

# Saluting Bulkley and Fiske

## *The men behind these unique ceramic whiskey flasks*

*By Jack Sullivan*

The whiskey flask of a saluting soldier (Figure 1) is emblematic of the production of unique liquor containers issued by the New York City grocery and liquor firm of Bulkley, Fiske & Co. Within the span of about four years the partners gave the nation some of its most valued spirits jugs, shown throughout this post.

The saluting soldier, for example, recently was listed at auction for \$4,500. But who were the originators?

William Franklin Bulkley was born in Brooklyn in 1805 to Gershom and Mary Day Bulkeley (notice the additional “e”).

The name has both English and Irish roots, with this spelling more likely English. The family had an early New England heritage. An ancestor also named Gershom Bulkley was a well-known preacher and Revolutionary War patriot.

About 1833, Bulkley married a woman well-educated for those times. She was Abigail Conklin, born in 1811 to Daniel and Isabella Lusk Conklin in Rensselaerville, N.Y. She had attended the Litchfield Female Academy, an important institu-

tion of American female education at the time. From the union of William and Abigail Bulkley a daughter, Elizabeth, was born in 1834. Records differ on whether there were any other children.

Bulkley became a merchant whose principal occupation was running grocery stores. One location was 78 Front St. in Brooklyn. Additionally, he was a director of the Nassau Insurance Co. of Brooklyn, capitalized at \$150,000 (\$3 million equiv. today). In 1853 Bulkley also was listed as a director of the Brooklyn Gas Light Co. He and Abigail also owned a significant amount of land along the Hudson River.

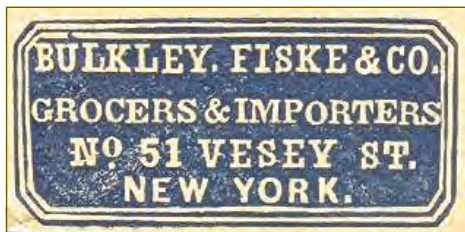
These acres may have resulted from his 1852 purchase of a ferryboat company (its headquarters shown next page). This was a water route connecting Catherine Street in Manhattan and Main Street in Brooklyn across the East River. Being unable to compete with a one-cent fare adopted by a competitor, Bulkley sold the ferry line after a few months. Note, too, that at right in the photograph of the ferry terminal (Figure 2) the Brooklyn Bridge is being constructed, suggesting an impending decline in cross-river boat traffic.



FIGURE 1

Finding that the major profit from his grocery was alcohol, Bulkley began to emphasize liquor sales. In 1858, he teamed with Frederick B. Fiske, of whom





ABOVE (from top): Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5.



ABOVE (from top): Figure 6, Figure 7, and Figure 8.

I have been able to learn very little, in a business at No. 51 Vesey St. in Manhattan (Figure 3). From the outset the partners began to issue ceramic liquor containers that have become coveted by collectors.

The pair of cruet-like jugs shown here are in a Rockingham glaze, both a tan and a darker brown (Figure 4). That attractive marbled look was highly popular in the United States during the early 1800s, copied from British glazes with a similar look. A shield on the front of each container says, "Schiedam Gin Imported by Bulkley, Fiske & Co." The name of the firm and the address also was impressed into their shoulders (Figure 5). There was no mistaking by whom these vessels were issued.

Even more impressive is a whiskey jug with a similar handle and top and also in a Rockingham glaze. Titled by the company "Game Bag," each side has a bas-relief picture (Figures 6-8). One side is the satchel with four dead quarry hanging from it; from left are a pheasant, duck, rabbit and dove. The other side is another hunting scene featuring two dogs and a standing shotgun. A British "hunting jug" influence is evident. There is a variant on this jug that marks it with an embossed "B.F. & Co." on one side and an incised "Bulkley, Fiske & Co., New York" on the other. Glazes ranged from tan to dark brown.

From 1820 to 1856 figural spirits flasks were a popular ceramic item in England, often molded in the images of royalty or well-known political figures. Often the latter were involved in reform movements and in Britain such ceramics sometimes are called "reform flasks." The U.K. flasks held whiskey and often came from Scottish potteries. The Bulkley Fiske ceramics, however, were almost certainly of United States origin.

Shown here is a Bulkley-Fiske jug made in the likeness of military man (Figure 9). From the shoulder epaulets and tunic we may infer he is an officer, perhaps one





FIGURE 9



FIGURE 10

of high rank. His belt reads “Morning Salute,” a reference that would have been widely understood. Many men would take a swallow or two of whiskey every morning before going off to work, believing that it was beneficial both to health and mental well-being. This practice was popularly known as a “morning salute.”

From the archives of the New York Historical Society comes another example of a Bulkley-Fiske figural flask. This one is called “Man with a Fiddle” (Figure 10). This bottle is the standing form of a man sticking his tongue out, perhaps with a smile. His battered hat is the spout. He is wearing an overcoat and holding a violin and a bow against his chest. Might he be a street corner virtuoso? The name Bulkley, Fiske & Co. is impressed in the base.

Although a final example of the company’s ceramic offerings is less articulated than the others shown here, it is still interesting. It is a barrel or keg — some have called it a \*rundlet (Figure 11). The barrel features a bunghole from which beer, wine or whiskey could be accessed. Note the well-developed four sets of three bands each that surround the barrel staves. This ceramic bottle, like the others, obviously held a quantity of spirits, but it is not clear what kind.


The relatively brief history of Bulkley, Fiske & Co. may have been the result of Bulkley’s death after only several years of operation. His partner carried on for a few months, but in 1862 shut down the Manhattan store. Nonetheless, during that abbreviated period this New York City store left a legacy of liquor containers notable for their rarity and the level of collector interest.

Note: Thanks go to John DeGraft, the noted expert on sarsaparilla bottles, who also collects whiskey ceramics from his home in Arizona. Not only did John alert me to Bulkley, Fiske and their iconic containers, he provided me with the photo of the “Morning Salute” flask shown above.



FIGURE 11

*\*Editor’s note:* Wikipedia explains: “The rundlet is an archaic unit-like size of wine casks once used in Britain. It was equivalent to about 68 litres. It used to be defined as 18 wine gallons — one of several gallons then in use — before the adoption of the imperial system in 1824, afterwards it was 15 imperial gallons, which became the universal English base unit of volume in the British realm.”



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