

Pure, Bright & Solid:
Raising A New Standard
For
John McMullin and His Silver

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Portrait of John McMullin 1765-1843
by Joseph Biays Ord

from the collection of
The Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Preface

Philadelphia silversmith John McMullin (1765-1843) was an important and valued member of his craft community whose work product was equal and comparable to that of numerous of his period colleagues. Surviving examples McMullin's early work from 1790 to 1810, notably demonstrate that his skills matched those of his peers. A select analysis compares and contrasts examples of those wares with those of fellow silversmiths Christian Wiltberger (1769 – 1851), Joseph Lownes (1758 – 1820), Samuel Richards (1765 – 1827), Samuel Williamson (1772 – 1843), and the Richardson brothers: Joseph (1752 – 1831) and Nathaniel (1754 – 1827). These men spent their careers laboring within just two blocks of one another and in some instances are known to have collaborated.

A thorough examination of McMullin's marks points to likely changes he made in how he worked during the course of his career. Crafted between 1790 and 1800, his early silver is often distinguished by one specific mark that disappeared early in the next century. Another mark suggests that McMullin likely sold silver outside of Philadelphia. After 1815 a new group of marks appeared indicating that McMullin likely altered the way he worked by joining forces with fellow craftsmen and by using freelance journeymen who produced components later assembled in McMullin's shop or elsewhere. He and other silversmiths may have purchased certain elements from the same sources or perhaps from one another.

Though the identity of few of McMullin's customers have come to light, scrutinizing nearly two-dozen discovered clients reveals they were from a range of social

and economic status in Philadelphia, as well as elsewhere but with ties to Philadelphia. In a city where competition for business must have been overwhelming, McMullin likely relied on his societal ties, especially his brothers in the ship building trade, his extended family, and his church.

Military heroes, sea captains, merchants, physicians, neighbors, and rising members of Philadelphia's new middle class comprised these customers. The families and individuals who sought to purchase silver saw it as a symbol to express their new wealth and status, the same value with which owning silver had always been highly esteemed.

For want of documentation, frustratingly little has been known or written about the life and work of John McMullin. Scant research uncovered anything substantive about him since scholars and collectors began the study American silver sometime in the early twentieth century.

This thesis considers details uncovered about McMullin's life and work, placing them within the context of thriving, post-Revolutionary Philadelphia into the first third of the nineteenth century. Genealogical research, investigation of primary sources found in church and public records, wills, period newspapers, and from the examination and study of some of the extensive number of objects McMullin produced that are held in museum and private collections. Knowledge and material gathered and interpreted from each of these sources creates a more vigorous and comprehensive profile of one of Philadelphia's noteworthy silversmiths than previously recognized.

CHAPTER I

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John McMullin's father prepared his youngest son for his trade by apprenticing him to a silversmith whose identity is still unknown. His training took place during the Revolution. Within the boundaries of his Southwark neighborhood, the young man must have observed the plight of many of the city's less well off citizens, for post-Revolutionary Philadelphia presented images of stark social contrast. Throughout the next four decades, great wealth and great poverty could be seen residing together as neighbors, visible within a promenade of just a few blocks as the city's fortunes rose and fell.

On the morning of July 4, 1788, twenty-two-year-old John McMullin, now a master himself, must have filled with pride to see master silversmiths Joseph Gee and John Germon carrying a standard emblazoned with the motto, "The Purity, Brightness, and Solidarity of This Metal is Emblematical of that Liberty which We Expect from The New Constitution." They and their fellow silversmiths represented one among the forty-four trades who gathered at Third and South Streets at eight o'clock that morning, queuing up to celebrate the progress toward final ratification of the United States Constitution. Patriot Francis Hopkinson organized the parade.¹

McMullin's father William, his eldest brother and master workman Robert, and Samuel Ormes supported the banner for the ship joiners company.² Less than two weeks before, New Hampshire had become the ninth out of the thirteen states sanctioning the content of the document. The Federal government was now duly authorized to

commence. Organized by the Federalists, though the parade was a bit of political grandstanding, in the annals of Philadelphia it came to be known as “The Grand Procession.”³

The decade that Philadelphia served as America’s first Constitutional capital generated a high volume of business for the city’s silversmith population. The 1790 Census shows that John McMullin likely employed four journeymen and one apprentice in his shop at 47 Shippen Street. (Appendix 4)

During Washington’s first and second presidencies, Philadelphians experienced another kind of struggle. They weathered two calamities of massive proportion that erupted at the end of each summer and lasted until the first frost. The outbreaks of Yellow Fever in the years 1793 and 1798 proved the most deadly. Not everyone bitten by the disease-carrying mosquitoes died, among them silversmith John McMullin and Dr. Philip Syng Physick, the father of modern surgery, both survived the terrible sickness.⁴ “Yellow Fever returned to the city in 1794, 1796, and 1797, but never so virulently as 1793.”⁵

Despite the scourge of yellow fever, by the turn of the century, 41,220 people inhabited Philadelphia, now ranking second largest city in the United States after New York.⁶ The maritime shipping and trades brought one-quarter of Philadelphians their livelihood.⁷ One notable figure who sailed the waters in vigorous pursuit of goods that would appeal to Philadelphia households at many income levels was John McMullin’s customer, Commodore Richard Dale, whose ship “Pigou” delivered tea, silk, and nankeens along with China wares each spring, brought from Canton harbor to the port of Philadelphia.⁸