

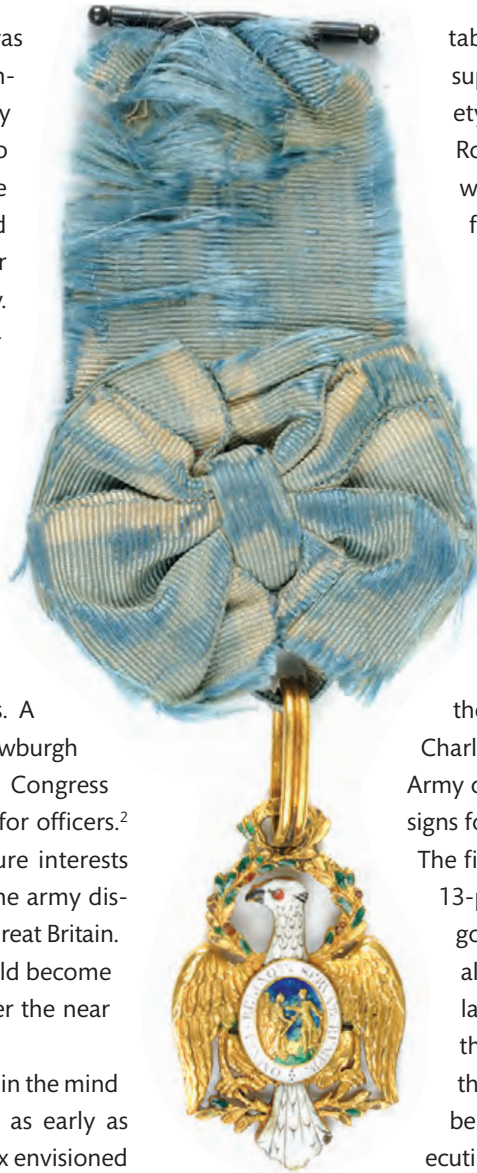
“BY WHICH ITS MEMBERS SHALL BE KNOWN”

The Material Culture of the Society of the Cincinnati at Historic Deerfield

by Samantha Frost

BY THE SPRING of 1783, mutiny was in the air in New Windsor, New York. Continental Army officers grew increasingly displeased with Congress's inability to provide back pay for their service in the War for Independence and were prepared to force those in power to settle their grievances or disband the army entirely. In a March 12th letter to Alexander Hamilton, George Washington described the situation as “distressing beyond description.”¹ Refusing to let his officers descend into mutiny, Washington instead ordered them to meet in Newburgh, New York, on March 15th, where he delivered a speech sympathizing with their concerns yet denouncing the violent measures they planned to take if Congress did not meet their demands. A week after Washington delivered the “Newburgh Address” and laid the uprising to rest, Congress agreed to provide five years of full pay for officers.² However, officers feared that their future interests would no longer be protected should the army disband following a peace agreement with Great Britain. Thus, the seeds were sown for what would become the Society of the Cincinnati shortly after the near mutiny of March 1783.

The Society of the Cincinnati formed in the mind of Massachusetts General Henry Knox as early as 1776. Wanting a “Society of Friends,” Knox envisioned an organization that could maintain the “mutual friendships which have been formed under the pressure of common danger.”³ In May 1783, out of a desire to maintain mutual friendships, advocate for officers' interests, promote the ideals of the Revolution, and provide charity to needy members and families, Knox es-



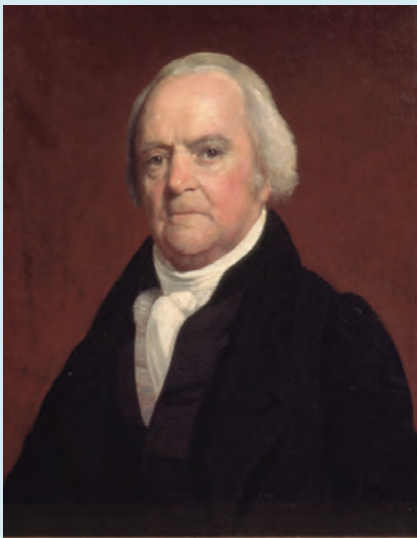
Society of the Cincinnati Eagle insignia owned by Tench Tilghman, made by Nicolas Jean Francastel and Claude Jean Autran Duval, Paris, France, 1784. Gold, enamel, silk, metal. The American Revolution Institute of the Society of the Cincinnati, Inc., Gift of Harrison Tilghman, Society of the Cincinnati of Maryland, 1953, M.1953.224.

tablished the Society of the Cincinnati with support from other retired officers. The Society was named in honor of the ancient Roman hero Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, who was called upon by the Senate to defend Rome from the Aequi in 458 BCE and shortly retired to his farm after leading the Roman army to victory. The Society's members “resolved to follow his example by returning to their citizenship” after sacrificing their own private interest for the good of their country as had Cincinnatus.⁴

Less than a month after the Society's inception, the elected officers—including George Washington as president general and Henry Knox as secretary general—began working on the insignia for the new organization. Pierre-Charles L'Enfant, a French artist and Continental Army officer, presented the Society with two designs for a badge at the convention of June 19th. The first design featured a gold eagle holding a 13-point star, while the second comprised one gold eagle with a separate design for a medallion on its breast.⁵ The Society adopted the latter design, and L'Enfant travelled to France the following fall to oversee the making of the eagle-shaped badge and medallion, as he believed Parisian artists were “capable of executing it to perfection.”⁶ Craftsmen Nicolas Jean Francastel and Claude Jean Autran Duval created 225 gold eagle badges for Society members in 1784; these included a medallion depicting Cincinnatus at his plow while receiving a sword from two Roman senators, suspended by a blue silk ribbon edged in white representing the union between France and the

United States. The Society's principal guiding document, known as "The Institution," held that this gold eagle badge and medallion would be the order "by which its members shall be known and distinguished."⁷

The eagle became the institution's most prolific emblem. It appeared on several types of goods such as Chinese export porcelain, as seen on a 38-piece tea service in Historic Deerfield's collection. Originally belonging to Dr. David Townsend, a surgeon-general during the war and Secretary of the Massachusetts State Society of the Cincinnati, the 1790 tea service bears the bald eagle badge over the initials "DT" in gold leaf on a white ground. The tea service was given to Townsend from Samuel Shaw, a fellow Society member and former aide-de-camp to Knox. Shaw wished for "something emblematic of the institution of the order of the Cincinnati executed upon a set of porcelain" while serving as the first Consul to China.⁸ On December 20, 1790, Townsend's Cincinnati tea set (originally comprised of 45 pieces) was



Dr. David Townsend, attributed to Francis Alexander (1800-1880), Boston, Massachusetts, c. 1825. Oil, linen canvas, pine, gilding, gesso. Historic Deerfield, Gift of Henry N. Flynt and Helen Geier Flynt, 65.238.1.



Tea Set, China, 1790. Hard paste porcelain, overglaze polychrome enamels, gilding. Historic Deerfield, Gift of Henry N. Flynt and Helen Geier Flynt, 56.105.

shipped from Canton to Boston, along with a letter from Shaw that reads:

*Accept my dear friend, as a mark of my esteem and affection, a tea set of porcelain, ornamented with the Cincinnati and your cypher. I hope shortly after its arrival to be with you, and in company with your amiable partner, see whether a little good tea improves or loses any part of its flavor in passing from one hemisphere to the other.*⁹

In addition to Townsend, Shaw ordered porcelain tea services for nine other Massachusetts Society members, including Knox, Henry Jackson, I.L. Stoddard, Benjamin Lincoln, Dr. William Eustis, and Constant Freeman.¹⁰

The Eagle insignia likewise appears on the Society diploma which L'Enfant suggested every member receive in addition to the order and silver medal. The eagle is imprinted at the center top of the diploma, while a personification of American liberty sprawls across the bottom in the form of an armed soldier bearing a Union flag in one hand and a sword in the other. Beside the armed soldier is an eagle whose talons project lightning toward the British lion, while Britannia, depicted as a young woman, moves toward the sea with a crown falling from her head.¹¹ The diploma iconography was sketched by L'Enfant and

later redrawn by artist Augustin-Louis Belle, so that it could be rendered as a copperplate engraving by the distinguished engraver, Jean-Jacques Le Veau. Knox, having seen and approved L'Enfant's original drawing of the diploma before he left for France, described it in a letter to Washington as "a noble effort of genius."¹²

Historic Deerfield owns two Society of the Cincinnati diplomas, one formerly belonging to David Townsend, and the other to Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Maxwell of Heath, Massachusetts. Maxwell was born in Ireland in 1733, emigrating to the American colonies with his family that same year and settling in Bedford, Massachusetts. In 1755, Maxwell served in the Provincial army during the French and Indian War, preparing him for the role of lieutenant that he assumed in 1775 at the start of the American Revolution. Maxwell became a major in 1777 and raised a company of 86 men to serve at the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Saratoga, Monmouth, and the siege of Boston.¹³ By the end of the war he held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel of the 3rd Massachusetts Regiment under Major General William Heath with whom he joined the Society of the Cincinnati in May 1783.¹⁴

Even though the Society of the Cincinnati quickly gained hundreds of

members and developed local and state branches across the original 13 colonies and France, it also garnered much criticism. In a 1784 letter to Washington, Knox described the Society as an “object of jealousy,” reporting that his New England contemporaries claimed that it was “created by a foreign influence, in order to change our form of Government.”¹⁵ After the success that Continental Army officers achieved by pressuring Congress to receive back pay for their war service, suspicions arose that the Society’s motives were to advance their personal interests in other ways.¹⁶ In the same letter Knox wrote, “The cool dispassionately sensible men, seem to approve of the institution generally, but dislike the hereditary descent.”¹⁷ Membership in the Society was originally granted to commissioned officers who resigned at the end of the war, or who had served for at least three years, as well as their eldest male posterity. The idea of inherited membership raised concerns about the creation of a hereditary nobility amidst a new democracy. Fears of a perpetual

military class dissolved over the following decades, as sons and nephews joined the Society, and the “remnants of the Cincinnati no longer occasioned suspicion or alarm.”¹⁸ Membership in the Society remains hereditary to this day.



Silhouette of Major Hugh Maxwell of Charlestown, Massachusetts, Frederick Chapman, New York, New York, 1781. Paper, watercolors, ink. Historic Deerfield, Museum Collections Fund, 2003.51.5.



Society of the Cincinnati Diploma, designed by Pierre Charles L'Enfant (1754–1825), Paris, France, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Parchment and ink. Historic Deerfield, Museum Collections Fund, 2003.51.1.

ENDNOTES

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17. “Henry Knox to George Washington, 21 February 1784,” *Founders Online*.
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