



Paperweight Collectors Association, Inc.

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William Price, Esq.

William H. Maxwell and His 'Eureka' Paperweights

According to census records, William Maxwell was born in Ohio in about 1845. He was recorded in the 1880 *Federal Census* as living with his wife and two small children on Sarah Street, South side of Pittsburgh, in the heart of the Pittsburgh glass making district. The 1880 *Pittsburgh City Directory* lists his occupation as glass blower. The national trade publication *Crockery and Glass Journal*, reported in its January 3, 1878 issue that Maxwell was operating a small factory at the head of Twenty-Seventh Street, on the South side of Pittsburgh with a four pot furnace. At that time, he was manufacturing glass labels and photograph covers of a convex shape. He was employing fifteen men, boys and girls and had been in operation since about 1876. His establishment was listed as the only one of its kind in a city with literally dozens of glass factories. Unfortunately for Maxwell, on June 2, 1879, a lamp explosion caused the complete destruction of Maxwell's plant.

Maxwell's name again appeared in the *Crockery and Glass Journal* in an article about Pittsburgh glass factories dated September 13, 1879. The article led with the following paragraph:

A novel paper-weight for office desks has been designed by Mr. William Maxwell, of the Southside, and the feature of the device is the name of the party for whom it is being made being worked in the centre. Hon M Humphreys of the Bureau of Statistics, Harrisburg, received the first one made.

Maxwell continued to experiment with glass and with paperweights. On June 15, 1882, he made application to the United States Patent Office to secure a patent for a process he had invented for the manufacture of paperweights. His patent, granted on September 5, 1882, number 263,931, explains in detail how Maxwell would print a name, monogram, photograph or design upon a thin plate of white glass and then place it into a mold so that the molten glass could be used to encase the image. By 1882, Maxwell had also forged the business partnership of Brown, Maxwell & Co. in Rochester, Pennsylvania, just north west of Pittsburgh. The patent was issued to William H. Maxwell as an assignor to Brown, Maxwell and Company.

On November 23, 1882, Brown, Maxwell & Co. began running sizable ads in *Crockery and Glass Journal*, expounding upon their various glass products. The main part of the advertisement promoted their production of blown crystal tumblers and their latest novelty, "optic blown tumblers". The ad claimed the factory had the capacity to produce 100,000 tumblers per week and that they also made lamp founts, prescription vials and other glass products. The ad also stated that a specialty of theirs was producing the "Eureka" glass paper-weight with names, monograms, advertisements, photographs and designs of any style encased in solid glass.

I presently know really nothing about Mr. Brown. The *Crockery and Glass Journal* ad contained within it a quote from someone at Brown, Maxwell & Co. possessing the initials N.B. Alternatively, I note that Maxwell's application for patent submitted in 1882 listed a witness as Hartford P. Brown. I hope to research Beaver County's court records for more information.

On November 16, 1882, the following appeared in the *Crockery and Glass Journal* at page 36:

Brown, Maxwell and Co. of Rochester. Pa have embarked quite extensively in the manufacture of glass paperweights. They are novel and of handsome design, and will, no doubt prove of valuable feature to the Pittsburgh glass works.

For a while the Works are in Rochester, we naturally claim it a Pittsburg concern.

I roughly divide the paperweights produced by William H. Maxwell and/or Brown, Maxwell & Co. into three different groups. Every one of these paperweights has the same distinctive concave clear glass base I have only seen beneath Maxwell's paperweights. Other contemporary paperweight makers in Pittsburg manufactured their paperweights with translucent flat ground bases.

The first category were portrait paperweights with actual photographs of ordinary people encased within them. I wrote an article about these which appeared at page 13 of the 2000 edition of the *Annual Bulletin of the Paperweight Collectors Association, Inc.* These portrait paperweights were made as one-of-a-kind items for customers.

The second category of paperweights Maxwell manufactured promoted businesses. These clear glass paperweights encased a white plaque upon which was printed an advertisement. These paperweights were mass produced. Many of these advertising paperweights were stamped, underneath the plaque, with Brown, Maxwell & Co., Ltd. Others were not signed. Apparently, sometimes Maxwell and/or his employees or customers, were not content to simply produce identical paperweights. In an article I wrote about vintage advertising paperweights for the *Annual Bulletin* in 2002, I included images of five different color variations I have found of the George I Wilbur Company paperweight. Each of these was created by the maker hand coloring in the printed ad. In the same article, I showed variations in the paperweights made for the J. H. Leshar Company. On the Leshar paperweights, the ad is identical on each glass plaque but the borders around the edge of the plaque were each hand decorated in differing colorful designs. Although none of the Leshar paperweights that I have handled are signed, I see many similarities between the fancy leaf borders and sprays and similarly decorated signed Maxwell paperweights to make an attribution possible. Of course, these Wilbur and Leshar paperweights each have the distinctive Maxwell base.

The third (and to me) the most wonderful category of paperweights Maxwell produced, were one of a kind paperweights custom made for certain individual's desks. These paperweights were completely hand decorated and typically contained within them the name of the intended owner and often his occupation or place of employment. These paperweights were sometimes additionally illustrated with attractive and original art work representing some special aspect of the intended owner's life or occupation. I know of at least two different paperweights with hand drawn images of trains. Each of these trains has its own distinct engine number. No doubt, the recipients of those paperweights worked on those particular trains. One personalized paperweight I own was made for a pharmacist named Petzold and has a well drawn picture of a mortar & pestle. Another paperweight, of which I have only seen a ragged photocopy image, shows a sketch of a man on a cart pulled by a horse. The cart is filled with coal. The paperweight was made for the A.C. Davis and Company, Coal Dealers, Port Smith, Ohio.

Because the hand done paperweights were individualized undertakings for unique individuals, they tend to be one of a kind. There are, however, exceptions to this. I do own two completely hand done paperweights for W. J. Caskey's Boat Store. Although each is hand decorated, they are so similar I am certain the glass plaques for both of the paperweights were done at the same time on the same work bench by the same person. Likewise, I have seen two virtually identical paperweights made for "fashionable" tailor Dan W. Miller.

Merely two months after the rosy report of *Crockery and Glass Journal* announcing Brown, Maxwell & Co had opened their company in Rochester, it was reported that on January 11, 1883 that their works were shut down: "owing to an accident to their furnace, the result of which will take some time to repair." Just one week later, on January 18, 1883 a terse one line statement was printed in *Crockery and Glass Journal* which read as follows:

The works of Brown, Maxwell & Co., at Rochester, PA reported shut down in last weeks JOURNAL are offered for sale.

The earliest date I have ever seen on a signed Maxwell paperweight is 1882 and the latest date I have ever found on a signed Maxwell paperweight is 1887. I also own an unsigned paperweight made in 1881 for a man named F. W. Wahl and another unsigned paperweight 1888, promoting the Greenville Exposition, both of which I attribute to Maxwell. The 1881 paperweight contains an intriguing image of a shooting star printed beneath the plaque along with the date 1881. Could this have been an experimental trademark for the “eureka” paperweight which Maxwell later abandoned?

When Maxwell did sign his work, he did so in a variety of ways. I have found several examples that contained the following line hand printed dark blue on the underside of the white plaque: “Made by W. H. Maxwell, Rochester. Pa.” Others were signed with a rubber stamp that said: “W. H. Maxwell Pittsburg, S. S. PA”. For an example, see the mark illustrated on page 13 of the *Annual PCA Bulletin* for the year 2000. Some included a third line of the stamp, either above or below the name setting forth the date of Maxwell’s patent. In a couple examples, such as a paperweight that was hand made in 1884 for “Cornet Soloiste” Irene Zieg, the patent date appears as a separate line elsewhere on the back of the plaque.

Despite Maxwell’s obviously serious setbacks of losing two different glass factories to destructive fires within five years, he continued to work in glass and he produced paperweights throughout the 1880’s, apparently in the South side section of Pittsburgh. On February 21, 1886 he applied for a patent, granted on March 22, 1887 at Patent number 359,682, for a method of forming letters on glass. The patent does not explain the ultimate use of the product, but it does have a drawing of a rectangular plate of glass with a large number printed on it. My hunch is these might have been used as house numbers. Perhaps it is no coincidence that there do not seem to be any signed or unsigned Maxwell paperweights after 1888. Maxwell may quite simply have drifted into manufacturing a different product. On the other hand, It was speculated by Lowell Innes in his epic 500 page book on Pittsburgh glass that the paperweight manufacturing concern known as Pittsburgh Novelty Glass Company may have become an outgrowth of Maxwell’s operation. It is also quite possible he lost control of his patent. It did begin to appear on the paperweights of other manufacturers such those Barnes and Abrams distributed at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Or was Maxwell unable to compete after fellow Pittsburgher Albert A. Graeser, in 1892, patented a much cheaper process of manufacturing mass produced advertising paperweights within simple glass blanks? Or did Maxwell become disabled and/or die relatively young? While I have located the obituaries of several men named William Maxwell who died in Western Pennsylvania after 1888, I have not yet determined whether any of those obituaries pertained to glassblower, inventor and artisan William H. Maxwell.

By William C. Price, Jr.

Attorney Price, also known as *The Paperweight Potentate of Pittsburgh*, acquired his first Maxwell paperweight shortly after he began collecting advertising paperweights in 1978. Bill, coincidentally, was born and grew up within a half hour drive of Rochester, PA. He presently lives and works in Pittsburgh, not far from the sites of Maxwell’s home and his first factory.



Figure 1. Hutchinson Personalized Paperweight

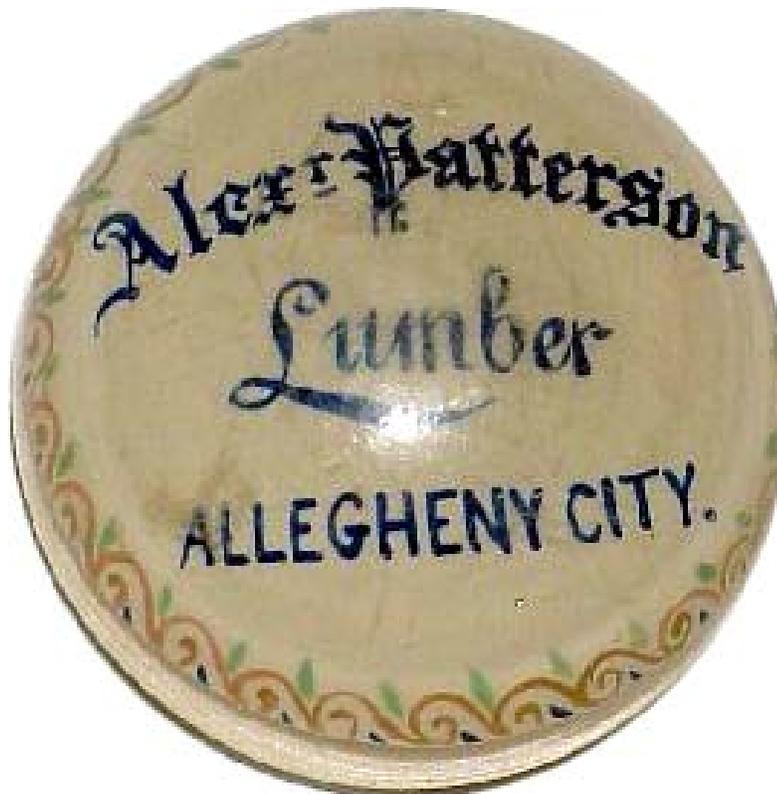


Figure 2. Patterson Lumber Paperweight



Figure 3. Jeweler Advertising Paperweight



Figure 4. Purchasing Agent Paperweight



Figure 5. Pharmacist Paperweight

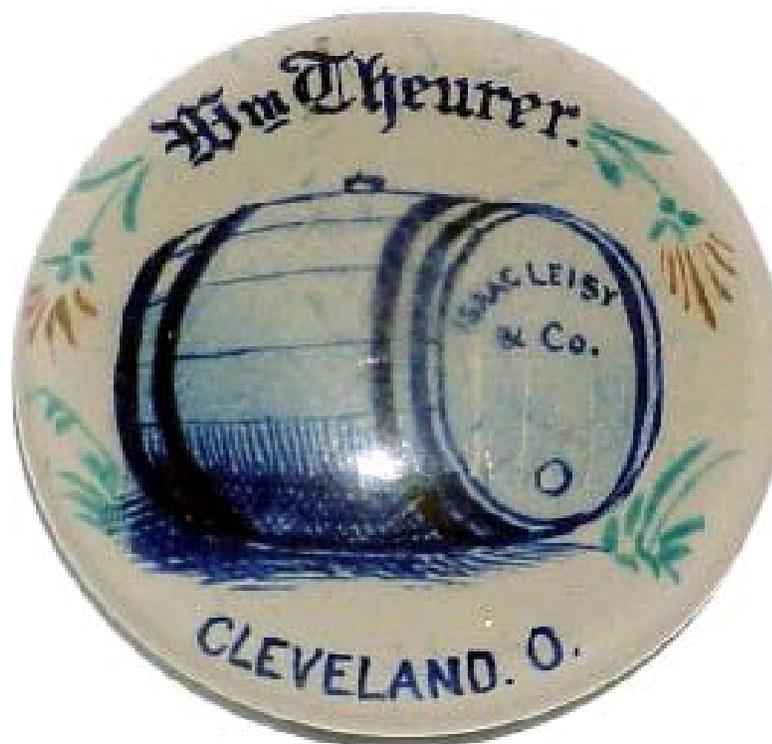


Figure 6. Advertising Paperweight



Figure 7. Maxwell Paperweight



Figure 8. Cornet Soloiste

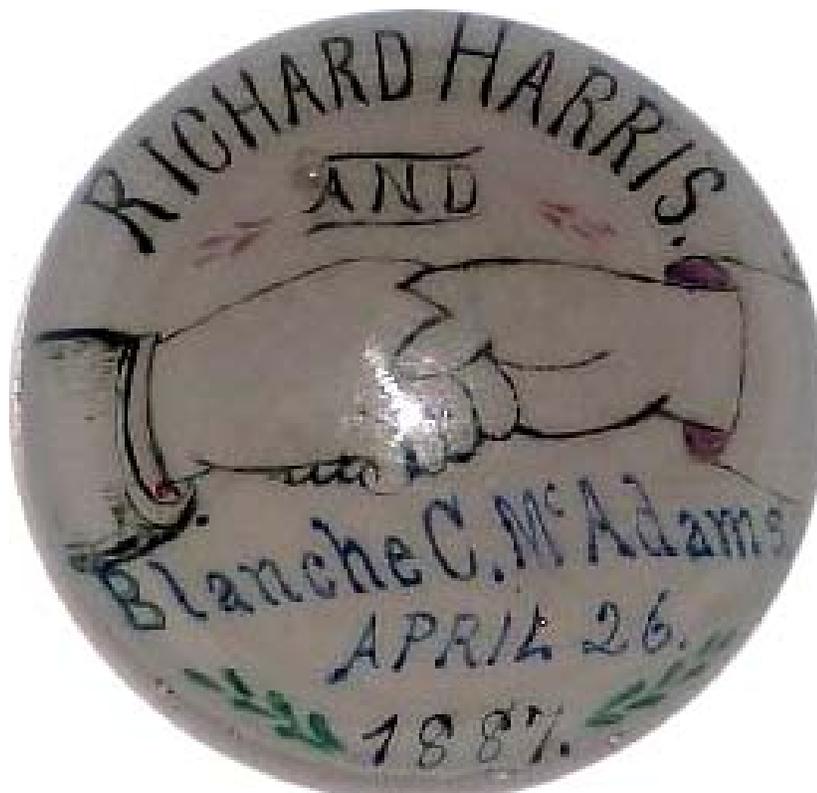


Figure 9. Wedding Paperweight



Figure 10. Rail Road Paperweight (Sweetheart's Gift)