

Bottles from the Burgin Family

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Sources disagree slightly on the early history of the Burgin family glass houses, and we have sorted those out to the best of our ability. The confusion, however, had little bearing on dating the few bottles and flasks used by the firms. Only two of the operating companies – Burgin & Wood and Burgin & Sons – embossed initials or the firm name on products. In each case, the mark identified only a single type of flask or bottle.

Histories

Phoenix Glass Works, Millville, New Jersey (1828-1846)

Born on March 19, 1836, Dr. George H. Burgin joined with Richard L. Wood and William C. Fowler to form the firm of Burgin, Wood & Fowler – druggists and apothecaries – in 1820. Fowler withdrew after “several years,” and the business became Burgin & Wood (*American Bottler* 1908:64).

James Lee and a group of glass men built a glass factory at Millville, New Jersey, in 1806. Gideon Scull likely owned the plant in 1814, and Nathaniel Solomon was apparently the “manager for a company of blowers,” probably during the mid-1820s. No one recorded how long either party was involved (Farinaccio 2020; Pepper 1971:225; Van Rensselaer 1936:146).

The druggist firm of Burgin & Wood (Dr. George H. Burgin, a Philadelphia physician-pharmacist, and Richard L. Wood) acquired the plant, possibly with Joel Bodine, ca. 1827 and made window glass, along with “bottles and vials of every description.” The company reorganized in 1829 (possibly 1830) as Burgin, Wood & Pearsall and again as Burgin & Pearsall, sometime between 1833 and 1835. Burgin and his partners sold the factory to William Scattergood and Thomas Booth (Scattergood, Booth & Co.) in 1836. By 1838, Booth withdrew to be replaced by G.M. Haverstick to form Scattergood, Haverstick & Co. (Lee 1907; McKearin & Wilson 1978:90; Oberholtzer 1912:612-620; Pepper 1971:225-226; von Mechow 2023).

Containers and Marks

B&W (1827-1829)

Knittle (1927:441) identified the “B.&W.” mark as belonging to Bryce & Walker. Toulouse (1971:98) called the company Bryce, Walker & Co. and dated the firm 1865-1886. McKearin & Wilson (1978:555) illustrated a flask with “B&W” in script letters on the front heel below an eagle. They described the finish as a “rolled-over sloping collar.” The base of the flask had a pontil mark, but the authors clarified that only two specimens were known and they could not identify the manufacturer (Figures 1 & 2). Hawkins (2009:91-101) discussed six separate companies associated with the Bryce brothers of Pittsburgh, including Bryce, Walker & Co. None of them were called Bryce & Walker.



Figure 2 – B&W flask (McKearin & Wilson 1978:555)



Figure 1 – B&W flask (Great American Bottles)

We consider Burgin & Wood to be a much better choice. The firm was only in business for two or three years (1827-1829 – possibly 1830), a time period which fits well with only two flasks being known with the mark. The plant advertised itself as manufacturing bottles.

PHOENIX GLASS WORKS, PHIL^A (ca. 1840s-ca. 1870s)

Von Mechow (2023) listed two porter bottles embossed “PHOENIX GLASS WORKS, PHIL^A” in a circle around the base (Figures 3 & 4). They were yellow-green in color, had “blob” finishes, and improved pontil scars. Each had the word “PATENT” embossed on its shoulder.

Von Mechow (2023) noted that the Phoenix Glass Works name was first recorded in 1840 but was dropped by 1880. Assuming that the name was not used earlier, these bottles were likely made after the Burgin family had sold its interest, but there is a remote chance that the Phoenix name was used prior to the sale, and the Burgins made the bottles prior to the sale.



Figure 3 – Phoenix Glass Works base (von Mechow 2013 & eBay)

The name was embossed “around base rim” in a Rickett’s plate that encircled the outer edge of the base, leaving the center free for empontiling or other working.

Developed in 1812, the technology was used until ca. 1870s (see the

section of A&DH Chambers for more discussion about the process). Von Mechow (2023) noted that the earliest evidence for the Phoenix Glass Works name was in 1840.



Figure 4 – Phoenix bottle (eBay)

Early Philadelphia Firms (1835-1853)

According to William Burgin’s obituary in the *American Bottler* (1908:64):

In 1835, the firm which was now known as Burgin & Pearsall purchased at sheriff’s sale an old glass factory located at what was then known as Franklin and Cherry Streets in Philadelphia but now known as Girard and Montgomery Avenues, the present location of the plant.

Oberholtzer (1912:614), however, claimed:

In 1846 Burgin & Pearsall sold their factories at Millville and built a glass-house on Cherry street above Franklin. This is now . . . the block bounded roughly by East Girard avenue, East Montgomery avenue, Moyer and Palmer streets.

There is virtually no question that the *American Bottler* is correct. The 1837 Philadelphia city directory listed the firm as “Burgin & Pearsall, green glassware, 46 N. Front.” That also makes better sense. If Burgin & Pearsall sold the Millville plant in 1836, it would not make sense that the firm waited ten years to build its Philadelphia plant in 1846.

Pearsall retired from the firm in 1848, and it was reorganized as Burgin, Fowler & Co., with Burgin, his oldest son, Dr. George H. Burgin, Jr., and William C. Fowler as the initial

partners, with the office still at 46 N. Front St. Fowler withdrew in 1853, and the firm became Burgin & Sons (Oberholtzer 1912:614).

Burgin & Sons, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1853-1908)

In 1853, Fowler withdrew from the partnership, while another son, Charles F. Burgin, was admitted, and the firm became Burgin & Sons. Two more sons, John H. and William N., were admitted in 1857 without any change in company name. In 1865, Burgin turned the entire operation of the glassworks over to his sons. He died in 1870 (Oberholtzer 1912:614-615).

During the 1850s, the company advertised itself as chemists as well as glassware manufacturers, specializing in the production of soda, sal soda, bicarbonate of soda, saleratus, Rochelle salts, and Seidlitz powders. The glassworks made black, green and “German flint” bottles, the wares being enumerated as homeopathic vials, prescription bottles, packing bottles, mustard, mineral water, porter and wine bottles, graduated measures, nursing bottles, glass syringes, and all kinds of druggists’ glassware. They established agencies in various cities, including, by 1859, one in San Francisco, intended to serve the Pacific Coast market (*American Druggists’ Circular* 1858; Freedley 1859:208, 277; *Alta California* 1859).

One furnace at the factory was devoted to “German flint glass” (imitation lead glass). Freedley (1859:277) claimed that:

although not as beautiful in appearance as Flint Glass containing lead, it is preferable to it for many purposes, particularly for holding acids and alkalies, as they have no effect upon it. It is a very strong variety of Glass, and is much used by Chemists, Apothecaries, and Perfumers; it can be colored, moulded, and pressed into all the various patterns and forms of Flint Glass, and is sold at intermediate prices between Green and Flint Glass.

On October 5, 1875, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that the factory had burned to the ground the previous day, although the damage was entirely covered by insurance. By 1875, the firm had installed a Siemens gas furnace, manufacturing gas on the premises using coal and wood. The factory at this time was employing 77 men and 72 boys, with an annual production

of almost 3.4 million bottles and other wares, valued at \$50,578 (*Crockery and Glass Journal* 1875; Grier 1877:713). However, on October 4, Burgin & Sons experienced a fire the resulted in \$20,000 in damage (Independence Hall Assoc. 2010).

Burgin & Sons experienced at least two more fires – in 1879 and 1887 (Von Mechow 2023). The plant may not have been badly damaged in the earlier fire. The 1880 Hexamer General Survey map called the business the Philadelphia Glass Works – north of E. Girard Ave., between Montgomery Ave. and Palmer St. – and illustrated a total of four furnaces “of brick and iron, well constructed,” although one was unused. In addition, the plant had eight lehrs and one annealing oven. The property also included several other buildings, including a packing house, several storage facilities, an office, a blacksmith shop, and “pot ovens” for making clay pots to use with the furnaces.

In 1897, Burgin & Sons were listed in the “Green Bottle and Hollowware” section of a glass factory schedule and used 16 pots to make its products. The number had increased to 18 pots the following year (*National Glass Budget* 1897:7; 1898:7). On October 1, 1902, the family incorporated the business as the Burgin & Sons Glass Co. William Burgin, the last of the partners, died on May 19, 1908, at the close of the 1907/08 blast, and the family decided not to continue the glassworks (*American Bottler* 1908:64; *Commoner and Glassworker* 1908a; 1908b; 1909). The firm continued to be listed in the Thomas Registers (1905:104, 578; 1912:481, 2727) – as making both green and flint glass and, separately, as making milk jars – until 1912, long after the plant had closed.

The firm, however, apparently continued to exist as a legal entity. On June 14, 1910, Burgin & Sons Glass Co., along with Bishop & Babcock, sued the law firm of Cann, Barrow & McIntire over the distribution of funds from a February 7, 1908, judgement – probably connected with the cessation of production at the Burgin & Sons plant. The original judgement, however, was affirmed by the court (*Southeastern Reporter* 1910:490-492).

Containers and Marks

It is certain that most of the Burgin family glass houses used no logo on their products. Even the two that used marks did so sparingly, leaving most of their glassware unidentified.

PHILADA GLASSWORKS (arch) / BURGIN & SONS (1863-mid-1870s)

The only mark we have discovered for Burgin & Sons was on blob-top soda water bottles. All the bottles we have seen were virtually identical except for the color variations: aquas, greens, light blue, and a smokey colorless. Each bottle was topped with an applied “blob-top” finish (Figure 5). Because they were made by hand, the finishes varied, although all were rounded at the base and tapered upward to the rim.



Figure 5 – Applied finish (eBay)



Figure 6 – Iron pontil scar (eBay)

Each bottle had a short push-up or kick-up on the base with an iron pontil scar (Figure 6). Each body was embossed “PHILADA^A GLASSWORKS (arch) / BURGIN & SONS (horizontal)” (Figure 7). At this point, we have not discovered any significant variations in the mark. Although Burgin & Sons were in business from 1853 to 1902, these bottles were probably made at some point between the beginning of the firm and the mid-1870s.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although the early history of the Millville glass house is confusing and contradictory, most dates are only in disagreement by one or two years. This is much more of an academic concern rather than having any real bearing on dating bottles. The flask with the B&W logo was very likely made during the 1828-1829 period.

Bottles with “BURGIN & SONS” marks were probably only made for a relatively short period of time. Unfortunately, we have no way of tracing the specific dates. Our estimate is based on manufacturing characteristics. Soda bottles of this style could have been made from the beginning of the firm until the Hutchinson style had completely dominated the market by the mid-1880s. We have neither discovered any other manufacturer’s marks used by the glass house nor any other bottle types with the “BURGIN & SONS” mark.



Figure 7 – Burgin & Sons soda bottle (eBay)

These bottles have been found in San Francisco. Because the bottles were marked with both the name of the glass house and the location – an unusual occurrence at that period – they may only have been used in California. The plant and city location may have been used because the bottles were made at a point so distant from the sales outlet.

Porter bottles, embossed with the name of the Phoenix Glass Works, may have been used prior to the sale of the Millville works to Scattergood, Booth & Co. in 1836 or 1837, although they were probably made after that time.

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