

PRIMITIVE, PRACTICAL... PERFECT!

A Look At Early New England Utilitarian Bottle Forms

by Michael George



SIMPLE, HARD TIMES

They were simpler times, but very much "hard times" in comparison to the luxuries of today! The colonist in New England relied heavily on imported goods. However, with independence in their hearts, they sought to produce their own wares, even under some very primitive accommodations. Any talented glassblowers would have migrated from other countries, so naturally the techniques and influences from these regions is quite evident in early colonial glass. The relation between the early New England and Continental glass is very close in form, and often glass quality. For this reason, most vessels from this period are very difficult or impossible to reasonably attribute. The objects discussed in this article are very likely from New England, 1750s - 1820s period. This is merely a basic overview of common (and some not so common) forms. A article should (and could) be written for each one!

Common (or junk) blown bottles of yesterday were made to be used regularly. Most were for the use of beverages such as ciders, ales or porters, however there were many other uses in the household as well. The form needed to be functional, and have a purpose... although a single form can have a wide variety of purposes. Most 18th century households required a dozen or more vessels for spirits, medicines, spices, etc. These vessels were reused, possibly for many years.

EARLY NEW ENGLAND GLASS PRODUCTION

Although the first glass factory in New England was in operation during the 1640s in Salem MA, it was short-lived and we have very few records of the endeavor. The first moderately successful and documented factory in New England was Joseph Palmer's Germantown Glassworks in Braintree MA (1752-1768). Germantown produced bottles daily, and the operations lasted a little over 15 years. Documentation of excavations and artifacts provide us with information regarding the type of vessels produced there. Further, we can analyze the tooling marks and techniques as determining factors when reviewing possible Germantown bottles. I would never dare to definitively attribute any of these bottles (Fig. 1) to Germantown. However, I can say that they have a strong probability based upon a close match to excavated shards (Fig. 2). Germantown produced many of the mallets and rum bottles (which most collectors associate this factory with), although the diversity in glass color and bottle forms from Germantown is remarkable. There is significant evidence of gins, snuffs (some with base markings), ribbed flasks, vials and medicines, chestnuts and even table wares... in a wide range of colors!



Figure 1 - Possible Germantown (Braintree, MA) products



Figure 2 - A sampling of Germantown glass shards excavated by Richmond Morcom during the 1950s.

The Hartford Connecticut vicinity was also an active glass center during the first quarter of the 19th century. William Pitkin pioneered the industry in 1783, which was later followed by John Mather and factories in Coventry, Willington and Glastonbury. The quintessential 18th century New England bottle, the **chestnut**, was produced in abundance at the these factories. Within the past decade, a rare miniature 1.8" chestnut was uncovered at the Pitkin site, along with many other artifacts including ribbed, swirled bottles and inkwells, referred to by collectors as a "Pitkin".

Serving bottles (as seen in Fig. 3) are round at the base for support, however, elongated and tapered. They are not flattened like the chestnut, and not bulbous like the globulars. The form resembles a carafe. I have handled at least four very distinct sizes of these serving bottles.



Figure 3 - Pitkin Glassworks objects - 3 chestnuts (left) and 3 serving (or club) bottles.

During the first quarter of the 19th century, bottle glass factories emerged in NH, MA, VT, and NY. Since this article is not about the factories but rather the forms, I will keep this brief. Many early New England utility bottles from this period have been "predetermined" to be Keene or Pitkin, and I am also guilty of making these quick assumptions. However in fact, there were many other factories in the region producing similar wares. Factories such as the New England Glass Company in Cambridge MA, were producing demijohns, porters, wines, octagonal bottles, snuffs, preserves, etc. in mass quantities!

FORMS

Demijohns or Carboys - These are names used for large storage bottles usually covered in wicker. During the late 18th century these were advertised as 1 gallon to 5 gallon sized bottles, however, some even exceeded 5 gallons! These larger bottles required the skills of an experienced glassblower, with considerable "puffing" power. A "great bottle" weighing 43 pounds and holding 31 gallons was reportedly blown in the New England Glass Co. in 1829.

Many of the earliest demijohns produced in New England are of a more ovoid form than the later straight-sided versions. Taller, slender demijohns really gained popularity during the mid-19th century. Some demijohn "forms" have also been referred to as **globes, onions, bullets, teepees, apple, pear, and kidney** based upon their shape.



A few unusual demijohn forms, along with a stubby beer for scale.

Chestnut Bottles or Flasks - Among the earliest common utilitarian bottles produced in America were “chestnut” bottles. Typically oval with flattened sides, they ranged in size from a couple of inches tall to more than 13 inches, although any bottles under 4" and over 11" should be considered quite rare. Our ancestors compared the shape to that of a chestnut, as chestnut trees were much more common then. However, today we would recognize the form to resemble a teardrop shape. The primitive nature and delicate quality of chestnut bottles and flasks, together with their early production, gives them special appeal to glass curators and collectors.

Their simplicity and versatility made these free-blown vessels a common production item throughout New England. Similar glassmaking techniques and glass batch color make it difficult to distinguish the specific source of a chestnut flask or bottle, although regional styles often vary enough to differentiate one from another. While colors can vary, the majority are a shade of olive green or olive amber. Pontil scars, lipping techniques, and glass texture or "metal" can often help glass scholars solve the regional attribution question. These bottles have been found with wicker or leather coverings, however, most of them probably were without.



A group of chestnut bottles...most are likely New England, a couple may be NJ origin.

Globular Bottles - The "globular" form is similar to a chestnut bottle, however, it is perfectly round and bulbous. The base of the bottle is circular, and the sides are not flattened like the chestnut. Although these are far from "typical", the most common size is the one gallon globular, slightly smaller than a basketball. These "gallon sized round bottles" were advertised by the Pitkin factory in 1794. Unlike the demijohns, these bottles did not possess a wicker cover. Judging from their proportions and usually heavy base wear, it is likely that these were used as tavern serving bottles. The miniature forms were likely used for medicinal products. Ironically, the rarest size in a globular form are the most common sizes in the chestnut form, 5" to 8". The strong presence and elegant flow of the globular bottles makes them quite desirable to collectors.



18th Century Globular bottles; Two "standard" gallon examples, one tooled into a rare jar, and one miniature.

Patterned Flasks / Saddle Flasks - As a predecessor to the American historical flasks, the "flask" form was utilized throughout New England, some patterned and some without. The swirled and ribbed flasks were very popular between 1780 and 1820, although evidence of production dates back to the mid-18th century in Germantown. Please refer to an article published in January 2010 to learn more about the Pitkin flask. Flasks without any pattern were produced as well. These seem to be slightly heavier in weight than chestnut bottles, and much more of a classic flask form. These are quite basic, flattened, and easy to travel with. Some of them may have been in wicker or a leather covering.



Patterned (swirled, ribbed Pitkins) and un-patterned flasks.

Multi-Sided or Square Bottles - Long before "Bitters" ruled the world, snuff was the stuff! These early square, octagonal and multi-sided bottles held snuff, blacking, mustard, spices, etc. Usually formed by a crude dip mold or paddled into shape, these can be quite primitive looking and attractive to collectors. As with much of this early New England glass, no two specimens are the same... or even close! The most widely used snuff form is rectangular with chamfered corners. Other forms include round, oval, square, square with chamfered corners, and multi-sided. Of particular interest to collectors are the early octagonal forms... not chamfered, but rather 8 even sides. These examples are early, handsome bottles and quite scarce.



Sided snuff or blacking bottles dating from 1750 to 1830.

Cylindrical Utilities - Many of these early cylinder bottles are made from the same glass as the chestnuts, presumably from CT, circa 1780-1820. Most are produced with a wide mouth for easy food storage, some of which could be classified as jars. Like the chestnuts, these utilitarian vessels share the same primitive glass quality with the warm "earthy" tones of olive and forest greens and honey ambers. These are freeblown. Later (after 1820s) cylindrical utilities would be blown into a two piece mold, finished with a flared lip or an applied medicine type collar.



Cylindrical utility bottles, probably Connecticut 1780-1820.

Case (or Gin) Bottles - These early case bottles, also commonly referred to as "gin" bottles, were named for the tall square form that fit so well (by the dozen or more) into a wooden case. Naturally, this was convenient for shipping, offering the safest passage for the contents within this delicate glass. Many of these originated in Belgium, Netherlands and Germany, however there is plenty of evidence pointing to production within the early New England glass factories as well. Case bottles were advertised by Joseph Palmer (Germantown) as early as 1755.



Possible case bottles from early New England glass factories.

Inkwells - Prior to the popularity of the octagonal (umbrella) cone style, the earlier inkwell forms were far more exciting! Many specimens were produced from a patterned or dip mold, such as the melon form (in Fig.8) which was produced from a 28-rib dip mold. These early inks were stable, held a large capacity, and fairly decorative. The more common swirled pitkin style was produced in round and square forms.

The inkwell was a daily necessity in the home and business during the Colonial and Early American period, and ink was often purchased in a powder form. Without a doubt, an inkwell could be used for many years, and it is not unlikely to see decades of base wear on these items.



*Figure 8 - An assortment of various New England inkwell forms, 1780-1830s.
(melon form, blown three mold pattern, round pitkin form, annular ring, and domed form)*

Table Wares and Offhand Pieces - Where do you draw the line on the term "utilities"? Highly-prized are many of the early table wares and offhand pieces. Once again, a trained eye is required to determine age, authenticity, and possible origin. The collector also needs to recognize a "good" example from an average one. A well-executed offhand object should really portray a sense of craftsmanship, even if the intention is simplistic. These objects are rare and prized, especially the great decorated pieces which should be considered the highest form of glass artistry of the era.



*Early Table Wares.
(bowls, jars, hats, pitchers, creamers, vases, salts, rolling pins, and whimsical objects)*

The Collector's Eye - So what does a collector look for in an ancient New England utilitarian object? Well, obviously the beauty is subjective, however, the collectors of early New England utilities all share some common threads. These primitive objects speak to us... they tell a story. Prior to the Industrial Age, these early objects were crafted, tooled and manipulated by a talented glass gaffer. Often, the collector can see special markings, tooling or a specific glass batch to "read" into the production. Further, It is understood how these objects were used, regularly. The interests go beyond the object itself, and venture into the history of a young America!

Early New England utilitarian bottles can be quite mysterious, leading collectors on a path of many unanswered questions. Analysis of these unique objects can take us one step closer to solving the puzzle... so we think. Sometimes this can be quite maddening, however the quest for information is always so important and enjoyable!

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An unusual torpedo soda bottle