

# The Rensselaer Glassworks

*A multifaceted — and important — piece of New York history*

*By Phil Bernnard*

This glasshouse was located in what is now known as Sand Lake, N.Y., located on Rouses Lake, which today is called Glass Lake. The actual date is disputed. Some say 1788 and some say 1804. Town records indicate the 1804 date. This was when a lease was applied for by a Francis Bloodgood, Elisha Jenkins, Ambrose Spencer, James Kane, John Woodworth, Dudley Walsh, William James, Giles Porter, Ira Porter (all of Albany County) and Matthew Hildreth of Johnstown, N.Y.

It is of interest to note that none of these people had any practical glassmaking experience, so things went awry quickly.

In 1806, the lease was changed between the Van Rensselaers and Thomas Tillotson, Elkanah Watson, Elisha Jenkins and George Pearson as tenants in common and in consideration of \$750. It is interesting to note that in Rensselaer County, the Van Rensselaers never sold any land. They only leased it. Again, this group of owners were local businessmen; they were not involved in glassmaking.

Before going any further, this unique history is difficult to separate out from other glasshouse histories. In point of fact, one must include the first Albany Glassworks (1788-1815), the Durhamville Glassworks (1843-92) and the Berkshire

Glassworks (1860s-1930s). These all had commonalities which tied them together either through common ownership or manpower usage. More on that later.

The Albany Glassworks was thought to be established in 1785. At this time, Guilderland was known as Sloansville. The founding Dutch partners were Leonard De Neaufville, Ferdinand Walfahrt (manager) and John Hofke, (business manager). It should be noted that none of them had any experience in this field, and they soon ran into financial difficulty. The most important issue was location. No direct transport, no local access to raw materials, no steady supply of fuel. They

soon had to petition the State Assembly for a loan and were granted \$1,500.

The company reorganized in 1792 under new ownership. The name changed to McCallum and MacGregor & Co. and then again in 1795 under Thomas Mather & Co. Under this new ownership, they expanded their board of directors to include most of the Dutch landed gentry in Albany County. These included Jeremiah Van Rensselaer, Elkanah Watson, Samuel Mather, John Sande, Abraham Ten Eyck, Frederick DeZeng, Douw Fonda, Walter Cockran and Killian Van Rensselaer. They incorporated under the name Hamilton Manufacturing Society on March 30, 1797.

With all this new financial backing, they were still lacking in experience of how to run a glasshouse. It was not until 1802 when Jeremiah Van Rensselaer took over that a glassman was hired. They hired Lawrence Schoolcraft, who was originally from Bennington (Vermont) Glassworks. They were shut down by creditors that same year. He was the plant manager from a family who had multigenerational experience in the field in Europe as well as design experience. He came in and reorganized and redesigned the furnaces in order to increase efficiency.

At this particular time, a great debt hung over the glasshouse. The New York State legislature wanted its loan repaid. But instead of money they wanted window glass. They also had to deal with intense competition from Europe without the benefit of tariff protection. This, combined with material shortages, labor and fuel shortages, forced the works to close.

By 1800, John Van Rensselaer had control of the Land Board. He again petitioned to lease the factory from the manufacturing society, which his brother controlled. Neither of them had any glass experience, only some financial. This was not enough to convince the board. John was asked to provide financial security. He refused, causing negotiations to cease. This rift was never repaired, not to mention that the



**TOP:** Drawing of the Village of Sand Lake showing the glassworks and worker's homes.

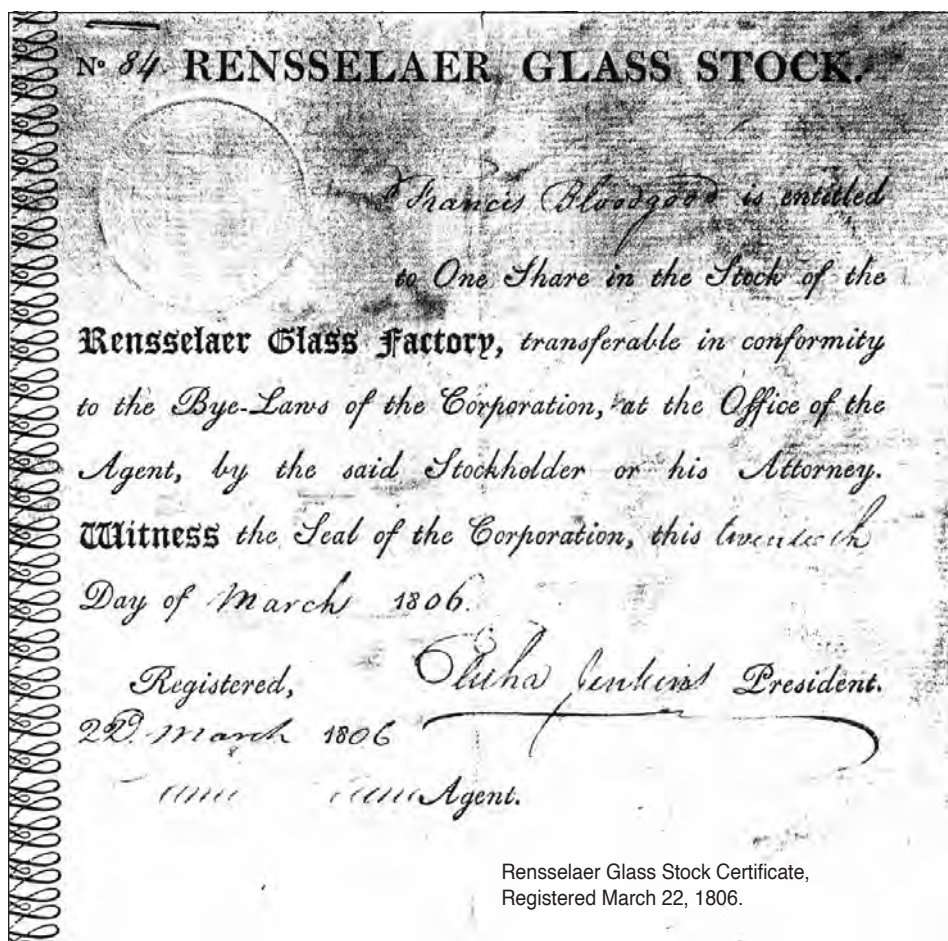
**ABOVE:** Sketch of the Durhamville Glass Works that the Fox brothers purchased because they could not expand at the Rensselaer Company site. The Durhamville Glass Works went on to become one of the largest window glass factories in the country.

Hamilton Manufacturing Board found out that he secretly was taking over the new glasshouse in Sand Lake. The meeting got testy and vulgar, but it was found out that several members of that board wanted to start in a new location.

It was at this point that the original Albany Glassworks faded into obscurity.

Between 1800-15 there was a depression, a flooding of the glass market with European goods and another war with England that caused the fires to be put out. But through all that, the factory was able to put out some good quality flasks and window glass, but in limited quantity. So exit Albany Glassworks and enter Rensselaer Glassworks.





area) but it happened again in 1816 when they lost both furnaces. Only one was replaced. It's also interesting to note that even though they had the fire equipment, it was never used and when they rebuilt, it was done the same way. Again, another story was that when the White House was burned by the British during the War of 1812, the glass to repair the windows came from Rensselaer Glassworks. A nice story but no corroborating evidence has ever been recovered.

When the factory was up and running again in 1819, it was experiencing other problems. The company was sold at tax sales or by ownership. Up to that time, many of the owners had no experience in the field and got in financial difficulty early. This, in combination with current economic events, like depressions, economic panics or stiff competition from Europe, caused the business to be sold at least twice for financial hardship. It was not until 1836 that ownership got their act together. The new owners were Stadler and Rouch and Co. The "and Co" were the Fox Brothers (Albert and Samuel). They ended up taking over in 1838 and began to finally show a profit. The Fox Brothers still had the raw material problem, but they found the source of sand in Lanesborough. The expense was great, but the quality was worth it.

Besides making of window glass, there have been bottles found locally for local merchants that were made in Sand Lake. Alas, there were only two found: D. Evans Camomille Pill Bottle and a bottle for liquor from the same doctor. As far as I know, there is no photo of the liquor. If someone has it, I'd love to get a photo for myself or for the National Bottle Museum. The Pill Bottles were located in Glass Lake in the 1960s by a local historian who has since passed. He submitted a report to his high school which was passed on to the Sand Lake town historian where he found a gross case of these bottles in the water near the shoreline of the factory site (Don Carpentier, 1969).

There has been debate over when this works actually began. The town sprung up first and then the factory, so I like to use the 1806 date. That is when land records coincide with production. The original lease was 1802 and the buildings were put up first. This was basically a company town built for the factory workers.

In that time the land was leased, cleared and buildings erected. The plant itself was simply made, constructed of wood with clay furnaces and wooden chimney (a very dangerous combination). Not the best of ideas when one is working with 1,500 degrees. It did not take long to damage the factory. They had two major fires by 1816.

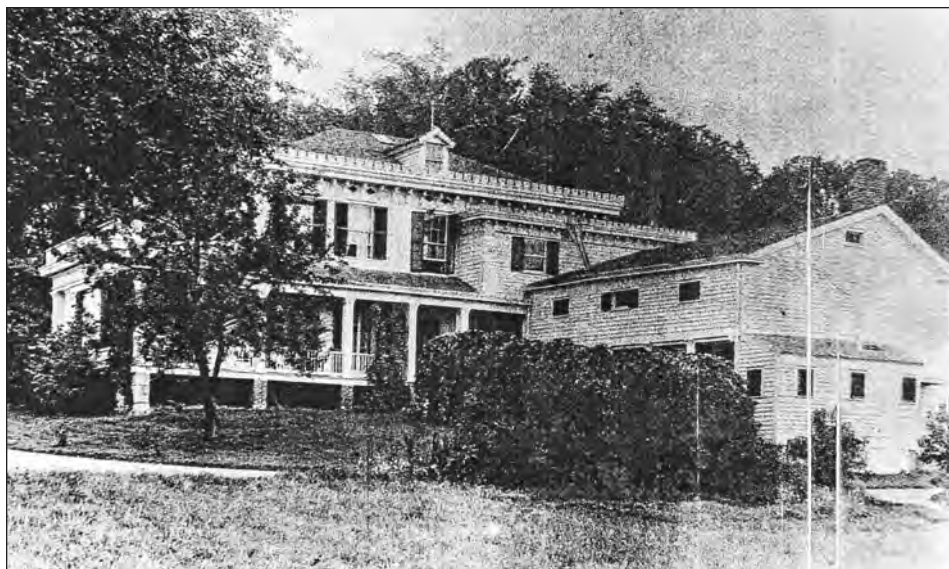
Rensselaer Glassworks had a bright future. It had an abundant source of fuel, good access to raw materials, a good supply of workers and a good system of transport. They were within eight miles of

the Hudson River and shipping to major cities. The only issue was sand quality, but they found a good source in the Berkshire Mountains and were able to build a road to transport it.

There were also stories of a man from the factory who went to Europe to recruit glassblowers from Scotland and Ireland. He would dress as a piper of sorts because recruiting glassworkers from Europe was still considered a crime, as England was still trying to protect its trades. As nice as these stories are, they can't be substantiated by records.

So by 1813, the factory suffers its first fire. Up until then, the issues were financial; this one was physical. They did have two furnaces, one for crown glass, one for cylinder glass. They lost the cylinder glass furnace and it took almost one and a half years to rebuild. They went and purchased fire equipment (the first of its kind in the





**TOP:** Home of the last owner of Rensselaer Glassworks, Albert R. Fox.

**ABOVE:** Photo of D. Evans Camomille Pills bottle thought to be made around 1820 at the factory for a doctor in Schodack, New York. There was only one gross ever found. Below the bottle is a glass 'icicle' from the explosion of the furnace in 1852.

There is also a story of employees moving to Durhamville via the Erie Canal, where they packed their food for the trip in canning jars made for the trip. Again, there is no proof, but it does lend credence to the idea that more than window glass and whimsies were made there.

So when the Fox family bought the glassworks, they began to make changes. They reorganized and re-engineered the factory by hiring someone to redo the kilns and smokestacks so that they were less prone

to fire. The fortunes of the company finally began to change. The quality improved, the sales improved.

In 1843, the Fox brothers purchased Durhamville, a factory that was only two years old and had all modern equipment, most of all not wood. This was formally the DeWitt Stevens factory and considered the largest of its kind in the country. Samuel Fox moved half the workers there, so with two factories they could really supply the entire country with window glass.

So fast forward to 1852, Christmas Day. There is a new batch of ingredients in the kilns. The kilns are being brought up to temperature and the workers are enjoying Christmas Eve merriment, probably a little too much. They fall asleep, the kilns overheat and catch the chimneys on fire (the wooden chimneys). So they ignore the fire, and the kilns catch fire. The result was a very large explosion. There were stories of glass icicles all over the village. The damage was so extensive that it was decided not to rebuild.

The workers were moved to Durhamville and all salvageable equipment was sold to Berkshire Glass Works, along with one of the Fox brothers going along as superintendent.

So, in Durhamville, with the new equipment, glass output increased along with quality. They continued production with some minor setbacks (a small fire in the 1870s and again in 1885). They ended up merging with U.S. Plate Glass, which was their major competition. The result was shuttering the plant in 1891.

Getting back to Berkshire Glass Works, they continued on, developing a very unique product. Through a formula developed by them, they were able to make a glass of extreme purity, unable to be matched by anyone else. Many companies tried to buy the formula or the company without success. It is also rumored that they did make other items but it's only speculation. But with their situation and protection of their proprietary technology, they were able to survive until the Depression in the 20th century.

In closing, Rensselaer Glass Works was filled with mishaps. Three fires, two tax lien sales plus four or five ownership changes over a half century would put anyone off this type of business. But extreme perseverance was there in an uncanny way. There were many good products and whimsies that came from there, locking it into the integral part of Rensselaer County history.

## RENSSELAER GLASS WORKS TIMELINE

This is a linear history of the glassworks.

**1788:** Leoanrd de Neufville, Jan Heefke, Ferdinand Walfarhert apply for a lease of 5,000 acres from the Van Rensselaers to begin building the Glass Works. It should be noted here that they were also involved with Albany Glass Works. Nothing was done as far as I can tell.

**1795:** The company changes hands. It is now called MacGregor & Co. The new owners are Jeremiah Van Rensselaer, Elkanah Watson, Robert MacGregor, Thomas Mather and Samuel Mather.

**April 1795:** The company changes hands again. New owners are Jeremiah Van Rensselaer, John Saunder, Abraham Ten Eyck, Elkanah Watson, Frederic A. de Zeng, K.K. Van Rensselaer, Douw Fonda (ancestor of Henry and founder of Fonda, N.Y.) Walter Cochron, Samuel Mather. This was the Hamilton Manufacturing Society. There were principle investors in both glass works.

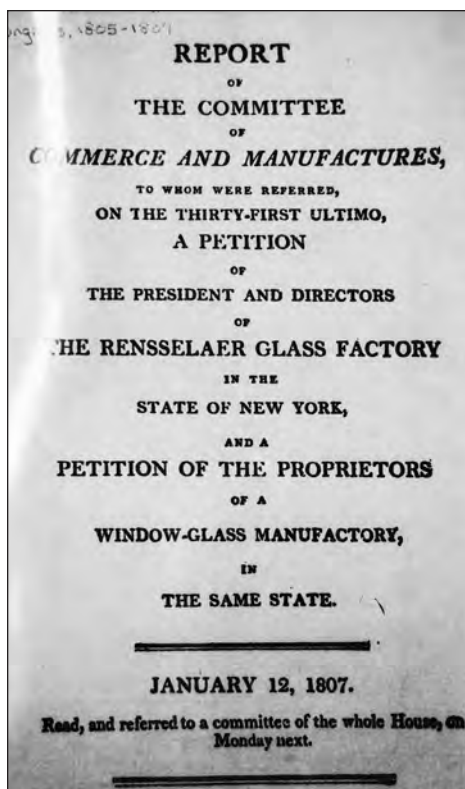
**February 1806:** Albany and Glass Lake split when the state legislature voted to incorporate Rensselaer Glass Works stockholders and not Albany. It is also interesting that some of the stockholders were secretly funding one glasshouse and not the other. This began the demise of the first Albany Glass Works. The fires were extinguished by 1815.

**1818:** The RGW was renamed under new owners Crandall, Fox & Co. (This Fox is Albert and Samuel's father.)

**1825:** Becomes Knowlson & Schamassa and Co.

**1826:** Knowlson sells factory at a sheriff's tax lien sale.

**1830:** John B. Schamassa & Co. This is when glassblowers were brought in from New Jersey. There were end-of-day piecces that were unique in their style now at the



A copy of the first financial report and a petition for a loan from the State of New York.

Historical Society, unfortunately without much information.

**1835:** Factory burned down for the second time. Only one furnace was repaired.

**1837:** Stadler and Rouch & Co.

**1838:** Albert and Samuel Fox buy the factory, and begin to turn a profit.

**1843:** The Fox Bros. purchase the DeWitt Stevens glass factory in Durhamville, N.Y. (Oneida County)

**1852:** In December, a massive fire and explosion rips through the village as the kilns catch fire. Glass icicles were found everywhere in the town. It was decided not to rebuild the factory.



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