

# Beginnings Of A Flask Collector

by Mark R. Smith

(with editorial comments by his other half, Laura J. Rock-Smith)

I am sure many of our readers have at some time “backed” into collecting some area of bottles. You dig one or two, get lucky at a shop and pick up a couple for a song, buy a box lot or two and another turns up. Then it strikes you, you have ten or a dozen of them, and a collection has begun! (*Ugh! Excuse me, Laura here, but you have always said a collection consisted of two or more, so we have lots of collections you have “backed” into around here.*) Well, this is how I became involved with flasks from my area of the U.S., in particular New York (City), Brooklyn and Long Island.

Like many, I came into bottles as a digger, and my collection contained what I dug. Since in my area blob tops and hutches are popular, I began to focus on them. Digging, attending shows, club meetings, friends and plenty of trades resulted in a fine, and large, collection. Then it happened. Guess I was about 16, and a friend had given me a lift to an antique show in Huntington. There it was, on a table, all alone, and just ten dollars. It was the only old bottle at the show of any interest, so I purchased it. It was a strap flask “S. Lefkowitz Wines & Liquors Huntington LI” in the slug plate. I had never seen one from Long Island before, and seeing how many blobs and hutches there were, it seemed like a nice price.

Perhaps a year went by, and picked up one from Patchogue, a shoo fly, sun-colored amethyst. Then at a shop, two different ones from Greenport came home. Now there were four. No one in the club really seemed to collect them, and the blob top/hutch

market was very tight, every new bottle had four or five folks after it. So I started to give these interesting flasks a home, since to me they seemed to be overlooked. What fun! The blob tops and hutches continued to pack my shelves, and the Huntington stoneware filled every spot on the floor, but, I would now pick up a flask or two at a show, if I could not get a new blob top or piece of stoneware to add. The little flasks started to trickle in now. The door had been opened.

Then, something happened. No, not that! I met my future wife. (*Who by the way did not mind going to bottle shows and even looked for an area I could get into so we could share.*) It took a while, but she convinced me that those boring, look alike blob tops and hutches were not nearly as interesting as those cute little flasks (*Excuse me, I never said cute. They are just much more interesting to me than the blob tops, more color, shapes and sizes. Plus the added benefit of not being so many at the bottle shows, which makes for an easier hunt. Especially with a child in tow.*). And how the cute (*Remember I never called them cute, cool yes, cute no, well except maybe for the 1/4-pint.*) little flasks went so well with my collection of stoneware, while the blob tops and hutches seemed to clash. Well, it took awhile, but in the end the boring hutches and blob tops were sold, to make room for more stoneware, and more strap flasks.

Now, at just about the same time, a long time friend, and mentor in the bottle hobby, was in the process of selling off his collections in preparation for his retirement, and moving from the area. He very kindly offered me his entire collection of strap flasks from Brooklyn and Long Island. He felt that since I was the only one he knew who had any interest in them, that I would provide a good home for them. (*And I agreed whole heartily.*) Guess I had about 40 or 50 strap flasks by now. I was now a bonifide strap flask collector!

Now, at about this time, we (remember my wife with the cute [*I did not say cute!*] flasks) noticed many different N.Y.C. flasks were at the bottle shows, as we searched for Brooklyn and Long Island flasks. We noticed that the flasks did not seem to sell, as we began to see the same one at show after show. So, we started to give them a home too! Now we could go to a show and bring home 15 strap flasks at a clip. What a great time we were having! The shelves filled faster than I could build them. We did this for years. What a great thing it is to have a wife who also loves the bottles you collect. (*Thanks!*) She would gladly attend a show without me to search for flasks! And she would bring them home too! (*Remember what I said about how they where easier to look for, well one of my first solo trips was when I was seven-months pregnant and went to Toms River in '96 and came home with 14. One of our friends is a dealer and he let me drop off my purchases as I went round. It must have been a sight to see this short very pregnant woman loaded with bags, hehe. I've since not done as well on my own but still occasionally show up sans the other half but with our daughter in tow, who by the way has a collection of miniature bottles and marbles and knows the difference between a blob top and a*



Here are three of the quart strap flasks I have from N.Y. Left to Right: JOHN F. HEINBOCKEL/COR HICKS & FULTON/STS/BROOKLYN, amber quart strap. JOHN HAY/152 & 154/WASHINGTON ST./COR. LIBERTY ST./NEW YORK/amber quart strap. ALBRO & BRO'S/156/BOWERY/N.Y., amber quart strap. The “John Heinbockel” came to me via Australia! Both the “John Heinbockel” and the “Albro & Bros” have applied tops. The “Albro Bros” may be the easiest of the amber quarts to find. I have seen a number of them over the years. Think of the good time you could have with one of these filled with a little “86”!



Here is a sampling of the different colors and some of the different styles our flask collection holds. There are aqua strap flasks, an amber pocket flask, two different pumpkin seeds, and a citron strap. Top Row: ½ PINT/JOHN SCHNEIDER/627/AMSTERDAM AVE/BET 90 & 91ST ST/NEW YORK, strap in aqua; A VAL WOODRUFF/1201 FULTON ST/BROOKLYN/N.Y. (on angle in script), strap in citron; WARRANTED/FLASK/S. SUMBERG/576 9TH AVE./BET/41ST & 42ND ST/NEW YORK/CONTENTS 6 OZ., strap in aqua. Bottom Row: SPIEGEL BROS/No. 421. 7TH AVE/N. E Cor 33RD ST/NEW YORK, pumpkin seed in SCA; PARK & TILFORD/NEW YORK, pocket flask in amber; EDWARD FREUND & CO./NEW YORK/ (mono on rev.) "EF & CO.," clear pumpkin seed. The pocket and citron flasks are favorites for both of us.

*flask, she's six.)* I will tell you what is amazing to us. After years of collecting strap flasks from N.Y.C., it is rare to see a double. As I write this, our collection is very close to 400 different N.Y.C. strap flasks, 100 Brooklyn examples, and about 30 from Long Island. They range from private mold examples in shades of amber, citron, aqua and clear to the slug plate examples in the same colors. Then there are the coffin and shoo fly flasks...

Now, about the flasks.

The strap flask, as we know them did not come into being overnight. Their roots go all the way back to the famous historical flasks. By the 1860s, plain oval flasks were being produced. These flasks resemble strap flasks, but are missing the straps. These were produced in two forms. One a plain example, on which the merchant could place their own paper label. Or, if the merchant had the means, they could have a mold custom made, a private mold. The private mold was a costly undertaking, as the bottles were only of use to the owner of the mold. Due to this reason, few private molds were produced.

By the 1870s, straps begin to appear on the flasks. Then came the big doggie in 1875. Gustavus Storm, who with his brother Francis, operated the Philadelphia Flint Glass Works, received a patent for a slug plate. Now things began to happen with the flasks. With the only the cost of a slug plate to consider,

it was now economically feasible for even a small shop owner to have custom made flasks. The orders began to roll in!

At about the same time as the development of the slug plate, the air vented mold was also patented in 1875. With the use of the vented molds, clear, clean, crisp embossing was achieved. By the 1890s, the air vented mold was in wide spread use. To check your flask for air vents, look very carefully at the back of the flask, in the shoulder area for a series of small dots. Tends to be three, but I have seen more and less on some examples.

Along with the introduction of the air vented mold, and the slug plate, there also came a change in the finishing of the mouth of the flask. The earlier flasks featured applied tops. Now, while we collectors can wax poetic about a nice drippy glob top (*I still don't get what's so exciting about a glob top, must be a guy thing.*), the fact is they required labor and time to produce. To increase production the glass houses switched to refiring and tooling the lip of the flask. To check your flask for a tooled, or applied top, look carefully at the area where the neck meets the lip or top of the flask. The applied top will show a seam right up to the base of the top, some times with a glob of glass stuck to the neck of the flask. You may also, if your finger is



Top left to right: H. FERRIGAN & BRO/LATE/DAVID PATTULLO/80 DUANE St/N.Y. Pint; amber; early oval w/ applied top; private mold; PARK & TILFORD/NEW YORK/Pint in light golden amber, applied top, private mold. Bottom left to right: CENTRAL R.R. HOUSE/H. RAUBE/PROP/N.Y. Half pint; amber; strap side; letter plate; JOHN H. PEPPER/1201 3d AV./COLUMBUS AV./& 99th ST/N.Y. ONE PINT/FULL MEASURE, Base: L. & M.G./182 FULTON ST./N.Y., amber; strap sided; letter plate (double circles); JOHN. C. BOYLE/797/SIXTH AVE./N.W. COR. 45TH ST/NEW YORK half pint; amber; strap side; letter plate. Here we have an example of a plain oval flask, prior to the introduction of the strap side flask, in the "H. Ferrigan & Bro" specimen. The "Park & Tilford" flask is an applied top, private mold in beautiful golden amber. The "John H. Peper" shows the base markings of one of the jobbers of flasks in NYC in the 1880's period.



small, try your pinky; feel the seam where the top is applied on the inside of the mouth. The tooled top will show a wiping away of the mold seam below the top, and the top and the neck will appear to be made of the same gather of glass. The inside of the mouth will be smooth. You may also see the horizontal marks on the flask from the lipping tool. Some of the tooled tops can be very crude and poorly made. You are far more likely to encounter a tooled top on a strap flask than an applied top. I have seen applied tops on slug plate flasks, but they are rarer than applied tops on private mold examples. Perhaps the most available N.Y.C. flask with an applied top on a private mold are the Park & Tilford examples. Just two applied top slug plate examples come to mind, one, "Albro & Bros 156 Bowery NY" in an amber quart, and the other, an amber quart, "John F Heinbockel Cor Hicks & Fulton STS Brooklyn."

The strap flasks were produced in many colors and sizes. I have had the chance to see displays of colored strap flasks. The shades of green, blue (even cobalt!) amber along with shades of citron make for quite a rainbow of glass. As for the embossed flasks, which I enjoy, colors that I am aware of include citron, shades of amber, aqua and clear. I have a rule of thumb on the colors, which I have learned through research of the merchants who used the flasks in their business years ago. The ambers



The hotel flasks make a very interesting sub collection and we show two different types – leather wrapped and glass. Back, left to right: HOTEL GLENWOOD A.E. HAWKINS, PROP. MATTITUCK, L.I.; THE LONG ISLAND HOUSE FRANK J. CORWIN, Prop. RIVERHEAD, L.I.; O'KEEFE'S COTTAGE INN EASTHAMPTON, L.I. N.Y.; PARAGON HOTEL GREENPORT, N.Y. D.J. CASSIDY, PROP. All wrapped with leather, printed in gold. Front, left to right: HOTEL/BOROUGH/JULIUS SIMON/ 98 LEXINGTON AVE./ S.W.COR. 27th ST./N.Y. CITY half pint; amber; strap side; letter plate; CENTRAL R.R. HOUSE/COR. LIBERTY & WEST STS./HERMAN RAUB/NEW YORK pint; amber; strap side; letter plate; MANSION HOUSE/478 FOURTH AVENUE/NEW YORK/ Wm BRANDES PROPRIETOR pint; amber; strap side; letter plate; CENTRAL HOTEL/272 & 273/ WEST. ST. N.Y./HERM. WILKING, PROP. Half pint; amber; strap side with threaded neck finish and ground lip. Some of them are "cross over" items, which means they are sought after by collectors in other fields, for example, railroad collectors might look for "Central R. R. House", or collectors of Niagara Falls items might want the "The Niagara Hotel" flask. These hotels flasks are some of my favorites.



Top Row: VON GLAHN & WAJE/59th STREET/N.E. COR. OF COLUMBUS AVE/ NEW YORK/FULL MEASURE, shoo fly in clear; M. HAHN/"MH" (monogram)/WINES/&LIQUORS/823/ COLUMBUS AVE./ 2191/EIGHTH AVE./NEW YORK, coffin in clear; CAPACITY/FULL ½ PINT/L. ZIEGEL/190-8TH AVE/ BETW./19TH & 20TH STS/NEW YORK, shoo fly in clear. Bottom Row: HENRY LAUSCHER/WINE/&LIQUOR/MERCHANT/816-2nd AVE./NEW YORK/CAPACITY 8 OZ, coffin in clear; MAX LURIA/IMPORTER & DEALER/IN/WINES LIQUORS/AND BRANDIES/485 SECOND AVE./613 FIRST AVE./645 FIRST AVE./NEW YORK, half pint, clear; coffin; letter plate; MAX LURIA/IMPORTER & DEALER/IN/WINES LIQUORS/AND BRANDIES/485 SECOND AVE./613 FIRST AVE./645 FIRST AVE./NEW YORK, coffin in clear; 3OZ./ISENBURGER'S/FINE/ WINES & LIQUORS/NEW YORK, coffin in clear. Coffin and shoo fly flasks are less commonly found than the strap side flasks, and a nice grouping is a bit of a challenge to get. One I like a great deal is the "Max Luria", as he certainly has a lot of embossing on the bottle!

seem to date up to the 1890s, while the clear dominates the post 1900 period. Aqua is available, but not often seen. This rule of thumb also applies to the examples from Brooklyn. Size is very variable also. The half-pint and pint sizes are the most commonly seen. Quarter pints are very, very cute. (*That word again!*) Quarts are available, and the ambers are stunning in a window. Quart strap flasks are big! Must have had some big pockets years ago to slip those into. Perhaps that is where the term "deep pockets" comes from. (*Groan!*)

Now, strap flasks were very popular with the wine and liquor trade for about 40 years, but they were not the only flasks used. Other flasks used in the trade were the pumpkin seed. (*I really like pumpkin seeds.*) Pumpkin seeds are very flat, very round flasks, with a small base. Which makes them very, very tipsy! I use sticky wax, which some of you may know as Quake Hold to help keep mine upright and intact. You also have shoo fly and coffin style flasks. (*Another two favorite shapes.*) These

are confusing to tell apart, here are some tips. Your coffin flask will have a flat front and back panel. The sides, or edges, when viewed from the base of the flask will also be flat, giving a total of six flat sides to the bottle. Some collectors will call the coffin a knife-edge. The shoo fly also has a flat front and back panel. But when viewed from the bottom the edges are round or curved, not flat. Shoo fly flasks have only two flat sides, and two curved sides.

As did many bottlers of the period, wine and liquor merchants would charge a deposit to try and ensure the return of their bottles to keep down costs. Some merchants even embossed this right on the flask! (*Okay, I do not remember this. Guess I have go down to the basement for another look.*) Nonetheless, the flasks have a very high mortality rate. Lets me be honest. Who is careful after even a half-pint of whiskey? Heck, if you and a buddy did in one of the quarts, you would not even know if you broke the thing. Breaking the bottle would also provide a safe and efficient way of “disposing of the evidence” so a



Top row, left to right: MONOGRAM/(picture of horse head w/ grain)/WHISKEY./A BLEND/GUARANTEED BY ELIAS & CLYNE, UNDER THE/FOOD AND DRUGS ACT, JUNE 30, 1906./ELIAS & CLYNE,NEW YORK (all on paper label printed red, black and gold on white paper); REGISTERED/LAFAYETTE CLUB/TRADE/(Bust of Lafayette)/MARK/WHISKEY/A BLEND OF WHISKIES/GUARANTEED UNDER THE FOOD AND DRUGS/ACT, JUNE 30, 1906 BY/STEINHARDT BROS CO./NEW YORK (All on paper label); MARYLAND/MONOGRAM RYE/TRADE/FG/MARK/WHISKEY/THE CONTENTS OF THIS BOTTLE IS/STRICTLY GUARANTEED FOR FAMILY/AND MEDICINAL PURPOSES./FR. GRUENEWALD/1275 3RD AVE. NEW YORK.(paper label printed gold and black on white). Bottom Row: RED ROBIN/bird on a branch/WHISKEY/HUMBER DISTRIBUTING CO./BROOKLYN, NEW YORK/7 OZ; THOS. OATES & CO./picture of 3 shamrocks/TRADE MARK/IMPORTERS/ESTABLISHED 1865/NEW YORK/FULL MEASURE, clear coffin; 7 OZ./ASK FOR/CIVIC CLUB/TRADE “B&C”(monogram) MARK/WHISKEY/BALSAM & CO./BROOKLYN. We wanted to show you some of the interesting paper labels and monograms in the collection. Laura is fond of the horse head on the top shelf, while I like the three shamrocks on the Thomas Oates example in the second row.



Display of New York City amber strap flasks presented at the Long Island Antique Bottle Associations 2001 Show and Sale.

disapproving spouse (*Which spouse? I am sure quite a few wives liked to drink too.*) would not find it. The broad flat sides are easily broken since they do not roll very well in the dumps. Of course, the failure of a business, or change of address would result in obsolete bottles. As such they would either go back to the glass house as broken cullet, or resold for another use. Many from N.Y.C. and Brooklyn seem to have been used for laundry bluing, as over the years I have acquired a number of examples with paper labels for “Boyer’s Bengal Liquid Blue Manufactured by Boyer & Co. Philadelphia.” (*One of those sub collections he mentioned earlier, some still have the bluing in them.*)

Now, residing near New York City, and collecting New York City and Brooklyn flasks, this naturally makes for fairly easy research. I am lucky to live just a few minutes from the Patchogue-Medford Public Library, which happens to have a large collection of N.Y.C. and Brooklyn Directories on microfilm. I thank my friend Gary Guest for letting me in on this fact. As I have been conducting the research, I have noticed that the research is as exciting as finding them. (*Sorry no – I’d rather do the finding, I love the hunt part. Oh isn’t he lucky to have a wife who lets him wander off to the library for hours to do this research?*) While it takes time, a lot of time, I do hope one day to share what I have learned about these flasks with others by publishing a book on the flasks of N.Y.C. and Brooklyn. Hopefully these wonderful flasks from the East will one day have the chance to share the limelight with their big brothers from the West. (*That’s okay with me as long as their prices do not get to where their big brothers from the West are at, as that would slow us down considerably on adding more flasks, and as any true collector will tell you, you never have too many.*)

#### Bibliography:

Cheney, John. “Eastern Strap Flasks,”  
*Old Bottle Magazine*, Feb., 1979.



This display of flasks was presented as part of a program I presented to the Rocky Point Historical Society in 2001. Flasks shown are from NYC, Brooklyn and Long Island.