

Rappa' Forge Posnet?

By

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A posnet is a metal cooking pot with three feet and a handle. Most are cast bronze or cast iron, and they are sometimes referred to as skillets. The posnets of interest in this article were cast both in the British Isles and in America throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

The stated purpose of this brief article is to present a signed, 18th century, bronze posnet in an effort to locate additional examples and, hopefully, determine its maker and place of origin (Fig 1, IH posnet). Preparation of this article was at the suggestion of our colleague, noted Virginia material-culture scholar and author, Giles Cromwell.



Figure 1

This posnet is signed with the maker's initials, IH, cast into its handle, along with the size of the pot, 4 for four quarts (Fig. 2, IH initials and 4). Originally, the pot was supported on three feet, now lost. A faint remnant of the round casting sprue is visible to the far-left center in the worn area on the outside of the bottom (Fig. 3, Bottom view of IH posnet. Note the three-finger pattern extending from the missing foot onto the pot wall. This pattern is repeated at the locations of the other two feet.).



Figure2



Figure 3

The diameter of the pot is 9". The handle extends 8 1/2" from the pot rim, and the central depth of the bowl is 4 1/2". As can be seen in Fig. 3, the handle is reinforced below the rim with a cast wedge.

This particular IH posnet was discovered around 35 years ago in a Norfolk, Virginia yard sale. It was of particular interest because over the years, the authors have seen roughly a half-dozen of these posnets marked, IH, all in eastern Virginia. Numerous similar posnets with various maker's marks have been imported from the British Isles, likely for use during the 18th century, as well as by antiques dealers for collectors in the 20th century.

Finding multiple examples of a common form with the same maker's initials in a fairly restricted geographic area leads to the question, were they made locally? Certainly, foundries in Virginia were casting iron, bronze, and brass throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Positive proof of this is the well-known, clearly marked, circa 1790, bronze posnets cast by John Taylor in Richmond, Virginia (Fig. 4, Taylor posnet).



Figure 4

If the IH posnets were, indeed, manufactured in Virginia, who could have been the likely maker? The IH initials immediately lead to James Hunter, who owned and operated a massive industrial complex, the Rappahannock Forge, above Falmouth, Virginia, across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg at the fall line of the river. Also, referred to as Rappa' Forge, it is best known for manufacturing and repairing arms for the Americans during the Revolutionary War. However, its output was far more extensive than arms production and repair. Colleague, Jerrilynn Eby MacGregor, in her 2007 book, *Laying The Hoe, A Century of Iron Manufacturing in Stafford County, Virginia*, covers the Rappahannock Forge in detail. There was a foundry in the Rappahannock Forge complex, and it certainly would have been capable of producing the IH posnets. However, both Cromwell and MacGregor have studied the sparse records and have examined extensive collections of artifacts recovered at the Rappahannock Forge site, and there is currently no evidence that it was doing so.

A brief general discussion of cast posnets should be helpful here. Figure 5 shows three cast iron posnets with pot diameters ranging in size from 3" to 5 1/4" to 6 1/4" (Fig. 5, Cast iron posnets found in Virginia). All three have Virginia discovery histories and were likely made in one of the numerous iron furnaces and foundries in the Valley of Virginia in the first half of the 19th century. Larger cast iron examples up to 9 1/4" are also commonly encountered in Virginia. Similar cast iron posnets were being made in other east coast states during the same timeframe as well.



Figure 5

Note in Fig. 6 the linear sprue marks on the bottoms of the three posnets in Fig. 5 (Fig. 6, Bottom view of posnets in Fig. 5).



Figure 6

A bronze posnet marked, Y 4, was found by antiques picker, Don Williams (deceased), in 1987 (Fig. 7, Y 4 posnet). It was likely imported from England by antiques dealer, Frank Dickinson (deceased), of Swan Tavern Antiques. This example has a pot diameter of 9" and handle length of 9".



Figure 7

Posnet Y 4 retains its original feet; and as seen on the IH posnet in Figs. 1 - 3, it, too, has the three-finger pattern extending from the feet onto the pot wall (Fig. 8, Bottom view of posnet Y 4). Likewise, it has the handle reinforced below the rim with a cast wedge (See Fig. 3).

However, unlike the IH posnet with a round sprue mark (See Fig. 3), the Y 4 posnet has a linear sprue mark.

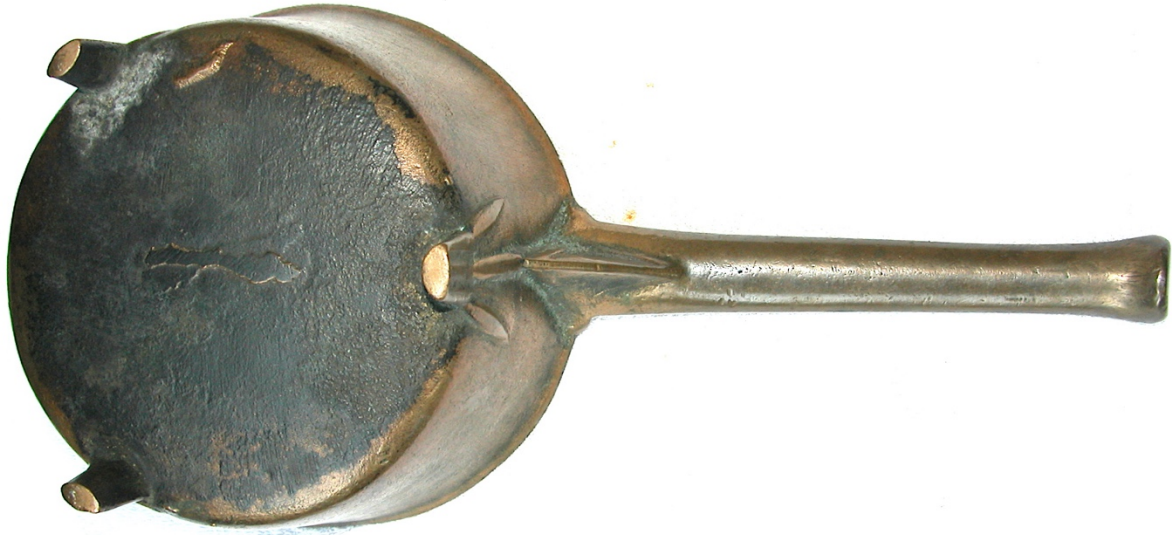


Figure 8

A quite large bronze posnet with an interesting wrought-iron handle repair has a discovery history in the Richmond, Virginia, area (Fig. 9, Large posnet). It has a diameter of $12 \frac{3}{4}$ ", stands $8 \frac{5}{8}$ " high, has a bowl depth of $6 \frac{1}{4}$ ", a handle length of $13 \frac{1}{2}$ ", and has an overall length along the handle and across the bowl of $26 \frac{1}{2}$ ". On the bottom of this posnet, there is a round sprue mark that clearly indicates that the sprue was removed with a saw and the mark was subsequently peened (Fig. 10, Details of bottom and peened sprue mark).

The handle has a serpentine-and-dot decoration along its length, unlike the more linear designs on the more commonly found bronze posnets. The three-finger patterns extending from the feet onto the pot wall as seen in Fig. 3 and Fig. 8 are not encountered on this example.



Figure 9



Figure 10

While conducting research online, two interesting posnets were found germane to those in this article. The first example is smaller, but otherwise nearly identical in construction and decoration, to the posnet in Fig. 9 (Fig. 11, Posnet similar to Fig. 9).



Figure 11

As with the posnet in Fig. 9, this one has the same round sprue mark that has been sawn and peened (Fig. 12, Bottom of Fig. 11) (See Fig. 10), the same serpentine-and-dot decoration on the handle (Fig. 13, Handle of Fig. 11) (See Fig. 9), and is lacking the three-finger pattern extending from the feet onto the pot wall. The bowl diameter is $8 \frac{5}{8}$ ", and the overall length along the handle and across the bowl is $20 \frac{1}{4}$ ". It is advertised for sale on eBay by Mason Antiques (Dec. 2021). Obviously, these two posnets were made in the same foundry.



Figure 12



Figure 13

The next online example is clearly marked IH followed by a faint 4 (Fig. 14, Second posnet marked IH) (Fig. 15, Handle of Fig. 14). This posnet is quite similar to, but not exactly the same as, the IH posnet in Fig. 1. In addition to the IH and 4 markings, this one also has the wedge support under the handle, the three-finger marks above the feet, and the round sprue mark (Fig. 16, Bottom of Fig. 14). Its bowl diameter is approximately 9 3/8". The subtle differences between the posnets in Fig. 1 and Fig. 14 could be artifacts from finishing the castings or slight variations in the patterns used in making the molds for casting. However, these subtle differences also could indicate that they were produced in entirely different foundries.



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

This posnet is advertised for sale on eBay UK by Simon Willcock Antiques (Dec. 2021). Its current UK location does not necessarily mean

that it was produced in the UK any more than posnets currently in the US were made here. After all, there has been back and forth trade for well over 300 years.

The round sprue marks on the posnets in Figs. 1, 9, 11, and 15, could indicate Virginia production. The well-known, Virginia-made Taylor posnet also has a round sprue mark (Fig. 17, Bottom of Taylor posnet).



Figure 17

In contrast, the Y4 posnet in Fig. 7, has a linear sprue mark (See Fig. 8). Other similar bronze posnets with linear sprue marks, imported for the antiques trade in the 20th century, have been encountered in Virginia shops. However, trying to make the argument that round sprue marks on cast posnets indicate Virginia production is an extremely weak argument at best. So far, the sample size is way too small to support such an attribution. To further complicate this argument, the cast iron posnets with strong Virginia histories in Fig. 5 all have linear sprue marks. In addition, the three-finger pattern extending from the feet onto the pot wall is a common decorative element on the IH posnets and the Y4 posnet.

Still, we are left with a number of IH posnets being encountered in eastern Virginia over several decades. Could they have been cast in James Hunter's Rappa' Forge near Fredericksburg? It is possible, but there is no compelling evidence at present to suggest that they were. We urge anyone with a cast bronze posnet marked IH contact us at info@ehcnc.org. We would like to examine any examples and record any associated discovery histories.

Photo Credits:

Figs. 4 & 17 - Courtesy of Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts

Figs. 11, 12, & 13 - Courtesy of Mason Antiques

Figs. 14, 15, & 16 - Courtesy of Simon Willcock Antiques