

Part 2 of 4

# A Reminiscence of 53 Years of Bottle Collecting in South Carolina

*by Harvey S. Teal*

Antique  
Bottle  
Collecting  
Histories

*One of a series...*

Up and coming digger Lebbby Clementi with Steve Harris in trench off King and Spring streets in downtown Charleston. (Courtesy of Vic Svendsen)



## New Directions in Bottle Collecting

By the late 1960s, much interest had developed in the whole area of bottle collecting. This interest was being sparked primarily by new sources of bottles across the state in city and town dumps. When you have a dump that is 15 to 20 feet deep and 200 yards long, quite a number of people can dig there for a long time before they exhaust it. There were a number of towns in South Carolina where people started digging in their dumps.

There were various dumps here in Columbia. One was about six blocks from the State House. At this spot, a steel company was located beside the railroad tracks. A dump had occurred here where a ravine and a little stream ran beneath the railroad and then under the area where the steel company was located. This dump was loaded with dispensary bottles and others from the 1880s and '90s.

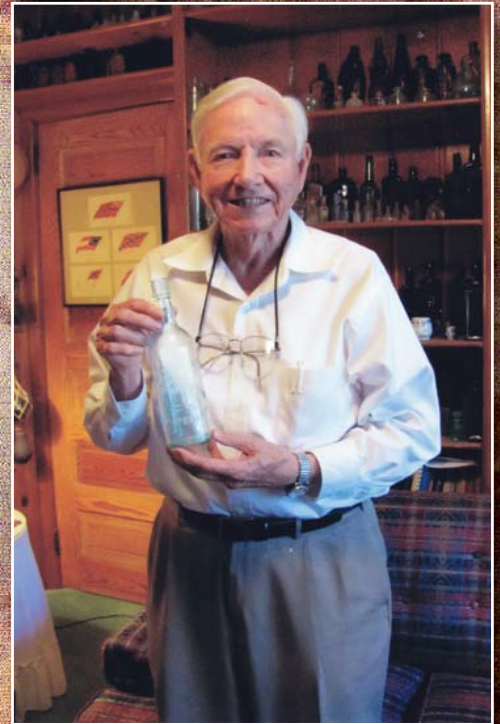
Another dump located here was called the Huger Street dump and was the chief city dump for Columbia starting in the early 1900s and ending about 1920. It came to light during construction of an interstate highway into town. In spots, it was 30 feet deep. Dozens and dozens of in- and out-of-town people began to dig there for a few years.

People began to dig on those places and they began to look out in the country and call up grandpapa and see if he had any old bottles. Many individuals contracted "bottle collecting fever" during those times.

Let me relate one personal digging story from this period. The story began on July 3, 1965. My wife had gone downtown to do some shopping and while she was doing that, I decided to scout around where excavation was occurring and might be turning up old bottles.

As I approached the excavation for a parking garage across from the main post office in town, I saw a ceramic pint ginger beer bottle lying on top of the ground. I hustled over, picked up the bottle and peered into the hole being dug for the garage foundations. About four feet down, a five-foot layer of glass and bottles looked at me.

The site was behind the old C.C. Habenicht Beer Bottling Plant. The ground sloped away to a former gully and the company had thrown away lots and lots of bottles it couldn't use. Maybe some came from out-of-town breweries and some were other types of bottles.



Harvey Teal

Below: Dark green pontiled George Washington/Fells Point historical flask dug by Vic Svendsen on same day as Baltimore Bottle Club show. (Courtesy of Vic Svendsen)



I didn't have a shovel or any digging tools with me, but that did not stop me. I jumped into the hole, scratched around and liberated 15 or 20 bottles. After taking my wife home, I returned that afternoon and found about 100 bottles. These bottles dated to the 1880s and early '90s and included beer, soda water, Hutchinson and a few other types of bottles.

For about a month, I went to the site every afternoon after work and dug until dark. No other collector was to be seen. I talked to the construction people and they explained they were just going to haul off the dirt, debris and bottles and for me to get all I wanted.

When I explained I feared one side of the hole might cave in on me, the foreman called over the bulldozer operator and had him shave off the overhang at the hole for me. I called my brother to come over and we dug there together a couple of times.

### Then He Had Company

A month after I found the site, a newspaper reporter discovered it and put an article in the *Columbia Record* along with a worker holding a bottle. The next day when I arrived at the site, there were 12 people digging. My exclusive had ended. In the meantime, I had acquired 700 to 800 bottles. I had taken home so many of a few types of these bottles, I'd reached the point of not picking them up.

Most of the individuals who showed up to dig were friends. We were competitive, but in this case, there were plenty to go around. Although competitive, we kept it on a friendly basis. This would stand us in good stead when we later organized the South Carolina Bottle Club.

This is a part of the Columbia story, but let me return to Charleston and address the matter of why so many bottles were found there. In 1800, Boston, Charleston and Philadelphia were the largest cities in the United States. Charleston remained the largest city in the South until bypassed by New Orleans by 1830. It would remain the largest city in South Carolina until well into the 20th century.

In Charleston, the "honey wagons," as they were called, emptied their

contents from cleaning out privies into the marshes near the rivers or in low places. Many collectors dug the marshes. In the early days, collectors mostly dug privies, however. When large hotels began to be built, urban renewal projects undertaken and interstates traversing the city, places to dig materialized.

Several collectors amassed wonderful collections of antebellum Charleston colored sodas, drugs, bitters and medicine bottles from these sources. Their bottles generally dated much earlier than those found elsewhere in the state.

Although I got in on Charleston digs in only a limited way, over the years I managed to acquire some wonderful bottles from that port city. My collection includes several examples of drug, medicines, soda water, beer, bitters, Hutchinsons and whiskey bottles, plus a few others. However, I never pursued Charleston bottles to the extent I have other South Carolina bottles. I knew I could not match the better local Charleston collections unless I spent tons of money to purchase rare bottles.

Toward the end of the 1960s, I had stopped looking for bottles out in the country. Dumps and privies caused me to begin digging for bottles in more urban places. At first, it was difficult to locate privies in Columbia, but we soon began to find them.

### Trio Becomes a Team

When I say "we," I am referring to three people. Paul



**Diggers 3: (L-R) Paul Jeter, Harvey Teal and John Derrick**  
(Courtesy of Harvey Teal)



Jeter, like myself, was a school administrator. John Derrick was the purchasing agent for an Allied Chemical plant located on the outskirts of town. The three of us became a bottle digging team who dug trash pits, privies, wells, hedgerows and dumps in Columbia for more than a decade. Almost every weekend would find us digging bottles.

We found untold numbers of drug bottles from about 40 different local drugstores dating from the 1870s to the early 1900s. Dispensary bottles, local sodas, beers, medicines, etc. regularly showed up in privies and elsewhere.

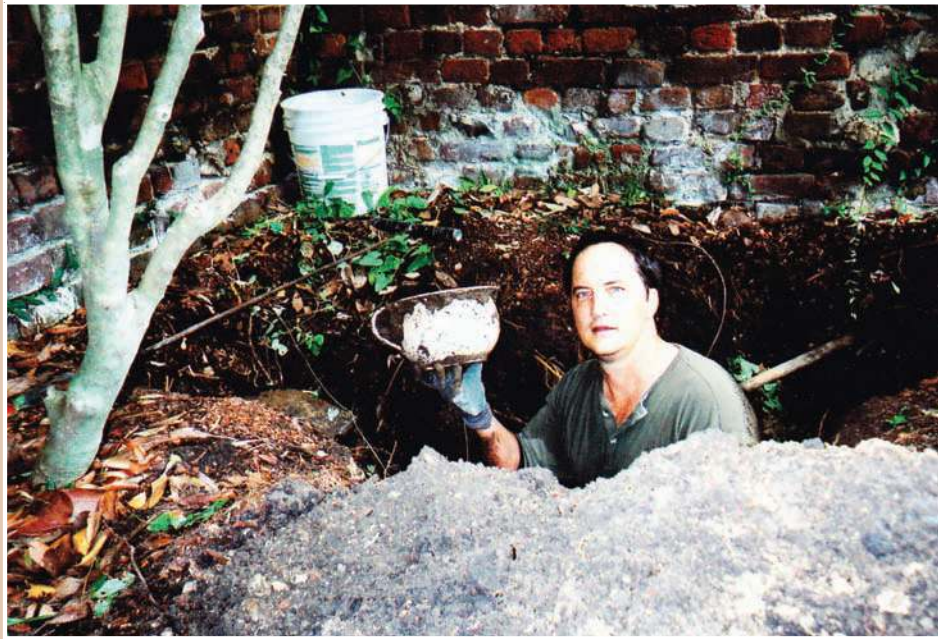
Back then, it was fairly easy to get permission to dig a privy, but there were times when we needed permission to dig other kinds of places. Such a place was the site for a new highway department building to be constructed in 1977 about three blocks from the State House. The building was being placed in an area where a small creek had been covered over with about 15 feet of fill dirt.

When digging the foundation for the building it became necessary to clean out all that fill dirt and construct a culvert over the creek in order to get a solid foundation. This excavation uncovered a dump along the creek. Several persons tried to get permission to dig the site for bottles, but had failed. I met with the construction company owner and was able to convince him to let us go in there for one night.

The three of us dug from dark until about 3 a.m. Bone weary and sleepy, we locked up the site, loaded our cars with more than 400 bottles, and caught a few hours' sleep. The next afternoon we met and divided the bottles.

The bottles dated from the late 1860s to about 1890, about two years before the S.C. Dispensary came into existence. There were lots of early bottles from Columbia and a number of bottles from elsewhere including one late historical flask.

Growing out of all our digging in Columbia, in 1976 Paul Jeter and I decided we would put together a publication on what we had found in our capital city. We called it *Columbia's Past in Glass*. We had done such extensive digging in Columbia and had such a good handle on what was here until everything that's been discovered since our publication came out in 1976 can be listed on one page.



**Steve Harris with a nice whole chamber pot dug out of a Tradd Street privy in Charleston. (Courtesy of Vic Svendsen)**



**Virgil Svendsen (L) and Steve Harris with a couple of nice black glass bottles dug from an Alexander Street privy in Charleston, S.C. (Coutesy of Vic Svendsen)**

Since then, of course, we have learned far more historical information about the drug stores and breweries which had bottles, plus the merchants who had flasks with their names and other information embossed on them. We've learned more information about these matters, but we included about 95 percent of what has turned up to date. Examples of most of these bottles are in my collection. Jeter and Derrick also have examples in theirs.

Our publication was added to my library, along with



Dr. Huggins' dispensary book published in 1971.

## Well-Digging Profitable

One of the sources where we found old bottles was wells. Many lots in town not only had a privy, but a well. Over time, a well might go dry or the water become unsuitable for drinking for one reason or another. The homeowner then had a 10- to 60-foot-deep hole in his backyard. He could haul in dirt to fill it, or he could fill it with kitchen garbage, yard trash, etc. over time. That's what often happened. Our Columbia digging team dug over a dozen wells in town and recovered hundreds of bottles in the process.

In Columbia, wells were found in a variety of soils. Some were in hard clay, others in soft sandy soil; Many of the wells originally had wooden curbing supporting the sides, especially those located in sandy soil. Wells in hard clay did not require any lining to support their sides.

We rigged up a 5-foot-high metal frame, placed it over the top of a well and attached a wheel to it. We then threaded a nylon rope over the wheel and tied a bucket to one end of the rope. As we dug down, we would windlass the bucket full of soil and debris to the top, dump it and repeat the process.

Sometimes we would find bottles starting at the top for a few feet and then encountered dirt that had been hauled in to fill the well. We usually did not dig further. I suspect we may have missed many bottles by not doing so. It

required much faith and commitment to continue digging for 20 or more feet in the hopes the trash layer would resume later.

The trash and debris in one well in particular proved to be a time capsule dating from about 1920 back to the Civil War. We do not know just how deep this well was since we stopped digging at 60 feet and had not reached the bottom. I have chosen to relate the digging of this well since I found it to be one of the most interesting and productive we ever dug.

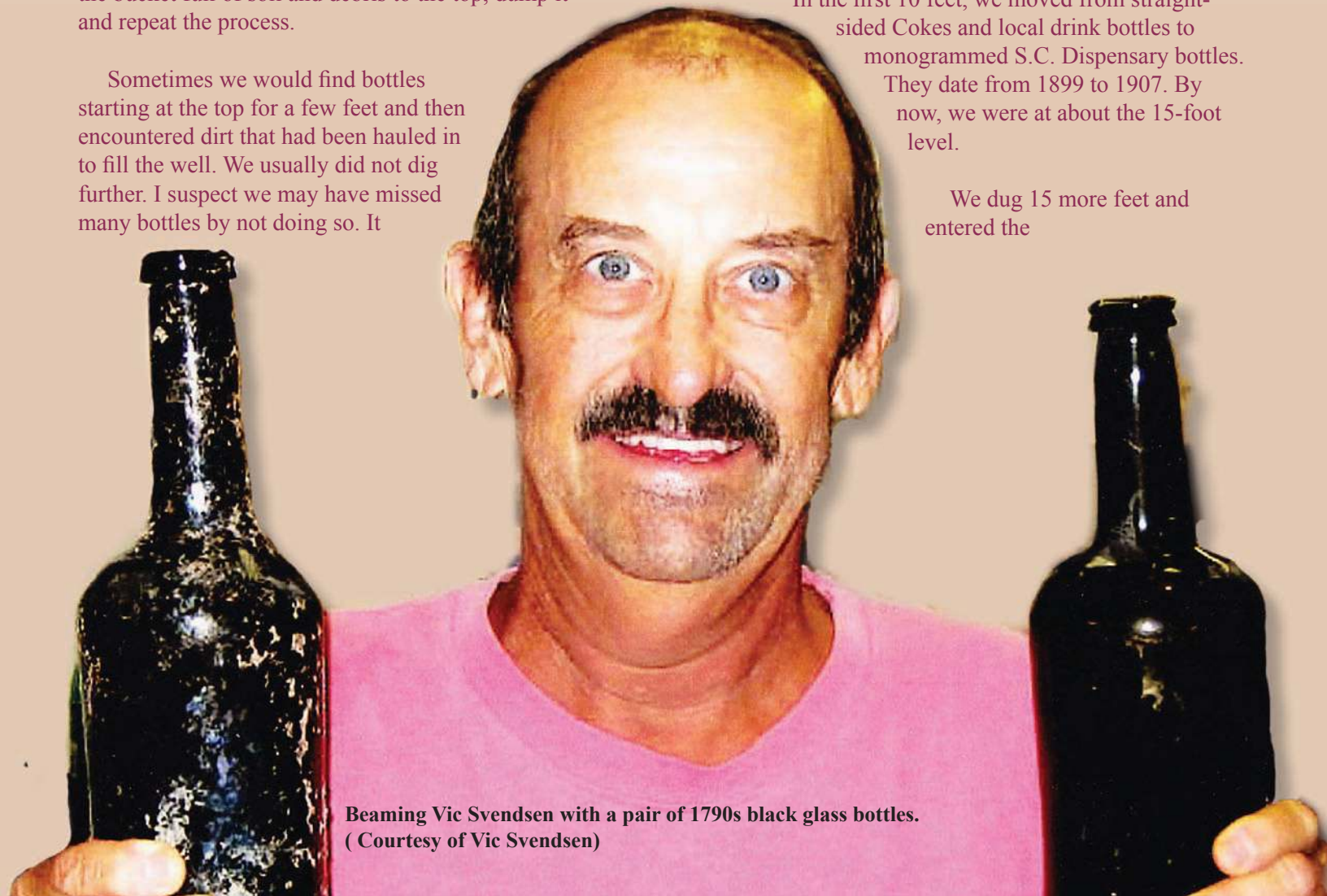
The lot on which this well was located sat only a short distance from the headquarters of the Columbia Police Department. Several diggers, including our team had dug 10 or 15 privies and trash pits along the perimeter of the lot. In the middle of the lot next to the street sat an abandoned house used by vagrants.

One of these diggers discovered the well and dug it down to five feet, but was too skittish to dig further. He had found several straight-sided Cokes dating from just before 1915 and a few local soft drink bottles dating to about 1920. He refilled the well.

Shortly thereafter, our team began to dig this well.

In the first 10 feet, we moved from straight-sided Cokes and local drink bottles to monogrammed S.C. Dispensary bottles. They date from 1899 to 1907. By now, we were at about the 15-foot level.

We dug 15 more feet and entered the



Beaming Vic Svendsen with a pair of 1790s black glass bottles.  
( Courtesy of Vic Svendsen)

era of palmetto tree S.C. dispensaries dating from 1893 to 1899. We were finding many local Hutchinson bottles and local beers and a few non-Columbia bottles. At this point, we had reached about as deep as we could with our equipment and as deep as we felt comfortable to dig. With some regrets, we filled in the well.

During the next year, we thought often about that well, knowing we were finding good bottles while we were digging. At this point, another brother of mine, Hollis Teal, entered the picture. He was a recent career Air Force retiree. A few years earlier, he also had become interested in collecting bottles. I told him about the well and he persuaded our team to re-dig it.

### Getting In Deeper

We began about 6 p.m., on the Friday night before the Labor Day weekend. By 9 p.m., the four of us had re-dug all of the first 30 feet that had been dug about a year earlier. At that point, we threw two old doors we found stacked beneath the abandoned house over the top of the well, threw a little dirt over the doors for camouflage and retired for the night.

The next morning, we removed the well covering and began to dig in the un-dug portion of the well. Almost immediately we found more S.C. Dispensaries, including a pint round amber and an amber half-pint we broke while digging it out.

It was not long before we passed from the dispensary era and moved into bottles from the 1880s. We unearthed lots of local beers, Hutchinsons and other bottles. We closed up the well that afternoon in the fashion of the previous night and decided we would rest up on Sunday and return Labor Day.

Bright and early Labor Day morning, we removed the well covering and prepared to reenter the well to begin digging. We were using two 22-foot-long, chain-linked ladders to enter and leave the well. We were now at a depth of between 45 and 50 feet.

Hollis wanted to be first in the well and quickly descended to the bottom. In a minute, he called up saying he felt "funny" and was going to come out. I told Paul and John, "He's lost his nerve. When he gets out, I'll go down and dig."

As soon as Hollis reached the top, I hopped onto the ladders and quickly descended to the bottom and started digging. In about a minute, I began to breathe very rapidly. A light came on in my thick skull. There was very little oxygen in the bottom of that well! I quickly climbed out and informed the others of my suspicion.

To test the oxygen level, we lit a piece of paper with a match and dropped it into the well. At about 10 feet, it snuffed out. That confirmed my suspicion. We tied a cardboard box to the end of a rope and lifted it rapidly up and down to stir and mix the air. We then lit another piece of paper and it burned all the way to the bottom.

It was Labor Day and getting an air pump seemed problematic. A trip to my home secured two 30-foot long watering hoses. We tied one end of the hose to the top of our rig and dropped the hose into the well. We continued our dig by sucking air out of the hose as we needed it.

Three o'clock in the afternoon found us about the 60-foot level. We had added a 10-foot aluminum ladder to our equipment and were about as deep as we could go. I was the last person in the hole and at the very end, I dug a broken U.S.A. Hospital bottle. We had moved from 1920 back to the Civil War!

We tossed all the debris and dirt back into the well and divided up the bottles and that ends the story of that dig. This story illustrates how persistent and dedicated to collecting bottles many of us are. In retrospect, it may also illustrate how unsafe it might have been to dig 60 feet into the ground where the air quality is in question.

I dug a couple of wells in Charleston with others, but they were not productive. They usually were brick-lined and were about only 8 to 10 feet deep. I dug one in Georgetown, S.C., with the Glenns and have a small black glass bottle on my shelf from it. A few other wells out in the country were not productive.

With all this interest here in South Carolina and elsewhere prompted by information on bottles and the experience gained over time in digging bottles, there were enough reasons to congregate and organize a bottle club.

*To Be Continued...*

