Privy Pit Information Booklet

Display and Booklet by Roy Topka

NOTE
REMOVED FROM EXHIBIT

#13 – Geo. W. Hoxie Premium Beer
#14 – Utility or general purpose bottle
#18 – Nowills Pectoral Honey of Liverwort

INDEX

A Brief History of Privies

This display case is a representation of an actual privy pit showing the bottles and where they were found in relation to the depth of the pit. The dimensions of the wood-lined pit were 9 feet deep, 7 feet long, and 4 feet wide. Although it was first used as a privy until the late 1860s when it was abandoned and filled with wood ash and rubbish, bottles and crockery were thrown in as early as the late 1850s.

This display is informational and not an archaeological record. While many other items, such as ceramics and glassware, were found in this pit, space limits the display to only the whole bottles found. A few of the 1870s whole bottles are substitutes for broken specimens found in an 1870s to 1880s privy pit in the same yard. #9 Flask, was not found at this site, but was included to show design changes.

At least twice since the initial abandonment and filling, first in the mid-to-late 1870s, and later around the mid-1880s, the depositing of refuse and ash appears to have been discontinued and re-started. In the 1890s a new privy was dug through the original fill of the pit, apparent by Traces of wood lining, a different composition of the fill, and a slight use layer. This was not a large pit and appears to have had only a few years of usage.

From the time the privy was first used through the mid-to-late 1870s layer, approximately 100 to 110 bottles were discarded. Forty-eight of these were whole, some damaged. There were at least 50, probably closer to 60, broken bottles.

While the privy was in use, pontiled bottles were still common. From c.1860 to the mid-to-late 1870s, there were 27 whole bottles with pontil marks, and 21 without pontils. Four or five of the bottles having no pontils were discarded in the very early 1860s. In the same 1860 to mid-to-late 1870 period of the remaining 50-60 broken bottles, approximately 35 were pontiled. No pontiled bottles were found after the 1860s.

Breakdown of all bottles discarded c. 1860 to mid-to-late 1870s

Medicinal*/unknown 80±	Alcoholic Beverage 9	Soft Beverage 6	Food 6
Utility 3	Ink 2	Cologne/Perfume 2	Snuff 1

*13 embossed medicine bottles; the rest could be referred to as medicinal-type bottles. Their actual use is unknown. These bottles may have held cosmetic preparations or extracts which, at this period of time, were usually purchased at a drugstore in bottles similar to, or the same as, medicine bottles.

In the 1800s, for most families in an urban environment, outhouses were the customary landfills. While we could look for reasons to justify discarding large amount of bottles and ceramics in an outhouse pit, it was done simply to get rid of the trash. The depositing was for the most part deliberate. Items are found intermittently that would defy explanation: whole plates, pitchers, lamps, cups, chamber pots, porcelain dolls, etc. For many of these items, there is probably a very interesting story lost in time. One could easily picture a chamber pot slipping from an overworked mother's hands as she emptied it, or threw it away in a hurry due to someone's illness. A child who took some pie on a plate might want to dispose of the evidence. New owners may have moved in

and cleaned house. In any case, the premature filling of the pit did not seem to cause a great deal of alarm. Social consciousness about the environment was non-existent; if refuse was out of sight, it was out of mind.

Pits dating from the 1820s through the 1840s usually contain more broken than whole bottles as well as pottery, ceramics, and stoneware. People, especially the working classes, kept glass containers for secondary uses.

By the 1840s and the 1850s, all types of bottles were more plentiful, and secondary use was diminished. Therefore large quantities of bottles were thrown out unbroken. Also, by this time advances in the glass industry allowed for items that were previously made in potteries to be produced cheaper in glass houses, creating more items which would eventually find their way into the privy pit.

The contents of some pits have been shoveled out and the area filled in, while other pits may hold everything discarded in forty years of use. A 10-foot pit may have been divided in half by a stone or brick floor, the upper half being continually shoveled out until abandoned, leaving material from 1890 at the 5-foot level. After turning over a few bricks, you're back to the 1840s.

Some pits are a series of 2-foot or 3-foot deep trenches across the entire side of a back yard, the privy shack having been moved every year or two. A yard away, the pit may be 12 feet deep.

The pits may have been wood, brick, or stone-lined. The stone-lined pits often show the same careful construction that went into the house foundation meant for years of faithful service.

Some older pits are an irregular hole with no lining at all. The variety is endless, no doubt as individual as the men who dug them.

The life and usage of a privy were subject to many factors. The size of the dwelling or business as well as the number of people it was to accommodate, the pit size and depth, construction location, and proximity of other structures, or unique features of a house played a part in the life of the pit.

Privies were usually, but not always, located on one side of the yard or the other, or in a back corner. For a street of row houses, you often find the pits in the same location in each yard, not too different from the way yard sheds of today are set up. Some pits were built right against the back of the house. Many were heated. An abandoned well may have served as a spot to place the privy building.

In many cases when a privy was abandoned the privy-shed was left standing atop the hole and converted to use as a storage shed. Refuse could have been deposited through the original opening or a separate trap door. The shed could also have been moved to a new hole, and the original somehow covered. Many pits were immediately filled in with the dirt dug out for a new privy.

Objects on Display

1. George Weller
   “Hutchinson” Stoppered Soda Bottle
   Discarded mid-1880s

The Hutchinson stopper is named for its inventor, W.W. Hutchinson of Chicago, IL. It is an internal sealing stopper consisting of a spring wire loops and a rubber gasket that sealed against the bottle’s shoulder. The stopper was pushed in to open the bottles, and was re-usable. Weller started using these in the early-to-mid 1880s.

2. Strap-sided Flask
Discarded mid-1880s

Strap-sided flasks were primarily used for whiskey, but proprietors also used them for bitters, medicine, and household products. Flasks were a convenient bottle for non-carbonated drinks which could be easily sealed with a cork. This flask, as well as many other bottles produced from the 1880s onward, displays an improved tooled collar and lip. Part of the collar was probably formed in the mold, and a lipping tool turned or pressed the top of the bottle (known as the finish) into its final shape. The finish was quickly re-heated in a high-temperature furnace, known as a "glory hole," to give it a smooth appearance. Though improved lipping techniques were in use in the 1870s, they are rarely found in a privy pit prior to the early-to-mid 1880s period. By the 1890s, the improved finish, with the collar or lip area blending smoothly into the neck, predominates.

3. Octagonal Cone Ink (Umbrella Ink)
Discarded early mid-1880s

Octagonal cone inks are not often seen in privies after the mid-1880s, but, like any discarded article, there may be a long period of time between the production date and when it was thrown out. This practical design, almost impossible to overturn, might have been found in schools, businesses, and homes.

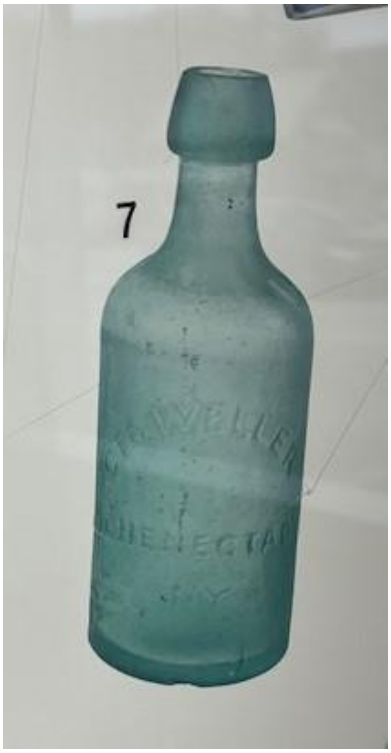
4. C. Clemenshaw, Troy, NY
Gravitating Stopper Bottle
Discarded mid-to-late 1870s

C. Clemenshaw started bottling in Troy around 1850, and was using Gravitating stopper bottles by at least 1875. In 1884, the business became Clemenshaw & Co., helping to date this piece between 1875 and 1884. Gravitating stopper bottles were filled in the inverted position. The glass stopper with bulbous rubber gasket on one end "gravitates" in the closed position, and when righted was held in place against the shoulder of the bottle by pressure of carbonation. The bottle was opened by pushing the stopper inward. By the mid-1880s, most bottlers who had been using these stoppers and bottles switched over to the Hutchinson bottle because it was more economical and practical.

5 & 6. Strap-sided Flasks (Union Oval)
Discarded mid-to-late 1870s

Unlike the mid-1880s, Flask, the collar on these bottles is a totally separate gather of glass, added to the neck of the bottle and tooled. In the 1870s and into the 1880s, amber and aqua were the most common colors for these strap sided flasks, shades of green and other colors less common. Clear flasks (ex. Warranted, Warranted—Full Measure) are more common as the 19th century drew to a close, and into the 20th century.

7. Geo. Weller Schenectady, NY
Soft beverage bottle
Discarded early-to-mid 1870s



This bottle was used by Weller from c.1867 to the mid and late 1870s. Note the cloudiness in this bottle. Collectors call this glass sickness. It is a result of moisture in the ground leaching from the glass soda and lime, two ingredients in glass formation.

8. Fermented Beverage Bottle
Associated with Ale and Porter
Discarded early 1870s

This shape, common in the middle of the 19th century, was still advertised in glass company catalogues at the turn of the 20th century as a “Porter Bottle.” This bottle would have been sealed with a cork which was usually secured with a wire that tied down under the collar. The majority of fermented and carbonated beverages were so sealed until the late 1870s to early 1880s when more “modern” closures came into use.

9. Amber Flask
Discarded early 1870s

By and large, this style of Flask was no longer produced by the mid 1870s. Note the crudely applied collar and mold seam that extends up to it. Once believed to be an indicator of age, seam lines that disappear anywhere on the neck of the bottle only indicate it was blown in a full height mold. This piece is the only bottle which did not come from this privy pit. It is shown here to illustrate design changes that occurred in flasks.

10. Food Bottle
Probably Olive Oil
Discarded mid-to-late 1860s

This free-blown bottle with deep kick-up and crudely applied flat collar is probably not blown in the United States. You will notice that this piece has no pontil mark. Free blown bottles such as this may have had the collar attached to the neck prior to separation from the blowpipe. When the bottle was separated, it could have been held in a snap case or been somehow cradled to be brought to the annealing oven or to have any finishing work done.

11. Ayers Compound Extract of Sarsaparilla Lowell, Mass.
Discarded mid-to-late 1860s

James Cook Ayers first bottled his Extract of Sarsaparilla around 1857. It was marketed as a cure for about every illness known to man. Ayers, who marketed many products, retired a multi-millionaire and died in 1878, though his products continued to be sold for many years after. An indentation on the base of this bottle gives it the false appearance of being pontil-rod scarred.

12. J. Lake, Schenectady, NY (sic)
Soda Water Bottle
Discarded early-to-mid 1860s

Unlike most J. Lake bottles which display a bare Iron pontil, this one does not. Its base area, as well as other bottles in this display, (such as #26, black glass bottle) is slightly pitted or appears distorted by heat or other processes of manufacture. On many of these bottles it is difficult to tell whether or not they are pontiled.

Lake sold out his business in 1859, and this bottle is believed to have been used by him in the late 1850s. Though slightly newer (not to say that pontiled Lakes made in different molds were not being produced) it is less common than the bare iron pontiled version due to a shorter production period. This bottle had stains inside associated with bluing or dye, a good indication of secondary use.

13. Geo. W. Hoxies Premium Beer (not currently on display)
Discarded early 1860

George Hoxie started his business in 1860 in Albany, NY. The darker glass shades of amber, olive-amber, and shades of green were often used for fermented beverage bottles of this period as it protected the contents from the light.

14. Utility or General-Purpose Bottle (not currently on display)
Discarded early 1860s
Bare iron pontil

Bottles like this could have contained anything from ink to medicines and could date into the mid-to-late 1850s.

15. Octagonal Cone Ink (Umbrella Ink)
Discarded early 1860s
Blowpipe pontil scar

This bottle is the older cousin of the aqua ink above it. This ink has an inward rolled lip and an unusual extended neck. These inks are seen in a wide variety of colors, aqua being the most common, followed by shades of green. For the time period this shape is one of the most common found in the area.

16 & 17. Early Medicinal-Type Bottles without pontil scars

Discarded early-mid 1860s

Held by some form of a “snap” case to complete the finish, these bottles were found in with other bottles of similar construction with pontil rod scars. The pontil rod seems to have been in use longer for medicinal-type bottles than other types of bottles, at least in the east. Note the mold seam line across the base of bottle #17 showing two-piece mold construction. This type of mold was in use into the 1870s when it was superseded by other mold types.

18. Medicine Bottles, Nowills Pectoral Honey of Liverwort

19. Dr. Atherton’s Wild Cherry Syrup. E.W. Hall, Whitehall, NY

Discarded early 1860s

Blowpipe pontil scars

(#18 not currently on display)

Both of these bottles with blowpipe pontil marks were discarded early in the 1860s. There is not a great deal of information about these bottles and the products they contained. Dr. Atherton was still in business in 1871 and the Nowills bottle contained a remedy for consumption bottled in New York.

20. Lyon's Katharion for the Hair New York
21. Dr. Sanford's Liver Invigorator New York
Discarded early 1860s
Blowpipe pontil scars

"Katharion," according to Emanuel Thomas Lyon, is derived from the Greek work "Kathro," meaning to cleans, purify, and restore. It was supposed to do all this for your hair. Dr. Sanford's was billed as one of the "best Purgatives and liver medicines now before the public." Bottles 19 through 22 could date anywhere from the mid-to-late 1850s to the early 1860s.

22. Mineral Water
Discarded early 1860s
Bare iron pontil

A common type of bottle, which could have been used by many different proprietors who may have attached their own labels. Bare iron pontils are not usually seen on eastern blown beverage bottles like this after around 1860.

23. R.G.W.S. Excelsior Beer
Discarded early 1860s
Smooth base

This is believed, but not proven, to be a Rodgers & Weller Bottle from Schenectady, NY. These two individuals were in business by 1860 after Rodgers purchased John Lake's soda business in 1859. The lip roughness is probably due to a problem extracting the cork by the purchases during secondary usage.

Since this bottle is believed to date from 1860, and the Hoxie beer definitely dates from 1860, these bottles provide valuable dating guidelines. Because they were very near the bottom of the hole, their date helps to date when the surrounding bottles were discarded.

24. Spirit Bottle
Three-piece full height mold
Pontil-rod scarred
Discarded early 1860s

This bottle could have contained spirits or perhaps wine. These tall, cylindrical bottles are actually the end of the evolutionary process of the spirits bottle, which started in the 1600s. Some of the earlier styles are seen elsewhere in the museum.

25. Stoneware Inkwell
Salt glaze

Though undeniably more durable than its glass counterpart, these bottles are less common than glass inks in the city where this privy was located. For corresponding time periods, when this ink was manufactured, it would have been more expensive to produce than glass.

26. Fermented Beverage Bottle
"Bottle Glass" green
Discarded early 1860s

This bottle was blown in a 3-piece mold with the neck partially formed with hand tools. Though crude and bubbly, this bottle could date anywhere from the mid-1850s to the early 1860s. "Bottle Glass" is actually the natural color of the glass batch without the addition of other agents for color or clarity. The addition of Iron Slag (the formula at the Saratoga Mountain glassworks utilized ashes) to bottle glass produced a stronger, more durable bottle known as "black glass," as the color of the glass was so dark as to appear black. Either type of bottle could be extremely dark in color. Today most bottle glass bottles are referred to as black glass.