

The Pennsylvania Copper Tea Kettle

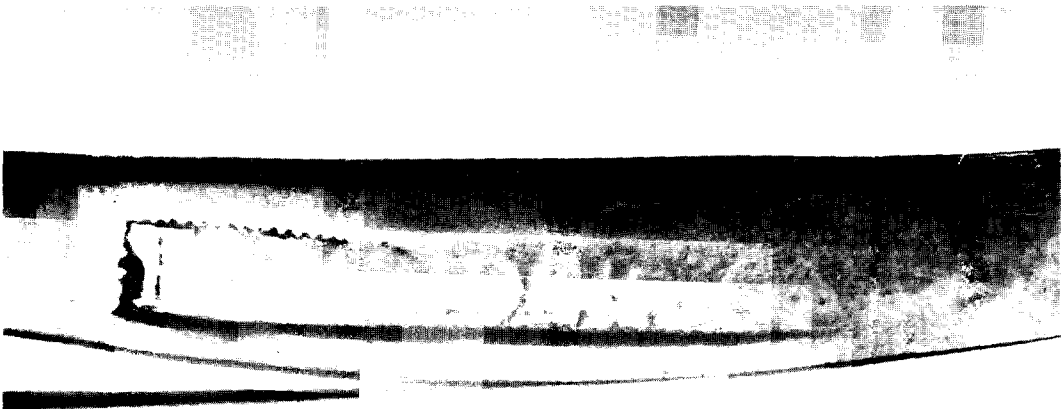
By Henry J. Kauffman

When one thinks of antiques in Pennsylvania one's thoughts usually turn to furniture, glass ware, pewter, and guns. Recent research has revealed that this group should also include objects made of sheer copper, particularly copper tea kettles. Emphasis is placed on "copper" for it is important to note that no tea kettle made of brass has been identified as the product of a Pennsylvania coppersmith in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. This circumstance is difficult to explain since many were made of brass in Europe, and one would logically expect that some of brass were made in Pennsylvania. This one major difference between the products of European and Pennsylvania craftsmen points up the fact that there were probably other major differences in their products; and these will be the subject of the discussion to follow.

A second major difference between European and Pennsylvania tea kettles is that many made here were signed by their makers. This statement does not imply that no kettles made in Europe were signed, but that signing them was a much more common practice here than in Europe. It might also be noted that a larger proportion of tea kettles were signed in Pennsylvania than were other products of the coppersmith. It is difficult to account for this practice, but one might assume hypothetically that because the tea kettle was difficult to make, the craftsman wanted to be identified with his pro-



Copper tea kettle made by F. Sanderson, probably in Lancaster in the 1760's. The European globular form was probably made here before the Pennsylvania form had developed. The trade card of Benjamin Harbeson, a Philadelphia coppersmith shows a kettle with a similar shape, dated Feb. 5, 1754. Below is the Intaglio mark of Sanderson on the tea kettle illustrated above. Photos courtesy of the J. P. Remensnyder Collection, Smithsonian Institution.



FRANCIS SANDERSON,
COPPERSMITH from LANCASTER, living in
GAY-STREET, BALTIMORE-TOWN, a few
Doors above Mr. *Andrew Steiger's*.

MAKES and sells all sorts of COPPER-WORK,
viz. stills of all sizes, fish and wash kettles,
copper and brass, brewing-kettles, saucepans, coffee
and chocolate pots, stew-pans, and Dutch ovens. He
sells any of the above articles as cheap as can be im-
ported from *England*, and carries on his Business in
Lancaster as usual. He likewise carries on the TIN-
BUSINESS in all its branches. Country shop-keepers
may be supplied, either by wholesale or retail, and all
orders sent from the country shall be carefully executed.

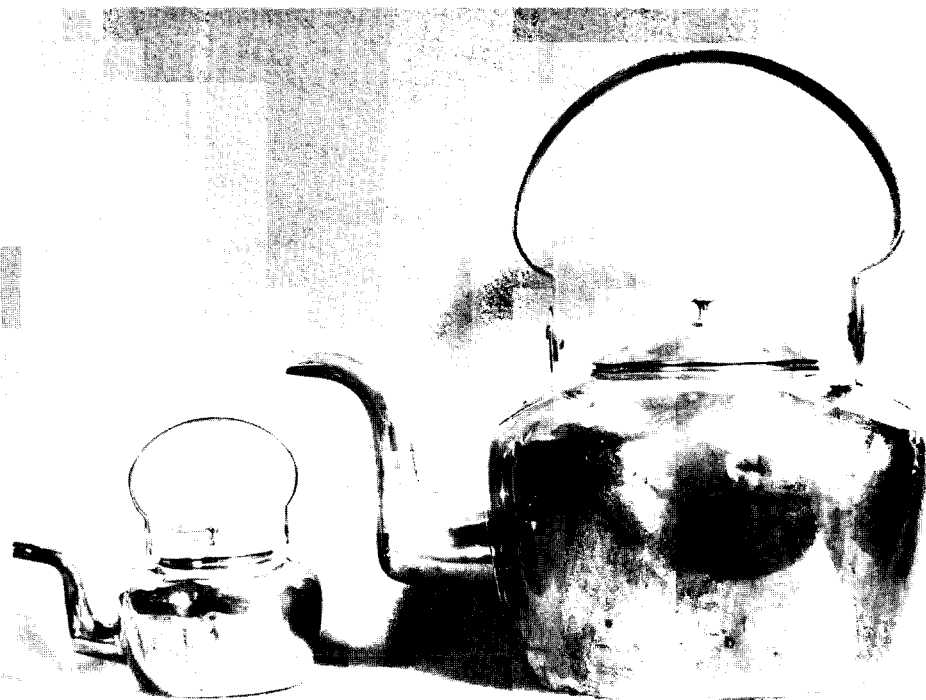
*Advertisement of Francis Sanderson from the MARYLAND JOURNAL AND
BALTIMORE ADVERTISER, August 20, 1773. Sanderson is known to have been
working in Lancaster in the 1760's.*

duct. The flaring portion of the body of the kettle was no more difficult to form than any other piece with a similar flare, but to draw the sides into the horizontal position of the top required much skill and patience. The spout with its interesting contour and reverse bends also was a challenge for the craftsman whose attempts must have sometimes ended in failure.

*I*t might also be suggested that no two kettles have the exact same shape. They may have been regarded as an art form by the coppersmith and in the tradition of men who create unique objects, they signed them. It also is evident that the strap handle was an excellent place for the coppersmith to imprint his name, particularly when this area is compared with the forbidding surface of a funnel or a still.

The practice in the eighteenth century was to stamp the name of the maker on the top of the handle with an intaglio stamp. Sometimes the die (stamp) imprinted only the name of the maker within a plain rectangle, while at other times the edges of the rectangle were ornamented with escallops or dots. The dies were made of steel and struck with a hammer while the underside of the handle was supported on an anvil. This procedure expanded the metal and made it slightly wider where it was struck, and the craftsman then had to file the excess away to make the handle uniform. Many marks are difficult to read, either because an imperfect impression was made when the handle was stamped, or because an over-zealous restorer was more concerned with the lustre of the handle than with the legibility of the name. Therefore, a kettle with a fine sharp impression of an intaglio stamp must be regarded highly in the collection of Americana today.

In the nineteenth century many craftsmen continued to use their intaglio stamps, particularly men such as John Getz, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who seems to have used the same die on the handles of all of his tea kettles. Other men, possibly those who were not apprenticed in the standards of the eighteenth century, used simple block letters to impress their names without a panel. These men frequently added a date to their names, the capacity of the kettle, and the year it was made. At least one coppersmith named Kidd, who worked in Reading, engraved his name on the handles of his kettles, but the occurrence of this procedure must be regarded as rare.



Large and small copper tea kettles made by Pennsylvania coppersmiths. Photo courtesy Rock Ford-Kauffman Museum.

Research on the shape of tea kettles indicates that although the form changed slightly from time to time and place to place, the greatest variation was in size. Unfortunately many of the smallest kettles attributed to Pennsylvania are not signed but are identified by their unique style. Extremely few have been found with a diameter of less than six inches, while a number in the six-inch range bear the marks of American craftsmen. By all odds, the

greatest number of signed kettles are within the eight to eleven-inch range, with a very few extra large ones in the twelve-inch size. If a signed one is larger than twelve inches, it must be regarded as a rarity.

It is also evident that tea kettles were made in Pennsylvania over a long period of time. The following advertisement of Peacock Bigger in the August 3, 1738 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* includes tea kettles among a variety of other products.

PEACOCK BIGGER, BRAZIER in Market Street, near the sign of the Indian King: Makes and sells all sorts of Copper Work, Viz., Tea Kettles, Coffee Pots, Sauce Pans, Kettle Pots, Dutch Ovens, and Stew Pans, Brass Kettles, and other sorts of Copper Work when bespoke: He tins and mends old Copper Work and sells Tinwork at reasonable prices, and gives ready money for old copper and brass.

For at least a century after Bigger's advertisement, tea kettles were one of the common products of Pennsylvania coppersmiths.

Later, when areas such as Lancaster, Reading, York, and Harrisburg became important trading posts and places of residence on the frontier, coppersmiths plied their trade there. Among the well known makers are the Babbs of Reading, the Schaums of Lancaster, William Bailey of York and Chambersburg, and Youse of Harrisburg. By the nineteenth century a few of the craftsmen had drifted to Albany, New York; to Winchester, Virginia; and west to Ohio.



*Nineteenth century signature in individual block letters.
Photo from a private collection.*

The popularity of tea kettles is attested to by the frequent use craftsmen made of the shape, and the mention of it in their advertising. The trade cards of Phillip Apple, William Heiss, and Benjamin Harbeson depict them as one of their major products, William Bailey used a "cut" of a tea kettle on the top of his advertisement in the July 7, 1772 issue of the *Pennsylvania Staatsbote*. As a matter of fact a large majority of coppersmiths enumerate them among their products.