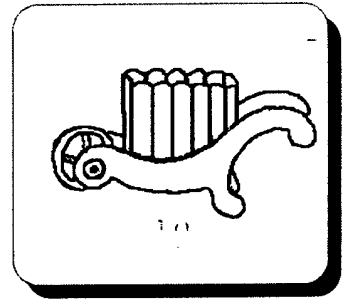




Salty Comments

No. 42

Facts and Opinion about Open Salt Collecting



When we decided to examine our pewter salts, we were surprised at the variety of shapes. Looking further, we found only a few we thought were old. When we went looking for literature on the subject, the reason for this combination became apparent. Pewter was a desirable material for tableware in the 18th century, but was considered inferior to glass and china by 1900. When it wore out it was melted down or thrown away.

In colonial times, pewter was the preferred material for tableware for the middle class. The rich had silver and porcelain, the poor used wooden or pottery utensils. When a family could afford it, their first pewter would be spoons or an open salt. Harvard students in 1680 ate from wooden trenchers, but had pewter mugs for their beer. Ben Franklin's diary in the 1730's complains that his extravagant wife spent 23 shillings to get a silver spoon and a china bowl for his breakfast, replacing the 2-penny earthenware bowl and pewter spoon he previously used. One reason for the scarcity of pewter was the English tariff on tin, the primary ingredient. This made the cost of tin in America as high as the price of finished tableware. The craft of recasting pewter gradually grew, however, because the worn-out dishes were valuable. You could trade 30 pounds of worn dishes for 15 to 20 pounds of new ones. Sometimes the pewterer sneaked a little more lead into the batch, which gave him a substantial profit because lead was cheap. Since it was worthwhile to rework worn-out dishes, very few early ones survived. One book claims there are only 3 known examples of 17th century American pewter. After the revolution more people learned the trade because lower-cost raw material became available from countries other than England.

Pewter is the element tin, with small amounts of other metals added to make it harder. The best pewter contains little or no lead, while the lowest grade might have 40% of this cheaper material. Until about 1800, the pewter vessels were cast in molds and then polished by hand or turned on a lathe. About this time a different alloying material - antimony - was adopted. The new product was called britannia metal, though it was still mostly tin. It was stronger and could be made into thinner (and therefore less expensive) wares. By 1820 it had replaced most of the lead formula material. Soon afterwards stamping and spinning processes were developed for making tableware from sheets of metal, eliminating much of the need for molds and further reducing costs. By 1870 silver plate had almost completely replaced the tin-based alloys.

Collectors of old pewter look first for a touch mark, if there is one. Several books are available for dating and identifying the maker if a mark can be found. Lacking this, they seem to look at style and appearance to tell how old it is. In general, pewter pieces imitated silver designs of the time, and silver is usually marked. One book cautioned that many large and most smaller pieces (like salts) were unmarked, but that all fakes are marked. The pewter collectors have the same problem as we do.

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In looking at the pewter salts, we believe they can be split into 3 categories. The first is genuinely old ones, made by craftsmen rather than by factories. These are expensive, and are the kind that pewter collectors want. These are cast pewter, finished by hand work or by turning on a lathe. The second category is salts that were made for table use during the years when pewter's popularity was at a low ebb. These are made with machine tools like stamping presses, sometimes with parts soldered together. The third category is modern salts made for sale at gift shops to collectors or to buyers of cute little things. The copies of old designs for sale by museums would be included. In this issue we will try to show some of each type.

The first 8 shapes shown in the figures are representative of those used before 1850. The figures 1 through 4 are taken from books. The salts were dated by old records or by comparing them to known silver shapes. Since pewter was "poor man's silver", the shapes imitated their more expensive cousins as mentioned before. Housewives used to keep their pewter highly polished, so it looked like silver. The idea of a "dull luster" is a modern thing. The higher grades of metal gave a brighter shine than the lower ones which contained more lead.

Figures 5 and 6 are old pewter salts we have been fortunate to find. Both are cast pewter finished by turning. Neither has a maker's mark, but Figure 6 is one of a presentation pair. The first of these has J.W.C. engraved on the base, and the second has the year, 1840.

Figures 7 and 8 are reproductions of early salts made for Colonial Williamsburg. They were made by two different firms, but both have the mark shown at the right. Since Williamsburg takes great pains to be accurate, we are sure that the shapes are copies of authentic colonial pieces. We have been unable to find out whether the original salts were silver or pewter.



Figures 9 and 10 are salts made in Holland, probably as gift shop items. The trencher is probably a smaller version of an old design. It is cast pewter and heavy. The porringer copies an old-time shape, though we don't think it was used for salt 200 years ago. A porringer is supposed to be a dish for eating porridge, with the handle to hold when the contents are hot. One of the books said that some porringers were used for blood-letting, a popular remedy for disease in early times.

Figures 11 and 12 are salts with a ceramic bowl. A sheet of pewter was spun on a lathe and formed around the bowl, trapping it in place. This protects the metal from the salt. Both of these dishes look old enough to have been used on a table somewhere.

We believe that the dishes in figures 13 to 15 also were made for use with salt, not for souvenirs. This is just a judgement call, but the marks and the appearance have convinced us. The Nekrassoff salt, figure 14, is the only hammered pewter dish that we have. Hammering was done for appearance and also to harden the metal so it would keep its shape better.

Figure 16 and 17 are from Max Reig, a modern pewterer. These probably belong in the gift shop category. Figure 18 is a pepper shaker that sits on an open salt. Both dishes are engraved and marked CHINA underneath. We believe the set is modern, and made for export. We have several salts resembling figure 19. The marks include Woodbury Pewterers, Nantucket Pewter, and Conn. House. This design seems to be a popular in the gift shops.

Figures 20 and 21 show salts made by Hampshire Pewterers, a New Hampshire firm who produced the New England club's fifth anniversary salt in 1983. They use the old techniques, casting their dishes then turning them on a lathe. Their mark is shown at the right. There are usually two letters with the mark, identifying the workman and the year it was made.



The last 3 figures show samples of viking boats made in pewter. There are at least 7 variations, most from Norway but one from Denmark. We saw three shapes for sale at the Norwegian pavilion in Epcot Center in Disney World about 4 years ago. Prices ranged from \$7.00 to \$18.00 each.

If you are interested in collecting old pewter, you can join the Pewter Collectors Club of America, founded in 1934. They had about 500 members in 1972, so they are about the same size as the combined salt collector organizations. The members seem to be hunting vigorously for old pewter, especially any whose maker can be identified. They are competing with us for old open salts, and they have a 50-year head start.

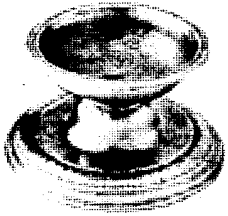
We hope that you have a few pewter open salts in your collection. If they have a few pits or perforations from use, this is not unusual. If you ever see a really old pewter salt - one made before 1800 - you should not be surprised if it is priced in the hundreds of dollars. Until you find one of these at a bargain price in a flea market you can enjoy the reproductions, which are in much better condition.

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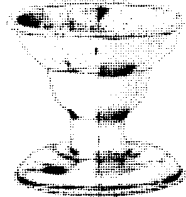
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References: "5000 Open Salts" by William Heacock and Patricia Johnson
Ten books, "Open Salts Illustrated", by Alan B. and Helen B. Smith
"A History of American Pewter" by Charles F. Montgomery
"Old Pewter" by Malcolm Bell

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SOME PEWTER SALTS



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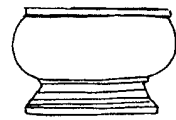
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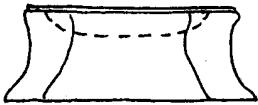
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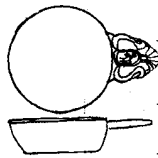
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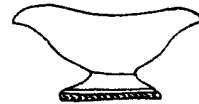
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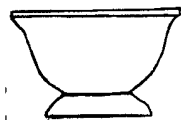
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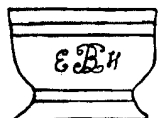
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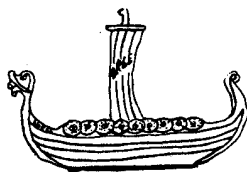
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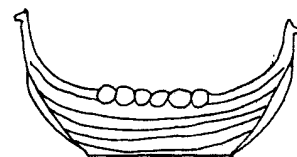
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SOME PEWTER SALTS

Figure No.	Description	Smith No.	H&J No.
1	American pewter salt, late 18th century		
2	American salt estimated 1775-1810		
3	English salt, Georgian period		
4	American salt, late 1800's		
5	Cast pewter pedestal, probably 1800-1850		
6	Cast pewter pedestal, knurled decoration, marked 1840	218-3-3	
7	Colonial Williamsburg reproduction by Max Reig, square foot		4391
8	Colonial Williamsburg reproduction by Stieff		
9	Trencher design, made in Holland		
10	Porringer reproduction, made in Holland		
11	Pewter enclosing a cobalt porcelain bowl	349-3-3	4389
12	Pewter enclosing a light blue porcelain bowl		
13	Oval pedestal salt marked Reed and Barton		
14	Hammered individual size marked S. Nekrassoff	161-1-3	
15	Stamped and folded individual salt marked A.E.Chanal	62-2-2	4400
16	Oval pedestal, "lips" on each end of bowl, marked Max Reig	122-4-3	
17	Bulbous pedestal marked Max Reig		
18	Pepper shaker on bulbous open salt, marked China, engraved		
19	Individual salt marked Woodbury Pewterers	415-5-2	
20	New England club 5th Anniversary salt, 1983, Hampshire	416-5-2	
21	Cast and turned individual salt, Hampshire Pewterers, 1983	416-5-3	
22	Viking boat, Norway, marked Handstopt Tinn		4262
23	Long viking boat with sail, Norway, marked Handstopt Tinn	421-6-3	4258
24	4-1/2" viking boat, marked Just Danmark		

