

Curator's Choice

A Day at the Beach - Ruby Stained Souvenir Glassware

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Ocean City, MD began as an isolated fishing village on a barrier island. It only developed into a beach resort after the railroad and Atlantic Hotel arrived in 1876. With greater accessibility, the city grew, with the iconic boardwalk constructed in 1900 and Trimpers Amusements following soon after (Ocean City Maryland n.d.). People strolled along the boardwalk in their finery (Figure 1), enjoying the amusements and a good meal. Many returned home with ruby stained glassware as inexpensive souvenirs, etched with their names or those of loved ones (Mann 2016).

Ruby stained glassware is sometimes mistaken for a similar, earlier glass type – ruby flashed glass. The flashing process involved taking hot blown glass and dipping it in colored glass, producing a thin, colored surface layer. Staining was a more economical substitute. Instead of using colored glass, staining involved brushing finished pressed glass with a chemical solution, typically copper sulfate for ruby glass. The glassware would then be reheated in a kiln, adhering the chemicals and changing the color. Other colors, including amber, green, and a cranberry/pink variant, were produced in lesser quantities by applying different chemicals (McKearin & McKearin 1989; Miller 1988). This process allowed decorating companies to purchase premade pressed glass in bulk and then use unskilled labor to apply the color (Mackinac State Historic Parks 2015). However, the final product was inferior to flashed glass, as the colored surface scratched easily (Miller 1988).



Figure 2: Mended ruby stained spooner from the Victualling Warehouse Site etched with, "1905 Ocean City MD Grace Schumacher".

The golden age of ruby stained glassware was 1892-1912, a result of increased interest from the Chicago Columbian Exposition (Heacock 1986; Miller 1988). It was a popular substitute for more expensive bohemian glass (McKearin & McKearin 1989). There were 200-300 different patterns of ruby stained glassware produced by decorating already finished pieces (Miller 1988:22). Toward the end of this period, interest began to wane and the glassware was sold as cheap souvenirs at beach towns and fairs. Some researchers believe the ruby stained glass sold as souvenirs may have been purchased from decorating companies as close-outs or seconds, allowing them to be decorated and resold even more cheaply (Heacock 1986). These souvenirs were typically personalized with the location, date and name of the person purchasing them, or of a loved one (Mackinac State Historic Parks 2015). Fancier pieces may have been engraved with a copper wheel. This was spun on a lathe by a skilled artisan, using abrasives and different-sized wheels to carve away the ruby color in intricate patterns (McKearin & McKearin 1989; Mackinac State Historic Parks 2015; Pattern Glass School n.d.). This was more time consuming than acid etching, which did not require a skilled artisan; instead, anyone could be quickly trained to coat the glass in a resistant material, such as beeswax or asphaltum, and scratch a design through the coating. This was done with either a needle or a steel etching plate. They would then dip the glassware in hydrofluoric acid, which would bubble the surface of the scratched area, and then peel off the resistant layer, leaving the final design. In contrast to engraved pieces, acid-etched decorations would not leave a depression in the glass, instead appearing flat or blurry (McKearin & McKearin 1989; Pattern Glass School n.d.).



Figure 1: Photograph of Ocean City circa. 1904 showing people wearing their best outfits on the boardwalk and enjoying the beach.

The ruby stained glass object shown above (Figure 2) was found in Annapolis at the Victualling Warehouse Site, the location of stores and residences since the 1740s (Pearson 1991). It is most likely a spooner, designed to hold spoons and used with other tea wares such as creamers and sugar bowls. However, most personalized souvenir glassware was purchased individually as a memento, instead of in sets (Tascione 2016). This particular pattern is Lace Band (Figure 3), produced by the Imperial Glass Co. between 1902-1910 (Heacock 1986). The blurry acid-etched decoration reads, "1905 Ocean City MD Grace Schumacher." Unfortunately, we don't know anything about Grace or her life in Annapolis. Perhaps she was a resident, or a shop worker, or maybe she had no connection to Annapolis, and her spooner was discarded or resold by someone else.

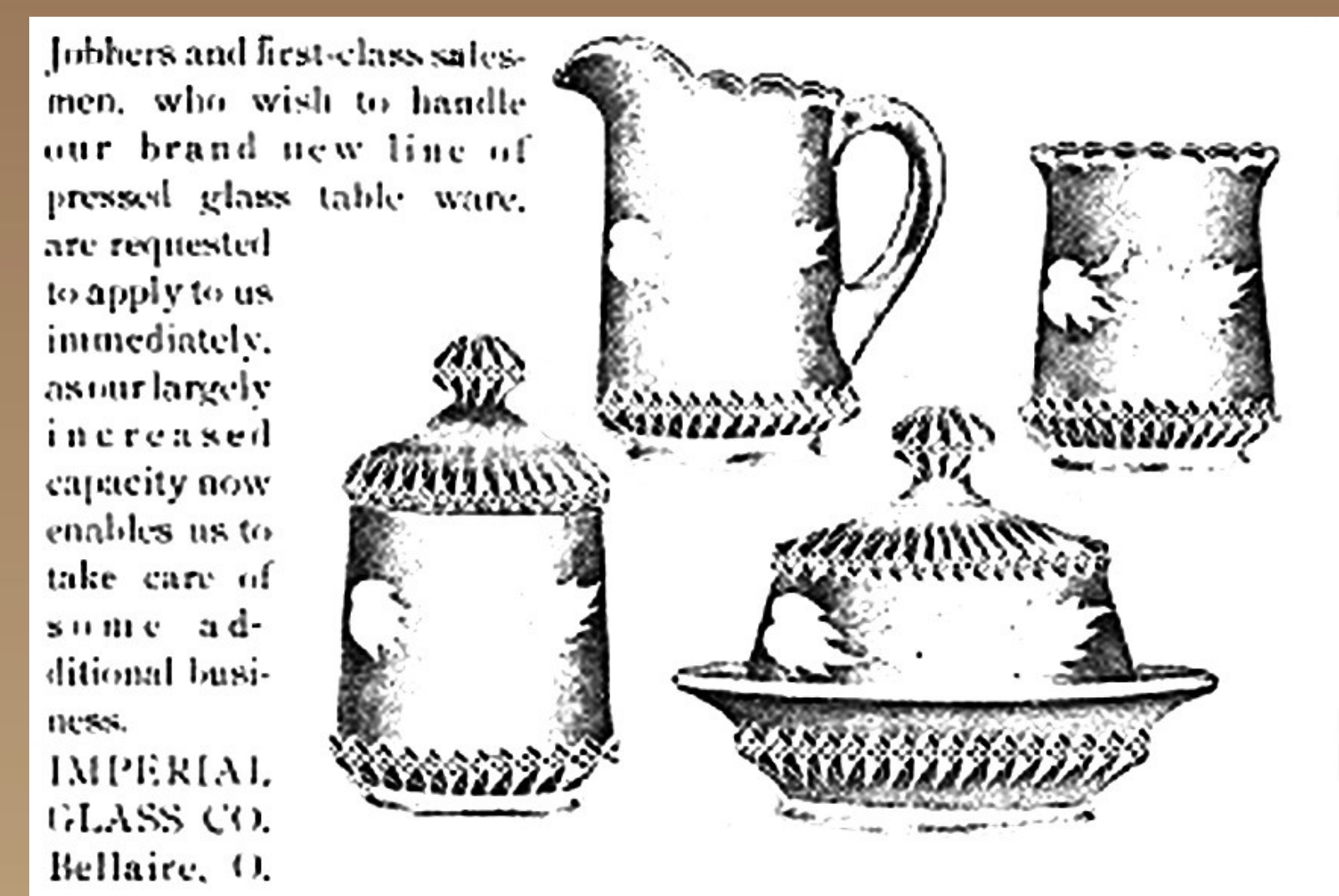


Figure 3: Advertisement for a set of glassware with the same pressed glass pattern, Lace Band, as the red stained piece from Annapolis. The vessel in the top right corner is an example of a complete spooner.

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