

Spectacles of the Past

by Carrie Crane

In the United States, 143 million adults wear prescription eyewear (64% of the adult population). This is big business. The U.S. market for spectacles, not including sun glasses was 13.11 billion dollars in 2019. And while the numbers have been increasing in modern times, there have always been a significant percentage of the population who suffer from either myopia (nearsightedness) or hyperopia (farsightedness). And added to that, there are those who suffer presbyopia, the loss of near vision as one ages.^{1,2} It was this last condition that was the first vision hinderance to be address with a visual aid.

The earliest known form of reading assistance is the *reading stone*, which dates back to 1000 BC and was a hemispherical shaped piece of polished quartz or glass and served to magnify something that it was held directly up against.³ This suggests there was a rudimentary understanding of the magnifying properties of curved glass but this was just the beginning. It was the Italians, in the 13th century that first created something similar to spectacles. Blown glass lenses were attached to wood, leather or horn frames and held before the eyes with a handle or hinged in the middle and precariously arranged on the bridge of the nose. These were used as reading aids only and it was another 200 years before the understanding of light refraction through a lens was understood well enough to create lenses that would help those suffering from myopia.

It took almost 500 years from the development of spectacles for someone to devise a better way to keep them on the face. In the 1700s a British optician named Edward Scarlett invented the temple piece, the arm that reaches from the lenses and wraps around the ear. This rapidly became the standard.⁴



*Civil War era spectacles with silver frame,
scroll shaped bridge, and straight teardrop temples, 5" x 2.25".
These glasses donated by Henry Harlow are believed to belong to a member of the
Flagg family.*

Initially spectacles were used by monks and scholars but as time went on, they became more popular among the wealthy elite. They were associated with learning and knowledge and so became a symbol of intelligence. As their popularity grew, styles continually changed but the basic design remained the same until the Civil War in the United States. At that time blockades were put in place on imported goods, among which spectacles were counted. American opticians set out to make their own eyewear but raw materials were now harder to find and more expensive. John Jacob Bausch (co-founder of Bausch and Lomb) seized the opportunity by popularizing a previously snubbed French spectacle style, the Pince-Nez (*French for pinch nose*). This style fit snugly on the bridge of the nose when needed but hung from a decorative cord otherwise, always handy when not in use. By eliminating the temple arms, and sometimes almost the entire frame,

¹ <http://wilmes.co/wp-content/uploads/MESVision-Facts-and-Statistics.pdf>

² <https://www.statista.com/topics/1470/eyewear-in-the-us/>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reading_stone

⁴ Hindsight is 20/20, the Pince Nez

the spectacles were less expensive to manufacture.⁵

The popularity of the Pince Nez style lingered long after the end of the War. This was in part because most wearers suffered from presbyopia (loss of near vision with age) which requires a simple magnifying lens. They also remained less expensive and were very convenient particular for the vain. At this time, those wearing glasses were thought to look elderly (because most were) rather than intelligent.⁶



Very late 19th century scroll bridge, gold spectacles (5" x 2.25") with curl temple (ear piece) and leather case from John W. Sandborn & Co. Optical which was in business in Boston as early as 1898. These were donated by Mrs. Arthur Knight and believed to have been owned by John B Gough.

Insert: *Folding C-spring gold metal spectacles (3" x 1.75") with leather metal trimmed case. Late 19th century*



C-spring oval pince-nez tortoiseshell spectacles (3" x 1.75") with leather and cardboard case, late 19th century.

The Boylston Historical Society Museum has a diverse collection of the Pince-Nez style spectacles. Not all of the original owners of the eyewear are known but these shown here all date from the late 19th century or very early 20th century. Some are quite snazzy and as an eyeglass wearer myself I thought they might be fun to own. I am not alone, in researching this article I found many eyeglass sites selling reproductions of these early styles, including Pince-Nez.



Circa 1910 C Spring Pince Nez smoked glass spectacles (4.5" x 2") with velvet lined, leather covered metal (likely tin) case, imprinted with J C Freeman Optical, 376 Main Street, Worcester MA .

The case may not be originally for these glasses. These were donated by Mrs. Arthur Knight and believed to have been owned by John B Gough

⁵ Hindsight is 20/20, the Pince Nez

⁶ Hindsight is 20/20, the Pince Nez

Eventually, lens technology advanced to correct other vision weaknesses, such as myopia, hyperopia and astigmatism. Further bifocals and progressive lenses could address multiple issues at once. These lenses did not lend themselves to being taken on and off and needed the stability of the temple to keep the prescription aligned properly on the face. This spelled the end of the Pince-Nez style which petered out during the first half of the 20th century.

Eyeglass wearing continues to increase as vision in the 21st century declines. The cause of this is thought to be that young people are spending less time out of doors developing their distance vision. And, ironically the emphasis on their education and reading has played a negative role as well with more time spent in school in front of books and computers.⁷ This is feeding an already huge industry; one many of us are thankful for.

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Renaissance vision from spectacles to telescopes

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⁷ <https://www.popsci.com/why-are-so-many-people-nearsighted/?con&dom=newscred&src=syndication>