

Hitting the Bottle

Nicky Hughes

The study of glass bottles is a complicated topic, and bottle collecting has many dedicated adherents. Full knowledge of the history of bottles is not essential, however, to allow Civil War living history practitioners to improve that aspect of their impressions. This article will provide some basic information about mid-19th century bottles. It probably contains some generalizations that will drive bottle collectors crazy, but it definitely will help readers select bottles more intelligently. If you find the topic tantalizing and cannot wait to read about three-piece hinged molds, lipping tools, and snap cases, please see the books cited at the end of this article.

Following are some features that can help place a glass bottle in the date range of the 1850s and early 1860s:

Color - Bottles could be made of clear, essentially colorless glass during our period of interest, but clear glass was harder to work and did not take lettering very well. Clear glass bottles seem to have been commonly used where it was important to be able to see the contents - such as with apothecary bottles. Most everyday bottles were of colored glass — green, amber, black, or perhaps most commonly the pale blue color collectors call aqua.

Seam lines - Most bottles were blown into molds that determined their shape and left lines up the sides of the bottles where the seams in the molds were. During our period the lips of bottles were separate pieces, applied after the body of the bottle had been made, or were worked up from glass at the tip of the bottle neck.

To attach or form these lips the bottles were re-heated, and this heating obliterated the seam lines near the lip. (See **Illustration #1**.) Seam lines that disappear well below the lip are best for the Civil War era. Bottles with lines that pass right up to the top of the bottle are of post-war manufacture.



Illustration #1. Seam lines should disappear near the top of the bottle, where the lip was re-heated and applied by hand. The lip may be irregular.

Pontil marks - Round blotches of color - usually dull red or gray — on the bottoms of bottles are called pontil marks or scars, referring to the pontil - a handling tool - that left this mark on the bottle. Some “open” pontil scars are just round circles of glass without color. Pontil marks are excellent indicators of pre-1865 bottle manufacture. Some bottles had diagonal lines across the base instead of pontil scars. See **Illustration #2**.

Closures - Screw lids were very scarce - most commonly seen on fancy patent whiskey flasks - and metal caps like those on soft drink bottles lay far in the future. Most bottle closures depended upon corks - but they were often hidden under sealing wax or heavy metal foil similar to but a bit thicker than that still found on champagne bottles. The foil often bore embossed seals. Some bottles had wire bails. Bottle lips were sometimes made and attached with

little precision and may be quite irregular in shape.

Markings - Bottles made in molds often carried raised texts and images, but most such surviving bottles date from the post-war decades. Study and experience are necessary to date lettering styles. Numbers or other markings on the base of a bottle usually indicate postwar manufacture.

Texture - Civil War era bottle glass sometimes displays a wavy texture, and air bubbles may be encased in the glass.

It is important to remember that bottle shapes were

somewhat specialized —a person in mid-19th century America could get a clue of the contents of a bottle from its shape, although there were plenty of unspecialized, utility bottles. Bottles that looked like cathedral windows might hold pepper sauce or other condiments or maybe pickles or preserved fruit. Ale bottles were dark amber or black with long necks. Bottles for bitters -- over-the-counter medicines often based on herbs and alcohol -- were usually square, but they came in many novelty shapes as well -- some mimicking the appearance of log cabins, complete with molded logs and shingles.

The search for convincing Civil War era glass bottles for living history use can be frustrating. To this writer's knowledge (and he would love to be corrected by some better-informed reader) no completely

accurate to the 1860s blown-in-mold bottles are being reproduced today. Jamestown Glassworks offers free-blown bottles (marketed to reenactors by the Bohemian Brigade Bookstore, 7347 Middlebrook Pike, Knoxville, TN 37909; phone (615-694-8227). Blenko Glass makes very attractive blue bottles of a similar style (available from the craft store at the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Lexington Road, Harrodsburg, KY; phone 606-734-5411). Both these lines demonstrate manufacturing techniques that were primitive by 1850s standards, but at least nothing about them post-dates our period. Wheaton Glass of New Jersey has long distributed copies of period novelty bottles, especially bitters bottles. These are of obviously modern manufacture with over-the-lip seam lines and 20th century quality glass. Their simulated pontil scars should not fool anyone, but apparently they do -- Wheaton bottles can be found in just about every antique mall in the country, all too often priced as if they were rare, original bottles. Don't pay more than ten or so dollars for a Wheaton reproduction bottle. Pier One and other importers sometimes carry foreign-made bottles that look superficially like 1860s period bottles. They have wavy glass, a greenish color,

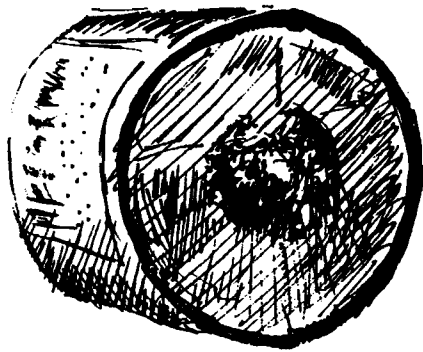


Illustration #2 showing pontil mark.

and sometimes open pontil marks and period shapes. Even the most convincing of these have over-the-lip seam lines, however. Select bottles from such sources with extreme care (don't you dare say, "I got it at Pier One, and *The Watchdog* said their bottles are OK!"). Avoid ones with bright colors, exotic shapes, and ornate geometric or floral designs (these are from European prototypes). The best you can get here are simple utility bottles and maybe an occasional eagle whiskey flask. Original bottles are, then, the most accurate (dare we say "authentic" in this context?) available for use in Civil War living history. This article should be helpful when shopping for such bottles. They are not all that scarce, and can sometimes be found for reasonable prices at antique shops. They even turn up on occasion in merchants' tents at events -- often lonely amid a collection of bottles from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But we need to remember that original bottles are a non-renewable resource, and are by their very nature delicate. Living history practitioners should think twice before subjecting antique bottles to the rigors of reenactment campaigning. If you must use old bottles, handle them with the care these charming, fortunate survivors deserve!

Please do not remove or damage any paper labels you might find on period bottles - these are very rare today and are extremely valuable documentation of mid-19th century commercial practice. Very many Civil War era bottles had paper labels when new, and this should be reflected in living history practice.

What these labels looked like and how to obtain reproductions of them is -- well -- another story altogether, which will be featured in a future edition of *The Watchdog*.

Sources

Russell, Mike. *The Collector's Guide to Civil War Period Bottles & Jars* (second edition, with price guide, available from the author for \$15.95 plus \$1.50 shipping at 401 Virginia Avenue, Herndon, VA 22070; Mr. Russell also sells original bottles and issues a quarterly catalog).

Switzer, Ronald R. *The Bertrand Bottles; A Study of 19th-Century Glass and Ceramic Containers*. National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC, 1974.

Examination of original examples in *The Arabia Museum*, Kansas City, Missouri, and elsewhere.

Illustrations by Larrie S. Curry