

# The Doorknob Collector



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*A Nonprofit Organization Devoted to the Study and Preservation of Ornamental Hardware*

## AN OVERVIEW – GLASS, HISTORIC AND COLLECTIBLE

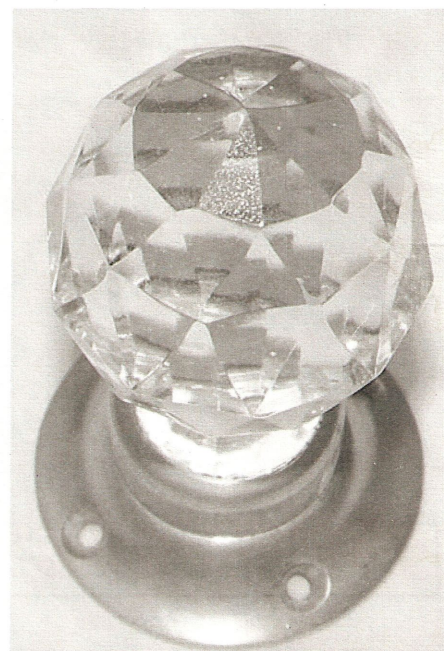
*By Maud Eastwood*

Few areas of collecting vintage articles have been as widely addressed and professionally covered as the field of glass in all its complexities. But what is long overdue is a comprehensive treatment of glass doorknobs which addresses the needs of the serious collector seeking to identify acquisitions. This is a collectible that grows on the seeker. The more in-depth the search, the greater the understanding and appreciation, not only of the decorative treatment but also the underlying substance.

Glass is unique among mediums used in the manufacture of door knobs. It is found in nature at volcanic sites as obsidian, formed by the melting and hardening of common earthly elements. From molten state to solid state, it neither expands nor contracts and is not subject to deterioration.

The history of glass reaches far back into antiquity. Still preserved is a glass object from the tomb of a Pharaoh of 1500 B.C. There is also graphic evidence of glass-blowing in that era: on the walls of one tomb is a depiction of a man blowing glass. Glass beads from ancient Egypt display patterns that are also used in paperweights from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were six ventures which unsuccessfully sought to establish glass works. In the same period, England had 98 operating glass houses. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, successful American glass houses were largely formed by persons who had previously been involved in glass-making in Europe.



Facetted knob by Gustov Elstner C. 1880

According to E. M. Elvill, The Collector's Dictionary of Glass (London Country Life, Ltd., 1961), glass making in the colonies was a under the system of Royal monopolies in which the right to engage in a particular trade was granted to a single man, who was obligated to pay a royalty to the Crown. These glass monopolies were eventually all unsuccessful. For example, Thomas Darling of Connecticut was granted the glass-making monopoly in 1747 for a 20 year period, but never exercised his rights. (See Eastwood, The Antique Doorknob, hereafter referred to as "TAD", p. 24).

Inside		
Doorknob Exchange .....	4	Photography for VDA..... 3
Glass- Historic and Collectible ...	1-3	Point of Interest .....4
		Business Members..... 5
		Welcome to Baltimore..... 4

Seeking experienced help, Isaac Mosely advertised in 1780 in the Pennsylvania Packet for “A Glass Maker – Master Worker Well Recommended”. Benjamin Blakewell’s New York importing firm commissioned searches in England and France in 1804-1806 for experienced glass workers. In 1808 he established Blakewell & Ensell in Pittsburgh as the first successful flint glass company in America.

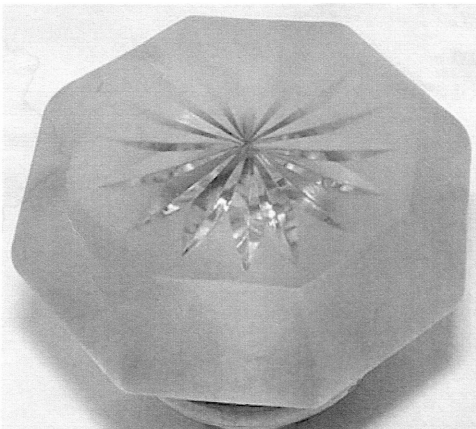
Early glass houses were founded, failed, moved operations, reopened under different names, with out without former owners, managers or workers. Documentation of the early glass houses is sketchy and fragmented. As N. Hudson Moore stated in his classic work Old Glass, European and American (7<sup>th</sup> Reprint, Tudor Publishing Co., 1935) “The story of the work of the early American glass makers is still much fogged”.

In the 1820s there was a revolutionary development in glass manufacture in the United States, the invention of mechanical glass pressing. Between 1825 and 1830, there were four patents granted relating to glass knobs. The second patent was granted to Henry Whitney and Enoch Robinson (remember him? See TDC 123) of the New England Glass Works in Cambridge, Massachusetts. So what were these machines? Not easy to tell, due to a fire in the Patent Office in 1836 which destroyed all patents issued since 1790.



Reading Knob Works 1927

Fortunately, however, Hellen McKearin discovered that the New England Glass Works had filed a patent infringement action against the Union Glass Company in 1829 for infringing the Whitney/Robinson patent, and in the court files was a Bill of Complaint which attached a copy of the patent specification. The machinery described is a hand-operated bench press where the molten glass is introduced into a mold, and then a plunger (mounted on a lever) is depressed, which both forms the top of the knob and presses a hole through the molten glass to receive a screw which would fasten the knob to a surface. In 1832 the New England Glass Company prevailed in the lawsuit. Little is known of the other three patents issued during the period. See McKearn, The Case of the Pressed Glass Knobs, The Magazine Antiques (August 1951, p. 118); Wilson & Nelson, The Role of Glass Knobs in Glassmaking and Furniture, Id., (May 1996, p. 750).



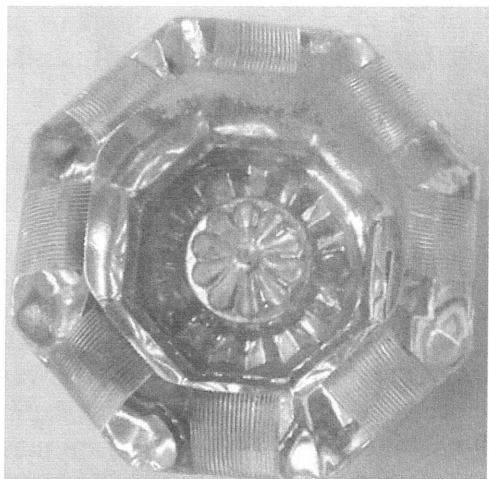
Reading Knob Works 1927

Glass knobs in this period were principally used for furniture. The Whitney/Robinson invention, which allowed standardization and greater production (and thus lower labor costs) proved very popular. By 1833, 40 to 50 machines were being used by the New England Glass Company, and there was a great increase in the usage of pressing machines and new patents related thereto. Deming Jarvis (1790-1869) a legend in American glass making - having initially organized the the New England Glass Company in 1817, a rival, the Boston and Sandwich Co. at Sandwich, near Cape Cod, in 1826, the Mount Washington factory in South Boston and the Cape Cod Glass Co. in 1858 - was issued five patents between 1821 and 1830 dealing with mechanical methods for forming and molding glass.

Glass knobs of various patterns and types of glass were offered in Boston and Philadelphia advertising directories of 1830-1834. These included plain and cut furniture knobs and knobs for inside and



outside doors, including patterns which could be made on short notice. As Bishop, History of American Manufacturers 1608-1860 (Edward Young, 1864), noted, glass knobs were the first “domestic only” in Amassa Goodrich’s store without any competing imported versions. (Goodrich’s store of 1834 is considered to be the prototype of the American hardware store.).



Technical Glass of California c. 1920

When the glass industry turned to producing of glass door knobs (not simply, as before, furniture pulls), a new problem emerged: how to attach a glass knob to a metal shank? Enoch Robinson was issued multiple patents addressing this problem, see TDC 123, pp 3-4. See also TDC 132, p. 4, for pictures of door knobs of the period.

Silvered and flint glass knobs were advertised by 1857. Various sizes of ribbed, twisted, plain, opaque and pearl glass knobs were offered in 1868. A poster of 1875 advertised a public auction in Boston of 5,000 packages of plain, pressed, cut, flint and colored glassware.

Few glass houses identified their knob patterns by name, although Wm. Hall’s 1897 catalogue named 48 knob patterns. Y&T, which numbered its illustrations, also listed the knobs by shape and whether they were pressed or cut. See TAD, p. 26-29. Of note is that the patterns found in the Wm. Hall catalogues are the same as those offered by the four major hardware manufacturers through the turn of the century (the author inspected W, Hall catalogues for 1897, 1901 and 1910 in the Philadelphia Athenaeum in the 1970s). For example, both Corbin and Russell & Erwin (both of which became operating divisions of American Hardware Corporation) offered Pairpoint knobs, but with different metal shanks.

I trust that, given the foregoing, the reader will see the validity of glass-making as a time-honored and significant profession of mankind, worthy of attention and collection, and of one of the least space-taking of glassware, glass doorknobs. Will collectible doorknobs be available for newly inspired collectors? Without doubt. Collections will be downsized or disbursed and offered for sale, family heirlooms will be released. Museum collections have been redirected – in one case artifacts on loan have been returned. And, of course, the internet rages on. Good hunting!

## **Photography of Unpublished Knobs for *Victorian Decorative Art***

### ***Please Note if you have knobs to be photographed***

As of now, there are no plans to photograph hardware at the convention for the VDA. But if you have hardware to be photographed, please contact Win Applegate at [WINGATE34@OPTONLINE.NET](mailto:WINGATE34@OPTONLINE.NET) or (609) 586-7285

# A Point of Interest

*By Nick Doto*

During our convention in Baltimore, a special event will be taking place, a once in a lifetime exhibit of the Victorian master, L. C. Tiffany. L.C. Tiffany is to glass as Ludwig Kreuzinger plus Russell & Erwin are to decorative builders' hardware.

You might want to put this on your travel agenda. The display is in Richmond, VA at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts beginning on May 29 and running through August 15. Some of the items will be on display for the first and only time in the United States.

I would like to encourage any member who cannot make the entire convention to try to make one or two days or any part of the week. All members are made welcome. We love to meet new members as well as those attending for the first time. You will be amazed at the amount and diversity of the hardware that will be on display there. It is a wonderful chance to find some piece that you have been looking for years. So bring along some of your extra pieces of hardware to sell or trade. Remember there are more than just doorknobs. You will see both door and window hardware and there is always those unusual pieces to just sigh over - or to buy.

Hope to see both old friends and to meet new ones. See you in Baltimore.

## WELCOME TO BALTIMORE !!

### JULY 20-23

You have all received your Convention Packages, so there is only one thing left to do – return them, filled out, with a check. This is particularly addressed to our members who have not yet attended a Convention. Nobody bites, everybody is friendly and helpful, and it doesn't matter if you have only a few knobs to show - or even if you don't have any yet. It is a great place to start your collection, to improve it, and/or to show it.

## The Doorknob Exchange

Members are reminded that your dues entitle you to advertise items for sale, trade, or wanted at no charge. ADCA is not responsible for any transaction or the condition of the items advertised.

### ***Wanted: Old Hooks***

My true love is old hooks – especially figural, dragons & mythical characters, bronze and/or brass preferred. Please contact me via e-mail, phone or postal mail; Pictures are greatly appreciated.

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# Last Chance!

## *Get your Reservation in for the 2010 Convention in Baltimore NOW!*

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