

## Some Early U.S. Tackle Dealers

Steven K. Vernon

In his seminal book, *Angling in America*, Charles Eliot Goodspeed mentioned a few of America's earliest fishing tackle dealers, whom he discovered primarily through their broadsides and newspaper advertisements. The dealers from the first decades of the Union or earlier were located in northeastern cities. The advertisements that Goodspeed cited or that I have seen elsewhere offered long lists of recently imported goods that included fishing rods, hooks, and/or lines. The earliest offers of reels for sale were included in broadsides and advertisements by Edward Pole, beginning in the 1770s.

### LATELY IMPORTED,

And to be sold, by Samuel Neave, at his Store near  
Fishbourn's Wharffe, in Water-Street.

**KERSEYS, Broad Cloths and Trimmings**  
in Suits, Blankets, Gamblets, Calimancoes, striped and plain  
Fustians, Chims, Silk and Linnen Handkerchiefs, double and single  
Slesias, Muslins, coloured Threads, Silk, Cotton and Thread Laces,  
Non-fo pretties, Tapes, Gartering, Silk Ferit, and Quality, Men  
and Womens Hose, double and single Worsted and Cotton Caps,  
Womens Shammy Gloves, Men and Womens Horse-Whips, Ivory,  
Horn, Coco, and Maple (Case) and Pocket Knives, and Forks,  
Spring Knives, and Penknives, Siffers, Shears, Tibbles, Needles,  
Pins, Wooll-Cards, Frying Pans, Sheep Shears, Box, and smooth-  
ing Irons, Pepper and Coffee Mills, Mettle and Mohair Buttons,  
Pewter Plates, Dishes, Balons, Porringers and Spoons, Fishing  
Rods, and Hooks, Castor Hats, Choica Boker Tea, and Tea  
Kettles, Ivory and Horn Combs, Gun Locks, two Foot Rules,  
Gimblets, Files, and Rasps, with sundry other Small Wares,  
also variety of Cutlery Ware.

*Samuel Neave's ad in a November, 1737, issue of the Pennsylvania Gazette includes rods and hooks.*

Many merchants, though not specializing in fishing equipment, were selling it very early. In Philadelphia, Samuel Neave sold imported rods and hooks at least as early as 1737. The city built an alms-house in 1732, and in 1736 Joseph Scull was appointed manager. Hoping to provide revenue for the institution, he advertised products made by his charges, including "Fishing lines of all sorts cheap." The "specialists" arrived decades later.

Edward Pole referred to his store, on Market-street, Philadelphia, as a "Fishing Tackle Shop," and to himself as a "Fishing-Tackle-Maker." Though he also sold "fowling tackle" and other wares, his ads indicated that he specialized in fishing equipment. Pole and his successor, George R. Lawton, who supplied the tackle for the Lewis & Clark expedition, are familiar names to historians. Few other dealers advertised tackle

extensively as early as the 1770s. They include Gilbert Forbes, primarily a gunsmith and proprietor of Sign-of-the-Sportsman, on Broadway in New York City, and Jeremiah Allen, Boston. Forbes was identified as a recruiter for the British army during the Revolution. In contrast, Allen consulted with John Adams regarding the treatment of fisheries in post-war treaty negotiations. He would later become High Sheriff of Boston.

At the **WORK-HOUSE**, in  
**PHILADELPHIA;**  
**ALL** Persons may be supplied, at Eight Pence  
per Pound, by the Dozen, with Bed-Lacings, Bed-Cords,  
Plugh-Lines, Plugh Traces, and Halkers, of all Sines; and any  
large Rope at the same Price; by the single Rope; Sacking-Bottoms  
with Lacing at Twenty Shillings per Bottom; House-Lines and  
Mar-Lines, at Ten Pence per Pound; deep Sea-Lines, Lead and  
Hambro' Ditto, at One Shilling per Pound; Log-Lines at Two  
Shillings per Line; Netting-Twines, Sewing Ditto, and Hatters  
Ditto, at Two Shillings and Four Pence per pound; Jack-Lines,  
at One Shilling and Three Pence per Pound, and Cloath-Lines made  
of Hair, at One Shilling and Three Pence Ditto; Bagging made  
of Hemp, from One Shilling and Six Pence to Two Shillings per  
Yard; Saff-Lines at One Penny per Yard; Fishing Lines of all  
Sorts cheap: Also Oakum, Shoemakers Hemp, cur'd Hair, and  
Hemp Tow. Where also is Wove Woollen and Linnen, well, and  
at the cheapest Rates, by  
**JOSEPH SCULL.**

*Joseph Scull's ad in a May, 1739, issue of the Pennsylvania Gazette includes fishing lines.*

Shops that specialized in fishing tackle were a rarity through the first half of the nineteenth century. Identifying them requires discovery of their advertising, and that discovery is often fortuitous, at best. One development that makes life a bit easier for today's researchers was the increasingly widespread publication of city directories during the nineteenth century. Many of the directories not only identified the occupations of city inhabitants but identified business specialties and carried advertising. Original directories can be found all over the country, usually as woefully incomplete sets in individual city libraries or on collections of microfilm in relatively few libraries with limited accessibility. Even when a researcher has these resources at his disposal, identifying every tackle shop in a directory is an almost insurmountable task.

The first-known city directories were published in London, beginning in 1588, and the first in the New World was compiled in manuscript form for New York City in 1665.<sup>1</sup> Now we have the Internet and, thanks to efforts and expenditures from many sources, copies of



## Fishing Tackle

Of all sorts, for Use on either SEA or RIVER,  
MADE AND SOLD

By Edward Pole,

In Market Street, near the Court-house, Philadelphia,  
viz.

Red cedar, dogwood, hickory

and other fishing Rods, of various sorts and sizes, either plain or ringed; hair, silk, and hemp Lines of any length, either for fly, trolling or bottom fishing, all ready fitted; Deepseas, for sea or river, complete; Trimmers for pike fishing; a variety of cork Floats, with either swan or goose Quills; silk worms Gut, Weed and Indian-grass; Leads of various patterns; best watch spring, kirby and common Fishing Hooks of all sizes, either loose or ready hung on silk, hair, or Indian-grass; casting Minnow, landing and scoop Nets, with a great variety of other Fishing Tackle.

Any Gentlemen going, on parties of fishing, either to Black-Point, sea, river, or any other place, may be completely furnished, or have Tackle made of any particular kind or pattern, on a very short notice.

N. B. As he has a very general and complete Assortment of the very best kind of Fishing Tackle, he flatters himself he is able to serve the Public with better Tackle, and on as low terms as any other in the city.

A L S O,

Two fishing Seines to be exchanged for Wool or other Country Produce.

## Fishing Tackle.



Edward Pole,

At his long established

FISHING TACKLE SHOP,

In Market-street, near the Old Coffee-House, Philadel.  
MAKES AND SELLS,

A Complete and General Assortment of FISHING TACKLE of all Kinds, for use of either SEA or RIVER, which, from 20 years Experience, he flatters himself he is able to furnish of the best Kinds, and upon the most reasonable Terms, viz.

**F**LY, trolling, bottom, bag, and all other sorts and sizes of Fishing Rods, either hollow or solid, plain or ringed.

Plain and multiplying Brass Wheels.

Horse-hair, silk, hardest, hempen, cotton, Layout and Angling Lines.

Deepseas, for sea or river, ready fitted.

Trimmers, and other Tackle, for pike fishing.

Cork Floats, a variety, with either goose or swan quills.

Artificial Baits, consisting of Flies, Moths, Hackles, Minnow, Chub, Birds, Mice and Frogs, for Trout, Rock and Pike fishing.

Best Silk Worms Gut, India Grass and Weed.

Leads of various patterns, for Black-Point and other fishing.

Best Kirby and common Fishing Hooks of every size, either loose or ready hung, on silk, hair, Indian grass, gut, or weed.

Double and treble, spring and dead snap Hooks wired.

Box and plain, Salmon, Jack, and Trout Swivels.

4, 8, 10 and 12 flave round and flat Pocket Reels.

Pike and Eel Hooks, hung on wire.

White and yellow Gimp.

Casting, minnow, landing, and scoop Nets, &c. &c.

Pole's advertisements from 1781 (left) and 1790 indicate his major specialty.

printed directories online. Even better, .pdf files of the directories and text transcriptions are searchable for key words. Using carefully chosen key words, a researcher should be able to discover all the inhabitants and shops in a given directory that have labeled themselves as involved with or specializing in fishing tackle. Let us hope that directories will continue to be posted online.

The earliest fishing tackle specialist I've discovered in city directories is Israel Mead, who manufactured

fish hooks on Washington St., Boston, at least as early as 1796. He was still making them there a quarter-century later. Of course, anglers needed more than just hooks to pursue their prey. The first Boston directory had appeared in 1789.

\* \* \*

After the war, New York City directories were printed as early as 1786. In 1822, John Lentner first listed his business as "fish. tackle" in a New York directory. His shop was located at 36 Maiden Lane.



**FISHING-TACKLE**  
 A complete assortment of  
**HARDWARE, CUTLERY,  
 FISHING & FOWLING APPARATUS,**  
 AT THE SIGN OF THE ANGLER,  
 No. 1, *Boylston Square, Orange Street,*  
 BOSTON.  
 WILLIAM TAYLOR, JUN.

*William Taylor, Jr.'s directory ad of 1823 and Bradlee & Son's of 1830*

Lentner had been a cabinet and chair-maker during the 1790s, and I'm not sure of what he was doing for two decades before he opened his shop in 1822. After changing locations a couple of times, he was still selling "fishtackle"[sic] in 1841. He died intestate in 1846. Lentner's directory listing is the earliest I've found anywhere that includes "fishing tackle."

\* \* \*

William Taylor, Jr., ran a hardware store at a couple of different locations in Boston during the early 1820s. He moved to Boylston Square in 1823 and ran a directory ad touting the "Fishing & Fowling Apparatus" available at his "Sign of the Angler." Meanwhile, he confessed to selling hardware and sporting apparatus in his individual listings, even after moving to Washington St. in 1828. Based on an 1830 directory ad, it appears that Samuel Bradlee & Son, a competing hardware dealer, may have bought out some or all of Taylor's fishing tackle.

Now we return to Philadelphia. Although Philly directories were published as early as 1785, the earliest tackle dealers I could find in them online were William B. Scull, "fishing and fowling tackling store," 96 N 3<sup>rd</sup>, and Samuel Bacon & Co., "ironmongery & fishing tackle store," 188 N Front. Both were included in an 1825 directory. Neither Pole nor Lawton had included fishing tackle in their directory listings, which ran as late as 1807.

In Baltimore, another major eastern city, it was not until 1842 that J.K. Stapleton & Son finally admitted that they manufactured "brush, bellows and fishing tackle." Later in the decade, Stapleton would emphasize its rod making.

To put these dates into a more familiar context, John Conroy was in business during the 1820s, but he did not include "fishing tackle" in his directory listings un-

**SAMUEL BRADLEE & SON,**  
 At the Sign of  
  
**FISHING-TACKLE**  
 THE ANGLER.  
 No. 142 Washington Street, (Old Door north of the Old South Meeting House,) Boston,  
 IMPORT AND KEEP CONSTANTLY FOR SALE  
 A COMPLETE ASSORTMENT OF  
**SPORTING APPARATUS.**  
 ALSO, an extensive assortment of *Hard Ware, Fine Cutlery, Edge Tools, Fancy Goods, &c. &c.* Hemming's *Superfine Needles*, which are offered on reasonable Terms, for Cash or approved Credit, Wholesale and Retail.

**BRUSHES, BELLOWS.**



**JOSEPH K. STAPLETON,**  
 No. 198 **BALTIMORE STREET,**  
 FOUR DOORS WEST OF ST. PAUL STREET,  
**BALTIMORE,**  
 MANUFACTURES ALL KINDS OF  
**BRUSHES, BELLOWS, FISHING RODS & TACKLE,**  
 And has in store a great variety of articles for Town and Country Trade, for sale very low, by Wholesale and Retail.  
**BELLOWS and TACKLE made and repaired to order.**

*An 1845 Stapleton directory ad*

til 1838. Benjamin Welch, watchmaker, added tackle to his listing in 1839. J.B. Crook and George Karr joined the crowd in 1842.

There were certainly many other colonial vendors who sold fishing tackle besides the few mentioned above. Of course, there were other later vendors, as well. Nevertheless, the city directory listings give us a hint of how few were the shops whose revenues depended largely on tackle. It was not until the 1850s and later that substantial numbers of firms so specialized. The growth in such numbers was highly correlated with the increase in the numbers of American manufacturers of fishing equipment, a result of the increasing popularity of sport fishing.

Having spent hundreds of hours poring over city directories in book and microfilm form in many libraries, I'm willing to give up on that approach. The number of directories available online is sadly limited at this time, but their posting already provides a rich source of historical information about our hobby. I would enjoy hearing from collectors who have discovered other pre-1850 vendors by using other city directories or finding old advertisements.

#### Note

1. Philip Sutton, *Direct Me NYC 1786: A History of City Directories in the United States and New York City* (<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/06/08/direct-me-1786-history-city-directories-US-NYC>, retrieved 1/23/2019)