WILLIAM PRICE AND THE ROUND CHURCH

LOWELL INNES

Glass students have been accustomed to speak glibly of Bakewell's as the first commercial flint glass manufactory in the country. Often, however, they omit a necessary and crucial adjective — successful. Deming Jarves' praise of Bakewells in his Reminiscences of Glassmaking and Joseph D. Weeks' Report on the Manufacture of Glass have entrenched the idea. We are not even certain whether George Robinson and Edward Ensell, who erected the factory a year before it was purchased by Benjamin Bakewell, may have produced flint. Certainly it is a good guess to believe that before Bakewells in 1808 some flint glass was manufactured adjacent to such centers of demand as Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Names like George Bakeoven, Philadelphia, and Thomas Caines, South Boston, persuade us of earlier and later attempts.

In Pittsburgh, James O'Hara and Isaac Craig entertained the idea of white glass soon after their window and bottle glass factory began producing. In the summer of 1800 they were primarily interested in engaging a superintendent for the works. William Price, lately from England but also carrying a recommendation from William Peter Eichbaum, answered their advertisement in the Philadelphia paper. After a flurry of letters between Craig in Pittsburgh and O'Hara in Washington and Philadelphia, Price was allowed to come to the factory to show his proficiency and experience. Craig wrote Price on the 13th of August requesting him to come even before Price had conferred in the East with Colonel O'Hara as Craig had originally planned.1 By September 5th Craig indicated to O'Hara that Price had "offered to show us a specimen of his abilities without any charge."2

That Craig had doubts about Price is evident by another September 5th letter to Sam Hodgdon, a correspondent, in Philadelphia:

1 Isaac Craig to William Price, Craig Papers, August 13, 1800, mss. in Pennsylvania Division, Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh.
2 Ibid., Craig to James O'Hara, September 5, 1800.
"It appears that Mr. Price has been employed altogether in the Flint Glass Manufactory which differs so very materially from our Window glass and bottles that I am apprehensive he will not answer our purpose."  

Nevertheless, by the 11th of September, Craig wrote Aaron Aimes near Funks Tavern on the Franklin Road as follows: to "beg of you immediately to prepare about one hundred pounds of Pearl Ash and you are to observe that it is to be refined in the best manner, so that it may be perfectly pure as it is to be applied in the composition of Chrystal Glass by a man immediately from London, and who is unable to make his first experiment until he receives a quantity of your Pearl Ash. I have therefore to beg of you to lay aside all other business that might prevent your immediate attention to it."  

In October Major Craig informed Colonel O'Hara, who was in Washington, that Price had determined to return to Philadelphia in consequence of their being unable to employ him to advantage at the present furnace. He agreed not to align himself with any other glass manufacturer. By the 17th of November Craig stated: "He [Price] has satisfied me as well as others that his abilities in the White Glass manufacturing is equal to his professions. I had entertained some hopes that a part of our present Glass House and furnace might have been appropriate to his business and he says it is impracticable to carry on the White and Green Glass in the same fire—but says a building and apparatus suitable for his purpose can be erected for $600. You, however, in conversation with him will be a competent judge of the propriety of prosecuting that business—and notwithstanding I have a high opinion of Mr. Price and of the success of such a manufacturing yet you will not be surprised that I feel great reluctance to engage in further expensive buildings."  

This was not the end of the experiment. In December Price and Frederick Wentz were sent to the neighborhood of Connellsville and Jacob's Creek for especially good sandstone. There seems to be little record of chrystal glass from the O'Hara factory unless the crudely finished cut celery vase at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania is an example. According to family tradition it qualifies. Ap-
parently Price stayed on till 1805, when O'Hara, writing to James Morrison in Lexington, complained: "the perfidy of Price, my superintendent, and Wendt, the foreman, maker, in plotting to abandon the work, the large size glass is not made." 7 That same year O'Hara was hiring as superintendent of the factory Frederick M. Amelung, son of the great communal leader and glassmaker, John Frederick Amelung.

What happened to William Price immediately afterwards remains clouded. From the Craig letter of October to O'Hara in Washington we catch a prediction of the future: "had determined to return to Philadelphia and endeavor to obtain employment in the brass foundry business, which he says he understands." George H. Thurston in Allegheny County's Hundred Years reports that William Price established the second foundry in Pittsburgh in 1808, later known as the Berlin Foundry, a business which remained in the hands of the Price family to the end of the century. It came to be a landmark, writes Thurston, because of a singular shaped dwelling which Price attached to it being perfectly round. This dwelling was built later than the furnace.8

The Pittsburgh Directory for 1815 gives a single listing about him in the appendix.

Butt Hinges &c
William Price, at his Foundry at the Roundhouse, makes Crucibles to cast all kinds of iron, brass &c of every dimension. All kinds of small castings in brass or iron, softened fit for turning or filing, for all kinds of machinery — he also casts Butt-hinges, and manufactures Fire Bricks for furnaces, foundries, bake houses, glass houses, &c.9

He could not forget his background of glass manufacture, however, for in 1816 he was granted a patent for the composition of glass (probably a formula for flint, wherein his experience lay). Since the disastrous fire of 1836 destroyed records at the government office, we shall never know.

Soon after his patent William Price laid out a good portion of the Second Ward, from Ross Street running out Second Avenue. This locality was then fittingly known as Pipetown.10

In 1819 his operation was listed as an iron foundry. By 1826 it had become Price's Cupola Furnace, situated one-fourth of a mile east

---

7 O'Hara to James Morrison, O'Hara Letter Book, April 19, 1805, mss. in Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
8 George H. Thurston, Allegheny County's Hundred Years (Pittsburgh, 1888), 168.
9 James M. Riddle, The Pittsburgh Directory for 1815 (Pittsburgh), 142-143.
of Pittsburgh. It was "considered a brass as well as an iron foundry, as all various articles of a light nature in both branches are manufactured here. Mr. Price also makes large crucibles for fusing copper, brass etc. and is the only person about Pittsburgh who has succeeded in making these articles in perfection. The value of castings and other manufactures were about 4,000 dollars." 11

When Anne Royall visited the city in 1828 Price's Cupola was flourishing. Manufacturing around it had increased so that Pipetown had come to stay. William Price had become a local character, not just for his industrial success but for quirks and humor of his personality. Anne Royall describes him thus: "an eccentric little gentleman well known for his humour and the universality of his mechanical genius." 12

Probably the best known of whimsical anecdotes is the one about his behavior, supposedly at the funeral of Colonel Presley Neville. Spying one of the physicians who had attended Neville and who was walking in the funeral procession, Uncle Billy called out: "Ah, I see you are delivering your work as I do!" That he knew the doctor well did not lessen the dramatic effect of marring the solemnity.

His glassmaking skill, particularly his being the prime mover in making the first flint in Western Pennsylvania, and his industrial success with the Cupola Furnace will keep him alive in the annals of Pittsburgh. The whim that led him to rebel against conventional architecture and construct a house which copied the first Episcopal church may have been loyalty or an understanding of the value of an eye-catching device near his furnace.

Mrs. C. Simpson in "Reminiscences of Early Pittsburgh" has this to say: "My father came to Pittsburgh in 1797 and I was born in 1800 near O'Hara's glass works, the first establishment of its kind in this vicinity. . . . I have often wondered why no one has ever mentioned the Little Round Church at the corner of Wood and Liberty Streets. Does any one remember it? It is said that Mr. William Price modeled his 'Round House' after this building. I recollect it quite well and when it was demolished, but I cannot give the date of its demolition." 13

The so-called Round Church, really octagonal, was constructed of brick on the triangle formed by Liberty, Sixth and Wood Streets. This first Episcopal church in the city had its cornerstone laid in 1805, but was not completed till 1808 and not consecrated till 1825.

11 S. Jones, Pittsburgh in the Year 1826 (Pittsburgh), 57. A Directory.
12 Anne Royall, Pennsylvania (Washington, 1829), II, 53.
13 Mrs. C. Simpson, "Reminiscences of Early Pittsburgh," WPHM, IV (October, 1921), 243.
then by Bishop White. An 1805 bill for £ 356-8-9 from Richard and John Robinson indicates them as builders. The first rector, the Reverend John Taylor, beside being a saintly man was an able astronomer, mathematician and lecturer. He contributed valuable material to Cramer’s Almanacs. A story of his life and works would shed light on the intellectual phase of pioneer days and at the same time be sincerely inspiring.

The sharp-tongued Anne Royall, who several times cut down the Presbyterians as well as other religious sects in Pennsylvania, 1829, gives this grudging accolade: "He is an Episcopalian and if there be a Christian in their ranks I would take him to be the man — and notwithstanding their hollow professions of spreading the gospel."

With her hint and Henry M. Brackenridge’s moving but heartfelt tribute we accept John Taylor as the kind of Christian needed everywhere: "He was as good a man as there is any use for in this wicked world."

William Price and the Round Church came to life again in 1961 when the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania received the gift of a handsome cherry corner cupboard with its contents. These few pieces ranged from semi-modern china and glass to a shapely but somewhat drab pitcher tucked away in the rear of the bottom shelf. It was a mealy yellow with designs and legend fired in a darker shade of blue-green, both colors typical of Ohio Valley pottery. This pitcher was a very exciting find for everyone interested in early glass history and Pittsburgh life. The Fort Pitt Glass Works figures not only as a name around the base, but also as a furnace in full blast, for William Price had returned to an earlier love — the glass business. Undoubtedly Robert B. Curling, who had been a pot-maker at Bakewells in 1815 and a clerk eleven years later, had known Price in the trade. The partnership between Curling and Price, which included the Curling sons, Alfred and William, lasted for only a year, 1827-1828. That year was a happy and prosperous one for the founder of the Fort Pitt Glass

16 Anne Royall, Pennsylvania (Washington, 1829), II, 73.
18 Frances W. Lane, Estate of, WPHM, XLIV (December, 1961), 421.
Works or he would never have bothered with a present which memorialized it.

Beside the glass furnace on the pitcher one immediately notices the eagle. The national bird had decorated countless colorful early whiskey flasks of the Pittsburgh-Monongahela district. In 1817-1818 Jardelle, from Bakewells, engraved eagles on the glass President James Monroe had ordered for the White House. Likewise the more extensive order by President Jackson in 1829 had the national emblem engraved in order to enhance patriotically services on the White House table. In 1825 one of a pair of cut and engraved vases presented to Lafayette on his triumphal tour carried an eagle as the main decoration. To trace the eagle on silver or pewter, carved in wood or decorating furniture, in textiles or on china, would be a Herculean task. It was so popular a motif that English manufacturers used it whenever they could for the American trade. In fact, a knowledgeable antique dealer has pronounced this memorial pitcher English, somewhat on the existence of the eagle. Whatever artistic parentage the pitcher may claim from England is more than offset by practical considerations of time and distance. Who could know that Price would withdraw from the firm after a short year? Pottery had long flourished along the local river valleys. Messrs. Trotter & Company were advertising in the Pittsburgh Directory of 1815 “pitchers similar to those of the Potteries of Philadelphia.”

Who other than a local potter would have more zest for capturing the Round House and for immortalizing the furnace and cannon under glass! The whole scene is typical of Pittsburgh. The matter of ordering locally would not cause the complication of a long delay. Fittingly it should be of Western Pennsylvania origin.

It is well enough to remember William Price for his association with early glass manufacture, for the industrial success of his Cupola Furnace, for humor that led him to build a Round House modeled after a Round Church, for the eccentric wit that might upset his fellows, for the many unrecorded contributions he must have made to pioneer life in a growing commercial center. When we read the legend, however — “Friendship’s Gift” — William Price comes alive and under it all we recognize a warm human being.

20 Thomas C. Pears, Jr., “The First Successful Flint Glass Factory in America,” Antiques, XI (March, 1927), 201-205.