

Tinned Americana

Lenett Fellow discovers the secrets of an early Connecticut tavern sign

By R. Ruthie Dibble

Editor's Note—Each academic year, a second-year student at the Williams College/Clark Art Institute Graduate Program in the History of Art is awarded the Judith M. Lenett Memorial Fellowship in Art Conservation. The fellowship provides the student with the opportunity to pursue an interest in American art through the research and conservation of an American art object. This year's Lenett Fellow, R. Ruthie Dibble, requested an object that would allow her to explore early-American material and visual culture; an early 19th-century painted tavern sign from the collection of the Connecticut Historical Society was chosen as her project. Ms. Dibble worked under the dual guidance of Sandra Webber, Conservator of Paintings, and Adam Nesbitt, Assistant Conservator of Objects. The project culminates in a public lecture Ms. Dibble will present at the Clark on May 6.

Bristol town history records that an Abel Lewis (1749-1820) opened a tavern at the corner of Maple and Stearn Street in Bristol, Connecticut in 1794.¹ The son of an early Bristol settler and one of nine brothers, Abel Lewis was a veteran of the Revolutionary War and an active member in the community, which lies some 15 miles southwest of Hartford. Like many adult males in New England communities, Lewis served as a “tythingman,” or tax collector, in addition to his own work.² With his wife and eight children, Lewis was part of an expanding network of inns that acted as social centers for New England towns and travelers.³ Reflecting the importance of these institutions, each town in Connecticut was required by law to have at least one tavern, and each tavern was required to have a sign advertising the establishment.⁴ Travelers, who typically covered six to eight miles an hour, could expect shelter and sustenance for themselves and their horses within a comfortable distance at all times during their journey. Villagers gathered in taverns for many reasons beyond imbibing, such as evening social events or to have their portraits painted by itinerant artists.

A circa-1800 tinned sign, quite likely from the Abel Lewis tavern, has been my focus as 2008-2009 Lenett Fellow at WACC. The sign was acquired by the Connecticut Historical Society in 2006, as an addition to that institution's definitive collection of early American tavern signs.

Both the painted surfaces and the metal substrate of the Lewis sign needed conservation. The 22-by-16¾-inch sign is made of two sheets of tinned iron, roughly equal

in size, that are soldered together horizontally across the center. Side One features the Connecticut State Seal above a central row with a punchbowl, two full glasses of punch, and a full decanter. Below, the words “A. LEWIS’ / INN,” entwined by a flowering vine, have been inscribed. Side Two features the eagle of the United States Seal, complete with arrows and an olive branch in each talon. The name of the innkeeper is repeated and surrounded by similar foliage.

In keeping with its status as the emblem of a public establishment, the Lewis sign employs imagery that communicates the role taverns played in post-Revolutionary New England. One side speaks to national community through the Great Seal of the United States, which had been established by Congress in 1782. The other side appeals to local community through the trio of grape vines on the Connecticut State Seal, a design in use since the mid-17th century. The punch bowl, glasses and decanter advertise the socially welcoming and physically nourishing nature of the establishment. While the imagery is typical of other signs in the Connecticut Historical Society's collection, certain aspects of the sign raise questions about its production and use.

The sign is smaller than others that were known to have hung outside taverns. Indeed, its imagery could have proved hard to distinguish by passersby on the road. Yet the fact that it is decorated on both sides suggests that it was not originally meant to be hung on a wall or door. The question of how it was presented to the public is difficult to answer, since the sign lacks any traces of how it was originally mounted. In addition to the issue of size and

mount, the use of tinned iron as signboard material is rare; most were made of wood.

Although the use of tin is unusual for a sign, as an object made in Hartford County, it is a fitting material. By the late-18th century, western Connecticut had become the hub for the production and sale of tinned iron products in the United States.⁵ Peddlers working out of Berlin, Bristol and other towns traveled to Boston to receive shipments of tinplate from Pontypool, Wales, and supervised the transportation of the sheets inland to western

Connecticut.⁶ At the turn of the century, the standard size for sheets of tinplate was 10 by 14 inches, but tinplate also came in a variety of sizes, including 12½ by 16¾ inches, which appears to have been used in the production of the Lewis sign.⁷

Once brought to Connecticut, the sheets were often made into lanterns, coffee pots, trays and other household wares peddlers sold throughout New England. Unworked sheets could also be purchased. An 1815 inventory of the Pattison and Peck Store in Berlin reveals a stock of



Lenett Fellow R. Ruthie Dibble examines the Lewis tavern sign in WACC's objects lab.



This page and next, the A. Lewis tavern sign, c. 1800: Side One is at left; Side Two opposite.

lead white and vermilion, and an additional layer, possibly composed of linseed oil and natural gum resin, that was used to bind the painted layers to the tin surface.

Both the painted layers and the metal substrate have sustained damage. At some point after it was painted, the sign's upper edge was bent backwards from Side One toward Side Two into a shallow lip, and 10 nail holes, again driven from Side One to Side Two, were created using square-headed nails. These physical blows damaged the painted surface, causing deterioration of the paint and tinned coating, and allowing the exposed iron to oxidize.


In order to arrest the paint loss and secure the painted layers

before cleaning, I applied a binding consolidant to areas where the paint layers were broken and fragile. With this complete, I was able to begin cleaning the painted surface. Relatively little dirt came up from Side Two, while Side One was extremely dirty. As I cleaned, it became apparent that the blackened background was originally the same dark red as Side Two. A chelating solution was applied to the rusted areas to remove corrosion and stop further oxidation, followed by a protective coating to the exposed metal. Exposed areas were then inpainted, to protect the tin layer and reduce distracting reflective surfaces.

Although the sign fits comfortably into the context of early 19th-century New England, exact dating was still being explored as this paper was prepared. Initial x-ray fluorescence spectroscopy, which identifies the chemical elements in an object, revealed the presence of lead, a material thought not to have been introduced into the tinning process until the third decade of the 19th century.⁹ Further analysis, including use of a scanning electron microscope, will help determine the elemental composition

of the sign and establish more precisely what materials were used and how that may affect the production date.

Damage sustained by the sign suggests it may have lived more than one life. For some period of time, Side One appears to have been exposed to the elements, while Side Two was protected, presumably sealed against a wall. Perhaps the sign was nailed as decoration to a door or left hanging on a beam in an attic or barn as many other signs were. Many of these questions may remain unanswerable, but there is no question that the sign is part of a rich history of Connecticut tinware production and decoration, tavern keeping, and the early system of New England peddlers and merchants.

The Lenett Fellowship has proved to be an invaluable experience, one that has piqued my interest in the technological innovations that go hand in hand with artistic production in the United States. I look forward to conducting further research in Hartford County on local history and the sign's provenance before my talk in May, and hope to find answers to some of the many questions the sign prompts. 



1. Euphroditus Peck, *A History of Bristol, Connecticut* (Hartford, CT: Lewis Street Bookshop, 1885), 101.

2. At the first town meeting in which Bristol was a separate town than Farmington, it was voted that "Abel Lewis...be Tythingmen for the present year." Dated June 13, 1785. Reproduced in Eddy N. Smith, et al, *Bristol, Connecticut: "In the Olden Time New Cambridge, which Includes Forestville"* (Hartford, CT: City Printing Company, 1907), 39.

3. Margaret C. Vincent writes that "by 1800 there were over sixty hundred fifty licensed Connecticut innkeepers operating simultaneously." See Margaret C. Vincent, "Signboards and the Enterprise of Innkeeping in Connecticut," in *Lions & Eagles & Bulls: Early American Tavern & Inn Signs from the Connecticut Historical Society* (Hartford, CT: Connecticut Historical Society in Association with Princeton University Press, 2000), 41.

4. A law passed in 1644 stated that towns "should prouide amongst theselves in ech Town one sufficient inhabitant to keepe an Ordinary for pruisio and lodging in some comfortable manner." [sic] See J. Hammond Trumbull, *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, Prior to the Union with New Haven Colony*, 15 vols. (Hartford: Brown & Parsons, 1850), vol. 1 pp. 103-4. Another ordinance in 1672 required that "every person licensed for Common Entertainment shall have some suitable Signe set up." See *The Book of the General Laus for the People within the Jurisdiction of Connecticut: Collected out of the Records of General Court, Lately Revised, and with some Emendations and Additions Established and published by the Authority of the General Court of Connecticut holden at Hartford in October, 1672.* (Cambridge, MA: Printed by SamuelGreen, 1673), 34-36. Both quoted in Vincent, 36, 38.

5. In Great Britain, factories had been efficiently and cheaply producing tinplate since 1728, when Thomas Payne developed a technique for creating sheets of iron by rolling rather than the costly and crude method of hammering. Diane S. Waite, *Nineteenth Century Tin Roofing and its Use at Hyde Hall* (Albany, NY: New York State Parks & Recreation, Division for Historic Preservation. State, 1974), 1.

6. Gina Martin and Lois Tucker, *American Painted Tinware: A Guide to its Identification* (New York, NY: Historical Society of Early American Decoration, 1997), vol. 1, xvii.

7. Waite, 3.

8. Martin and Tucker, vol. 1, 146.

9. This cheap, durable substitute for tinplate was used in varying combinations, for instance a patent awarded in England in 1844 says that no more than 15 percent of the alloy should be made of tin. See E. H. Brooke, *Monograph on the Tinplate Works in Great Britain* (Swansea: Welsh Plate & Steel Manufacturers' Association, n.d.), 14. Quoted in Waite, 6.

"common tinplate, thick tin, damaged tin, sodder [sic], and iron wire."⁸

While available resources related to the tin peddling tradition make it clear that tinplate was a central part of western Connecticut's economy and material culture, it provides no explanation for exactly how the Lewis sign came into being. Perhaps a peddler stopping for the night exchanged products from his wagon for rest and victuals, and went so far as to offer his rudimentary painting skills. Perhaps a member of the family picked up a piece of discarded tinplate at one of the numerous tin shops in Bristol and decided to make an advertisement for the inn. "Flowering," the term for painted decoration applied to tinware, was typically done by girls and young women who were trained in local shops. Yet wares produced for commercial profit exhibit a higher level of painting skill than has been used on the sign. Perhaps a member of Lewis's family, even one of his seven daughters, provided the decorations.

Analysis of the paint layer revealed Prussian blue,