

Antique Bottle Collecting Histories

One of a series...

Part 1 of 4

The Beginning

My interest in collecting bottles began in the late 1950s. At that time, I taught Social Studies in grades 7-9 in the public schools of Columbia, South Carolina.

While completing undergraduate and graduate work at the University of South Carolina to earn my teaching credentials, I worked part time or full time at the South Caroliniana Library from 1948 to 1953. Growing out of being immersed in the library's South Carolina history environment, I acquired a lifelong interest in old documents and materials pertaining to the state's history.

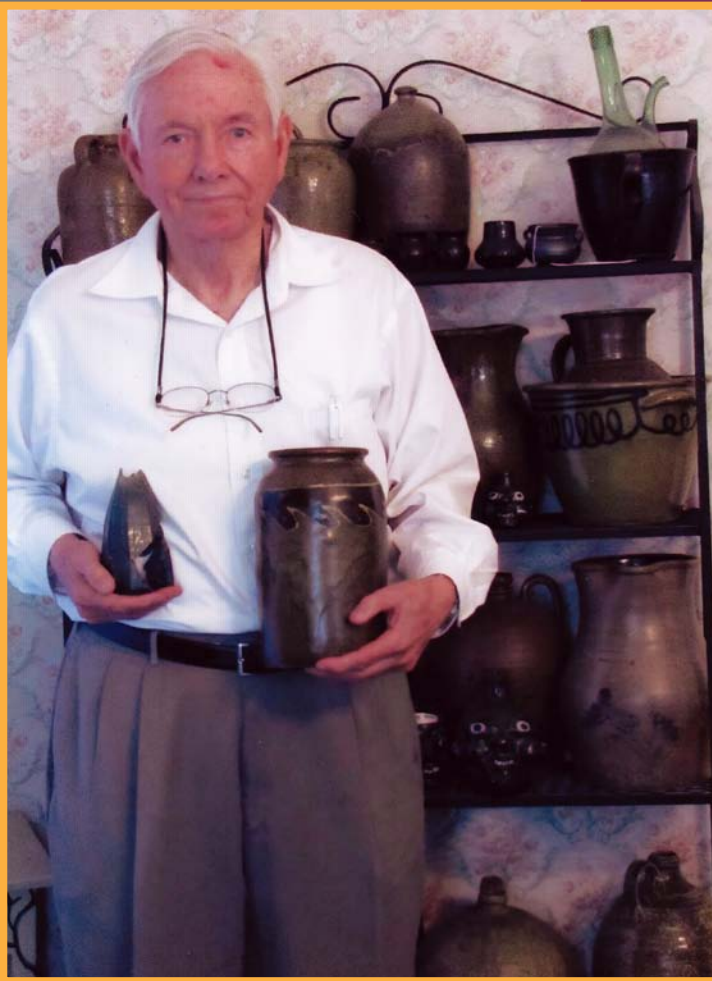
About this time (the late 1950s), I learned that Bill Cloer, a local Methodist minister, had purchased an 1803 Thomas Jefferson letter. Judging from the letter's contents, John Milledge of Georgia had written to the president, seeking directions from Washington, D.C., to John Randolph's home in Virginia.

Jefferson sat down and wrote a three-page letter, including a hand-drawn map, giving Milledge these directions. That was a time when the affairs of state moved at a much more leisurely pace. Of course, a president of today would not personally have the time to do something like that.

I went to the minister's home and attempted to purchase the letter, but he declined to sell. While there, I noticed he had some bottles, among which were several South Carolina Dispensary bottles. If I could scrounge up some of these bottles, I suspected I might be able to trade him out of the letter.

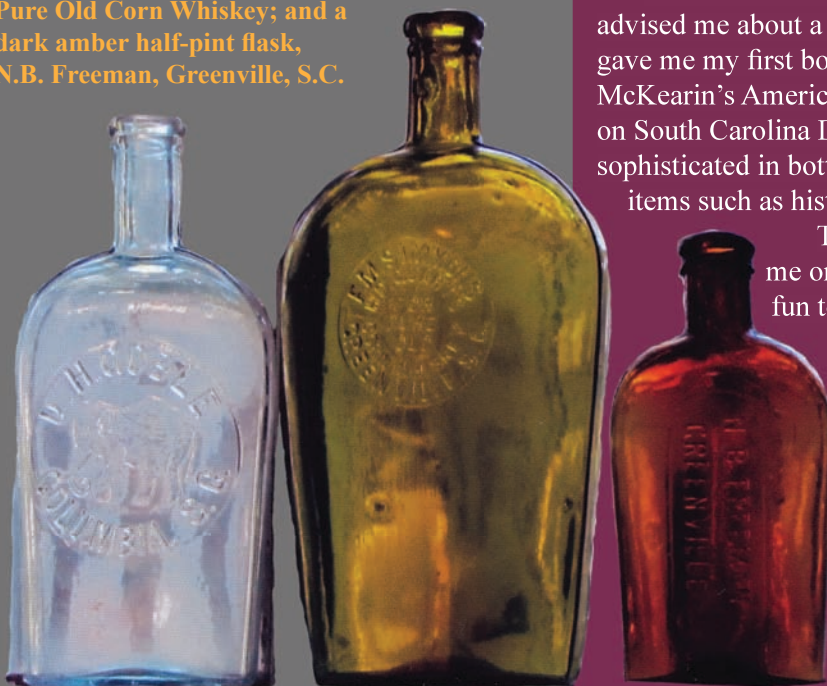
A Reminiscence of 53 Years of Bottle Collecting in South Carolina

by Harvey S. Teal



Above: Edgefield District potter Colin Rhodes made storage jar held by Teal. He also holds the fragment of a super-rare cobalt C. Alfs soda bottle from Charleston, S.C.

Below: Trio of local flasks, L-R: D.H. Goble (embossed Elephant), Columbia, S.C.; honey amber quart embossed F.M. Simmons, Greenville, S.C., Hdquarts (Headquarters) for Pure Old Corn Whiskey; and a dark amber half-pint flask, N.B. Freeman, Greenville, S.C.



A couple of antique dealer friends in Camden, South Carolina, who sold dispensary bottles, were told of my plan. One gave me two bottles since they were very, very cheap at that time. Another gave me one and I think I got one from someone else. I went back to see the minister, but we still could not come to terms on the letter.

This episode led me to speculate that there must be plenty of these bottles around. If people were interested in them, certainly an enterprising person should be able to find some.

One Saturday afternoon I left my boyhood home in Kershaw County, South Carolina, in the community of Cassatt, and journeyed four or five miles away to an abandoned old homestead. The people who formerly lived there for generations had been prone to imbibe in spiritous liquors. I suspected some dispensary bottles were there.

After looking in the stables, barns and outbuildings for an hour or more without success, I had just about given up hope of finding any bottles. While coming through a pasture behind one last remaining small building, I spotted lying in front of me a quart clear and perfect South Carolina Dispensary bottle with an embossed palmetto tree. While excitingly scratching in the leaves and grass, four or five more were unearthed.

The next day, with my antique dealer friend Norman Fohl, of Camden, South Carolina, in tow, we found seven more dispensary bottles, bringing the total to 12 from my first venture in search of bottles.

Let me digress for a moment and relate some things about Norman Fohl. He had come from Connecticut during the Great Depression and had settled in Camden where he started a furniture refinishing and antiques business. He collected nothing except pre-Victorian furniture. With Camden a town dating to the 1760s, he soon developed quite a market there for his refinished furniture and antiques. Many of his pieces today still grace the antebellum homes of the town.

Norman was a dear friend who helped me acquire bottles and advised me about a number of antique items. As a matter of fact, he gave me my first bottle book, a 1941 edition of George S. and Helen McKearin's *American Glass*. Although not containing information on South Carolina Dispensary bottles, in time as I became more sophisticated in bottle collecting, it was of great help on many other items such as historical flasks.

This initial success in searching for bottles hooked me on the hobby, so to speak. I concluded it would be fun to search for these artifacts which were just lying around waiting for me to pick them up. That's the story of my beginning collecting bottles in the late 1950s. As a postscript, I eventually did purchase the Jefferson letter and all of the Rev. Cloer's bottles.

The South Carolina Dispensary

To this point, South Carolina Dispensary

bottles have been mentioned a number of times. To the uninitiated, an explanation of what they are and how they came to be is in order.

In the late fall of 1892, the State of South Carolina voted to go dry. Benjamin R. Tillman, governor of the time, personally drank very little, but thought if one wanted to take a drink, he should be able to do so. As an alternative to prohibition, he came up with a plan whereby the state would take over all of the alcoholic beverage business, sell these beverages and use the profits to pay for public education. He was following the age-old principle of using "sin taxes," so to speak, to fund education.

On Christmas morning 1892, after much debate and arm-twisting by Tillman, the South Carolina General Assembly passed this plan and Tillman signed it into law; what a Christmas present for the state! The legislation created a state agency called the South Carolina Dispensary. Through this agency, the state became the wholesaler and the retailer of alcoholic beverages in South Carolina as of July 1, 1893.

Between December 25, 1892 and July 1, 1893, the state set up the South Carolina Dispensary system. It contracted with distilleries for whiskey, with breweries for beer and with glass houses to produce bottles and ship them into South Carolina. Dispensary workers at a bottling plant filled these bottles with booze, corked and sealed them, glued on labels, and shipped them out to retail stores in the counties.

The bottles had the wording "S.C. Dispensary" and the state symbol, a palmetto tree, embossed on them. They came in shades of amber, clear glass, light blue and light green, with varying shades of the green and blue. The light blue or the blue actually was sort of like the color of fruit jars of that era. I call it "fruit jar blue" or aqua. I was to learn as I went along that they came in various sizes and shapes, too. As this reminiscence unfolds, the Dispensary and its bottles will be discussed many more times. Eventually, I would author a book on the topic.

Where Bottles Were Found

In the late 1950s, the use of land was changing quite a bit in South Carolina, especially in the rural areas. A federal program called the "Soil Bank" was



Five of the Seven Dwarfs flank Snow White; figurines were dug by Teal.

created in an effort to remove marginal land from row crop planting and to reforest the land with pine trees. Certain number of dollars per acre were given to participating landowners and a large percentage of them did. Consequently, vast areas of land changed use under this program in the late '50s and '60s.

Most tenant farming and sharecropping stopped in South Carolina. A migration by many former African Americans and some white sharecroppers and tenant farmers began to the Northeast and Midwest from the South. This resulted in old farmsteads and homes being abandoned all over rural South Carolina. Landowners often just left the old houses, barns and other buildings sitting in the middle of a former cotton field where they had set up pine trees around them. Sometimes, timber companies also bought up land and set out pines.

Almost none of the land was posted and it was easy to get permission to look for bottles. A farmer would think you were a little peculiar, but if you just wanted to look for bottles, you must be harmless. I kind of had free run of the area where I grew up because I knew the farmers and the landowners there.

When I went to an old homestead to look for bottles, I would look underneath the houses as well as in barns and other buildings. I soon learned to look in the old outhouses. Sometimes, the man of the house might have been a sneak drinker and didn't want the wife to know it. If he had a bottle hid, when he emptied it, he might discard it in the outhouse.

I also looked where a family could have thrown away their junk. If there was a ravine behind the house, that was a good place, or perhaps a ditch. I knew the habits of people in the rural areas and knew most of them didn't throw away a whole lot.

More bottles turned up in the barns or the



Trio of tall amber S.C. Dispensary quarts with embossed palmetto trees stand behind shot glasses.



Above: A pair of rare S.C. Dispensary whiskey jugs.

Below: A fragment of a U.S.A. hospital bottle (like this whole example) was found at the bottom of a 60-foot deep well dug by Teal and Friends



smokehouses since rural folks frequently used bottles from times past for other purposes. This was especially true of jugs. A whiskey jug when emptied of whiskey could be refilled with molasses or even refilled with whiskey. It also would hold grape juice.

Not only bottles, but ceramics, including Edgefield, South Carolina jugs, churns, jars, etc., turned up in the process of searching for bottles. My knowledge on that topic at the time was limited, but I knew these items were worth picking up.

Since I was born in 1928, in my very early days in the 1930s some of the straight-sided Coca-Cola bottles were still in use. I drank out of them as well as the later 1915 and 1923 (Christmas Cokes) hobble skirt-designed Coke bottles. To me, these bottles were not very old and I didn't consider them collectible. I didn't bother picking them up.

The Mason jars and fruit jars I saw around I didn't bother with, either, since we still had them at home full of canned items. Those were items, though, that others then and later on were collecting. There were times when I went back to places where I had left these items and retrieved them on the second trip. On many occasions, I discovered I had been preceded by others.

An older brother, J.R. Teal, was a rural mail carrier in the community where we grew up. He saw what I was doing and we'd talk about it. He began to ask some people on his mail route about old bottles. One day, he opened a mailbox on his route and there sat a South Carolina Dispensary bottle, with a note attached saying he could have the bottle.

The mailbox owner was a very poor African American lady. Consequently, J.R. stopped, discussed the matter with her, gave her some money for the bottle and told her he would pay her for any others she could find. We wound up getting 25 or 30 bottles from her.

We reached an agreement for her to show us where she was finding these bottles and we would still pay her for the bottles. We went down and dug (not really dug), but scratched out a dozen or more bottles from the debris of a rotted-down cabin.

At the time, we were not digging for bottles. We thought that was crazy. If you could find them beneath a building or in a building, they weren't going to be that dirty. Digging for bottles was yet to become one of our approaches to bottle collecting.

My brother became interested and due to our interest, a younger brother, Curtis Teal, who lived nearby, also became interested. The three of us became a kind of team in looking for bottles in that area of Kershaw County. It wasn't long before we branched out into other areas.

At the time, I was living in Lexington County. Instead of returning to my old home territory, I began to look around that county with a friend, Lee R. Gandee. He was a fellow member of the Lexington County Historical Society and lived in an antebellum home in a rural area not far from



University of South Carolina grad harvey Teal chuckles as his “pet” gamecock crows.

the town of Lexington.

Lee had found a dispensary bottle in his home and became interested in acquiring others. We visited many places in the area and found quite a number of bottles.

My brothers joined me as we began to look in Lexington County where the state capital is located and in an area to the north known as Dutch Fork. We still approached bottle searching from the standpoint of old farmsteads and abandoned buildings and were being quite successful. If we didn't find four or five dispensary bottles when we went out, we thought we had a bad day,

This was taking place in the early '60s. There were other people now who got interested, not so much from what we were doing, but word gets out when people are finding bottles.

There were one or two people in the Columbia area who had been out West and had been looking in abandoned ghost towns and gold mining towns. There were places out West where practically nobody had been around in 75 or 100 years. They picked up many bottles in and around those ghost towns.

Interest in bottle collecting in the state was now beginning to blossom. It became somewhat of a national movement after World War II. There had been people who had collected what I term fine glass for a long time, but not just the more common everyday containers and the bottles we were finding.

As time passed while we were collecting these bottles, we began to learn more about bottles in general. We were finding many other kinds of bottles besides South Carolina Dispensary bottles.

If I could find artifacts like drug store bottles from



Three Columbia Habenichts - bottle on right has Habernicht spelled with an “R,” an error.

little towns with the names of the druggists embossed on the glass, and maybe a slogan like “He Puts Up Fine Prescriptions,” that's a useful thing to have. This is a documentation of what's going on or what had gone on in that community and such artifacts are worth saving. I began to reshape my collection into one of South Carolina bottles and jugs.

As I collected, I learned there were topical categories of bottles such as inks, bitters, milks, sodas, spring waters, whiskies, beers and medicines. I learned there were national groups collecting in each of these categories and there were publications on them. This knowledge opened up and expanded my bottle collecting exponentially. My search now narrowed to finding and collecting South Carolina bottles from those categories.

We began to hear stories about people in Charleston digging in privies and decided to investigate. We went down to Charleston, but didn't have any tools. We knew nothing of digging privies or how you find them. We had no probes and you can't find many bottles in Charleston without one. By using our usual approach of searching beneath buildings, we did find a few bottles that day.

As time passed, we did learn how to find and dig privies in Charleston. However, local collectors were more successful than outsiders due to their more detailed knowledge of people and places to dig and their advantage from these factors in getting permission to dig in someone's back yard or elsewhere. Later, I will discuss Charleston digging in more detail.

Since I taught South Carolina history and had acquired knowledge about where old roads ran, where people of note lived, when and where wars were fought,

where Revolutionary and Civil War campgrounds were, where historic bridges, taverns and homes were located or had been located, maintained membership in many historical groups, I had a leg up on most collectors. We branched out to some of these potential sites to search for bottles.

We primarily looked for bottles where one was apt to discard them. We tried to put ourselves into the place of people living in a certain area in a certain time and imagined where they would have discarded bottles. Then we looked there.

Being from the country and rural areas, I could spot old home sites quite easily. We were now using probes. If we went into the smokehouse, six inches under the ground we often would find bottles that had gotten covered with dirt and dust over time.

We still were not digging much or very deep. My older brother mostly used a pitchfork to start with. He mined that area over where his rural mail carrier route was located and got lots and lots of bottles with that simple tool. He made contacts profitable to all of us. My brothers likewise profited from my contacts where I lived.

Bottle Literature

Just to possess the artifact was never satisfactory to me. I wanted to know as much as I could about it. I had already been given American Glass by Mr. Fohl and had begun to amass a library of bottle books. I soon began investigating the kinds of organizations which might have been around or if any existed where people of like interests could get together, discuss, read about and study bottles. Others who felt similarly led to the formation of bottle clubs and it also led to the development of bottle literature.

Due to my experience in the hobby of collecting old documents, South Carolina postmarks and philatelic items, I knew if you seriously pursued any hobby you had to develop a library in that field. The more you knew about your field of collecting, the more advantage you had over other collectors who were primarily interested in possessing the artifacts.

As the years passed, I spent many hours researching bottles and began studying the South Carolina Dispensary bottles very seriously. By 1967, I had moved from teaching in public schools to teaching South Carolina history over the state ETV network. I did that for a couple of years, then went to the S.C. Department of Education in 1969 where I was placed in charge of certain aspects of instructional television programming for the state's public schools.

My office was in Columbia across the street from the State Archives. This state agency had the S.C. Dispensary files in its collections. On my lunch hour, I started studying those files, looking toward identifying the glass companies that manufactured dispensary bottles. I was seriously studying that agency, looking toward publishing a book on the subject, which I eventually did. However, it would be 36 years before I did so.

To develop a library on bottles as well as research them, I was constantly



Teal checks out a part of his massive bottle and eclectic collections.



Closeup of dispensary rum bottle with a whiskey top.

on the lookout for books I did not have. I learned Dubose Heyward had written and published a book entitled *The Half-Pint Flask* in 1929. The plot of this story involved someone who stole a dispensary bottle off an African American grave and what happened to him as a result.

At that time, much of the African American community in South Carolina was quite superstitious. That caused them to have burial practices somewhat different from their white counterparts. They frequently would place items like a piece of carnival glass, bottles and that sort of thing on a grave of the departed. Maybe it was the last bottle he took his medicine out of before his death – things like that.

The dispensary bottle in the book had been placed on the grave by someone. Maybe a flower was in it originally. I don't know. Heyward developed his story about all the bad things that began to happen to the bottle thief. That individual finally began to understand why he was having all these problems and returned the bottle. I concluded the book would be a good addition to my library and bought a copy.

John Evans Eubanks had authored a history of the S.C. Dispensary in 1950 which was entitled *Ben Tillman's Baby*. I went to Eubanks' home in Augusta, Georgia and purchased a copy. It didn't contain much about dispensary bottles, but it was a decent history of that state agency and helped me to understand its history.

Several collectors began to develop little pamphlets on S.C. Dispensary bottles and other South Carolina bottles. As they were produced, I added a copy of most of them to my library.

Bob Frazier produced a little dispensary bottle pamphlet of eight pages in 1969. Bobby Dawkins and a friend whose last name was Smith published a little pamphlet on bottles. In 1970, Leon Robinson and Joe Holcombe did a short book of some 20 pages on Charleston sodas. J.L. Jones developed an illustrated book on S.C. soft drink bottles and that sort of thing.

During the 1960s, Dr. Kenneth Huggins, a local psychiatrist, had been buying dispensary bottles from collectors and dealers over the state and had amassed a very large collection. He decided to publish a book on the subject. He obtained permission from John Evans Eubanks to republish his 1950 book, along with a catalog of the collection Huggins had developed. He also included a price guide.

During 1969-70, the state of South Carolina was celebrating its Tri-Centennial and it was my honor to be one of the commissioners who planned the celebration. Dr. Huggins appeared before our commission and proposed we endorse his effort to reproduce S.C. Dispensary bottles. Since the dispensary had started in 1893 and that date had nothing to do with our 300th birthday, we declined to endorse his effort.

But he had the right to issue those reproductions if he wished to do so and he did. He created a set of the dispensary bottles embossed on their backs as souvenir bottles. These bottles had palm trees embossed on them. There were a few clear ones and a few hundred amber, green and blue ones. This occurred before his book came off the press in 1971.

Although a very good and useful book, I knew it was missing much other very useful information. It was missing much of the history of the glass houses, how many bottles they produced, what kinds of bottles they manufactured, where they were located, who the dispensers were, which counties had dispensaries, etc. There was just a whole host of information I sought to discover and had planned to put into my book that his did not contain.

I stopped plans to publish at that time since the "market" likely would not support two books on the same subject. However, I kept all my notes and continued to research and collect information. All of that would lay fallow for many years. (To be continued) x



Teal shows off a clabber bowl decorated by Edgefield District potter Thomas Chandler. Bowl was found in pieces in a privy and restored by John Davis, of Savannah, Ga.



Here's a closeup of the puce historical flask embossed Zachary Taylor/Old Rough & Ready on the front and Corn for the World (embossed stalk of corn) on the reverse. Teal refers to it in his history.