



A photograph of all three concentric ring molds discussed in this article

# A Concentric Curiosity

By Matt Lacy

I am grateful for the journey that began over 30 years ago to become an astute student and avid collector of early American bottles and flasks. I am always looking for opportunities to learn, because there is always something new to discover in the bottle collecting hobby. There are many ways to obtain information, including bottle digging, visiting museums, viewing private collections, monitoring auctions, attending bottle shows, seeking mentorship, and reading publications. I subscribe to both *Bottles & Extras* and *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector*, which I consider the two “must have” publications for any aspiring collector.

I returned home from work after a long and somewhat stressful day to find the October 2019 issue of *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector* waiting for me on the counter. I didn’t waste any time skimming the colorful magazine for content. My first stop in the magazine

was an article entitled “The Exotic Concentric Ring Eagle Flasks,” written by leading flask authority and personal mentor, Mark Vuono.

Mark writes in his article that these flasks are “highly unusual and unique in form to any other flasks.” Some collectors find these molds aesthetically appalling. Other collectors find the group visually pleasing, and are captivated by the symmetry and artistic influences. I have personally changed my own position on these molds over the years. I now view them as incredible works of art within the ranks of the earliest American flasks.

One might ask if these flasks are truly historically significant in nature. They may be viewed as a simple glass canteen or even decanter-style flask with rings and an eagle, nothing of consequence other than the crudely sculpted national bird. It is my belief that nothing was left to chance with any of the early historical

flask molds, and every detail was carefully planned and executed. Mark’s article really enthralled me, as he outlined some details on the Concentric Ring Eagle Flasks never before published. One such detail was that each of the three known molds has a different ring count. What is the significance of these rare and important molds? That simple question is the basis for this article.

This is the point in time in which I switched gears, put on my detective cap, and entered into my all-time favorite movie: *National Treasure*. In the movie, the main character, Benjamin Gates, works to uncover the greatest secrets of America’s founding fathers through hidden clues in symbols and artifacts. Following this lead, I immersed myself in questions and research. It was not long before some simple thoughts and clues led me into a world of all but forgotten events captured within these flask molds.





Side view of the concentric ring molds showing how the circle count was derived

What is the meaning of a concentric ring, and why was it on this flask surrounding an eagle? I immediately turned to the internet for answers. The term concentric ring yielded very few results. However, the search for concentric circles proved very rewarding. The meaning behind concentric circles summarized into one simple thought is “Unity” or “to Unite.” The flying eagle was commonly used as a symbol to represent a new country. The overall theme of these molds could then be deduced to be “Unite the Country” or “Unite the States.” Well, that wasn’t so difficult to figure out now was it? But, wait, why the different ring counts on each mold?

Mark’s article articulates the ring counts on each side of each mold as 8 rings

on the GII-76a, 9 rings on the GII-76, and 12 rings on the GII-77 mold, all culminating to a medial rib. I started to graph out the possibilities. I will use the GII-76a for illustration purposes. One side of the flask has 8 rings. If you include both sides of the flask, you derive 16 rings, and if you include the medial rib which is actually a ring of its own on these molds, you end up with 17 rings on this mold. Think of it as viewing the flask from the side profile. I did this same exercise with the remaining molds.

The newly considered data is as follows: GII-76a has 17 circles; the GII-76 has 19 circles; and the GII-77 has 25 circles. This thought went nowhere fast as I contemplated the possibilities. Then I went back to the basics. Remember, we

have discovered the theme of the flask is likely to “Unite the States.” Could the rings represent the states? I then wondered about the age of the different molds, glasshouses, and how many states were part of the Union at that time each mold was made. The research was about to get exciting.

Mark’s article also referenced a few prospective glasshouses in which these flasks could have been blown, including the South Boston Flint Glass Works, Thomas Cain’s Phoenix Glass Works, and The New England Glass Co. I also researched the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, and other museums across the country and found similar attributions. I then looked up the years





The GII-76 concentric ring flask



The GII-77 concentric ring flask

for each glassworks to have a baseline for quick reference.

South Boston Flint Glass Works was in operation from 1813 to 1830, according to most records. Some of the records indicate the first furnaces started operation as early as 1811. Then I found records that the works had been erected in 1811. Production was sparse during the War of 1812 as glassblowers were difficult to find, and many were sourced from England. One such glassblower was Thomas Cain, who left the South Boston Works to found the Phoenix Glass Works in South Boston in 1824. Phoenix Glass Works operated through 1870. The New England Glass Company was founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and operated from 1818 to 1892.

Now, it was time to attempt to correlate the ring count on each flask with a point in time in history. I started with the GII-76a, which has the least number of concentric circles at 17. I then did some data correlation with a list of states and

the years in which each state became part of the Union. Ohio became the 17th state to join the Union in 1803. I immediately thought that this correlation was already falling apart. I quickly realized the next state did not join the Union until 1812.

While pondering other data points, another idea overwhelmed me. How about the history of the American flag? Why you ask? Well because it was a symbol of the time period to show how many states were considered part of the Union during specific years. The next discovery is when things really started to come together.

I researched the time period in which the 17-star flag was used, and a very interesting event in history presented itself as the first of many strong evidences. This event would mean little to us today, but was a huge political symbol at the time in which it occurred. A 17-star flag was raised at the Colrain School House in Colrain, Massachusetts, in 1812. This

handmade flag was the first to ever be flown above a schoolhouse. An event like this would not occur again until after the Civil War. This event took place not far from some of the early Boston glassworks. I surmised that the GII-76a mold could have been made very early on in the life cycle of the South Boston Flint Glass Works or, at the very least, during that time period or shortly thereafter.

I decided to switch gears and try this exercise with the GII-76. This mold has 19 rings or concentric circles. The 19th State to join the Union was Indiana in 1816. Again, no correlation to the data was evident. So, I decided to look up the history of the 19-star flag. Finally, a big breakthrough occurred in my research. The 19-star flag is one of the rarest of all, and only commissioned for one year to be used. The most famous of these made had a very special place, and flew as a symbol of strength and unity aboard "Old Ironsides," better known as the *USS Constitution*. It is very likely that the flag was never flown in battle, but served as a



**RIGHT:** The rare 19-star flag that flew above the *USS Constitution* in Boston Harbor.

**BELOW:** This is the 17-star flag being raised above the Colrain schoolhouse in Massachusetts. This event would not happen again anywhere in the nation until after the Civil War.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The GII-76a concentric ring flask.

All photos by Mike Newman  
(except for images on this page)







patriotic symbol while in port and while drydocked for repairs. I did not get too excited until I discovered that this ship spent these years in Boston Harbor! Based on this information, there is a very strong possibility the GII-76 mold was made between the years of 1816 and 1817 for production at the South Boston Flint Glass Works.

The final correlation to consider is the GII-77, which is the only flask in the group embossed with the mark for The New England Glass Company of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The New England Glass Company had two very large furnaces operating by 1823, and produced several tons of glass weekly. A good portion of this glass was sent to Boston to be sold by various merchants. The mark used by the New England Glass Company changed over the years. A research paper by Bill Lockhart (et al) entitled "The New England Glass Companies" suggests the particular mark "NG Co." was used between the years of 1818 and 1845. The GII-77 mold features 25 concentric circles. Considering the number of states in the Union and the time period, the Union consisted of 24 states from 1821-1836 and 25 states from 1836-1837. It is also possible that this flask was made

during the 1837 election year to commemorate Andrew "Stonewall" Jackson's accomplishments as the seventh president to the United States.

This flask, being blown at a New England Glass Company rather than one of the early Boston works, may have had alternate political motivators for its design and creation. Additionally, the mold maker may or may not have considered the medial rib in the circle count. The important correlation is the number of concentric circles matches the number of states and the time period in which the flask was likely produced.

In closing, my findings are inconclusive at best. However, this is a theory to consider when looking at these beautiful flasks. Much thought and detail went into each of these molds, and there was usually some kind of event or political motivation behind each historical flask mold produced. Keep in mind that learning is not always about the definitive answers of an end result. Sometimes it is about the journey and possibilities that lay ahead as we dive deeply into the long forgotten history locked away in the glistening of these stunning and truly historic flasks.

## CORRECTIONS —

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