

Early
American
Iron
Cooking
Utensils

by Scott J. Mangieri



Fig. 1: Skimmer, flesh fork, spatula, spoon, ladle (left to right), Probably Pennsylvania, circa 1800–1850. Wrought iron. 2001.0033.046.001-.004, .007. Jefferson and Anne Miller Collection.

Decoration for the Everyday


Wrought iron skimmers, flesh forks, spatulas, and ladles were commonly used in open hearth cooking in early American kitchens. Sometimes enhanced with simple, yet elegant decoration to please the eye, these objects were wrought and sold by metal smiths, as advertised in the *The Pennsylvania Chronicle* on December 19, 1768: “Made and sold, wholesale and retail by JOSEPH SURMON, Opposite the English Church, in Second-street, Philadelphia, where he carries on the smith’s trade as usual, viz... spits, gridirons, dripping pans, iron and copper chafingdishes, frying pans, ladles, skimmers, fleshforks, and squeezers....”

Cooking utensils of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were sometimes produced in sets, possibly given as presents or articles to be included in a dowry for young couples setting up housekeeping. A remarkable survival recently gifted to Winterthur by the late

Jefferson Miller, includes a skimmer, flesh fork, spatula, spoon, and ladle (Fig. 1). Each utensil features similar proportions such as curved hooks at the tip of flattened handles, round in-section shafts, and rounded flattened shoulders. The curved hooks or pierced tips of handles are typical for early American cooking implements and suggest that they were hung in close proximity to the hearth where they were used.

The handles of the finer cooking implements were often heightened with chased decorative flourishes or engraving. Circles, star bursts, and semicircular designs in alternating arcs embellish the handle seen in Figure 2, at left, impressed by hammering metal die or punch tools in patterns onto the handle. The ornament in figure 2, at right, was formed from a semicircular tool blade that was struck in a varied composition to form a flower at the top and an abstract design along the lower section of the handle.

The brass inlay decoration on three flesh fork handles (Fig. 3) illustrates how smiths utilized the dual tonalities of both iron and brass in different ways. The top and bottom handles were formed by filing rectangular recesses into the upper surface that were then filled with brass. More significantly, the bottom example contains an engraved inscription, “Philadelphia 1815,” identifying the place and date it was made. The central example, by contrast, was engraved with the maker’s name “M:Eisenhauer” surrounded by small circular dots and filled with brass.

Despite their everyday use, the decorative elements of cooking utensils were intended to delight the user and were a testament to the craftsmanship of their makers. 

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Fig. 2: Spatula detail (left), probably southeastern Pennsylvania, 1775-1825. Wrought iron. 1958.2299; Ladle detail (right), United States, 1775-1825. Wrought iron. 1965.2721. Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont.



Flesh fork detail (left), probably New England, dated 1757, wrought iron. 1958.2357; Flesh fork detail (right), probably Pennsylvania, dated 1760, wrought iron. 1965.2479. Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont.

The worn engraved decoration on these flesh forks are of trees (left) and a tulip and, along the bottom, a fish (right).



Spatula detail (left), Pennsylvania, dated 1835. Wrought iron. 1965.2484. Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont; Spatula detail (center), Berks county, Pennsylvania, circa 1850-1870. Wrought iron, 2001.0033.057. Jefferson and Anne Miller Collection; Spatula detail (right), probably Pennsylvania, 1775-1850. Wrought iron. 1965.2722. Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont.

Decorative piercing was an additional embellishment found on wares made in Pennsylvania. Angular geometric shapes were more typical than the circular pattern seen on the right.



Fig. 3: Flesh fork detail (top), probably Pennsylvania, circa 1780-1840. Wrought iron with brass inlay. 2001.0033.068. Jefferson and Anne Miller Collection; Flesh fork detail (center), by Martin Eisenhauer, Berks County, Pennsylvania, dated 1776. Wrought iron with brass inlay. 1960.0792. Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont; Flesh fork detail (bottom), Philadelphia, dated 1815. Wrought iron with brass inlay. 2001.0033.230. Jefferson and Anne Miller Collection.