

Black Glass Bottles

By Cary Adelman

Editor's note: In memory of black glass collector, Cary Adelman, who passed away one year ago, June 10, 2009, we are printing the last article written for us by him.



In the last few years, collecting Black Glass bottles has been gaining momentum in the United States, though it's been popular for decades in Europe and even longer in England. If you begin to study, learn, and handle examples of these early mostly free-blown bottles, your interest in them is sure to grow, just as mine has. As a lover of Black Glass bottles who still has much to learn—and one who, as he learns, often comes up with more questions than answers—I will do my best to write about a few aspects of this area of early bottle collecting.

What collectors refer to as Black Glass bottles are typically the dark green bottles that were blown in Germany, England, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Italy, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe. From roughly the 16th through the early 19th centuries, glass houses in these regions produced Black Glass bottles for domestic use as well as for export. Often called *wine bottles*, they also contained other spirits, olive oil, vinegar, medicines, cider, or just about any of the liquid—and even dry—wares of the time. The very earliest Black Glass bottles were produced in wood-fired furnaces. Later on, coal-fired furnaces became the norm.

The evolution of the forms we're discussing here emerges as early as 1550 in Germany and by 1600 is a distinct form known as the shaft-and-globe (photo 1, circa 1660). Later shaft-and-globes (approx. 1650 to 1690, photo 2) slowly evolved into the onion form (approx. 1700 to 1720, photo 3). Late onion forms transformed into the mallet-shaped bottle (approx. 1720, photo 4, to 1750, photo

5). Mallets begin to grow a bit taller into what many call the squat-cylindrical form (approx. 1750 to 1780, photo 6). Photo 7 shows a bottle well on its way to becoming the tall cylinder form we know today.

As they evolved, regional bottle forms retained similarities yet developed distinctive characteristics. An English shaft-and-globe bottle, for example, had Dutch and German counterparts, and collectors can distinguish between them. There are also distinctively Scottish forms, octagonal forms, varied sizes, and other miscellaneous styles. There are transitional forms throughout these different periods—again with slight differences in the same form from different geographic locations!

Black Glass bottles were also produced in the American colonies, almost certainly beginning with Caspar Wistar's first "successful" glass house in 1739. Though indisputable attribution of specific examples is sometimes still debated and perhaps difficult to prove, bottles of this type are strongly thought or known to have been produced by Wistar and later by others. One factor at play here is that the same German, Polish, Dutch, and other glass-blowers who worked in Europe emigrated to

the colonies to work in North American glass houses. And so, the bottles we know and love from American glass houses not only had ancestors all over Europe but were produced here by those same Europeans newly arrived on North American shores.

We know that Black Glass bottles were blown in America. A bottle is given an American attribution if, by its identifying seal, it can be shown to have belonged to a known colonist working and living here in North America—even if the bottle may have been blown, say, in England. Attribution is also accomplished through archeological work at known American glass house sites through shard evidence. Information proving specific examples is coming to light all the time (some bottles are known absolutely to have been blown in North America—the well-known RW sealed bottle, for example).



Sealed G.S. with two lions rampant, late shaft-and-globe/early onion form, circa 1690.



Shaft-and-globe Black Glass bottle, circa 1660.

The bottles pictured in this article are from my own collection. I have tried to represent the general evolution of the form—from the shaft-and-globe, onion, mallet, squat-cylinder, and finally the tall cylindrical form still in use today. My collection contains a few beautiful Black Glass bottles from the Netherlands, specifically several with oil-painted portraits or battle scenes. Most of my Black Glass bottles are English, with a few that can be given an American attribution



Onion form, seal not legible because of long burial in ground, circa 1700–1720.

and a couple that are almost certain to have been produced on North American soil, either at a New York glass house or even at Wistarburgh, according to some bottle historians. As an American, I've perceived our closest link with English bottles, followed by German, Dutch, and the like. I now realize, however, that history proves early bottle production was a world-wide affair, with forms intertwining, distinct yet parallel in their evolution, with each "new" form emerging from its predecessor.

Now, what is a glass-sealed bottle? First, there are many types of sealed bottles that are not categorized as Black Glass—many whiskeys and the familiar Binninger bottles, just to name a couple. But here we are discussing the very early



Very late straight-sided onion beginning to show mallet characteristics. Sealed N. Green 1724. American attribution.

olive green, usually dark "black" glass bottles that, when just blown and still warm and malleable, were "sealed" on the side with a blob of molten glass. The blob was then stamped or impressed with a personalized die.

Early seals might be of a crest, a coat of arms, the symbol of a tavern or pub, or the name of a titled individual. A bit later, universities and other institutions began to use seals. Personal names, initials, and dates soon followed, and



Mallet form, sealed W.R. 1752

eventually wine merchants and other purveyors sealed bottles with product and brand identities. Some of the reasons for sealing or personalizing bottles were identification, status, disease prevention, or in recognition of some special occasion, and probably others reasons as well.

The practice of sealing bottles is thought to go back as far as the early 1600s and was in widespread use by the early 1700s. The date on the seal may or may not be consistent with the time of the bottle's making. The date could represent anything that was significant to the bottle's owner. So antique bottles are dated more by their style and form than they are by the dates on the bottles—though you very often find that the date on the bottle does seem to be consistent with its form, with exceptions. For the most part, sealing



Late mallet/squat-cylinder form, sealed Sidney Breese, 1765, almost certainly an American-made bottle.



Almost cylindrical but still a bit wide, this form will soon grow taller and thinner. Sealed wine P.C. Brooks, 1820

bottles began to decline in the early 1800s and was all but abandoned by the mid-1800s, again with a few exceptions.

I claim only limited knowledge in the area of antique Black Glass. But I have been able to piece together information about my collection and some knowledge of the technology from which American glass houses eventually produced glass. Some American collectors, when they see a Black Glass bottle, think of it as either English or "Dutch"—and leave it at that. As we've been discussing, there is a lot more to it than that, and I have only scratched the surface of the subject.

Much knowledge has been gathered by antique bottle scholars the world over, and that makes for very exciting collecting. What I do hope to accomplish here is to lure some of my fellow old-bottle collectors into this fascinating area of early bottle collecting. The crudity and character of these beautiful old bottles—qualities we love so much—are nowhere more evident than in the wide-ranging category we often over-simplify as Black Glass.

For those interested in pursuing this in greater depth, I suggest the book *Antique Glass Bottles their history and evolution 1500 to 1850* by Willy Van den Bossche. An antique collector and glass scholar from Belgium, he spent 10-plus years researching the book. What Helen McKearin and Kenneth Wilson did for American bottles with the publishing of *American Bottles and Flasks and Their Ancestry* in 1978, Mr. Van den Bossche has accomplished in a world history of early glass bottles. This is the very origin of the bottles we collect today regardless of the type or form. It all started here! (Speaking of course of "modern" bottle production—post 1500 or so.) If pursuing bottles with a so-called American attribution is of interest to you, please see two excellent books by Dale Murschell, *American Applied Glass Sealed Bottles* and *Wistarburgh—Window Tiles, Bottles, and More*.

Finally, the writer of this article would like to add to his circle of friends and fellow collectors the world over with an interest and desire to learn more about these crude, early, misshapen, often free-blown bottles we call Black Glass

Suggested Reading

American Bottles and Flasks and Their Ancestry: Helen McKearin & Kenneth Wilson

Antique Glass Bottles, Their History and Evolution (1500–1850): Willy Van den Bossche

Understanding Antique Wine Bottles: Roger Dumbrell

American Applied Glass Seal Bottles: Dale Murschell

Wistarburgh—Window Tiles, Bottles, and More: Dale Murschell

Glass in Early America: Arlene Palmer
Dutch Glass Bottles of the 17th and 18th Centuries: Robert H. McNulty

The Decanter—An Illustrated History from 1650: Andy McConnell

...and there are several others, not to mention countless articles and other research!

Searching - can someone help me?

I am searching for battery jars like the damaged ones pictured here.

As you can see, they are part of an art work that got damaged. They were made for VARTA, a German company and used as marine or telephone batteries. Each was probably a cell unit of a larger battery.

Measurements: H - 9.5", L - 5.5", W - 3".



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