

COIN SILVER

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I am sure that many people have the mistaken idea that coin silver was made in flat pieces only, such as tea spoons, dessert spoons, serving spoons and the like, but this is not the case. Hollow pieces such as the pitcher Mary Raven has brought with her today and many other larger utensils as trays, tankards, serving bowls and platters were also made of coin silver.

According to Carl Drepperd in his book "Primer of American Antiques" (kindness of Betty Stuart) he says: "Do not hesitate to enter the field of Early American Silver either as a collector or student for, as either, you have years of satisfaction and delight ahead. You may add a leaf, a twig, a branch, or a limb to the tree that is today's written history of American antique silver. This because, in spite of all we know about it, we do not have data on more than 2/3 of the silversmiths who worked here between the years 1650 and 1850. There are at least 200 cities whose silversmithing data are yet to be searched for." Mr. Drepperd mentions also that hall marks, as such, are not on American ^{coin} silver. The English custom of hallmarking this work of all silversmiths with stamps applied by the Goldsmiths and Silversmiths Company, or the Worshipful Company of Silversmiths of the City of London, was a legal device to insure fineness of silver. A different stamp or hallmark was used every year. In American there was no comparable governing body, and hallmark stamps were rarely ^{used} used. Notable in this rare category are the star quality mark of Casar Ghiselin (1713), Philip Syng's leaf marks (1703), and the Baltimore assay marks used from 1814 to 1830. Many silversmiths between 1790 and 1810 used marks to designate the standard of silver used. These ~~marks~~ occur as 71 different emblems in addition to the words Premium, Standard, Dollars, Dollar, Pure Coin and Coin. This, unfortunately, is the only mention of Coin Silver in Mr. Drepperd's book.

In the book titled "The Collecting of Antiques" by Esther Singleton (my thanks to Frances L'Hommedieu for this one) Miss Singleton says "To the uninitiated this class of silver at first appears plain, severe, and, perhaps even uninteresting; but a little attention soon reveals many striking qualities. The forms are simple; the types are often primitive; and the pieces bear little or no decoration, save perhaps a moulding, a beading or a bevelled edge, and the engraved coat-of-arms of the person for whom the particular article was made.

Another thing about coin silver that attracts the eye is the peculiar, cold whiteness of the metal. It may be said that most of the silverware made by our Colonial silversmiths was obtained by melting down the coin received from the West Indies in payment for the products of farms, ~~fisheries~~ fisheries, and forests. It should also be noted that nearly all of the early American silver was made in New England and New Amsterdam (which of course was New York eventually). Nothing whatever was produced in the Southern Colonies, where the wealthy planters, living on their large estates or plantations according to the tradition of the aristocratic class, were not at all interested in promoting native craftsmanship. They imported their silver from England, and kept up with the latest styles to such a degree that they frequently sent their silver to London whenever a new fashion arose to have it melted down and remodelled. After the Revolution, in the late 18th century, when native industries were encouraged, the American silversmiths in the South always followed the latest English styles.

In another of Mr. Carl W. Dreppard's books (and again thanks to Betty Stuart) entitled "First Reader for Antique Collectors" I found this bit of interesting information: The silver that collectors consider silver is, of course, solid silver. American silversmiths of the 17th and 18th centuries followed as best they could, the silver standard established by law in England. During and after the Revolution, and until we established "Sterling" as the American standard, our silversmiths con-

sidered coin silver as "pure". Sterling, as a name is said to derive from the "easterlings" who in the 14th century, were given the task of refining silver mined in England. About 1350 the term sterling was used to designate refined silver fit for coin. The word sterling was not stamped on silver plate. That sentence, because of the confusion still current in respect of silver terms, requires explanation. Silver plate did not, and should not now, mean plated silver. It means plate made of pure silver, and includes salvers, dishes, trays, pots, cans, beakers, and other vessels, eating tools and all other pure silver objects.

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An interesting bit of information as to how one became a silversmith I gleaned from John Marshall Phillips' "American Silver" (thanks to New Brunswick Free Public Library for this). The skill of the silversmith was based upon the apprenticeship system established in England in the 13th century and subject to well-defined regulations, especially during Elizabeth's reign, by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths of the City of London; the Company was responsible, then as now, for maintaining the quality of manufactured wares of gold and silver as well as ~~the~~ coin of the realm. Transplanted to the Colonies, this system assured the artisan of successors and provided him with a supply of skilled labor. Under the terms of the indenture, made before a county court, the apprentice was bound at the age of 14 to serve a master craftsman for a period of 7 years. In those days this was the only means of advancement in one's chosen craft. In 1660 the Selectmen of Boston voted that no person could open a shop who was not 21 years of age and could not present evidence from town records of a full 7 year's service as an apprentice. The same ruling applied in New York City by 1675, following the taking-over of its government by the British. The indentured stipulated that the apprentice live in the Master's house, serve him faithfully, obey his lawful commands, keep his secrets (trade) and protect his interests, promise not to absent himself from the Master's house save with his permission, not to frequent ale houses, etc. The Master in turn was bound to provide

sufficient meat, drink and washing in winter time fitting for an apprentice and to suffer the apprentice to attend the winter evening school, usually at his father's expense, and to teach him the art of mystery of a goldsmith, the popular name for a worker in the preceious metals.

For the average impressionable young apprentice, the mysteries of the craft became part of his daily life. He became familiar with all the steps in the fashioning of an object from the melting of the coins, the forging of the sheet, the raising of the form, the casting of small separate parts, assembling and soldering them, to the chasing, polishing and engraving of the finished object. This familiarity developed in him a feeling for the metal, the forms into which it could be worked, its appropriateness to its use, and a sense of balance and proportion.

In those days before pattern books and specialization, the silversmith was not only a designer but also an artisan, skilled in the handling of a great variety of tools.

As I have mentioned previously the American silversmiths did not use hallmarks and I have with me three pieces which have come down from my great-grandmother, Louisa Ackerman. The small coffin-^{End}~~handed~~ spoon I was able to trace by the C&W on the back, it being made in Dublin in 1803. The other two, unfortunately, I was not able to identify, but I feel must be English. One, the larger spoon, has the name of M. Sayre and this could be the name of the firm who sold it. On the ladle the name S. Baker appears and this I cannot identify. ^{at the} Mary Raven will tell you about her four spoons and pitcher. Betty Stuart and Betty Schenck also have some pieces which I hope they can tell you a bit about.

The dessert spoons and serving spoons belong to Mother (Mrs. Swgoine) and these belonged to her grandmother ^{my great-grandmother} Louisa Ackerman, of Dutch and English ancestry.