

Georgia glass works designed amber S.C. Dispensary flask

By Bill Baab

The South Carolina Dispensary, through which Gov. Benjamin Ryan “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman controlled the sales of whiskey in the Palmetto State from 1893 to 1907, was sold in a variety of glass and ceramic containers.

At least two – one of glass and the other pottery – came from a pair of Augusta, Georgia area firms. How is this known?

Several years ago, Harvey Stuart Teal, of Columbia, South Carolina, teamed with graduate history student Rita Foster Wallace to research the dispensary system and then publish their findings in a 2005 book, “The South Carolina Dispensary & Embossed South Carolina Whiskey Bottles and Jugs.”

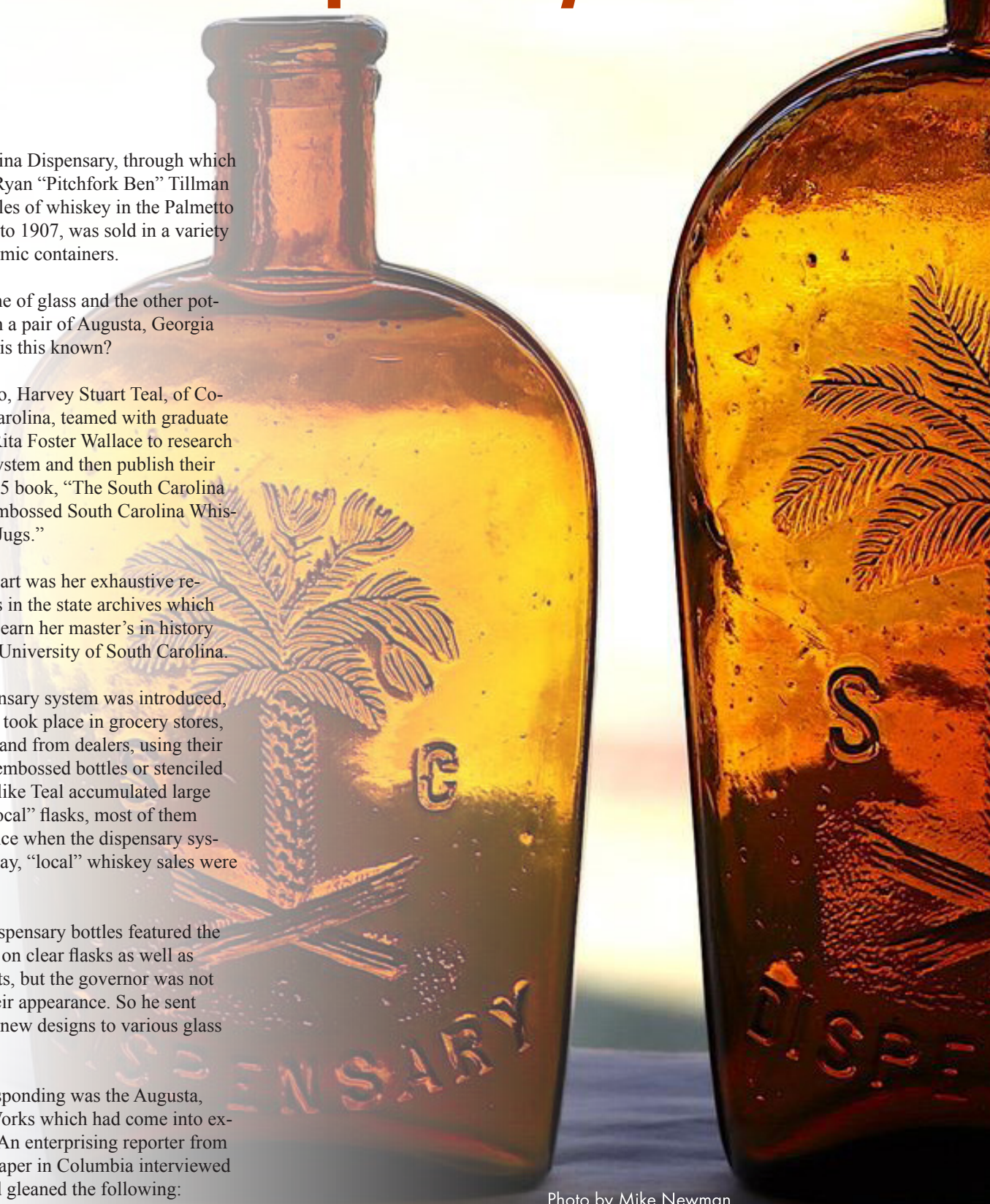
Mrs. Wallace’s part was her exhaustive research of records in the state archives which she later used to earn her master’s in history degree from the University of South Carolina.

Before the dispensary system was introduced, sales of whiskey took place in grocery stores, saloons, taverns and from dealers, using their own personally embossed bottles or stenciled jugs. Collectors like Teal accumulated large collections of “local” flasks, most of them scarce to rare since when the dispensary system came into play, “local” whiskey sales were outlawed.

The first S.C. Dispensary bottles featured the SCD monogram on clear flasks as well as round clear quarts, but the governor was not satisfied with their appearance. So he sent out inquiries for new designs to various glass factories.

Among those responding was the Augusta, Georgia Glass Works which had come into existence in 1891. An enterprising reporter from The State newspaper in Columbia interviewed the governor and gleaned the following:

Photo by Mike Newman



It's interesting to note that the Augusta firm only sold 38,736 amber quart union oval flasks in 1893.

“Governor Tillman since his return from Washington has been busy getting samples and bids for the furnishing of official flasks and jugs at the dispensaries. . . The Augusta Glass company’s flask has been adopted. . . It has been suggested to Governor Tillman that the coat of arms of the state with the words South Carolina Dispensary be blown into each bottle and placed on the jugs.”

Tillman chose the palmetto tree and not the coat of arms. It is believed he left the tree’s design to the Augusta Glass Works and the various master potters who participated.

It’s interesting to note that the Augusta firm sold 38,736 amber quart union oval flasks (like the two from the Mike Newman collection pictured here) only in 1893. Teal’s book features a chart showing the numbers of half-pints and pints produced by the Augusta business and sold to the dispensary that same year.

By 1894 and ‘95, the company was out of business for reasons unknown. News articles in *The Augusta Chronicle* never mentioned the company’s decline or the reason for it. So the dispensary system purchased flasks and bottles from more than a dozen glass factories located throughout the U.S.

Meanwhile, one of the potteries approved by the governor was the Joseph G. Baynham works near Trenton in Edgefield County, South Carolina. Mention of the governor’s interest in attracting bids from potteries was published in the local Edgefield newspaper where Baynham saw it.

On March 31, 1893, he wrote to Tillman: “I saw from yesterday paper where you were receiving samples of jugs for the dispensary. I will ship you a sample by next freight of my jugs. You can see the shape, and if you would like some other shape. Draw me a moddle (sic - model) something like what you want, and I can make them after that. . . assure you that I will make you a good jug. . . Yours truly, J.G. Baynham.”

There was competition from the William F. Hahn Pottery, of Trenton near the governor’s home, but Baynham was awarded the contract.

Collecting South Carolina Dispensary bottles and jugs continues to rank high with collectors today, especially since publication of the Teal-Wallace book.

