

# Early English Decanters— Mallet and Cruciform



*This is an extremely unusual grouping. It is rare to see all these varieties in one setting. All are probably English. The decanters range in height from 8¾ to 11 inches. From left to right: (1) Octagonal mallet circa 1710-20. (2&3) The cruciform circa 1720-35. (4) The transitional form 1750 (5&6) The mallet, with grooved or pinched corners. circa 1760 into the 1780s. The circa 1730-40 English balustroid wineglass with a bell bowl and folded foot, is 6⅞ inches tall and is shown for scale. All objects from anonymous private collections.*

Wine was aged in wooden casks then shipped and stored in dark green (“black”) glass bottles, which were often then used for serving. Wine from the cask frequently contained considerable sediment which could not be easily detected in black glass bottles. Spurred by the refinement of clear leaded glass by England’s George Ravenscroft, transparent glass decanters became fashionable in the late 17th century. Impressing themselves and their guests, wealthier households embraced the glassware displaying their new clear decanters filled with clarified wines. The presence of string-rims and the heavy construction suggest that these vessels may also have been used to store and serve effervescent drinks. Cider, ale and champagne utilized corks that were secured in place by being tied to the string-rims. By the early 18th century two basic decanter forms had emerged—shaft-and-globe and mallet. The shaft-and-globe is extremely rare, particularly in the Colonies (we have no examples in the exhibit). Though not common, the mallet is found archaeologically. Descended in the family, a late mallet type survives at the Sayward-Wheeler House in York, Maine. Authors vary in the timeline attribution of the various shapes and we chose to use the research work of Ivor Noël Hume.<sup>1</sup> He correlated archaeological findings with the most accurate data on the development of the mallet form from circa 1710 to circa 1760. This illustration is a decanter timeline based on Hume’s work.

**THE OBJECTS:** *The number after a description refers to the caption of the illustrated object.* All the objects have some common characteristics. The common characteristics include very thick, heavy, leaded glass (probably 20-30% lead); a flared lip for ease of pouring; absence of a ground neck interior suggesting that they were never meant to have glass stoppers; molded panels and kick-ups; and small +/- 3 cm rough glass-tipped pontil scars. The earliest shape with octagonal sides is circa 1710-20 (1). The next development, circa 1720-35, was the cruciform style (2 & 3); presumably developed to increase surface area and thus rapidity of cooling when placed in ice. Object (4) circa 1750 with a less pronounced cruciform illustrates the stylistic transition occurring in the 18th century. From circa 1760 into the 1780s the shape becomes less angular and a new form develops, the mallet (5 & 6), with grooved or pinched corners. The number of string rims on a decanter neck and their placement varies. The ring placement does not help to accurately date the pieces. Early lead glass was subject to surface degradation and several pieces demonstrate the resultant cloudiness. Several show some opalescence of the bases which results from an excess of sodium sulfate, which is reminiscent of glassgall.

<sup>1</sup> Ivor Noël Hume, *A Guide to Artifacts of Colonial America*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, pps. 198-202

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