What is a "Pitkin"?

One of the earliest form of American flasks was the swirled ribbed style known as a "Pitkin". This flask type was named (by collectors) after the famed Pitkin Glass Works which operated in East Manchester, CT from 1783 until the 1830s, as it was once believed that all of the Pitkin-style flasks produced in New England originated at this glasshouse. We now know that this style was not only a product of MANY glass factories, but also produced long before the Pitkin factory existed. This article is a review of the Pitkin flask form only, primarily the New England forms. Inkwells will be reviewed in a future article.

How is a Pitkin flask created?

A Pitkin is a ribbed flask, bottle or inkwell that is produced using the German half-post method. To describe this method in simple terms, it is basically a second gather of glass up to the neck area which overlapped the first slightly inflated gather. This was to strengthen the walls of the fragile object. These objects can have ribs swirled to the left, right or vertically, and many have combined rib patterns, known as a "broken swirl". The rib swirl is determined by the direction of the ribs from the bottom of the flask to the shoulder. These ribs are produced by the use of a grooved dip mold. The number of grooves in the mold produced a corresponding number of ribs in the glass object. All of these dip molds had vertical ribs, and the swirled effect was the result of the glassblower twisting the gather once removed from the mold. A single ribbed bottle required one insertion into the mold, a double ribbed pattern would require two insertions before being completely inflated.
Where were Pitkin-type flasks produced?

Although this method of glassmaking originated from Continental ancestry, the technique has been practiced in America since the mid-18th century. Naturally, the skillful German glassblowers who migrated into the new world, supplied their talents and techniques from the old country. In America, it is likely that the first ribbed and swirled dip mold Pitkin-type flasks were produced at Wistarburgh in Southern NJ, during the mid-18th century. Other glass operations in this region, such as Stiegel's factories, would also likely produce these patterned bottles, most of which were probably single vertically ribbed examples. We really do not have much evidence of production of swirled ribbed flasks from this area until around the turn of the 19th century. New Geneva, Clementon NJ and Philadelphia were all very likely sources of Pitkin-type flasks from the New Jersey and Pennsylvania area.

"Pitkin-type" glass shards unearthed at the Clementon Glass Factory site
Early Mid-Atlantic or Midwestern Pitkin flasks

As we "dig" deeper into analyzing commonly blown wares such as chestnut bottles and Pitkin-type flasks during the late 18th century in to the first quarter of the 19th century, the realization that glass quality and blowing techniques were very similar amongst glasshouses in particular regions. Attribution to a particular glass factory is an extremely difficult task, however, we can clearly identify objects from particular regions. Such are the characteristics of the New England Pitkin flask.

Group of New England Pitkin flasks!
So who produced New England Pitkin flasks?

Massachusetts:

New England Pitkin flasks may have been produced as early as the mid 18th century at the Germantown Glass Works in Braintree, MA. The only real evidence to substantiate this claim are shards uncovered at the factory site. No less than a dozen fragments were uncovered, all within the context of other Germantown glass fragments. As one would expect, the style is very similar to the earliest bold and chunky South Jersey Pitkin-type flasks; quite a bit different from the typical New England style. We will get to the "typical" New England style later.

Pitkin-type flask shards unearthed at the Germantown Glass Factory site.

Connecticut:

In 1783, William Pitkin established the Pitkin Glass Factory, in East Hartford. This factory, as well as the numerous other glass factories in this area, would become a source for many 36-rib Pitkin inkwells and flasks. It is also a likely source for the 28, 32, and 38 ribs as well... but who is counting! Although early excavations did not conclusively produce evidence of such production at Pitkin, more recent excavations have clearly proven that Pitkin produced Pitkins!

There is also no doubt that the production of ribbed Pitkin-type bottles were produced at the surrounding Connecticut glasshouses from the turn of the 19th century through the 1830s. It is probable that John Mather's Glassworks (1805-1820s), Coventry Glass Works (1813-1849), Willington Glass Works (1815-1872) and the Glastenbury Glass Works (1817-1827) were all likely producers of these flasks. By far, the most conclusive evidence would come from the Coventry Glass Works and Glastenbury Glass Works sites, excavated by Harry Hall White in the 1920s (Coventry), and Old Sturbridge Village in 1962 (Glastenbury). Fragment examples of numerous swirled, ribbed German Half post flasks were uncovered. These were mostly 36 ribs, some swirled to the left, and some to the right.
Pitkin-type flask shards unearthed at the Glastonbury Glass Factory site.

New Hampshire:

The short-lived New England Glass Works (1780-1781) in Temple NH, may have produced ribbed bottles, however, not a single fragment has been uncovered.

The Keene Marlboro Street Glassworks (1815-1841) was the only known producer of Pitkin-type flasks in New Hampshire, although likely a very competitive contender for the Connecticut factories. This flask form was durable and convenient, preceding the popularity of the historical figured flasks, so it is assumed that production of these flasks reached its peak between 1810 and 1825.

Larger rough pontil mark, similar to shards excavated at the Keene Marlboro Street site.

Excavations by Harry Hall White (Antiques Magazine, Vol. XI, #6) illustrate an abundance of Pitkin flask shards at the glasshouse site. Analysis of the bases show a larger rough pontil, as well as a blowpipe type pontil mark. Incidentally, the three flasks that I observed as having the large rough pontil mark, were also produced in a form that is referred to as a "knife edge" form. This is where the ends of the flask are much more pointed than the usual blunt end. This is merely an observation, and not necessarily a characteristic of a glasshouse, but rather likely the style of a particular glassblower.
A top-down view detailing the difference in form between a usual Pitkin and a "knife edge" example.

So what can we say about the "typical" New England Pitkin flask form?

Pitkin flask are usually produced in a 1/2 pint and pint size variations. A typical 1/2 pint is 5"-5 1/2" and a pint is usually 6 1/4"-6 3/4". Size variations below 4 3/4" and above 7" should be considered quite rare. The overall form is typically much different than the Midwestern specimens. A typical New England Pitkin flask can be described as:

- Typically lighter in weight than Mid-Atlantic and Midwestern Pitkins.
- More of an ovoid, elongated shape. Flattened sides and sometimes pointed at the edges.
- With the exception of Germantown, the ribbing is quite tight with usually 32 or 36 ribs.
- Colors in olive amber to olive green tones, occasionally in lighter rich greens and yellows.

To distinguish between Connecticut and New Hampshire ribbed and swirled flasks would be practically impossible to do, however, we can easily identify a New England Pitkin-type flask. The myth that Connecticut had ribs to the left, and New Hampshire had ribs to the right is simply untrue. A simply twist of the wrist could determine the rib direction!
Two New England Pitkins ranging size from 4" to 7", single swirl and broken swirl patterns.

What To Look For When Pickin A Pitkin?

Much of the attraction is in the eye of the collector, however, there are certain attributes that make one Pitkin flask more desirable than others.
- Unusual shapes, such as round or bulbous forms
- An unusual rib count or orientation, and a very pronounced rib impression.
- Unusual colors such as lighter or pure bright colors are more desirable.
- Sizes below 5" and over 7" are outside of the average-sized flask.
- Long necks or applied lip treatments.
- Superior condition with lack of wear on the high point of the ribs.

A rare Pitkin flask swirled to the left and the right.
An usual Pitkin flask with 31 ribs and a much wider, flattened body.

A rare Pitkin round bottle in a pale citron green color.
These iconic early American pattern molded vessels are beautiful and desirable. Every collection should have a specimen, or two, or three... yes, they can be addictive! As they are all different, good luck with your hunt for the perfect Pitkin!

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