Silver Spoons:

A Social History of the Nichols Family Silver Collection

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Nichols House Museum

In 1885, when the Nichols family moved to the house at 55 Mount Vernon Street, they brought with them a collection of decorative arts objects, some collected over the years and some inherited from their families, handed down by generations past. Once settled in Beacon Hill, the Nichols continued to acquire objects of art and design, filling the home with textiles, silver, and furniture, as evidenced by the extant collection and the careful documentation of acquisition and maintenance in the family's personal papers. Arthur Nichols kept thorough records of his European travel expenses with regular notations for purchases of foreign furniture, silver, and other antiques, while his wife, Elizabeth Fisher Nichols, was an avid antique collector in her own right. The Nichols also imparted these interests to their children, Rose Standish Nichols, Marian Clarke Nichols, and Margaret Homer Nichols. Rose, especially, developed a penchant for the decorative arts, with numerous receipts, appraisal reports and personal notes indicating her dedicated interest in the many objects that she and her family acquired, as well as her attempts to grow the family's collection once she acquired the house herself.

In addition to their personal, sentimental, or inherent monetary value, records also indicate that the family's decorative arts collection held social meaning for the family. In addition to purchasing their objects locally and abroad, the Nichols often received furniture, textiles, and silver as gifts from friends and family, as supported by personal letters, notes, and drawings. An inventory of the family's home dated 1906 indicates that the family received a variety of decorative arts objects to commemorate weddings, anniversaries, births, and other momentous occasions, underlining the utility of the decorative arts as bearers of social meaning. Critical to the relationship between decorative art object and social meaning is the reliance upon both domestic service and cultural exchange, a fact made clearly visible in the family's inventory of objects. The inventory's pages indicate that the Nichols family home was filled with objects

that bore the influence of cultures and craftspeople from around the world. In addition, the variety and quantity of objects owned by the Nichols family, like those of other wealthy families of their time, required diligent upkeep. Silver needed polishing and textiles needed mending, tasks that frequently fell to hired domestic workers. To understand the power of these objects, it is necessary to place them in their original social contexts.

Despite an inherent and longstanding connectivity, the histories of decorative arts, cultural exchange, and domestic service are often perceived as adjacent subjects of study rather than intimately connected histories. In the section dedicated to the family's time in the house at 55 Mount Vernon Street, June Hutchinson's *At Home on Beacon Hill* seamlessly transitions from describing the interior furnishings and decorations of the family home to explaining the role and lived experiences of the Nichols family's domestic workers, many of whom were immigrants.[1] Missing in the pages of Hutchinson's history, and other scholarship on the Nichols family's collection and the decorative arts more generally, is an interrogation of the relationship between domestic service, cultural exchange, and the decorative arts. To that end, this project aims to complicate that transition, using one aspect of the Nichols family's collection, their silver, to build a social history of the objects in their time. Present in America from the time of the earliest settlers, silver wares provide a unique window into the connection between the decorative arts, cultural exchange, and domestic service in this country. The development of the American silver trade was critical to the success of the American economy, and the acquisition and use of silver wares retained a cultural and social importance well into the 20th century. The prevalence and importance of silver in American society are further linked to a number of other related histories, including the legacies of enslavement and immigration. This project considers how all of these

[1] June Hutchinson, *At Home on Beacon Hill: Rose Standish Nichols and Her Family* (Boston: Board of Governors, Nichols House Museum), 39.

interrelated histories are present in the collection of the Nichols House Museum through a dual analysis of the Nichols' family silver and the development of the American silver trade. The "Early Generations" section will analyze the earliest pieces of silver present in the Nichols House Museum, and consider their relationship to the developing silver trade in the American colonies and the legacies of enslavement and immigration carried from Europe. The "Long Nineteenth Century" will explore the nineteenth-century examples of the Museum's silver, with attention to the ways in which those objects are products of the growing silver trade and how they engaged with histories of domestic service and cultural exchange. The final section, "The Twentieth Century," will focus on some of the latest examples of the collection to consider how these histories have been carried into the present day, and the importance of placing these objects in their social contexts.

The Early Generations

The Nichols family's silver collection contains a number of early silver wares, and as a group they reflect the many characteristics of the silver trade in early America. Ample evidence from the family's papers suggests that at least part of the Nichols family's early silver was inherited from earlier generations, supported by the fact that the Nichols family can trace its lineage to the colonial period with evidence of Elizabeth's family, the Fishers and the Homers, living in Massachusetts as early as 1669.[2] At the time that the Nichols' ancestors were

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[2] In May 1923, following Arthur's death, Elizabeth had a number of his belongings appraised, including his decorative arts collection. Among the items appraised were "silver, candlesticks, spoons of Nichols family and others…" (Elizabeth Fisher Nichols Diary, May 3, 1923. Box III: Diaries and Notebooks, Nichols House Museum, Boston, MA). Another note in the Nichols Family archives contains hand drawn sketches of "markings on Homer family silver." ("Sketch of a Chair," Box IV: Miscellany & Publications, Folder I, Nichols House Museum, Boston, MA.) In an inventory of the family's silverware a number of entries indicate that the family owned, at one time, early silver that had belonged to their immediate and extended family. (Arthur Howard Nichols Family Inventory, 1906, Nichols Family Papers: Vol. I, Nichols House Museum, Boston, MA); Family Tree of Jabin Fisher, WikiTree.com, https://www.wikitree.com/genealogy/Fisher-Family-Tree-8472

immigrating to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the silver tradition was likewise making its way across the Atlantic. The earliest silver in the colonies was carried by those colonists immigrating primarily from England, and their reasons for bringing their silver plate, or solid silver goods, along for the journey were numerous. Colonists relied on their silver plate for its utility as the dominant choice for drink and dinnerware, as well as its social and sentimental value. Given the treacherous nature of the trip, much of the silver brought to America in those early days were precious family heirlooms and other sentimental silver wares. Silver has a storied history of use in worship and ceremonial practice and is known for its ability to confer honor and signify status and wealth. Its cultural value is paralleled only by its inherent monetary value, such that it was often considered liquid currency for its ability to be melted down. This was especially true in colonial America, and those colonists who brought silver from England were often some of the wealthiest; their possession of silver plate allowed them a financial asset that could readily be sold for its weight or fashioned into new silver plate.[3]

Though the earliest colonial silver was carried by the colonists, the silver trade quickly took root in the colonies. For those colonists that carried their plate by ship, the services of silversmiths were necessary to maintain and repair their silver, or to melt it down for currency. The establishment of the silver trade in America was, by necessity, modeled on the trade in Europe, forming a reliance on immigration from the start. The earliest silversmiths in the colonies were European immigrants, and though they left behind the strict regulations of the European guild system, they carried with them the learned traditions of their trade as well as the knowledge and practices of their shops in Europe. They also inherited the traditional elevated status of the silversmith that was established in the medieval period. New England silversmiths

[3] Beth Wees and Medill Higgins Harvey, *Early American Silver in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art), 3-4.

John Hull (1624 – 1683) and Robert Sanderson, Sr. (1608 – 1693) exemplify this idea, as both silversmiths, merchants, and leaders of the community.[4] Because silver was so costly, the silversmith dealt almost exclusively with an elite clientele. The services they provided for the wealthy made them highly respected members of society, viewed as both trustworthy and essential. The status of the silversmith would change during the period of the Renaissance, as the work of the painter, sculptor, and architect superseded that of the silversmith, but, as Graham Hood explains, the Renaissance did not arrive in America until the beginning of the 18th century, and thus the early American silversmith enjoyed an elevated status in society for at least a century.[5]

Even as the American silver trade continued to mature, the American taste for silver was consistently influenced by the styles of Europe, specifically of England. A substantial amount of silver continued to be imported from England, which remained the global tastemaker of silver into the 18th century. Early settlers of the 17th and 18th century often preferred English silver to that made by American silversmiths, and it was not uncommon for patrons to order silver from England despite a number of quality silversmiths actively working in their city. Complex silver forms, like bread baskets and candlesticks, were almost exclusively imported from English silversmiths, but smaller, less expensive items like snuffboxes and buckles were imported as well.[6] In addition, silversmiths advertised the availability of imported silver in their shops and expressed the desire to match the quality of those imported pieces.[7] This may explain the presence of a number of early European silver wares in the Nichols family collection, including a

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[4] Rose Standish Nichols profiled John Hull in her unpublished manuscript on the decorative arts. The manuscript is in the collection of Historic New England (Rose Standish Nichols unpublished manuscript collection, 1920s-1995, Historic New England, Boston, MA).
[5] Graham Hood, *American Silver: A History of Style, 1650-1900* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 12-13.
[6] Wees and Harvey, 9.
[7] Hood, 13.

sterling silver tablespoon (1961.323) (fig. 1) and a sterling silver cream pitcher or gravy boat (1961.300) (fig. 2), engraved for Arthur Howard Nichols and Elizabeth Fisher Nichols, respectively. Both examples bear marks that indicate they were crafted in England in 1783, with the tablespoon crafted by Walter Tweedie and the pitcher crafted by Samuel Godbehere and Edward Wigan. Because silver was marked in the country of origin, it is difficult to know if these objects were purchased in England or imported and sold through an American silversmith. Their later engravings are also representative of another common trend in the American silver trade. With each crafted nearly 60 years before their births, it is safe to assume that both the tablespoon and pitcher were engraved for Arthur and Elizabeth decades after the objects were first made. This was a common practice in the silver trade. Just as older silver plate could be melted down for cash or to be fashioned into something new, older plate could also be refreshed by the addition of an engraving or the replacement of one existing. Simple initials may not have required the services of a separate chaser or engraver, but these silversmiths, who specialized in decorative techniques, were prized for their artistic abilities. Immigrant chasers and engravers were especially valued given their training, and it was not uncommon for these more specialized silversmiths to enter into agreements with silversmiths who owned retail shops. This is evidenced in the advertising language of early newspapers. In 1748, the Pennsylvania Gazette ran an advertisement that read: “Engraving on Gold, Silver, Pewter done by Lawrence Herbert, from London, at Philip Syng’s, Goldsmith, in Frontstreet.”[8] Unfortunately, the names of many immigrant chasers and engravers are now unknown due to the nature of their work. They rarely signed the silver they worked on and many of those active in the trade did not advertise in early

[8] Wees and Harvey, 11.

newspapers, which has resulted in the labor of immigrant silversmiths going largely unrecognized.

The silver trade in early America was also modeled off of the European tradition in relation to social behavior. Those financially capable of dealing in silver were motivated by the promise of upward mobility that a collection of fine silver might offer, capable of providing financial security as well as increased social standing. Importantly, though, the possession of silver plate represented more than the potential for financial wealth. The early American silver trade inherited the European trade's inherent connection with enslavement and domestic service, a connection formed over hundreds of years and made visible in a number of early silver wares in the Nichols family collection. Importantly, any discussion of silver's longstanding connection to enslavement must address the full scope of the trade's involvement with slavery, an involvement that extended beyond the dining room. From the 16th century, the labor of enslaved people was critical to the silver trade in every way, from the mining of silver in mining towns like Potosí, in what is now known as Bolivia, to the work that took place in silversmith shops, to the use and maintenance of silver wares at the dining table. Before the American silver trade found footing, the English silver trade was enmeshed in the transatlantic slave trade as Britain became the dominant force in enslaving and trading African men, women, and children into the 18th century. It is important to note that not all Black Britons or Africans were enslaved or employed as domestic servants before the legal end of slavery in Britain in 1807. Many worked in a variety of professions including artisans, shopkeepers, sailors, laborers, and more. The most common profession, however, for both white and Black populations was that of domestic service, and Black domestic workers were more likely to be underpaid or unpaid entirely.[9]

[9] "Silver Service Slavery: The Black Presence in the White Home," Victoria & Albert Museum, http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/silver-service-slavery-the-black-presence-in-the-white-home/

Likewise, England was not the only country involved in both the silver and slave trades: both were vast, spanning multiple continents and extending over centuries. The Nichols House Museum's collection reflects this through several examples of Portuguese silver, including what may be the earliest example in the collection. The beaded silver salver (T-89) (fig. 3) is estimated to have been crafted between 1750 and 1799, and bears the initials "JAPM" or "IAPM."[10] Portugal was a major hub of the global silver trade during the period, connecting the "New World" of North and South America with Asia. Evidence suggests that in the 17th century, Portugal traded huge numbers of enslaved people from Africa for silver from Brazil and Peru.[11]

Though the silver trade's association with the slave trade extended far beyond the dining room, that was primarily where it became most visible for the consumer. New commodities of transatlantic trade like coffee, chocolate, and tea necessitated the proliferation of new silver forms which in turn necessitated domestic labor to complete the dining rituals. The relationship between domestic labor, particularly enslaved domestic labor, and silver is reflected in the visual culture of the period. From the Victoria & Albert Museum, plate II of William Hogarth's 1732 etching, "A Harlot's Progress," depicts a white man and woman amid an overturned tea table (fig. 4). A Black child, presumably enslaved given the silver collar, stands to the side with a silver tea kettle. This relationship is made expressly clear on another example in the Victoria & Albert Museum, an English soft-paste porcelain tea-bowl and saucer dated 1756-57 (fig. 5). The bowl and saucer feature the same on-glaze transfer printed design, a scene of a white couple taking tea outdoors. Off to one side, a Black servant pours water from a kettle into a teapot.

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[10] Though this salver is present in the Nichols House Museum collection, it is unknown if it was owned by the Nichols family. The engraved initials are not related to any known member of the Nichols family and documentation has not survived related to the piece's origin.
[11] Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giráldez, "Born With a 'Silver Spoon': The Origin of World Trade in 1571, *Journal of World History* 6, no. 2, Fall 1995, 216.

Images like these were common during the period and underlined the mutually reinforcing relationship between the commodities of colonialism, enslaved labor, domestic labor, and the silver trade.

This relationship is reflected, too, in the Nichols family's early silver, the majority of which is dining ware. Examples include a sterling silver cream pitcher from London dated 1795 (1961.301) (fig. 6), an Irish Robert Breading teapot from the late 18th century (1961.358) (fig. 7), and a set of four sterling silver teaspoons crafted by John Powers and Michael Keating, also from the late 18th century (T-90.1-4) (fig. 8). It is known that the Nichols family employed domestic servants from before the time the family moved to Beacon Hill in 1885, and surviving family papers indicate that handling the silver and assisting with dining practices was very much a part of those employees' duties, as is supported by the Nichols' substantial collection of dining silver.[12] Despite these workers' direct engagement with silver service, it is important to note that the domestic laborers of the Nichols house lived vastly different experiences than enslaved people, like those depicted in Hogarth's engraving and the porcelain bowl and saucer. Paid domestic laborers were certainly governed by social hierarchies in Boston, and immigrants especially were subject to discrimination and violence, but their lived experiences were not comparable to those enslaved. The link between paid domestic work and enslaved labor, in relation to silver, relied on the visual and cultural histories of silver service that preceded them.

The Long 19th Century

The growth of the family's silver collection, both in number and technical complexity, in the 19th century mirrors the development of the American silver trade. As silver historian Charles

[12] Rachel Kirby, "From Maids to Mary King: Stories and Spaces of the Nichols House Employees," Nichols House Museum, 2017.

Venable has explained, the trade in America witnessed a remarkable development over the course of a century. The maturation of the American nation allowed for the emergence of a number of highly successful American-born silversmiths. Still modeled after the trade in Europe, silversmiths operating in the early decades of the 19th century worked in small shops that employed few people and crafted silver objects by hand with little assistance from machinery. These shops provided services for minimal amount of local well-to-do clientele, employed little advertising, and produced objects that were largely modeled after European forms and designs. By the end of the 19th century, the trade had completely transformed from trade to industry with the success of several large silver manufacturing firms making the United States a global leader in silver design and production.[13] The reasons for this remarkable shift, which took place in only a 50-odd year period, are numerous, but are primarily related to the industrial revolution – increased technological development, the reorganization of labor and production, the emergence of the silversmith entrepreneur, and increased demand from desirous consumers. Though many of these changes were novel in the United States, they relied on familiar traditions of domestic service and immigration.

The traditional date given for the start of the shift in the American silver trade is typically 1840. This was the time period in which the major household silver manufactories, like Tiffany & Co. and Gorham Mfg. Co., were first finding their footing, and the period in which several technological advancements were being introduced. Arthur Nichols and Elizabeth Fisher Homer were born at the start of this revolution, born in 1840 and 1844 respectively. According to the 1906 family inventory, Arthur and Elizabeth inherited a sizable amount of early silver from their families. Pages of the inventory are dedicated to silver passed down from Arthur's parents, John

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[13] Charles Venable, *Silver in America, 1840-1940: A Century of Splendour* (London: Harry N. Abrams), 1994.

P. Nichols (1798-1891) and Mary Ann Clark Nichols (1810-1885), Elizabeth's parents, Thomas Johnston Homer (1813-1880) and Mary Elizabeth Fisher Homer (1819-1899), Elizabeth's maternal grandparents, Jabez Fisher (1786-1843) and Hannah Bradford Fisher (1788-1871), and Elizabeth's paternal grandparents, Joseph Warren Homer (1775-1863) and Sarah Rea Homer (1773-1834).[14] These early silver wares are not present in the current collection of the Nichols House Museum, but descriptions of them indicate that they were typical of form and design in the period, primarily silver tea and tablespoons, salt spoons, forks, and knives.[15] By the time of Arthur and Elizabeth's engagement in 1869, their silver collection reflected the great change occurring in the trade.

The newlywed Nichols received a substantial amount of silver plate as wedding gifts. This reflected both the increased accessibility of silver wares and the increased demand for new silver forms and designs. The family inventory indicates that the Nichols received a silver soup ladle lettered "LFH" (Lizzie Fisher Homer), two silver gravy ladles lettered "H," a large silver preserve spoon, a silver cheese scoop, a half dozen silver teaspoons in a leaf pattern and lettered "H," a silver pie knife lettered "H" (possibly 1961.324.8) (fig. 9), a silver sugar spoon sifter, two silver napkin rings, eight silver forks lettered "H," and two large silver spoons lettered "H."[16] The breadth of forms demonstrated by their wedding silver is indicative of the many changes that had occurred in just a few decades. One of the most significant was the increased accessibility of silver due to both the discovery of the Comstock Lode in 1859 and technological advancement in silver manufacturing. The Comstock Lode, a lode of silver ore discovered under Mount Davidson in Virginia City, Nevada, provided a domestic source of raw silver for American

[14] Arthur Howard Nichols Family Inventory, 1906, Nichols Family Papers: Vol. I, Nichols House Museum, Boston, MA.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

silversmiths thereby reducing the cost of silver plate, while decades of technological advancements allowed for easier, faster construction of holloware. The introduction of electricity to traditional silver techniques, such as spinning and galvanizing, allowed a day's work to be cut down to just a few hours.

In addition to technological advancement and increased accessibility of raw material, silver plate became more accessible to the average consumer because of the immense shifts taking place in the organization of silversmith labor occurring across the nation. Where the silversmith of the early 19th century would labor in a small workshop with few employees, the silversmith of the mid to late 19th century would more often labor under the supervision of a foreman. Silversmith work became more specialized, with certain workers performing certain tasks to complete an object. This was especially true of large silver manufacturing companies like Tiffany & Co. or Gorham Mfg. Co., which organized the labor of their silversmiths into various departments. The shift from trade to industry is illustrated in the Nichols family silver collection, especially a sterling silver ladle (1961.325) (fig. 10) given to Arthur and Elizabeth for their 25th wedding anniversary in 1894. The ladle was manufactured by William B. Durgin Co., a silversmith out of New Hampshire, and sold in Boston by the still-extant Shreve, Crump & Low. Before William B. Durgin Co. became an important silver manufacturer in the second half of the 19th century, the company started out as a small silversmith's shop in Concord, New Hampshire specializing in the production of silver spoons in the 1840s. Durgin incorporated the company in the mid-1850s and increasingly grew the business over the years, adding the manufacture of silverware and transitioning from shop to factory. The firm eventually grew to be one of the largest manufacturers of holloware and flatware in the United States, producing almost exclusively for the wholesale trade, and was eventually acquired by Gorham Mfg. Co. in the

early 20th century.[17] At the time of the ladle's purchase in 1894, William B. Durgin Co. was at the height of production and just on the cusp of being acquired by Gorham Mfg. Co. The presence of the ladle in the Nichols family's collection illustrates the rapid shift from trade to industry.

As the silver trade transitioned to industry, it continued to rely on the labor of immigrant craftspeople who crafted some of the most technically complex and important examples of silver during the period. In the 19th century, as in the colonial period, many of the most talented and sought after chasers and engravers were immigrants, and they filled the ranks of the growing number of silver manufactories that emerged in the second half of the century. Even further, the most fashionable silver designs and forms continued to be shaped by the tastes of Europe and the Far East. Charles Venable notes that many holloware forms produced in America in the 19th century were outright copies of foreign-made work.[18] At the same time, immigrants occupied a tenuous place in society given their simultaneous importance to American production and increasing subjection to discrimination, racism, and xenophobia. It is estimated that between 1820 and 1845, anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 immigrants entered the United States each year. Due to increased economic instability in Germany and famine in Ireland, those numbers increased to 2.9 million in the years between 1845 and 1854.[19] Nativist sentiment was exemplified by the Know Nothing Party, a political third party formed in the 1850s and highly active in cities like Boston and New York which were hubs for Irish immigrants. Proponents of the Nativist party practiced religious discrimination especially, and were notorious for anti-

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[17] Venable, 74.
[18] Venable, 55.
[19] Lorraine Boissoneault, "How the 19th-Century Know Nothing Party Reshaped American Politics." Smithsonian Magazine, January 26, 2017. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/immigrants-conspiracies-and-secret-society-launched-american-nativism-180961915/

Catholic and anti-Irish discrimination. In Boston, Know Nothing posters advertised the following: "All Catholics and all persons who favor the Catholic Church are…vile imposters, liars, villains, and cowardly cutthroats."[20]

Research has shown that a tension between reliance on and disdain for immigrant labor was also at play at 55 Mount Vernon Street. Rachel Kirby's research on the employees of the Nichols House indicates that Arthur and Elizabeth could, at times, express contempt for their Irish immigrant domestic employees, despite their continual care for the home, the family, and their belongings. Kirby notes that it was not uncommon for Elizabeth to refer to her servants and maids as the generic "Bridget," a derogatory term used for Irish women. Though it is unclear, based on Elizabeth's records, if she used "Bridget" to refer to a single individual or a more general group, additional information in the archives suggests that the Nichols family often distrusted, if not disrespected, their domestic workers.[21] In a letter dated May 22, 1902, Arthur wrote to Elizabeth: "We continue to hear unfavorable as to the maid who left us last week. Why did we not enquire of her last employer? It looks now as if she might have been the thief of our missing silver."[22] Though it is impossible to know if these events were related, some years later Arthur took extra precaution with the family silver in advance of a months-long trip to Europe. His receipt book indicates that on July 13, 1909, Arthur entrusted some portion of his silver with Boston Safe Deposit and Trust Company, paying $1.00 for the storage.[23] In spite of the seeming concern about the safety of family's silver, the Nichols family continued to acquire new silver throughout the 19th century, especially dining silver. These records allow for a greater

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Kirby, 14.
[22] Arthur Howard Nichols to Elizabeth Fisher Homer Nichols, May 22, 1902, Papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff Family (A-107, Folder 11), Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
[23] Arthur Howard Nichols, Travel Diary, July 13, 1909. Box 8: Diaries and Notebooks, Folder 9, Nichols House Museum, Boston, MA.

understanding of how the Nichols family engaged in paradoxical tensions also facing the nation– a reliance on domestic, and often immigrant, service while seemingly harboring distrust and contempt for the workers they employed.

The 20th Century

The diversity and breadth of the Nichols family's twentieth-century silver is further indicative of larger trends in the American silver trade, including a variety in form and function. The Nichols family archives indicate that the Nichols children became silver collectors in their own right, and as the 19th century moved into the 20th, they, too, began to acquire more silver plate. The 1906 family inventory expressly delineates silver belonging to Rose and Marian in two sections titled: "Property of Rose S. Nichols" and "Property of Marian C. Nichols." The girls' silver plate, as recorded in the inventory, was primarily collected during their childhood and given to them by close family members and friends. Marian received a silver mug from "Grandmother Nichols" engraved with her date of birth, a teaspoon from her maternal grandmother with the engraving "M.C.N. from M.E.H. 1884," a silver fork engraved "M.C.N 1883," a napkin ring, and a cream pitcher. Rose's collection was similar: a silver mug from Rose S. Whiting, a dessert spoon gifted by a doctor, a fork lettered "R.S.N 1888" and a teaspoon lettered "R.S.N from M.E.H 1884," both from her grandmother Mrs. T.J. Homer, a filigree bandy dish, and a napkin ring.[24] These records are revelatory in a number of ways. Primarily, they indicate that the ownership of silver plate began at an early age in the Nichols family and the Nichols children were granted the authority and autonomy to own "property." This likely had an impact on the way they were to view the decorative arts in the future. Rose, especially,

[24] Family Inventory, 1906, Nichols House Museum, Boston, MA.

became heavily interested in art and design and continued to collect decorative objects into her adolescence and adulthood, including after she acquired the house at 55 Mount Vernon Street in 1930, following the death of her mother.

Rose's interest in art and design is well documented in numerous research publications. She was trained in fine art and architecture and became a well-established and successful landscape designer. Over the course of a career that spanned 40 years, Rose designed 71 gardens across America, from Massachusetts to California.[25] Rose's career and interest in the arts took her to many countries, most frequently those in Europe. Surviving receipts and records, as well as silver objects in the current collection, indicate that Rose collected a number of silver objects during her European travels. A number of silver wares in the collection indicate Rose's growing interest in the Renaissance Revival occurring in America from about 1890-1930. Rose designed a number of Renaissance-inspired gardens throughout her career and even published an article for *The House Beautiful* entitled "The New Renaissance Gardens of Italy," in 1926. Eight standard silver fruit knives (1961.322.1-8) (fig. 11) in the Nichols family collection further underline Rose's interest in Italian culture. The knives, made in Venice, are engraved "RSN," and were crafted or retailed sometime during the late 19th or early 20th century by the Venetian firm Missiaglia. Several other Italian examples exist in the Nichols collection, including a set of three standard silver coffee spoons with pressed Baiocchi (currency of the papal state) coin bowls (1961.332.1-3) (fig. 12), and a Venetian sugar bowl (1961.305a-b) (fig. 13), both from the late 19th or early 20th century. Rose also collected silver elsewhere during her European travels. On March 5, 1928 she had a number of silver objects appraised by Salao de Antiguidades in Lisbon, Portugal. The objects, which included three silver trays, two creamers, a tea caddy, and

[25] "Rose Standish Nichols (1872-1960)," Nichols House Museum, https://www.nicholshousemuseum.org/rose-standish-.nichols/

an inkstand, were "guaranteed to be more than 100 years old."[26] It is unknown if any of these objects made it into the Nichols family silver collection, but an example of Portuguese silver is present in the collection in the form of a lamb-shaped toothpick holder (T-83) (fig. 14). Rose reportedly gifted the toothpick holder, crafted in the late 19th century, to her friend, Ethel Randolph Thayer.

Rose's interest in European art and design and the presence of a number of 20th-century foreign-made silver wares in the Nichols family collection reflects the continued reliance of American consumers on the trends of foreign nations, especially those of Europe. At the same time, American consumers continued to rely on the labor of immigrant workers to produce "American-made" objects at home. As the United States transitioned from a largely rural agrarian society to an industrial economy with major urban centers, immigrant workers became a critical part of the reorganization of labor, such that in 1920 first and second-generation immigrants made up half of the manufacturing workforce in the United States.[27] In spite of their critical contribution to the U.S. economy, immigrants faced increasing discrimination and racial violence in the early years of the 20th century, both legally and socially. Politicians increased their efforts to pass anti-immigration laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Immigration Act of 1891, the Immigration Act of 1903, and the Immigration Act of 1913. These acts regulated immigration by excluding classes of people based on race, political beliefs, and health and disability status. The most sweeping of these acts was the Immigration Act of 1924, which "limited the number of immigrants allowed entry into the United States through a national origins quota." This quota only allowed a small number of people per nationality, completely

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[26] Receipt from Salao de Antiguidades, Box 9: Miscellany & Publications, Folder 1, Nichols House Museum, Boston, MA.
[27] Charles Hirschman and Elizabeth Mogford, "Immigration and the Industrial Revolution From 1880 to 1920," *Soc Sci Res. 38,* no. 4 (2009): 897-920. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2760060/

excluding immigrants from countries in Asia. Before these sweeping immigration exclusion acts, intended to promote white homogeneity, the immigrant workforce accounted for some of the most "dirty, dangerous, and heavily regimented" jobs available in this country.[28]

Coinciding with the campaign to curb immigration was a similar trend in the decorative arts. The Colonial Revival, a design style that favored simplified forms with little ornamentation, peaked in the early years of the 20th century, affecting a variety of industries but likely most visible in that of silver. As Charles Venable has explained, the late second half of the 19th century was a period of intense interest in foreign culture, especially in art and design. Silversmiths, especially, turned to the cultures of Asia and Europe for inspiration, if not outright appropriation. Though these designs enjoyed great popularity for decades, there emerged a call for an "American style" towards the end of the century. Inspired by the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, these reformers encouraged American artists and designers to develop a style that was strictly American. Some silversmiths did attempt to achieve an American style, using Native American imagery and depictions of flora and fauna indigenous to North America (fig. 15), but no national style ever took hold. Instead, Americans turned to their colonial beginnings as a way to, according to Charles Venable, "simultaneously satisfy their dual longing for exotic escapism and heightened nationalism."[29] Venable explains that by the late 19th century, most Americans were removed from their colonial ancestors by at least two full generations. This was true, too, for the Nichols children. Without the lived experience of the colonial period, these Americans constructed the past as a sort of utopia, "a mental safe haven from the mounting pressures of an America caught in the grip of industrialization, urbanization,

[28] Ibid.
[29] Venable, 269.

and massive immigration."[30] Those without colonial family heirlooms, as the Nichols had, were left to purchase antiques or other reproductions, and magazines and etiquette books began to advise the American consumer in the ways that they might use decorative objects to transform themselves. The 1906 publication *The Quest of the Colonial* advertised towards "people desiring to lay claim to a respectable ancestry," a non-subtle link to the relationship between the Colonial Revival, nativism, and xenophobia.[31]

At the peak of the Colonial Revival's popularity, Rose Standish Nichols channeled her interests in art and design into a manuscript on the decorative arts. From the 1920s to the 1940s, Rose continued to work on the manuscript, which considers all mediums from glass and silver to textiles and furniture. Organized chronologically, Rose's work places heavy emphasis on colonial contributions to the nation's decorative arts, likely the result of the ongoing Colonial Revival. Several examples from the family's archives indicate that while crafting her manuscript, Rose may have revisited the Nichols family's colonial silver. From the unpublished manuscript, a page in the chapter on silver and silversmiths features a number of drawings of silver objects, several of which are recognizable as examples of Nichols family silver (fig. 16). The drawings depict two categories of silver, 1760-1800 and 1800-1830. In the earlier category, Rose drew a creamer or pitcher (possibly 1961.301) (fig. 6), a "straight-sided teapot" (possibly 1961.358) (fig. 7), and an unrecognizable sugar bowl. In the latter category, Rose drew an unrecognizable cup and an unrecognizable "gadrooned oblong sugar bowl."[32] Another indication that Rose may have revisited the family's early silver exists in a handwritten note that includes drawings of a

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Mary Miley Theobald, "The Colonial Revival: The Past That Never Dies," *Colonial Williamsburg Journal,* Summer 2002, https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/Foundation/journal/Summer02/revival.cfm.
[32] Rose Standish Nichols unpublished manuscript collection, 1920s-1995, Chapter IX, Historic New England, Boston, MA.

number of early silver hallmarks with the title "Markings on Homer family silver." A notation at the bottom of the note reads: "JSH – Joseph & Sarah."[33] This likely refers to Rose's great-grandparents, Joseph Homer and Sarah Rea Homer, who passed down their silver to the Nichols family according to the 1906 inventory.

While Rose worked on the manuscript she continued to live in the house at 55 Mount Vernon Street, and in the early years she altered the regular routines of the house to fit her needs. Without her parents or siblings living alongside her, Rose found herself without the need for live-in domestic help, relying primarily on the work of day servants.[34] She busied herself with her landscape designs, her desire to grow the family's collection, the decorative arts manuscript, and her activism as both a suffragette and pacifist. After decades of living in the house alone, Rose eventually hired a live-in caretaker to assist her with daily tasks in 1957. At age 85, Rose employed Mary King, an Irish immigrant from Galway, Ireland. Like many of the domestic workers who had labored in the Nichols House before her, Mary immigrated to the United States in search of work.[35] She was also responsible for many of the same tasks as her predecessors – cooking and cleaning, assisting Rose and her guests during teatime, and, according to Driscoll and Negroponte, "polishing the silver tea urn until it gleamed so brightly that it was the first thing you saw when you entered the dining room."[36] Unlike those workers however, as Rachel Kirby has noted, Mary occupied a decidedly different social space in the house. With Rose as the homeowner, the culture of the house at 55 Mount Vernon had changed. Mary did not occupy the rooms formerly reserved for live-in servants, but lived in Arthur and Elizabeth's former bedroom

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[33] "Sketch of a Chair," Box 9: Miscellany & Publications, Folder I, Nichols House Museum, Boston, MA.
[34] Kirby, 18.
[35] Kirby, 18.
[36] Elizabeth Driscoll and Elaine Negroponte, *Tea with Miss Rose: Recipes & Reminiscences of Boston's Teacup Society* (Boston: Mount Vernon Press, 2009): 60.

on the third floor across from Rose. She also functioned as a companion for her aging employer who increasingly needed assistance.[37] In this way, another tension emerges between the clearly shifting ideals about social hierarchy and the objects, some centuries old, that filled the house: though Mary King occupied a new social space with less hierarchical bounds, her duties found her using objects steeped in classist and xenophobic traditions that bound her predecessors.

After acquiring the house in Beacon Hill, Rose took up the task of growing the Nichols family's decorative arts collection with the idea of later turning the house into a museum dedicated to the memory of her parents.[38] Following her death in 1960, the house at 55 Mount Vernon Street became the Nichols House Museum, and Mary King continued to live in the bedroom on the third floor as the home's caretaker, assisting the various staff of the house as the collection shifted from private to public. Some objects in the collection, without additional utility, likely went untouched after Rose's death, but Mary continued to polish the silver collection; a testament to its continued relevance even centuries after the first piece was made. Now, the surviving collection and the family's papers are the greatest window into how the Nichols silver was used over the years. Records indicate that the collection fluctuated over time and was once much larger than is reflected in the current collection, possibly even twice the size. The 1906 inventory indicates that at that time the family owned a greater amount of silver than is currently present in the collection, including a number of very early silver wares. As with any collection, tastes and styles change and its possible that some objects were lost to time, sold for profit, or melted down to make something new. The objects that have survived, and their accompanying records, allow us to piece together their histories. When placed in their social and cultural context, these objects reveal the values and ideas of those who make, own, use, and care

[37] Kirby, 18.
[38] Ibid.

for them, and allow us to see how the Nichols family's silver is linked to long traditions of domestic service, cultural exchange, appropriation, and xenophobia. The history of the Nichols' silver collection is just one part of their engagement with these systems, but their silver spoons reflect a more complicated portrait of the family in their time.

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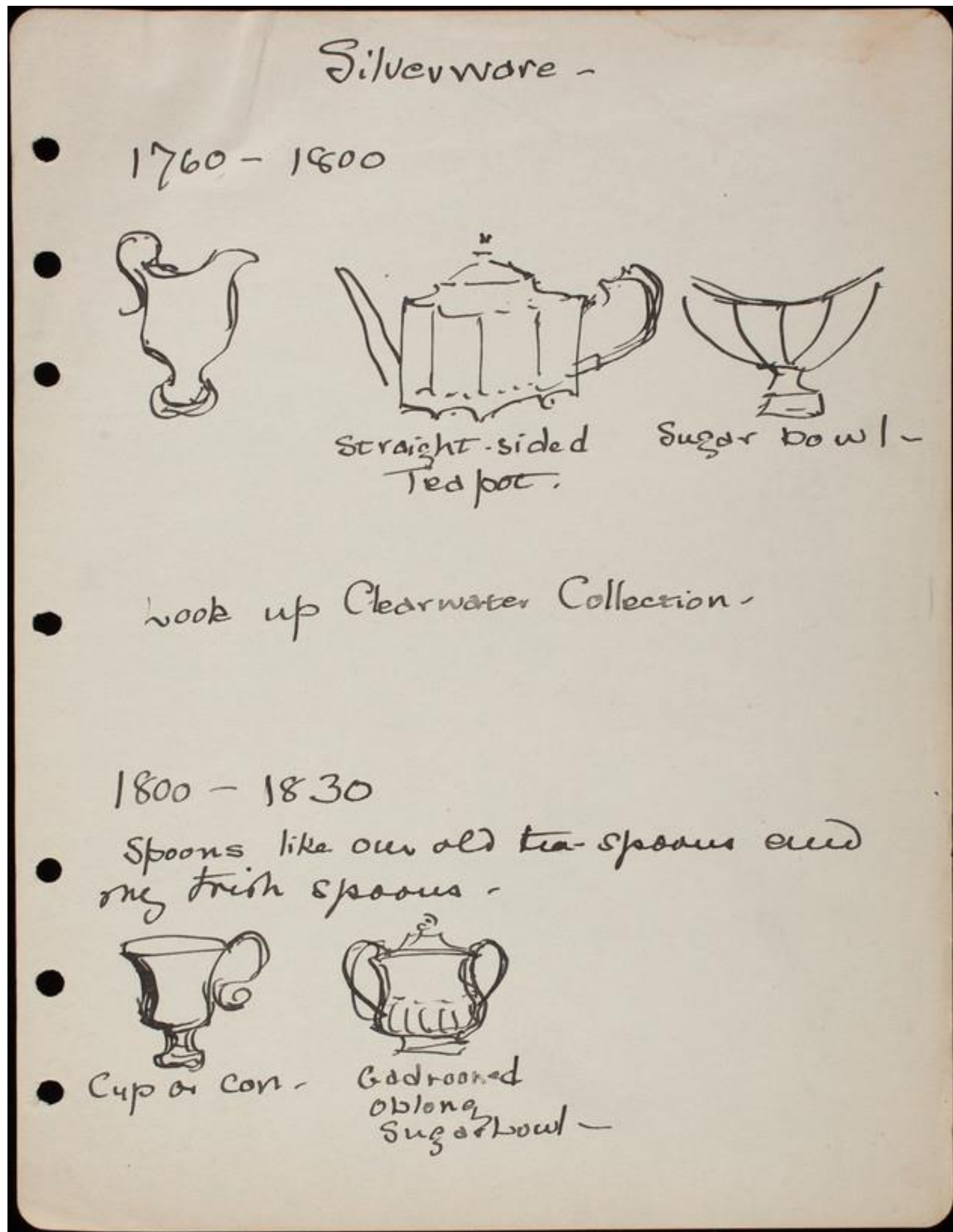

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