

Illumination in Colonial New England

The Pilgrims found the Native Americans using pine torches, and immediately made use of this convenient mode of producing light in their homes. These torches were made of short sections of dry limbs having an exposed knot at one end. The extra amount of resin in the knot would supply a brighter flame for a relatively long time. Some of the poorer families used something called "Candle-wood", which were sections of old, dry pitch pine logs cut into lengths of about eight inches, then the center of these were split into thin slices. The centers, like the knots, had a high concentration of pitch, or resin. These were burned several at a time where much light was required, or singly for carrying about the room. Much of the Bible reading at night by the pious colonists was done by the flickering, smoky light of these primitive lights.

For a light to be carried out of doors, the pine torch was employed. These torches were also used in the houses. As late as 1820 records indicate that pine torches were still in use in northern New England. A variation of these torches was the progenitor of the modern streetlight, and was known as the basket torch. This consisted of a crude iron basket about the size of a peach basket, and when suspended from the corner of the street, or over a doorway, as was common in early colonial days, and filled with pitchy pine knots, which when lighted, afforded a satisfactory streetlight. It was part of the watchman's duty to supply the pine knots for these lights during the early hours of the long winter evenings. Torches similar to these were used as headlights on the Mississippi paddle wheelers as late as 1860.

Early candles were difficult to make due to the rarity of cattle in New England prior to 1652. Tallow was derived from rendered animal fat, and it wasn't until after 1660 that enough cattle existed on this side of the Atlantic to provide a workable supply. The earliest of these tallow candles were known as rush lights, so named because the centers, or pith of rushes, were extracted from the outer shell of the grass and dipped into melted tallow, the result being a passable candle.

Wax for candles was supplied by the wild bees found throughout the forests of the new world, and it was found that a pleasant aroma could be had by adding a small amount of the fragrant wax refined from the Bayberry, a fruit of a bush growing along the New England coast.

The most beautiful and efficient of all candles were made from the oil called spermaceti, found in the heads of sperm whales. One of these candles gave off more light than three tallow candles. They were, however, regarded as very expensive in comparison with the "tallow dip" and were at first only used by the wealthy.

The making of candles, while a simple operation, involved much care and labor. The earliest method was by the process known as "dipping". The twisted or braded cotton or flax wicks were suspended from a stick called a candle rod, the number on the rod being determined by the size of the pot or kettle. When carefully straightened, the wicks were dipped into the melted tallow, receiving a coating of the hot fat. When cool, the operation was repeated until the candle had grown to the desired size. Some housewives first immersed the wick in a solution of saltpeter. This made the wick burn more evenly, and prevented what was known as "candle robbers", which were simply the burning wicks bending over and coming into contact with the

body of the candle, thus melting the edge and causing the reservoir of hot tallow to run down the outside of the candle and be lost.

The next advance in candle making was the invention of the candle mold. These were groups of tin or pewter cylinders into which the melted tallow was poured, the product being a molded candle, much superior to the “dip”. Men known as “candle-makers” traveled about the country with large candle molds holding from 36 to 50 candles. These men could easily make in two days a sufficient supply of candles to last a large family all winter. All candles, after being made, were carefully cared for by the woman of the house. She packed them away in boxes and stored them in cool places, protected from the ravages of rats and mice, which would make short work eating them. Those intended for immediate use were kept in what was called a candle-box, which was a round tin cylinder with a hinged lid, which hung horizontally from the wall of the living room. The candle box also protected the candles, so that they did not turn yellow, which they would do if exposed to light. Examples of several types of candle-making devices may be seen at the Colebrook Historical Society.

The candlestick was always an important article of house furnishing, and was frequently ornamental and costly. The most primitive was a potato or turnip cut flat on the bottom and having a hole carved at the top to hold the candle. Crude iron and tin candlesticks were in common use among the people, and were among the first articles of purely domestic manufacture produced in New England.

A candleholder to be placed upon the walls was known as a “sconce”. The more common kind was of tin, the back often corrugated, and kept polished as a reflector. The sconce was also made in more beautiful forms, frequently silver plated, brass and sometimes bronze, and with fine cut glass pendants.

Pewter candlesticks of various styles were largely made in Boston. Paul Revere offered quite an extensive line of these goods to his customers.

Many brass candlesticks were largely imported from England and other countries on the Continent. A pair of brass candlesticks was considered a very appropriate wedding gift.

Silver candlesticks, first imported from England, were made in large numbers in Connecticut, principally in Meriden. These also took the form of branched candelabra, and graced many of the mansions throughout New England.

Glass candlesticks were introduced into New England about 1700. Some of these, especially of cut glass, were often as expensive as those of silver. When supplied with spermaceti candles and lighted, the effect was said to be beautiful in the extreme, and added a grace and elegance that was a mark of refinement and good taste.

All candlesticks of the better kind, whether silver, brass, pewter or glass, were more often than not made in pairs.

Lastly, we come to snuffers and extinguishers. Extinguishers were cone shaped and sometimes had a chain attaching it to the base of the candlestick. They extinguished the flame and kept the wick from smoking after the flame went out; they always matched the candlestick

material. Snuffers, for snuffing or removing the charred or carbonized wick were as varied in shape and material as the circumstances of the family owning them could afford.

Historic Bytes

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