

Harry Hall White, Bottle Archaeologist and Researcher Extraordinaire

By Bill Baab

When Harry Hall White died in April of 1944 at the age of 60, collectors of early American antique glass, including bottles, lost a stalwart friend and researcher, but are still enjoying the fruits of his early labors.

He was a Chrysler Corporation engineer who, during his free time, explored and excavated the sites of many of the early glass houses in the Midwest, Northeast and New England.

He shared his research with many notables of the bottle collecting hobby

of his days, prompting legendary George McKearin to say in his book, *American Glass* (1941): "Harry Hall White is the outstanding pioneer in this field of research and investigation."

McKearin went on to say that "the excavations to which we frequently referred, made over a period of 20 years or more by Harry Hall White on the sites of many glass houses, have been a source of almost priceless information and positive knowledge to collectors in practically every category of American glass. Not only is Mr. White a thorough student with a

valuable store of technical knowledge, but he is restrained and conservative in arriving at conclusions."

Patient staffers at *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, Ohio came up with several references to White by scanning their Microfilm files for this writer. "The first meeting of the newly formed Society of Collectors will be held tomorrow evening at the Salle Moderne of Hotel Statler," said a story published Sept. 17, 1933. Among those present was its newly elected president, "Harry Hall White, known for his collection of old glass."



Obverse (left) and reverse of the rare A. Jackson Masonic historical flask first documented by Harry Hall White.
(Courtesy of Mark Vuono)

On May 3, 1937, another story said “the Women’s Civic Club of Cleveland Heights will hear about glass artistry. Harry Hall White, of Detroit, formerly a Cleveland, comes to speak on the subject on which he is an authority. He will bring along several fine pieces to illustrate his talk.”

On March 9, 1941, *The Plain Dealer* reported that “Harry Hall White, of Detroit, an engineer of the Chrysler Motor Company, last night described to members of the Society of Collectors his research work in identifying articles of glass manufactured in the early 1800s by factories in Ohio and surrounding states. Factories which made the glass have disappeared.

“This hobby, in which he has ‘little competition,’ takes White mostly to small towns and remote places in search of clues which may lead to the factories’ former sites. After the general region is determined, he digs in various spots and sifts the dirt to salvage fragments of glass which bear identifying marks in color, design, shape or mold construction.”

The last reference to White in the Cleveland newspaper was in a story about the city’s sixth annual antiques show on Oct. 5, 1942. “Visiting the show was Harry Hall White of Detroit, an outstanding authority on American glass ware.”

White shared most of his research in articles written for *The Magazine Antiques*. Kathleen Luhrs, a staffer on the magazine that’s still being published, kindly sent copies of most of his articles written between the 1920s and 1940s.

The first was on the Kentucky Glass Works written in the February 1926 issue. As usual, White furnished photos of bottles from the Louisville glass houses (scroll flasks, ribbed or fluted types and eagle flasks) from his own vast collection.

To illustrate just how passionate a collector and archaeologist he was, here in his own words are excerpts from his Keene, New Hampshire story published in June 1927:

“From the standpoint of possible discovery, the site of an old glass factory occupies, in my mind, relatively the same position as an old attic. The uncertainty and the chances of unexpected revelations of treasure exercise a constant lure. In the exploration of an old factory location, one, and only one thing, is certain; namely: that the fragments of glass remaining there from days of early activity are permanent and

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unchanging records ... Some sites are not accessible: one that I know of is now occupied by a railroad station, another by a business block, while a third has been washed away by the changing course of a river, forever denying the explorer the joy of discovery.”

Not only was White able to excavate old glass house sites, but was able to interview surviving members of the factory families. “It has been my good fortune to have an interview with Frank H. James, son of Dr. James, the former owner who was associated with his father in the management of the (Lancaster, N.Y.) works. Mr. James has given me much information regarding the factory’s later products,” White wrote in the October 1927 issue of the magazine.

Bottles produced there included scroll flasks, urn and cornucopia flasks, Wishart’s Pine Tree Cordial, Flora Temple, C.W. Merchant, Warner’s Tippecanoe Bitters, Drake’s Plantation Bitters and Warner’s Safe Cure bottles.

He compiled a four-part series on the glass works of New York State and later even described a reproduction of the Jenny Lind flask made in Czechoslovakia (March 1931). “No

attempt was made to represent it as anything other than a copy useful as a lamp base,” he said.

He wrote a two-part series on the “Glass Monuments to Zebulon Pike,” he of Pike’s Peak fame, in the magazine’s September and October 1932 issues. Part II was a checklist of the known variants of Pike’s Peak flasks taken from Charles McMurray’s *Collector’s Guide of Flasks and Bottles* (1927) and Stephen Van Rensselaer’s *Early American Bottles and Flasks* (revised edition, 1926).

His discoveries of interest to bottle collecting and collectors are nothing short of amazing. For example, he asks in the January 1934 issue, “What Is a ‘Sheared’ Neck?” Edward Attlee Barber, one of the few early authorities on antique bottles, in his *American Glassware, Old and New*, published in 1900, asserted that, “In older forms the mouth was cut by shears while in a plastic or soft condition.”

White wasn’t satisfied with that being the case. He perused earlier authorities who wrote about early glass-blowing procedures and found in an 1840 *Dictionary of Arts, Manufactures and Mines*, the following statement:

“He then lifts the bottle up at the end of the rod, and transfers it to the finisher, who touches the glass tube at the end of the pipe with a cold iron, cracks off the bottle smoothly at its mouth ring.” White found further references that “by application of cold iron or a drop of water, the neck can be separated from the blowpipe.”

White’s discovery of the Mantua, Ohio glass factory site, subsequent excavations and the study of “bushels” of shards revealed the existence of a historical flask that was unknown to the collecting world at that time. He described his finding evidence of the one-pint A(ndrew) Jackson – Masonic flask as “the outstanding single discovery made during this research.” His four-part series published in *The Magazine Antiques* from December 1934 to November 1935 certainly bears that out. At that time, he had

discovered only shards of that flask. Here is what he had to say in the November 1935 article:

“Never did my highest hopes comprehend the pioneer discovery of an important early historical flask. However, one evening the revelation came when I was washing a bit of my treasure trove. I suddenly uncovered the familiar Masonic emblem of the Holy Bible, the square and the compasses. I have seldom undergone a more intensely dramatic experience than my subsequent search for additional fragments, and, as these were found, the piece-by-piece reconstruction of the Jackson-Masonic flask. When the work was complete I had retrieved from oblivion a flask of splendid proportions and of exceptional historical value. It bears the simple eloquent legend: A JACKSON / OHIO, Above the arc of Jackson’s name are the initials J T, standing for Jonathan Tinker, glassblower and co-founder of the Mantua works.

“The reverse is ornamented with more Masonic symbols than I have ever seen used before – the spade, the coffin and a sprig of acacia. Above the usual beehive, and at the right

of the pillars, appears the triangular form of seven lighted tapers.”

A few years later, a whole example of the flask was discovered sitting on a timber of an old barn just a few miles from Mantua. Owned by pioneer collector Neil C. Gest (who was inducted into the FOHBC Honor Roll in 1987), the flask was made available to White for further study, with details carried in his magazine article in December 1942.

McKearin, who devised a numbering and identification system for historical flasks, designated this one as GI-70. Contemporary flask expert Mark Vuono, of Stamford, Conn., knows of just three in existence: one at an Ohio historical society, one at the Corning (N.Y.) Glass Museum and one in his own collection. He kindly provided photos of the latter to accompany this article.

Other topics of White’s writings in the magazine include The Albany (N.Y.) Glass Works (July 1936); Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Glassmaker (December 1938, February 1939), April 1939); Pattern Molds and Pattern-Mold Glass (August 1939); More Light on Coventry and Its Products (October 1940, November 1940, February 1941); The Willington Glass Company (August 1941); The Mantua Jackson-Masonic Flask (December 1942), and Glass Balls (June 1943).

The Plain Dealer on Sunday, April 9, 1944, published the following:

“Harry Hall White, 60, consulting engineer with the National Farm Machinery Co-operative, Inc., of Indiana, nationally known authority on Early American Glass and a former resident of Cleveland, died Friday in Shelbyville, Ind., while on a business trip.

“Mr. White, a resident of Cleveland for 25 years until he moved to Detroit in 1938, had collected Early American glassware for many years. He had completed several years of research work for a book on glass, but died before he started to write it.

“In 1938, he was elected the first president of the Cleveland Collectors Society, but moved to Detroit before he had a chance to serve. Surviving him are his wife, Mrs. Jessie Jewitt White; a daughter, Mrs. E. Clay Ingram, and two sons, Roland A. and Ernest A. Ball.”

In 1985, Harry Hall White was joined by Edmund R. and Jayne Blaske and John C. Tibbitts in the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors Hall of Fame.

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