EARLY HISTORICAL FLASKS OF PITTSBURGH AND THE MONONGAHELA DISTRICT

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From the invention of the blowpipe, which is thought to have taken place some time between 300 and 100 B.C., until the present, containers for liquids have been made from glass. Specimens of the craftsmanship of the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Romans, the Venetians, the Germans and the English are to be found in many parts of the world. In this country, museums and private collections contain samples of the skill of glassblowers who plied their trade in America from about the middle of the Eighteenth Century—Stiegel perfume bottles, Pitkin flasks, a few Amelung, New Geneva bulbous and the ribbed and swirled of both Zanesville and Pittsburgh. These bottles are all examples of what a workman of ability and training could accomplish while working in glass. Many are unattractive as to shape or color while others are the embodiment of beauty in color and design.

Early in the Nineteenth Century, probably as early as 1810, there appeared in America a bottle, now called the historical flask. Who the originator was, and in what factory the first ones were blown is not definitely known. But so keen was competition among the early glass manufacturers, that it was but a few years until the idea had spread to almost all bottle factories of the new country. These flasks were blown in full-size two-piece molds. This gave uniformity instead of the irregularity of the freeblown bottles. It also made possible more rapid production, as speed rather than skill became the requirement for the blower. The trade of moldmaker increased in importance, as it was his technique that determined final designs on the new containers.

It is not surprising that these designs were of an historic nature. Ours was a very young nation 140 years ago, and a very patriotic one. Many flasks were decorated with the busts of men who had helped win political freedom and had helped shape the destiny of the young republic. Others bore the emblems and insignia of the new nation. Some bore slogans used in its political and industrial development. They paid tribute to agriculture, its chief occupation, and to the new methods of transportation. They were designed by Americans, blown in American glass houses and portrayed only events of America. No less

* A paper presented at a meeting of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society, December 7, 1955, based upon much historical research done by Mr. Dambach, a member of the Society, in collecting the flasks. The rarest of the flasks had been specially photographed and were shown in color. (See note under Additions to Glass Collections, p. 49.)—Ed.
an authority than George S. McKearin has said, "In no other category of American glass is there such varied historical background as that encountered in the pictorial flasks whose production was coincident with that turbulent period of development in our country from about 1816 to the War between the States."

While many of the early bottles were all-purpose containers, historical flasks were made primarily to accommodate hard liquor or whiskey. Regardless of what may be the attitude now or of the intervening thinking of the American people, whiskey, in the formative days of our country, was a common commodity. It was used as a medium of exchange. Even ministers are said, on occasion, to have taken their pay in hard liquor. A few years ago a western Pennsylvania church was celebrating its sesquicentennial. The women in planning the dinner thought it would be fitting to have the same menu as on that first day, one hundred and fifty years ago. When the old records were examined, to follow the same menu was deemed inadvisable. Yes, whiskey was an important item on that first bill of fare.

In limiting this discussion by using the word early, it might be well to determine just what early means in this connection. While so-called historical flasks were made from 1816 through 1870, the flasks made in the Pittsburgh district prior to 1850 were much more attractive in design, more appealing in shape, and covered a greater range of persons and events than those manufactured after that date. The detailed mold work on the early Pittsburgh flasks was far superior to that on the later ones, and was equal to the best of the bottle world. The earlier the flask, the more expertly and elaborately sculptured was the mold. In range of colors only were early Pittsburgh flasks lacking.

Although the search for early blown bottles has been continuous since about the beginning of this century, it was not until 1941 that the then known four hundred historical flasks and bottles were charted and accurately pictured with line drawings. This was accomplished by George S. and Helen McKearin in their book, American Glass. The place of origin of about 300 was established. Fifty-two have been attributed to the Pittsburgh and Monongahela district. When it is considered that flasks were blown in almost all the New England states, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Kentucky, Ohio, that portion of Virginia, now West Virginia, and in the Kensington and Dyottville plants of Philadelphia, then Pittsburgh district must be rated very high among the producers of flasks.
The first successful glass house in Pittsburgh was established by Major Isaac Craig and General James O'Hara in 1797. It was called the Pittsburgh Glass Works and was located on the south side of the Monongahela river opposite the mouth of the Allegheny. That would place it below the south end of the present Point bridge. This plant made window glass, hollow ware and bottles. It was here that one, Frederick Rudolph Joacim Lorenz, a native of Germany, learned to blow glass. He had come to America in 1809 at the age of 15. A man of keen perception, he quickly realized the possibility of the business, leased the works about the time of O'Hara's death in 1819 and later bought it. In the same year Lorenz purchased the Trevor and Encell plant which had been founded in 1812 on the south side of the Monongahela opposite Wood street. In 1824 he built the Sligo Glass Works on the Southside. This was opposite Market street. These three plants Frederick Lorenz operated alone until 1838.

It was evidently in one or more of these establishments that the three flasks that bear his initials were made. The attribution to Frederick Lorenz has not been questioned, but the particular glass house that made each flask has never been determined. From the nature of its products the Craig & O'Hara works could have blown all three.

The portrait of Washington appears on at least 65 different flasks. One of the rarest is the pint showing the general in uniform with “G. G. Washington” in a semicircle above. The first “G” is thought to stand for general. On the reverse is a large eagle standing on an oval containing the initials “F. L.” In a semicircle above in large letters is “Pittsburgh.” Some collectors think this the finest of the Washington flasks. From a Pittsburgher's point of view it is certainly one of the most desirable. But it is very difficult to obtain, as only five have been discovered.

2 Directory of Pittsburgh, 1826, Samuel Jones
4 Harry Hall White, Antiques, November 1926, "Early Pittsburgh Glass Houses."
5 The Commonwealth, Pittsburgh, Dec. 23, 1812.
7 White, op. cit. Bining, op. cit.
A second pint shows “G. GEO. Washington” in a semicircle above a bust in uniform. On the reverse the large eagle is standing on an oval within which are the letters “F. L.” This one is not quite so rare, as about twenty have been found.

The third and last Lorenz flask is a half pint. An eagle with sun rays surrounding its head stands on an oval with “F. L.” enclosed. On the reverse is an upright cornucopia filled with produce. About ten have come to light.

For thirty-five years Frederick Lorenz was one of Pittsburgh’s most successful glass manufacturers. When he died in 1854 his son, Frederick, took his place as a partner in the firm of Lorenz and Wightman.

In 1807 George Robinson and Edward Ensell began the erection of a glass house on the Monongahela river at the foot of Ross street.8 The following year Robinson withdrew and Benjamin Bakewell, Thomas Kinder and Benjamin Page bought into the company, which was now called Bakewell and Ensell.9 In 1809 Edward Ensell withdrew.10 Two years later Kinder dropped out which left only Bakewell and Page.11 In 1813, Thomas Bakewell, son of Benjamin, entered the firm the name of which was now changed to Bakewell, Page and Bakewell.12 Bakewell had the honor of operating the first successful flint glass factory in the United States. In 1844 they became Bakewell, Pears and Company and so operated for almost forty years. As early as 1824 they received awards for their cut glass and in 1876 for their pressed glass. Their’s was Pittsburgh’s showplace for visiting dignitaries. However, they did not pass up the revenue to be obtained from making the lowly whiskey flasks.

Among the early ones is a half pint scroll or violin that bears the initials, “B. P. & B.” Since these were the initials of the owners from 1813 to 1844, it is logical to assume that the flask was made by Bakewell, Page and Bakewell between those years. This is a dainty little thing and is desired by many collectors. While the scrolls are not historical flasks in the true sense of the word, they are included because they carry initials or names of a number of manufacturers and of at least one person of historical importance.

8 Allegheny County’s Hundred Years, p. 184.
10 Pittsburgh Commonwealth, April 5, 1809.
11 Pittsburgh Gazette, May 31, 1811.
The only other flask with the initials "B. P. & B." is the extremely rare one known as the "American System." These words surround an early steamboat with paddle wheel. On the reverse is a sheaf of rye encircled by, "Use me but do not abuse me." In an oval underneath the sheaf appears "B. P. & B." Only one of these has been found. The year 1824 seems the most likely time of manufacture.

The "American System" is outstanding in its historical and political significance. This phrase is thought to have been coined by Henry Clay in the congressional battle over the protective tariff act passed in 1824. Thanks to its coal, Pittsburgh was by then a leading center in the glass industry. Its representative, Henry Baldwin, gave Clay such effective support that the bill was called a "Pittsburgh bill" and a "cut glass bill." It would be quite natural for this flask to be produced in Pittsburgh during the debate or upon the successful passage of the act. This system of Clay's was broader than merely protecting our infant industries. It included internal improvements, waterways and turnpikes by the Federal government. This may account for the river boat on the flask. Lost in the political scuffle was the temperance slogan on the reverse.

In addition to the one marked "B. P. & B.," two other "American System" flasks have been found. One is similar, but not identical, and does not have any lettering. On account of the similarity it was at one time thought to be another Bakewell, Page and Bakewell flask. Fifteen to twenty have been found. The second variant is similar but has the letters "B & M" underneath the steam boat. Only one has been discovered so far. Helen McKearin, who has possibly done more research in the field of American glass than any other person, in Two Hundred Years of American Blown Glass, says, "It is not yet known for whom the "B & M" was intended. It is assumed that some moldmaker, possibly Joshua Laird of Pittsburgh, made the mold for each of the varieties of this flask, and in each instance for a different glass house." It has also been observed that few flasks are so eagerly sought as the American System.

Another early glasshouse of Pittsburgh was the Stourbridge Flint Glass Works established by John Robinson near the corner of Ross and Second street in 1823. At least four very beautiful flasks are attributed to this factory. It is likely they were made between the beginning of operations in 1823 and the year 1830 when the firm became "J. & T.

13 Directory of Pittsburgh, 1826, Samuel Jones.
Robinson."\textsuperscript{14} John and Thomas were sons of the founder.

A pint shows Washington in uniform with "General Washington" in a semicircle above. On the reverse is a large eagle on an oval containing the initials "J. R." The "J. R." has been ascribed to John Robinson. Underneath the oval is "Laird Sc. Pitt.," which proved a puzzle for a long time. However, Cramer's Magazine Almanac of 1829 has Joshua Laird with Jonathan Kidd and John L. Williams advertising a new patent rolling spring printing press. Apparently Joshua Laird continued to work in metals for in the third directory of Pittsburgh, Harris of 1837, is found, "Joshua Laird, Glass Mould Maker, residing on Smithfield street near Fifth avenue." The "Sc." probably stands for sculptist. Laird, rightfully proud of his workmanship, was the only moldmaker of this period known to have signed his mold. From the number of flasks closely resembling this fine piece of work his services must have been in great demand. Although Philadelphia at one time listed six moldmakers, Laird is the only one of record in Pittsburgh.

The pint Jackson showing the general in uniform with "General Jackson" in semicircle above, has for its reverse side a layout so like the reverse of the Washington that it is possible the eagle side of the mold was used for both flasks. Every detail seems identical, including the "J. R." and the "Laird. Sc. Pitt." This of course is another John Robinson flask and is thought to have been produced in 1828, as were many of the Jackson flasks, for the political campaign in which Jackson was elected president.

A second pint Jackson is similar in most details to the first, excepting there is no inscription on the eagle side. It has been said this one may also have been made by Robinson. It is so like the previous flask there is no doubt that Laird was the maker of the mold. More of these are found than either of the initialed ones.

Two scrolls bring to four the number of carefully molded flasks that have been definitely assigned to John Robinson. The first is a beautiful so-called corset-waisted scroll of pint size. It has the inscription, "J R & Son" on one side. It is rated scarce. The second is a rare half pint which shows "J R & S" on one side. The "S" is thought to stand for son as there is not room for more letters on the smaller size. On the reverse is a large anchor. Another anchor half pint, similar in detail, is found more frequently, but it does not have the initials. Again,

\textsuperscript{14} Pittsburgh Gazette, Oct. 6, 1834.
similarity promotes the possibility of this one also having been made by Robinson.

Among the flasks having an eagle for their main decoration appears a half pint on which the eagle is perched on an oval containing the letters “W. C.” On the reverse is an inverted cornucopia from which produce is pouring. This flask has been attributed to the Pittsburgh district but to no particular factory. So far, only one person has been suggested as the owner of these initials. Can “W. C.” stand for William Curling? Let’s investigate. Robert Curling and William Price, formerly employees of the Bakewell Company and of the Pittsburgh Glass Works respectively, established the Fort Pitt Glass Company on Washington Place at Franklin street in 1827. Considerable information is available in regard to this company as it continued to operate with many changes in personnel until the year 1900. . . . There is no early record showing that they made bottles. However, there is a tendency to engage in wishful thinking. It was officially reported that from 1831 to 1834 they were a private company using the name of R. B. Curling and Sons. Could the senior Curling have made some flasks and honored his son, William, by putting his initials on one? This is suggested in spite of the fact that is was not until 1850 that the advertisement of Curling, Robertson & Company offered among other things, “Druggist ware, demijohns and black bottles.” A full-page ad in the Pittsburgh Directory of that year showed two large store windows with many sizes and shapes of bottles on display. It is doubtful whether this change to bottles came about suddenly. It may rather have been the trend from 1832 when they reported that in the previous year “They had made upwards of $40,000.00 worth of all articles of flint glass.” It can only be said that the “W. C.” flask might have been made in that transition period.

In 1834 Samuel and James McKee and James Salisbury established the firm of McKee and Company in Birmingham which was the name

15 *American Glass*, George S. and Helen McKearin, p. 598.
17 *United States House Executive Documents* relative to the Manufactures in the United States collected and submitted to the House of Representatives by the Secretary of the Treasury, printed 1833, Vol. 222 and 223.
18 *Directory of Pittsburgh*, 1850, Samuel Fahnestock.
given to that section of the Southside between what are now Sixth and Seventeenth streets. In 1836, Samuel, James, and Thomas McKee organized the Pennsylvania Glass Works near Thirteenth and Carson streets. But they operated as S. McKee and Company for over fifty years.20

Two extremely rare pint scroll flasks are definitely known to have been made by this company. On one side of one appears, “S. McKee.” The other is its counterpart except that the “S. McKee” has been cut out of the mold and replaced with a slightly sunken elongated rectangle. However, the workman failed to remove the period which appears after McKee in the first flask. Both flasks show a large eight-pointed star and a smaller eight-pointed star above.

The pint titled “Ihmsen’s Agriculture” shows a large eagle on an oval containing the word “Glass.” Above the eagle is “W. Ihmsen’s.” On the reverse is the word “Agriculture” in a semicircle above a sheaf of rye. Beneath the sheaf are some of the implements used by the farmers of that time. The flask is a reminder of the days when the Monongahela valley was known for the abundance of its agricultural products and for the quality of its rye whiskey. Probably about twenty to twenty-five remain of what were made by William Ihmsen in one of his two Williamsport plants.

Charles Ihmsen had been one of the organizers of the first Birmingham plant in 1812.21 His family became associated with so many glass making endeavors that it is difficult accurately to chronicle their undertakings. A son, William, leased the Williamsport Glass Works in 1826.22 This was located on Coal street in Williamsport, and had been built by Warne, Parkinson & Company in 1816.23 Prior to this lease William Ihmsen is said to have erected a glass factory in 1820, nearby, on an island in the Monongahela river.24 It may be of interest to note that Williamsport was the name given to a town laid out by Joseph Parkinson in 1796 at a point on the Monongahela where he had for some time been operating a ferry. On April 1, 1837 the name was changed to Monongahela City and more recently shortened to Monon-

20 Bining, op. cit.
21 Allegheny County’s Hundred Years, p. 185. Pittsburgh Mercury, Nov. 5, 1812.
22 George H. Thurston, Pittsburgh as it is, 1857.
23 White, op. cit.
24 Ibid
The town is historically celebrated as the chief rendezvous of the “Whiskey Boys” in the rebellion of 1794.

The “B. K.” Washington is an outstanding rarity of the Monongahela Valley. In a semicircle above his bust on a pint flask is the word, “Washington.” On the reverse is a large eagle with sun rays from its head terminating in 13 stars. The eagle is perched on an oval containing the initials, “B. K.,” which are said to stand for Benedict Kimber. There are only five or six specimens of this flask.

Mrs. Rhea Mansfield Knittle in her book, *Early American Glass*, says, “Benedict Kimber was an expert glassworker who came to America from Germany with Amelung when he established the New Bremen Glass Works in Maryland.” Apparently Kimber migrated westward after the Amelung failure for in 1822 he acquired the Bridgeport Glass Works, which had been established in 1811 by John Froth, Henry Minhart, Isaac Van Hook and associates.

Kimber at a later date operated the Brownsville Glass Factory built by George Hogg in 1827. It was run successfully for one year and then changed to John Taylor & Company whose operation was a decided success. Two years later Taylor sold his interest. After many changes, some failures and a sheriff sale Benedict Kimber took over the plant in 1840. Both Mrs. Knittle and George S. McKearin think the “B. K.” was made at Bridgeport in Kimber’s earlier venture.” In 1837 the town of Bridgeport became a part of Brownsville. This town played an important part in the development of the glass industry in the Monongahela district. Sands of the Brownsville region supplied the glass works all along the river, including those of Pittsburgh.

Another extremely rare and much sought flask is the John Quincy Adams pint. Only six have been found. In a semicircle above his bust is “John Q. Adams.” On the reverse is a large eagle on an oval. Underneath the oval is “J. T. & Co.” A similar flask showing “General Jackson” on the obverse and the same eagle and same “J. T. & Co” on the reverse is found more frequently. It would seem that both flasks

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25 Ibid
28 *History of Fayette County*, op. cit.
29 Ibid
30 Bining, op. cit.
were made by John Taylor & Company during the two years they so successfully operated the Brownsville Glass Works. It was in 1828 that Andrew Jackson defeated John Quincy Adams for the presidency. These flasks are thought to have been made for that campaign. Was Mr. Taylor straddling the fence or just being a good business man?

With few exceptions the early Pittsburgh flasks have a double row of horizontal beading on the edges. Flasks of no other district show a similar beading. This directs attention to one of the exceptions. Two specimens of a pint flask have been found which show three rows of horizontal beading on the edges. The glass is not known. This is a General Washington flask with a large eagle on the reverse showing sun rays and stars. It is almost identical with another flask which has the usual two rows of beading. If this unique flask were initialed or if there were some inscription to identify it with a particular glass house, it would be the number one in its district.

In this discussion, it must be remembered, no attempt has been made to revive the history of all of the many glass houses of the district considered. Rather, as was suggested, the number mentioned has been limited to the number of flasks having characteristics from which their maker could be discovered.

The converse is also true. Of the fifty-two flasks definitely attributed to the district only fifteen have been assigned to individual companies. Over twice as many remain whose place of origin has not yet been determined. Of these some resemble the Lorenz flasks. Others are of the Robinson type. And many have come from well known factories with which, on account of lack of knowledge, it has been impossible to associate the flasks.

From this study a few observations may be made. First, early Pittsburgh district glass houses produced many of the rarest and finest historical flasks; second, the early Pittsburgh district flasks are predominantly portrait, eagle and factory initialed; third, they lack variety of color. They seldom occur in colors other than light green and aquamarine. A few have been found in brilliant amber, olive amber, deep green, and yellow green, but they are very rare. Some appear in clear glass with amethyst and blue tint but none in solid amethyst or sapphire blue and other colors are found in eastern bottles of the same and later period.

31 History of Fayette County, op. cit.