

A Brief History of the Coventry Glass Company

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The Coventry Glass Company

Against the new republic's Congressional debate to declare war against Great Britain for its kidnapping and impressing seamen off American vessels and placing them on British naval ships, a group of men gathered in late 1812 in Coventry Connecticut to discuss starting a glass factory in that town along the main Boston Turnpike. The factory would be in competition to the current factories in East Hartford — the Pitkin Company (1783-1830) and the Mather works (1808 - ?) and later (1817) the small Glastenbury factory, and across the Connecticut River, the later (1827) Hartford Glass Manufactory — all located less than 20 miles west of the Coventry site — plus the Willington factory (1815) just east Coventry.

In late 1811, following the new American Republic's victorious Battle of Tippecanoe in the Indiana territory, the defeated Shawnee Indians (with Shawnee Chief Tecumseh) sought the help of the British forces who had given up the battle against the colonial revolutionists to control the colonies. The fledgling Republic only 35 years old, found itself in an internal Congressional struggle between "War Hawks" representing mostly Western and Southern states pushing President Madison to ignore the Federalists made up mostly of New Englanders (who relied heavily on trade with Britain) and to declare war on Great Britain.

As the over confident and sorely unprepared American troops sought to strike at the British colonial foothold in Canada, they suffered a humiliating defeat from Sir Isaac Brock, the British administrator and soldier-in-charge of Upper Canada (now modern Ontario). On August 16, 1812. American forces, led by Michigan's William Hull, were chased by Brock and Tecumseh back to Detroit forcing Brock to surrender the city without any shots fired.

The war raged back and forth with victories on both sides with the Americans retaking Detroit and the American navy scoring several victories over the powerful British fleet. But the British retaliated entering Chesapeake Bay and capturing Washington, D.C. on Aug. 24, 1814 burning government buildings, the Capitol and the White House.

Most New Englanders tried to ignore the battles west and south of them and continued to expand their industrial bases manufacturing goods for the growing commercial markets. But Connecticut was not out of reach of the war when on April 14, 1814, a contingent of 136 British marines attacked and burned ships and ship yards in Essex, striking at the center of sea transportation in this New England state. This incursion most likely affected Nutmeggers' attitudes toward the war, especially slicing into a major transportation fleet.

It was late in 1812, when that Coventry group of men met in the various homes along the Boston Turnpike, and in particular, the home of Nathaniel Root Jr. (located at the juncture with North River Road), with seven men signing an agreement Jan. 14, 1813, to erect a glass factory on the west side of the Skungamaug River just opposite Root Junior's eastside home, on an acre of land owned by Capt. Nathaniel Root Sr. for a \$1-a-year fee.

None of the men had any experience in glassmaking. The signers — Capt. Nathaniel Root Sr., Ebenezer Root, Joseph Norton and Eli Evans of Coventry, and Uriah Andrews and Thomas Bishop of East Hartford plus Nathaniel Root Jr. Perhaps the East Hartford incorporators probably had some contacts with glassmaking owners and workers at the Pitkin and John Mather factories in East Hartford just a little over 15 miles from their Coventry site, and those two would guide building

the glass factory with its ovens and pots and recommendations for use of nearby sand deposits along the river.

The group agreed to issue 32 shares of capitol stock for \$10,000. Root Sr., Ebenezer and Root Jr. would split 16 shares and 8 to Joseph Norton and 8 divided among three glassblowers who were expected to spend most of their energies to manufacturing glass as the majority found necessary to insure the profitability of the company. The blowers would receive \$26 a month for their labors and \$45 a year for every year of actual labor. Additional monthly wages were paid to 5 woodchoppers paid out of the company's funds. And any partner would receive compensation for any time and money spent on company business. Should there be a loss after three years, a partner could withdraw his interest following a 60-day notice.

The group agreed to how they profited from or shared losses from the number of shares each owned. Reviewing the plan for the operation and sharing of costs, Thomas Bishop withdrew from the glass company before any building and production was begun.

On Nov. 3, 1814, four of the shareholders appointed Root Jr. as agent of the Coventry Glass Factory until April 1, 1815. His responsibility was for "sole management of all the concerns" of the company to keep accounts, make all sales, and pack the glass. He received \$20 a month for those responsibilities.

During this formation period for the glass works, in 1813 it appears Root employed John Turner, a self-named "Captain" taken from his work at sea, to serve as the manager of the glass company. And after a year on the job, he took on Root's designated responsibilities to insure the widest distribution and sales of the glass production.

¹Author Ken Wilson estimates from these records that glass operations were ongoing since November 1814 and Root Sr. increased the company's factory land holdings selling two parcels of adjoining land for \$50.

New co-partnership papers were signed by Root Sr., Ebenezer Root, and Root Jr., Joseph Norton, Eli Evans and Uriah Andrews. They dubbed the documents the "*Glass Factory Company Constitution*." The capital added to a little over a third of that specified in the original agreement: \$3,200 divided into 32 shares at \$100 a share. 10 each went to Ebenezer Root, Root Jr., 8 to Joseph Norton, 4 split between the glassblowers Eli Evans and Uriah Andrews.

The construction of the factory included a furnace with two pots and a storage building for the wood and ash supply. The adjacent river provided the coolant supply. As in the first agreement, there were special articles applying to glassblowers Andrew and Evans. The pair agreed to work as much time in the factory as necessary to meet the interests of production and to receive \$45 a year for each actual full work year plus a \$1 a day for additional work in the factory or, when blowing, the different kinds of glass vessels. However, the blowers did not "have the liberty of blowing all of one kind (of bottle) but an equal proportion of each."

These two glassblowers each would produce 150 various glass pieces during one workday six days a week and probably 10 hours a day. They were helped by assistants who were not identified or included in the principle factory records that were reviewed, but were critical employees to open and close the molds, handle the

various tools, assist with the tooling of the glass and carrying each hot finished piece to a cooling oven, and adding fuel to the ovens plus other tasks.

It is believed that when Thomas Stebbins operated the glass works in 1820, the continual run of *Lafayette (portrait)-embossed flasks bore his initials "T.S." indicated those pieces made under his management. The flasks embossed with "S" in "S & S" on some of these flasks may have been an error for "C" indicating another Stebbins had joined the factory perhaps early in 1824. In 1815, the company became Stebbins & Chamberlain (Rufus B. Chamberlain). Shortly following the joint ownership the glassworks operations were taken over by Gilbert Turner & Co.

Jesse Brainard (an independent researcher of glassmaking in New England factories) added to Wilson's information on the evolution of the glass company when he noted on Oct. 31, 1828, John Turner, Jasper Gilbert and Rufus Chamberlain – all of Coventry – plus Turner's brother, Levi Turner of Mansfield, became the owners of the Coventry and West Willington operations. (Jasper Gilbert and John Turner plus Alvin Preston were part of the group who in 1836 founded the Ellenville NY glass factory - a larger operation than those of Coventry and West Willington.) In the spring of 1848, Chamberlain bought out all of the Coventry owners with John Turner as co-owner.

2 Author Wilson found in the Connecticut state library account books showing the operation from 1846 to 1850, although accounts listed bottles and inks sold from 1846 – 1847 – which indicated the sales were small (possibly accumulated, unsold stock not freshly made) not in the volume of a prosperous glass company (indicating in the sales records winding up the liquidation of the company's inventory, dismantling the factory buildings and selling off the equipment as they dissolved the old company by 1848 and the dissolution paperwork completing the end of the Coventry company by 1850.

The Captain John Turner house — circa 1813

Shortly after the start of the Coventry factory, John Turner — who took on the title "Captain" from some earlier duty on a sailing vessel — was recruited by Nathaniel Root, Jr. and company to manage, market and pack and ship (by wagon) the products of the factory.

With an English background, Turner apparently insisted on building a "brick" home rather than the wooden structures built for workers and Root Jr., and others in what is now on the National Register as the nation's only Glass Factory Historic District. Two additional similar, but not as large brick houses still exist in the District – one west and one east of the present Turner house.

Following the various changes of management of the glass business and factory, Thomas Stebbins bought Turner's house and moved into it. (It is not known where Turner moved but as consideration of expanding the glass production holdings which included West Willington and New London (a major destination for the importation of rum in the 1600s), he probably moved closer to the nearby Willington factory). And as the company ownership changed to Turner and Chamberlain, Rufus Chamberlain (a prosperous businessman who served as President of the Tolland Bank, bought the house from Stebbins and occupied it as the Coventry Glass Company was dissolved in 1848 – 1850.

* American Revolutionary hero, General Marquis de Lafayette

It probably was under Turner's promotional marketing — with consent of the incorporators — that the designs of the bottles were developed (or copied from other nearby glass works products such as the Cornucopia & Urn embossed flasks, the Pitkin eagle, and the sunburst design bottles (plus many of what are now known as chestnut free-blown bottles of varying sizes) with the specially embossed Lafayette portrait flask with the reverse French liberty caps (or Masonic arch) commemorating the French support for the American revolution (possibly a reminder to the 1812 - 1814 warring British that that revolutionary patriotism still is strong among the citizens of the new Republic).

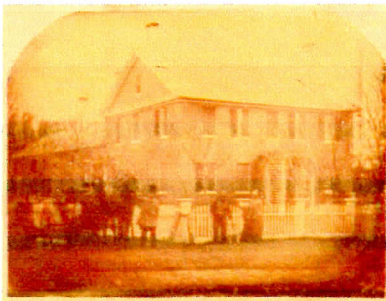
The use of embossed eagles blown at many of the mid-Atlantic, mid-western to New England glass factories (including on the later Coventry-run West Willington and New London factory containers) on their bottles from sodas to flasks also may have been a "patriotic" reminder to the British of the Republic's defeat of British forces during the Revolution renewed by the War of 1812.

For Coventry, metal mold making most likely was done at a nearby foundry (not at the glass factory) in the Coventry area or the more productive foundry in Mystic Connecticut which records show was casting special, private and other production molds ordered by businessmen from Boston and New York, and by New England glass factories.

Much of the Coventry bottle production moved in wagons northward to Boston on the Boston Turnpike (now Rt. 44) and southward along the Connecticut River to New York City either by boat on the Connecticut River or on various southbound roadways with stops in between to supply Connecticut food, liquor and other product businesses with their orders of the much-in-demand glass containers which more rapidly replaced the stoneware containers produced in Hartford and other small kiln-oven operations.

The Museum of Connecticut Glass continues to acquire records (such as a recent addition of the business records of the Willington Glass Company) for its archival research library and other documents related to Connecticut glass production.

2014 — Noel Tomas



Nathaniel Root Jr. house



Capt. John Turner house circa 1813 (1840 photo & current)