A Closer Look at Early American Spectacles

By Karla Klein Albertson

Eyglasses, in American portraits of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, symbolized the distinguished sitter’s education and status. Spectacles also implied an ability to read, then still a social distinction that separated the upper and middle classes from small farmers and simple artisans.

For example, early-nineteenth-century portraits of Lawrence and Eleanor “Nelly” Parke Custis Lewis—the granddaughter of Martha Washington who once lived with the president and his wife at Mount Vernon—show the couple wearing their spectacles pushed up on the tops of their heads.

In the late 18th century, most Americans relied on spectacles imported from England, such as this c. 1787 tortoiseshell-framed pair by Peter Dollond, with a red leather case. The short rectangular temple pieces terminate in ring ends, which are padded inside with blue velvet. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Eleanor “Nelly” Parke Custis Lewis, who was raised at Mount Vernon by her grandparents George and Martha Washington, sports a pair of spectacles atop her head in this portrait by John Beale Bordley. In a companion portrait, also painted by John Beale Bordley, Lawrence Lewis wears his spectacles on top of his head. The Lewises lived at Woodlawn plantation on land given to them by Washington. Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association.

Another well-known early American image is the 1801 portrait of botanist Rubens Peale (1784-1865) with a flowering geranium, painted by his elder brother Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860), now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (see “American Flowerpots” in the April issue). The young scientist, who eventually became manager of the family museums, obviously had a scholarly bent—in the portrait he wears a pair of small silver spectacles and holds another pair in his left hand.

Self-portraits reveal that artist

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Rembrandt Peale, so dependent on vision for his livelihood, also wore glasses when he worked. Such images helped create the stereotype of the glasses-wearing “four-eyes” as an intellectual type that continued well into the twentieth century.

Eyeglasses earned their symbolic value serving a real need. In the past as in the present, people have had the same vision problems in youth and old age. As the ability to read and the availability of reading material increased, so did the necessity for practical lenses to assist people with less-than-perfect vision. That a convex piece of natural crystal could be used to magnify manuscripts or other materials needing close inspection has been recognized since antiquity. In 1268, English Franciscan friar Roger Bacon noted that letters appeared larger and clearer when viewed through a lens. By 1286, a creative but anonymous soul in Pisa, Italy, found a way to link two lenses in a usable frame. A monk, Giordano da Rivalto, first described these eyeglasses and coined a term to describe them—*occhiali* in Italian—in a written sermon in 1306.

Florence became an early center for ocular glass production, making corrective lenses in various strengths for aging presbyopes who had difficulty reading and for myopes who wanted to see the new frescoes on the church ceiling. In the mid-fifteenth century noblemen could afford to present the useful spectacles to their friends as gifts—Francesco and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Dukes of Milan, ordered Florentine *occhiali* by the hundreds—and by the end of the century peddlers had begun selling less expensive eyeglasses on the street, a practice that continued for hundreds of years.

Settlers in the New World brought their spectacles with them

Born in Glasgow, John McAllister Sr. settled in Philadelphia, where he became America’s first optician. Once a manufacturer of canes and whips, he began producing spectacles in 1799, eventually becoming a specialist in the field. The family firm continued until 1972. These four silver-framed pairs, dating between 1820 and 1860, are stamped “McAllister” and have two-piece temples joined by an adjustable slide. Courtesy of Winterthur Museum.
from manufacturing centers in Germany, Italy, and England. Rock crystal used for early lenses was gradually replaced by glass as it gained more clarity through technical improvements in its manufacture. Early makers fashioned frames from gold and silver as well as cheaper alloys such as brass. Natural materials—horn, bone, tortoiseshell, and even leather—offered more comfort if less durability.

No matter the material from which they were made, these early eyeglasses had a problem. “From the beginning, spectacles failed to remain in position and stay on,” says David Fleishman, a retired eye surgeon who created the web site www.antiquespectacles.com as a clearinghouse for information and research on optical history.

London optician Edward Scarlett (1677-1743) is credited with first attaching stiff sidepieces or temples to help hold the lenses in place without disarranging elaborate coiffures. His trade card bears the earliest surviving illustration. Keeping glasses in place led to numerous variations in sidepiece forms, such as extendable “sliders” and folding temples.

The style of sidepiece can help identify the date of manufacture of eyeglasses, according to Jerome Redfearn, a retired fine arts professor from Kentucky Wesleyan College. Writing in Silver Magazine (December 1985), he notes, “Early nineteenth century spectacles of American manufacture were generally made with a heavy, rather broad temple, containing a sliding extension which could be adjusted to suit the wearer. These rather cumbersome ‘sliders’ continued to be produced with only minor variations until about 1835, at which time spectacles with less heavy frames and sometimes without sliding temples appear to have assumed a certain popularity. ... By about...
1840, the heavy framed spectacles had been all but replaced by lighter framed styles, thus we can say with some accuracy that all heavy framed, sliding temple types were produced prior to the above date.”

Eyeglasses were in common use in the American colonies by the second half of the eighteenth century. As with mirrors, local craftsmen likely made the frames, but the glass within continued to be imported from England. Domestic production began with the War of 1812. The first optical shop, that of Scotsman John McAllister, opened in Philadelphia in 1799, but McAllister imported his lenses until the wartime embargo cut off the supply.

Opticians were not the sole suppliers of spectacles, however. In the 1800s, a wealthy buyer might purchase a silver pair of spectacles from a jeweler. Notes Redfearn, “Early in the nineteenth century, spectacle manufacture seems to have become an important part of the silversmith’s trade, along with flatware and jewelry. By the decade of the 1820s, every important city in the United States had at least one silversmith producing spectacles. Even the far western towns of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Lexington, Kentucky, had their spectacle makers working before 1830.”

Country folk and the less affluent found their spectacles in the general store or peddler’s cart. Ophthalmologist and collector Charles Letocha points out, “It would be like going to the drug store now and trying on the different reading glasses—you just picked the one that suited you best.”

Prescription eyeglasses did not exist. For most people, the fitting and construction of eyeglasses for a particular condition was not a possibility. Letocha adds, “They did a little testing, but it was pretty minimal. That came in the late nineteenth century.”
Modern and stylish as they seem, tinted lenses have a long history. Pliny (23-79 A.D.) wrote that Emperor Nero held an emerald to his eye to view the gladiatorial games. Portraits and miniatures from the early nineteenth century occasionally depict people wearing small tinted spectacles.

Frederique Crestin-Billet, in her book *Collectible Eyeglasses*, notes, “Today, tinted glasses are associated with the great outdoors, sport, and sunshine, but this has not always been the case. Since antiquity, people have found the color green relaxing for the eyes, believing it to have beneficial properties.” An English lifestyle guide from 1860 supports the use of tinted lenses, but suggests, “If the eyesight is weak, blue or smoked tinted glass is more suitable. Green lenses are utterly loathsome!”

Fleishman adds, “If you look into Samuel Pepys’s diary, begun in 1660, he wrote about his eyes being irritated and bothering him. He thought that if he got some green lenses his eyes would feel better. In a later entry, he had acquired the glasses and his eyes felt better.”
COLLECTING SPECTACLES
Because so many people needed and used eyeglasses, antique spectacles are widely available in the marketplace, appearing at auction, in shows, shops, and flea markets, and on Internet web sites. Magnifying spectacles are found more often than lenses for people with poor distance vision. Letocha explains, “The first near-sighted correction goes back at least to the 1400s, so they could get lenses, but they were not nearly as common as reading glasses. I have a pair of McAllister gold frames with ten diopter lenses—that’s a really thick lens.”

Eyeglass collectors can concentrate their search on makers working in a particular city, on tinted lenses of various shades, or on patent spectacles, such as the heavy-rimmed “Martin’s Margins” popular in the eighteenth century. Many nineteenth-century spectacles are marked with the names of their makers or retailers in the eastern United States—there are hundreds. Occasionally eyeglasses will list a city of origin, such as New York, Philadelphia, or Baltimore.

Although collectors prize pairs made by the McAllister firm because it is so well documented, Letocha notes, “When I first started collecting, you would go to the flea market and find a pair by McAllister, and the dealers would mark the price up because they had that name. So I wondered who McAllister was and began to research his company. They probably should charge less because he was the biggest maker, while other makers’ marks are not as common.” Members of the McAllister family operated the firm from 1799 until 1972.

Winterthur Museum owns a number of marked McAllister

In this miniature portrait, painted in 1796 by H. Janvey, an unknown gentleman wears a pair of “Martin’s Margins,” developed by London optician Benjamin Martin in 1756. Martin believed the eyes could be damaged by excessive light, which he reduced by about 30 percent by adding the broad inner frame of horn. The popularity of these unflattering specs faded with the beginning of the 19th century, but pairs occasionally turn up on the antiques market. Courtesy of Dr. David Fleishman.

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Hollis Brodrick of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, both collects and trades in antique spectacles and prefers pre-Revolutionary war examples. “The later ones I don’t have much interest in. The period and the details are everything. You can buy a very late-eighteenth-century or early-nineteenth-century pair of eyeglasses for $100. As soon as you get back in the Revolutionary War period, that’s when they take a jump in price.”

Recent prices from Brodrick’s inventory include a pair of early spectacles with green-tinted lenses, circa 1775, for $200, a pair of Martin’s Margins-type heavy-rimmed glasses with the original eighteenth-century steel case for $450, and a pair of eighteenth-century silver and tortoiseshell spectacles, hinged to fit into their own tortoiseshell case, for $595. “The cases are valuable, too,” he points out, “and eyeglasses are always worth more if they have their original cases.”

Collecting unusual lens variants such as single-lens monocles and lorgnettes, which were in use from the late eighteenth century until World War II, is a subspecialty. Mostly an upper-class phenomenon, these devices could be held to the eye for a quick, clear look in situations where wearing glasses simply would have spoiled the total effect. Lorgnettes were often framed with ivory, mother-of-pearl, or even gems, turning them into a valuable jewelry accessory. *

Karla Albertson also writes about antiques for The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Magazine ANTIQUES.
To solve the problem of keeping spectacles in place, manufacturers tried various types of adjustable temples, as on this brass model with a hinged end piece that could be folded behind the ear. A maker’s mark with a running animal and “H” stamped in oval reserve can be found on the outside of each arm at the hinge. The steel case protected the glasses and identified the owner, “Solomon Freeman, June 25th 1787.” Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

**IDENTIFICATION OF ANTIQUE SPECTACLES**

From 1730 to the early 20th century, eyeglass frames were individually handmade and newer models appeared in quick succession. The guidelines below represent the *period of common use* of these design elements; however, they are not all-inclusive. Much remains unanswered, so this should only be used as a guide.

All pre-1730 spectacles had round frames with a bow or C-bridge, no sidearms, and therefore no finials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lens Design</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<td>Round lenses</td>
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<td>Pre-1730-1820</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visual glasses (Martin’s Margins)</td>
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<td>Early 1760s-1820</td>
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<td>Oval lenses</td>
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<td>Around 1790-1900</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rectangular and oblong lenses</td>
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<td>Octagonal lenses</td>
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*Courtesy of Dr. David Fleishman*

View the entire identification chart at [www.antiquespectacles.com](http://www.antiquespectacles.com)

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