

Shirley Pewter Shop: A reflection of quality craftsmanship and family pride

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Daily Press Creative Services

There are those Williamsburg natives who think of Merchant Square as 'a charming place for tourists' — which it is. But residents and visitors alike who cross the threshold of the Shirley Pewter Shop quickly realize they have entered a showroom of true distinction. For more than 30 years, the Shirley Pewter Shop on Duke Of Gloucester Street has offered handcrafted and custom-designed pewter pieces to customers who appreciate the fine craftsmanship and longevity of a piece of pewter art. But this gallery has humble beginnings that can be traced to a police officer, a German mentor and a metalcraft shop on Jamestown Road.

"Our company is 50 years old," says Bruce Robertson, Manager of Shirley Pewter. "It was started by my father, Shirley Robertson. In the early 1940s, he went to school to learn a trade and began an apprenticeship with Colonial Williamsburg's first master silversmith, a German immigrant."

His father's mentor was a real disciplinarian, according to Robertson. "The apprenticeship was a six-year program," he explains. "My father left school early in the afternoons to practice his trade and worked every summer with the silversmith to master the craft. The instructor insisted that my father learn to work silver, brass, copper and pewter."

The education paid off. In conjunction with the hands-on training he'd already completed, Robertson studied design perspectives at William and Mary. Now Robertson was ready to officially launch his career. However, in order to support his family in the beginning, he had to wear many hats. Robertson made handcrafted pewter pieces during the day, patrolled the streets of Williamsburg as a police officer at night and attended National Guard meetings on the weekend.

Shirley Robertson passed his love for pewter onto his sons — Scott manages the metalcraft shop on Jamestown Road and Bruce manages the retail end of the business. Now, a third generation of Robertsons is learning the family business, Bruce's son Derek and youngest daughter Caitlin are involved in the 50-year old tradition.

A GALLERY OF PRODUCTS

The first of the two shops that make up the Shirley Pewter family of stores is the showroom on Duke of Gloucester Street. "We are a small eclectic store trying to appeal to a large variety of customers," says Robertson. "You can find a lot of 18th century reproductions if you want to furnish a home of that period or if you are looking to accessorize your antiques."

"When we first opened the retail shop," he says, "we were only showing the things we made." But Robertson was getting requests for products and finishes that his craftsmen didn't create. Wanting to meet his customers' needs, Robertson began representing other pewter companies from around the world. "We have a great diversity of items that we sell," he says. "There are some new and exciting products out of Europe that have never been

available before." According to Robertson, one product line from France has a beautiful array of wine-related products; a product line from Italy offers very large fruit bowls that are made by casting pewter, rather than spinning. (By casting the craftsmen are able to cast a design or motif into the bowl, rather than soldering the pieces on.) Two Austrian and German companies have pewter pieces with panel casting that depict entire scenes on goblets or beer steins. Shirley Pewter salespeople are eager to suggest gift ideas that may include pewter candlestick holders, bridal goblets, mugs and toasting cups.

"We have a wonderful local following," says Robertson, "who send our products all over the country as baby and wedding gifts. We have pewter tea services, candelabras, jewelry, mugs, baby cups, 18th century reproduction porringers, baby albums, rattles and spoons." Shirley Pewter has something for everyone. "We even have pewter Looney Tunes and Star Wars figurines," says Robertson. "We carry over 4,800 products."

CRAFTSMEN AT WORK

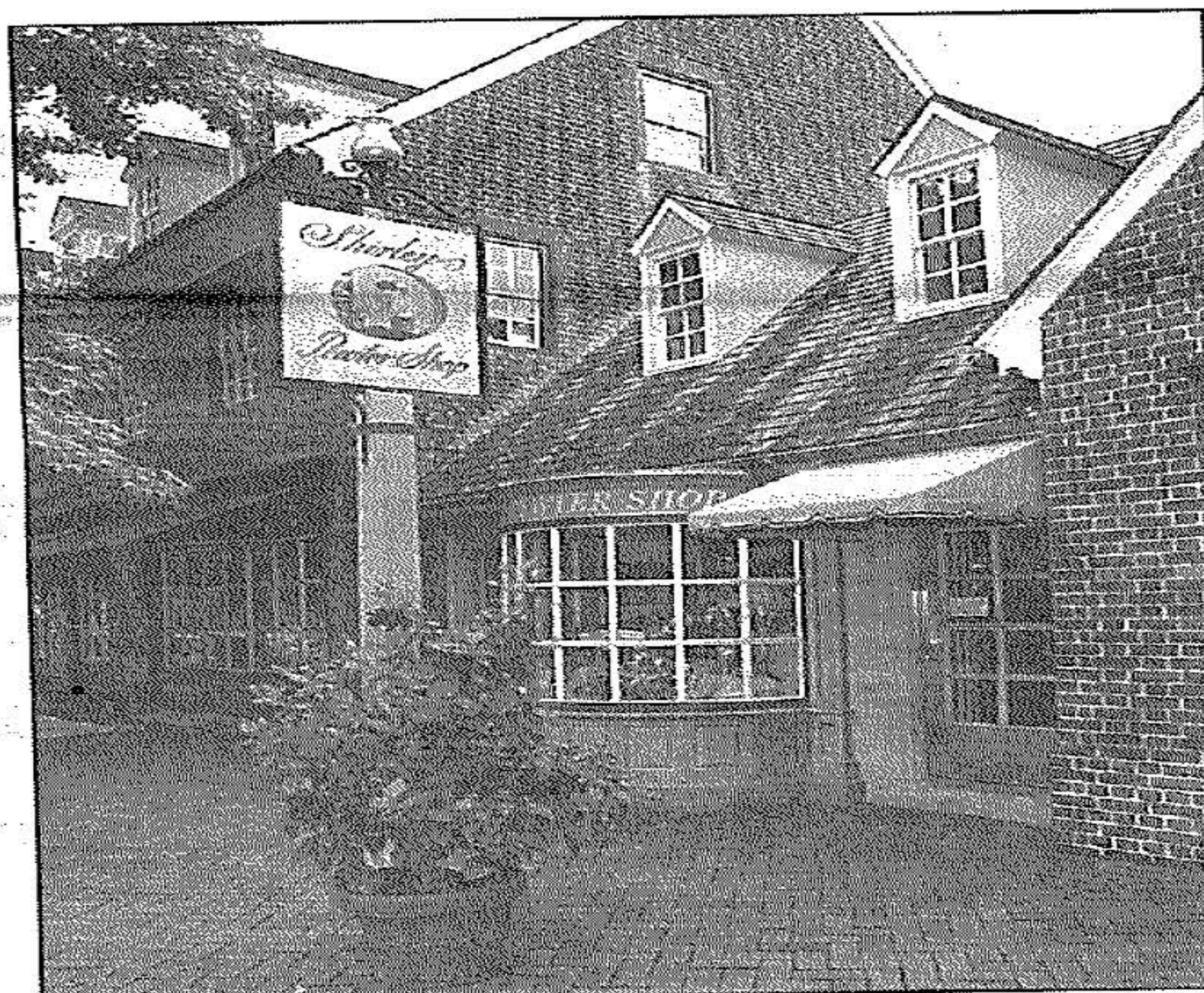
The second shop allows customers to get a real feel for the artistic process that is Shirley Pewter. "We encourage people to stop by our metalcraft shop on Jamestown Road," says Robertson. "There they can see brand name Shirley Pewter being manufactured by hand in the shop."

The Jamestown Road location also has a showroom that sells the pieces that the craftsmen are making in the shop. "On the premises," Robertson says, "we cast handles for coffee pots, sugar bowls and porringers, as well as finials for candy dishes and coffee pots and arms for candelabras. It is really fascinating to see such a thing of beauty created from raw materials." ♦

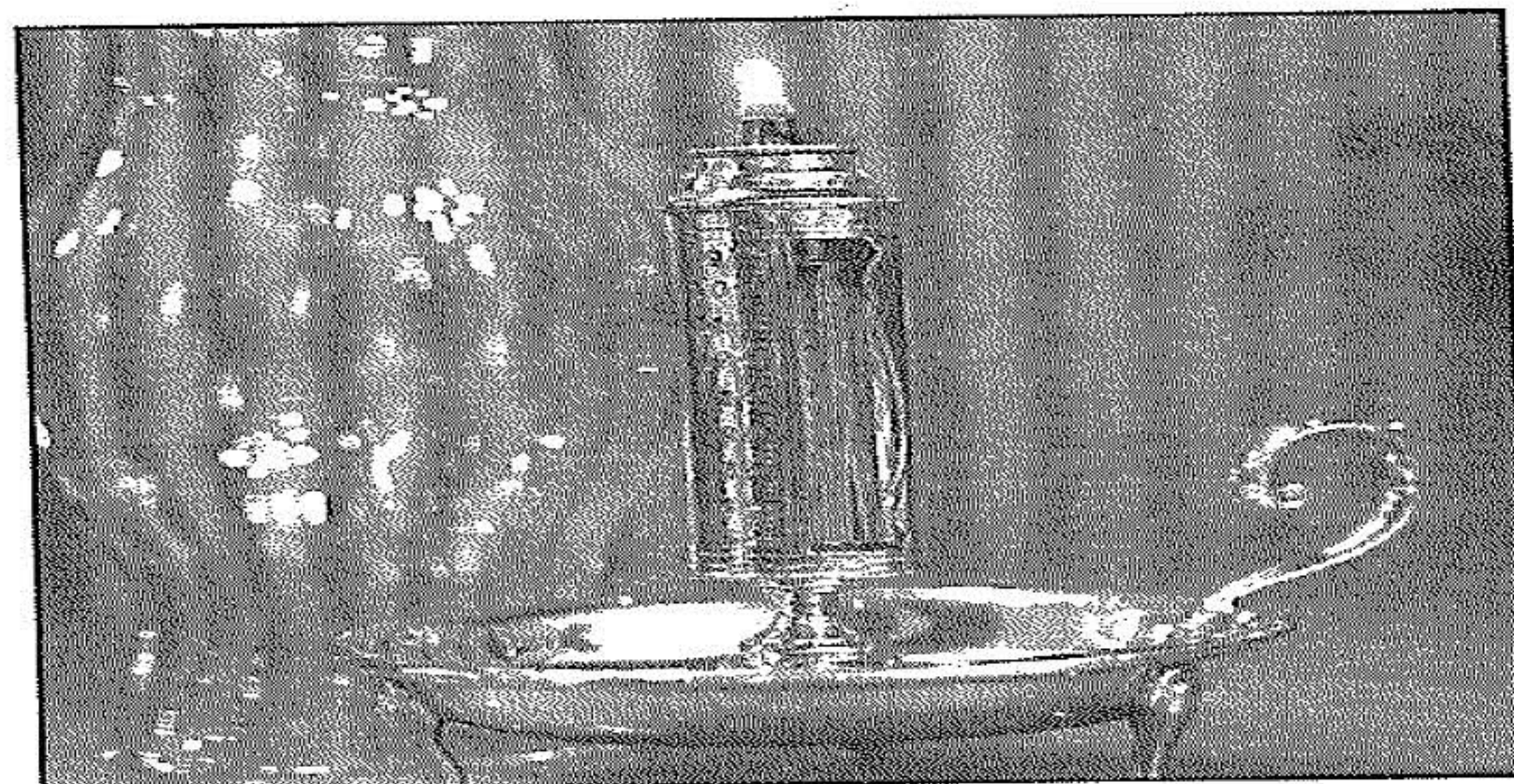
Shirley Pewter Shop
Merchant's Square, Colonial Williamsburg
(757/229-5356)
9:30 a.m.-9 p.m.

Shirley Pewter Metalcraft Shop
1205 Jamestown Road
(757/229-1378)
9 a.m.-5 p.m.

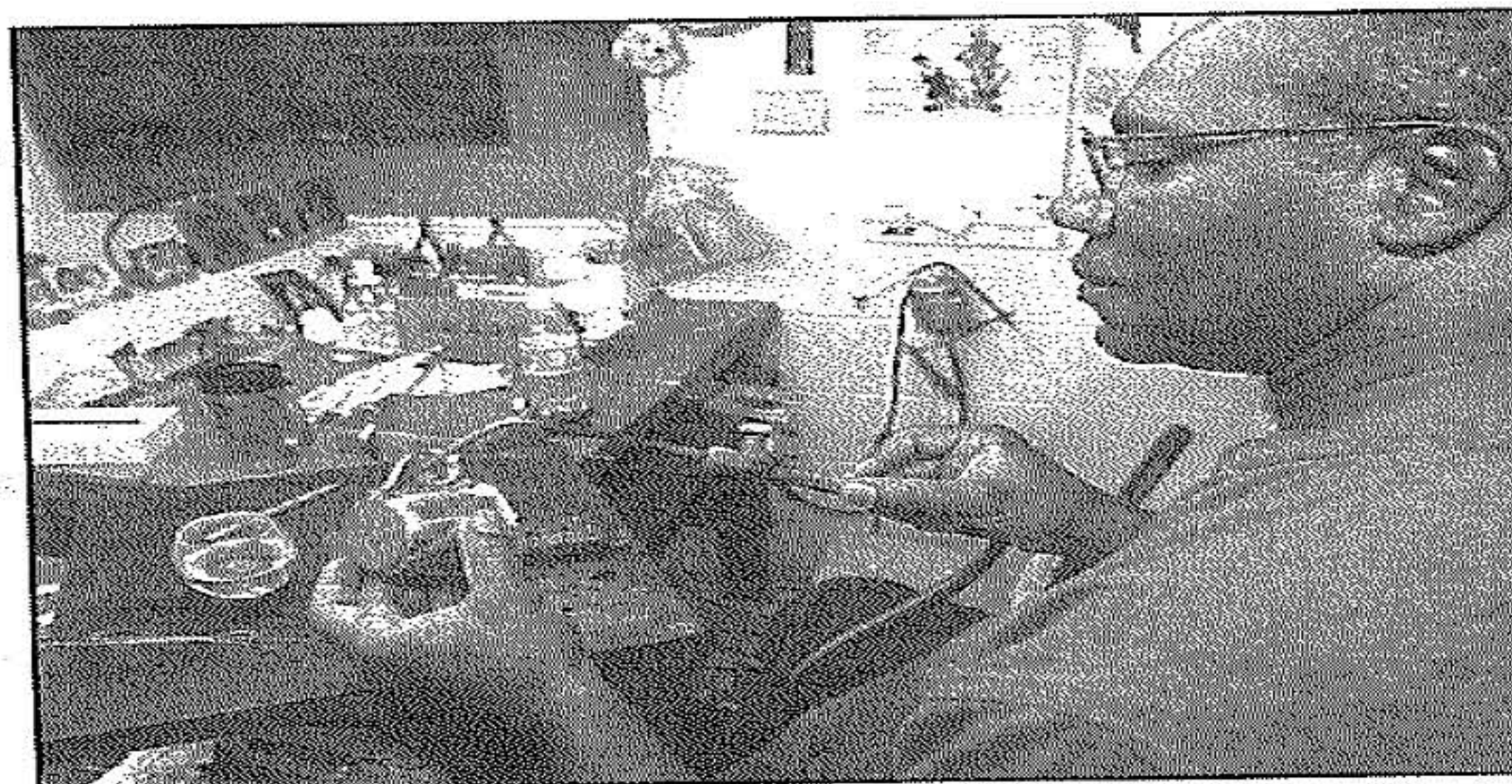
www.shirleypewter.com



For more than 30 years, the Shirley Pewter Shop on Duke of Gloucester Street in Colonial Williamsburg has offered handcrafted and custom-designed pewter pieces.



The Executive Time Lamp is one example of beautiful pewter pieces that combine functionality with classic design.



John Jones has been a pewter craftsman for over 35 years. Here he is seen soldering a handle to a baby cup.



The shop carries every piece of brand name Shirley Pewter and pieces from over 48 other manufacturers, all told.