

# Bottles from the S.S. Republic

By Bill Baab

When Odyssey Marine Exploration's robotic submersible Zeus turned its powerful lights onto a wrecked steamship called *Republic*, stacks of gold coins weren't the only things that glittered on the Atlantic Ocean bottom.

More than 6,000 bottles sparkled under the lights for the first time in 138 years. The *Republic*, enroute from New York to New Orleans, foundered in hurricane-force winds in October 1865 and then sunk in 1,700 feet of water off the coast of Savannah, Georgia. The wreck was discovered in July 2003.

Now, for the first time, readers of *Bottles and Extras* can discover for themselves the amazing variety of glass containers scooped from the depths. Ellen Gerth, Odyssey Marine Exploration's curator of collections, describes them all in her 2006 112-page booklet, "Bottles from the Deep."

One would think the tremendous water pressure at that depth would pulverize fragile things like bottles, but that wasn't the case.

"Amazingly, most of the bottles were found unbroken," Mrs. Gerth writes in her booklet's introduction. "Many retained their original corks, often pushed inward by the great water pressure at the depth of 1,700 feet. A number of bottles, however, still hold remnants of the contents they once carried."

Neil Cunningham Dobson, Odyssey's principal archaeologist, notes that the bottle collection is "one of the largest ever recovered from a shipwreck (and) provides a fascinating insight into the technology, manufacturing and everyday use of the many types of bottled contents popular in America just after the Civil War."

Equally amazing is the technology used to recover everything from gold and silver coins to historical artifacts, including the bottles.

"From the research vessel, Odyssey Explorer, the nine-foot-square and eight-ton remotely operated vehicle (ROV) named Zeus, configured for archaeological investigation, survey and recovery, was the system used for the investigation and excavation of the *SS Republic*," Mr. Dobson said in a report shared with *Bottles & Extras* readers.

He noted that "ROV technology has been successfully used in the offshore oil

industry, the pipeline and cable industries and for scientific and survey investigations of the deep oceans of the world.

"The excavation and recovery of the bottles followed careful archaeological standards and practices," he said. "The recovery process was painstakingly slow and took many months to complete. Each bottle was delicately excavated and picked up by a silicone rubber limpet suction device attached to the ROV's port manipulator arm. Consisting of a soft bellows-type tube with a small suction pad at its end, this device could pick up tiny items such as buttons weighing less than a few grams. When fitted with a large suction pad, the limpet is capable of lifting objects comparable to the weight of an average man. As each bottle was lifted and placed in a recovery basket, its position (at the wreck site) was systematically documented by data-loggers who tracked all activities performed by the ROV during each dive to the wreck site."

As for the bottles, what types were represented?

They ran the gamut of patent medicines, bitters, foodstuffs, inks, beers and ales, mineral waters, whiskeys, hair tonics, perfumes and wines.

"Those with their contents still remaining, often mixed with sea water, were a challenge to clean and the smells that

emanated from these century-old glass containers were overwhelming," Mr. Dobson continued. "I soon dubbed the phrase, 'One can smell the history!'"

Mrs. Gerth takes each type one by one with color photos accompanying each of the six major chapters in which each brand or type of bottle is thoroughly documented. Knowledgeable collectors will see rare colors in the Drake's Plantation Bitters and Hostetter's Stomach Bitters, as well as super-rare examples of Lediard's OK Plantation Bitters in a three-sided format.

Readers may recall viewing the National Geographic Society's *SS Republic* documentary on television some years back. More than 51,000 gold and silver coins also were recovered, along with 14,000 historical artifacts including all those bottles.

"Bottles from the Deep" is available at \$12 through the Odyssey websites of [www.shipwreck.net](http://www.shipwreck.net) and [www.lostgold.net](http://www.lostgold.net). Some of the bottles also are for sale, with more due to be available in the future.

Today, Odyssey is working toward reopening its museum, Odyssey's Shipwreck and Treasure Adventure, which was forced to close down after only two days' existence by Hurricane Katrina. No date for its reopening in a different location has been set, but readers will be notified when it happens.



Lying on the ocean floor under one of the ship's portholes, wine bottles share space with small fish.



Above, Zeus recovers a bottle from the sand. Right: Hostetter's Stomach Bitters bottles. With its high alcoholic content, Hostetter's was advertised as a "medicinal cordial...suited to greatly mitigate the infirmities of age" and to restrain "the natural physical decay attendant upon advancing years."



Left, and below, hundreds of umbrella inkwells were aboard the S.S. Republic. Most were eight-sided versions in shades of aqua.



Just one of the gold coins recovered from the S.S. Republic's cargo, a Coronet Head \$20 Double Eagle.



*The year was 1865...Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated. The Civil War had just ended. All 11 states of the Southern Confederacy lay in ruin. By October, it was clear that something must be done immediately to begin Reconstruction.*

The S.S. Republic sailed from New York in 1865, just after the Civil War. The steamship was carrying 59 passengers and crew members along with a mixed cargo intended to help New Orleans recover from the war. However, during a hurricane about 100 miles off Georgia, it sank in waters a third of a mile deep.





The cathedral bottle was an American invention. Typically, three sides had fancy arches framing ornately embossed panels. The fourth side was left smooth for the product's label. By selling their products in elaborate bottles, American merchants hoped to convince the consumer that their preserved goods were superior to imported European brands in plainer bottles.

The *SS Republic* carried an impressive cargo of cathedral pickle bottles. Pickles were not the only fare preserved in such bottles, but also pickled vegetables that were a key staple in the 1800s, equivalent to our salad. Over 150 of these utilitarian bottles were recovered, many examples featuring an uncommon cross-hatch pattern.



According to legend, Lea & Perrins Worcestershire Sauce originated in India and was a favorite of Lord Sandys, an English nobleman from the county of Worcester. Sandys approached two chemists, John Lea and William Perrins, who owned an apothecary, and asked if they would replicate a recipe Sandys had acquired in India. The two men concurred. Later, the sauce was imported into the U.S. by John Duncan & Sons of N.Y. By 1849, it was being sold west of the Mississippi as far as California's gold mines. The *Republic* carried more than 250 bottles, in two sizes, of Lea & Perrins.

Mexican Mustang Liniment was introduced in 1825 by George W. Westbrook of St. Louis, Mo. The salve claimed to cure over 30 ailments, including sprains, strains, burns, scalds, colds, sore throats and lameness.

Some 25 years later, Dr. A.G. Bragg had become a well-known agent for the formula. On the heels of the Mexican War (1846-48), Bragg popularized the product with claims that the nostrum was "oil from the burning mountains of Mexico." In fact, the pungent liniment was a mixture of bottled crude petroleum, ammonia, water and brandy.

Sometime in the late 1850s, Westbrook sold his business to Demas Barnes and Co.

The 30-plus bottles of Mexican Mustang Liniment recovered from the *Republic* site bear his name embossed on the bottle.



The children's market was especially marketable for patent-medicine purveyors. With limited health care and high infant mortality, hope for an ill child was often purchased in the form of a small bottle - which frequently contained some sort of narcotic. One of the most famous was Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, a morphine-based formula bottled as a remedy for infant's "teething sickness." First formulated by Mrs. Charlotte N. Winslow, it was her son-in-law, Jeremiah Curtis, and a partner, Benjamin A. Perkins, who began marketing her recipe in 1849.

Mrs. Winslow's preparation enjoyed enormous success. However, tragically, the popularity of this and similar morphine-based products resulted in wide-spread drug addiction among children. Numerous infant deaths from overdoses were reported, but it was not until the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 that more stringent steps were taken to prevent the manufacture and sale of harmful children's nostrums.

Shown is one of the examples found aboard the *Republic*.

Information about the brands contained in the bottles came from the book, *Bottles of the Deep*. Similar information is available, along with advertising examples for the product, for each type of bottle found at the wreck.

