

Let's Talk About Ink

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The history of ink can be traced to ancient people who made and used it in many colors, but we mainly want to discuss ink in America in this article. In Colonial America ink was a necessity in the business community and the government, but was not used extensively by the common folk for several reasons. It was expensive to buy, quality was not always good, and a lot of people did not read or write very well.

Also, it was very expensive to have a post rider carry a letter, and most people relied on someone who was traveling to carry what few letters they did write. Therefore, the use of ink grew as the general population grew and became more literate. As literacy and education grew, so did the use of ink and general writing materials.

Many people made their own ink at home, but it was also sold by most druggists, merchants, and bookshop dealers, who mixed it from recipes popular during that time. Later on, ink powder, and sometimes ink sticks, were available for mixing in quantity.

An E.S. Curtis broadside from around 1840 gave the following directions for mixing their powdered ink: To one groce of ink powder, in a wooden vessel, add five gallons of vinegar, stir well with a stick every day for a week, then add twenty gallons of rain water and it is ready for immediate use. Water must be added from time to time to preserve the liquidity. A groce will make about 36 gallons. To deepen the color from blue-black to jet-black, add about an ounce of powdered Aleppo Galls to each gallon. Directions were given also for making smaller amounts.

This early ink left much to be desired. Quite often it had sediment left in it, and it tended to mold quickly. Early writings suggest that mold was quite common and many ways to prevent it were tried including the use of cloves, oil of lavender, salt, and even a bit of carbolic acid.

In a Massachusetts letter written in 1820, the writer asks for the ingredients to make his own, as he can find "no ink fit to write with." By the middle 1800's, ads began appearing stating that the quality of ink was improving. It was advertised as being free from sediment and would not corrode steel pens.

Shopkeepers who mixed ink for sale bought their bottles from local glass houses and used a paper label with their name. The earliest known advertisement that listed "inks of all sorts" for sale was in 1772 by the Manheim Glass Factory in Pennsylvania. George Ball of New York listed inkbottles for sale in 1775 and Thomas Tisdale, a Hartford merchant, listed inks for sale in 1788. These were probably common utilitarian type bottles.

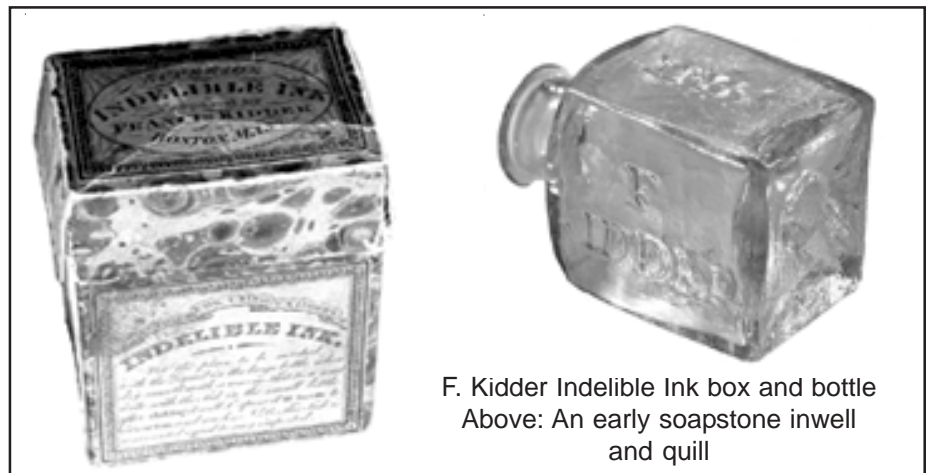
Most inkbottles shipped to the colonies from England were pottery bottles until the 19th century. By mid-19th century a few of the larger ink companies were using embossed bottles as glass bottles became more common and less expensive. By the 1860's, some ink manufacturers designed and patented bottles to be unique to their company. The first patented ink bottle was a pottery bottle by Thaddeus Davids in January 1859.

Although ink was imported by American businesses as early as the 1700's, there was not a large established ink manufacturing company in the US until 1816. Maynard and Noyes was the first American manufacturer of ink, beginning in 1816, followed by Thaddeus Davids, whose letterhead states his company was begun in 1825.


However it was not until the 1840's and 50's that other big ink companies began operation. These included James Mason and Hover in Philadelphia, J. J. Butler in Cincinnati, E. Waters in Troy, NY., and F. Kidder, and Wm. Kidder and others.

Perhaps the most well-known was Apollos W. Harrison, who marketed his ink as Harrison's Columbian Ink. The word Columbian simply meant it was American ink and not imported. His first listing in the Philadelphia directory was 1847 and no listing was found after 1877. Like many older companies, HC made other products that included perfumes and hair dye.

Harrison envelopes from the early 1860's show his company as Perfumery and Ink. We also have an extract bottle with A.W. Harrison embossed on it. It is the typical rectangular bottle like most extracts. The label says Harrison's Flavoring Extract, A.W. Harrison, Philadelphia. This must have been either a short-lived venture, or was not successful, as the bottle is rarely seen.



F. Kidder Indelible Ink box and bottle
Above: An early soapstone inwell
and quill



Philadelphia April 10th 1852

Mr. A. T. Sloan

Bought of JAS. S. MASON & CO.

Manufacturers of Mason's celebrated Challenge **BLACKING** and Black and Blue Writing **INK**.

From their new **GRANITE STORE**, 108 NORTH FRONT ST. between Arch & Race Sts.

Harrison Columbian bottles are perhaps the easiest to find today of the early inkbottles. They were made in sizes ranging from about an ounce to a gallon size, the gallon size being extremely rare. They were made mostly in aqua and shades of blue, and are less common in green. The small aqua ones can still be found at reasonable prices and are nice older embossed bottles for the ink collector.

Some of the earlier bottles have the word indelible on them. This meant it was durable and could be used to mark cloth and save time from needlework for items to be marked. The earliest indelible inkbottles most often seen are F. Kidder, and Wm. Kidder and Williston's. These were small aqua rectangular bottles with pontils, although there are later F. Kidder bottles with a smooth bottom.

It was probably in the 1840's that uniformity in bottles was started. With slates and slate pencils on the way out, there was more demand for ink in the schoolroom. A bottle was needed that would not tip over easily, yet small enough for individual use. The "cone" and "umbrella" inks first became popular about this time, although the short round and octagonal bottles were preferred by Harrison.

Cones and umbrellas stayed popular the rest of the century and some cones were made by ABM in the 20th century, although umbrellas are not known to have been made by machine. These bottles came in a wide range of colors, with the umbrella being made in all shades of aqua, green, blue, amber, amethyst, and more rarely, clear. Cones also can be found in many colors.

Pontiled umbrellas (unembossed) are easy to find in aqua at very reasonable prices. Pontiled cones are harder to come by, but can be found at most large bottle shows and frequently in Internet auctions. Cones and umbrellas, pontiled and smooth

bottom, are especially desirable with today's collectors because of the wide range of colors to be found, as well as embossing of manufacturer on some.

As ink manufacturing became more common, different means had to be found to compete. The Carter's, Sanford's, and Stafford's companies, as well as many others, were established around 1858 and competition was fierce in the next few years.

Perfumed ink in several colors was advertised to appeal to the ladies. Combined writing and copying ink was advertised. Different shaped bottles were made that were not only colorful, but decorative as well, as most bottles were kept on the top of the desk.

W. E. Bonney advertised a "barrel"

inkbottle in sizes up to a quart. Other shapes included cabins and houses. The first known cabin was made in 1840 for the "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" campaign of William Henry Harrison. The house ink was made off and on through the 1880's. Other shapes included a locomotive ink and teakettles, so called because of the spout.

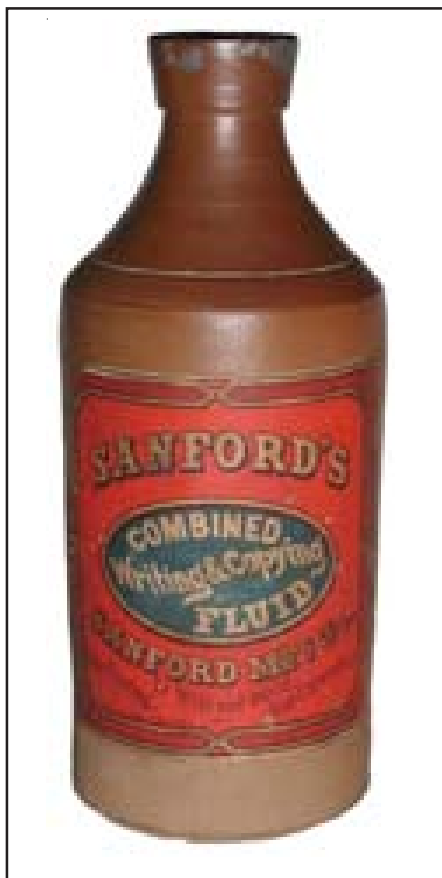
But perhaps the most popular one, and the most easily found today, is the "turtle" ink by J. & I.E. Moore. This bottle was designed to be popular with students in the schoolroom and remained popular until the late 1890's. Most other large manufacturers used this shape as well, but the Moore bottle is the one most commonly found. Although made in several colors, only the aqua is easily found at reasonable prices.

Also mention needs to be made of pottery bottles - these were used during all of the 19th century and were both imported from England as well as being made in American potteries. Many of these have been found in Civil War sites and can still be obtained at very reasonable prices in both small and master sizes.

The Bourne & Denby Stamp (English) on a lot of these bottles is the potter and not the ink company. Arnold was one of the largest English ink manufacturers to use pottery bottles for export to the US. Most of the larger American companies also used them from both English and American potters.

American pottery bottles were seldom marked with a pottery name. According to William Covill, in his book, **INK BOTTLES AND INKWELLS**, the Robinson Clay Products of Akron, Ohio made many pottery inks. The best-known marked pottery bottle is by Boss Brothers, an Ohio maker.

Ink collectors quite often have a preference for either small bottles or the large bottles called master inks. The most



desirable of either size are the embossed, and are even better if they still have the original label. Older master inks quite often had a pour spout and the later ones had attached metal spouts and later plastic pour spouts.

As can be seen in the Williams' Ink Co. ad, a great many companies offered ink in larger quantities. Some companies offered 5, 10, 20 and even 50 gallon barrels. We have been looking for an example of one of these barrels for a number of years but have never found anyone who has even seen one. There must be one out there somewhere!

Inkbottles are popular to collect because there are so many varieties, colors, shapes, and sizes. While some collectors, like us, prefer the early bottles, many prefer only labeled bottles, regardless of age. Ink collecting offers many different categories to please any collector.

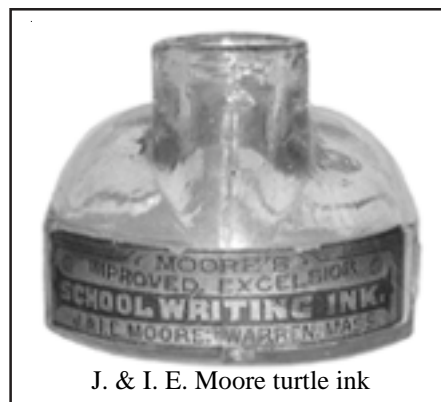
Bottle shows are still the best place to learn about old bottles of any kind. Nothing beats actually seeing and handling a bottle that is over a hundred years old.

Ink use declined rapidly with the invention of the ball-point pen. Although the modern ball-point pen was invented in 1935, it was not in general use until the middle to late 1950's. With the ball-point pen, one did not have to worry about blotting or ink smears as much, and ink began a rapid decline, with only a few companies still making ink today.

One old company that did survive is the Sanford Company. They survived by going to other office products when ink use declined. You can find their history by going to www.Sanfordcorp.com.

There are still people today who enjoy repairing and using old fountain pens, or the new designer variety. Ink can still be found in specialty or office supply stores for those who want to use it. In future articles we hope to be able to have information on some of the older ink companies.

Parts of this article first appeared in The Digger, the newsletter of the Richmond, Virginia Bottle Club, edited by Ed Faulkner.



J. & I. E. Moore turtle ink

References:

Pen, Ink, and Evidence
Joe Nickell
1990

American Bottles and Flasks
McKearin and Wilson
1978

Ink Bottles and Inkwells
William Covill
1971



Above: An early ad for Thaddeus Davids
Right: 1891 Williams' ad offered a variety of products

4 oz.
A BIG
5 Cent
BOTTLE.

WILLIAMS' INK.
Writing Fluid and Mucilage.

Thousands testify to their merits. Best BLACK in the market. Other colors excellent. Prices very low. Write for Circulars. BP Guaranteed to satisfy or no pay.
WILLIAMS INK CO. SALEM, VA.

All Size Bottles, Jugs and Barrels. All Colors Same Price.

SPECIAL FOR SCHOOLS!

We have the BEST black ink on the market.
PURE NUTGALL.
The only black ink we have seen that will not fade when exposed.
READ THE TESTIMONIALS TO THEIR MERIT.

— LOOK —

Five Gallon Jug, \$2.50.
Twelve Quarts, \$2.50.
In Barrels per Gallon, 40 cts.
ALL COLORS SAME PRICE.

TESTIMONIALS:
From Capt. W. T. B. HILL, Principal, Bunkerhill Military Institute, Bunkerhill, N. C.:
"I have used Williams' Ink for the past twelve months, both personally and in this school. I unhesitatingly pronounce it for all purposes the BEST ink of which I have knowledge."
From W. F. HEATON, Esq., Supr., Public Schools, Atlanta, Ga.:
"BEAR WIT:
"The barrels of black ink bought of you in April for the Atlanta Schools gave EXTREME SATISFACTION to teachers and pupils."
From Dr. WELLS, Prof. of Chemistry, Boston College, Salem, Va.:
"Have used Williams' Ink for some time, and can recommend it as the BEST."
GUARANTEED TO SATISFY,
WILLIAMS' INK CO.,
SALEM, VA.

THE TYPE-SETTING HOUSE, BOSTON, MASS.