

Punchbowl

Jiaqing period circa 1806
American Market
Diameter: 16¼ inches; 41cm

An important Chinese export porcelain punchbowl for the American market, with a ship building scene *en grisaille*, the borders in gold and iron red, with the monogramme HE

Provenance: Henry Eckford (1775-1832) by descent to Elizabeth I Richardson (1904-2000), Providence, Rhode Island, to her nephew, Alanson B. Houghton II (1930-2016).

Exhibited: 1983 “*Inherited & Collected: Rhode Island Collects the Decorative Arts*” Rhode Island Museum of Art, Providence, RI

This bowl is one of the most significant examples of Chinese export porcelain made for the American Market. It was made for Henry Eckford (1775-1832) a Scottish shipbuilder who worked in the USA, and who was described as ‘the father of the US Navy’. Although the family story has it that the bowl was a gift from the Turkish Government to Eckford circa 1832, the style of the decoration is earlier and it seems more likely to have been a gift from John Jacob Astor to Eckford circa 1806.

The scene on the front is taken from Plate 1: ‘A Ninety Eight Gun Ship on the Stocks’ from a series of 8 plates in *Introduction to Drawing Ships*, pub: London, Robert Sayer 1788.

Henry Eckford was born in 1775 in Kilwinning, near Irvine in the Clyde District, Scotland, the son of Henry Eckford Sr and Maria (or Janet) Black. In 1791 he was sent to Quebec to work under his mother’s brother John Black, a shipbuilder. In 1796 he moved to New York to work in the ship building industry. He married Marion Bedell in 1799 and she bore him at least nine children. Philadelphia was then the main American ship building city but Eckford, among others, helped New York gain ascendancy in the first decade of the nineteenth century. He was a shrewd businessman and

gained a reputation for producing good quality ships using live oak and for keeping within the planned costs.

Between 1803 and 1805, working with Edward Beebe, he built the ship *Beaver* for John Jacob Astor, his first ship intended for the China Trade. In 1806 the *Beaver* went to Canton under the Captaincy of Isaac Chauncey, where “a full load of Teas, Nankeens & China” was purchased (letter from Chauncey). It seems likely that this bowl was brought back at this time.

The use of the earlier print is interesting: it was produced at the time when the young Eckford would have been learning to draw ships as part of his apprenticeship with his uncle. So he could well have chosen it for nostalgic reasons - or it is even possible that the drawing that went to China to be copied was Eckford’s own copy made as a boy.

During the War of 1812 Eckford entered into a contract with the US government to build ships on the Great Lakes, at which he was very successful.

James Fenimore Cooper in his *History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1839) wrote: ‘On the 6th April Mr Eckford put into the water on the American side, a beautiful little pilot-boat schooner that was intended for a lookout and despatch vessel. She was armed with merely one long brass nine on a pivot, and was called the *Lady of the Lake*. Two days later the keel of a new ship was laid.’

In the *History of American Sailing Ships* (1935) by Howard Irving Chapelle, Eckford is described as a ‘genius of organisation’ and ‘the designer of nearly all of the men-of-war built on Lake Ontario during the war, *Superior*, *General Pike*, *Lady of the Lake*, *Mohawk* and others’. He was also a great teacher and many of his apprentices went on to great careers including Jacob Bell and Isaac Webb.

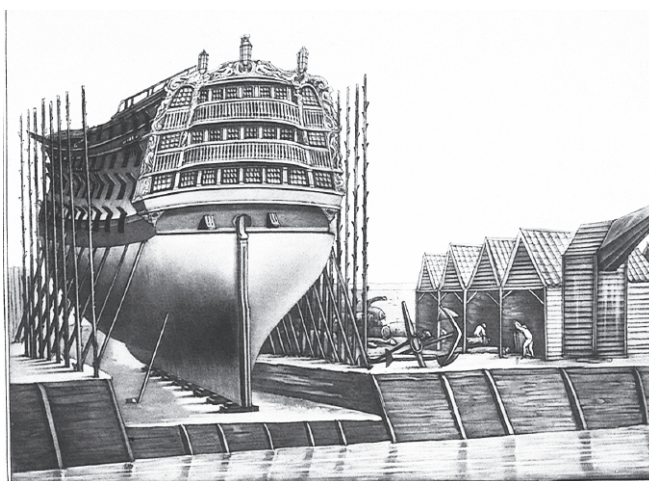


Plate 1: ‘A Ninety Eight Gun Ship on the Stocks’ from a series of 8 plates in *Introduction to Drawing Ships*, pub: London, Robert Sayer 1788



After the war Eckford prospered greatly (his taxed earnings by 1820 were \$50,000) and he went into business with the banker and insurance broker Jacob Barker. He built a fine house between 7th & 8th Avenues near 24th Street. He continued his association with John Jacob Astor, building more ships for him: the *Isabella* and *Henry Astor* of 1820 and the brig *Tamaahmaah* of 1824.

He had also become part of the leadership of Tammany Hall, a coterie of Democrats who ruled New York. In 1826 the group was accused of corruption by the District Attorney Hugh Maxwell and many were found guilty of fraud, though not Eckford. Maxwell however refused to declare him innocent so Eckford challenged him to a duel, which was refused.

In 1828 his eldest daughter Sarah Drake fell ill and another daughter Henrietta was badly burnt when her skirts caught fire and her brother John burnt his hands trying to rescue her. Both Henrietta and John died of their wounds and then Sarah died.

After this great financial and personal loss Eckford resolved to rebuild his fortunes away from New York. He built a 26-gun corvette *United States* in 1830 and sailed it to Constantinople in 1831 where it was purchased by Sultan Mahmud II for \$150,000 and he was commissioned by the Sultan to begin building ships there for the Turkish Navy.

Eckford became a favourite with the Sultan and the Americans immersed themselves in Turkish life, enjoying the conversational proverbs frequently used in polite society. One they recorded was: "Death is a black camel which kneels at every door".

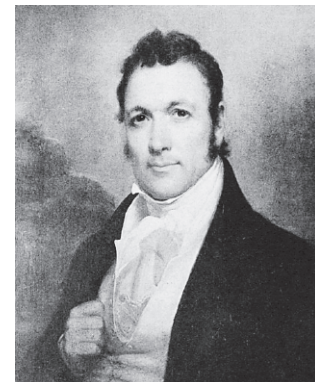
Henry Eckford died suddenly on 12 November 1832, probably from cholera. His body returned to New York on a ship appropriately called the *Henry Eckford*.

His granddaughter Janet Drake survived in New York and her daughter Katherine Coleman DeKay became Mrs Arthur Bronson (1834-1901) of Newport, Rhode Island and Venice. Henry James described her in *Italian Hours* and she was also friends with Robert Browning.

References: Mudge 1962, pp. 184 and p. 193, figure 133, this bowl; Phyllis deKay Wheelock (1947) *American Neptune*, Quarterly Journal of Maritime History, Vol VII, No 3, July 1947, an entertaining account of Eckford's life on which much of this is based.

Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It is already tomorrow in Australia.

Charles Schulz



Henry Eckford
by Henry Inman (1801-46)



Henry Eckford's Residence in Manhattan,
between 7th & 8th Ave, near 24th St, drawn circa 1860

