

SETTING THE
American Table

THE ILLUSTRIOUS LEGACY OF THE
Fostoria Glass Company



FOSTORIA GLASS MUSEUM



BY EMILY MCMACKIN DYE

Years ago, when my dad would return from business trips to the Ohio Valley, he had a ritual. After giving us hugs, he would present my mom with a decorative platter, bowl or vase he had picked up during his travels to the region. “Ooh, Fostoria!” she would exclaim, clapping her hands in delight. She cherished those pieces of Fostoria glass, pulling them out of the china cabinet every holiday and special occasion to add a touch of elegance to our table.

Known for its clarity, quality and exquisite designs, Fostoria glassware graced the tables of millions of American homes throughout the 20th century. Skilled artisans using pressed, etched and blown glass techniques made every piece by hand, and their craftsmanship and artistry brought sophistication and style to everyday dining and elevated household entertaining. Over nearly a century, Fostoria produced more than 1,000 patterns of formal and informal tableware in an array of colors and styles that were used everywhere—from middle-class homes to the White House. Its creations reflect the evolving culture, art and taste of Americans and the refinement and rituals of a bygone era.

Fostoria's *American* pattern is the longest continually produced glass pattern in U.S. history. The company used it for nearly 400 different glassware items.

JULIE NOYAS, FOSTORIAAMERICAN2056.COM



An Auspicious Beginning

Fostoria Glass Company was founded in 1887 by glass industry veterans Lucian B. Martin and William S. Brady. The men were lured to Fostoria, Ohio, by an abundance of newly discovered natural gas in the area. But as more glassmakers flocked to the city, the resource grew scarce. Just four years later, in 1891, the company relocated to Moundsville, West Virginia, where it received a free building site, a \$10,000 cash incentive and a 10-year contract for coal to fuel its operations.

From its earliest days, Fostoria built a reputation for the durability and sheen of its glass. The company brought a skilled workforce to Moundsville, including artisans who had emigrated from parts of Europe with rich glassmaking traditions. To enhance the shimmer of the glass, they used high-quality sand from Michigan.

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AMERICAN ARTISANS

Initially, Fostoria made hand-pressed items for the table, along with kerosene lamps and lamp parts. But with a furnace that could fire 14 pieces of glass at once—impressive for the time—the company soon expanded its product line, manufacturing everything from cologne bottles and inkwells to candelabras, vases, finger bowls and fruit jars. The DAR Museum has a Fostoria candelabra from this time, featuring an ornate twist pattern influenced by the French luxury glassmaker Baccarat.



Candelabra in the DAR Museum

By the turn of the 20th century, Fostoria began developing hand-blown stemware, featuring intricate designs that were needle etched or wheel cut. In 1915, the company debuted its iconic American pattern—a cube-like geometric design prized for its elegance and versatility that remained a company bestseller for more than 70 years.

The 1920s marked rapid growth for Fostoria. The company moved into a larger factory with five furnaces, established its own design department and ratcheted up production of stemware and tableware. At first, the finer glassware was marketed to hotels, restaurants and clubs, but as these establishments turned to machine-made glassware, Fostoria pivoted its focus to the home. In 1924, the company introduced the first crystal dining sets and began producing colored glassware in green, amber, blue and canary. It built on that momentum with a nationwide advertising campaign, targeting the homemaker audience of magazines such as *Woman's Home Companion*, *House & Garden* and *Ladies Home Journal*.

The company thrived through the Great Depression by making “elegant glass”—a higher-quality form of Depression glass that served as an affordable alternative to fine china. It continued to roll out vibrant new glassware colors, including iridescent carnival glass. It also partnered with designers

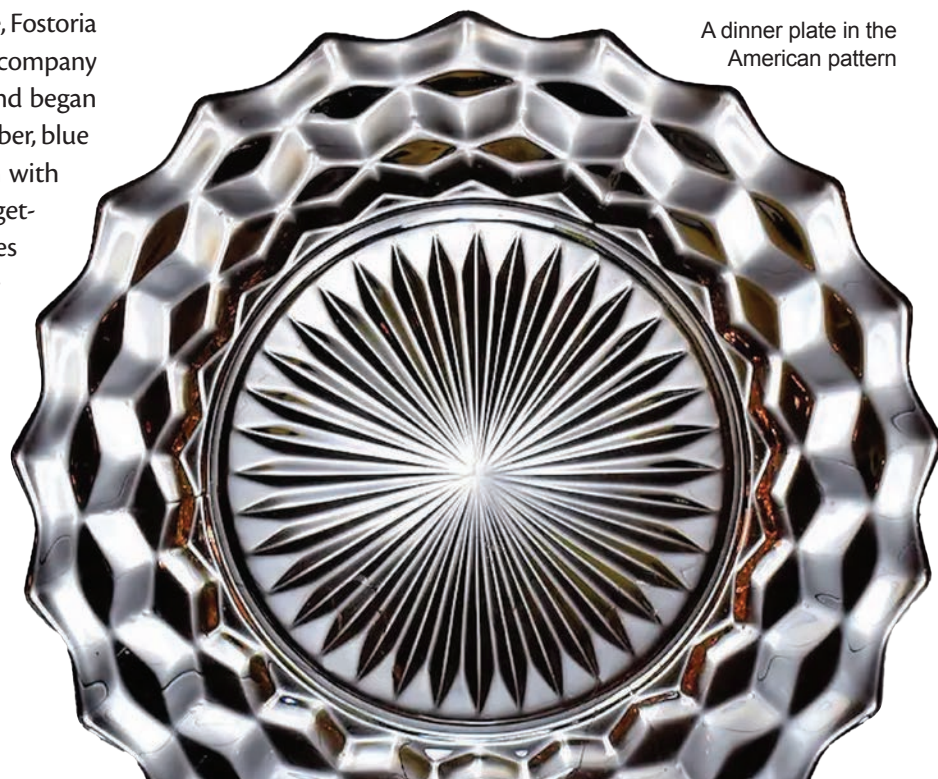
such as George Sakier, who designed some of Fostoria’s most popular patterns, including the Art Deco-inspired Lotus vase (housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection).

While World War II cut Fostoria’s workforce in half, it did not slow its innovation. The company added milk glass—opaque or translucent glass resembling porcelain—to its production, along with new patterns such as Chintz, Colony, Romance and Holly.

Fostoria’s Peak and Decline

After the war, demand for Fostoria glassware boomed as soldiers returned home, bought houses and started families. The company unveiled new patterns, including Century, Rose, Wedding Ring and Jamestown, with cleaner, simpler designs. By 1950, Fostoria employed nearly 1,000 workers and produced more than 8 million pieces of glassware a year, cementing its status as the largest provider of handmade glass in the United States.

Unlike most factories at the time, Fostoria did not have an assembly line. Instead, its facility consisted of small shops where laborers and glassblowers worked together closely to create each piece of glassware.



A dinner plate in the American pattern



“They saw themselves as artists, and they took pride in their work because they were paid by the piece,” said Gary Rider, Moundville’s town historian and co-author of *Memories of Fostoria Glass*. “If they exceeded their quota with glassware that was clean and without bubbles, they earned even more.”

Jobs at Fostoria were coveted in the small community, with many second- and third-generation employees. Kids began working there as early as their teens, starting as apprentices and working their way up through the shop, Rider said. “Workers were encouraged to practice making glass during their time off, and if they came up with a creative design, Fostoria would put it into production,” he said.

Fostoria flourished into the 1960s, expanding its marketing to boutiques and jewelry and department stores. Its glassware populated bridal registries and became the favored gift for milestones like anniversaries and retirements. The company even did custom work

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Want to explore more of Fostoria’s history or see its glasswork on display?

Visit the Fostoria Glass Museum (fostoriaglass.org) in Moundville, West Virginia, to view its extensive collection of glass and glassmaking objects from the Fostoria factory. The tour includes a video from the 1940s showing how the glass was made, plus a look at original molds acquired by the Fostoria Glass Society. Fostoria, Ohio, also displays early Fostoria glassware at its Glass Heritage Gallery (fostoriaglass.com), which highlights glass companies that operated in Fostoria in the late 1800s and early 1900s.



for Washington, D.C., creating glass etched with government seals for lawmakers and special orders for presidents from Dwight Eisenhower to Ronald Reagan.

As lifestyles grew more casual, Fostoria began to focus on decorative glassware, introducing contemporary lines such as Seascape and Sculpture and bolder palettes of opaque pastels. It even collaborated with the Henry Ford Museum to produce reproductions of early American pattern glass.

Despite the company’s prestige, competition from cheap foreign imports, coupled with changing tastes and increased use of plastics, led to Fostoria’s decline in the 1970s. In 1983, the Lancaster Colony Corporation bought Fostoria, folding it three years later. Its closure was a shock to Moundville, which lost many of its skilled workers to jobs in other areas. Some glassblowers set up their own shops, and avid Fostoria collectors formed the Fostoria Glass Society to preserve the history of the legendary brand.

Today, Fostoria’s legacy lives on in the throng of collectors who treasure the glass for its beauty, history and nostalgia and in the families who cherish these heirlooms for the memories they hold and the stories they evoke. 🏠