

# The Rise and Decline of Masonic Flasks

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My interest in the subject of Masonic flasks dates back to my time as a student of history at the George Washington University. During my senior year and for one year thereafter, I had the good fortune of sharing a townhouse with Robert G. Flippen, III, a fellow student at G. W. and an expert in Virginia antiquities. Bob was quite interested in old bottles at the time, and had amassed an impressive collection of bottles and books related thereto. While "shooting the breeze" with Bob one evening, I happened to notice a book in his collection in which a "Masonic flask" was depicted. Being a newly raised Master Mason, I was instantly intrigued, and have pursued the subject with interest ever since.

Masonic flasks were manufactured in the United States primarily from 1810 to 1830. During this period, it was not unusual for Lodges to meet in local taverns or in rooms rented for the occasion. Following the meeting, the Brethren would customarily assemble for a "festive board" or collation, at which toasts were offered and libations consumed. As likely as not, Masonic flasks came into use at time.

Masonic flasks probably were manufactured as a by-product of most glass works, which were mostly concerned in the production of window glass. Among those glass works responsible for producing Masonic flasks are the following:

Keene-Marlboro Street Glassworks (Keene, NH)

Stoddard Glass Works (Stoddard, NH)

Coventry Glass Works (Coventry, CT)

Kensington Glass Works — T.W. Dyott (Philadelphia, PA)

White Glass Works (Zanesville, OH)  
Mantua Glass Works (Mantua, OH)  
Knox & McKee (Wheeling, Virginia [now West Virginia])  
Mount Vernon Glass Works (Mount Vernon, NY)  
Murdock & Cassell (Zanesville, OH)

As an interesting footnote, Masonic flasks manufactured by the Keene-Marlboro Street Glassworks usually include the initials "HS" for Harry Schoolcraft, who owned the glassworks and was a member of the Lodge in Keene, New Hampshire. Also interesting is the fact that the Coventry Glass Works was responsible for producing one of the rarest Masonic flasks on which the letter "G" is reversed.

According to "American Bottles and Flasks and their Ancestry", by Helen McKearin and Kenneth M. Wilson, Masonic flasks, like other flasks, are bottles whose cross section is elliptical or ovate, whose convex or flat sides rise to a shoulder or taper into a narrow short neck, and whose volume range from half-pint to quart. There are some fifty-one (51) varieties of Masonic flasks, bearing a combination of thirty-one (31) different symbols commonly associated with Freemasonry, to wit:

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Square and compasses  | Mosaic pavement                         |
| All-Seeing Eye        | Radiant triangle                        |
| Letter "G"            | Trowel                                  |
| Holy Bible            | Jacob's Ladder                          |
| Blazing sun           | Radiant moon surrounded by seven stars  |
| Beehive               | Crossed level and plumb line            |
| Skull and cross-bones | Clouded canopy or starry-decked heavens |
| Paschal Lamb          | Ark of the Covenant                     |
| Scythe                | Blazing comet                           |
| Hourglass             | Five-pointed star                       |
| Sprig of acacia       | Spade and coffin                        |

|   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Setting maul                            | Naked heart                      |
| Crossed keys                            | Star of David or Seal of Solomon |
| Sheaf of wheat                          | Star-crescent moon               |
| Past Master's emblem                    |                                  |
| Two-columned archway with keystone      |                                  |
| Seven lighted tapers in triangular form |                                  |

Not surprisingly, Masonic flasks are found in thirty-four (34) different colors, to wit:

|                                |                             |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Amethyst                       | Golden amber                |
| Deep amethyst or black         | Amber                       |
| Clear green                    | Clear amber                 |
| Emerald green                  | Deep brown amber            |
| Clear deep green               | Citron                      |
| Peacock green                  | Gray-blue                   |
| Light green                    | Pale blue                   |
| Yellow-green                   | Violet-blue                 |
| Very pale green                | Pale amethystine            |
| Dark olive green               | Almost crystal clear        |
| Deep blue-green                | Deep sapphire blue          |
| Deep yellow-green              | Green-blue puce             |
| Clear green with yellowish hue | Clear with blue tint        |
| Light yellow-green             | Clear blue-green            |
| Aquamarine                     | Cornflower blue             |
| Olive green                    | Black dark-olive green      |
| Olive amber                    | Colorless with a smoky tint |

The rich variety of colors is attributable to the various chemicals added to the raw materials during the glass-making process. For instance, a purple tint indicates the presence of manganese, whereas iron results in green glass and cobalt in blue.

The reasons for the demise of the Masonic flask are unclear. Some writers have speculated that the flood of anti-Masonic sentiment which resulted from the so-called "Morgan Affair" in 1826 led discontinuation of the manufacture of Masonic flasks. By way of digression, it will be recalled that "Captain" William Morgan, as he preferred to be addressed, was purportedly born in Virginia and subsequently removed to Batavia, New York. He claimed to be an itinerant stonemason by trade, but it has been said, "his greatest talents were ... in the areas of drinking, chasing women, and ignoring his wife and family." Although never verified, Morgan claimed membership in several Masonic Lodges and a Chapter of Royal Arch Masons at Le Roy, New York. At some point, Morgan signed a petition for the institution of a Chapter at Batavia. Certain objections concerning Morgan were raised, however, and a second petition was circulated without his signature. Morgan was apparently incensed by the actions of his Companions and sought revenge upon the Craft in general and the local Brethren in particular by contracting with David C. Miller, a newspaper publisher at Batavia, to disclose the secrets of Freemasonry.

Following his release from incarceration on September 12, 1826 for failing to repay a debt of \$2.69 owed to a local shopkeeper, Morgan was allegedly kidnapped outside the jail at Canadaigua, New York by certain Masons who were outraged by the prospect of Morgan's expose of the Craft. It was said that he was driven in a closed carriage to Lewiston, Niagara County, New York and thence to unoccupied Fort Niagara, where he was imprisoned in the fort's magazine. From this point Morgan vanished; his true fate has never been determined.

During the weeks and months that followed, public sentiment began to turn against the Craft as evidenced by various resolutions passed at mass meetings, which declared Freemasonry to be a menace to freedom and the enforcement of law, and which urged the boycott of Masons seeking public office and newspapers failing to publish full reports of "Morgan" meetings. As the unsuccessful search for Morgan continued, the tide of anti-Masonic sentiment reached a fever pitch throughout New York State. Governor DeWitt Clinton himself issued a proclamation offering a reward of \$1,000.00 for the discovery of

Morgan or his remains, and \$2,000.00 for the discovery of the murderers. Significantly, Governor Clinton was a stalwart Mason, having served as Grand Master of the Grand Encampment Knights Templar of the United States and General Grand High Priest of Royal Arch Masons. Governor Clinton responded to the furor surrounding the so-called "Morgan Affair" as follows: "I know that Freemasonry is friendly to religion, morality, liberty and good government." He also said, "I shall never shrink under any state of excitement, or any extent of misapprehension, from hearing testimony in or of the purity of an institution which can boast of a Washington a Franklin and a Lafayette as distinguished member — which inculcates no principles and authorizes no acts that are not in accordance with the good morals, civil liberty and entire obedience to the government and the laws."

Further fuel was added to fire with the 1828 publication of the "Illustrations of Masonry by One of the Fraternity who had devoted Thirty Years to the Subject," by David Miller. At the same time, the "Narrative of the Facts and Circumstances relating to the Kidnapping and Presumed Murder of William Morgan," was published by a committee based in Lewiston, New York which had been appointed for that purpose at one of many public meetings. In the local elections that followed, approximately 17,000 votes were cast for the anti-Masons. Thereafter, an anti-Masonic party was formed and a convention in Utica, New York. Interestingly, the party's gubernatorial nominee polled more than 30,000 votes in the general election of 1828.

The unrest that spread throughout New England in the years followed resulted in the formation of a national Anti-Masonic Party, which held the very first national political convention at Baltimore, Maryland in 1831. William Wirt, who formerly served as Attorney General in the John Quincy Adams administration, was the party's Presidential nominee, and subsequently received 7 electoral votes in the 1832 election. The Anti-Masonic Party continued as a political force until the 1840s, when its popularity waned and its members allied themselves with other political movements.

Another reason for the demise of Masonic flasks may be deduced from the social history of our Nation. Commencing in the 1840s, temperance movement became a national force, and remained so until well into the twentieth century. Although purely conjecture, it is entirely possible that American Masonic Lodges were simply desirous of avoiding association with the consumption of alcoholic beverages and therefore discouraged the use of Masonic flasks. Whatever the reason, however, Masonic flasks ceased to be manufactured and, today, are considered rare and valuable acquisitions for the collector of Masonic antiquities.

I would be remiss by not noting that Masonic flasks comprise just one type of Masonic glassware. Tumblers, decanters, punch bowls, shaving cups, and ashtrays, to name a few, have been utilized by Masons in honoring the Craft. But few, if any, can match the often rough-hewn and primitive beauty and authentic history of the Masonic flask. So the next time you visit an antique shop or flea market, don't forget to look at the old bottles; you just might find the Masonic treasure of a lifetime!

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