A LOVE ETCHED IN TIME

THESE FINELY ENGRAVED GLASS TUMBLERS, PART OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY’S COLLECTION SINCE THE EARLY 1970s, CAME TO THE MUSEUM WITH A TOUCHING FAMILY STORY OF ROMANCE AND TRUE LOVE.

Research done for the major exhibition on Western Pennsylvania glass at the History Center expanded our understanding of the man who made the tumblers, the woman he loved, and the life they led.

The tumblers also provide us access to the industrial world of the early 19th century, when skilled workers built a craftsman’s empire in Pittsburgh, then witnessed its demise.

In 1811, John and Jane Lee left Inverness, Scotland, to live with John’s brother on his farm near Egg Harbor, New Jersey. Their first child, James, was born November 10, 1811—right after their arrival. In 1820, when James was 9, the family moved west, first to Wellsville, Ohio, then, within three years, to Pittsburgh.

On Christmas Day 1826, the 15-year-old James began his apprenticeship at John Robinson’s Stourbridge Flint Glass Works. In exchange for learning the “art and mystery” of the glassblower’s trade, James received lodging, food, drink, wearing apparel, and 12 months of schooling. The apprenticeship, a contractual legal agreement in those days, ended when James turned 21 and took his place at Robinson’s downtown factory as a master glassblower.

The first two glass works in the region opened in 1797; soon Pittsburgh was an established national center for glassmaking, with 15 factories in Pittsburgh and another 13 in Washington and Fayette counties by 1837. Early on, glassmakers were recruited from the East Coast, Germany, France, and the British Isles.

Factory owners also came to rely on the local boys of Pittsburgh to fill unskilled positions in the factory and, by the 1810s, to become apprentices. When James began in 1826, Robinson’s workforce of 18 blowers, cutters, and engravers turned out $22,000 worth of products.

Window glass and bottles dominated the early trade, but within 20 years glasshouses such as the famed Bakewell & Co. were producing finer lead glass tableware adorned with cut and engraved decoration. Robinson’s Stourbridge Works competed with Bakewell’s for that same high-end market, so James Lee would have trained among a corps of skilled craftsmen.

As James came of age on the factory floor, so, too, did his thoughts turn to finding a bride and settling down. Family history holds that in 1832 he first spied his future wife through a pane of glass as she walked along the street; he is said to have vowed that they would someday marry.

And wed they did—James Lee and the 19-year-old Charlotte Barker, on December 18, 1835.

James gave Charlotte the two engraved tumblers as a betrothal gift. The central shield bears Charlotte’s initials, while the rose on the one side symbolizes her English heritage and the thistle on the other side represents his Scotland. Above the shield are two doves, common symbols of peace and love in marriage. The reverse side bears a basket of fruit with fern-like
plants and draping leaves evoking fertility and abundance. The engraved iconography celebrates the joined heritage of two individuals and the hopes for a fruitful and loving union.

No doubt James Lee had an active role in the design and creation of the tumblers, and could well have made them himself. The pieces were then cut with panels at the base and engraved by decorators in the Stourbridge factory. While the beautiful pieces show the quality of Pittsburgh glass, immense change was sweeping through the glass industry during the same period.

Technological innovation in the form of machines to press and form glass objects, introduced in the 1820s, was transforming the industry. Patented first in New England, the technology was quickly adapted by both Bakewell's and Robinson. Standard sizes and shapes could be produced more quickly than by hand. Advertisements for a "large and extensive assortment of rich cut, plain, and pressed FLINT GLASS WARE" and several authenticated pieces document Robinson's entry into the machine age of the mid-19th century.

Because of the city's booming iron industry, Pittsburgh teemed with machinists and mechanics whose innovative presses and molds greatly accelerated change, making Western Pennsylvania the pressed glass capital of the nation. Though blown glass continued to be made (and is to this day in the area), press machines rapidly eroded demand for skilled workers such as Lee. He and his family left Pittsburgh for Philadelphia in the early 1840s, staying there several years with family. They returned to Pittsburgh by 1847, and James found work as a blower, but by 1850 he was out of the business for good.

Lee turned to farming, which occupied him for a quarter-century, until a disabling stroke in 1876. He died in 1887 at age 76.

James Lee left us beautiful reminders of the glassblower's craft in Pittsburgh. His years as a farmer were a response to the machines that destroyed one craft and created demand for many new skills in the mechanical and engineering trades. By the time he died, near the peak of the Industrial Revolution in America, Pittsburgh was firmly established as the national center of glassmaking, with 51 factories in Allegheny County alone. More than a quarter of America's glass came from Western Pennsylvania.

With the rare power that objects from the past occasionally possess, the delicate Lee betrothal tumblers represent the continual change that is among American history's most enduring features.