

A Book Review

Long Island's Leading Silversmith

by Lita Solis-Cohen

This book about the life and work of Southampton, New York, silversmith and entrepreneur Elias Pelletreau (1726-1810) makes the past come alive. It will give those who read it something to think about when stuck in traffic on Long Island's Route 27 on the way to the Hamptons. Imagine Pelletreau, his wife, two sons, and his servant girl leaving Sag Harbor in a boat for Simsbury, Connecticut, at the end of August 1776 after the Battle of Long Island ended in defeat for the Americans. Think of Elias Pelletreau coming back with a hired man to collect his 11 head of cattle, two horses, and additional belongings. The Pelletreau family stayed in Connecticut until the war was over. In 1782 when they returned to Southampton, they found their buildings vandalized, hay fences taken by waggoneers, and his male servant gone.

Elias Pelletreau: Long Island Silversmith and Entrepreneur, 1726-1810 was published by Preservation Long Island to accompany the Long Island Museum's 2018 exhibition of the same name. Two chapters on Pelletreau's life and work are by Dean Failey (1947-2015), who in 1976 first championed Long Island craftsmanship in his landmark book and accompanying exhibition *Long Island Is My Nation*. Jennifer Anderson, associate professor at Stony Brook University, an editor of *Long Island History Journal*, and author of *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America*, wrote a chapter about silversmithing in America. Deborah Dependahl Waters identified Pelletreau's customers. Knowing New York silver well, she found portraits of the customers to illustrate with their silver. Waters edited and wrote the catalog entries for *Elegant Plate: Three Centuries of Precious Metals in New York City* (2000) when she was curator of decorative arts at the Museum of the City of New York. David Barquist, the H. Richard Dietrich, Jr., Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and author of the landmark book *Myer Myers: Jewish Silversmith in Colonial New York*, wrote a chapter placing Elias Pelletreau's silver in the context of work by the finest New York City silversmiths, showing how this rural silversmith responded to stylistic changes in the city.

Elias Pelletreau was Dean Failey's first and last project. He was the subject of Failey's Winterthur thesis in 1971. Charles Hummel, who was Failey's thesis advisor, wrote a foreword to the book telling how Failey continued H.F. du Pont's effort to assure the reputation of Elias Pelletreau. From 1960 to 1966 du Pont, who summered in Southampton, supported the restoration of the Pelletreau workshop on Main Street and put some of Pelletreau's work on view seasonally.

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Two chapters tell the story of the silversmith's life and work and how he built his business. In 1741 Pelletreau, a boy from rural Long Island, went to New York City to be trained as a silversmith by Simeon Soumaine, one of the most successful merchant artisans of his generation. Soumaine's large workshop catered to clients from Albany to Long Island as well as New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. After his seven-year apprenticeship, Pelletreau returned to his hometown to make silver tankards, porringers, tea services, pepper boxes, spoons, jewelry, buttons, and buckles for his neighbors. He was Long Island's leading silversmith, and his sons and grandsons followed in his footsteps.

Pelletreau sold more jewelry, buttons, and buckles than porringers, tankards, cans, pepper pots, teapots, cream pots, and spoons, but commissions from the Gardiners of Gardiner's Island, the Smiths of Smithtown, and William Floyd, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, brought him fame.

The book shows how Pelletreau followed New York styles, making flat-top tankards with applied ornament on handles, but for the Reverend Naphtali Daggett (1727-1780), a president of Yale, he made a dome-top tankard, 1750-55. Daggett was from New England and he may have asked for a dome top, a Boston feature. The tankard's bell finial is unknown in New York or in Boston silver. Daggett's father-in-law, Richard Smith, was one of Pelletreau's best customers, and the tankard may have been a wedding gift to Naphtali and Sarah Daggett.

More porringers are listed in Pelletreau's ledgers than any other form of hollowware. Those extant have handles in three distinct patterns. The first is a design of opposed commas and a circle, identical to one used by Simeon Soumaine. The second is a keyhole design used in New England and elsewhere. The third has elongated commas and a shield between them and may have been made as late as 1807. Of 34 recorded commissions for porringers, all but nine were orders for two or more.

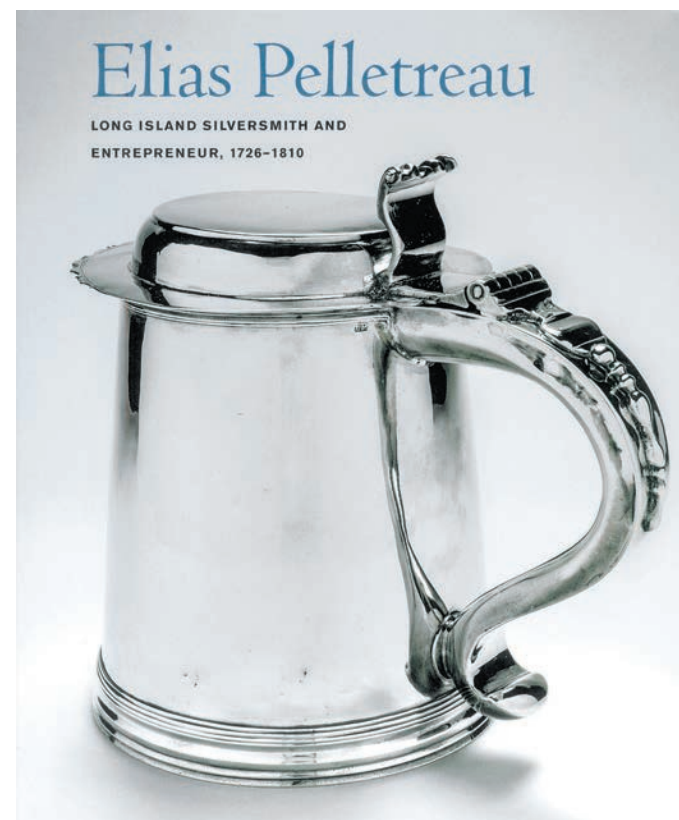
It is possible that the Pelletreau shop produced twice the 246 pieces of hollowware listed in his surviving ledgers. His first account book, now missing, contained over 190 pages, and possibly half or more of his extant silver is datable before 1765-70. Unfortunately few extant items can be traced firmly to specific ledger entries.

There are very few pieces by Pelletreau in the Neoclassical style popular in New York

Elias Pelletreau: Long Island Silversmith and Entrepreneur, 1726-1810

by Dean F. Failey, with contributions by Jennifer L. Anderson, Deborah Dependahl Waters, and David L. Barquist

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immediately after the Revolution. A "soop" spoon made for John Lyon Gardiner in 1792 has a downturned end with bright-cut ornament. A round-bodied sugar bowl made in the Pelletreau shop by his son John Pelletreau, 1810-20, is somewhat Neoclassical. The conservative Long Island community apparently preferred objects in the older styles. A tulip-shaped cann by John Pelletreau is the same shape as one made by his father 50 years earlier.

Shop ledgers show that Pelletreau provided more jewelry than hollowware. Gold beads, buckles, and buttons, sewing implements, including knitting needles and silver rings for pincushions, necklaces of gold and silver beads, and a gold cane head are listed. Pelletreau cleaned and rectified watches, removed bruises from porringers, and replaced hinges and clasps on Bibles and hymnal covers.

His innovative approach to marketing kept his business afloat. Between 1761 and 1804 Pelletreau had a network of 25 different agents in various Long Island communities from Huntington to Oyster Ponds (now Orient) and from Southold to East Hampton. Some were peddlers, and others were women who sold from their houses; they all received commissions. Others were merchants and shopkeepers or owned taverns. After the war the amount sold by commission agents decreased. By the time his grandson William Smith Pelletreau carried on the family business, it was a retail shop selling goods produced in cities, and the clamor of planishing hammers in Southampton was silenced.



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