

Did George Washington Drink from This Bottle?

By Bill Baab

NOTE: A stoneware bottle bearing the G. WASHINGTON imprint was found on a dredge, perhaps off the Virginia coast. I cannot tell a lie, so I admit the following is a figment of my imagination. Of course, it may be closer to the truth than imagined. Then again, maybe not!

It was summer at Mount Vernon and steamy hot, so George Washington decided a cruise aboard a friend's sloop would help him cool off. He met his friend at Mount Vernon's wharf on the Potomac River, boarded the little vessel and they set sail for a cruise around Chesapeake Bay.

While enjoying the breeze as the sloop plowed through the water, the former president of the United States felt thirsty. He had brought a few stoneware bottles of his favorite ginger beer kept cool inside a moss-lined picnic hamper.

He had a local potter turn the bottles and personalize them by stamping their shoulders with his first initial and last name. He took one of the bottles out of the hamper and carefully pried out the cork stopper.

He drained the bottle, which contained

little more than a pint of the peppery liquid, and sat it on the sloop's rail. Suddenly, a puff of wind caused the boat to heel and the bottle fell overboard.

"Drat!" bemoaned George. "Those bottles are expensive. I must remind myself to be more careful!"

Fast-forward to February, 2008. I had e-mailed a photo of the bottle to David Graci of South Hadley, Mass., asking the stoneware bottle expert if the bottle could have been around in George's day, from the late 1700s to the early 1800s.

"The shape indicates it is older than George's time period, but there are few stoneware bottles that date to his era, with most being in the early 1800s," Graci replied. He suggested I contact someone at Mount Vernon.

A source at Mount Vernon who asked to be identified only as being "close to the former president" disagreed with Graci, saying the bottle's form and heavy rim indicates it dates to the mid-19th century. Since Washington died in 1799, that surmise rules out the bottle being his.

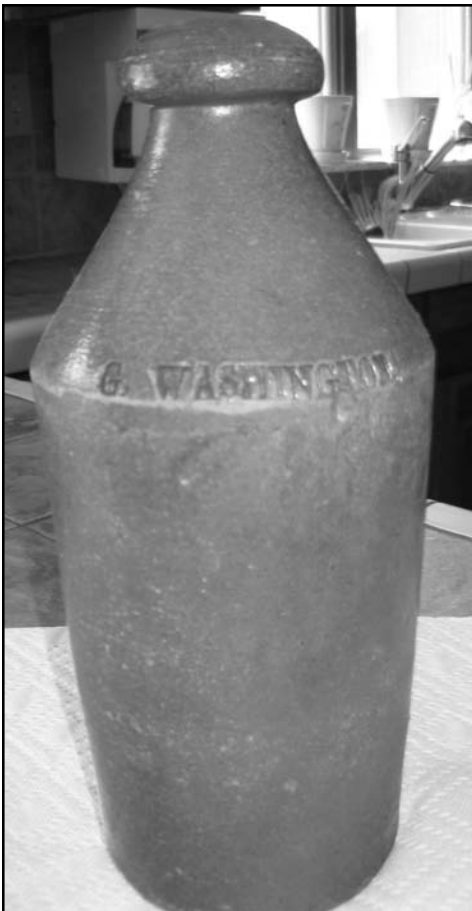
Who's right?

The imprint more than likely was that of a potter or a bottler bearing the same name as the nation's first president. A check of Don and Betsy Yates' "Ginger Beer and Root Beer Heritage" and Graci's "American Stoneware Bottles" did not reveal a G. Washington potter or bottler.

Images of the bottle and a photo of her late husband, Tony, were e-mailed to me from Carol Ann Volpe, who was curious about the bottle's origins.

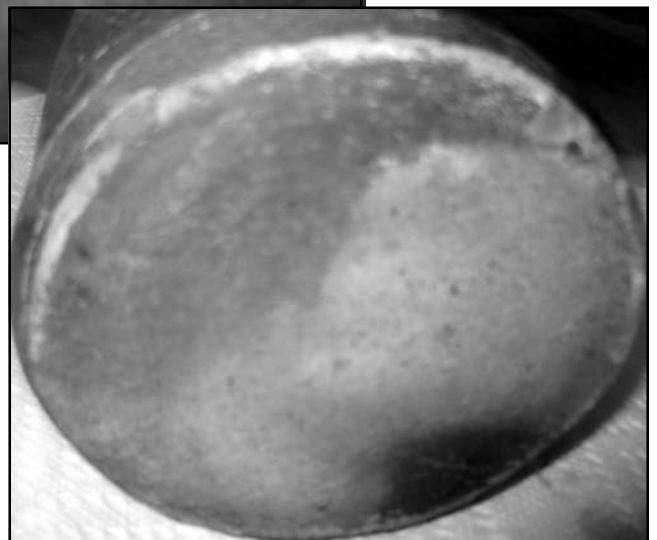
He was a commercial clammer for more than 16 years, working on many different dredge boats from five to 60 miles offshore from Maine to Florida.

"We started collecting early when an old bottle came up in the dredge," she said. "My husband brought it home and I fell in love with the mystery of this bottle so I asked him to bring me more. I can't say where in the ocean it's from. I have many bottles throughout our years together and built shelves in the kitchen to display them after he died in 1993."



Stoneware ginger beer stamped G. Washington dates to late 18th century, expert David Graci says.

Tony Volpe found the bottle while aboard a clammer's dredge.



Bill Baab
2352 Devere Street
Augusta, GA 30904
(706) 736-8097
riverswamper@comcast.net