

## THE ONEIDA GLASS FACTORY

Vernon, New York (1809 – 1836)

by Jon Landers

The first glass factory in Oneida County came into existence in 1809 when a stock company was formed to establish a window glass factory in Vernon, NY. The capital stock was \$100,000 and the stock holders list contained many names of prominent men from Utica and Oneida County. The Oneida Glass Factory was formed to make cylinder window glass and had nothing to do with the Mt Vernon Glass Company that made bottles, flint glass and tableware that was also located in Vernon. The only connection between the two was that a few of the stockholders owned shares in both companies. The Oneida Glass Factory which was located in Vernon on what is now known as Peterboro Road also had an office in Utica which was twenty miles away.

To most antique bottle collectors, a window glass factory doesn't seem to have the romance attached to its history like that of a bottle glass factory although most of the mechanics of the trade were the same. The main structures were similar, the ingredients were basically the same and both operations used glassblowers with blowpipes. Both used large amounts of timber to feed the furnaces and a batch maker was used to mix the sand and other components. The main difference between the two is that for cylinder window glass, an elongated balloon-like glob of glass was blown and then a worker called a glass flattener cut the cylinder and rolled it out into a flat piece. After the glass was put in annealing ovens and cooled, a glass cutter cut the sheet into panes of glass that were usually either 6 X 8 inches or 7 X 9 inches and then packed in a wooden box (see figure1). Another difference was that bottle factories manufactured glass of different colors where early window glass was an aqua color. In a bottle glass factory blowers most often used bottle molds to shape bottles although free blown bottles could be made without a mold in either factory. Glass blowers from either of the operations could use the left over glass at the end of day to make items for home use such as free blown dishes, pitchers or whimsical pieces.

One of the stockholders not from the area was a man known to those who are students of American Glass. Lawrence Schoolcraft, who was the superintendent of the Hamilton Glassworks near Albany, invested \$2500 in the Oneida Glass Factory. The Hamilton Glassworks was primarily a window glass factory but also made bottles as a sideline. The idea of a window glass factory in Vernon came to be by the promise of cooperation and assistance from Lawrence Schoolcraft who agreed to spend two years at Vernon getting the firm started.

A flurry of glass houses were being built in this country during that period because of our strained relations with Great Britain which eventually ended with the War of 1812. During the time it was illegal to import any goods including glass from any part or places in Great Britain, Ireland, or any of her colonies. Of course, this was also a time when our country was experiencing a rapid expansion which resulted in a great demand for goods including glassware. With very little foreign trade and a shortage of goods, American investors needed a place to channel their money and much of it went into domestic manufacturing.

Vernon was chosen for the location of a glass factory for several reasons. It was located on the Seneca Turnpike which was the main East West thoroughfare in the center of New York State which enabled the glass to be shipped by wagon and sleigh. At the time, plans were being made to build the Erie Canal which was to be located only eight miles from Vernon and would provide even cheaper transportation for shipping finished glassware that couldn't be consumed locally. Because there was an ample supply of wood to fuel the glass furnaces and sand was readily available, Vernon was an ideal location for a glass factory.

In 1813, Willet H. Sherman and his wife Catherine Ann Schoolcraft came to Vernon. Willet Sherman came to take charge of the Oneida Glass Factory, a position he held until the entity closed in 1836. In later years their Grandson, James Schoolcraft Sherman would be elected the 27<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States.

Willet Sherman owned a beautiful white house with large pillars next to the Oneida Glass Factory. The house still stands today and is privately owned (see figure 2). Supposedly Sherman had a wooden sidewalk made from the village of Vernon to his home so that he would not have to walk in the mud. Around Vernon the factory was referred to as the “Sherman Glassworks.”

Lawrence Schoolcraft only worked at the Oneida Glass Factory for two years but purchased a family home on the Oneida Turnpike (now Route 5 in Vernon) and lived in Vernon for some years. Lawrence Schoolcraft had served as a private in the Revolutionary War and when the War of 1812 started, he temporarily abandoned his career in the glass industry and served in the war as a Colonel. Lawrence Schoolcraft is buried in the cemetery in Vernon on Cooper Street.

Lawrence Schoolcraft had a son Henry Rowe Schoolcraft who is also well known to students of American glass. Henry was very bright; college educated and had learned the glass business from his father at the Hamilton Glassworks but did not accompany his father to Vernon. After learning the trade at the Hamilton Glassworks Henry was connected with the industry at Cheshire Mass.; Geneva, NY; Lake Dunmore, Vermont, and then both father and son went to Keene, New Hampshire in 1814. Lawrence Schoolcraft was in Keene managing a window glass factory and had convinced his son Henry to come to Keene to run the Keene-Marlboro-Street Glassworks of which he was a stockholder. This glassworks made many beautiful bottles including the GIV-2 Masonic/Eagle Flask which has the initials of Henry Schoolcraft (HS) on the front.

Although the Oneida Glass Factory was fairly successful, it suffered the same consequences that most glass houses did during that period. The War ended on December 24, 1814 and as a result, English goods which had backed-up in Great Britain soon flooded the market for consumers who were hungry for the high quality glassware. Low tariffs permitted glass items made in Europe to be sold here at prices below American manufacturing costs. This caused a recession by 1816 and then a depression which crippled American glasshouses that didn't end until 1820.

In 1822 the Oneida Glass Factory leased the Utica Glass Works that had been built by the Utica Crown Glass Manufacturing Company which was on what is now Glass Factory Road in Marcy. This window glass factory made crown window glass which was suppose to be of superior quality but very difficult to make. The glass was spun on a table into a round disc about 31 inches in diameter. Because it was so difficult to make, the Utica glass factory was one of the very few factories that made crown glass other than the Boston Glass Company that was famous for its crown glass. The Utica establishment was never very successful during its existence.

In 1831 the Oneida Glass Factory filed for Chapter 13 and a document called “Statement to Assessors of Corporate Property” is on file in the Town's Clerks office in Vernon. This document gives a very accurate description of the glass factory itself. The factory property consisted of about four acres situated in the Town of Vernon and had three buildings with drying ovens and other necessary appendages for manufacturing window glass and a small building occupied as a carpenter shop. Also, eleven small dwelling houses for families and one building occupied as a store and office for the superintendent, one stable and two out houses and about 103 acres of land of the north part of lot no. 215 in the late Oneida Reservation with a log house thereon occupied by a tenant. The company also owned Lot no. 199 in the late Oneida

Reservation containing about 250 acres of land in the Town of Verona which had a dwelling house, out house and two stables occupied by a tenant. The document was signed by Willet H. Sherman and stated that he was the superintendent of the establishment.

The Oneida Glass Factory struggled for five more years and then in 1836 it was shut down along with the Utica Crown Glassworks which they leased. Many of the early homes built around Vernon and Central New York had glass window panes that had been blown at the Oneida Glass Factory which was started by Lawrence Schoolcraft who in addition to being an interesting man was also a soldier, patriot and a pioneer of early American glass.



**Willette H. Shearman**

Willette H., son of (360) Robert Shearman and Honor Brown, was born at South Kingston, R. I., January 31, 1792; married, 1st, Catharine Ann, daughter of Col. Lawrence Schoolcraft, a soldier of the Revolution, and the sister of Henry R. Schoolcraft, the historian, in 1816. Died at Vernon, N.Y. December 28, 1868. He was the seventh son of the family, and left the homestead of his parents at the age of 19 years. He served a clerkship in Wickford and Providence, R. I., and at the age of 21 he took charge of the business of the Oneida Glass factory, an incorporated company doing business in Vernon, N.Y., in which position he continued from 1813 to 1837, after which he was appointed one of the commissioners for the erection of the State Lunatic Asylum at Utica, and later one of the trustees of that institution. In 1842 he returned to Vernon, and to the date of his death resided on and cultivated the farm owned by him in that place.