From Silver Spoons to Shell Casings

Gorham Manufacturing Company

By [Rebecca Soules](http://rhodetour.org/items/browse?search=&advanced%5B0%5D%5Belement_id%5D=39&advanced%5B0%5D%5Btype%5D=is+exactly&advanced%5B0%5D%5Bterms%5D=Rebecca%20Soules)

In 1873, an economic depression gripped the country and threatened the future of the Gorham Manufacturing Company. The company’s skilled metalworkers and innovative designers had a reputation for creating quality goods, but none of these things mattered if people couldn’t afford to purchase the company’s products.

Suddenly, Gorham received a commission to create a silver service like no other in the world. Costing more than $1 million dollars to produce, this 24-person set of dishes, utensils, and decorative items consisted of 740 pieces, that, when completed, filled seventeen trunks. In all, it took nearly seven years to create this impressive collection for insurance magnate Henry Jewett Furber. The Furber commission defined the Gorham Manufacturing Company’s reputation as the country’s premier silver manufacturer for the next century.

The Gorham Manufacturing Company began in 1831, as a small partnership between two Providence silversmiths, Jabez Gorham and Henry Webster. By the 1860s, Gorham was the world’s leading producer of silverware. Even Mary Todd Lincoln purchased a Gorham silver tea service for use in the Lincoln White House.

Though the company initially focused on silver goods, Gorham also dramatically expanded its bronze casting facilities when it accepted a commission to cast “The Skirmisher,” a massive sculpture commemorating the battle of Gettysburg.  By the 1890s, Gorham had the world’s largest bronze foundry. Gorham’s bronzes include such well-known pieces as the 12-foot-tall “Independent Man” atop the Rhode Island statehouse, the statue of George Washington in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, and the 1893 statue of Christopher Columbus erected at this location.

In 1900, the company showcased its work at the Paris Exposition Universelle. Receiving a grand prix and five gold medals, Gorham’s amazing display was a highlight of the exposition. As the century continued, however, Gorham’s fortunes ebbed. Interest in silver flatware waned in favor of modern products. The Great Depression decreased the company’s sales even more dramatically.

During World War II, Gorham virtually abandoned its civilian industries to focus on producing goods for the war effort. These included small arms parts, tank bearings, torpedo components, and millions of 40mm shell casings. After the war, [Gorham struggled to retain its preeminence](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/18#.U2PE28dX7Oc), and decreased demand and increased production costs plagued the company. In 1986, the company’s Providence facilities closed after nearly a century of operation.

Today, Gorham’s legacy lives on through the hundreds of bronzes that dot the American landscape and the company’s unique and highly collectable silver products.

**Discussion Questions**Why might the sale of a silver tea set to Mary Todd Lincoln have helped Gorham silver become popular?

How could Henry J. Furber afford to buy such an extravagant set of silver during a time when many Americans were struggling financially?

Why did Gorham Manufacturing Company have increased trouble selling their products in the twentieth century?

Why isn’t silver flatware as popular today? What do most people use instead?

Why might the residents of Providence have erected a statue to Christopher Columbus where they did? Would you put up a Columbus statue today? Where?