

Celebrating 150 Years of Mason Jars 1858-2008

By Jim Sears and Joseph Merkel



Figure 1 - Four sizes of early "Crowleytown" jars



Figure 3 - John L. Mason

This year, 2008, marks the sesquicentennial of the Mason jar. Fifty years ago the Glass Container Manufacturers Institute estimated that over 100 billion Mason jars had been produced, and jars bearing the famous Nov. 30th 1858 date continue to be made today. Early 1858-dated Mason jars offer a wide array of colors and embossings. Examples, ranging in price from a few to sever hundred dollars are readily available, making it possible for all collectors to enjoy these truly fascinating historic glass vessels.

John L. Mason was a tinsmith in New York City when he invented a method of mass-producing metal screw caps. In 1857, he patented the combination of a lathe and a metal chuck, which turned sheets of metal into threaded caps. While Mason did

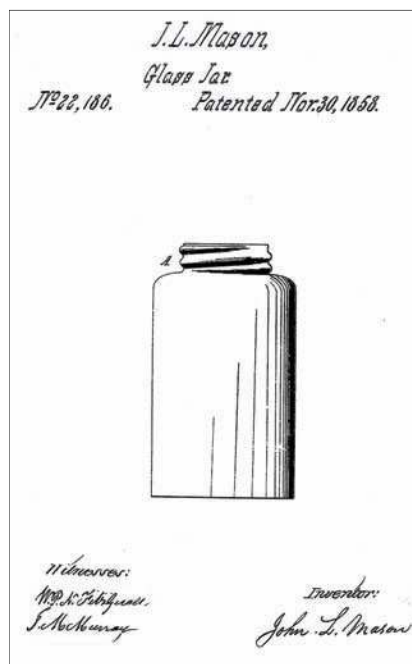


Figure 2 - Mason's patent drawing

produce some of these caps for use on hand-made tin cans, he soon turned to glass vessels which would accommodate his patent for lids. On October 23, 1858, Mason patented a mold for blowing glass jars with a screw thread (Figure 2). The more famous patent, that he received a week later, was only for the screw threads that terminate prior to the shoulder or mouth of the jar. The earliest Mason jars look like what they were: glass versions of tin cans - commonly referred to as

"Crowleytown" jars by collectors, having straight sides, flat bases and sharp base corners (Figure 1). It is commonly believed that they were made in the small village of Crowleytown, New Jersey.

The strongest evidence associating Crowleytown with Mason is the existence of a chipped Mason jar that was dug at the Crowleytown factory site by J. E. Pfeiffer, however, some early writers, including Van Rensselaer and Knittle, asserted that the first Mason jars were blown at Tansboro, New Jersey in an area where the 1869 business directories list John L. Mason among glass manufacturers. (Figure 3) shows John L. Mason promoting jars in the early 1870s. Most likely, the Crowleytown style jars were produced at several different factories. Crowleytown jars were marketed in four sizes: pint, quart, three-pint, and half-gallon. Collectors have not yet reported a jar that holds a full three pints and refer to the second largest size as forty ounces. Mason himself was a metalworker rather than a glass man, therefore, he would have contracted the production of his jars to one or more of the available factories. The



Figure 4 - Variations in "Crowleytown" molds

Crowleytown style jars exist in several variations (Figure 4). This strongly suggests their manufacture was over a period of time and that they were not blown at one particular glasshouse location.

Mason's tin can shape or style of jar soon proved to be a rather weak design for glass vessels and improvements needed to be made. The first improvement was a slight kick-up to the base, which gave the jars added strength. The late Dick Roller coined



Figure 5 - Semi-Crowleytown jars

the term semi-Crowleytown for these jars having straight sides, but, without flat bases.

Semi-Crowleytown jars are found in pint, quart, and half-gallon sizes bearing mold numbers below Mason's (Figure 5). All Crowleytown and semi-Crowleytown jars are considered both scarce and highly prized among collectors.

By the mid-1860s, the semi-Crowleytown jars gave way to the slope-shouldered Mason jars. Patents issued before the Civil War could be extended a total of 21 years, therefore, Mason's famous Nov. 30th 1858 patent did not expire until 1879. Many different manufacturers were engaged in producing Mason jars while the patent remained in effect.

Suppliers were typically prohibited from adding their own embossings to the sides of the jars, therefore, the Wheeler & Bayless jar, as well as



Figure 6 - Unauthorized 1858 jars

the Sun jar (Figure 6), likely represent unauthorized uses of Mason jar molds. These jars were almost surely made prior to the expiration of Mason's patents. Wheeler & Bayless is only re-



Figure 7 - Examples of jar bases

ported in business prior to the Chicago fire of 1871.

These transitional jars have slightly different shapes - varying from the earlier beehive style and the later, sloped-shoulder style jars. Suppliers who honored Mason's patents typically marked their jars on the bases. This may help collectors understand why there are numerous manufacturers initials or symbols on jar bases from this period. Some examples include BT&Co., BP&Co., E.H.E., FHL&Co., H&Co., HC&T, L&W, SR&Co., TW&Co., WCD, et al. (Figure 7).

In the late 1870s, John L Mason's patents fell under the control of the Consolidated Fruit Jar Company, which began adding its own CFJCo. Monogram to Mason embossed jars as a trademark. With the expiration of Mason's patent in 1879, other competitors quickly joined in, adding their own logos and marks.

By this point-in-time, the 1858 date was so strongly associated with Mason jars that most manufacturers continued to cite Mason's expired patent date on their own jars.

After 1879, glass manufacturers

were free to produce Mason jars in a wide variety of colors and embossings, but production continued to be limited by patents on another invention - the milk glass or "porcelain" lined cap. The earliest Mason jars featured unlined caps made of brass, zinc, or tin, but these would corrode and contaminate the food. Louis Boyd came up with a solution to the problem, and, on March 30, 1869, patented the lined zinc cap. This patent soon became a major asset of the Consolidated Fruit Jar Company. Due to a patent office error, a similar patent was also granted to Salmon Rowley of the Hero Glass-works in 1872.

Today, the earliest unlined Mason caps are highly sought by collectors since most were replaced by Boyd's or Rowley's lined lids.

During the early 1880s, only Consolidated and Hero were allowed to manufacture lined lids, protected by their respective patents. Other companies, including Ball Brothers Mfg. Co., of Buffalo, New York, waited until the Boyd patent expired in 1886. Zinc lids are another fascinating study unto themselves.

The greatest variety of Mason jars



Figure 8 - Various embossings on jars

were produced during a brief period in history, beginning in 1886, when manufacture was no longer restricted by any patents and ending in 1896 with the advent of machine-made Mason jars. During the late 1880s and early 1890s, embossed jars in an array of colors featured various added designs, such as rosettes, crosses, and keystones (Figure 8). These designs were often added to the zinc caps also so suppliers could sell lids matching their respective jars.

Consolidated Fruit Jar Co. monogram (jar on left, Figure 9), was soon mimicked by other companies including Hero Glassworks (center jar, Figure 9) and Hemingray Glass Co. (jar on right, Figure 9).

This amazing era was short-lived



Figure 9 - CFJ mimicked embossings

and came to an abrupt halt in 1896 when the new Atlas Glass Company captured one-third of the U.S. fruit jar market. The new automatic bottle machine produced jars that were less expensive, quicker to produce and eliminated the need for hand grinding the finish of the mouth. Small manufacturers who lacked access to the patented jar-blowing machines continued to fill small orders with handmade jars for many years.

Likewise, this new, automated process forced many small manufacturers to cease production as it became nearly impossible to compete with the modernized process. Dupont continued to pack and



Figure 10 - Dupont

market powdered paint in handmade ground-mouth Mason jars as late as World War I (Figure 10).

Fruit jar collecting emerged as a distinct hobby in the 1960s, and by the early 1970s, reproduction jars began to appear bearing the Nov 30th 1858 patent date. While collectors in all areas are learning to be wary of reproductions, oddly colored reproduction Mason jars continue to tempt beginning collectors. Reproductions, such as this half-gallon jar (Figure 11), have fooled collectors for a generation.

While not all of the jars bearing Mason's 1858 patent date are as early as collectors may wish to believe, these jars continue to offer endless collecting



Figure 11



Figure 12 - Rare AUTHENTIC Colored Mason jars

possibilities. The amazing array of colors (Figure 12), embossings and prices should keep collectors of Mason embossed jars busy for centuries to come. Uncatalogued examples continue to show up from time-to-time, and, there appears to be no foreseeable end in sight.

Merkel & Sears continue to work on their *Mason Jar Book* project, focusing on ground-lip finished jars bearing the Mason(s) embossing. If you have a jar you think should be reported, please contact them.

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Editor's note:

Joe and Jim had a wonderful display on this subject at the 2008 York Expo. Shown here are some pictures of their display with more on the following page.



