Evolution of a Ceramic Jug

by Jack Sullivan

For more than a decade I have been collecting material on a Cleveland inventor named Henry Stiles and how his 1892 patent of a "spout for cans" resulted in a variety of ceramic jugs found throughout the United States and countries overseas. [See Fig. 1.] Missing information has stymied my efforts. There was no way to explain, for example, just how an invention meant for improving metal containers instead came to be married to stoneware. My recent discovery of a second Stiles patent on a pottery mark now has made it possible to understand "the rest of the story."

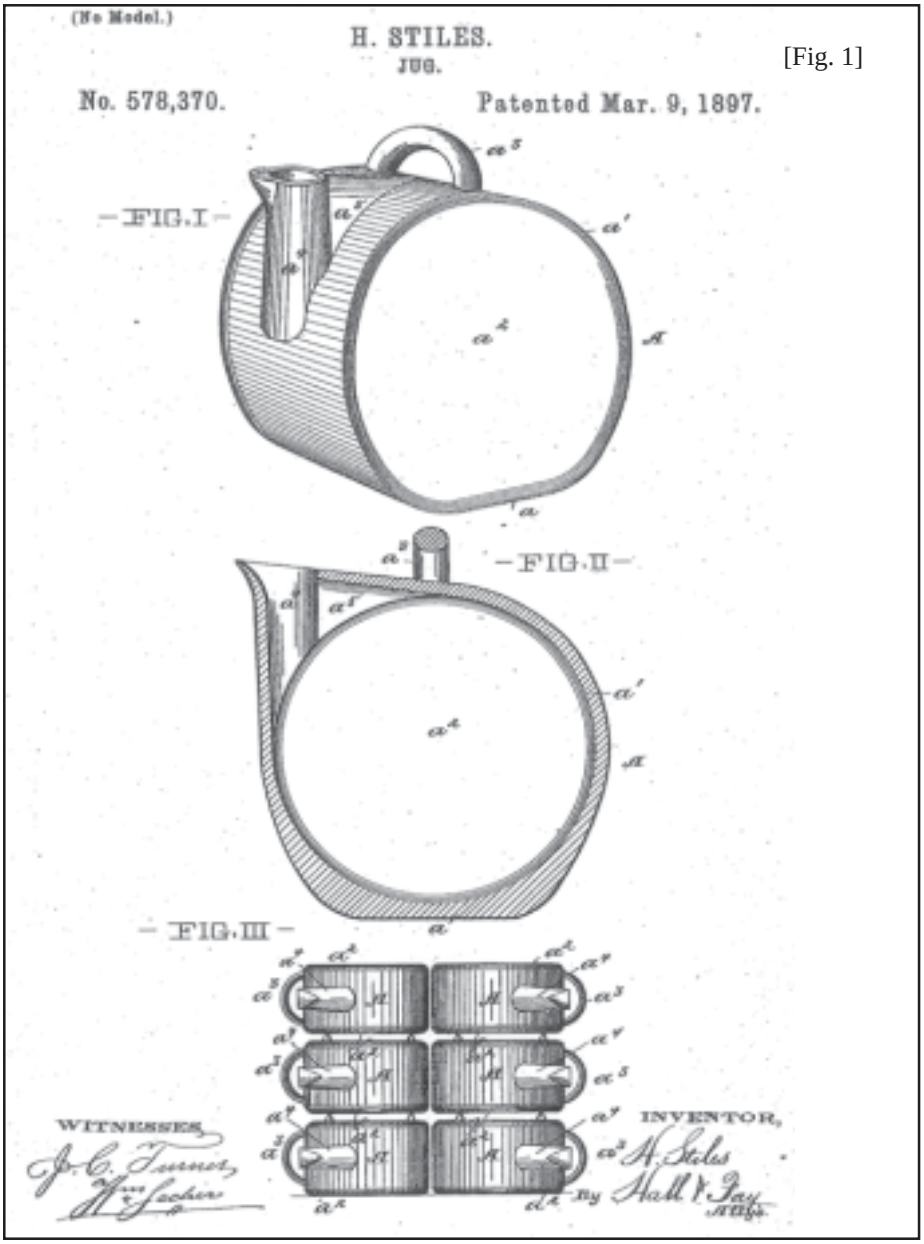
Henry Stiles and the Age of Invention

The late 1800s represent the golden age of American invention. Ohioan Thomas Edison brought forth the phonograph and the electric light bulb, Dureya the gasoline-powered automobile, and Jenkins the motion picture machine. The country was awash in garage workshops, where thousands of inspired Americans worked diligently to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of countless processes and machines.

It is evident in reviewing patent applications of the time that a great deal of attention was being paid to improving containers for liquids. Consumer trends were changing. In an earlier day customers brought their own cans, crocks, jugs or baskets to the merchant for filling. Now products came in their own distinct packages. Improving those containers as well as the efficiency and speed of their manufacture occupied many an inventive mind. For Henry Stiles the challenge lay in how to pour liquids out of a can without sloshing and spilling. In other words Henry was trying to eliminate the "glug, glug, glug."

He appears to have succeeded. In a patent application, approved on May 10, 1892, Henry said he had invented "a can-spout which unites in one and the same device or construction all the functions of theordinary discharging spout and of a free and sufficient vent therefore." Translating the "patent-speak" into plain English, this simply means that Stiles had found a way to let air flow through the spout of a container at the same time as the liquid contents.

[Fig. 1]



[Fig. 2]

Evolving from Cans to Jugs

City directories list Henry Stiles as living at 160 Giddings Avenue in Cleveland when he applied for and received his patent. The Stiles name is famous in Cleveland history because Job Stiles and his wife, Tabitha, were its first settlers. The couple accompanied a surveying party to the site in 1796. Surveyors built them a cabin and made Job Stiles custodian of their supplies. In 1797, Their son, Charles Stiles, was the first non-Native American

born in the Cleveland area. It is not known whether Henry Stiles was directly related to these pioneers. We do know, however, that in the census of 1890, he listed his occupation as "foreman." In 1894 he was still at the same address but said he was a "treasurer." Neither entry indicated where he was working. That same year in November, he applied for his second patent -- one that clears up the missing link between cans and jugs.

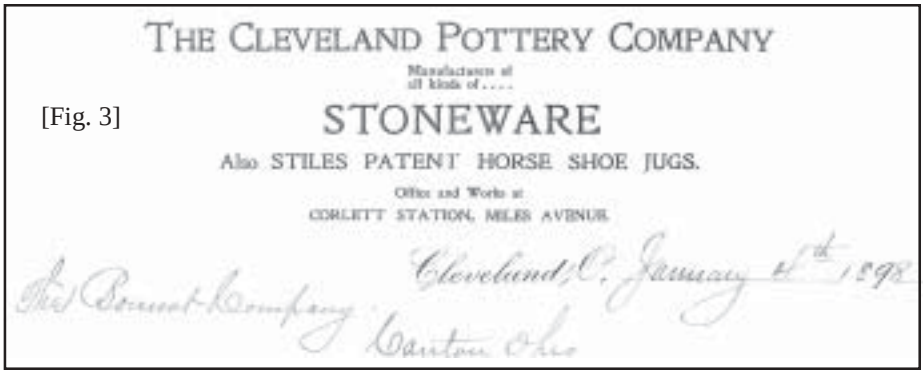
In his 1894 statement to the U.S. Patent Office, Stiles emphasized the advantages of his pouring spout to a ceramic jug, adding that vessel "on account of its shape may be convenient for pouring, as it may be simply rolled over upon the rounded side beneath the spout until the contents flow out through the same." But its principal advantage, he contended, was that its flat sides permitted the jug to be stacked more easily and efficiently for "baking" during manufacture and later for packing and transportation. Here Stiles was joining other Ohio inventors, such as John McCloskie of Massillon and A. J. Weeks of Akron, both of whom had devised ways to eliminate empty areas within kilns during the firing process. With demand high for individual jugs, it was important to maximize every inch of space. Stiles' patent drawings emphasized this benefit. [Fig. 1, bottom] The U.S. duly awarded him his second patent on March 9, 1987. The "spout for cans" [Fig. 8] was now a spout for jugs.

The Advent of "Recherche Ware"

Sometime during the period 1892-1898, Stiles' invention found a home with the Cleveland Pottery Company whose offices were at Corlett Station on Miles Avenue. According to a 1961 newspaper article, this firm, founder unknown, dated from the 1870s, producing both earthenware and stoneware products. Citing Stiles' first patent while adapting the spout, the firm marketed a ceramic jug in quart and half-gallon sizes that they called "Stiles Patent Recherche Ware" in a mark that appears low on the curved front of the jug. The use of the French word "recherche" (research) suggests to me that the Cleveland Pottery was implying that the design of this unusual stoneware container had roots in the "art nouveau" movement then sweeping Europe and America.

At that time, Cleveland could claim considerable repute as a site for innovation in the applied arts. In the 1870s, a group of artists and craftsmen working in Northeastern Ohio had organized the Cleveland Academy of Art. Over succeeding decades they worked in close proximity to share ideas and techniques. Art nouveau was favored, particularly in ceramics. Later called the "Cleveland School," the influence of these artists, we may assume, spread to the artisans of the Cleveland Pottery Company. Company designers also embellished Stiles' jug with a heavy glaze in green or white, a horseshoe design on its flat sides, and sometimes an overtly art nouveau handle. The company placed strong emphasis on this product. Its letterhead boasted of being a manufacturer of the "Stiles Patent Horseshoe Jug." [Fig. 3]

[Fig. 3]


THE CLEVELAND POTTERY COMPANY

Manufacturers of all kinds of....

STONEWARE

Also STILES PATENT HORSE SHOE JUGS.

Office and Works at

CORLETT STATION, MILES AVENUE.

Cleveland O. January 1st 1898

The Bennet Company

Canton Ohio

The horseshoe model is the Stiles jug most frequently seen at bottle shows and auctions. Some have spongeware sides, others have painted flowers, and still others have fancy gold and lettering with inscriptions like "Greater Cleveland" or "Whiskey." Some may have been made to serve ice water; others held liquor. One Stiles jug actually has been found in Australia, a long way from Cleveland. That container advertises a New York City wine and liquor dealer. [Fig. 2] Judging from their many guises, the Stiles jugs proved popular and, one assumes, profitable. Pictures of several variations are shown here. [Figs. 4, 5, 6, 9]

The End of the Story

At some juncture, the Cleveland Pottery Company decided to move its mark to the bottom of the jug, put it in an oval, add its own name, and cite the second Stiles patent. This mark provided the ultimate and essential clue for me in discovering how Henry's concept evolved from cans to ceramics. [Fig. 7] These later jugs also vary from earlier models because the horseshoe accents are gone and the handles now attach to the spout rather than bridging it.

Henry Stiles disappears from city

[Fig. 4]

[Fig. 5]

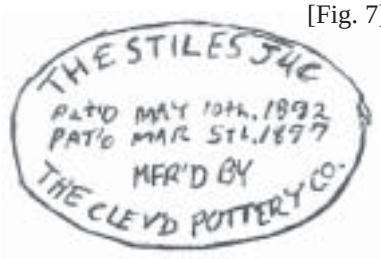
[Fig. 6]

directories about the turn of the century. The Cleveland Pottery Company was bought in 1919 by Louis Friedl, having survived National Prohibition, the Great Depression and World War II, events that killed off many American pottery manufacturers. In 1960 the firm advertised itself as among the top three flower pot makers in America. Court records show that the firm was still operating in 1967, but that was its last public record.

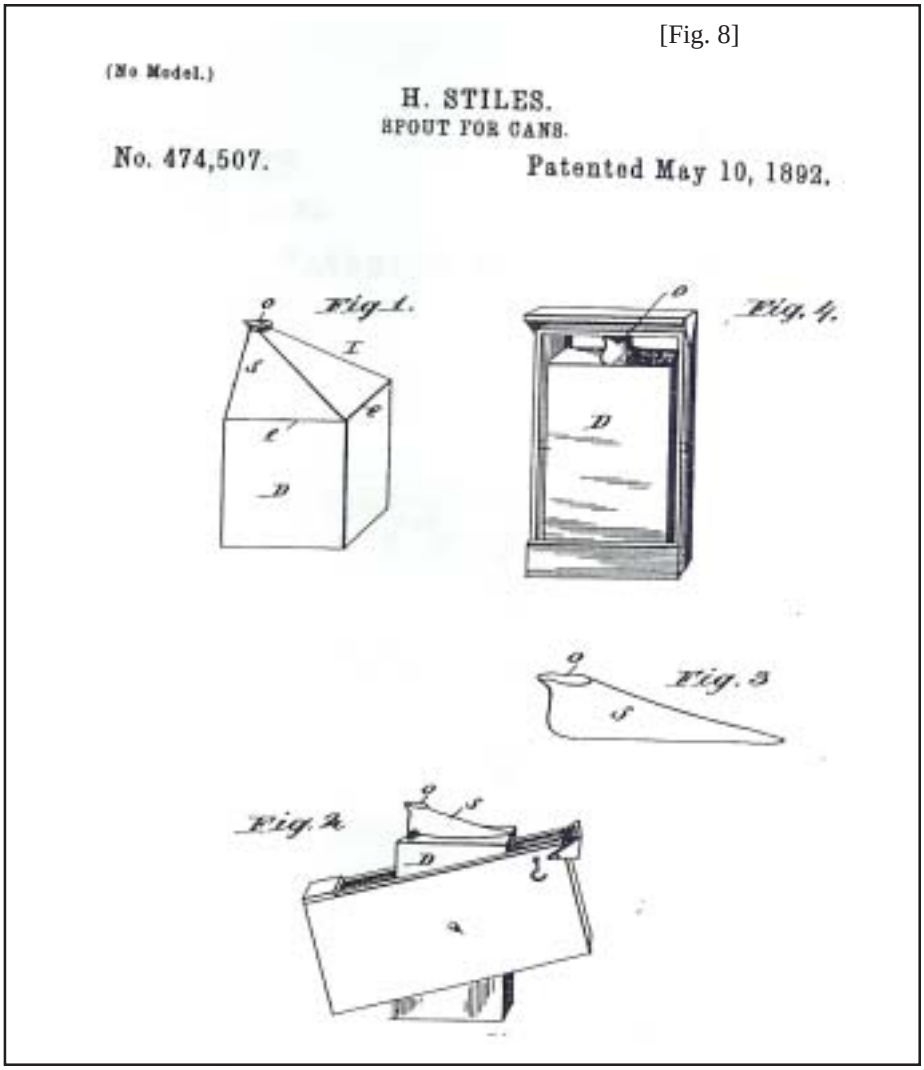
How long did the company produce the Stiles jug? My guess is that with the onset of Prohibition the market for such containers became very restricted. Moreover, new manufacturing processes had obviated the need for flat-sided jugs. Thus, production of the Stiles model may well have ended about 1920.

But in the meantime, what an evolution this son of Ohio had created! By innovating a new "spout for cans" that led to "recherche ware" and on to "horseshoe jugs," Henry Stiles is one of only a few 19th Century amateur inventors who saw their ideas actually put into widespread production. Even though it was a lowly ceramic container, made to be used today and likely thrown away tomorrow, the special qualities of Henry Stiles' invention have insured that his name is forever perpetuated on jugs to be found in collections the world over.

[Fig. 7]



[Fig. 8]


(No Model.)

H. STILES.

SPOUT FOR CANS.

No. 474,507. Patented May 10, 1892.

Fig. 1. Fig. 4. Fig. 3. Fig. 2.

[Fig. 9]