

# Ellenville Glass Works

The rise (and slow fall) of a New York glassworks

By Phil Bernard



A display of Ellenville base-embossed whiskeys at the National Bottle Museum in Ballston Spa, N.Y.

I volunteer for the National Bottle Museum in Ballston Spa, N.Y. As a museum entity, our mission statement in the industry is to promote the technology of bottle making through the ABM machines.

We have gotten away from that, but are trying to return to that purpose. My responsibility is to go to shows as a museum representative and cast our presence once more into the hobby. We only do it regionally due to budget constraints, but we try and send out packets to show chairs around the country. And that brings us up to date.

So last August we were at the Hudson Valley Bottle Club show in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., a small but well-attended event. The show chair at this event is Mike Stephano, president emeritus and owner of this outrageous collection of Ellenville Glass Works items.

Until that time, I was oblivious to the existence of such a glassworks. The items were so unique and unusual that I was able to persuade Mike to lend us some for display. After about four months of negotiation and pleading, we were able to get the display set up. I am happy to say that it has made quite an addition to our museum.

Since no one at the museum really knew anything about this glassworks, I was tasked with putting together a talk. I gave the talk in March and here is my research:

Ellenville Glass Works was originally founded in 1836 on the Round Out Creek in Ulster County, N.Y. This is about ten miles west of New Paltz, N.Y. There seems to be controversy about how long it lasted, but 1897 is given as the fire draw-down date. There are local people that say it continued to 1922, but no marketable product was successfully produced in that time.

The original founders were (no first names) Merrick, Carpenter and Shaffer. They originally purchased 4,200 acres of forested land. Their novel marketing plan was to divide this in to fifty-acre lots and sell to farmers. But what they did was they accepted no money. The buyers had to clear the timber off their land and that was part of their payment. Also the location was on the original Delaware and Hudson Canal, just completed, which connected the creek to large waterways and transportation routes.

Once they got the kilns going, they were making about 65,000 bottles a year. During that time, their customers were

Dr. Townsend, Lydia Pinkham, Shenks and Swaims Pulmonic Syrups. They were just one of the several glasshouses making these items. Meanwhile, they were having management and financial issues. None of the owners had a great deal of experience in this field, so inventory and raw material supplies were a constant problem.

In 1845, the original owners sold the glassworks to Jasper Gilbert, John Turner and Alvin Preston. These new owners also owned Coventry and Willington Glass Works in Connecticut. This enabled molds to be moved back and forth, which explains the similarity of their products and inventory. These new owners remained until 1866, when financial woes beset the Connecticut companies. But between those years, output at Ellenville went from 65,000 to 300,000 bottles annually. They also did contracts with the larger patent medicines and bitters as well as flasks and cylinder whiskeys. Incidentally, the only item marketed by the company was these cylinder whiskeys. These same designs were also found with Coventry, Willington and Westford marks, showing that the molds travelled around. None of them were embossed; they all had paper labels. The Ellenville bottles ended up in South Carolina or the





**Medicines & Bitters**  
 Ellenville Produced Many Types of Patent Medicines & Bitter's Products under Contract for Various Manufacturers – Dr. Townsends, Udolpho Wolfes, Doyle's Hop Bitters, Swaim's Panacea, and many others....  
 Collection of Michael Stephano – MIS Antiques

**B.B. Wilcox Fruit Jar**  
 Ellenville Produced a Number of Fruit Jars for Various Manufacturers  
 Collection of Michael Stephano – MIS Antiques

**PHOTOS (clockwise from top left):**  
 A display at the National Bottle Museum.  
 Some of the Hutchinson bottles produced.  
 Ellenville diamond base embossing.  
 A dazzling array of Ellenville bottles.  
 Labeled cylinder whiskeys.





Caribbean. They are found on shipwrecks in that area.

Also during this time (1845-66), the canal wharfs were expanded. There was an influx of Irish, English, Scottish and German glassblowers who displayed a distinct South Jersey influence on whimsys or “end-of-day” pieces: footed bowls, candle sticks, and pitchers with lacy decor.

In 1859, it was recognized that there was not enough wood to feed the furnaces (they were using 4,200 cords annually), so the decision was made to change to coal. Most other glass factories did not change until after the Civil War (around 1866).

So without embossing, the only signature marquee was the color of the glass. They did not use local sources. Soda ash came from England, sand from New Jersey, and limestone from Ohio. This is what gave the glass its yellow green amber, olive amber or olive green color.

All this was possible through the canal system that was right behind the factory.

The company prospered until about 1866 when economic depression hit the glass industry hard, causing financial despair. This affected not only Ellenville but Coventry and Willington glassworks as well. So in 1866, the company reorganized. A.B. Prescott became president and Jacob Hermone the plant manager. In this time frame (1866-79) more contracts were made with bottlers of patent medicines and bitters and whiskeys. Bottles included Doyle’s Hop Bitters, Plantation Bitters, Dr. Townsend, Wilcox patent fruit jars, hero jars, druggist ware, carboys, demijohns as well as cylinder whiskeys.

When the company was making carboys and demijohns, they had a large willow lot. This was where the weaving was done on the bottles to protect them during shipping. When the men were making the glass, the children were transporting the bottles and the wives were weaving the willow basketry. The entire town was employed during these times (estimated



More labeled bottles from the Ellenville Glass Works displayed at the National Bottle Museum.

to be about 500 workers). In addition to bottles, insulators were produced there.

Then in 1879 the company was court-ordered to be sold. From this time on, the company continually experienced financial and production difficulties, mostly due to new owners that had no experience in this industry or went into it underfunded. During this next phase, they attempted crown glass (windows) but could not produce clear glass.

Between 1880-97, the company reorganized or changed hands at least four times. If it wasn’t financial (depression, run on banks), it was labor disputes or poor organization. The company limped along without having a great deal of success during this time. In 1897, they finally saw the light and stopped.

This situation is not unique to Ellenville. Many of the smaller glasshouses that I have looked at in New York had multiple owner turnover. Very few lasted more than a few years before another change. These would include glassworks like Redwood Glass Works, Redbrook Glass Works, Sand Lake Glass Works, New Lebanon Glass Works to name a few.

The exceptions would be Lancaster Glass Works, Clyde Glassworks, Vernon, Mt. Pleasant, Congressville, Merchant Glass Works and, of course, Corning.

*Photos courtesy of Mike Stephano*

**SOURCES:**

Fowler, Rob: *Hutchinson Bottle Directory* - Seattle History Co. Hutchbrook.com 2015.

Knittle, Rhea: *Mansfield Early American Glass* - Appleton Century N.Y. 1927.

Skye, Stephan: *Irish Glassmakers of Ellenville*, Neversink Valley Museum of History and Innovation. 2014.

*Editor’s note: In a November 15, 1889 issue of the New York Times was this notice: “MIDDLETOWN, N.Y., Nov. 14. -- The manufacture of glassware by machinery on a permanent scale is now for the first time undertaken in this country at the long-idle Ellenville Glass Works, in the neighboring village of that name.”*

