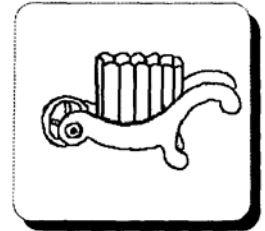




Salty Comments

No. 50

Facts and Opinion about Open Salt Collecting



Most glass salt collections - ours included - center on cute little dishes that were made for individual place settings at the table. Almost all of these are pressed, and were made after 1865 when the glass industry learned how to produce high-quality glass with a low cost soda-lime formula. The period immediately before this - the Lacy era, 1825-50 - came just after the glass press was invented. Some people concentrate on the lacy salts, although a comprehensive collection of these will leave you pocketbook much thinner. Few people collect the glass salts made before 1825, however, although they are often available at a reasonable cost. One indication of this is that few are shown in the salt books we use - either Heacock & Johnson or Smith. We think they are attractive, however, and find it hard to pass one by when we see it.

In hunting for information on early salts, we have to rely on the research of others. We know of no old catalogs, like those we find for glass companies operating 100-150 years ago. There are several authors who have studied the older glass, and who shed some light on what open salts were like before 1825, but few cite their sources of information. What we will cover here is a consensus of what we have read, but is not based on any original research.

Before the invention of the glass press, salts were made one by one by skilled workers using a blowpipe. The earliest types we know of are the “Stiegel” kind, named after Baron Stiegel who established a glass house in Manheim, PA about 1765. He brought in glass blowers from Europe, so the designs that he made were the ones that the blowers had learned before they came. Because each is hand made, there are a great number of variations in the final shapes. Figure 1 shows two representative ones. They are called pattern molded, because the design on the glass was made by blowing a bubble of glass into a mold before final forming. The molds were often made of wood which had to be replaced frequently, so there are a variety of patterns. When Stiegel went bankrupt in 1774, his workers migrated, taking the know-how for making open salts with them. As a result it is impossible to prove that a specific salt was made at the Stiegel glass factory. Some “Stiegel type” salts have been documented as being made in Zanesville, OH. In addition, there are enough of them around that we wonder how so many survived. We’re still asking people for information about possible reproductions.

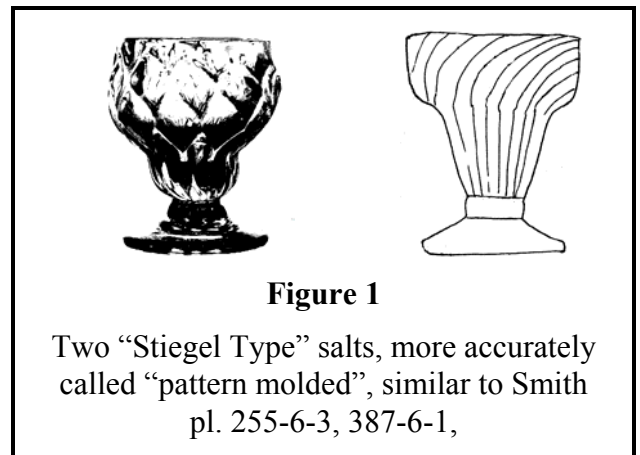


Figure 1

Two “Stiegel Type” salts, more accurately called “pattern molded”, similar to Smith pl. 255-6-3, 387-6-1,

In the period before 1825, many salts were imported from England and Europe. Cyril Manley, an author and salt collector in England, has done a substantial amount of research on what glass salts of this period looked like. He shows Stiegel type salts dated about 1725, which he calls Wrythen decoration. Where the “Wrythen” name originated we have yet to discover. It is possible that some of the Stiegel types we have are really English, but we couldn’t tell one if we saw it.

While most of the Stiegel types were clear, some were made in color. We have cobalt blue, which is the most common, and one in an emerald green. There may be a few more colors available, but all of them are expensive. All of these designs, both crystal and color, were made only in flint glass as far as we know.

There is some controversy about whether the Stiegel type dishes are salts or not. The Dewitt Wallace museum at Williamsburg has them labeled as “jellies”, meaning dishes to serve what we call gelatin today. The ones with a shoulder below the top they call “syllabub glasses”, with the shoulder designed to support the whipped cream used as a topping. They say that British museums use this designation also, but Cyril Manley calls them salts in his writings. We guess that one man’s jellies can be another man’s salts, especially if that’s what he collects. We know it’s true in our collection. Our tried and true formula says, “When it is part of the collection, it is an open salt no matter what someone called it before”.

A more practical dish for serving salt is one with heavy walls which can take more abuse. The early ones of these were made by blowing glass directly into a full-size mold. When the salt cakes, this kind of dish can stand the poking needed to break up the mass. Manley dates this type as early as 1725 in England. They were made in the U.S. in the early 1800’s, according to old glass company records. Because they have heavy walls, you cannot feel the details of the pattern on the inside, like you can with thin-wall ones. The inside shape still conforms to the larger contour changes which does not happen on pressed glass. When the shape was blown it left a jagged rim, and the top was subsequently ground or cut. A variety of shapes were made by this method, and as far as we know all are in flint glass and none have been reproduced. They are not a popular collector’s item, so prices have not risen to the point where it would be profitable to make copies. It’s a shame that more collectors don’t appreciate them, but that keeps prices down for us who do.

Not all salts that were blown into a mold have heavy walls. We don’t know when the practice started, but thin-walled salts were made for a time using full-size molds. There might be a little shaping of the dish after blowing, especially to finish the rim, but the basic shape and size were established in the first blowing. These gained the unfortunate name of “blown three-mold” glassware, because most of the molds had 3 parts to them. The name has led some less informed antique dealers to label anything from a three-part mold as “blown three-mold”, even though some are obviously pressed. We have two of these mold-blown thin wall salts, but they look impractical for extended use.

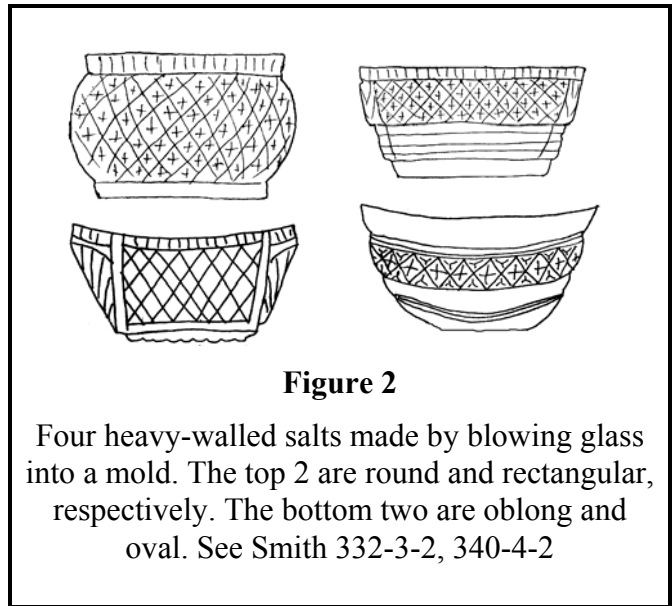


Figure 2

Four heavy-walled salts made by blowing glass into a mold. The top 2 are round and rectangular, respectively. The bottom two are oblong and oval. See Smith 332-3-2, 340-4-2

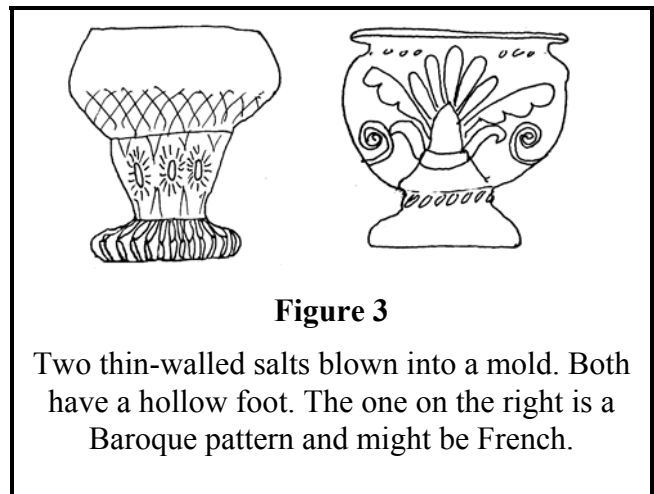


Figure 3

Two thin-walled salts blown into a mold. Both have a hollow foot. The one on the right is a Baroque pattern and might be French.

The foot is hollow, which means that it fills up with caked salt rather quickly unless it is washed carefully after each use. It's interesting to have them as examples of mold blown dishes, however, because many books on antique glass talk about this type.

Blowing glass into a mold gives a pattern on the outside which is somewhat blurred because the glassmaker has only so much strength in his lungs. In France there was one blower who suffered from consumption (tuberculosis) and who had a very hard time blowing hard enough. To solve his problem and keep his job, he invented a hand pump which he put on the end of his blowpipe. This gave even more pressure than his healthy counterparts could, so some factories over there adopted it for regular use. Glassware made with this system have much sharper detail in their pattern. We have a pump-blown salt in a black (dark cobalt) Drapery pattern, which resembles one shown in an 1840 French catalog (Heacock & Johnson p. 286, first row, second dish). We showed it to a lady who is studying French glass factories, and she felt it almost certainly was made with "the pump".

Fancier and more expensive early salts were made by cutting a blown glass blank. Here the dating is a little harder, because cut glass has been made continuously for over 200 years. People who have studied cut glass often judge it by the type of patterns used. A salt that Manley has dated about 1810 is very close to one of ours, shown in Figure 5. Because these salts are hand made, there are a great variety of shapes possible. All the old ones are made from blown blanks,

however, and are lead (flint) glass. You can look at and feel the inside to tell that the dish was blown instead of pressed, which gives you a clue that it could be old. Much glass like this was made by the original Waterford operation in Ireland. Present-day Waterford crystal is not related to the original company, though the prices are sometimes higher than what it would cost to buy an old one.. Remember - if it has a Waterford mark, it is modern.

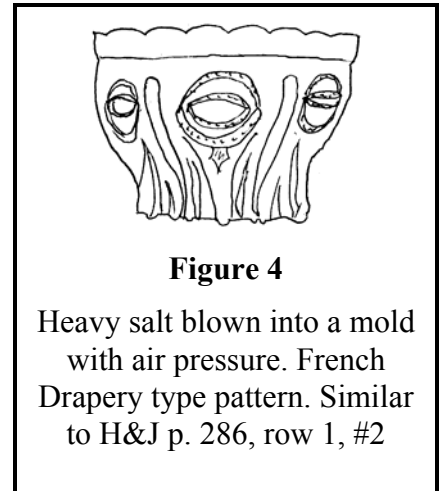


Figure 4

Heavy salt blown into a mold with air pressure. French Drapery type pattern. Similar to H&J p. 286, row 1, #2

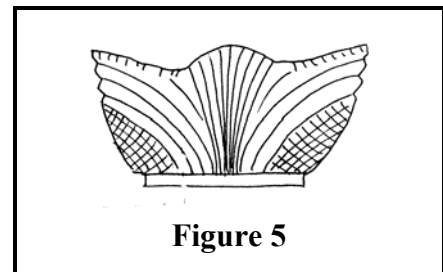


Figure 5

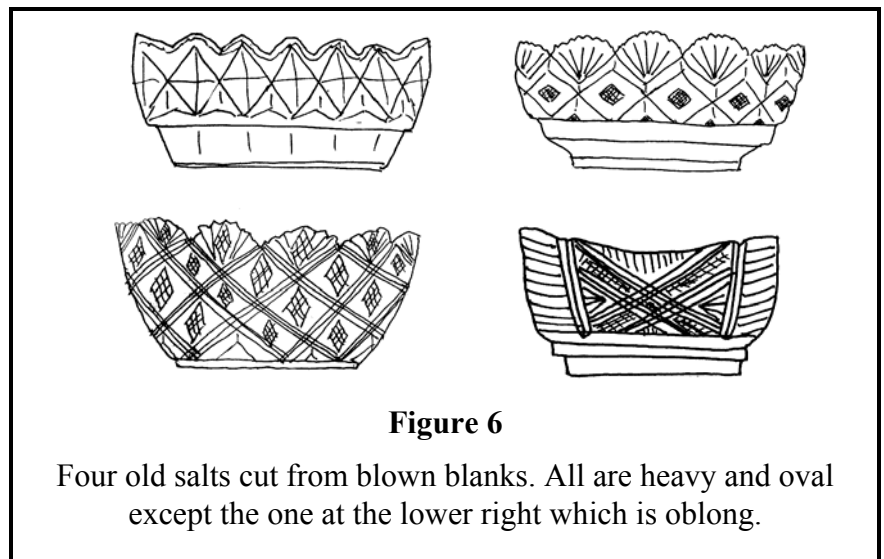
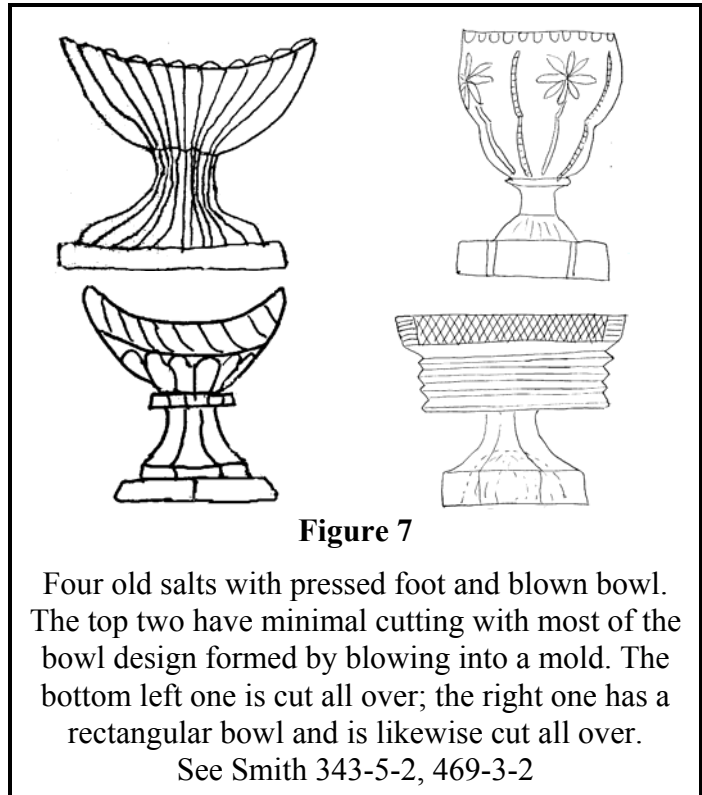


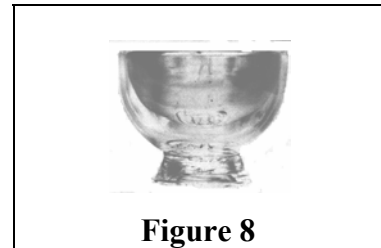
Figure 6

Four old salts cut from blown blanks. All are heavy and oval except the one at the lower right which is oblong.

The first salts to use pressing technology were made with a blown bowl on a pressed foot, as shown in Figure 7. Manley dates the English salts like this in the late 1700's. These are hand made, and there are many different designs. According to some books, the base was made with a pressing device that looked like a large pair of pliers. Glass was dropped into one side of the jaws and was formed by squeezing the jaws together. The finished foot was attached to the blown bowl directly or with a wafer of glass in between. The inside of the foot often had raised ribs, which has led collectors of early glass to call it a "lemon-squeezer foot". In cutting the dish, the outside of both the foot and bowl could be polished and decorated. There are many variations in the final shape and decoration



One interesting type of salt that Manley shows is what we call Mercury Glass. These are double-wall dishes, where the hollow portion is silvered to rival the look of silver. The glassmaker blew a bubble and formed the foot on it. Then he heated the end in the furnace and inhaled through his blowpipe. This made the end of the bubble pull inwards, forming the bowl where the salt is placed. We doubt that this technique was used with larger dishes, otherwise the inhaler would get his lungs filled with very hot air, but it certainly could be used for small open salts. He dates these kind of salts about 1710, though he doesn't show any that are actually silvered and doesn't tell how he established when they were made. We have always understood that mercury glass in the U.S. was made about the mid-1800's.



Double-wall glass salt, ready for silvering.

Although they are not plentiful, these really old salts can be found if you look for them. It's a shame they are not appreciated more, but if they were their prices would rise out of sight. If you do not have some already, we suggest that you find a few for your collection for their historical value.

Ed Berg
401 Nottingham Rd., Newark, DE 19711

June 1995

- References:
- C.C. Manley, "Changing Styles in English Glass Salts", *The Antiques Journal*, August 1972.
 - N. Hudson Moore, "Old Glass, European and American"
 - G. Bernard Hughes, "English, Scottish and Irish Table Glass"
 - William Heacock & Patricia Johnson, "5000 Open Salts"
 - Alan B. & Helen B. Smith, series of 10 books, "Open Salts Illustrated"