

A Recent Acquisition

By Matthew Hofstedt, Associate Curator, Supreme Court of the U.S.

A five-piece silver coffee and tea service associated with the family of Associate Justice Henry B. Brown, who served on the Court from 1891 to 1906, was recently acquired by the Society for use in the Court. It is often said in the museum field that objects speak for themselves. If so, this set tells the story of how an object may be valued for different reasons throughout its history.

To start at the beginning, the silver service was made sometime in the late 1840s, based on the hallmarks found on the original four-piece service (coffee pot, tea pot, sugar bowl, and cream pitcher). The marks are from the New



Collection of the Supreme Court

Early Wood & Hughes Hallmark.

Pitts of Detroit, Michigan (in 1864) and was serving as a federal judge on the U.S. District Court for Eastern Michigan. Sometime after Judge and Mrs. Brown received the original coffee and tea service, they chose to add a hot water kettle on a warming stand. Wood & Hughes was still in business and they created the new piece with the same pattern, but this time using sterling silver (containing 92.5% silver).

At first glance, all of the pieces look identical, but upon closer examination, it is clear that the newer kettle lacks some of the fine detail and precision seen in the earlier pieces. The hallmarks on this newer piece date it to the last period of Wood & Hughes' work, sometime between 1880 and 1899. Following the earlier pattern, Caroline Pitts Brown's name was engraved on the new piece in the same fashion



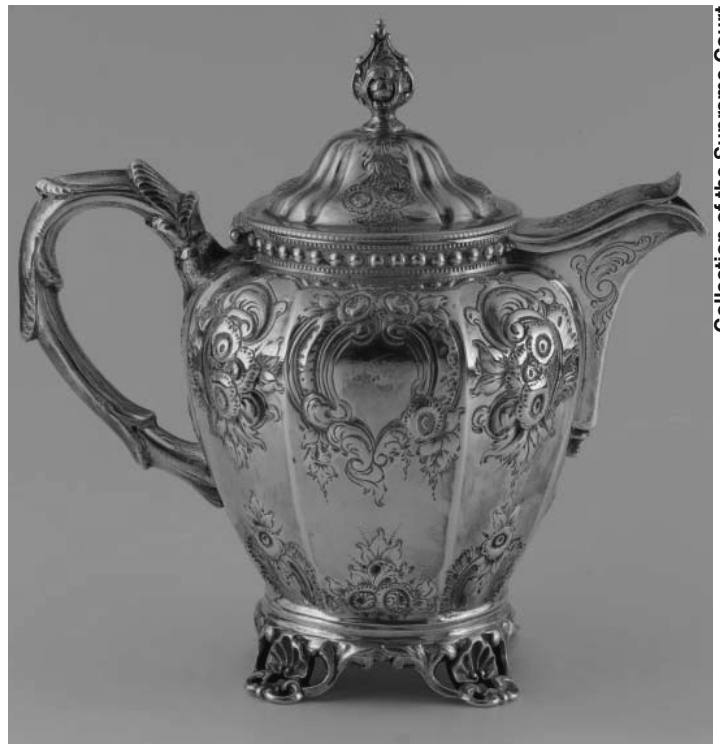
Collection of the Supreme Court

Coin Silver Teapot, Wood & Hughes, Coin Silver, c. 1849.

York silversmiths Wood & Hughes who were in business from 1845 to 1899, making this one of their earlier works. The pieces are made of "coin" silver, a term meaning they contain 90% silver, which was common for American silver produced prior to 1852.

Designed with delicate floral (possibly sunflowers) and c-scroll elements, the name "Mary Tyler Brown" appears on each of the original pieces, along with the date 1849. Mary Tyler Brown was Justice Henry B. Brown's mother. The significance of 1849, however, is more elusive. Does it mark the year the set was purchased by the Brown family? Or could it commemorate the year the Brown family—with thirteen-year-old Henry in tow—moved to a new home in Ellington, Connecticut? Perhaps the significance was only known to the Browns themselves, but unfortunately they were able to enjoy the set for just a few years before Mary died in 1853.

Billings Brown, father of the Justice, later remarried and the silver set likely passed on to his son sometime after Billings' death in 1883. By then, Henry had married Caroline



Collection of the Supreme Court

Cream Pot; Wood & Hughes; Coin Silver; c. 1849.

as her mother-in-law's had been. But herein lies another bit



Hot Water Kettle, Wood & Hughes, Sterling Silver, c. 1895.

of mystery, because the year engraved, 1901, was the year Caroline died. Were the engravings added by Mrs. Brown soon after commissioning the new piece? Or perhaps they were added later by Justice Brown as a memento to his late wife? Like the earlier date, this part of the story may never be known.

Three years after his first wife's death, Justice Brown married Josephine Tyler, the widow of a cousin. Justice Brown never had any children with either of his wives, and upon his death in 1913, he left most of his substantial estate to his widow, but he left a few specific bequests in his will. One of these was that a cousin, Mrs. Fanny Tyler Merrell, was to receive "\$20,000 and the **family silver**"[emphasis added] and her daughter, Dorcas Merrell, an additional \$20,000. Fanny Merrell was the wife of Rear Admiral John P. Merrell, but sadly both of them died during 1916, and their estate—including the Brown family silver—came to Dorcas, who had married a naval officer, Richard H. Johnston.

The Brown silver set descended in the Johnston family until 1992, when it was donated to the Virginia Chapter of the Colonial Dames of America in honor of several family members who had been members of the organization, including Dorcas Merrell Johnston and Elizabeth King Johnston. The silver set became part of the collection at the Dumbarton House in Washington, D.C., the headquarters for the National Society of the Colonial Dames. Twenty-five years later, the curatorial staff at Dumbarton House decided to refocus their collection on decorative arts from the Federal Period, 1790-1830. The Brown Family silver set fell outside this more specific collecting scope and it was approved for sale at auction. When the lot did not sell, the Supreme Court Historical Society was able to purchase it in a post-auction sale.

Once valued as a special family gift, then a treasured family heirloom, the silver set eventually became valued for its decorative form. Now, the silver set has found a new home, where its historical associations to a Supreme

Court Justice are also appreciated. In the care of the Society and the Court, the set will undergo conservation treatment to repair some minor flaws—one handle was previously broken—and will eventually be placed on view in one of the dining rooms in the Supreme Court Building, where it will help to recall stories of Justice Brown and his family.



Detail of Engraving on Hot Water Kettle.