

## **A Bold and Calculating Spirit — Capt. Oliver Filley (1784-1846)**

A year before Oliver Filley was born in 1784, his father, also named Oliver, purchased approximately 72 acres of land with a house in Simsbury, in the area known as Wintonbury Parish. Later, adjacent land was purchased, making a total of about 93 acres on Cook's Hill on present-day Mountain Avenue, Wintonbury (now Bloomfield), Connecticut.

When Oliver Filley, Sr., died in March 1796, young Oliver, then 12 years old, was given the responsibility of running the farm with his mother, Tabitha. On May 8, 1805, Oliver, then 21 years old, married Annis Humphrey of Simsbury and continued farming the land. He had four siblings, but two died before their 7<sup>th</sup> birthdays. In about 1806, in addition to farming, Oliver Filley started his tinware business. This craft involved creating tinware items, perfecting the exacting (and somewhat secret) japanning process, and decorating these works. Oliver and Annis had seven children – Oliver Dwight, Marcus Lucius, Jay Humphrey, Joseph Earle, Giles Franklin, Jennette Annis, and John Eldridge – from 1806 to 1820. Three children died in early childhood, but several of Capt. Oliver's sons in adulthood ventured out far beyond the boundaries of Connecticut to sell a myriad of tin products. In addition to St. Louis, Capt. Oliver's brother Harvey and son-in-law Augustus Filley expanded the tinware business to Philadelphia and Lansingburg (now part of Troy), New York.

During the age of slavery, Oliver stands out as a man not only fair but also focused. Indenture papers reveal that Oliver hired at least one black man, Harry Crane, son of Jack Crane ("a black man") in 1811, promising to teach the 17-year-old the art of tinware and japanning. By 1815, Harry was still working in the Filley business, decorating tinware as an apprentice to Augustus Filley, Oliver's brother, in Lansingburg, New York. (Indenture, Filley Family Papers, CHS).

The manufacture of tinware involved the importing of tinplate from England by ship, then carried far inland via horse or oxen. Tinplating, invented by John Hanbury of England (1664-1734), consisted of rolling thin, iron sheets, then coating them with tin and japanned black in a secret, German, process that slowed rusting. By 1720, tinplate was exported to the United States, its "secret" method of japanning covetously held by Capt. Oliver, among others. Tinplate is a soft material, worked then as now with simple cutting and punching tools called anvils, stakes, shears, swages, hinged hammers, swedges, and solder tools, all used for cutting, fluting, grooving, and soldering the metal pattern pieces. The craftsmen fashioned a wide variety of highly decorated household items such as trunks, pitchers, trays, blow-horns, buckets, pots and pans, measures, funnels, scoops, strainers, ladles, lanterns, candle holders, graters, sconces, lamps, muffin rings, tea pots, scales, roasters, house pipes, gutters, "tableware, pistols, wagons, agricultural implements, and even tortoise-shell combs" (DeVoe 22). The painted decorations were often done by women artists as well as by apprentice Harry Crane, who proved to be an able and talented craftsman.

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Oliver's distribution plan was extensive and innovative, involving his sons, his brothers, his cousins, indentured servants, apprentices, and tin craftspeople in other towns. His plan was to market his wares from Wintonbury to New York State, Pennsylvania, and St. Louis, and to use the best materials and the most creative painters and craftspeople. Oliver was "the Connecticut *entrepreneur [italics theirs]*, a shrewd Yankee,.. one of the first big American industrialists [who]. . . judged trends and planned his marketing strategy" (DeVoe ix).

Never forsaking the land, however, he continued to make sure that the ancestral family land continued to be farmed. Several stone farm houses had been built in and around Wintonbury (later Bloomfield), Connecticut, by David Grant and Francis Gillette, both friends of the captain's and all members of the Hartford Agricultural Society during this time, and Oliver chose such a plan for the 1834 stone house that is currently under rehabilitation by the Wintonbury Historical Society of Bloomfield. His son, Jay Humphrey (1810-1883), unhappy in the tinware business, farmed the land as his father and grandfather had done before him. He grew tobacco and corn, cultivated apple and peach orchards, experimented with mulberry trees for silk, and raised cows, sheep, and pigs (Filley Family Papers, CHS). By 1834, the date above the lintel, the magnificent stone house was finished, and Jay and Julia moved in. By 1843, Capt. Oliver had slowly reclaimed the landholdings of his father's original farm, acquiring acreage from his siblings as well as purchasing additional land. As a farmer, as early as 1823, Oliver received an award for the "best cultivated farm in New England" that included a certificate and an engraved silver cup (Private Family Collection).

He died in 1846, having built a business complete with traveling peddlers, a solid marketing plan, and products of high professional craftsmanship. His commercial shrewdness and good judgment was a significant precursor to later industrial expansion in the United States, and the work of him and his craftspeople – men and women – is legendary among scholars of 19<sup>th</sup> century manufacture and crafts.

Capt. Oliver Filley was the quintessential American merchant and farmer whose qualities embody the excellent commercial energies of his time as well as setting the seeds for the mercantile values of the present time. In addition, his aspirations and good judgment brought him to a position as representative in the Connecticut State Legislature.

Oliver was an entrepreneur who understood the American economic system and organized a business that involved manufacture and national marketing. He exemplified "the bold and ... calculating spirit that was to establish the preeminence of New England in the industrial expansion of the nation during the closing decades of the nineteenth century" (From Wintonbury to Bloomfield).

In addition, Capt. Oliver Filley was a conscientious citizen who joined the home guard during the War of 1812 and was appointed Captain. The pressures and limitations imposed by this war on Oliver as a businessman were often trying, but his "Yankee ingenuity and persistency" enabled him to carry on business as usual and create a strong foothold in the burgeoning commercial economy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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He and his sons carried on his business in the true American mercantile spirit of his time. He was "well known in Hartford among the banking and political circles of his day....Tin peddling contained all of the elements of primitive distribution, public relations and advertising and was the American foundation of all those crafts or professions in later developments" (Robinson 16).

He raised a large family of responsible men and women who were outstanding contributors to the Connecticut fabric of life, many of whom followed and enlarged the tinware business to the point of celebrity, economic success, and high artistic achievement. For example, one descendant, Dwight Filley Davis, Capt. Oliver's great, great grandson, in 1900, began the competition known as the Davis cup. His great grandson, Oliver Dwight, was mayor of the City of St. Louis.

During a time when business ventures hired few women, the Filley tinware enterprise employed many women because of their artistic accomplishments and abilities. The surviving tinware and japanned ware are recognizable because of their often delicate yet striking designs and bold colors.

One of the most important of Capt. Oliver Filley's enduring legacy of excellence, of bold and innovative design and beauty, is the stone house that he had built for the only son who wasn't a tinsmith, Jay Humphrey (a farmer), and Jay's wife, Julia Ann Newberry. The house is as dramatic and daring as Oliver purportedly was. When everyone else was building with wood, Oliver built a stone farm house that still stands proud amidst fields that are still being farmed.

*By Sharon Y. Steinberg, Filley Researcher  
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### **Works Cited:**

DeVoe, Shirley Spaulding, The Tinsmiths of Connecticut. Middletown: Wesleyan, 1968