

Colonial Tradition of Boston's Eighteenth-Century Silversmiths Has Its Counterpart Today

Gebelein Shop Follows Steps of Paul Revere

Unpretentious Establishment Uses Primitive Tools of Past Centuries

By W. E. Hutchinson, Jr.

Everybody knows that Paul Revere was a patriot, a silversmith, and the man who made artificial teeth for George Washington. Everybody knows, too, that he was a Bostonian. But not everybody seems to know that Revere's craft and his art and even his tools are still in use, here in Boston.

In a neat flannel sack lodged in a heavy safe in the shop of George C. Gebelein, in Chestnut street, at the foot of Beacon Hill, lies the brass scale that Paul Revere used when he plied his trade in Boston. It shows signs of hard use, and must have been the Colonial artisan's constant companion. A fine split in one end, carefully calibrated, indicates that the scale was used to measure wires for dentures—possibly even for those Washington used.

A Contemporary Colonial

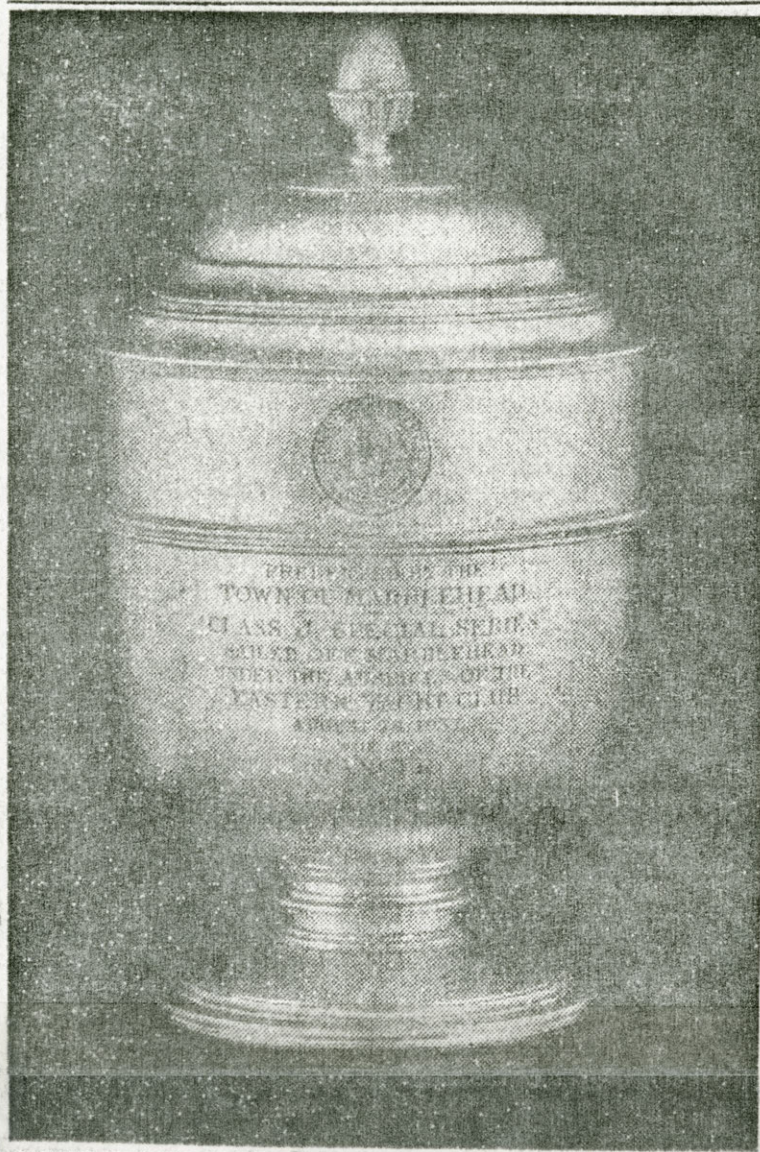
In other safes and around the walls of Mr. Gebelein's shop, which is an unpretentious, second-floor shop reached by dark, steep stairs, are some of Boston's finest examples of Revere's work. Many more are the close, careful copies and interpretations of his pieces, all made in the same slow, painstaking fashion the old smith used.

For Mr. Gebelein is a silversmith. And more than that: he is so much a lover of the perfection of Colonial silver that he and his workmen impose upon themselves the same rigid standards of craftsmanship which governed workmen 200 years ago.

They scorn the modern devices of the mass-production silver industry, which turn out reproductions of old and better works in record time and at a minimum of trouble and expense.

Emphasis on Feeling

They believe—and no lover of old silver disputes them—that the only satisfactory reproduction is the one which carries the same feeling as the original; and the only way by which they can obtain that feeling is by making the piece in exactly the same way, hand raising it from the flat sheet of pure metal with the old tools, and without spinning devices or dies or any other of the



THE MARBLEHEAD TROPHY

The town fathers of Marblehead, in selecting a trophy to bear the town seal and to be presented to the winner of the international yacht races there this past summer, chose this massive solid silver "Guild Cup," designed by George C. Gebelein after the type of cups presented to the early guilds and used by them in their ceremonial occasions. The cup stands thirteen inches high and is seven and one-half inches in diameter at the top of the bowl. Its weight is eighty-five and three-quarters ounces of sterling silver. The work throughout is that of the handcraftsman, the bowl entirely "raised" from the flat by the action of hammer on the silversmith's raising stake or anvil. Cover and pedestal are similarly made by the primitive process.

watch the expert silversmiths at work.

Hand Replaces Machine

But the shop is kept busy by assignments which the machine age of silversmithing cannot fulfill. For example, if a connoisseur is planning to give or loan a treasured bit of silver to a museum, the chances are good that he will first send it to Gebelein's to be copied, so that he may continue to enjoy it.

If another lover of old silver has a fragment of an old tea service, he is very likely to have the Gebelein shop complete it,

and communion silver in the North Church at Salem, in St. Mary's at Newton and in St. Paul's at Dedham.

Then there are some outstanding trophies the shop has made: at Harvard, the Alexander Agassiz Cup, for the inter-house championship in rowing, a massive three-handled affair which looks exceedingly modern but really dates back to the 17th century, and bears dates from 1931 until sometime in the twenty-first century, when every winning crew between those years will have been recorded.

service is an unusual gift for a battleship—most battleship services have been built around punch bowls—it is nevertheless thoroughly in keeping with the historic associations implied in the warship's name.

Present Linked With Past

The town of Lexington, after which the battleship was named, was not the modern town it is now; it was a Colonial town, and comparatively primitive. Therefore, for the sake of authenticity, the methods used in making the service had to be in keeping with Colonial workmanship and tradition.

Mr. Gebelein adapted the design from Colonial models in the ancient urn-shaped design which was most traditional of the Revolutionary period. Paul Revere, whose name is linked so closely with the history of the town, made essentially similar pieces by the same hand processes.

There was no sacrifice of workmanship for speed in making the service. More than six months were taken to plan and execute it. There will probably never be another like it; but if a duplicate were required, the same time would be necessary to produce it, for there can be no short cuts in this class of work.

This past summer has been, along the New England coast, a summer chiefly devoted to international yacht racing. When, after the America's Cup races were finished, the town of Marblehead decided to invite the Class J boats to race there, they decided to give a trophy which, if not as rich in personal history as the battered old America's Cup, would at least be as satisfying from an esthetic standpoint.

They went to Gebelein's. And Gebelein's wrought them as fine a cup as yachting circles had ever seen. The Marblehead Cup is made as silversmiths of Marblehead might have made it 200 years ago.

The trophy consists of a massive solid silver "guild cup," so designated by its maker because it follows the feeling of the type of cups used by the ancient guilds on their ceremonial occasions.

Hint for Mr. Vanderbilt

It is not, however, a copy, but rather an original adaptation of its type by Mr. Gebelein. A similar cup by Gebelein is illustrated in the new Encyclopedia Britannica in connection with the article on silver by E. Alfred Jones, English authority on the subject.

Perhaps the ancient use of the guild cups can be keyed to certain after-the-race yachting practices. Mr. Jones, in his book, "Old Silver of Europe and America," writes, "It was the custom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to celebrate any civic or domestic event of im-

Mr. Gebelein finds it easy to differentiate between his shop and the new school of silversmiths. "If a workman from one of the factories came in here," he said, "he'd feel lost. He wouldn't be able to work. He wouldn't find any of the tools which he had been using. But if an old-time silversmith came in, he could go right to work. He would be able to see before him everything he needed."

Tools Centuries Old

As a matter of fact, if he were an eighteenth century Boston silversmith, he might find the tools he himself had once used, for some of them date back that far.

All this emphasis on the traditional method doesn't mean that Mr. Gebelein and his associates are idle romanticists. Far from it: true silver lovers appreciate his concern for the valuable features of the old craftsmanship, and they flock to him.

And the old craftsmanship had many valuable features. The beauty of design created by the master silversmiths of the eighteenth century has never been equalled. In this country early silver, like early architecture and early furniture, was characteristic of the taste and life of the period.

Sheer Silver Surfaces

Simple in design and substantial in weight, it reflects the classic mental attitude of the people. Colonial silversmiths rejected the baronial influence of their English contemporaries, and displayed their skill in an artfully contrived "blind hinge" or "bayonet catch." Their art was all the greater because they scorned decoration in favor of sheer classic lines and simple engraving which let the eye enjoy the clear white texture of the metal: the silver advertised itself, and by so doing advertised its maker's skill.

That is the principle of Mr. Gebelein's work, and he has a tradition to back him up. George Christian Gebelein was born near Bayreuth, Bavaria, in 1878, which makes him fifty-nine; but he was brought to America when only a year old, so his training was wholly American, and for our purposes he is only fifty-eight.

The Colonial Tradition

At the age of fourteen he started work as an apprentice in the firm of Goodnow & Jenks, prominent Boston silversmiths, successors in their craft to Boston's celebrated Jeremiah Dummer, John Coney, the Burts, the Hurds and the Reveres. Thus Mr. Gebelein in turn became a descendant of the Colonial Boston tradition in silversmithing, and now he has trained his sons in that tradition.

Buyers are not an overwhelming majority of the many visitors to the Gebelein shop. Collectors come to examine the unusual display of fine old pieces, curators of museums come to consult the library of rare books on argentry; possessors of ancestral silver come for expert advice on renewing or matching their treasures, students come to

Gebelein's acquaintance with the history of the craft will insure its being the closest possible reconstruction of the missing pieces.

Or, should a parishioner wish to give his church a worthy communion service the chances again are good that he will come to the unpretentious shop in Chestnut street.

Silver at King's Chapel

Among the sets of communion silver Gebelein has made are the service at King's Chapel, that in the chapel of the United States Military Academy at West Point and in the chapel of William and Mary College at Williamsburg, Virginia; a service for Washington Cathedral and altar pieces for Christ Church at Providence;

Even the Cox is there. Another trophy is the Percy D. Haughton Memorial Cup of the Tennis and Racquet Club of Boston, and a third, unusual in its design, is the rowing trophy of St. Paul's School at Concord, N. H. The trophy is wrought in the shape of a varsity eight, with its oarsmen, coxswain, sweeps and even tiller ropes all fashioned from the metal. The trophy is eighteen or twenty inches long, which means that it contains quite a lot of silver, and quite a lot of work.

And then there are the presentation pieces, two of which are outstanding among their fellows. One is the U. S. S. Lexington silver service, given by the town of Lexington in 1927 to the then new airplane carrier. Although a tea and coffee

portance by the gift of a cup. . . These cups were displayed at convivial gatherings of the guilds, as is the custom with the splendid plate of the old guilds of the City of London, and were passed round as 'loving cups' in accordance with ancient ritual."

It is interesting to note that the Marblehead Cup, won by Harold S. Vanderbilt, will not be the only piece of silver from the Gebelein workshop in the possession of the sportsman.

— The sail of a parachute is made of carefully chosen untreated silk, while the shroud lines are of a high grade thrown silk, consisting of not less than thirty-two threads of three-ply each. They have a breaking strength of not less than 400 pounds.