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Composite Table Cutlery from 1700 to 1930

Introduction

The early manufacturing technology of steel table cutlery has been documented for many years (Ure 1849:385-386; Tomlinson 1854:480-488; Lloyd 1913; Himsworth 1953; Smithurst 1987). As well, there are several publications on fine quality cutlery of the 17th and 18th centuries in museums and private collections (Bailey 1927; Hayward 1957; Victoria and Albert Museum 1979). With few exceptions (Noël Hume 1969:177-180; Kidd 1972; Wade 1982; Moore 1995; Stone 1998), however, cheaper-quality cutlery has been largely ignored. Accordingly, this work focuses on the description (Figure 1) and dating of steel table cutlery with handles of less expensive materials (commonly called "composite cutlery") from ca. 1700, to the rise of stainless steel in the 1920s.

The dating of early examples of composite cutlery depends upon comparison with similar hallmarked silver pieces, pieces with known cutlers' marks, examples from datable archaeological contexts, and iconographic evidence. By the 19th century, trade catalogues, patent records, and mail-order catalogues help to fill out the picture.

Knives and forks with matching handles and steel blades and tines are extremely rare before the third quarter of the 17th century. By the 1660s, they could be found on the tables of the affluent, and handles were of costly materials such as silver, ivory, semiprecious stone, mother-of-pearl, or tortoise shell (Davis 1976:183, No. 196; Victoria and Albert Museum 1979:13, Nos. 40, 43). Extant examples usually have a ferrule of silver between the handle and the blade or tines (Figure 2). The tang is of either the rat-tail or through form (Figure 3).

By the early 18th century, the use of matching knives and forks had become more widespread,

and the major manufacturing centers of Sheffield and London were producing cutlery similar in form to their finer wares, but of less-expensive materials. For over 200 years, such cutlery was a popular alternative to silver, silver-plate, or better-quality steel. Recognizing that the old does not give way overnight to the new, it is possible to assign date ranges (with some overlap) to these pieces based on stylistic changes, innovations in manufacturing methods, and new handle materials.

1700-1740

The typical knives and forks of this period have handles of bone or wood. By far the most common form for the handle is the "pistol-grip," so called because the down-curving handle resembles the pistol handle of the period. This shape first appears in the late 17th century. Like better-quality cutlery, knives and forks have rat-tail or through tangs. In place of a silver ferrule, the bolster is heavier and forged as an integral part with the blade and tang (Figure 4).

Steel was more expensive than iron, thus knives of all qualities were made with a steel blade and an iron bolster and tang welded to it. This lapped join often forms a visible mark called a "thumbprint" at the base of the blade (Figure 5). The table knife has a blade with a strongly concave back, a bulbous tip, and convex edge which tapers to the bolster (Figure 4).

One recognizably Continental table knife form (Figure 6) is occasionally found on French-occupation sites in North America (Tremblay 1996:101, 111, Figure 23a, Figure 30b). The blade is narrow, tapering, and turns up at the tip, which is not bulbous like on English knives. The back of the blade has a low hump, and the bolster is very small. Both rat-tail and through tangs were used with this form. Blades of this type were made in cutlery centers all over Continental Europe. The shape appears by about 1700, and is found throughout the period of the French regime, until about 1760. Similar blades do not appear on English or American

COMPOSITE TABLE CUTLERY FROM 1700 TO 1930

knives until the 1920s (below). Interestingly, one of the names given them at that time was the "French shape."

It should be noted that knives became stained from acidic foods, and were subject to regular and vigorous polishing and occasional sharpening. These processes can drastically modify the shape of the blade (Figure 7), making dating difficult and creating confusion between Continental and very worn English blades. As mentioned above, Continental blades normally have a very small bolster.

The fork has two long, straight or slightly curved tines and a rounded shoulder. The shank usually narrows to a waist and broadens again to meet the handle. Occasionally the shank is balustroid as in Figure 2, but weaker in form.

1720-1770

By the 1720s, the flat tang began to be used regularly on table cutlery alongside rat-tail and through tangs. Flat-tanged table knives have been found *very* occasionally on late 17th-century French sites (Faulkner and Faulkner 1987:243, Figure 8.18), but do not seem to be associated with English knives and forks until the introduction of the "hump-backed" blade (below). This tang (Figure 3) has the same profile as the complete handle, with two scales riveted to either side. This construction allowed

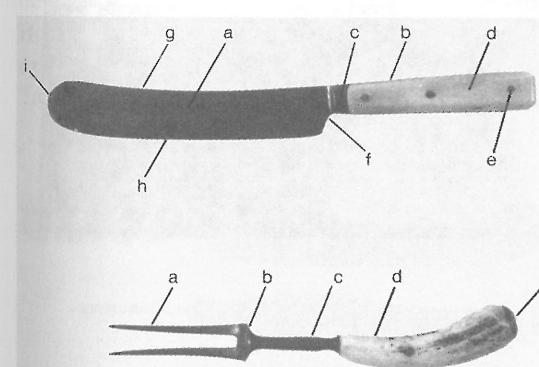


FIGURE 1. Knife terminology: *a*, blade; *b*, handle (in this case with a flat, full or scale tang); *c*, bolster (integral); *d*, scale; *e*, pin; *f*, choil or heel; *g*, blade back; *h*, blade edge; *i*, blade tip. Fork terminology: *a*, tines or prongs; *b*, shoulder; *c*, shank; *d*, handle (in this case with a rat-tail tang); *e*, butt cap.

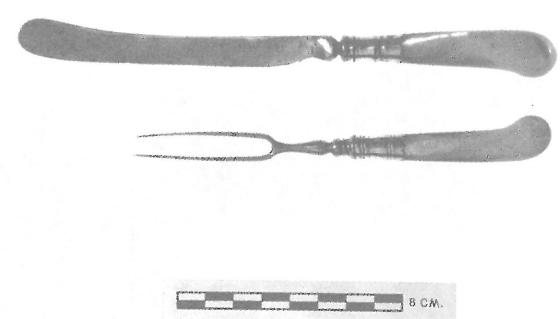


FIGURE 2. Set of small-size dessert cutlery with mother-of-pearl handles and silver ferrules, ca. 1700-1730. The knife is 19 cm long overall. Less-expensive cutlery followed the same forms with cheaper handle materials, no ferrule, and simplified shaping of the heavier bolster and shank. (Don Carpenter Collection.)

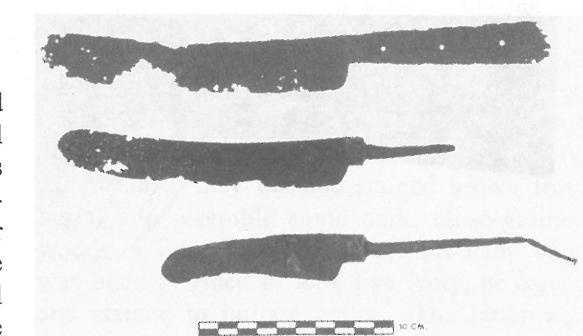


FIGURE 3. Table knives of the late 18th or 19th century. *Top*, flat, full or scale tang (scales would be pinned to either side of the tang); *center*, rat-tail tang (the tang is cemented and/or pinned into the handle); *bottom*, through tang (the tang passes through the length of the handle and is peened over a washer or butt cap).

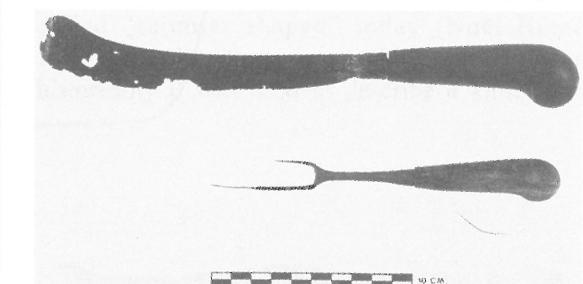


FIGURE 4. Knife and fork (non-matching) of forms and materials typical of ca. 1700-1740. The knife handle is of wood; the fork handle is of bone. Both are variations of the "pistol-grip" shape. (Fork: Colonial Williamsburg Collection.)

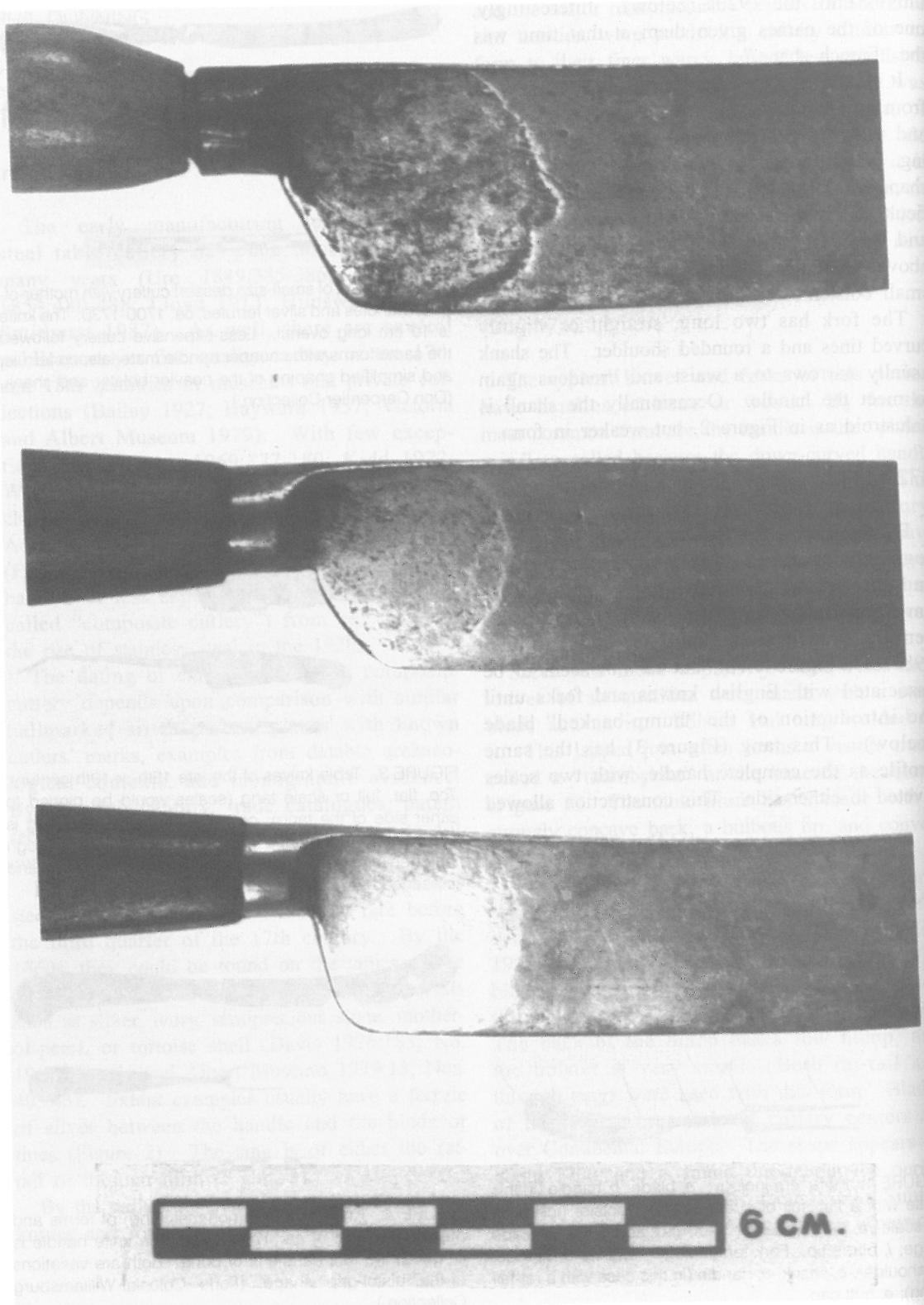


FIGURE 5. Late 18th- or 19th-century knife blades showing the "thumbprint" caused by the lap weld between the steel blade and the iron tang and bolster.

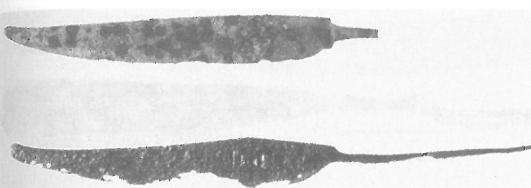


FIGURE 6. Continental European table knife blades, ca. 1700-1760. This form is found on French occupation sites in North America. *Top*, rat-tail tang; *bottom*, through tang.

smaller, thinner pieces of bone, wood or other material to be used with less wastage. Another shape of handle appeared with the new tang: it is wedge-shaped, tapering towards the blade. Bone handles of this form are frequently decorated with rather coarsely scored hatching or cross-hatching (Figure 8). The pistol-grip was also made with the flat tang (Figure 9). It, too, is sometimes heavily scored (Figure 10). Antler (called "stag" or "buck") was used both for scales on a flat tang and as the full handle with a rat-tail tang similar to the (later) fork in Figure 1 (Stone 1974:176, Figure 95*i*). Antler and bone may have the pith or marrow exposed on the end, thus handles often have an iron or, occasionally, a brass butt cap (Figure 11). These caps are attached with two pins which may be present even when the cap has been lost. Full handles of antler continued to be popular into the 20th century, and the attached cutlery must be dated by form and manufacturing methods. Bovine horn was also used. D. Gooking, for example, advertised "Maple, horn & buck haft Table Knives and Forks" in the *Boston News-*

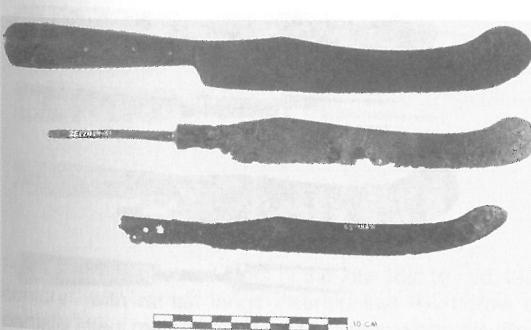


FIGURE 7. *Top*, knife ca. 1770-1820 with the edge of the blade showing minimal wear; *center*, contemporary knife with the edge heavily worn and the choil almost gone; *bottom*, knife so heavily worn that it is impossible to determine whether a choil was originally present.

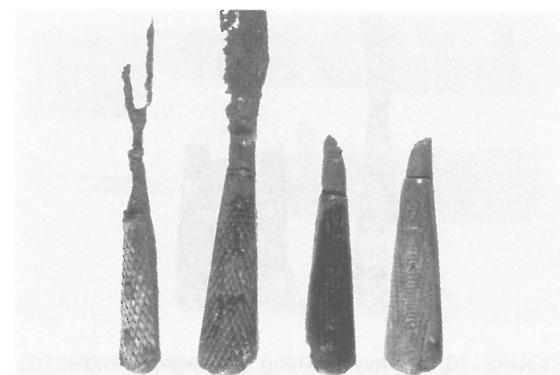


FIGURE 8. Wedge-shaped handles of ca. 1720-1770 with coarsely scored bone scales.

Letter of 1 December 1748. Lighter-colored horn came from oxen and black horn from Indian water buffalo (Dyson 1936:12; Hardwick 1981:135-136). Wood, bone, ivory, and even bovine horn can present a similar and confusing appearance to the naked eye. Bone and ivory, for instance, may become stained brown from burial and resemble some dark, close-grained woods or horn. To add to the problem, bone was often polished to look like ivory, or carved and stained to imitate antler. The latter was called "sham buck" or "forbuck" (Dyson 1936:22). Until the introduction of new materials in the 19th century, the form of the handle is more important than the material for dating purposes.

During the 1720-1770 period, some knife blades acquired a hump on the back close to the bolster (Figure 9). This form is sometimes called "scimitar shaped" today (Noël Hume 1969:178), but the term can be confusing as historically it was used to describe a knife with

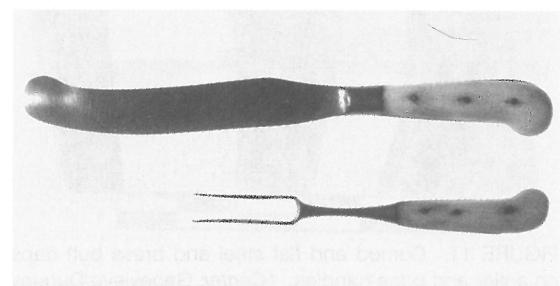


FIGURE 9. Knife and fork ca. 1720-1770 with flat tangs and bone scales in pistol-grip shape.

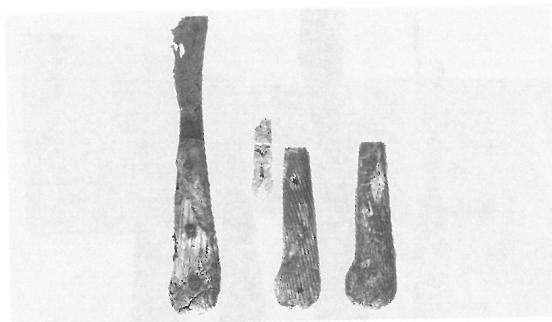


FIGURE 10. Heavy flat-tang pistol-grip handles ca. 1720-1770 with coarsely scored bone scales.

a simple concave back (Smith 1816; Gordon, MacKay & Co. 1913:389). The term "hump-backed" is used here as it is less prone to confusion.

The tines and shank of the fork continued in form much as they had since the beginning of the century. In the 1740s, however, some forks developed a pronounced scoop to the shoulder (Figure 12). Better-quality forks occasionally have three tines and more strongly modeled balustroid shanks.

1760-1800

Major changes in the forms of both knives and forks took place during the 1760-1800 period. Although the pistol-grip continued to be popular on silver cutlery, by the 1780s it was superseded by a variety of new shapes found on cheaper wares. The wedge-shaped handle

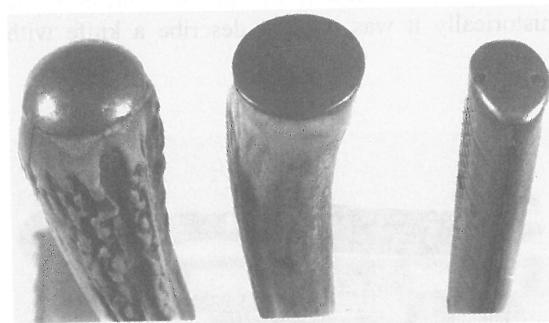


FIGURE 11. Domed and flat steel and brass butt caps on antler and bone handles. (Center, Genevieve Duguay Collection).

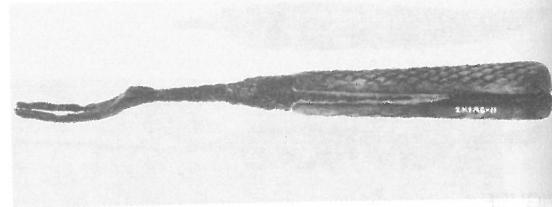


FIGURE 12. Fork, ca. 1740-1770. Two tines with a pronounced scoop to the rounded shoulder. The handle has a flat tang with scored bone scales.

became less broad at the butt with less of a taper towards the blade. The decorative scoring often found on these narrower scales was usually more complex and done with more care than previously (Figure 13). This decoration continued into the third quarter of the 19th century on English cutlery. The narrower wedge was also used on plain handles in bone, wood, ivory, and horn, all with rat-tail tangs (Figures 14, top and center, 20). A variation on the wedge-shape has the butt angled rather than straight across (Figure 14, bottom). The angled butt was popular until about 1820. Some rat-tail tangs were inserted into the hollow of partially intact metapodial bones of sheep which had been filled with resin or other composition. These were capped on the butt end, but the caps are frequently missing (Figure 15). By the late 1760s, green-stained handles became popular, both in ivory and bone (Figure 14, bottom).

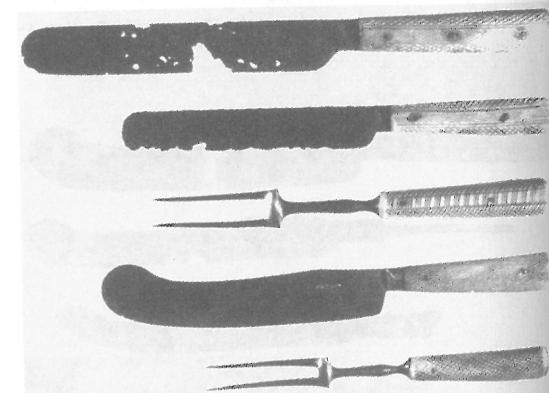


FIGURE 13. Scored decorations on bone scales typical of the late 18th and 19th centuries. The taper to the handle is not as pronounced as on earlier examples.

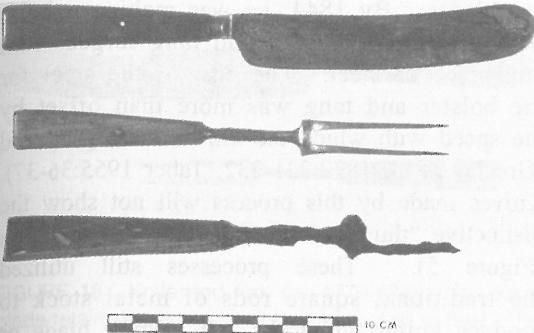


FIGURE 14. Top and center, late 18th- or 19th-century knife and fork with rat-tail tangs pinned to wedge-shaped wooden handles; bottom, fork ca. 1770-1820 with rat-tail tang and green-stained bone handle with angled butt.

Bovine horn had for many years been decorated by heating and pressing pieces in molds with designs, producing small items such as snuff boxes and, occasionally, cutlery handles. By the end of the 18th century, there was a vast variety of pressed horn handles (Figure 16), and they stayed popular through to the middle of the 19th century. Better-quality knives sometimes had "balance handles." The hole drilled for the rat-tail tang was extended deep enough that a weight could be inserted to counterbalance the blade and prevent it from touching the table when set down (Figure 17). The balance handle continued to be used through the 19th century

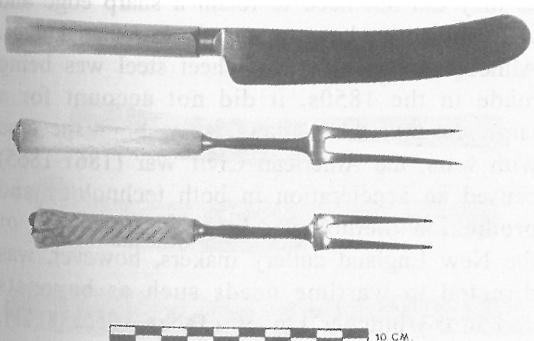


FIGURE 15. Knife and forks of the late 18th to mid 19th century with rat-tail tangs inserted into the hollow of partially intact metapodial bones of sheep which are filled with resin and the butts capped. Top, knife missing butt cap; center, fork with butt cap and pin inserted into resin to hold it; bottom, fork with resin exposed and tines worn short from cleaning.



FIGURE 16. Knife and fork with flat tangs and scales of pressed horn with elaborate decoration (late 18th to mid 19th century).

(Russell and Erwin Manufacturing Company 1865:357).

During the 1760s, the knife blade developed a choil or heel at the bolster (Figure 18). By the 1780s, some knives had lost the hump-back so that the back and edge of the blade were parallel. By the end of the century, there was a choice of hump-backed, curved, or straight blades on table knives (Figure 19). Stamped marks (Figure 20) such as "BEST CAST STEEL" or "SHEAR STEEL" are found on blades from this period until well into the 19th century. These marks indicate the quality of steel from which the blade was made. Until the 1780s, table knives usually had fairly large blades, averaging 16-18 cm in length including the bolster (dessert knives and forks were smaller, but were

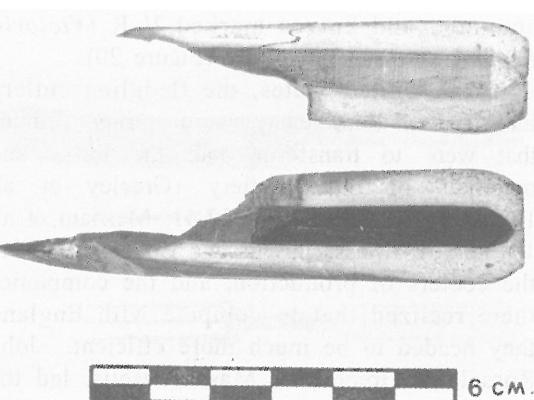


FIGURE 17. Balance handle of ivory with the counterweight still in place.

made with ferrules and lighter bolsters [Figure 2]). From the last decades of the 18th century through most of the 19th century, a much wider range of blade sizes was available, varying from about 12.5 cm up to 18 cm in length (Figures 13, 19). Of all the characteristics of knife blades, length is the least reliable for dating.

By about 1770, the shoulder of the fork became squared, retaining the scoop that had appeared a few decades earlier (Figure 12). At the same time, average-quality forks began to be made with three tines, which had previously been found only on fine cutlery (above). A choice of forks "With 2-3 or 4 Prongs" (Smith 1816) was available into the third quarter of the 19th century, when the two-tined fork finally lost favor (Figure 21).

1800-1850

With the exception of the hump-backed blade, which disappeared by about 1820, and the two-tined fork, the forms of knives and forks current at the end of the 18th century continued to be made in Sheffield late into the fourth quarter of the century (Silber and Flemming 1883:74-75; Harrod's Stores 1895:736-738). These forms were the products of a technology that had not changed in England since the 17th century (Ure 1849:385-386; Tomlinson 1854:480-488). English knife blades in the early part of this period were occasionally marked with the initials of the reigning monarch: G R for *Georgius Rex* (18th century to 1830) and W R for *William Rex* (1830-1837). By Queen Victoria's reign (1838-1901), the practice was much more common, and knives marked V R (*Victoria Regina*) are found regularly (Figure 20).

In the United States, the fledgling cutlery industry was introducing manufacturing methods that were to transform both the forms and materials of table cutlery (Greeley et al. 1872:229-238; Taber 1955:32-41; Merriam et al. 1976:8-30). Massachusetts and Connecticut were the centers of production, and the companies there realized that to compete with England they needed to be much more efficient. John Russell of Greenfield, Massachusetts, led the way with many innovations. In the late 1830s and 1840s, he introduced the trip-hammer for forging knives, steam power to augment water power, and a power press for cutting and shap-

ing blades. By 1844, he was making a knife with the blade, bolster, and tang forged from one piece of steel. The cost of the steel for the bolster and tang was more than offset by the speed with which the knives were produced (Greeley et al. 1872:231-232; Taber 1955:36-37). Knives made by this process will not show the distinctive "thumbprint" of joined steel and iron (Figure 5). These processes still utilized the traditional square rods of metal stock to produce knives and forks. If a knife blade or fork tines and tang were stamped or rolled from sheet steel and a separate bolster attached or "applied," cutlery could be made even more cheaply. Proposals for this process were patented in the United States by 1838 (United States Patent Office 1838), and in England by 1840 (Great Britain, Patent Office 1857). The sheet steel of the period, however, was often too brittle or too weak for cutlery. It was not until the 1850s that the quality of sheet steel began to improve.

1850-1870

Experimentation with stamping and rolling processes for knives and knife blades continued through the 1850s and 1860s. During this period, many knives were still made with steel blades and iron bolsters and tangs, but the parts were formed by mechanized drop-hammers, rather than hand forged, before being welded together. Sheet steel forks were easier to make as they did not need to retain a sharp edge and were subject to less stress and wear than knives. Although table cutlery of sheet steel was being made in the 1850s, it did not account for a large share of the market. As is often the case with wars, the American Civil War (1861-1865) caused an acceleration in both technology and production methods. Much of the output of the New England cutlery makers, however, was directed to wartime needs such as bayonets and utility/butcher knives (Taber 1955:38-41). The cargo of the wrecked steamboat *Bertrand* illustrates this. This vessel sank on the Missouri River in 1865, on its way to the gold mining districts of Idaho and Montana with goods for the miners. Almost all of the butcher knives in the cargo (95 of 106) were made of sheet steel with an applied bolster patented in 1860 by Lamson and Goodnow of Massachusetts (below).

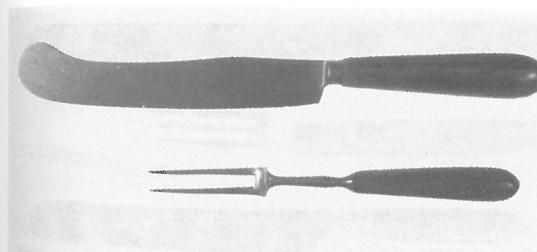


FIGURE 18. Knife and fork ca. 1770-1820. The knife blade retains the hump-back but has a choil or heel. The fork has a squared, scooped shoulder. Both have rat-tail tangs and plain wood handles.

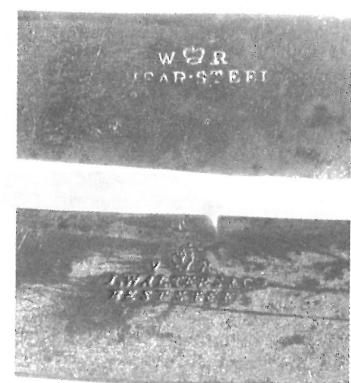


FIGURE 20. English knife blades with stamped "W R" (1830-1837) and "V R" (1838-1901) marks.

The 69 table knives and 66 forks, however, were of English manufacture, produced using traditional methods (U.S. Department of the Interior, *Bertrand* Collection: catalogue. Nos. 156/1-57, 157/1-69, 2202/1-6, 2203/1, 2204/1, 2434/1).

Both war and post-war demands led to numerous patents for bolsters. Joseph Gardiner, an employee of the Lamson and Goodnow Company, invented a stamped bolster in 1860 that had several imitators over the next few years (Figure 22) (United States Patent Office 1860). The most successful form of applied bolster over the long term was the cast-on bolster of tin or tin alloy. A bolster of this type was patented by James Frary in 1866 (United States Patent Office 1866). The tang of the knife or fork was clamped in a mold, often with the scales

in place on the tang. The metal for the bolster was poured into the space left for it and flowed around the tang. The earlier examples with this bolster are fairly simple (Figure 23), sometimes with a butt cap made in the same way (Landers, Frary and Clark 1869:36-41). By the early 1880s, elaborate decoration was added by pressing or cutting designs into the wood scales which would be filled by the molten metal (Figure 24). This decoration was also used with bone scales. To prevent the scales from scorching, the metal used had to have a low melting point and the handles were cooled quickly.

The same principle of casting metal onto the steel tang was in use by 1869, to form the entire handle of cast-iron (Figure 25). These handles were usually japanned black to retard rusting

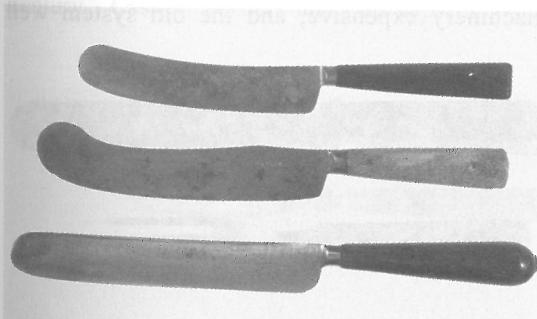


FIGURE 19. Table-knife blade shapes and lengths available at the end of the 18th century. Top, curved blade (with rat-tail-tang and wooden handle; 21 cm long overall); center, hump-backed blade (with flat tang and scored bone scales; 23 cm long overall); bottom, straight blade (with through tang and horn handle; 26 cm long overall).

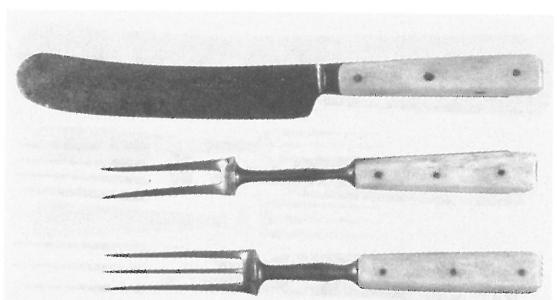


FIGURE 21. Knife with matching two- and three-tined forks with flat tangs and bone scales. Two-, three-, and four-tined forks were available with common cutlery starting in the late 18th century.

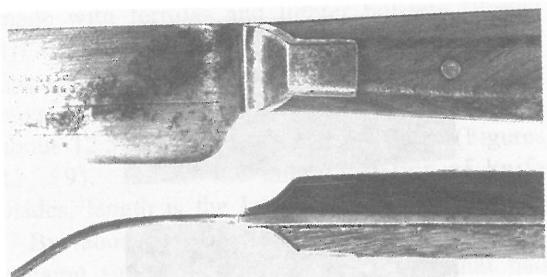


FIGURE 22. Cutlery made with Joseph Gardiner's 1860 patent (Lamson and Goodnow assignees). The bolster is of two separate pieces of stamped sheet steel, pinned onto the tang in the same way as the scales.

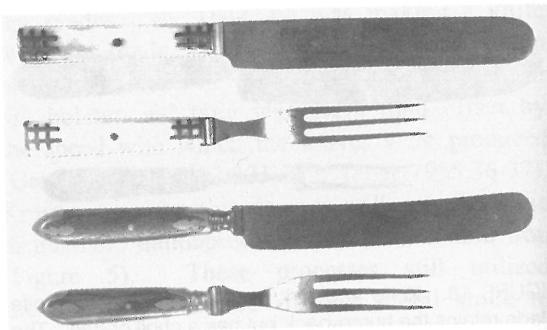


FIGURE 24. Knives and forks showing some of the many decorative patterns in cast-on tin alloy, ca. 1880-1920s. *Top*, with bone scales; *bottom*, with wooden scales.

(Landers, Frary and Clark 1869:33). This was some of the cheapest cutlery, and was priced in the same range as sheet-metal knives and forks with no bolsters at all (Figure 26). Cheap, bolsterless cutlery sometimes had a "half-tang" or "slot-tang." Instead of a full-sized flat tang with two scales, a half-length flat tang was inserted into a slot in a wood handle and held with two pins (Figure 26).

Another alternative to scale tangs was the hard or vulcanized rubber handle with a rat-tail tang (Figure 27). Charles Goodyear had discovered in 1839 that the addition of sulfur to natural rubber produced a strong, durable product (Hillman 1986:20). The John Russell Company tried this material in 1853, with little success (Taber 1955:38), but by the 1860s, rubber handles "warranted to stand hot water" (W. A. Currier 1862:7; Landers, Frary and Clark 1869:22) begin

to appear in catalogues.

The major rival to composite cutlery appeared in 1867. In that year, Matthew Chapman, an employee of the John Russell Company, patented table cutlery with the blade or tines and complete handle formed "from one piece of steel" (United States Patent Office 1867). This solid-steel cutlery could be nickel- or silver-plated depending on the quality (Landers, Frary and Clark 1869:23). It would eventually eclipse earlier types and is the basis for most of the steel cutlery used today. It was many years, however, before it replaced all the competing technologies and forms.

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, England lagged behind the United States in the introduction of new technology. Labor in England was cheap, re-tooling and new machinery expensive, and the old system well

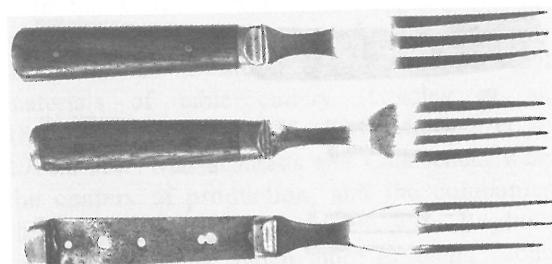


FIGURE 23. Sheet-steel forks. *Top*, with cast-on tin-alloy bolster; *center*, with cast-on bolster and butt plate; *bottom*, with scales missing and bolster and butt plate still attached.

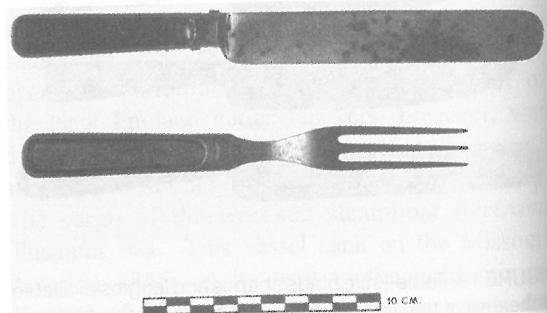


FIGURE 25. Knife and fork of sheet steel with handles of cast iron, late 1860s-1910s. The knife retains the original jpanning on the handle to retard rust.

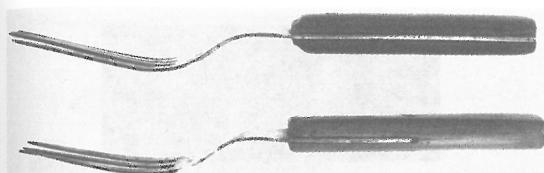


FIGURE 26. Inexpensive bolsterless sheet-steel forks. *Top*, with a flat tang and wooden scales; *bottom*, with a half-tang slotted into a wooden handle.

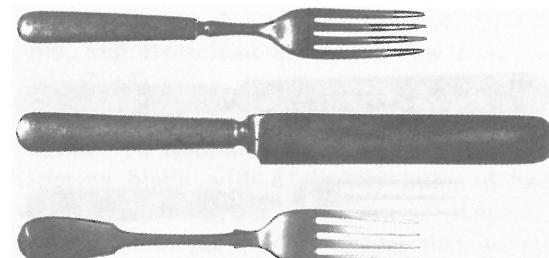


FIGURE 28. *Top and center*, solid-steel fork and knife made using Chapman's 1867 patent. This fork was offered as a set with the knife from the 1880s onward; *bottom*, this "non-matching" fork was sold as a set with the knife from the late 1860s and, occasionally, into the 1930s.

established (Grayson 1995:5-15, 57-58). For instance, forged knives and forks of English manufacture with handles of antler and buffalo horn (Figure 29) were still offered into the 20th century alongside newer types of cutlery (T. Eaton Co. 1901:157; Hudson's Bay Company 1910:178). It will be obvious from this work that if Sheffield had kept pace with New England in manufacturing methods, some cutlery could be much more closely dated.

1870-1890

This period saw the introduction of an important new handle material, and the increasing use of technologies developed from 1850 to 1870. Rubber handles continued to gain popularity in the 1870s, and by the 1880s, most catalogues carried them (F. A. Walker 1871:42; Francis T. Witte Hardware 1883:14; Merriam et al. 1976:83). The black-colored rubber had a precedent in the ebony and stained-black wood handles that had been made since the 18th century. Cast-on bolsters and butt caps on wood

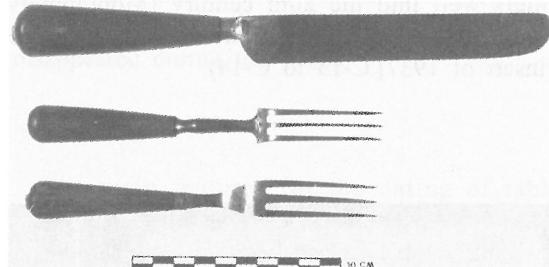


FIGURE 27. Cutlery with hard or vulcanized rubber handles. *Top and center*, knife and fork, 1860s-1910s, with handles impressed "GOODYEARS PATENT MAY 6. 1851". The knife blade is stamped "HARD RUBBER/CUTLERY Co"; *bottom*, knife with slipper-shaped stainless-steel blade, 1920s or 1930s.

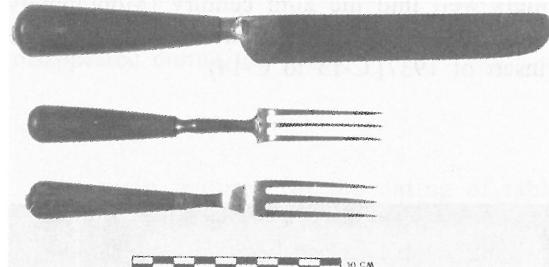


FIGURE 29. Knife and forks with round, tapering horn handles and through tangs. *Top and center*, knife and fork of late-18th-century form and manufacturing methods, but possibly made in Sheffield into the 20th century; *bottom*, sheet-steel fork with cast-on bolster dating from the late 1860s through the 1910s.

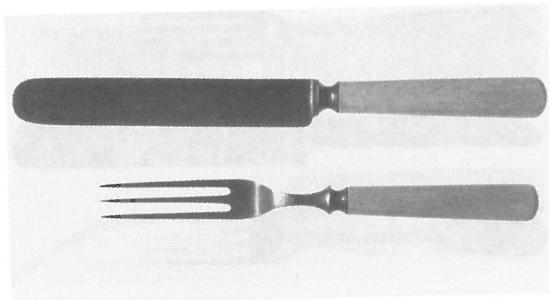


FIGURE 30. Cutlery with celluloid handles, 1880s-1930s.

restrictions, however, limited its use in the 1870s, and it is the 1880s before it becomes common as a handle material (Figure 30) (Francis T. Witte Hardware 1883:14; Hillman 1986:21). In 1883, a method was developed for graining celluloid so that it would better resemble ivory (Figure 31) (Hillman 1986:22).

Also in 1883, a method was patented for etching names and trademarks on knife blades (Figure 32) (Taber 1955:43). Previously names and devices were stamped into blades, and stamping continued to be used by many manufacturers into the 20th century.

The first solid-steel knives of the late 1860s and 1870s were paired with a fork which, to the modern eye, does not appear to match. These forks, often in the "fiddle" or "tipped" pattern (Figure 28), matched the spoons of the period and imitated pieces made by a silversmith rather than a cutler. By the 1880s, solid steel forks that matched the knife rather than the spoon began to appear in catalogues (Merriam et al. 1976:84). The earlier "non-matching" sets, however, continued to be offered by some suppliers well into the 20th century (Montgomery Ward 1926:550; J. H. Ashdown Hardware 1935 [insert of 1937]:C-13 to C-14).

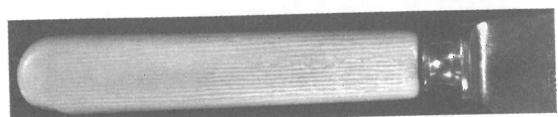


FIGURE 31. Celluloid handle showing graining patented in 1883 to more closely resemble ivory.

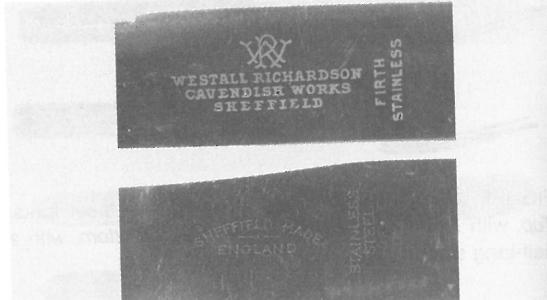


FIGURE 32. *Top*, stamped mark on a stainless-steel slipper-shaped knife blade, 1920s-1930s; *bottom*, etched mark on a blade of the same material and period.

1890-1920

With few exceptions, there is little change in cutlery during the 1890-1920 period. There was a slow increase in the number of synthetic handles being offered, and a gradual decrease in the number of curved knife blades. Even so, the same range of cutlery sold in the 1880s was still available.

From the mid-1890s to the 1910s, cast-iron handles were made with decorations in the casting (Figure 33) (Sears, Roebuck 1897:107; Gordon, MacKay 1910:381; Hudson's Bay Company 1910:178). Cast-iron handles generally disappeared from mail-order catalogues by the 1920s.

About 1900, another semi-synthetic material, made from milk extracts, appeared. This mate-

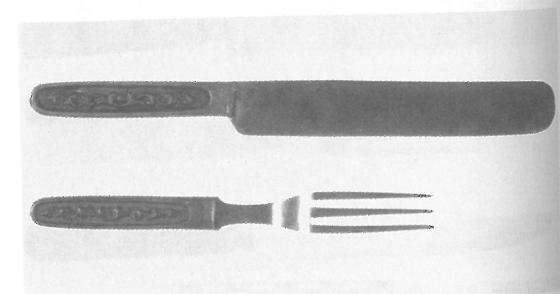


FIGURE 33. Sheet-steel knife and fork with decorated cast-iron handles of the mid-1890s to the 1910s.

COMPOSITE TABLE CUTLERY FROM 1700 TO 1930

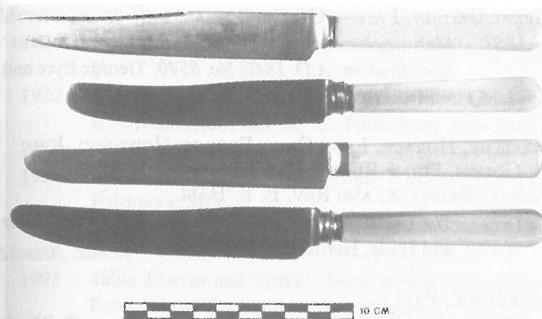


FIGURE 34. Knives of stainless steel with celluloid handles, 1920s-1940s. The knife blades show variations on the "slipper" or "French" shape. The third knife from the top has a slip-on bolster.

rial, commonly called casein, was occasionally used for cutlery handles but was never as widespread as celluloid (Hillman 1986:24). Casein can be difficult to distinguish from celluloid without burning or chemical testing (Katz 1984:146-147).

1920-1930

Several steel alloys that would not rust or stain were developed from about 1910 to World War I. None of them worked well for cutlery, as they tended to be brittle and their manufacture required special equipment and new skills. During the war, the American and British governments took over the production of "stainless" steel for military purposes and, by the war's end, many of the technical problems had been overcome. Most manufacturers, however, still had to change equipment and methods to use the new alloys, and this was costly. As well, the public was suspicious of the new product. The new processes were imperfectly understood by many makers, thus the first post-war products tended to crack and split, and knives would not keep an edge (Taber 1955:47-48). As late as 1927, the same page of the Montgomery Ward (1926:550) catalogue was offering both nickel-plated steel cutlery and "bright, rust-resisting stainless steel." Through the 1920s, stainless steel gradually improved and gained favor. Trade names for the various alloys were

myriad: Norust, Nevastain, Rustproof, Unstainable, and Everclean are but a few (Grayson 1995:57-64).

Along with the new steel, a new blade shape appeared on table knives (Figures 27, 34). This tapering blade with a slightly humped back was called a "slipper" or "French" shape. It is the first of the modern shapes that we still use today. It was originally considered a steak or "meat" knife, and it is shown in catalogues with the standard straight and curved "table" or "dinner" knives (Daniel Low & Co. 1926:91; T. Eaton 1927:223). Within a few years, however, it had gained acceptance for table-knife duties as well.

Knives with stainless-steel slipper-shaped blades sometimes had a bolster that was made separately (Figure 34). These bolsters were slotted to slip over the bare tang and slide up to meet the blade. The handle would then be cemented or molded onto the tang. Such bolsters are found in various metals including tin alloy, nickel-plated brass, and steel. After World War I, aluminum alloys began to be used occasionally as handle material (Montgomery Ward 1922:525), but they were rarely advertised in the 1920s or 1930s.

By the late 1920s, composite cutlery held only a fraction of the market. Although a range of wood, bone, antler, and rubber handles could still be found, most mail-order catalogues offered several pages of inexpensive stamped nickel- and silver-plate compared to a page or less of composite knives and forks (Montgomery Ward 1926:416-419, 550; Sears, Roebuck 1927:754-761). Except for knives and forks with handles of celluloid and the first modern synthetic plastics such as Bakelite (Hillman 1986:24-26), composite table cutlery all but disappeared during the 1930s.

Conclusion

The main features for the dating of table cutlery in the 18th century are stylistic. Some knives acquired humped backs in the 1720s, and choils appeared in the 1760s. By the end of the century, several new blade forms had appeared. Forks acquired a square shoulder around 1770, and three-tined examples became more common

about the same time. Little change occurred in the first half of the 19th century, but manufacturing methods being developed in the United States were to have a major impact. In the second half of the 19th century, the main changes were technological. Sheet-steel cutlery was introduced in the 1850s, and was common by the 1860s. Cast-on bolsters were introduced in the 1860s. Hard rubber handles became common at about the same time. Celluloid handles were introduced in the 1870s, and became common in the 1880s. All-steel cutlery was patented in 1867. In the 20th century, stainless steel and the slipper-shaped blade appeared after World War I.

Through all of this change, some cutlery continued to be made using older forms and manufacturing techniques. Although it is sometimes possible to put a *terminus post quem* on cutlery, it is often much more difficult to put a *terminus ante quem* on a style or technology.

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