

# Authentic Bottles as Part of Your “Plunder Chest” or Camp

By Cecil Munsey

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*[This article was written originally for Muzzle Blasts magazine, the official publication of the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association (NMLRA). It deals with teaching “Mountain Men”, “Historical Re-enactors” and “Rendezvous” fans about collecting and including original period bottles in their activities. Photographs courtesy of W. Van den Bossche and F. Weegenaar.]*

Black glass bottles, as pictured on the famous NMLRA target (Fig. 1), were among the first containers of liquids to come to America from Europe. While mountain men, like Jedediah Smith and Jim Bridger, carried some glass containers as they roamed and worked in frontier Amer-



Figure 1

ica, few examples remain today. Those bottles that do exist mostly belong to private collectors and museums. The bottle category is generically called “black-glass” because iron slag was added to the basic glass mixture of sand, soda, and lime to produce a very dark glass.

Until approximately the mid-1800s it was believed that dark glass (“black glass”) was the best glass. This belief probably stemmed from the demand for dark glass containers by merchants of wine and spirits after they discovered their products would keep better in dark containers. Glass-makers catered to the demand by making a very cheap “black glass.”

The glass was so dark that at first glance it appeared to be **black**. Interestingly enough, black glass is a very durable glass, and therefore better, because it can withstand a great deal more exposure to the natural elements than can glass of other colors.

## Squat Wine Bottles

Squat wine bottles (Fig. 2), made in the 1600s–1800s, are one of the types of early bottles most desired by



Figure 2



Figure 3

black powder aficionados who are concerned with the authenticity of their equipment (gear). They come in a wide variety of sizes and because they were free-blown no two are alike in shape. Squat wine bottles have several names including “king’s,” “onion,” “squat,” “mallet,” “Dunmore,” and “Wistarburg” – take your choice. Squat wine bottles were made in England from about 1600 to 1830; it is not likely that any were made in America but if they were it would be difficult if not impossible to differentiate between the two types.

The Dutch also made squat wine bottles during the seventeenth century. The Dutch version is usually found with a comparatively longer neck than the English model (Fig. 3). Another difference between the two types of free-blown squat wine bottles can be found by examining their bases. English bottles of this type have an almost nonexistent basal kick-up (bottom of the container pushed up into the interior during construction) and a rather small pontil (rod) scar, while Dutch versions have a rather severe basal kick-up and a large pontil scar (Fig. 4). Still another difference can be found on the bottlenecks: The Dutch examples feature flat wrap-around rims, whereas the English



Figure 4

specimens have an applied collar (laid-on ring).

### Demijohns and Carboys

While one doesn't very often see them at a rendezvous, very large glass containers known as demijohns and carboys are worthy of a separate discussion. These bottles command attention mainly because of their size. They sometimes are large enough to contain ten or more gallons and weigh up to thirty or forty pounds empty, although both types are normally manufactured to hold from one to ten gallons. Demijohns were usually manufactured in a bulbous or bladder

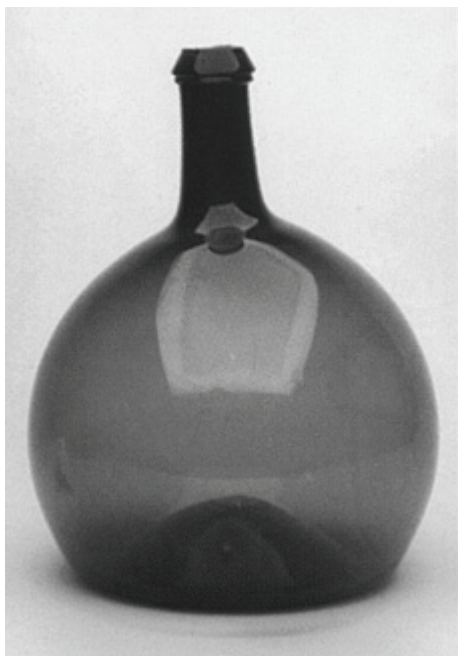


Figure 5

shape (Fig. 5) and have rather long necks; carboys, on the other hand, were generally cylindrical in shape and had short necks. From all indications demijohns were more popular in the early days when free blowing was the most practical method of producing bottles (Fig. 6), and carboys be-



Figure 6

came popular when the use of molds became the most efficient method. Both were bulk containers that were reused until broken. Originally almost all of these large bottles were



Figure 7

covered with wicker baskets (Fig. 7) or wooden boxes to reduce the chance of breakage. The earliest of these bottles were made in dark green to black glass but an amber specimen is sometimes located. Nineteenth-century examples are found in aqua and clear glass in addition to the common dark green and black glass, and are of the blown-in-mold type.

### Seal Bottles

The practice of attaching glass seals to the shoulders or sometimes the bodies of wine bottles began in England in the 1600s. Some of the earliest found bear dates from the 1650s.

Seal bottles (Fig. 8) were not a new idea when adopted by the English; they go back to Roman times. On glass bottles, seals were applied after the bottles were completed but not annealed (cooled). A glob of glass was taken from the furnace and lightly fused to the hot bottle, then while the glob was still hot it was impressed with a stamp rather like a stamp used for impressing sealing wax. The stamp would, of course, have lettering and/or design cut in backwards on it. (Such a process should not be confused with the later

practice of embossed lettering achieved by either carving into the bottle mold, or on plates that were inserted into the mold.)



Figure 8

On wine bottles, seals were first used as identifying marks for taverns and persons of the upper class (Figs. 9 & 10). Later the custom spread to

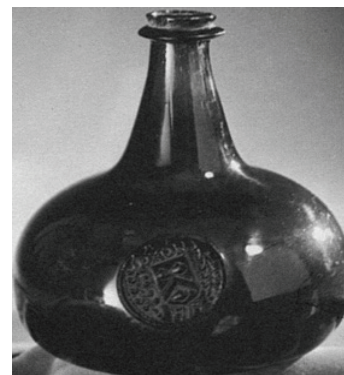


Figure 9



Figure 10

shipping agents, merchants, and distillers. Before the 1800s wine bottle seals were the exception rather than the rule.

Not all bottles bearing seals were wine containers. Some seal-bearing bottles contained mineral water, rum,



olive oil, anisette, and so forth; the same holds true for unmarked bottles and the large demijohns or carboys. Of the liquids other than wine that were put in bottles generally thought of as wine containers, rum was, no doubt the most popular.

Seals on wine bottles may also carry the date the bottle was manufactured or first used, and are especially helpful in dating the containers. *Such dates, however, are not necessarily indicative of the period the bottle was used because glass bottles were relatively expensive in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were often used and reused until broken.*

### Utility and Other Black Glass Bottles

Utility bottles and other black glass containers are also among the historic bottles that belonged in a



**Figure 11**

mountain man's "Plunder Chest."

(**Fig. 11**) is an example of a free-blown utility (or snuff) jar that was made in New England between 1800-1830. It is cylindrical, black glass and has an applied collared mouth with a laid on ring.

(**Fig. 12**) pictures an early free-blown utility bottle, from New England. It was made during the 1780-1840 period. It is eight inches tall and approximately five inches wide.



**Format 12**

(**Fig. 13**) is a typical black glass wine bottle of the early 1800s. This is probably one of the easiest to obtain free-blown bottles that may have graced the plunder chest of a typical frontiersman. These bottles were made by the thousands and were often used and reused because of their durability. (This particular bottle recently sold on eBay for \$25.)



**Figure 13**

### Case Bottles

Rum, gin and whiskey were favored "hard" beverages of pioneering

American trappers and traders – especially at rendezvous of mountain men. Trade goods almost always contained a few bottles of "fire water" – (This term comes from the Indian practice of throwing a cup of whiskey into a fire to see if it would burn. If it would not flame up, it would not be accepted.) Bottles used to contain those three alcoholic beverages had to travel some rough sea voyages and land trips to reach the places where they were consumed. To keep such bottles from breaking during shipment, case bottles were designed to fit in boxes made especially for that purpose (**Fig. 14**).

Containers for alcoholic beverages have been many and varied over the centuries. A variety of stoneware bottles were used as were many cylindrical glass bottles, but the most predominant of all gin containers has been square-bodied case bottles. The term "case bottle" originally referred to an octagonal bottle (**Fig. 15**).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries case bottles were used extensively by chemists and apothecaries; since gin was originally dis-



**Figure 14**

pensed as a medicine it is safe to assume that from its inception it was distributed in case bottles. Case bottles of the seventeenth century differ little from those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but the earlier examples were almost straight-sided, whereas the later types were more tapered (**Fig. 16**).

It can be supposed that it made no difference to traders and trappers but



Figure 15



Figure 16

it is often difficult to differentiate between Dutch, English and American types because glass houses made use of Dutch craftsmen, and vice versa. There are similar problems when dating is attempted. Unlike wine and other early glass bottles, the glass seals

occasionally found on case bottles are seldom dated, since gin does not need aging. Case bottles blown before the mid-1800s, approximately, have scars on their base left by the breaking off of the pontil rod, while later types (eighteenth and nineteenth century) were blown in dip molds. Beyond the mountain man period (1840s-plus) plate molds were used in the manufacturing of case bottles. This improvement made possible a variety of embossments. They are numerous on the late nineteenth-century bottles. That innovation can be used, by those looking for authentic bottles to include in their rendezvous equipment camp. In addition to a range of lettering usually identifying the company whose product the bottle contained there were many figures and designs such as people, animals, birds, stars and crests – none of these embossed containers from the post 1840-period would have been available to frontiersmen.

## COLLECTING NOTE:

Obtaining examples of the bottles discussed in this article is not particularly difficult or unreasonably expensive – that statement is not true when one is looking to obtain specifically historic or museum-quality pieces.

To shop for authentic bottles to include as part of your camp, a good place to start is the Internet auction site <http://www.ebay.com/> using one of the following categories: “king’s bottle;” “onion bottle;” “squat bottle;” “mallet bottle;” “Dunmore bottle;” “Wistarburg bottle;” “demijohn bottle;” “carboy bottle;” “seal bottle;” “utility bottle;” “utility jar.” Any and all of the above types may be found more easily in the large general category, “black glass container.”

Then there are, of course, the usual places such as flea markets, garage sales, estate sales, auctions or antiques stores.

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Robert J. Merada, of the Florida Frontiersmen, to author, March 2004.

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James Baird died on November 4, 1826 in El Paso. An inventory was made of his belongings at that time, with witnesses to approve the writing to be correct.

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