

The William B. Fenn Patented Water Bottle, Made For Perfection

by Barry L. Bernas

The water bottle was a familiar piece of glassware on the American family's table throughout the mid-1800s and well into the early twentieth century. By itself or as a set with tumblers, it also became a fixture in clubs, hotels, rooming houses, railroad dining cars, and on steamships.¹



Figure 1

Its profile made it easy to identify. Figure 1 shows the typical shape of one.²

The water bottle, which was produced in cut and pressed glass by many glass houses, came in numerous patterns that gave each one an attractive and distinctive persona.³

Regardless of its usefulness, the water bottle had some drawbacks. Cleaning it was one. Another was scrubbing the inside to ones sanitary expectations. The single piece, bulbous shape was the cause of these problems. It wasn't until William B. Fenn conceived the idea of a separating water bottle in 1896 and patented it a year later that these hygienic issues were remedied.

It must have taken William Fenn a few years to refine the design of his concept and convince a glass producer to make it in some pattern. I say this with some confidence because the first advertisement I could find for his utilitarian vessel didn't appear until early 1900.⁴ The extract that follows in Figure 2 shows what I believe to be the earliest form and geometric patterns placed on the initial William Fenn patented water bottle.

These likely prototype water bottles came in cut glass and cost \$4.⁵ This was a

tidy sum in those days, one that only the wealthy could afford.



Figure 2

If you look closely at the designs molded into the base of each water bottle in Figure 2, you will see that each model has a different pattern. I assume that the artist who drew these examples had either pictures of the water bottles or the real thing from which to work. Thus, it is conceivable that the first William Fenn inspired water bottles came with two dissimilar motifs on the side of their bases. Unfortunately, the ad didn't state the name of either one.



Figure 3

If I'm correct and these were the patterns on the original William Fenn marketed water bottle, something caused him to modify the design seen on later versions. In early 1901, his product was advertised as it appears in Figure 3.

At this time, the water bottle was made of pressed glass which drastically lowered the price of each piece. Instead of \$4 apiece, one could purchase a dozen of these bottles for the same price or about 34 cents for each one.⁶ A reduction in unit cost and a revised production process were likely the reasons for the change in the base pattern. As a result, this version was a much more affordable deal for the average household.

A similar pattern to the one shown in Figure 3 was discovered in a later advertisement for this water bottle.⁷ Figure 4 has this version of the pattern.



Figure 4

An examination of the two patterns on the water bottles in Figures 3 and 4 reveals a minor change in each one. The difference is in the set of diamond-like forms pointed out by the solid line arrows.

In Figure 3, there are three sets of these shapes. Conversely, in the Figure 4 example, there are only two. I don't know if the Figure 3 specimen was a representation of an actual production water bottle that was sold. It could have been. The Figure 4 one certainly was turned out and offered for sale. It is the pattern most often seen today.

At this point in late 1901, there were at least four patterns that were shown in advertisements for the William Fenn patented water bottle. Oddly enough, a name for these geometric forms wasn't provided in any of the promotions.

In the next year, several more advertisements for the same article were discovered. Unfortunately, each of these matched the ones already reported in Figures 3 and 4.⁸

Late in 1902, another change happened. Instead of a fifth motif modification to the pattern on the side of

his water bottle, William Fenn expanded the number of patterns available in this product line. Along with this initiative, he also had the water bottles made in different capacities than his original one.⁹ A picture of each design will follow.¹⁰



Figure 5

The water bottle in Figure 5 has the same pattern as the Figure 4 model. There was no change to the geometric design on its base. Of note, a name was finally attached to this motif. It was called the Royal pattern or style No. 250. The Royal design was offered for sale with two and three pint volumes.



Figure 6

The first new pattern on the William Fenn separating water bottle is the Imperial one. It is style No. 251 and is shown in Figure 6. The interesting aspect to this version is that it has no pattern at all. The base is made of clear glass which gives it a see through feature. Whatever liquid was in put in the base would be clearly visible at all times. It too was marketed in two and three pint capacities.



Figure 7

The next new design is seen in the Figure 7 example. It is style No. 253 or the Colonial pattern.

This motif has nine panels around the base which are rounded at the top and flat along the bottom. Separating each panel are two, pointed at the top, indented, V-shaped molded lines that resemble a W when placed side-by-side. These two V-shaped and indented lines are the same length as the panels. At the intersection of these two lines, visualize the point of the inverted V in the letter W, a series of indented, alternating, diamond and concave, oblong forms are placed along the entire section, running bottom to top. After the final oblong form at the top, three diamond shapes finish off the ornamentation at the top. The Colonial variety came only in a half gallon size.



Figure 8

The last new pattern is depicted in Figure 8. It is called Optic and labeled No. 254. It has a succession of single, convex protruding, vertical panels with rounded tops and bottoms, running around the base of the water bottle.

I'm not certain a Fenn water bottle was made in the exact style as the one in Figure 8. I say this because the supposedly Optic ones in my collection have the panels slanted to the left instead of being vertical. Figure 9 will show the version I have. The Optic pattern also had two and three pint models.



Figure 9

The bottoms of the William Fenn separating water bottles with the four side patterns just described have different designs on them.

The Royal and Optic bottoms are pictured in Figure 10. On the right is the one from the Imperial base.



Figure 10

Figure 11 shows the bottom of the Colonial style.



Figure 11

Besides the Colonial neck style shown in Figure 7, there are at least two other profiles that I have noted. Figure 12 has a photograph of each one.



Figure 12

The left hand one has eight panels that have rounded tops and ends. At the juncture of the panel sides, a series of side way "notches" are seen from top to bottom. There are also two bands consisting of two lines each molded onto the panels, seemingly tying the bundle of panels together. I couldn't find an example of this neck in any ad or catalog entry for the William Fenn water bottle. But it certainly looks a lot like the neck on the water bottle in Figure 1.

The other water bottle neck on the right in Figure 12 is the more common variety in my opinion. It has ten panels with a flat top section and a rounded bottom end.

All of the Royal and Optic base patterned water bottles that I have with a neck that has the "notched" and banded panels have the following embossing on the bottom edge of the neck's lip – PERFECTION BOTTLE Co. WILKES-BARRE PA PATD MARCH 30-97. Along

the side of the neck's lip the phrase, PLACE THE RUBBER HERE, is embossed.

The embossing on the ten paneled neck design varies. I have Royal, Imperial and Optic motif ones with the same wording listed above. But on the majority of water bottles in this list, the embossing on the lip's edge is crudely done and the N in PERFECTION is reversed. Others have the phrase, PATD MARCH 30-97, on the lip's side edge where the PLACE THE RUBBER HERE wording appeared on the other versions. On these examples, there is no embossing on the bottom edge of the lip. And on one model, there is no embossing at all on the neck's lip.

The Royal pattern, William Fenn patented water bottle in Figure 4 sold for 50 cents in 1901. In today's antiques market, the same item carries a fair market price between \$25 and \$40, depending upon condition. The Optic pattern is the next most prominent one seen for sale. This version is followed by the Imperial and Colonial varieties. The latter being the scarcest and most costly.

If the series of Perfection ads and catalog examples from 1900 to 1903 are taken at face value, there may be at least two or more cut glass, William Fenn patented, water bottles with unspecified patterns on them. Likewise, there could be two different pressed glass molded, Royal patterns, differing only by the number of diamond-like traits on them.

So far, I've only run across the pressed glass constructed, two diamond-like shaped, Royal style one. Maybe someday, the others will turn up. If you can provide more information, please contact me.

References:

¹ *The Evolution of Table Glass*. It is a circa 1903 catalog of the Perfection Glass Co., Washington, Pa. The term water bottle will be used throughout this article. As far as I can tell, it was used interchangeably during its use with the word carafe.

² *ABCs of Old Glass*, Carl W. Drepperd, Universal Publishing and Distributing Corp., New York, N.Y., 1968, pg. 235. The water bottle pictured was a cut glass example in the maker's self designated pattern, "Carmen."

³ *Early American Pattern Glass 1850-1910*, Bill Jenks and Jerry Luna, Krause Publications, Iola, Wis., 1990. At least thirty-two different water bottle or carafe patterns are listed.

⁴ *Crockery and Glass Journal*, February 1, 1900, pg. 26. The Perfection Water Bottle Co., 32 Park Place, New York, NY placed this advertisement. Little Falls, N.Y. was listed as the location of the factory for this New York City firm.

⁵ *The Evolution of Table Glass*. It is a circa 1903 catalog of the Perfection Glass Co., Washington, Pa.

⁶ *Crockery and Glass Journal*, February 7, 1901, pgs 7 and 28. The Perfection Water Bottle Co., 32 Park Place, New York, N.Y. was the firm that placed this ad. The cost of \$4 per dozen was prominently shown on the promotional. I presume the water bottles were still being made in Little Fall, N.Y., but I have no information to back up this thought.

⁷ Circa 1901 advertisement from the Perfection Bottle Co., Wilkes-Barre, Pa. contained this drawing of a Fenn water bottle. Apparently, William Fenn stopped trying to market his water bottle in New York City at some point in 1901. The Perfection Water Bottle Co, 32 Park Place, New York, N.Y. now became the Perfection Bottle Co, Wilkes-Barre, Pa. I think both of these firms were jobbers that advertised and sold the water bottle. Where the bottle was made in early to mid-1901 remains unclear.

⁸ Sears, Roebuck and Co. 1902 catalog, pg. 798. The picture of this water bottle was the same one as in Figure 3. The next one was in the October 23, 1902 edition of *Crockery and Glass Journal*. The water bottle pattern displayed in this ad was the same one as in Figure 3. The listing was the first promotional for the Perfection Manufacturing Co.

⁹ My article entitled, *More on Perfection* that appeared in the December, 2000 edition of *Bottles and Extras* contains more information about which companies and glass houses made the William Fenn water bottles from late 1901 until the end of 1903.

¹⁰ *Crockery and Glass Journal*, October, 16, 1902 carried the first note of the Perfection Manufacturing Co. expanding its product line beyond water bottles. The ads for these new items, which appeared in the same Journal beginning on October 23rd, showed the new patterns to be discussed. The pictures in the Figure 5 through 8 boxes were taken from the circa mid-to-late 1903 catalog by the Perfection Glass Co.

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On the lighter side...

