

Belle Pre Bottle Co.

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Although the Belle Pre Bottle Co. initially made other types of bottles, the firm may have been founded to manufacture milk bottles to the design of the John D. Miller patent of November 21, 1899. Miller designed the finish of the milk bottle so that a tab on the cardboard closure could be easily grasped to open the bottle. The firm began production in 1902 but only remained in business until 1911.

History

Belle Pre Bottle Co., Alexandria, Virginia (1902-1911)

The Belle Pre Bottle Co., Alexandria, Virginia, was organized as a Delaware corporation in 1901 with a capitalization of \$100,000.¹ Although the details are vague, the firm apparently owned the Miller 1899 patent for a specific type of milk bottle (described below) (Lilienthal 2003:1; von Mechow 2013; *Washington Post* 2/27/1912).² The plant on North Henry and Madison Streets was completed in the fall of 1902 and operated one furnace with ten pots and a single continuous tank in 1904, making “liquor and packers’ ware” (*Alexandria Times* 10/23/2008; *American Glass Review* 1934:173; von Mechow 2013).

Although the plant changed its production exclusively to milk bottles at some point, we have not been able to discover the exact date; however, the plant added a second furnace at some point between 1904 and March 1905, when the company rebuilt the other furnace (*Washington*

¹ The firm was listed in 1902 by *Commoner & Glassworker* as the “Belfry Milk Jar Co.” – from an obviously oral report (Roller 1998).

² Incorporating in a state other than the one where a factory was located was (and is) a common practice. Delaware offered tax incentives favorable to corporations.

Post 3/6/1905), and this may have signified the switch in products. In early 1905, Joseph H. Ramsey resigned his position as superintendent of the factory to be replaced by Louis Steelman, his former assistant (*Washington Post* 2/20/1905; von Mechow 2013).

In 1907, Edwin L.C. Cockrell was president, with F.R. Horner as vice president, E.A. Thompson as secretary and treasurer, and C.S. Bassett as manager. A pamphlet “Souvenir Virginia Tercentennial of Historic Alexandria, Va. Past and Present” claimed that Belle Pre was

the largest milk bottle factory in the world, and is devoted exclusively to the manufacture of milk bottles. The plant covers over six acres and produces 1,000,000 bottles monthly, employing 250 men. They also sell all kinds of dairy and creamery supplies, and require over 3,000,000 feet of lumber yearly to box their output, to produce which they operate two saw mills (von Mechow 2013).

The plant was making quart milk bottles by November 1908 (*Commoner and Glassworker* 1908:16). By 1909, Belle Pre made milk bottles exclusively by “nine machine operating shops” (Mayer 1909:1). At its end, the factory only used semiautomatic machines to make milk bottles in one continuous tank with 12 rings (*Journal of Industrial and Engineering Chemistry* 1913:954).

The plant closed down on November 29, 1911. Board president Ralph P. Bernard stated that he would “shut down the factory temporarily” to “make repairs and improvements.” The plant has “\$25,000 worth of manufactured stock” and few orders (*Washington Post* 11/29/1911). A group of enraged stockholders sued the company, citing negligence and carelessness “resulting in a failure to meet [the company’s] obligations.” The group sought and received “an injunction restraining the directors . . . from disposing of any of the estate of the company[,] real[,] personal or mixed” (*Washington Post* 2/27/1912).

Egbert A. Thompson was appointed as receiver on June 7 to affect the sale of the assets, and F.R. Horner, a representative of the stockholders purchased the property at public auction on October 14, 1913. The Old Dominion Glass Co. acquired the plant on October 19 and resumed production, this time of flasks instead of milk bottles, on November 3 (*Washington Post* 6/7/1912; 5/11/1913; 10/19/1913; 11/3/1913).

A serious fire burned some of the buildings on May 12, 1914. Firemen were able to save the main plant “after a stubborn fight that lasted nearly three hours.” Another fire destroyed the factory on February 7, 1917, but the operation reopened by the end of the month. In 1921, the plant burned again, but this time Old Dominion Glass declined to rebuild (von Mechow 2013).

Containers and Marks

According to the Alexandria Library (2008: von Mechow 2013), the Robert Portner Brewing Co. “contracted with Old Dominion, Virginia, and Belle Pre to produce 1,500,000 bottles” in 1902. At least one Portner bottle was embossed on its base with “OD” – the logo of the Old Dominion Glass Co. – but we have not found an example with a Belle Pre mark (see Chosi.org 2010). Old Dominion may have “inherited” the contract when it took over the Belle Pre factory.



Figure 1 – Slot or notch in finish (Lillienthal 2003:2)

The Belle Pre Bottle Co. owned the patent for – and were apparently exclusively manufacturers of – milk bottles with an unusual finish. Although the containers otherwise looked like the typical “common sense” milk bottle, the bottles had a quarter-moon-shaped slot molded into the outer edge of the finish (Figure 1). Frequently mistaken for a pour spout, this depression was actually used to allow an extension of the ligneous or cardboard disk (cap) to extend outside the milk bottle for easy opening (Lilienthal 2003:2).

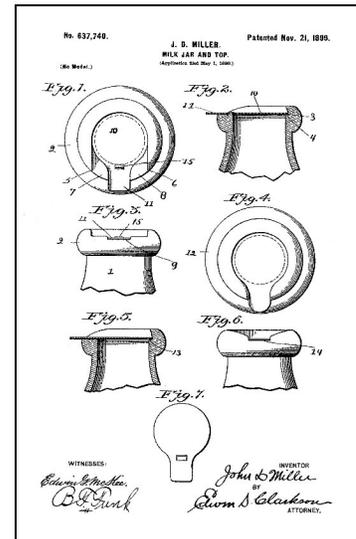


Figure 2 – Miller 1899 patent

John D. Miller applied for a patent for a “Milk Jar and Top” on May 1, 1899, and received Patent No. 637,740 for his invention on November 21, 1899 (Figure 2). Some milk bottles made by Belle Pre had the patent date embossed on their bases. Unlike many inventors, Miller disclosed his reasons for the invention. He described his sealing device as:

a pliable or resilient top adapted to fit into the groove formed in the top, said top being provided with a lateral extension, which is adapted to serve as a handle.

Heretofore it has been the custom for sanitary reasons to use a paper top for all milk jars; but it has been found in practice that said tops are liable to be damaged unless great care is taken when they are snapped into the mouth of the bottle. Again, it is somewhat difficult to remove said tops, and in removing them they are invariably damaged to such an extent that they cannot be used a second time, and this is particularly objectionable to consumers, as they have to provide an improvised cover for the jar to prevent the milk being contaminated with odors arising from vegetables &c., in a refrigerator. Again, it is not always convenient to provide an air-tight cover.

It is the object of my invention to produce a snap-cover for milk-jars that is cheap, simple, durable, and at the same time one that is not apt to become damaged in inserting in the mouth of the bottle and one that may readily be removed from and replaced in the bottle as often as found desirable without damage, the top being at all times an air-tight closure for the jar. . . (Lilienthal 2003:4).

Although the above description focused on the cap, the patent also included the glass bottle.

The special bottle and cap require a bit of explanation and speculation. Doug Gisi (personal communication 2/25/2007) noted that the squared notch in the patent drawing was different from the crescent-shaped notches on actual bottles. He added that, as Lilienthal (2003:2) mentioned in his article, caps (disks) with projections such as the patent document described are virtually unknown to collectors. Gisi suggested that Belle Pre used the idea of the notch but modified it to the crescent shape and used a typical ligneous or cardboard disk (without the projecting tab). The customer could easily insert a finger nail, knife, or other tool in the notch and under the cap to pry it out.

Gisi also speculated that Belle Pre may have modified the Miller design based on another milk bottle finish patented by Henry C. Emrich in 1902 (Figure 3). This design featured a sloped

ledge on the cap seat that would allow the user to press down on one side of the cardboard disk (allowing the other side to pop up) to remove the cap. Although there is no evidence that Belle Pre actually used the Emrich design, it could have influenced them to modify the Miller “slot” into the Belle Pre “notch.”

Gisi also mentioned that ads from Belle Pre referred to the depression in the finish as a “notch” – never as a “slot” – as described in the Miller patent application. He also commented on the general lack of Belle Pre bottles in collections. Since the Virginia Tercentennial pamphlet (cited above) noted that Belle Pre was listed in one publication as “the largest milk bottle factory in the world,” Gisi also wondered what happened to all the

bottles. A possible answer may have arrived from Massachusetts. Albert Morin (personal communication 2/16/2007) noted that he had not seen bottles with the Belle Pre code in the Massachusetts seal (see below) and the names of any local dairies on them. Since collectors generally seek bottles with dairy names and locations, the answer may be fairly simple – no one checked the “slick-sided” (generic) bottles made by Belle Pre.

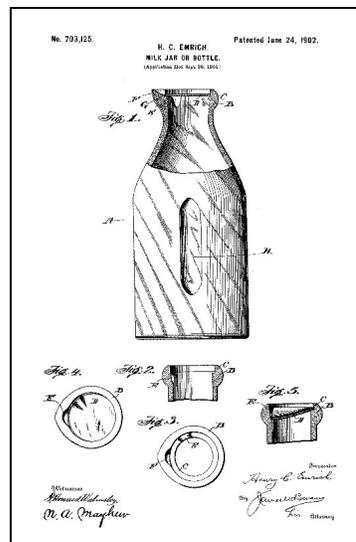


Figure 3 – Emrich 1902 patent

BP in the Massachusetts Seal (ca. 1909-1911)

By at least 1910, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (1911:4) listed the Belle Pre Bottle Co. as one of the glass houses allowed to manufacture milk bottles for sale to dairies within the state, and the firm remained on the list until 1918.³ Beginning in late 1909, factories embossed the seal at various places on the bottle and in several formats. By 1918, a circular format with “MASS (arch) / {factory designator} / “SEAL (inverted arch)” embossed on the shoulder was mandated by law. These often appeared in a small plate. The early marks (1909-1918) were often embossed in other configurations and on other parts of the bottle. The mark used by Belle Pre was “BP” (Blodget 2006:8; Schadlich & Schadlich 1984:2-5; Schadlich ca. 1990).

³ The Massachusetts bulletin apparently continued to list companies until their tenure with the state expired, even if the factory had closed.

According to Albert Morin (personal communication 2/18/2007), the “MASS SEAL BP” was embossed in either an arch at the shoulder of bottles or horizontally in a plate on the body. In both cases, the bottles were not embossed with any local dairy information. This suggests that Belle Pre only made generic bottles for use in Massachusetts. Morin noted that the bottles were quite scarce and brought high prices, confirming a probable short period of manufacture. Because Belle Pre closed in 1911, the seal was probably only used for a few years (ca. 1909-1911). We have not been able to find a photo of either of the seals.



Figure 4 – BP17 heelmarks

B.P.17 or BP-17

Al Morin found a milk bottle embossed B.P.17 / 2 on the heel (Figure 4). This can only be a later Belle Pre bottle mark. This also makes “17” the number assigned to Belle Pre by at least one state. A second bottle, used by a Washington, DC, dairy was embossed “BP-17” on the heel. The photo of the base does not show any mark (except an “X” in the ejection scar). In addition, we have now seen another example of each variation, also embossed on heels. The State of New York first required these numbers in 1910, so such bottles were probably only made in the last two years of the firm.

BPBCo (ca. 1905-1911)

Von Mechow (2013) listed the initials “BPBCo” embossed on the bases of four soda bottles as well as some Warranted Flasks. The logo was horizontally embossed across the center of three bases and in an inverted arch on the fourth one. The mark does not show up in the literature, although the initials certainly fit the Belle Pre Bottle Co. It is highly unlikely that any other glass house made the bottles, and they were probably made in the early years of the firm.

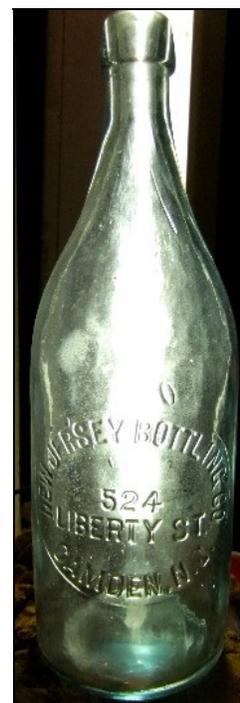


Figure 5 – New Jersey Bottling Co. (New Jersey Bottle Forum 2012)

Von Mechow's listing included three breweries and one soda bottler. Although we were unable to discover dates for Rocco Di Nubile & Co. of Philadelphia or the Star Bottling Co. of Wilmington, Delaware, Tony Kayser, also of Philadelphia was in business from 1899 to 1918 (Prepro.com 2013). The New Jersey Bottling Co. at Camden (Figures 5 & 6) bottled beer from 1903 to at least 1953 (New Jersey Bottle Forum 2012). Both of these easily fall within Belle Pre's early years.



Figure 6 – BPBCO logo (New Jersey Bottle Forum 2012)

BELLE PRE BOTTLE CO. (ca. 1905-1911)

Schadlich ([ca. 1990]) noted that the entire name of the Belle Pre Bottle Co. was embossed on its milk bottles, but this was certainly not the case on all Belle Pre containers. Lillienthal (2003:3) published photos of two solarized amethyst milk bottles embossed with the full name of the company. One was likely a sample bottle and is only currently known in the gill (¼ pint) size (Figure 7). The small bottle had a circular plate on one side embossed “BELLE PRE (arch) / BOTTLE CO. (horizontal) / ALEX, VA. (inverted arch).”



Figure 7 – Belle Pre Bottle Co. front plate (Lillienthal 2003:3)

The second example was embossed on the base with “BELLE PRE BOTTLE Co (arch) / WASHINGTON (arch) / 3 (in ejection mark) / DC (inverted arch) / PATENTED (inverted arch).” Both bottles were made in the slotted-finish style described above, the only type of bottle believed to have been made by the company (Figure 8). Milk bottles with the Belle Pre name should be dated ca. 1905 (the approximate date for the switch to milk bottles) to 1911 (the closing of the factory in November), although some of the existing overstock may have been sold in 1912. It is also possible that bottles with the full name were made prior to the issuance of the state numbers in 1910.



Figure 8 – Belle Pre Bottle Co. basemark (Lillienthal 2003:3)

BELLE PRE BOT CO NOV 21 99 (ca. 1905-1911)

Lilienthal (2003:3) also noted a variation of the basemark: BELLE PRE BOT CO NOV 21 99. November 21, 1899, was the date when Miller was awarded his patent (described above). With available methods, it is impossible to determine which mark was used first, or if they were in use contemporaneously.

Acknowledgments

Our gratitude to Doug Gisi for sharing his collected knowledge about Belle Pre with us. Doug's information is always insightful and helpful. We would like to thank Brad Blodgett, without whom this article would not have been written, and a great deal of information would not have found its way to us. Brad responded to our Essex article in *The Milk Route* and provided us with a section from his own manuscript, the manuscript prepared by Louis Schadlich, and data from his own bottles.

We are also grateful to the *Potomac Pontil*, the newsletter of the Potomac Bottle Collectors, for presenting its research online, where it can be used by others. Richard Lilienthal's article in the *Potomac Pontil* provided the final details needed to complete our research on Belle Pre. A final bouquet of gratitude to Albert Morin for furnishing further information about the Massachusetts seals and the BP mark.

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