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## Henry Clay's Sherry Decanters

by  
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A remarkable pair of decanters at Ashland, Henry Clay's estate in Lexington, Kentucky, provides further evidence of the high esteem held by glass manufacturers for this great American politician, and sheds new light on American cut glass of the 1840s<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1).

The decanters were probably made in 1843 at M. & R. H. Sweeneys' North Wheeling Flint Glass Works.<sup>2</sup> The Sweeneys presented glass to Clay on at least two occasions, and the bulk of their known products are vessels with the same broad cut panels that dominate these decanters. The Sweeneys were prominent supporters of Clay's Whig party in Wheeling, which was a center of Whig support in northwestern Virginia.

While the Sweeneys' *second* recorded gift to Clay is well documented, the only hint of an earlier presentation is found in an account of a visit to Wheeling by \*E\*:

I was much gratified by a visit to Mr Sweeney's glass manufactory where we saw this interesting business in all its details, from the rough rock out of which the sand is made, to the most finished specimens of table and mantel piece ornaments—some beautiful specimens of which were manufactured here as a present to Mr. Clay.<sup>3</sup>

The timing of \*E\*'s visit in January 1844 could not have been more auspicious for Clay or the Sweeneys. While Clay was pursuing the 1844 Whig presidential nomination, the Sweeneys were stepping up production and marketing in the wake of the depression in the late 1830s and early 1840s, and finding themselves better able to do so than many of their rivals. Over the next few years their reputation grew by leaps and bounds.

Born and educated in Virginia in 1797, at age 20, Henry Clay moved to Lexington, Kentucky.<sup>4</sup> This same year two ambitious Irish-Americans, Colonel James O'Hara and Major Isaac Craig, erected the first glass manufactory west of the Allegheny Mountains in Pittsburgh. Two years later the glasshouse of Albert Gallatin and Balthazar Kramer opened south of Pittsburgh at New Geneva on the Monongahela River.

In Lexington, Clay launched his career as a lawyer and was enthusiastically received. He was elected to the State Legislature in 1803, and appointed to serve out unexpired terms in the United States Senate in 1806 and 1809. In 1811, he was elected to the House of Representatives where he was immediately chosen as Speaker.

Sent to Paris in 1814 by President James Madison as part of a delegation that also included Albert Gallatin and John Quincy Adams, Clay helped negotiate the Treaty of Ghent which ended the War of 1812.



Figure 1  
One of a pair of decanters presented to Henry Clay, about 1843. Ashland, Lexington, Kentucky.

On his return to the United States, Clay became one of the nation's leading advocates of protectionism, championing American industries and particularly those of the Midwest. Due in no small part to Clay's encouragement, Congress enacted Tariff Acts in 1816 and 1824, which were designed to protect nascent American industry from foreign imports, including glass dumped on the American market with the specific intent of crippling American manufacturers.

In the few years following the Tariff of 1824, several major glass factories opened, including Deming Jarves' Boston and Sandwich Glass Company on Cape Cod, the Dummert's Jersey Glass Company in Jersey City, and the Union Glass Works in Kensington near Philadelphia.

Tariffs were the first of three elements of Clay's famous "American System." The others were federally funded internal improvements to ease the transportation of goods and information along the nation's waterways and roads, and a Bank of the United States to reduce the risks of selling goods to distant towns by ensuring that each town's bank notes would be honored. Each element resonated particularly well in industrial New England and the Midwest. However, they hurt Clay's political chances in the agricultural south. Primarily consumers of manufactured goods, southerners saw tariff protection as raising prices for desirable European goods.

Clay cleverly converted his failed bid in 1824 for the presidential nomination of the Democratic-Republican party<sup>5</sup> into the post of Secretary of State in the administration of John Quincy Adams. In anticipation of a four-year term in Washington, Clay placed Ashland in the hands of an overseer and sold much of its contents at auction. Glass items in the sale included "4 Large parlour & dining room mirrors" sold to "Geo. C. Thompson" for \$300, "1 Chandelier" sold to "Mr. Wickliff" for \$50, "1 pr. Cut Glass Lamps" sold to "D Castleman" for \$11.50, "1 Caster" sold to E. Warner for \$6.50, and "8 Glass Jars" sold to "D Castleman" for 35¢ each.<sup>6</sup>

Early in 1825, glass manufacturers Bakewell, Page and Bakewell of Pittsburgh expressed their appreciation of Clay through the gift of a pair of decanters. Of the highest quality cut wares produced by Bakewell at the time, the decanters were exhibited alongside other American manufactures in the United States Capitol. Engraved in an octagonal panel of each decanter is the inscription "THE AMERICAN SYSTEM" and, in script, the letters "HC."<sup>7</sup>

Clay received a steady stream of gifts from his supporters, even after losing the presidency in 1832 to Andrew Jackson. On his return home to Lexington follow-

ing a tour of the northeast in November 1833, Clay wrote his son Henry Clay Jr.:

The journey has at the same time been the most gratifying and exciting I have ever performed, as you may judge from the papers. They have loaded me with presents and with all sorts of testimony of esteem. I have thought some times that I should be prostrated. But we are all living and tolerably well. . . .<sup>8</sup>

His whereabouts and even his former presence were newsworthy, including a visit to the American Institute Fair in New York City:

Cut Glass—We have received a beautiful present this morning from Mr. Joseph Baggott, No. 78 Maiden Lane. It is an elegant goblet, which formed one of the specimens of the rich display of cut glass, exhibited by Mr. Baggott at the late Fair—and none the less valuable for having been used by Mr. Clay. The pattern is superb—the cutting executed with admirable taste—and the quality of the glass itself of the purest quality, clear and bright as the most transparent crystal. The art of glass cutting seems to have arrived at perfection in this country, as any person may convince himself; by calling at Mr. B's warehouse, and examining his splendid assortments for themselves."<sup>9</sup>

Working at the Bakewell factory in Pittsburgh during the 1820s, the young Michael Sweeney learned the commercial value of exhibiting at fairs and presentations to politicians, lessons he would later exploit while operating a glass manufactory in Wheeling.<sup>10</sup>

Initially incorporated in 1835 as M. and R. H. Sweeney and Company, the North Wheeling Flint Glass Works was operated by a combination of Michael, Robert, Thomas, or another member of the Sweeney family until 1863. In 1839 it was reported that their glass articles were "made to every pattern and receive every variety of beautiful finish, cut, pressed, and plain. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Their success in the manufacture of both glass and iron allowed the Sweeneys to occupy positions of considerable importance within Wheeling.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike many of their major competitors, the Sweeneys were in a strong position to prosper when, in 1842, Clay pushed through yet another protective tariff. On March 18, 1843, the *Wheeling Times and Advertiser* was pleased to "perceive" that "Messrs. M. and R.H. Sweeney have again set their Flint Glass establishment in operation."

Three remarkable exhibition pieces allowed the Sweeneys to establish the North Wheeling Glass Works

as leader of the glass industry. The first of these “float bowls”<sup>13</sup> was described in early September 1843 as “of princely dimensions and appearance”<sup>14</sup> (Figure 2). Between 1844 and 1853 the Sweeneys exhibited and won prizes for the float bowls at exhibitions of the American Institute in New York and the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. They displayed them at their warehouse in Pittsburgh, and in Richmond and Baltimore. Before being shipped for its first display in Philadelphia, one was described as “an article that [Queen] Victoria might covet.”<sup>15</sup>

As the Sweeneys gained favor through the exhibition of their float bowls and other glassware, Clay ran for another presidential election in 1844. The iconography of his campaign included the United States Capitol, a train representing internal improvements, symbols of agriculture, and a trumpet bearing the word “CLAY,” as shown in an engraving from a Wheeling newspaper (Figure 3).<sup>16</sup> The importance of transportation is echoed on the base of the one pressed glass salt which has Clay’s name (Figure 4).<sup>17</sup> It features a similar train on its

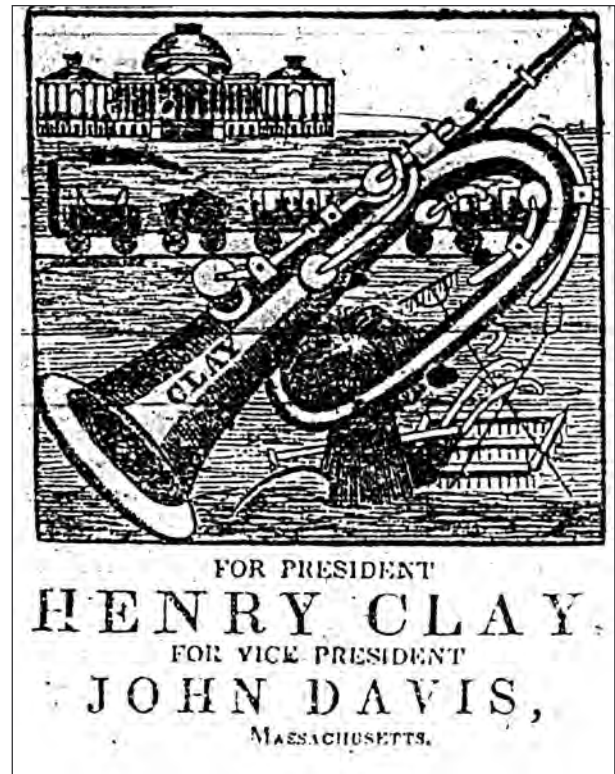


Figure 3  
Engraving which accompanied a laudatory biography of Clay in an 1844 Wheeling paper.



Figure 2  
One of three float bowls made by the Sweeneys between 1843 and 1846 for exhibition. OH. 5 feet. Collection of the Oglebay Institute Glass Museum, gift of Edward R. Sweeney.



Figure 4  
Side and base views of a rare lacy pressed salt dish. The train is similar to the one in Figure 2.

base, presumably alluding to Clay's advocacy of internal improvement. Clay was unsuccessful and lost his bid for the presidency once again. Within a few days of his loss, the Sweeneys presented Clay with one of the bowls, an extremely public gift that was of benefit to them both.<sup>18</sup> Following his defeat, Clay was showered with gifts and testimonials from Whigs across the nation. The Sweeneys' gift was the subject of a widely published exchange of letters between the two.<sup>19</sup> The letters gave Clay a double opportunity—to demonstrate his popularity with a major manufacturer, and to repeat the tenets of the American System. In exchange, the Sweeneys received public endorsement from a highly popular figure, had their name repeated in newspapers across the country, and placed a monumental advertisement of their skill in one of the most visited Kentucky homes—Henry Clay's Ashland. Clay expressed his:

regret that the Vase has not some more conspicuous place than in my humble dwelling, where it might be expected and would command the admiration of a greater number than can view it here. But we shall exhibit it to our visitors as a precious testimony of your friendly regard, and as a brilliant evidence of the degree of perfection to which that species of manufacture has already arrived.

No doubt each visitor to Ashland was taken to see the "vase" and told of the support, skill, and generosity of the Sweeneys of Wheeling.

If the sherry decanters (Figures 1 and 5), now at Ashland, were part of an earlier gift to Clay by the Sweeneys, the gift was considerably more intimate and personal than the later float bowl, and accompanied by considerably less fanfare.<sup>20</sup> Even the inscription—HC SHERRY—avoids the politics implied by the words "The American System" on the earlier Bakewell decanters.<sup>21</sup>

Dominating the cut design of the decanters is a series of broad flute or panel cuts. Broad flute cutting was a style in which the Sweeneys excelled and whose most monumental expression was in their float bowls.

The precise origins of broad flute cutting are still a matter of debate. A mid-1820s English pattern book includes prices which reveal the relative cheapness of cutting a decanter with bands of narrow, shallow flutes rather than bands of elaborate mitre-cut diamonds and stars.<sup>22</sup> However, the deep, broad flute cuts of the late 1830s were more luxurious. The fewer the number of panels, the broader and deeper each panel became, the more glass had to be removed by cutting to create the panel, and the thicker the original blank had to be to start with. This is reflected in the 1838–1840 price lists

of English glass manufacturer Apsley Pellatt.<sup>23</sup> While decanters with narrow flute cutting cost 8 to 9 shillings, comparable decanters in "fancy shapes" with eight flutes cost 16 to 18 shillings, and those with "six flutes only" cost 21 to 24 shillings. In 1837, a "set of very rich cut five-flute ware" made by the New England Glass Company was considered to be worthy of exhibition.<sup>24</sup>

In time, both British and American inventors patented mechanical aids for cutting broad flutes. John Gold of Birmingham, England, may have been issued a patent in 1834 specifically for cutting broad flutes.<sup>25</sup> In 1851, John P. Colné of New York used a paneled decanter to illustrate his patent for glass-cutting machinery that consisted of an adjustable series of frames, stops, and gages for accurately positioning, moving, and rotating a glass blank relative to a cutting wheel.<sup>26</sup> It was claimed that this method would ensure a greater accuracy in cutting, and in a manner that "may be advantageous when large quantities of the same pattern are to be produced."

As has been pointed out, Apsley Pellatt produced tableware with broad flutes, and Clay's sherry decanters share many features found in Pellatt's price lists, including tall flame-shaped stoppers and neck rings with shallow cuts above and below.<sup>27</sup> But, whether or not the Sweeneys had access to some unrecorded version of a machine like Colné's, much of the cut glass in the possession of the Oglebay Institute that descended in the Sweeney family is cut with broad flutes.

Moreover, the unconventional lettering (Figures 1 and 5) of the "HC" and "SHERRY" on the Clay decanters adds weight to the argument for a Wheeling origin. The font, called "Fat-Face,"<sup>28</sup> appears, for example, in an 1828 advertisement for J. D. Murphy's short-lived Cincinnati Glass Cutting Manufactory<sup>29</sup> and for a handbill of the Jersey Glass Company of Jersey City.<sup>30</sup> But it was also the typeface for the masthead of the *Wheeling Tri-Weekly Times and Advertiser* in the 1830s and 1840s as well as for the heading of a handbill *Price[s] Current of Glass Ware Manufactured by F. Plunket & Co. at the Wheeling Flint Glass Works, October 12, 1837.*<sup>31</sup>

The author could not find this style of lettering on objects known to have been made by the New England Glass Company,<sup>32</sup> The Boston and Sandwich Glass Company, or the Union Glass Company of Philadelphia. The only other piece found with similar lettering was a two-handled communion cup presented to the Unitarian Church of Meadville, Pennsylvania, by Benjamin Bakewell.<sup>33</sup> The lettering, "DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME," is in the same "Fat-Face" font, with large circular periods between the words similar to those following the letters "H.C." on Clay's decanters.

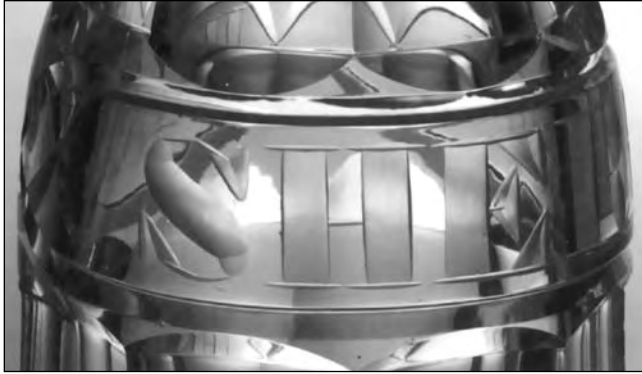


Figure 5  
The lettering of the word SHERRY on Clay's decanters.

The mid-1840s were difficult times for Pittsburgh and the Bakewells. The elderly Benjamin Bakewell died in February 1844, and in 1845, the factory was burnt to the ground in a fire that destroyed the heart of the city.

Since no other “Fat-Face” inscriptions have been found on Sweeney glass, the possibility that they were added by an independent engraver should be considered.<sup>34</sup> However, this does not preclude a Sweeney origin.

Whether or not future scholarship concludes that the sherry decanters were made and presented to Clay by the Sweeneys, they represent the finest in American broad flute cutting and must have been the gift of an ardent supporter during or soon after his 1844 presidential campaign.

At the very least, they are rare examples of early American glass presented to a prominent American who supported the cause of their makers.

References:

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1. The overall height of each decanter with stopper is 14¼ inches. Without stoppers they are 10¼-inches high. The point-to-point diameter of each base is 4½ inches. The bases have broad, polished pontil marks that almost reach the edge. They descended from Henry Clay to his son Thomas, to Thomas's son Thomas Jr., and to his daughter Henrietta, who returned them to Ashland in the 1950s.

2. For a detailed history of glass production in Wheeling, see Gary Everett Baker, “The Flint Glass Industry in Wheeling, West Virginia: 1829–1865,” Master’s Thesis of the Winterthur Program at the University of Delaware, 1986 (hereafter “Baker Thesis”). For a summary, see Gary Baker, “The Wheeling Flint Glass Works and The North Wheeling Flint Glass Works,” in Gerald I. Reilly, ed., *Wheeling Glass 1829–1939: Collection of the Oglebay Institute Glass Museum*, Oglebay Institute, 1994 (hereafter “Baker Oglebay”).

3. “Random Recollections of Recent Ramblings,” signed “\*E\*,” *Wheeling Times and Advertiser*, January 31, 1844. “Baker Thesis,” p. 100.

4. Unless otherwise noted, biographical details of Henry Clay are taken from Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union*, Norton, 1991.

5. The first representation of Clay in glass—a mold blown flask made by Knox & M’Kee of Wheeling—dates from this campaign. See Helen McKearin, “A Henry Clay and other Flasks,” *Antiques*, July 1973, pp. 84–87.

6. A fully-priced record of the sale is in the Thomas Clay collection at the Library of Congress and reproduced in *The Henry Clay Papers*, v. 4, pp. 457–461.

7. Arlene Palmer, “The Luxury Glass of Bakewell, Page and Bakewell,” *Antiques*, February 2005, pp. 72–79. See also, Arlene Palmer, *Artistry and Innovation in Pittsburgh Glass, 1808–1882: from Bakewell & Ensell to Bakewell, Pears & Co.* Frick Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2005, p. 151. The decanters are now at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

8. *The Henry Clay Papers*, v. 8, November 24, 1833.

9. *The Commercial Advertiser*, New York, October 24, 1833. Thanks to Maynard Steiner for bringing this to my attention.

10. See “Baker Thesis,” pp. 60–61. Prior to 1835, Michael Sweeney may also have worked at the Wheeling Flint Glass Works.

11. “Baker Thesis,” p. 64.

12. For a detailed account of the Sweeneys, see “Baker Thesis,” pp. 56–107. According to Robert E. DiBartolomeo, “The Public and Private Lives of Wheeling’s Glass Makers” (unpublished manuscript, Rakow Research Library, The Corning Museum of Glass), “Thomas was a fire warden, a councilman and a representative to the Virginia House of Burgesses. He was on the executive committee of the Home League, the president of

the Northwestern Bank of Virginia and of the company which built the [Wheeling] Suspension Bridge. He helped to organize Wheeling's first State Fair, was president of the Board of Health, and was named by the Governor of Virginia to the post of Commissioner for the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London [in 1851]." Thomas was also an iron founder who from 1830 was a partner or outright owner of the Wheeling Foundry.

13. The bowls have been referred to variously as "float bowls," "vases," and "punch bowls." "Float bowl" was used by the *Wheeling Times and Advertiser* in its articles (September 2, 1843; October 4, 1844; and May 13, 1845). The Sweeneys and Clay refer to it as a "large Glass Vase" (*Wheeling Times and Advertiser*, December 27, 1844). Reports of a bowl's exhibition in other cities reprinted in the *Wheeling Times and Advertiser* call it "a magnificent crystal Vase" (October 11, 1845), "a huge ornamental cut bowl" (October 28, 1845), and "a magnificent vase on a pedestal, and crowned with a handsome cover" (October 28, 1845). Rhea Mansfield Knittle (*Antiques*, August 1933, p. 70) cites a Wheeling directory that refers to "magnificent vases." The surviving bowl may have first been called a "punch bowl" by Josephine Jefferson in her *Wheeling Glass* (1947, pp. 58 and 60), a term repeated by Albert Christian Revi in his *American Cut and Engraved Glass*, 1965, pp. 366–367.

14. *Wheeling Times and Advertiser*, September 2, 1843; "Baker Thesis," pp. 68–69.

15. *Wheeling Times and Advertiser*, October 8, 1844; "Baker Thesis," pp. 68–75.

16. This picture accompanied an account of the life of Henry Clay that was serialized in the *Wheeling Times and Advertiser* in early January 1844 (Microfilm Collection, Ohio County Public Library, Wheeling, West Virginia). Clay's eventual running mate was Theodore Frelinghuysen of New Jersey rather than John Davis of Massachusetts who was mentioned here.

17. L. W. and D. B. Neal, *Pressed Glass Salt Dishes of the Lacy Period, 1825–1850*. Self published, 1962. Pattern HL4. See McKearin and McKearin, *American Glass*, 1941, p. 365, for a discussion of an earlier association of the salt with Clay's support for the Lexington (Kentucky) Railroad.

18. Baker Thesis. According to Baker, Clay's vase itself was destroyed in a fire early in the 20th century. Records at Ashland indicate that Thomas Hart Clay's wife left the vase in her will to her grandson Harry Boyle Clay Jr. This branch of the family moved to Tennessee and eventually had a house fire. (Private communication from Eric Brooks, 14 February 2007)

19. "Baker Thesis," pp. 68–75; "Baker Oglebay," pp. 32–33; and *Wheeling Times and Advertiser*, December 27, 1844. The Sweeneys' letter is dated November 28, 1844, while Clay's reply was December 14, 1844.

20. Besides the float bowl, the only mention of 1840s presentations of glass to Clay is in \*E\*s "Random Recollections of Recent Ramblings" [note 3]. There is no mention in *The Henry Clay Papers*, other unpublished Clay papers at the University of Lexington, or in Clay's papers, about 1843–1846 at the Library of Congress. Among the relatively small amount of glass remaining at or returned to Ashland by family members, the decanters are the most compatible both with the year 1843 and with the kinds of glass known to have been made by the Sweeneys.

21. From mid-December through April, Clay rarely visited Ashland, campaigning through the southeast including Alabama,

Georgia, North and South Carolina and Virginia (Remini [note 4], pp. 630–631). Perhaps this is why there is a relative poverty of Clay manuscripts, including letters, during this period.

22. Ian Wolfenden, "The 'WHR' Drawings for Cut Glass and the Origins of the Broad Flute Style of Cutting," *The Journal of the Glass Association*, v. 2, 1987, pp. 19–28.

23. The Pellatt price lists appear to date between 1838 and 1840. For an abridged list about 1838–1839, see Andy McConnell, *The Decanter*, Antique Collectors Club, p. 309. For a full list about 1840 see Phelps Warren, "Apsley Pellatt's Table Glass, 1840–1864," *Journal of Glass Studies*, v. 26, The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY, 1984, pp. 122–123.

24. *Report of the First Exhibition and Fair of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, Faneuil and Quincy Halls, Boston, September 18, 1837*, p. 26: "One set of very rich cut five-flute ware, of superior color, workmanship and finish, consisting of (two dozen each) goblets, clarets, wines, jellies and champagnes; with two sugars, two celeries, one center bowl, two butter tubs, eight decanters, ten dishes, one pitcher and two dozen green hocks, to match."

25. Among others, see Wolfenden [note 22], footnote 19, which refers to the 1857 publication of an 1834 patent, with reference "Patent Specifications: Gold, A.D. 1834. No. 6640, London, Great Seal Patent Office, 1857." This author's inquiries with the British Library suggest that there may be no such patent.

26. United States Patent Office. John P. Colné of New York, N.Y. Machinery for Cutting Glass. Specifications for Letters Patent No. 8323, August 26, 1851.

27. For similar neck rings and a flame stopper, see figure 27 of Pellatt's price guide. *Journal of Glass Studies* [note 23].

28. *The Oxford English Dictionary* quotes *Savage's Dictionary of Printing, 1841*: "Fat Face or Fat Letter is a letter with a broad stem." In his *History of the Alphabet, Types and Fonts*, Tom Selle describes "fat-face" as being "made by exaggerating the thin parts of letters by making them thinner, and the thick parts by making them thicker." <http://carroll1.cc.edu/~tselle/sixte.html>

29. *Daily Cincinnati Gazette*, June 26, 1828.

30. Jane Shadel Spillman and Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, "The Dummer Glass and Ceramic Factories in Jersey City, New Jersey," *Antiques*, March 1990, p. 711.

31. "Baker Oglebay," p. 24.

32. The New England Glass Company would probably have engraved an inscription after August 1843. In this month it advertised "a kind of engraving on glass that is entirely new" and which found immediate use on an extraordinary vase presented to its superintendent Thomas Leighton. Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, "A Masterpiece of the New England Glass Company at The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Journal of Glass Studies*, v. 25, The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY, 1985, pp. 225–230.

33. Thomas Pears Jr., "The First Successful Flint Glass Factory in America: Bakewell, Pears & Co. (1808–1882)," *Antiques*, March 1927, p. 205, fig. 8. See also, Arlene Palmer [note 7], pp. 70 and 131.

34. While the decanters' cutting is exquisite, their lettering (see Figure 5) is simultaneously bold and rudimentary. Individual cuts are readily visible rather than blended together. While placed in panels created for the purpose, the lettering cut for Clay may well have been by a different hand.