



## **Silversmithing**

### **The Pelletreau Shop, After 40 Years, Reopens in Southampton**

*By Victoria L. Cooper*

The other day, my co-workers and I were driving along Main Street in Southampton when, suddenly, a beautiful little gem of a cottage caught our attention. We had come face-to-face with one of the oldest buildings in Southampton, the Pelletreau Silver Shop, made famous by silversmith and Revolutionary war patriot Elias Pelletreau. When you first step into the Pelletreau shop, it really is like taking a walk into the past. Not one item in sight is modern and it feels as though the industrial revolution and the recent technological boom somehow missed this little shop, nestled amid million-dollar franchise storefronts like SAKS Fifth Avenue, which is just around the corner.

Built in 1696, this building remains one of the oldest structures standing on the East End. Today, you will find Eric Messin, resident jeweler and silversmith, practicing his art in the very same shop that Elias Pelletreau made famous centuries ago. Along with being one of the most talented jewelry designers on the East End, Messin has also been a pioneer in trying to educate the community by teaching intimate workshops for people eager to learn how to make their own jewelry in an authentic, old-world silversmith's studio. A rich, long history stands behind this

Main Street storefront and all those that have inhabited it and this history inspires Messin to create pieces that incorporate both new and old-world sensibilities.

The gambrel-roofed building was originally owned by Francis Pelletreau and upon his death in 1737, the shop was given to the then eleven-year-old Elias, who was encouraged by his stepfather to pursue the silversmith trade. He occupied the shop in 1750 and began making jewelry, buckles, boxes and eating utensils in gold, silver and tortoise shell. For the next 30 years, Pelletreau crafted a steady flow of silverware for some of Long Island's most prominent residents and their families, among them Nathaniel Woodhull, David Gardiner (the sixth proprietor of Gardiner's Island), the merchant Samuel Townsend and Dr. George Muirson.



In order to gauge the magnitude of his success, it's important to note that working in revolutionary Southampton was more like working in a rural village, which typically demanded just a handful of silver pieces a year, than in the bustling town we think of today. Yet the demand for Pelletreau's silver was anything but typical. His silver was a luxury, mainly because of its hybrid style, which mixed the solid and the fashionable (a combination of a trendy New York City approach and New England traditions). As a result, customers tended to be urban, educated and well traveled -- a class with a taste for "bling" and the money with which to indulge it. To understand just how far Pelletreau legacy has come, all you really have to do is compare the cost of his silverware to pieces made today. A Pelletreau teapot featured on the "Antiques Roadshow" television show was estimated to be worth close to \$20,000, making his work true American treasure.

Although the Pelletreau home was torn down in 1878, the shop was spared and turned to face the street. From 1878 until the 1950s, the shop changed owners until it became the home of a local bookseller. The last owner of the house willed it to the Village of Southampton, where it became the personal project of Henry Frances duPont, who restored the interior and exterior of the shop to reflect its original use as a silversmith's studio. In 1966, the Pelletreau shop was opened to the public on the weekends as an extension of the Southampton Historical Museum. However, it was not until 2006, when Eric Messin fell in love with the space, that the shop would be used as a

silversmith's studio once more. Today, there is a large sign on the door that reads, "Come in. We're OPEN," every day except Monday.

Some say that history repeats itself, and in this case it's true. When we spoke to Eric Messin, he said that Elias Pelletreau was French and that "The funny coincidence is, almost three centuries later, a Frenchman still works here." Messin discussed how he feels privileged to work in such a unique environment and that it feels almost as if he is home in France, where old structures like the Pelletreau silver shop are more common. "It enlivens my spirits. I feel very inspired, comfortable and cozy working with all this old wood around me," added Messin.

Messin explained that many people bring in old stones that he sets on newly designed necklaces or rings and that he also helps customers with repairs or creating new designs from scratch, which he produces from beginning to end. Messin seems to have a deep-rooted passion for working with his hands and producing art. His father was a painter and Messin originally studied sculpture. He found that he loved working with the first elements from the earth -- silver and gold, water and fire -- and how they changed and developed into beautiful objects with his help.

Next time you're taking a stroll along Main Street in Southampton, stop by the Pelletreau silver shop. You'll be glad you did.

Thanks to the Southampton Historical Museum, the Pelletreau Silver Shop is now open on a regular basis from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday. Messin is also teaching workshops for three or four students at a time, which cost \$290 for Southampton Historical Museum members and \$310 for non-members and run for 8 weeks. The next workshop begins on August 28. For more information, contact the Southampton Historical Museum at (631) 283-2494 or [www.SouthamptonHistoricalMuseum.org](http://www.SouthamptonHistoricalMuseum.org).