

# *How Glass Molded West Virginia*

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## **A Time-tested Process**

Beautiful and intriguing, glass is made by melting silica sand, which is found across the globe. To make the process easier, sodium carbonate and lime are combined with silica. The addition of sodium carbonate decreases the melting point from 3,600 degrees to 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit. The lime prevents the substance from being water soluble.

This magic recipe has been used for 3,000 years, so it is no surprise that glassmaking has been a part of West Virginia's history. Isaac Duval and Company was founded in Wellsburg in 1813, fifty years before the state was established. The company produced dinnerware and lead crystal known as flint glass. By the mid-1800s the glass industry was revolutionized by the industrial era.



## **West Virginia's Glass History**

Glass companies were established in Wellsburg, Wheeling, Paden City, Moundsville, New Martinsville, Williamstown, Parkersburg and Huntington along the Ohio River, as well as Star City, Morgantown, Fairmont, Clarksburg and Weston on the banks of the Monongahela River and its tributaries.

In 1850, glassmakers in Europe began to produce colorful and ornate art glass pieces. This trend spread to the United States as glass producers expanded into niche markets to produce Victorian art glass, lamps and chandeliers. Hobbs, Brockunier and Company of Wheeling became known as one of most innovative producers of art glass.

## **A Collectible Past**

The Fenton Glass Company of Williamstown and the Fostoria Glass Company of Moundsville produced carnival glass and proved to outlast the competition. However, Fostoria closed its doors

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permanently in 1983. The company was best known for its American pattern, which was produced for 68 years. As of 2011, the Fenton Company no longer produces conventional glass either but still makes glass beads and jewelry.

## Day Trips and Tours

### Blenko

From stained glass windows to round window panes, the Milton, West Virginia-based Blenko has survived the ups and downs of the industry since 1883. Known primarily for colorful hand-blown table and stemware, you can tour this factory and see glass craftsman at work. For a creative trip, mark the Festival of Glass on your calendars to see the special collectibles for sale.

### Museum of American Glass

The Museum of American Glass in Weston is another option to enrich your understanding of glass. The museum's focus extends beyond West Virginia companies and has exhibits explaining the people, factories and products that are important to this industry. You can visit two museums in one building, as the National Marble Museum is also housed here. The glass marble industry also has ties to West Virginia through Marble King, based in Paden City, which is one of the world's leading marble manufacturers.

### Glass Artists

Nowadays there are artists throughout the state who have helped preserve the heritage craft of glassblowing and developed it from producing utilitarian pieces to original works of art. At least fourteen different glass-related companies are found on the West Virginia Department of Commerce website.

#### Activity:

Try an activity that fits your group's schedule and needs.

- Have a show and tell party. Ask attendees to bring in a West Virginia glass piece and share a story or memory about the piece.
- Invite a local hobbyist to appraise items or glass collector to share how they find and preserve their collection.

- Use an online auction site, such as eBay, to find West Virginia glass for sale. Print photos of items and record their value. Guess how much, or little, the pieces are worth.
- Ask an area glass artist to show their wares. The artist may have photos or actual pieces of jewelry, stained glass or blown art.
- How should you care for your pieces? Have members research and describe the best practices for caring for glass.
- Take a class with some friends. An artists' cooperative or college in your area may offer continuing education art classes about glass.

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