



Fireback "IPA," 1660

Hammersmith, The Saugus Ironworks (1648-1677)

Peabody Essex Museum
Salem in History, 2006

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Saugus, MA

Cast iron

Gift of John Pickering 1874

1808



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Between 1644 and 1647, a group of British investors and the Massachusetts government supported the efforts of John Winthrop, Jr., a student of metallurgy, to build two ironworks built in the Boston area – one in Lynn (north of Boston) and one in Braintree (south of Boston). Winthrop had discovered ore deposits in the Boston area, and colonists were eager to produce their own iron products, which at the time could only be imported from Great Britain.

Hammersmith was the name given to the Lynn ironworks. It was largely a self-sufficient production where raw materials were processed into finished goods. The engines at Hammersmith were powered by water from the Saugus River that was dammed and held at a point higher than the waterwheels at the ironworks buildings (a blast furnace, forge, and rolling and slitting mill). At the blast furnace, waterwheels operated 18-foot bellows that helped to heat the furnace to a temperature of 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The blast furnace at Hammersmith ran continuously from 30 to 40 weeks until it was shut down for maintenance. Raw materials – iron ore, charcoal, and a “flux,” or substance that promotes the fusion of elements (in this case to fuse impurities that were removed), were gathered locally and combined into the high-temperature furnace. With impurities, or slag, removed, the iron was either cast into molds or poured into long trenches to later be converted into bars at the Forge. The bars might be converted into rods at the Rolling and Slitting Mill. Construction in colonial America required a great many nails, and the process to create nails by hand from bars was very difficult and time-consuming. Blacksmiths purchased bars and forged them into a range of tools (such as hoes, shovels or awls), and household items (like pots, kettles, skillets, or firebacks), and they forged thin rods into nails.

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A fireback is a metal plate installed at the back of a hearth; it serves to protect the bricks while reflecting heat back into the room. During the colonial period, firebacks were made from cast iron, such as this example that was cast at the Hammersmith ironworks. John and Alice Pickering's initials appear on this piece, which is decorated with elements similar to those used on furniture of the same period. Like other furnishings, then, the fireback was an important and costly addition to a home.

SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe this object. Can you describe its qualities in terms of size, shape, weight, or materials?
- Can you imagine how or where you might use this object if you were living in the colonial period? Would you use it inside or outside your home? Why?
- Why might someone want an object like this to be decorative?
- Knowing this object was used in the fireplace, what does that suggest about the importance of hearths in colonial homes?
- Do you think it was equally valued in a New England city like Salem as it was in a southern city like Richmond, Virginia? Why or why not?

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to examine a room in their own home. Ask them to make a list (or drawings) of objects that are “decorated” and those that seem “plain,” or unornamented. In a class discussion, consider whether decorated objects seem more important than plain objects. (Or are there other issues involved?)