

SHIELD, UNION, CLASPED HANDS, FLASKS AND COVID-19

By Steve Ketcham

May you live in interesting times. While the origin of this saying is often debated, with some saying it came from ancient China but others attributing it to Nineteenth-Century England, it nevertheless reminds us that we are not the first generation to live through interesting times. We are currently in the middle of what, for most of us, are the most interesting times we have ever experienced. No one knows just how long they will last or how our world will look once the pandemic recedes.

Many elements of our lives as we knew them will likely change or disappear in the coming months. One new rule of our current existence is the idea of social distancing. We are advised to avoid contact with even our closest friends and family. No hugs from loved ones, and no handshakes with friends and acquaintances.

Consider the handshake. The practice has been with us for thousands of years. It is a sign of peace, of agreement, of deals made and friendships sealed. We learn early to look the other party in



Yellow-Green pint is GXII-23



Amber pint is Unlisted.



Amber half-pint is GXII-29

the eye, grip their extended hand firmly, and briefly pump up and down. Today, it is a long-standing social gesture that is on the brink of extinction as we try to avoid the virus that is plaguing us.

Bottle collectors know the symbol of clasped hands is found in American history on the drinking vessels of the mid-Nineteenth Century. In the larger family of American flasks, as identified by McKearin and Wilson in “American Bottles and Flasks and Their Ancestry,” the Shield and Clasped Hands flasks are Group XII.

The flask design is beautiful and intricate. The reverse typically features an eagle atop a shield and grasping an olive branch and thunderbolts. On the obverse is found a shield with vertical stripes and clasped hands below thirteen stars. Laurel leaves are usually found on either side of the shield. Most examples have the word “Union” embossed above the shield in which the clasped hands are embossed.

Some 43 different molds are identified in the book’s listings, and another 20 or so unlisted molds are known to exist. The flasks were blown at numerous glassworks.

The flask design dates to the era of the American Civil War, and McKearin and Wilson suggest it was “inspired apparently by the awful struggle to preserve the Union.” As evidenced by the large number that survives today, the flask was a popular design. This



Union Forever Shot Glass

would suggest that most Americans wanted the country to come together in unity. They even drank to it.

Today we find ourselves in another kind of struggle, and how we deal with it seems to be a source of discord much like that which led to the Civil War. As states reopen businesses, some of us will choose to partake while others will continue to isolate. Some will go bare-faced, others will stay masked. Ultimately, let’s hope we find some semblance of unity.

Will we ever shake hands with one another again without concern for our health and safety? That page of history is yet to be written.

Meanwhile, here are a few examples of the Shield and Clasped Hands flasks which were blown in half pints, pints, and quarts. They came in many colors, with aqua being most common.

A back bar decanter and a labeled whiskey bottle, both dating to later in the Nineteenth Century, but both bearing the clasped hands symbol, are also shown.

A Civil War era, heavily embossed clasped hands tumbler is shown as well.

Be well, everyone.



Aqua quart is GII-37



Aqua pint is Unlisted



Union Rye Whiskey Bottle



Union Rye Whiskey Back Bar Bottle