

# *“Dipping Into Early American Inkwells”*

by Michael George



*A colorful selection of 8-sided umbrella inkwells.*

## **Introduction**

As a collector's glass interest increases, their pocketbook and space to display decreases. Well, this article can help you with the latter. Inkwells are the jewels of the bottle collecting world, and a collector can amass a stunning group of them without the clutter that often plagues the bottle enthusiast. I say that with a smile, as I look at my surroundings. This regular household utilitarian item of yesterday comes in a number of different forms and colors, each with its own character and beauty.

I will concentrate specifically on INKWELLS. For clarification, INK bottles are a more general category consisting of different sized bottles for packaging ink, including master inks. Inkwells are a small container used to hold ink in a convenient place for the person who is writing. These containers (glass in our case) were made to be refilled and used over and over. The inkwell needed to be sturdy, easy to access, and as we'll see, often an accessory to a gentlemen's work space. This article will highlight the different forms, and give the collector a fresh perspective of these glorious ink holders. I will also help attribute some of the inkwells that are local to me, here in New England.

## **Brief History**

Inkwells were made at most glass factories throughout America, from as early as glass was being produced until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the fountain pen replaced the need for a quill / inkwell. For the most part, the production of inkwells seems to parallel the Industrial Revolution in America. As growth increased, so did the need for correspondence and education. In the early years, ink was very expensive, produced by a chemist and marketed through apothecary shops. The vessels were freeblown or produced from a patterned dip mold. We find the round swirled Pitkin inkwells to be a popular representation of this late 18<sup>th</sup> century period. Around 1815, blown three mold (BTM) vessels gained popularity. Growth in our country, the Postal Service, and an imminent Civil War created higher demands and faster production. Bottles (and inkwells) became simple and more utilitarian. It is not until the 1880s and the vigorous Victorian Era that we see decorative designs once again. This article will be limited to reviewing objects pre-1870.

## Early American Inkwell Forms

Let's start off with some of the earliest American form, **freeblown** or **dip molded** inkwells. Although there is obviously overlap in forms, I will try to keep the flow in a somewhat chronological order. These freeblown forms date from the mid to late 18<sup>th</sup> century.



*Freeblown inkwells, 18<sup>th</sup> century. (Tom Marshall collection)*

We find the forms of early glass inkwells to parallel inkwells made from other materials such as redware and soapstone. Quite often, early glass inkwells were offered as part of set used by an intellectual or business person. The ink was purchased in powder form, and such a set would make traveling easier; a portable secretary.



*Early redware and glass inkwells, and an 18<sup>th</sup> century toleware writing set with blown inkwell.*

By the late 1780s, inkwells become a little more decorative with the use of **dip molds**, which produced the ribbed melon style, and the round and square **Pitkin style inkwells**. These early forms are not only rare, but also quite beautiful. In my experience, you will see a dozen Pitkin style flasks before encountering a Pitkin style inkwell. I was surprised to see that not a single Pitkin inkwell was reviewed in Helen McKearin's *American Bottles & Flasks and Their Ancestry*. I believe that these inkwells were produced during a fairly long span between mid-1780s until around 1820.



*Dip molded ribbed inkwells, late 18<sup>th</sup> - early 19<sup>th</sup> century.  
(left-right: Teepee shaped swirled Pitkin, ribbed "melon" and square Pitkin inkwell)*

Around 1815, we see the emergence of molds, and specifically geometric blown three mold glass inkwells. In both flint and bottle glass, we find inkwells in dozens of different patterns and mold variations. Some are fairly common, and others extremely rare. Most of the blown three mold inkwells originated from the Boston & Sandwich MA, Keene NH, and Coventry CT. Once again, inkwells were a "decorative" accessory to the writing quarters, and primarily for the educated or scholarly.



*Blown Three Mold Inkwells in rare forms or colors.  
(left-right: annular ring variation, GIII-25, GIII-20, GII-15, GI-2B annular ring)*

By 1830, growth in our country created a higher demand for education. The production of inkwells began to dramatically increase at the glass factories, and this growth continued right into the Civil war era. Inkwells became less decorative, and more simple, sturdy and utilitarian. **Sided** and **conical** forms became commonplace, and the “**umbrella**” ink became the quintessential American inkwell. It was a very sturdy object designed to never spill over. At this time, ink was being sold in liquid form, and merchants became involved with the packaging. More merchants and ink manufacturers were producing their own private embossed molds for bottles, and specific packaging was often patented.



*Sided inkwells (8-sided and 12-sided)*



*Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century “umbrella” style inkwell (left-right: 16 sided, 8 sided, 12 sided)*

Many of the form names are pretty self explanatory... cones, umbrellas, sided, etc. The photos will make these observations even easier! A “shouldered” example of an umbrella or cone is one that has a distinct shouldered edge between the neck and the body. Most glass factories during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century produced umbrella inkwells. This was the most common form for many decades, and MANY different colors were produced. Today, this wide array of incredible colors can make up quite a collection! Umbrella inkwells are found with 6, 8, 10, 12, and 16 sides. The 8-sided umbrella is most common. Generally speaking, cone and sided inkwells are much less common.



*Rare pink puce umbrella made into a jar, and a grape puce umbrella. Both are from the same mold.*



*A couple of labeled Stoddard inkwells. (left-16 sided inkwell, right-Farley's Ink from Marlow, NH)*



*Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century "shouldered" conical style inkwells*

During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the inkwells discussed could have been produced here in New Hampshire. Keene produced early freeblown and dip molded inkwells, as well as blown three mold, sided and cone inkwells. This was followed by the Stoddard glass factories, which produced inkwells for over 30 years! These would include 8, 12 and 16-sided umbrella inks, 8 and 12-sided round inks and a couple of different cone inks. The 16-sided umbrella inkwells come in at least 3 different sizes. Embossed inkwells include **Farley's Ink** from Marlow NH, and the amber **Wood's Ink** from Portland ME.



*Stoddard NH made Woods Ink and Farley's Ink.*



*Stoddard NH made Cone and Umbrella (8 and 16-sided) inkwells.*

A less common category is the **domed** inkwells. There is debate over the Bertinquot inkwells, French or American? The one pictured here looks very much like a New England bottle, as does the DeHalsey ink. Pure speculation, but I think they were made in America, but the product was marketed as imported goods. The domed ink in the center was likely produced in Stoddard NH, as a number of examples were found there.



*Early "domed" style inkwells.*



*"Harrison's Columbian Ink" inkwells in different forms and colors.*

### **Harrison's Columbian Ink**

One of the most successful ink manufacturers during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was Apollon W. Harrison. He started the company in the mid-1840s in Philadelphia, where he operated until the early 1860s. His ink and perfumery company continued until the late 1870s. I am not an expert in this area, but I can think of no less than a dozen different ink bottle forms produced by Harrison, and it may be many more. Probably the most well-known would be the impressive blue gallon-sized master ink selling for tens of thousands. It is nice to know, however, that an aqua Harrison inkwell can be purchased with ease at any show for under \$100. With the diversity of forms and colors, a collector could easily assemble a magnificent collection of Harrison Inks alone!

### **The Hunt for Inkwells!**

Keep on hunting for inkwells! While so much of this country was "dug" in the 1960s and 70s, inkwells are still emerging... tucked in a wall, under a root in a dump, or in the mud along a riverbank. The hobby of collecting inkwells is still young, and there are some wonderful opportunities to be had. Start filling your shelves with these little brilliant jewels of the bottle hobby, as they are just begging to be displayed!

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