TECHNOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY: This week’s object is a piece of tableware made obsolete by the addition of a handle. In 1827 Deming Jarvis, an innovative glass-man, moved from Boston to Sandwich on Cape Cod where he largely perfected the technique of pressing a gather of glass into pattern-designed full-sized molds, as well as the associated technique of Lacy glass. Best known for its use in the making of cup-plates, Lacy glass was achieved by placing multiple tiny drill holes in otherwise blank areas of the mold. This technique greatly enhanced refractivity in the already highly refractive lead glass utilized in making these small plates.

THE OBJECT: Why was a cup-plate needed for a cup and saucer set? Well into the 19th century tea was served in handleless Chinese Export Porcelain cups and saucers. Handled cups required much greater space in shipping, as opposed to handleless cups, which could be compactly stacked. Cargo space on an East-Indiaman returning from the Orient was at a premium with every cubic inch of space devoted to profit. When filled with hot liquid, the handleless cup often proved to be too hot to hold comfortably, so the liquid was poured into its matching porcelain saucer to cool. This left a dripping wet cup to spoil one’s tablecloth, thus the cup-plate came to the rescue as a place to set the dripping cup.

Once highly popular and heavily produced from 1827–c.1845, these plates give credence to the notion that tea was frequently drunk out of a dish, and that the oft-quoted 18th century phrase ordering “a dish of tea” has some basis in fact. Probably millions of these jewel-like plates were produced at many different glass houses from New England through the Mid-West. Unfortunately, pressed glass culminated in the automation of glass-making and the death knell for the skilled gaffer. The skill factor shifted almost entirely to the mold-maker.

Numerous designs were utilized including floral, geometric, gothic, political, memorial, commemorative, and perhaps in celebration of the industriousness of the young country—the illustrated beehive design. Like this week’s object, most were made of colorless lead glass. However, other examples of colored glass, mostly blue and amethyst, and opalescent glass survive. The Exhibition will be particularly rich with many of these varieties.

Supported with grants from

An Extra Saucer

Lacy cup-plate, c. 1830-40, D. 3 1/16” Mid-western. Pressed, Lacy, colorless, lead glass in the form of a shallow dish. Central bee and beehive design with a bulls-eye border, and Lacy background.