

“WASHINGTON-TAYLOR” FLASKS FROM RIVER BRIDGE

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Traveling from the Harbor of Hospitality north up the Pasquotank River, one would be hard pressed to spot the whereabouts of the old River Bridge site. The visible remnants of this one-time Colonial era inspection port are little more than an old abutment at the river's bank. Hardly a trace remains to suggest this overgrown turf was once a thriving center of trade and commerce. However, the site's real significance lies just beneath the water's surface where the refuse of two or three by-gone eras has prompted several years' worth of archaeological excavation and research.

Among the myriad of artifacts recovered at River Bridge, a modest assortment of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century glassware includes some of the most delicate yet intricate treasures found there: two portrait flasks, bearing the likenesses of Presidents George Washington and Zachary Taylor. These two objects are of special interest for their highly-revered status among collectors of early American, illustrated glass. An estimated 37 variations of the “Washington-Taylor” flask alone are known to exist and a few, at least, exhibit such minute contrasts they can be easily misidentified. However, through the diligent efforts of father and daughter experts George and Helen McKearin, these two recovered flasks, along with other examples of mold-blown glass from the Colonial and Federalist periods, were catalogued with a unique letter/number designation.

The two “Washington-Taylor” flasks on display in the museum's River Bridge: Sunken Secrets exhibit were both blown at the Baltimore Glass Works, in Baltimore's Federal Hill, sometime during the second quarter of the nineteenth century and are rare

examples of the GI-17 and GI-22 variants. Apart from their coloration, the former blown of an aqua-tinted glass and the latter of an amber tint, nothing initially stands out as markedly different between them. Nevertheless, a couple of small yet exceptional attributes confirm these flasks as distinct from one another. They concern the manufacturer's label, “Baltimore Glass Works.” The GI-22 variant exhibits a miniature “x” in-between the first two words of the maker's name whereas the other does not. Secondly, the GI-22 variant shows all three S's in this label in reverse, unlike those of its GI-17 counterpart.

Portrait flasks featuring patriotic motifs including the shield and eagle, George Washington, and other notable political figures such as Secretary of State Henry Clay remained popular in America throughout the nineteenth-century. Production of the “Washington-Taylor” flasks likely peaked around the late 1840s, when Zachary Taylor's victory over Antonio Lopez de Santa Ana at the Battle of Buena Vista played no small part in his ascendancy to the Presidential office. Apart from the glass works in Baltimore, the Dyottville Glass Works in Philadelphia produced the bulk of the several different variants of the “Washington-Taylor” flask.

While an untold number of these flasks were shipped out across the country and overseas during mid-nineteenth century, at least two we know of found their way to River Bridge.

River Bridge: Sunken Secrets will remain on display at the Museum of the Albemarle through March 2021.

