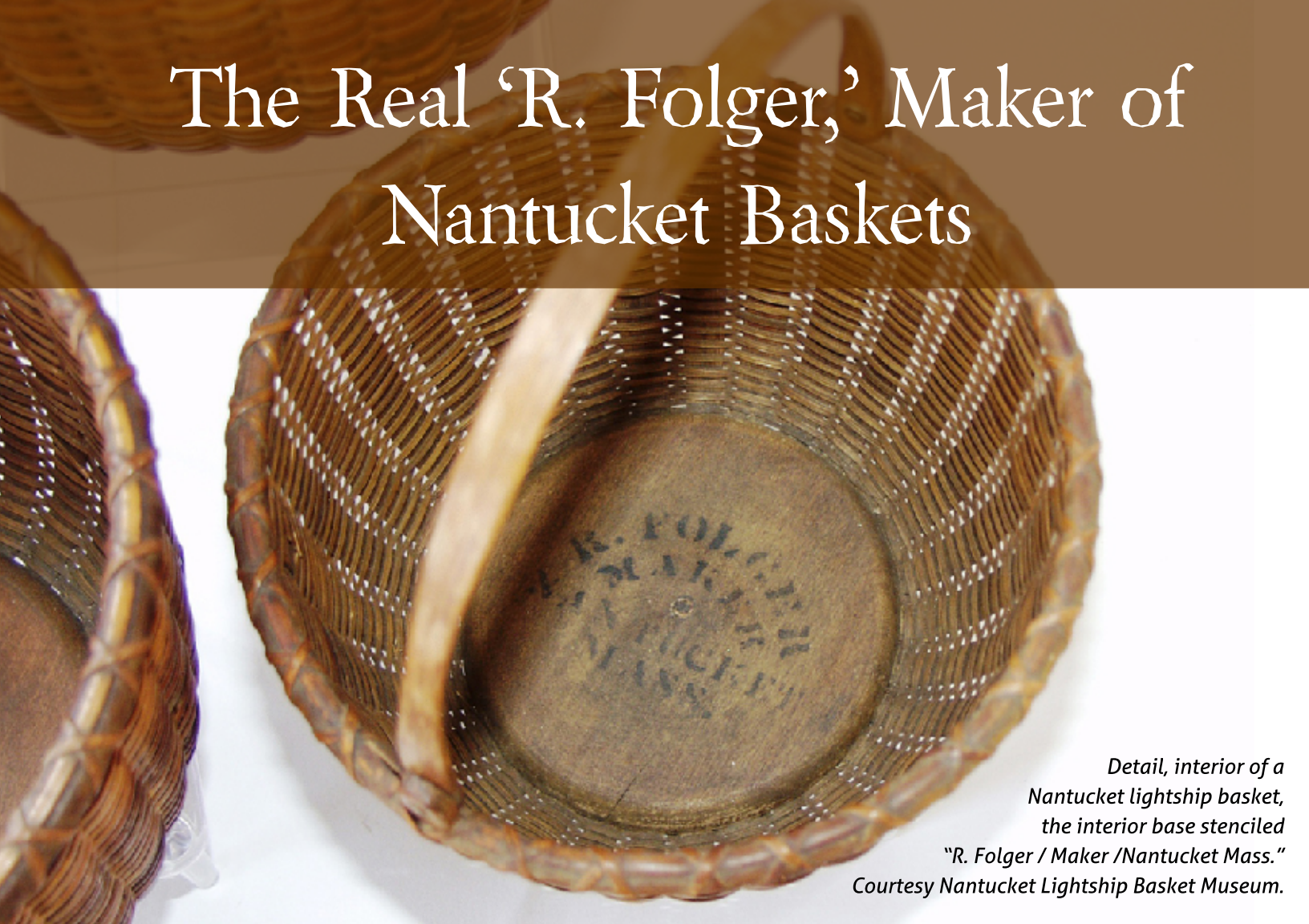


The Real 'R. Folger,' Maker of Nantucket Baskets



*Detail, interior of a
Nantucket lightship basket,
the interior base stenciled*

"R. Folger / Maker / Nantucket Mass."

Courtesy Nantucket Lightship Basket Museum.



Nantucket lightship basket with brass ears and oak handle, stenciled on the inside bottom "R. Folger, Maker, Nantucket Mass," outside stamped "E M Cary," probably for the original owner, diameter 10 inches. Courtesy Sylvia Antiques, Nantucket, Mass.

By Stuart M. Frank

The complete version of this story, with footnotes, appears in the March 20 print and e-editions of *Antiques and The Arts Weekly*.

NANTUCKET, MASS. — One of Nantucket's most significant artisans has been wrongly identified for many years, and it is time that the record be set straight. He was one of the earliest and one of the best makers of so-called Nantucket lightship baskets (which were not

all necessarily produced on lightships), an enterprising jack-of-all-trades who came from one of the island's most accomplished and most interesting families. He signed his baskets "R. Folger."

The actual basketmaker was Rowland Folger. The wrong man, to whom the baskets have erroneously been attributed for decades, is Roland Folger. Rowland Folger (1803–1883) was a shopkeeper and "basket-maker" who sold and repaired useful objects, operating from a shop near his famous father's dwelling in town. He lived his whole life on Nantucket.

Roland Folger (1849–1920) was a teamster and typesetter who, early along, moved off island and eventually came back in a wooden box, to be buried in the sacred soil of his birthplace.

A notice in the *Nantucket Inquirer* of December 29, 1823, proclaims: "All kinds of ivory work; umbrellas, and bellows made and repaired; combs mended by the subscriber; at the shop near the dwelling house of Walter Folger, Jr." At the time the advertisement appeared, the young man who placed it, Rowland Folger, was just starting out in business,

newly married with a baby on the way. He came from excellent stock.

Thanks to the passing along of bad information among collectors, auction houses and dealers, the wrong man — Roland Folger (1849–1920) — has for years been erroneously proclaimed to have been the maker of the celebrated baskets signed “R. Folger.” That Rowland Folger was the actual “R. Folger” who made baskets is confirmed by the 1870 US Census,

which unequivocally names Rowland Folger (not Roland Folger), age 67 (thus born circa 1803), husband of Eliza, age 63; occupation: “Basket Maker.” These facts alter the



Nest of three Nantucket lightship baskets by R. Folger. Each basket woven with cane and white oak staves, handles and ears, with the bases turned from pine; 4¼ by 6½ inches to 6½ by 8½ inches. Courtesy Nantucket Lightship Basket Museum.

perception of Nantucket basketmaking, and the cultural significance of the baskets themselves, in four respects. First, at least one of what Nantucket antiques dealer John Sylvia calls the “legendary weavers” of Nantucket baskets had only the most tenuous of relationships to any actual lightship. Folger’s baskets were produced ashore by a shopkeeper artisan.

Second, the “R. Folger” baskets were produced a full generation earlier than has hitherto been credited, deepening their interest and their significance to the unique circumstances of life on the island in its whaling heyday. Third, the much earlier vintage implies possible

influence upon the subsequent productions of other basket-makers. Finally, Folger’s baskets were woven by an enterprising businessman who was deeply rooted and broadly connected to the mainstream of Nantucket social, commercial and intellectual circles. Unlike the isolated keepers sequestered on lightships, he had daily contact and interactions with all kinds of folks on the island, and daily experienced the ebb and flow of island affairs.

Dr. Stuart M. Frank is the author, most recently, of *Ingenious Contrivances, Curiously Carved: Scrimshaw in the New Bedford Whaling Museum* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2012).

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