

World War I Nesting Travel Cups

By Carrie Crane



The other day, Charles Stille, a Boylston Historical Society and Museum summer intern, came across this object while helping organize, photograph, and catalog items in the Museum archives. “What is this?”, he wondered, as might you?

If you open the snap on the leather case and pull the flap back you will find three nesting porcelain enamel metal cups. The white enamel is showing the stains of age and use, in some instances cracked down to the steel metal form underneath, but still considered in good condition. The leather case is still in very good condition. These items, likely made in Britain or Germany, were primarily for use out in the field, while hunting, or on military duty. A layer of porcelain enamel fused to a substrate of steel was a very sturdy material and was used for WWI era canteens and mess kits. However, if the enamel cracked and exposed the steel underneath, corrosion would occur and contaminate the food.

By WWII, the army had moved to using other materials that were less corrosive. Most nesting travel cups were made in Germany in the early part of the 20th century and were often made from copper or silver, sometimes even gold-plated silver, but porcelain enamel ones like this set, appear to be rare. The porcelain enamel does resemble German-made WWI army mugs. There are no visible manufacturing marks to be seen on these pieces, so it is difficult to say where they were made with any certainty.



What we do know is that the cups and leather case were donated to the Boylston Historical Society and Museum in 1979 by Norman Houghton French. Norman was a long-time resident of Boylston and was a founding member of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum.

These nesting cups were used by his father, Harold Brigham French, also of Boylston during his World War I U.S. army military service. Harold, the son of Herbert Henry French and Mary Elizabeth Andrews, was born 7 February 1894 at Boylston. He attended the Boylston Center School and later worked for Wyman Gordan Company in 1917 when he registered for the World War I draft. He was at the recruitment examination station for the U.S. Army at Fort Slocum, New York in December 1917. This recruitment examination station served soldiers from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and the New England States. Harold was assigned overseas duty in France leaving from Hoboken, New Jersey with the 3rd Provisional Ordnance Depot Battalion, Company B. In June 1918, he was assigned to the Provisional Company 1 AEF, American Ordnance Base Depot, Mehun-sur-Yevre, France where he held a position as clerk in the Ordnance Repair Shop. He was promoted to Corporal in December 1918. And we do know one more fact and that is these cups travelled with him during his military service.



Cpl Harold Brigham French
Photograph courtesy of Scot French

Along with being a World War I Veteran, Harold served as Boylston town clerk for 26 years. He was a member of the Boylston Lodge of Masons, a Justice of the Peace, and a member of the Boylston Post, American Legion. But before all those he was in this class photograph. Can you help us identify any of the other students from the 1906-1907 class?



Boylston Center School Class of 1906-1907

Harold French is in 2nd row, far right
Can you help us identify any of the other students in this photograph?
BHSM Photograph Collection

This is another example of the various small but fascinating and often beautiful finds that fill the archives of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum and the stories that come with them.

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