

# Collecting Punched Tin Lanterns

## By Grant Hamilton

*Many of us who make an attempt to limit our lantern collections to models that were specifically used on railroads still find ourselves picking up interesting examples of other types of lighting. Many collections end up including non-railroad models from a favorite manufacturer, or unusual early lanterns. One such lantern is the punched or pierced tin lantern.*

*Although use of these lanterns by railroads was probably very limited (oil lanterns with glass globes were widely available by the time railroads began regular night operations), it is not unlikely that some saw railroad service. In locations where a broken oil lamp or lantern created a greater fire hazard, a well enclosed candle lantern was needed. The punched tin lantern was also easier to produce in regions that were far removed from the major glass-making centers. They were also no doubt used on stage coaches, ships, and the other early modes of transportation.*

*Regardless of where it was used, a pierced tin lantern makes a nice addition to any collection, and provides a connection to an early period in our country's history. The following article is reprinted from the monthly New York - Pennsylvania Collector magazine, and provides an excellent overview of the history of this well-known form of early lighting.*

The punched (or pierced) tin lantern has been a symbol of Early America in many illustrations and serves as a colonial craft project for school groups and adults at interpretive historical sites. They are often misnamed "Paul Revere" lanterns in reference to the "one if by land, two if by sea" account of the famous signaling of the movement of British troops in Boston. Those lanterns were not the punched tin variety. A lantern said to be from that famous night is in the Concord, Mass., museum, and it has glass panels.

Occasionally the punched tin lantern is called a "Guy Fawkes" lantern, in reference to the failed 1605 attempt to blow up the House of Lords during the opening of Parliament. However, that lantern, made of sheet iron, was not punched and would more accurately be classed as "dark" or "watchman's" lantern. It had a lens of thin horn and could be closed completely to hide the light.

So, despite the sometimes-glorified name, the punched tin lantern was an everyday utility item that was both practical and artistic. In the literature of the day and recollections printed in the early 1900s, the punched tin lantern was typically known as a stable lantern.

The stable lantern was used to carry a lit candle from the house to the stable and then provide safe, if dim, illumination. No doubt it was carried to other "out buildings" as well. With little capability to fight fires, many early communities enacted ordinances that imposed a fine on anyone who carried an open flame into a stable or barn, making some type of lantern a household necessity. The potential of a glass lantern breaking was probably a safety consideration as well.

The punched tin lantern also would have been a useful item for early travelers because of its durability. An 1836 account of one British officer's travels provided a unique suggestion.



*This stable lantern was made by (or perhaps for) Nathan Adams, and dates to circa 1770. It has the owner's initials in the door and a scarce additional "outside candle holder."*

He tied "tin stable lanterns" to the stirrups on his saddle as foot warmers that also provided some light.

When the first use of a punched tin lantern came into use seems to be lost to history, however lanterns themselves date to ancient times. In this country there are references to the tin lantern from pre-Revolutionary days on. The punched tin lantern's competition would have been a sheet iron or wooden frame holding glass, animal horn or oiled paper to emit light.

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Because glass was scarce and expensive in the Colonies, not to mention fragile, punched tin provided a good alternative. It was safe from breakage in the stable and it also could be transported to market over the rough roads of the day. Accounts of early days of this country, often written in the early 1900s, frequently speak of the punched tin lantern, noting that it provided a pleasant light without glare and was able to remain lit even in windy trips to the stable.

Tinplate was being produced in Germany in the 1600s, and there was production in England by the first quarter of the 1700s. The tinning process made sheet iron less prone to rusting. Early tinplate was made from iron, rather than steel. Perhaps a metallurgist could analyze a lantern to determine if it was made from coke iron or charcoal iron, and whether it was tinned or terne-plate, which mixes lead with tin. The typical collector, however, most likely will not be concerned with that much detail.

Production of sheet iron to be used for tinplate was limited in pre-Revolutionary America. While the colonies were major exporters of pig iron, the means to create sheet iron were limited. The British "Iron Act" of 1750 attempted to prevent colonies from making finished goods by restricting the construction of triphammers and rolling mills, thus protecting the British trades. The Colonists did their best to evade this and other trade laws and often were vague in reporting, so knowing if a pre-Revolutionary lantern was made here or abroad is hard



*A close-up view of the lantern shown on the previous page reveals details of a pre-machine era manufacturing style that assists in dating the lantern to the late 1700's period.*



*The handle loop on another lantern shows a crisp and uniform second impression, possibly indicating machine turning that came into use in the 19th century.*

to determine. It is clear, however, that there were tinsmiths working in the colonies well before the Revolution, with imported sheets of tinplate.

Several sources indicate the first commercial tinsmithing in the Colonies began in 1740 when Edward and William Pattison began making and selling tin products from imported sheets in the town of Berlin, Conn. The "Yankee peddler" traveling salesman is often associated with tin products. After the Revolution the domestic production of goods increased rapidly, and the tinsmith was an important tradesman, making a wide range of products.

Dating a punched tin lantern isn't an easy task. The tools and methods of tinsmiths changed little until the first quarter of the 19th century. The first machine patent for tinware manufacture was granted to Calvin Whiting and Eli Parsons in 1806. Seth Peck was one of the early purchasers of the Whiting/Parsons patent, and his machines became widely used during the 1820s and 1830s. But the basic materials and construction were not much changed from a century earlier. With furniture, saw marks, nails and screws can help date a piece, but tin lanterns offer few clues.

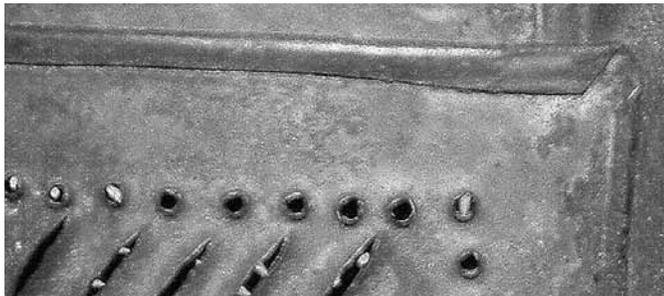
Early tinplate, which was typically offered in two qualities, was probably heavier and perhaps less uniform because of the method to reduce the thickness of iron that became sheet iron for the tinplate. Contemporary tin used in recent reproductions is typically thinner.

As is often the case with antiques, the best bet for the collector is to examine as many pieces as possible from reliable collections and dealers in order to get a "feel" for the lanterns. One lantern

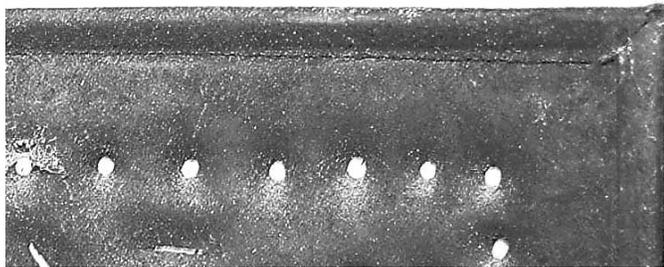
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in the Collector collection that was purchased from longtime dealer Chris Whittle (The Collection, Trumansburg, N.Y.) has provenance dating it to prior to 1800. The construction offers a few potential clues to differentiate it from later versions. The inside of the door where the tin is folded over is less uniform than another lantern in the collection. The loop of tin that makes the handle is absent a uniform line that was probably made by a machine making the fold. Other than that, there is little other than family provenance to date the lantern.

As is true with most crafts, changes in the production methods didn't occur uniformly. A country tinsmith may have used his hand tools for years after machines were introduced in other shops. So lack of machine evidence does not necessarily mean an early date. However, itinerant tin peddlers with wares turned out in quantity in more progressive shops would have been



*Perhaps offering a clue to dating lanterns, this 18th century example's door shows less precision in the folded metal. Interestingly, the fold is on the outside, making a frame.*



*Very uniform, and with precise corners, the edges of the door on this lantern suggest 19th century machine use.*

at such an advantage in price that a local tinsmith who didn't improve his shop would have likely been forced out of the trade.

As the 1800s progressed, glass became less expensive and less fragile, and lantern globes were being produced to protect "fluid lamps." While whale oil lamps began replacing candles decades earlier, the introduction of kerosene in the 1850s accelerated the decline of other lighting means, including the candle. However, the pierced tin candle lantern was still being made in the 1850s and '60s. A British book of 1861 referred to pierced tin stable lanterns, and an 1850 American book on homemaking suggested the pierced tin stable lantern was superior to the glass variety for durability and better than horn, which would obscure light if it became covered with soot.

#### References:

Hill, Benson. *Recollections of An Artillery Officer*. London: Richard Bentley, 1836.

Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and The Poor*. London: Griffin Bohn & Company, 1861.



*An example of a 19th century punched tin stable lantern, which exhibits uniformity of construction that is consistent with machinery use that was introduced in the 1810's.*

#### References (continued):

McMillen, Carpentier, Colletto. *Tinsmithing*. Historic Eastfield Village. <http://www.historiceastfield.org>.

Oxford University. *Ashmolean Museum Web Site*. <http://www.ashmolean.org>.