

How Glass Molded West Virginia

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Educational Objectives

1. Increase knowledge about West Virginia glass companies and the role of the glass industry in state history.
2. Understand the cultural significance of glassmaking in the state's heritage craft and tourism industries.
3. Provide ideas for visiting glass artisans or museums, and for collecting and discussing glass.

A Time-tested Process

Glass is beautiful and intriguing. This sturdy yet delicate substance is made by melting silica sand, which is found in abundance across the globe. To make the process easier, sodium carbonate and lime are combined with the silica. The addition of the 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 seemingly magic recipe has been used for over 3,000 years, so it is no surprise that glassmaking has been a part of West Virginia's history longer than the state has existed. Isaac Duval and Company was established in Wellsburg in 1813, fifty years before the state was established. Like many early glass companies, the company produced dinnerware and cut lead crystal also known as flint glass. By the mid-1800s the glass industry, as well as the Ohio River Valley, was revolutionized by the industrial era.



West Virginia's Glass History

The industrial revolution increased the transportation systems to and from West Virginia. The completion of the National Road from Cumberland, Maryland to the Ohio River, the development of the Baltimore and Ohio railway, and the Ohio River contributed to the development of Wheeling as a hub of commerce and immigrants. With a strong labor base, a variety of ways to transport goods, and the availability of timber and coal to stoke the fire, the glass industry quickly spread throughout the Ohio River Valley and the valleys of its tributaries. Glass companies were established in Wellsburg, Wheeling,

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Moundsville, New Martinsville, Paden City, 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 tributary, the West Fork. During this time, the Upper Ohio River Valley region was the primary production center for pressed glass in the United States.

Factory Formations

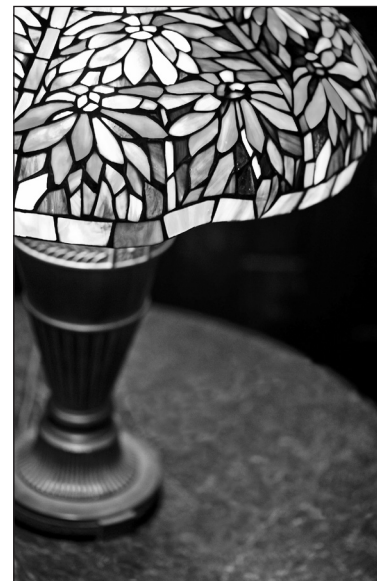
Throughout the region, glass factories large and small were established, merged, sold, moved, abandoned, reestablished and renamed due to economic and entrepreneurial factors. These factories made everything from window glass to art glass and were influenced by new technologies. Many companies moved to Ohio and Indiana when natural gas became accessible there. Around the turn of the twentieth century, those gas supplies proved unreliable and many companies went out of business. Coincidentally, advanced technology had been developed that allowed the natural gas of West Virginia to be utilized. As the state's natural gas proved to be vast and dependable, companies returned to West Virginia. With this resurgence, the glass industry grew, becoming the fourth largest employer in the state around 1910.

As more technological advances were developed, fewer employees were needed. Point Pleasant native, Michael Owens, perfected his mechanical bottle blowing machine in the early 1900s. In 1909, he opened a state of the art bottle factory in Fairmont. His Owens-Illinois Glass Company later operated bottle factories in Huntington and Charleston. Around 1916, he revolutionized window production with similar machinery and established a window manufacturing company in Charleston. While his advances decreased the labor needed, they also increased production remarkably. Owens' factories employed West Virginians for decades with the last closing in Huntington in 1993.

A Blend of Art and Industry

Technology also advanced the items that were made of glass. In 1850, glassmakers in Europe began to produce colorful and ornate pieces. This trend quickly spread to the United States as the wealthy carriage class yearned to own extravagant art glass. Glass producers expanded into niche markets to produce Victorian art glass, lamps and chandeliers in addition to clear tableware, fine cut lead crystal and windows.

Hobbs, Brockunier and Company of Wheeling became well-known as one of the largest and most innovative producers of art glass. At the time, the company was



as highly regarded as its surviving rival, Tiffany and Company of New York. Not to be left out, the increasingly prosperous middle class also desired colorful and elegant glassware. Harry Northwood, a former Hobbs, Brockunier and Company employee, sought to meet this demand.

An immigrant whose father was a renowned glassmaker in Europe, Harry Northwood became noted for carnival glass, which is glass that has an iridescent, rainbow-like finish. Developed by Northwood's former apprentice, Frank L. Fenton, this style of glass was often used as penny-pitch prizes at fairs and carnivals. More renowned today by modern glass collectors, Harry Northwood Company of Wheeling closed its doors in 1925 six years after the death of its founder.



A Collectible Past

The Fenton Glass Company of Williamstown and the Fostoria Glass Company of Moundsville also produced carnival glass and proved to outlast the competition. Both companies became nationally known due to their advertisements in the developing ladies' magazine industry. This advertising strategy is attributed to the companies' survival through the Depression era, when many glass producers failed.

Ultimately, these companies also suffered. Fostoria closed its doors permanently in 1983. The company was best known for its American pattern, which was produced for an astounding 68 years. The line was produced from 1915 until the company went out of business. Fenton stopped producing carnival glass in the 1930s to focus on household items. As of 2011, the company no longer produces conventional glass, but still makes glass beads and jewelry which you can see produced on a factory tour.

Day Trips and Tours

Blenko

From stained glass windows to sheet glass to round window panes called rondels, the Milton, West Virginia-based Blenko has survived the ups and downs of the industry since 1883. Although only in West Virginia since 1921, Blenko glass is one of West Virginia's most well-known brands. Known primarily for colorful hand-blown table and stemware, you can tour this factory and see glass craftsman at work. For another creative trip, mark the Festival of Glass on your calendars to see the special collectibles for sale. It usually occurs around the beginning of August.

Museum of American Glass

Close to Jackson's Mill, 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's Marble King, based in Paden City, which is one of the world's leading marble manufacturers. Can you believe that they make over one million marbles per day?

Glass Artists

Modern glassmaking in West Virginia is not only seen in factory and museum tours. There are artists throughout the state that help 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. There is probably a glass artist near you.

Clear Choices and Colorful Ideas

If you can't visit a museum, factory or artist how about trying these activities in your club or with a group of friends? These ideas will deepen your knowledge of the topic while exposing the audience to something fun and new. Try one or any combination of activities that fits your group's schedule and needs.

- Have a show and tell party. Ask attendees to bring in select pieces of their favorite West Virginia glass. They may want to share an interesting story or important memory about the piece.



(Photo credit: Dave Pape, www.wikimedia commons.com)



- 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 a wide variety of West Virginia glass for sale. Print photos of items and record their value. Participants can have fun guessing just 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 that they would like your group to see.
- How should you care for your pieces? Have members research and describe the best practices for caring for glass. Whether it's a priceless heirloom or an everyday piece that you enjoy admiring, keep your glass in tip-top shape.

- Take a class with some friends. An artists' cooperative or college in your area may offer continuing education art classes about glass. Oglebay Institute teaches classes, such as beginning glass working and paperweight making.

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