

Coventry Glass Works

Bill Lockhart, Beau Schriever, Bill Lindsey, and Carol Serr

Coventry Glass Works was a relatively early glass house and one of the few in Connecticut. One of its owners, Thomas Stebbins, has been credited as the first to make historical flasks embossed with busts of famous people – in this case the Marquis de Lafayette. The factory produced several Lafayette flasks, apparently during the 1824-1826 period. Although Stebbins had abandoned the enterprise by 1828, the plant remained in production until about 1845.

History

Coventry Glass Works, Coventry, Connecticut (1814-1849)

Nathaniel Root, Sr., Ebenezer Root, Nathaniel Root, Jr., Joseph A. Norton, Eli Evans, Thomas W. Bishop, and Uriah Andrews signed an agreement to construct a glass factory at Covington, Connecticut, on January 14, 1813. The capital stock was \$10,000, with the Root family retaining 50% and 25% to Norton. Although none of Root family (or Norton) had experience with glass, the other three men were glass blowers, probably from either the Pitkin or Mather works. These blowers distributed the remaining 25% of the stock between themselves. The plant began operation about November 1814, making flasks, decanters, tumblers, vases, apothecary phials, snuff jars, inkwells, and other bottles (McKearin & Wilson 1978:109; Van Rensselaar 1969:52).

The same group (minus Bishop) signed the Glass Factory Company Constitution on October 15, 1816, with a capital of only \$3,200. Apparently, the senior Root was retiring; he had no stock in this reorganization. Nathaniel, Jr., and Ebenezer each claimed 31.3% of the stock, with 25% to Norton, and the remaining 12.5% going to the three blowers (McKearin & Wilson 1978:109). This inclusion of blowers as owners was probably not a common practice.

Little more is known about the factory until Thomas Stebbins became involved. McKearin & Wilson (1978:110) stated:

It is believed that Thomas Stebbins was operating the works in 1820, and that the Lafayette flasks marked “T.S.” . . . were made by him, possibly in late 1824. Unless the second “S” in “S&S” on some Lafayette flasks was an error for “C,” it would appear that Thomas Stebbins was joined briefly by another Stebbins, perhaps early in 1825. In any event, probably also in 1825, the firm became Stebbins & Chamberlin – Thomas Stebbins and Rufus B. Chamberlin – and it too produced a Lafayette flask. This firm was also short-lived, for the glassworks was taken over in 1828 by Gilbert Turner & Company.

McKearin and Wilson apparently picked up their “It is believed” information from Knittle (1927:196-197).¹ Knittle, who never cited her information, stated clearly that “the business passed into the hands of Thomas Stebbins” “seven years later” – i.e. seven years after 1813, making the date 1820. She further noted that “In 1830, the house became known as Stebbins & Chamberlin” (also written as Chamberlain by some sources). Knittle either obtained her information from the *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* (1909:47) or from the source used by the museum. The *Bulletin* noted that the factory made “busts of General Lafayette and Governor DeWitt Clinton in commemoration of the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. These flasks were colored sapphire, blue, green, brown, and amber. The *Bulletin*, in turn, likely accessed its information from Barber (1900:56). Barber noted that “the business was carried on under the same management [i.e., Nathaniel Root and his associates] until about 1820 when it passed into other hands. During the following ten years, the works were operated by Thomas Stebbins and his successors, Stebbins & Chamberlin.”

We have found no record of why Stebbins left the glass business; however, Jasper Gilbert, Jason Turner, Jason’s brother, Levi, and Rufus B. Chamberlin took over the plant as Gilbert, Turner & Co. on October 31, 1828. The various partners shifted periodically during the next two decades, and Chamberlin became the majority owner in 1848. Although the plant

¹ McKearin & Wilson (1978:726) cited “Coventry Glass Factory Company papers in the manuscript collection in the Library of the Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum.” as their source for the earliest history, but it is difficult to reconcile that with “It is believed” statements. A study for the National Register of Historic Places retraced the document used by McKearin & Wilson, including the 1813 partnership agreement and the 1816 “constitution,” land records, and records of Gilbert, Turner & Co. from 1840 to 1847. The researchers found no better records for the Stebbins involvement (Clouette et al. 1986).

probably closed in 1848, the firm apparently continued until 1850 – possibly tying up loose ends (McKearin & Wilson 1978:109-110). However, Cloutte and his associates (1986) noted that “the works stayed in production until about 1845, at which time the proprietors continued operating at the nearby Willington Glass Co.” Since the Cloutte group included the records of Gilbert, Turner & Co. from 1840 to 1847

in its bibliography, their date is probably valid. Interestingly, the group purchased the Willington plant on October 31, 1828, and sold it in 1847 – almost the same dates as the group’s tenure at Coventry. See the Willington entry in the Other W section for more information on this nearby Connecticut firm. According to Barber (1900:56), the Coventry factory closed “on account of the scarcity of wood.” Most furnaces operated by burning wood in those early days, and northeastern plants increasingly closed or moved west into Pennsylvania, where the supply of coal was plentiful.

Cloutte et al. (1986) provided a map of a section of Coventry, showing the location of the glass factory and “bottle house, barn, and store” (Figure 1) as well as a photo of the probable location of the plant (Figure 2).² They assumed that the “bottle house” was a storage area for bottles, although that term was generally used in the glass industry to describe a factory for making bottles. Many of the houses in the area were owned by the proprietors of the glass factory and/or some of the glass blowers, including Nathaniel Root (Figure 3) and a house that was owned in turn by Thomas Stebbins, Rufus B. Chamberlin, and members of the Turner family (Figure 4).

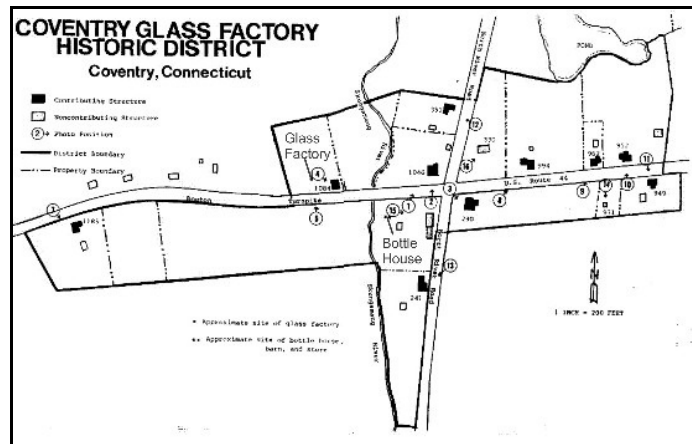


Figure 1 – Map of factory area (Cloutte et al 1986)



Figure 2 – Probable location of factory (Cloutte et al 1986)



Figure 3 – Root house (Cloutte et al 1986)

² We have added larger lettering to indicate the factory and “bottle house” locations.

Artifacts in the area suggested that some (many?) of the blowers were German. The artifacts apparently came from a survey of the area, but Cloutte and his associates did not cite a report.

An interesting postlude connects two of the characters. In May 1832, Thomas Stebbins, Ebenezer Root (one of the founders of the Coventry Glass Works), and John Boynton became the Board of Directors for the newly incorporated Coventry Sattinet Manufactory. The firm was formed “for the purpose of manufacturing cotton and woollen goods” (State of Connecticut 1836:779-180). This not only ties Stebbins and the Root family together, it places a clear end to their involvement in the Coventry Glass Works.



Figure 4 – Stebbins-Chamberlin-Turner house
(Cloutte et al 1986)

Containers and Marks

Knittle (1927:197) stated that

Thomas Stebbins may have been the first glass-house owner who adapted the portraits of well-known men to the whisky-flask. His “DeWitt Clinton” and “Lafayette” models were made, it is supposed, to celebrate the opening of the Erie Canal and the visit of the French hero to America in 1825. Clinton was governor of the State of New York at this time. Several of the Coventry flasks are marked – some with the stamp “T.S.,” while others bear the later initials “S&C.”

Vuono (2014:13-16) discussed these various flasks and presented some excellent photos. Unfortunately, he did not include any new historical information or other details that were useful in dating the flasks or identifying the factory.

COVENTRY and/or C-T (1824-ca. 1828)

McKearin & Wilson (1978:545) illustrated several flasks that were almost certainly made by the Coventry Glass Works. Some of these were embossed on the front with the word



Figure 5 – Flask with Coventry C-T (Vuono 2014:13)



Figure 7 – C-T mold (Vuono 2014:13)



Figure 9 – S&C logo (*Bulletin of the Museum of Pennsylvania* 1908:46)

“COVENTRY” in an arch above “C-T,” and each had a bust of Lafayette on the front (Figure 5). All but one of these also included one of three sets of initials: “S&C,” “S&S,” or “T.S.” embossed on the flask.

The exception had a bust of Lafayette on the front (with no accompanying initials) and a bust of DeWitt Clinton on the reverse above “C-T” (Figure 6). All of these flasks were made during the period when Thomas Stebbins was associated with the factory – ca. 1820-1828 – and certainly after the arrival of Lafayette in 1824. Vuono (2014:13) included a photo of a mold half for a Lafayette flask embossed “COVENTRY / C-T” that shows poor embossing and explains the low quality of the lettering and pictures on the flasks (Figure 7).

S&C (ca. 1825-1826)

McKearin & Wilson (1978:110-111, 544-545) described two flasks with “LAFAYETTE” above a bust, with “S&C” below it on the front and “DE WITT

CLINTON” above another bust on the reverse with “C-T” below that. They dated the flasks 1825-1826. They attributed the “S&C” to Stebbins & Chamberlin (Figures 8 & 9). Toulouse (1971:464) basically agreed, deriving much of his information from the McKearins’ earlier book (McKearin & McKearin 1941). He, too, noted that the flasks were made about the time of Lafayette’s visit in 1824.

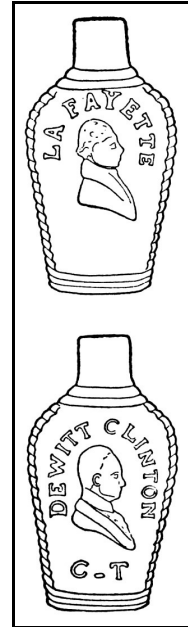


Figure 6 – Flask with C-T (McKearin & Wilson 1978:545)

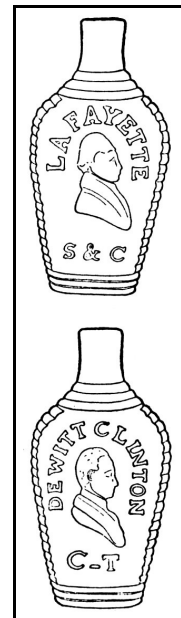


Figure 8 – S&C logo (McKearin & Wilson 1978:545)

S&S (ca. 1824)

McKearin & Wilson (1978:110-111, 544-545) described four Lafayette flasks with “COVENTRY” in an arch above “C-T” – both below the bust on the front and “S&S” below an oval frame surrounding a Liberty Cap on a pole. Each flask differed in presence and/or number of stars on the reverse. McKearin & Wilson dated the flasks 1825



Figure 11 – S&S flask
(Vuono 2014:13)

and suggested that the initials indicated Stebbins & Stebbins (Figures 10 & 11). Toulouse (1971:464) noted that the “S&S” marks “are generally thought to be mold-cutters errors – but three errors would be straining the probabilities. Others believe they mark a brief period of Stebbins & Stebbins.” Although other sources place the “S&S” bottle before the “S&C” variation, Van Rensselear (1921:107) suggested that “S&S”

“succeeded [i.e., came after] Thos. Stebbins ‘S&C’ on flasks.”

T.S. (ca. 1824-1825)

McKearin & Wilson (1978:110-111, 544-545) described three flasks with “T.S.” below a Lafayette bust on the front. One had a DeWitt Clinton bust on the reverse with “COVENTRY” in an arch above “C-T” below the bust, and the other two had masonic symbols on the reverse. They suggested Thomas Stebins as the user of the “T.S.” initials and dated the flasks as being made in 1824 (Figures 12 & 13). Toulouse (1971:464-465) agreed that Thomas Stebbins was the user of the mark.

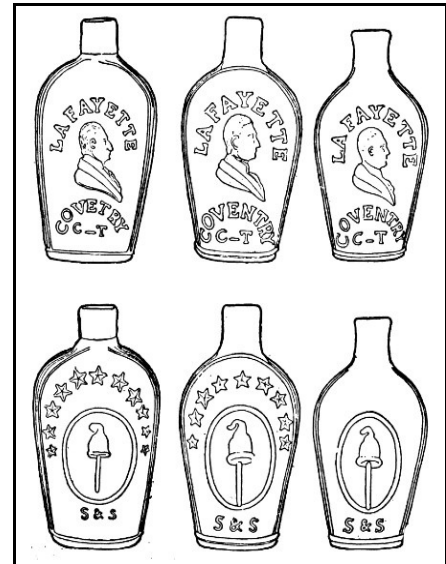


Figure 10 – S&S flasks (McKearin & Wilson 1978:545)

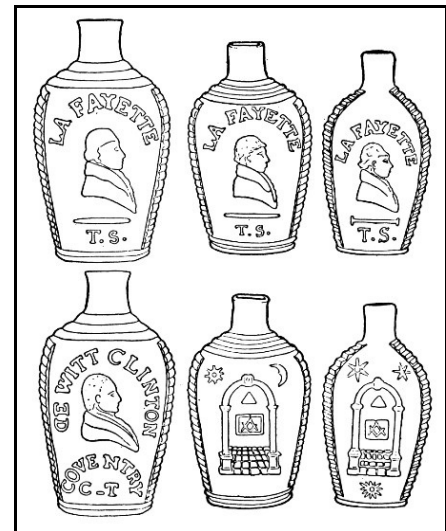


Figure 12 – T.S. flasks (McKearin & Wilson 1978:545)

Discussion and Conclusions

There is virtually no doubt that all of the flasks described above were made by the Coventry Glass Works during the ca. 1825 period or slightly later. The combination of “COVENTRY” and “C-T” embossing plus the distinct similarities in the flasks virtually eliminates any uncertainty. Similarly, Lafayette’s visit in 1824-1825 and DeWitt Clinton’s connection with the Erie Canal in the latter year also delineates the date (although, see below).



Figure 13 – T.S. flask
(Vuono 2014:12)

Table 1 – Chronology of the Coventry Glass Works and Related Events

Date	Event
1813	The Root family and others incorporated the Coventry Glass Works
1814	Coventry began production
1816	The Roots and others reorganized the corporation
1820	Thomas Stebbins (or Stebins & Stebins) acquired Coventry Glass Works about that year
1824	Marquis de Lafayette arrived for a visit to the U.S. in July
1825	Inception of Stebbins & Chamberlin (possibly 1926)
1825	Lafayette returned to France in November
1825	The Erie Canal was completed on October 26; project often called “Clinton’s Folly”
1828	Gilbert, Turner & Co. acquired Coventry Glass Works on October 31
1845	Probable closing of factory
1847	End of operating firm

* McKearin & Wilson (1978:109-110) suggested that the plant closed ca. 1948, with Rufus B. Chamberlin as the majority owner, although the operating firm may have lasted until 1850.

Unfortunately, we lack key primary sources or early secondary sources to date the sets of initials. Our earliest secondary source is from 1900, roughly 80 years after Thomas Stebbins apparently acquired the Coventry Glass Works. Barber (1900:56) specifically noted that “the

works were operated by Thomas Stebbins and his successors Stebbins & Chamberlin” from “about 1820” for the next ten years. Knittle (1927:196) placed Stebbins & Chamberlin at 1830, and McKearin & Wilson (1978:110) suggested “probably” 1825 as the Stebbins & Chamberlin date. See Table 1 for a chronology of events connected with the Coventry Glass Works and its flasks.

All sources agree that “T.S.” indicates Thomas Stebbins and that the original flask or flasks were made in 1824 or 1825. All sources also agree that S&C were initials for Stebbins and Chamberlin and that the flasks with that mark were also made near the same date (1825). All tacitly or overtly agree that the initial “S” in “S&S” again indicated Stebbins, but the second “S” is problematical.

Although McKearin & Wilson and Toulouse hypothesized an operating firm called Stebbins & Stebbins, there is no historical reference to that name – nor can we find any confirmation for such a name on internet or newspaper searches. In addition, none of the earlier owners (or later ones) had a last name with the “S” initial – which could have shown some brief continuity between the Stebbins tenure and the earlier operators. The mysterious “S” may, indeed, suggest a Stebbins relative in for a brief partnership, or it may have been any other financial backer or glass maker with the proper initial.

Toulouse discussed the possibility that the second “S” was a mold maker’s error but doubted that the same error would have been made on three separate flasks. There remains another, somewhat related possibility. Letters written to Charles Yockel, a noted Philadelphia mold maker (e.g., see Tyson 1971), show that virtually all 19th century missives describing molds and embossing were compiled in long-hand cursive, and this would almost certainly be true during the first half of the century. Many of these were obviously written in haste, with numerous misspellings and typographical errors. It is not a huge stretch of the imagination to picture a “C” with a curlicue serif at the bottom being mistaken for an “S” – and that error being applied to three flasks. Even a hastily scrawled “T.S.” could have become “S&S” if the letters were hand written in a quick flourish.

A closer look at dates and events may provide even tighter dating for the individual flasks. The Marquis de Lafayette arrived in the U.S. in July 1824 and visited Tolland, Connecticut, on September 4 of that year. Lafayette’s visit to Connecticut would have been an

excellent time for Thomas Stebbins to have created a commemorative flask – especially if Knittle was correct, and Stebbins *was* the creator of the first such flask made in an American glass house.

Ignoring the initials for the moment and only observing the other markings on the flasks, the logical initial flasks would be ones that fully commemorated Lafayette and France – with the bust of Lafayette on the front and a French cap on the reverse. This chronology would thus suggest that the flasks embossed “S&S” were the initials ones.

Flasks with Lafayette’s bust on the front and the Masonic symbols on the reverse likely were made next, and the logical connection between the symbols and Lafayette is clear. The date of Lafayette’s induction into the Masons has been lost, but he may have joined the order as early as 1777. There is no doubt, however, that he *was* a member (Masonic World 1934). This suggests that flasks with the “T.S.” logo *followed* those with “S&S” marks.

Lafayette returned to France in November 1825, another likely date for a commemorative flask. Conveniently, the Erie Canal – often called “Clinton’s Folly” because of the involvement of New York Governor DeWitt Clinton – was completed on October 26 of the same year. Thus, the logical reason for the addition of the bust of Clinton to the Lafayette flasks was the combination of the two events in late 1825. The flask with the two busts and “T.S.” initials was probably the first of these. The one with “S&C” likely followed. Since the glass house under Stebbins alone probably made the Lafayette/Clinton flask in late 1825, the firm of Stebbins & Chamberlin was unlikely to have been formed prior to the early months of 1826. The flask with both busts and “C-T” below Clinton – with *no* other initials – could have been made anytime after October 1825 and possibly as late as 1828 by Gilbert, Turner & Co. See Table 2 for this possible sequence of events.

Using this logical sequence of flasks reorganizes the probable chronological order of initials and calls for further speculation. This suggests that the “S&S” logo – and, thereby, Stebbins & Stebbins (or whomever the second “S” represents) preceded Thomas Stebbins or at least his “T.S.” mark. Although it is possible that the Masonic emblem flasks were the first, that would mean that the “T.S.” logo was initially used, followed by “S&S” – then a return to “T.S.” Logically, the “T.S.” marks should remain as a group, thereby following the “S&S” logos. This also decreases the likelihood that “S&S” was connected with “S&C.”

Table 2 – Possible Chronology of Lafayette Flasks

Initials	Characteristics	Date
S&S	Lafayette front; Liberty cap reverse	late 1824
T.S.	Lafayette front; Masonic symbols reverse	late 1824-mid-1825
T.S.	Lafayette front; Clinton reverse	late 1825
S&C	Lafayette front; Clinton reverse	late 1825-early 1826
none	Lafayette front; Clinton reverse	late 1825-early 1826

Assuming that the sequence of flasks is correct, and “S&S” was, indeed, the original logo, the realm of possibilities listed above must shift. One possibility is that Stebbins & Stebbins (or Stebbins & S?) was the original firm. Since no one has produced a primary source document to place Stebbins – alone – at the glass house, this scenario is as likely as any other, although this would suggest that Stebbins & whomever was the operating company from ca. 1820 to 1824, when the partner left, and Stebbins was alone for a year or so, after which he took on Chamberlin as a partner. Conversely, Stebbins may have been alone from ca. 1820 to 1823, have taken a partner whose name began with “S” in 1824, had the partner leave in 1825, and added Chamberlin in 1826. Confused yet?

Genealogy provides one final possible insight into the “S&S” mystery. Although we have not found a direct sequence for the Stebbins family, a Thomas Stebbins (1698-1793) fought in the American Revolution. One of his sons was named Thomas and this may have been the Thomas Stebbins who lived from 1748 to 1856. Another Thomas Stebbins (1778-1836) was likely the grandson of the original Thomas, and this was probably the Thomas Stebbins who owned or operated the Coventry Glass Works. The original Thomas also had a son, grandson, and great-grandson, each named Josiah. The great-grandson married Eliza Kingsbury Case, the granddaughter of Nathaniel Root and his wife, Elizabeth Kingsbury, in 1818.

This provides a family connection between Stebbins and the Root family. In addition, Josiah’s marriage into the family in 1818 is incredibly serendipitous. Nathaniel Root may have brought his grandson-in-law into the business as a wedding present (the “about 1820” of the sources), along with Josiah’s uncle, Thomas. Although we can find no documentary evidence,

this would have created Stebbins & Stebbins. If Josiah moved on to another line of work in 1825, Thomas Stebbins would have embossed his own initials on the next generation of flasks, followed by “S&C” later in the year.

Future research should center around a search of Connecticut records. Did Thomas Stebbins have any relatives in the area? If so, is there *any* indication that one of them went into business with him? Was anyone else with a last name beginning with “S” closely connected to Stebbins? Finally, it would be nice to have documentary sources for the opening dates for Stebbins involvement with the glass works and for Stebbins & Chamberlin.

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