

The Chain-Border Pressed Glass Tray

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The pressed chain-border tray¹ was arguably the most ambitious and complicated form produced or attempted by the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company or any of their competitors during the early period of American pressed glass. Machine pressing of glass is generally accepted as being invented in the United States in either 1825 or 1826.² The initial production consisted of small simple articles like bases for free-blown lamps, as well as candlesticks, cup plates, salts, and furniture knobs. Most pieces of the earliest period featured primarily angular ornamentation combined with simple scrolls, hearts, and fans.³

As mold makers and glass workers become more comfortable with the new concept of pressing glass, technological improvements like the cap ring, allowed for the manufacturing of wares with more intricate and stylistically pleasing designs.⁴ These improvements would usher in what is considered by many to be the most aesthetically beautiful and technically important period of pressed glass in America, the so-called “Lacy Period” of 1830-1860.

The subject of this article explicates the difficulties that mold makers and glass workers encountered as they explored the limitations of the new pressing technology while it was still in its infancy. The exact production period of the chain-border tray is undocumented, but it is thought to date as early as 1830 and

¹ Due to the absence of original source materials, e.g. company catalogs, which specifically names this particular form, the author has chosen the most commonly used designation, “tray” for means of brevity. Other authors have chosen to refer to this form as dish, a cake plate and a cake tray.

² Kenneth M. Wilson, *American Glass, 1760-1930: The Toledo Museum of Art*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1994, p.265.

³ For examples, see Raymond E. Barlow & Joan E. Kaiser, *The Glass Industry in Sandwich, Volume 1*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1993, pp. 105-107, figs. 1001-1008; and Wilson [note 2], pp. 299-310.

⁴ For discussions on early machine pressing and its development see Barlow and Kaiser [note 3], pp. 91-96; and Wilson [note 2], pp. 265-271.

possible as late as 1845.⁵ It is firmly attributed to the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company based on fragments dug at the factory site—first reported by Dr. Charles W. Green in 1937⁶ and most recently corroborated by Raymond Barlow & Joan Kaiser.⁷

The tray has been recorded in three distinct variations, each featuring the open-chain border and open handles, as well as a newly discovered variation with neither the border nor the handles. The three chain-border variants were first discussed by Edith Gaines in a 1971 article in *The Magazine Antiques*.⁸ The plain-rim variation was discovered by the author in 2006. All examples feature an identical complex central design of diamonds, scrolls, lilies and rosettes, all surrounded by a rope-like table ring. The variations, which occur in the rim and shoulder design, appear to be the result of the need to rework the original mold due to a deficiency and/or breach to the mold itself.

The first version of the tray (fig. 1), produced from what appears to be the original mold, features a rope-like top edge on the chain border and four 10-point stars on the inner border. These stars are placed symmetrically on each side and end within each of the four peacock-eye plumes. The singular example of this tray recorded originally in the William J. Elsholz collection⁹ had been broken and repaired with staples.

In the second version of the tray (fig. 2), the rope-like top edge has been erased leaving the upper portion of the chain unpatterned. This modification appears to be the initial attempt to improve the efficiency of the mold. The original serrated design on the top of the rim would have made it more difficult for the

⁵ Barlow and Kaiser place the tray's production period as 1830-1840 ([note 3], p. 119, fig. 1047), while Wilson narrows the period to 1835-1840 ([note 2], p. 370, fig. 497); and Jane Spillman (*American and European Pressed Glass in The Corning Museum of Glass*, p. 101, fig. 300) expands the date to ca. 1830-1845.

⁶ Dr. Charles W. Green, "A Most Important Discovery at Sandwich," *The Magazine Antiques*, v. XXXII, no. 2, August 1937, pp. 58-59.

⁷ Barlow and Kaiser [note 3], p. 119, fig. 1047.

⁸ Edith Gaines, "The chain border tray: three versions," *The Magazine Antiques*, v. C., no. 2, August 1971, pp. 256-257. The article was based on information supplied by James H. Rose and illustrations supplied by William J. Elsholz.

⁹ Richard A. Bourne Co. Inc., Public Auction: *The Elsholz Collection of Early American Glass, Sessions V & VI*, 1987, pp. 473-474, lot #1773. Elsholz acquired this tray from George and Michael Abraham, 5-27-48.

molten glass to fill in the chain completely¹⁰ as well as hindering removal from the mold after pressing. The only known example of this variation, also from the Elsholz collection¹¹ exhibits a small unintentional lump of glass on the reverse of the shoulder at one of the stars – apparently made by a seepage of molten glass through a small mold break. It seems reasonable to theorize that this break was the result of the machining process needed to erase the rope design on the upper rim.

The third, and most often encountered version¹² exhibits only two of the original four inner-border stars, one at each end below the handle. In this version the rim remains the same, but the mold was rather crudely repaired at the aforementioned shoulder break, which resulted in the elimination of the corresponding star. Presumably in order to keep the overall design symmetrical, the star on the opposite shoulder was removed in the same manner. On all of the examples of this version that I have observed, the stippling of the patched area is much less defined and the outline of the patch is quite obvious.

The fourth, and most likely final version of the tray, was produced without the chain edges and the end handles. The repaired mold used in version three was reworked yet a third time by removing all traces of the original open-work border and handles. At first glance, the author and numerous other glass scholars mistook this variation for an example with its rim and handles removed by post-production grinding and polishing, but upon close examination it became evident that this fourth variation tray exhibits a mold line encircling its rim indicating that it was pressed in the manner.¹³ There are only two examples of this borderless version tray currently known: the first example discovered by the author,¹⁴ and a second example contemporaneously discovered by Jane Spillman, in the collection of the Corning Museum of Glass. It is very likely that additional examples of version one, two, and four of this tray will come to light as a result of this article.

¹⁰ One handle of the tray in Figure 2 is incomplete due to the molten glass not correctly filling in the mold. The handles of the tray in Figure 1 show a crack-like line in each handle due to the molten metal not properly melding.

¹¹ Bourne, *Elsholz, Sessions I & II*, 1986, p. 131, lot #517. Elsholz acquired this tray from James H. Rose, 7-1-67, formerly in the collection of William Tallman Russel.

¹² This third variation is represented in numerable museum collections including The Sandwich Glass Museum, The Corning Museum of Glass, and the Toledo Museum of Art, as well as numerous private collections.

¹³ A number of altered examples of the third version of this tray exist that have had their damaged chain-border and sometimes handles removed by grinding and polishing. These post-production altered examples are easily identified because they show clear evidence of polishing to the rim and exhibit no indication of a mold line at the rim edge.

¹⁴ Green Valley Auctions, Inc., *Seventh Annual Spring Cataloged Auction of Glass & Lighting*, 2007, p. 122, lot #842. This tray was formerly in the collection of Bill Graham.

The Boston & Sandwich chain-border tray represents an important achievement for American mold and glassmakers in the second quarter of the 19th century. Unfortunately, there is very little information available concerning mold makers of this period, but it is quite obvious that the mold for this tray would have involved countless hours of tedious work to complete.¹⁵ Due to the unique open-work characteristics of the design, the glass factory pressman and workers had to overcome numerous production difficulties not previously encountered. The overall rarity of the tray in any of its variations would seem to indicate a short production period and/or a limited success rate of producing acceptable specimens. The extreme rarity of versions one and two indicates that the original mold and subsequent altered mold must have been in use for a very short period, possibly only a few turns for each. The fact that version three is the most commonly encountered variation suggests that the second mold modifications resulted in a somewhat more successful production period.

The extreme mold alterations of the fourth version, which completely changed not only the aesthetic integrity of the tray, but probably more significantly, the practical usefulness of the form, appear to be a final attempt by Sandwich or possibly a second firm to produce a satisfactory product from the original mold. Its rarity indicates that this final venture was unsuccessful and the mold was most likely abandoned, thus bringing to an end the saga of arguably the most arduous project undertaken by the early mold makers and glass pressers of early Industrialized America.

The author would be very pleased to learn of any new discoveries of versions one, two, or four of this tray.

¹⁵ See Barlow and Kaiser [note 3], pp. 94-95, for a discussion of the relationship between Enoch S. Dillaway, Boston MA (a brass founder and mold maker) and Deming Jarves of the Boston & Sandwich Glass Company.