of early silver not only occurred in the colonial period but silver was also melted and restyled by American silversmiths. In more recent times much old as well as relatively new silver was melted down as the result of the tremendous rise in silver prices. William Fitzhugh, of Stafford, had a great quantity of plate which he bought not only for its useful and ornamental qualities, but because he believed it to be a safe investment for his children. As wealth in the colony of Virginia increased during the eighteenth century the amount of silver plate also increased. Since most of the colonists were Englishmen they wanted items in the latest English fashions and purchased them either through their representatives in London or through members of their families still living in England. In fact, not only did they want English silver, but they wanted London silver since they considered it to be more fashionable than the "country silver" produced elsewhere in England. These English tastes continued in Virginia until the passage of the Stamp and Townshend Acts just prior to the American Revolution. The duties imposed by these acts on silver and other items greatly increased the cost, reducing the available quantity of English silver. It was at this time that the number of silversmiths in Virginia began to increase and colonial-made silver became fashionable.

Coin Silver

Coin Silver may be one of the least understood and most misused terms in the world of antiques. In the antique world the term is used to describe American silver flatware and hollowware made before 1870 that is NOT Sterling. Coin Silver is 90% silver, the same composition as American coins made prior to 1964. Silver is most often alloyed with copper for strength, so Coin Silver includes 10% copper. The silver content is 2.5% (25/1,000ths) less than Sterling. Colonial currency was a hodgepodge of Pounds, Francs, and Pieces of Eight (.25 cents or 2 bits was 2/8ths of a Spanish milled dollar when cut down). The value of any given coin was determined by its weight in silver or gold content. So, for the American silversmith to obtain raw materials he either had to purchase silver bars or melt silver coins. From that comes the generic term -- Coin Silver. Some pieces of flatware are marked "COIN", "PURE COIN", "PURE AS COIN" or "STANDARD".

Until the opening of the Comstock Lode in 1859 there were no silver mines in the United States of any significance and access to raw materials/silver was a problem. Before that nearly all silver in the U.S. first came as either a finished product – bowl, candlestick, spoon, broken or out- of- style silver items of European manufacture – or as silver coins to be melted down. Silversmiths would buy silver items from the public. Most every silversmith's newspaper advertisement would also include an offer to buy. This partially explains the rarity of very early American silver. As previously noted, to keep up with changing fashions, many a spoon from the 1720s was melted down to become an 1820s spoon. Another reason that pre-1800 silver is rare is the fact that there were far fewer people and, of those, fewer still who could afford silver. As both population and wealth grew so did the demand for silver. Much "Southern Silver" was lost due to the war of Northern aggression and the need for hard cash to supply the Confederate forces. Many Southern families donated their silver to the Southern cause.

Manufacture

The following is a description of silver manufacture from the *Hartford Daily Courant* - December 12, 1848, "Notes by a Man About Town":

The raw material here consists of pure coin, mostly American half dollars. These are to be melted down. Some fifty of these half dollars are run into a bar of about eighteen inches in length.

This bar is passed through a steam rolling mill and flattened, and afterwards hammered into a strip of the proper thickness for a spoon, and about half an inch of width, it is cut into pieces, each piece designed to be a spoon, but having no spoon fashion or shape, about it. One end of this then, by a succession of blows skillfully applied with a "peen" or oval faced hammer, spread out into the shape of a leaf for the bowl, and the other end formed in like manner for the handle. The whole spoon is then smooth hammered or planished upon an anvil, and brought to a uniform thickness and perfectly flat. The bowl is now shaped and the tip formed in a die by "swedging" or forcing these parts with a steel die into a spoon shaped cavity or matrix, formed in a block of lead. This completes the form. They now go into the hands of the filer, who trims them – next to a brush scouring wheel, which revolves rapidly in a lathe, where they are scoured smooth by a mixture of scotch stone in oil; and thence to the hands of the "finisher", who either polishes or burnishes them as the purchaser may direct, or as fancy may dictate.

Many ladies would bring in broken spoons hoping to have them repaired. They believed that the spoons were made in a mold and that it could just be repressed to repair the damage. Block tin, iron or pewter spoons are indeed cast but silver ones are always wrought with a hammer in the mode described.

With US population growth came advances in technology. The 1780s brought a rolling machine for processing melt into sheets of silver. In 1801, Thomas Bruff of Chestertown, MD invented a spoon press. Hours previously spent on repetitious preparatory tasks could

now be spent on ornamentation. Repoussed and Chased hollowware and patterned flatware began to replace the plain Federal styles.

The manufacture of silver by large companies began in the 1840s. This transition to large-scale manufacturing was necessitated by the tremendous increase in demand for silver products due to the increased wealth of the middle and upper classes.

The Silversmiths

The earliest documented silversmith working in Virginia was John Brodnax, who first settled in Henrico County and later moved to Middle Plantation (now Williamsburg) in 1694. No "documented" silver made by him remains. The golden age of silversmiths in Virginia was basically the one hundred years between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries. During this period over 400 silversmiths worked in Virginia.

The largest concentration of silversmiths in Virginia were in the eastern cities – Richmond had the most with 60, followed by Norfolk with 49, Alexandria with 47, and Petersburg with 36. There were 46 towns and cities in Virginia (including what is now Virginia and West Virginia) which had at least one silversmith. These numbers include silversmiths and retailers and jewelers who placed their marks on pieces of silver.

The first known silversmith to work within the City of Richmond was James Galt, who moved from Williamsburg to Richmond in 1766. He remained in Richmond for five years before moving back to Williamsburg.

A few of the more famous (collectable) local silversmiths were William Mitchell, Jr., Henry Hyman, James Geddy, Charles Lumsden and the firms of Jennet & James, Johnson &

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Reat, Mitchell & Tyler, and Nowlan & Co. The firm of Mitchell and Tyler was probably the most noted of these and more silver with the Mitchell and Tyler mark appears on the market than any other firm or maker.

Usually the only mark on pieces of Coin Silver was the touch mark of the silversmith. This mark was usually either the initials or name of the silversmith or partnership. Initials were generally used as touch marks in the eighteenth century but by the early nineteenth century most silversmiths were spelling out their names or names of their firms. A few craftsmen also used the name of the city in which they worked while even fewer marked the year in which the silver was made or the street address of their shop. Only two Richmond silversmiths marked their silver with the location, Lewis Hyman (working 1845-1850s) marked his products H, Hyman. RHD.

The American system of marking silver makes it difficult to determine when a piece of silver was actually manufactured. If a silversmith worked over a long period of time and used the same mark, the collector must then study the form of the silver to approximate the actual date of the manufacture. On the other hand, the British used an assay mark, a city mark, a date mark, and a maker's mark in combination which facilitate the identification of silver.

Perhaps because it is misunderstood, when compared to any other American antiques, Coin Silver remains a bargain. Certainly, important pieces by important silversmiths, such as Paul Revere, are bringing premium prices. But many beautiful pieces by lesser known, but equally skilled, silversmiths remain reasonably priced and available.

Because more pieces from the Northeast region exist today and demand is less, value for post-1820 pieces is basically just above scrap price. But as with many rules of collecting,

there are exceptions. Later pieces from the South or West are worth five to ten times more than flatware from the Northeast, because of rarity. As example, a circa 1820-50s Coin Silver tablespoon from Charleston sells for about \$300 today. The same spoon from Boston is \$30-\$40 or just above scrap.

A Masonic Connection

William Mitchell, Jr., previously mentioned as one of our famous local silversmiths, was born in 1797 at Boston, Massachusetts. He was on the building committee for St. Paul's Church and was elected one of the founding trustees of Hollywood Cemetery. His Mother Lodge was Richmond Randolph Lodge No. 19, and he was a member of Richmond Lodge No. 10, serving as Master in 1823-24, 1828-29, and 1834-35. He was also a member of Richmond Royal Arch Chapter No. 3, and served as High Priest.

Mt. Wor. William Mitchell, Jr. served as Grand Master in 1834-35 of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, A.F. & A.M. He died on September 3, 1852 in White Sulphur Springs, now part of West Virginia. His funeral service was held at St. Paul's Episcopal Church and he is buried at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond. *The History of Richmond Lodge No. 10* states:

Therefore, Resolved, That by the death of Wm. Mitchell, Jr., we have lost a true and faithful friend and brother, the State an excellent citizen, and society one of its brightest ornaments.

The Transition To Sterling

By 1855 Tiffany and Gorham were making exquisite silver and having difficulty selling it because: "It's not as good as English Silver"... and it wasn't. It was 90% silver. The English had been on the Sterling standard since the early 1300's. Their silver was 92.5%

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pure. It wasn't long before both Tiffany and Gorham were making Sterling silver. This, in turn, left Kirk, Wood & Hughes, William Gale & Son, and every other silversmith in America listening to: "Well, it's nice, but it's not as good as Tiffany or Gorham".

By the 1870's Sterling had all but replaced Coin Silver. The small, local silversmiths were replaced by jewelry shops and 'fancy goods' merchants who retailed Sterling silver mass produced in large, mostly Northern, factories.

Bibliography

The Messenger, April 1988, "Silver in the Lives of Virginians", James H. Willcox, Jr.

Encyclopedia of American Silver Manufacturers, Dorothy T. Rainwater

Silversmiths of Virginia, George Barton Cutten

American Silversmiths and their Marks, Stephen G. C. Ensko

Virginia's Past Grand Masters, the History of Richmond Lodge No. 10, 1780-1950, Rev. David K. Walthall

The Grand Chapter Royal Arch Proceedings, 1852, Robert E. Simpson

Display of Coin Silver included with Lecture

Editor's Note: Images of the silver displays were not available.

Legend – Case "A"

Beaded, Butter Knife, Hallmarked "A-C", Albert Coles, New York, after 1835

Bead Pattern, Sugar Shell, Marked "M W Galt & Bra.", Washington D.C. after 1847

Soup Spoon, Touch Marked "GF", George Fielding, New York, after 1730

My First Coin Spoon, No Mark, Engraved "Amos Stanton"

Fiddle Pattern, Mustard Ladle, Marked "COIN", "E. Jaccard & Co.", St Louis, MO, after 1852

Dessert Spoon, Marked "SAM.I. KIRK" & "10.15" Assay Mark, Baltimore MD, 1828 —1846

Fiddle Pattern, Soup Spoon, Marked "L Forbes" & "St. Louis", St Louis, MO, after 1835

Legend – Case "B" – Virginia Makers

Teaspoon, Marked "H.HYMAN.RHD", 96 W Main St, Richmond, After 1845

Fiddle & Thread, Dessert Spoon, Marked "C. LUNISDEN", Petersburg, after 1832, Engraved "H"

Kings Pattern, Dinner Fork, Marked "Bailey & Co", Philadelphia, PA, after 1848, Engraved "H"

Both of the above pieces are from a Nottoway Co, Virginia Estate

Soup Spoon, Marked "Kersey & Pearce", 6 E Main St, Richmond, c: 1845

Teaspoon, Marked "W. Mitchell, Jr.", 108 W Main St, Richmond, c: 1827

Soup Spoon, Marked "W. Mitchell, Jr.", 108 W Main St, Richmond, c: 1827

Salt Spoon, Marked "GENNET & JAMES", 55 Main St. Richmond, after 1849

Beaded, Dessert Spoon, Marked "MITCHELL & TYLER", Richmond, After Oct. 1, 1845

Samuel P. Mitchell & John H. Tyler Apprenticed under William Mitchell, Jr.