

ANTIQUE BOTTLE PROVENANCE AND OTHER VALUE ENHANCERS

By Burt Robbins

Antique bottle provenance needs more attention from collectors. It adds value, interest, and history to a bottle and helps create a story line to go to the next owner. In the event of bottle theft, provenance is important to validate ownership. Best of all, it's free and easy to do since it mainly involves keeping a record of ownership history.

STOLEN BOTTLES
RECOVERED FROM
OWNER INVESTIGATION

Should headlines such as these become more common, it is wise to be prepared. Bottle theft becomes more likely to happen as prices increase, collections become bigger and more famous, and morals decrease. While you are doing the provenance process for a bottle, I would recommend including a sketch or a detailed photograph of unique identifying details of the bottle such as bubbles, scratches or other damage, pontil or base wear, or applied top details. These details will help you identify and recover a stolen bottle.

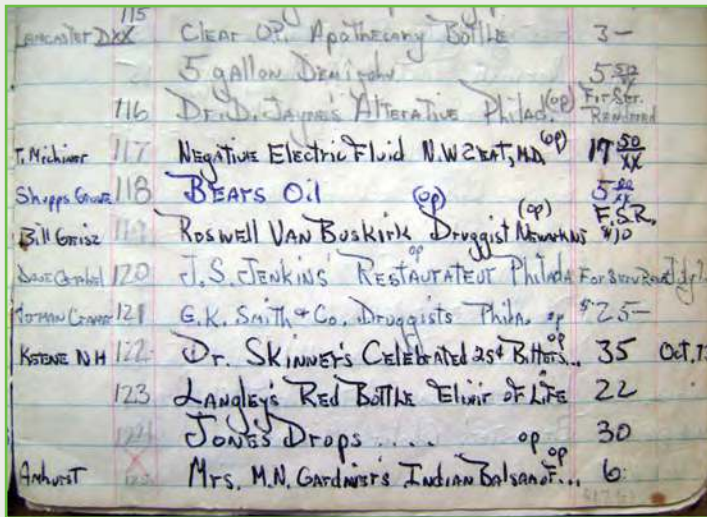
Over the years many large, important antique bottle collections have been sold, whether by private sale, by auction house, or through eBay. The prices realized have often been higher than estimated. Many of the bottles sold were one of a kind, in top condition, or best-known examples. The new owners of these items may be building important collections of their own recognizing that their time to sell will come someday. To obtain the highest selling price, the best thing the bottle collector can do is to keep notes of a bottle's previous owners and other relevant information. These notes will be helpful as memories fade and years pass. It pays off because even a more common bottle's value can be increased by the recording of the chronology of ownership that is called provenance. Bottle author and collector Matt Knapp believes that there are at least three significant forms of provenance relating to antique bottles. "One is who owned the bottle in the past, another is the context of where the bottle was found, and a third form is where the bottle was sold." The physical attributes of a bottle are enhanced by provenance. The ability to produce documented ownership history adds to the emotional appeal and satisfaction of ownership. Conversely, the lack of information can

side, ABM \$3.00. 43. Reed & Cormick Pharmacists, amber rect. \$2.50. **BEER & SODA & WHISKEY:** 44. Consumers Brewing Co. Erie Pa., amber blob top \$1.50. 45. Hutchinson soda, unembossed, aqua \$1.00. 46. Pluto Water, devil on base, aqua round blob \$1.00. 47. Amber squat blob beer, A B Co. or S G Co. \$1.00. 48. Burke with cat embossed, green, old crown top \$2.00. 49. Barrass & Walker Hoswellone, old inside screw, round beautiful yellow \$6.50. 50. VINOL Pat 1898, amber, chestnut flask shape \$1.00. 51. Many different embossed old crown top beers or sodas in amber or aqua \$.50 ea. 52. Very old green blob beer bottle \$1.50. 53. Warranted flask, clear 1/2 pint \$.25 ea. 54. Coffin shape whiskey flasks, clear

Before eBay and online auctions became popular, it was important to buy antique bottles from a trusted dealer. His reputation and the ad write up were all you had to make important decisions about purchases because in the 1950s-1990s bottles were commonly purchased sight unseen. Ads like this one from an issue of Old Bottle Magazine or Antique Trader commonly had no photographs. I really wish I saved all those receipts from the bottles I bought from those printed ads and also gotten more information from sellers at bottle shows.

add to a bottle's mystery.

For collections that have started with little information, it is better to begin late to gather provenance for antique bottles than to never begin at all. A collector can start by maintaining a logbook for his bottles. A numbering system is very helpful. Just write the number on a blank sticker and cut to size. Word processing software and self-adhesive labels can also be used to create low cost, personalized, numbered stickers. Examples can be seen on the HARDY'S and WISTAR'S bottle photographs shown in this article. Be sure to write down the seller's name in your notes. Information such as date of purchase, price, description, and where purchased will come in handy in the years to come. When purchasing the bottle, ask the seller who he bought it from and where and how long he owned it so that the information can be recorded. Is the bottle dug? Cleaned? Some collectors highly value western bottles or Civil War bottles for example, so it would be wise to record where a dug bottle was found. Keep the sales receipt. This helps to build bottle provenance and the documenting process. Write down any modifications made to the bottle such as damage, washing, cleaning, tumbling, polishing, oiling, and waxing so that changes in condition can be monitored and remembered years into the future. Provenance can travel with a bottle, either verbally or written, and a good story will help it sell for a higher price if the collector or dealer realizes he is part of the provenance process and can find a buyer with the same opinion.

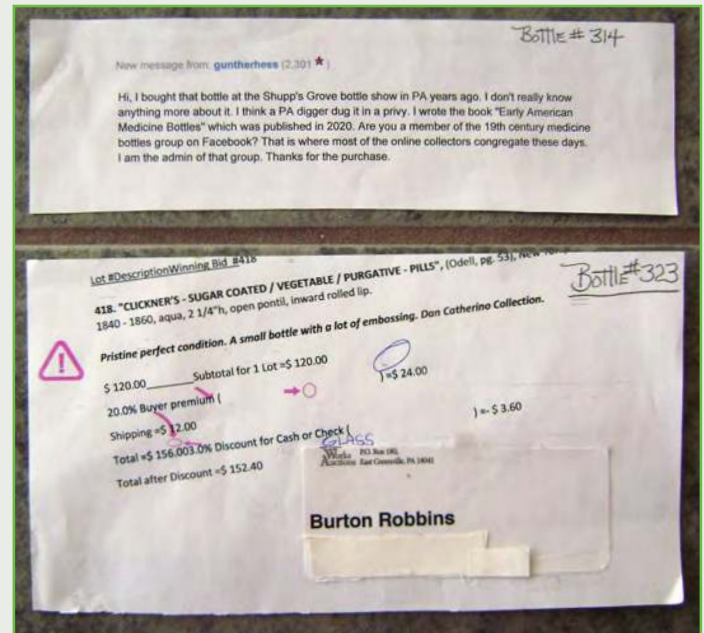


Shown here is a portion of a page of my bottle journal that I started in 1970. I logged in the basic information as I made my purchases but I wish I had recorded more information about the bottles using a more detailed system.

The ability to supply bottle provenance may add to a bottle's selling price but how important is provenance to the average collector? The answer may be found by comparing art collecting and bottle collecting. One difference between the two is that serious art collectors and investors must rely on sales receipts, old photos of a painting with a previous owner, exhibition records, and other authentication, before committing a large sum of money toward a painting. These documents, part of its provenance, go with the painting. A bottle dealer or collector does not need provenance as much as an art dealer. The reason is the high quality of the many art forgeries out there while antique bottles are difficult to fake. To avoid forgeries and stolen art, important works of art should not be purchased from unknown dealers. The collecting of antique bottles has many similarities to collecting art. Beauty, rarity, and historical interest are among them, but most bottle collectors do not normally need provenance as a prerequisite before buying a bottle unless ownership history is also of value to them. Most collectors can tell if a bottle is genuine and can recognize signs of age and authenticity. Of course, many a novice collector has purchased a base-scarred ABM bottle on eBay thinking it to be a pontiled bottle. Sometimes Clevenger or Wheaton bottles are sold as older historical flasks and FISCH BITTERS figural reproductions are sold as the much scarcer and more valuable original items. Generally, though, it would be very hard for any bottle forger to create a realistic looking antique bottle reproduction that would not be detected by the average bottle collector. When dealing with antique bottles, provenance is not a sales prerequisite for most collectors but it is important for some. Provenance may add to the desirability and price of a bottle but it helps most with a higher priced bottle.

Provenance is often not the most important bottle value enhancer and price will often make or break a sale. Characteristics such as color, shape, contents, labeling, geographical origin, manufacturing glasshouse, pontil, size, degree of bottle crafting art and/or manufacturing crudeness, cleaning treatments, historical value and lore, embossed words, rarity, damage, and condition can combine to influence collecting preferences and therefore bottle value. For example, some collectors will specialize in blue colored bottles. Some collectors will only buy mineral water

bottles. Sometimes value is added unintentionally when a bottle is given as a gift and it becomes a cherished memento. Strong attachment to a bottle can be created when a bottle is found at an unusual place or circumstance. Such bottles are kept and usually not for sale.



When buying a bottle, I ask the seller some questions such as: where the bottle was found, whose collection it was in, how long ago it was purchased, etc. I also write down the condition of the bottle and what I have done to the bottle over the years. Each bottle gets its own separate page for the information that will be saved. I also now keep receipts and shipping labels. The top part of this photograph shows the response via eBay from Matt Knapp, long time early medicine bottle collector and author of two bottle books, when I requested more bottle provenance from him. I was very happy to purchase the bottle from him, to receive the extra provenance, and add my sticker above his as shown in the WISTAR'S photograph.

The bottom part of the photograph shows a receipt for a bottle I recently won in an online auction. Keeping this receipt will add to the bottle's provenance because it adds a value and condition story line about the bottle in addition to the previous owner being mentioned. This information may prove useful when the bottle is sold.

Many collectors want top condition bottles. Many collectors do not want or collect tumbled, damaged, repaired, or greatly altered bottles unless there is no other choice due to scarcity. Some collectors prefer what they would call a natural bottle. Such a bottle would possibly have some wear or minor damage, have some traces of contents from long ago, or have dull surfaces and other evidence of use or the passage of time. Interestingly enough, a more natural bottle may be purchased for a lower or higher price depending on the seller. Many collectors do not mind paying extra for a tumbled bottle if the bottle looks like new and has been professionally treated. In contrast, some collectors will buy a super shiny, over tumbled bottle and have the bottle tumbled again to reduce the surface glare. It's a matter of preference, rarity, and often price. Damaged bottles usually sell for less but the rarest, most desirable of bottles can be bid up at auction even though they are badly damaged. Many top collectors will pay highly if necessary for a damaged,

rare bottle. Another example of a value enhancer can be the location where a bottle was dug or found. Historical value is added if it has been documented that a bottle was dug at a Civil War encampment or if a bottle was brought up from a notable old shipwreck for example.

Auctioneers can add value to an antique bottle by including known past provenance and the results of a thorough examination in their written catalog description. Auctioneer Jeff Wichmann says that upon customer request, the auctioneer can often supply a new owner with even more provenance information from his records. Sometimes though, Jeff cannot provide the previous owner's name due to an anonymity request by the seller. Bottle auctioneer Norman Heckler also honors anonymity requests. Drawing on old sales records to embellish the bottle's description can help new buyers and sellers make a more informed bottle sale years into the future if the description is kept. Matt Knapp believes that recording where a bottle was sold gives it provenance. "A bottle which was sold in a well-known glass auction may appeal to collectors because they perceive the bottle has been handled and examined by experts. The chance



When buying an expensive painting, an art collector must rely on provenance to avoid buying a fake. In contrast, most antique bottle collectors can easily identify most bottles they want to buy as genuine and can also assess their condition and approximate value without worrying greatly about unknowingly buying a fake or reproduction. If he wants a certain bottle, a collector will buy the bottle with or without provenance.

The story behind this painting illustrates how provenance is more important to the art collector than the bottle collector. When I bought this painting at a garage sale four years ago, I was told by the seller that it was painted by an artist in the Miami area over 20 years ago. I liked the painting and paid \$20 for it, therefore, I had little to lose. It was signed T. Denver and painted in the style of the popular artist, I. Tarkay. With a magnifying glass, I could verify that it was an acrylic painting and see the signature. I did not have to worry about the painting being a fake but if the signature was Tarkay, I should expect to pay much more and be provided with provenance to ensure its authenticity. Many people in the world make their living by painting in the style of a great artist but will fake his signature. Provenance is necessary for the artist but not for the bottle collector. The provenance and description supplied by the bottle auctioneer or dealer does not need to verify the authenticity of the bottle but rather is provided to attest to its desirability. The bottle collector can visually verify authenticity and check condition. In contrast, the art collector will want an unbroken ownership history, dealer testimony, or genuine papers of authenticity before spending large sums of money.



Stickers are important aids that help many collectors to identify a bottle and provide tangible evidence of bottle provenance. Whether it is an auction sticker or a personal collection sticker, they are reminders that bottles in a collection have a past and will have a future. Hopefully, as the bottle passes from collection to collection, the stickers don't become too numerous, distracting, or unsightly. If so, just put the sticker on the bottle's notes and information page. Take care to save any removed stickers though because it is possible over the years for bottle collecting to go through trends of people wanting bottles without stickers and then, much later wanting bottles with their original stickers. Auctioneer Norman Heckler says that he will keep a sticker on a bottle whenever possible and that "Gardner's stickers are golden."

that it is a reproduction, has been color modified, or has been adversely cleaned is lower. This provenance instills confidence lacking in a bottle found at a flea market." When the auction catalog is published, the description and record of sale become part of the bottle's provenance and can help future buyers and sellers make more informed decisions years into the future. This process will make a desirable bottle even more valuable when its current auction catalog states that it was, for example, in the collection of famous collectors Charles B. Gardner or Samuel J. Greer and the catalog photograph shows that the old sticker is still on the bottle. Even if a buyer was going to bid on the bottle anyway, solid provenance entices him to bid over his original intended amount. For example, if a collector reads from the description in an auction catalog that a rare bottle has damage and also reads that the bottle was in a famous collection, he may conclude that the bottle is the best available example for him to buy. The collector may then bid higher than normal for the damaged bottle. The reasoning is that if it was the best example that the long-time famous collector could get, it's likely the best that anyone could get because large collections are usually acquired by people with a good eye and the financial means to buy the best examples available.

A good example of how provenance increases the desirability of antique bottles comes from Jeff Wichmann, owner of American Bottle Auction and a veteran of 52 years of bottle collecting, who says he would not have considered auctioning two bottles in his latest bottle auction except for the fact that they had Gardner stickers. "Without those stickers, I wouldn't have touched them.

They might be interesting bottles but we need value to print a costly catalog. The stickers were everything". Jeff also included a rare date KELLY'S LOG CABIN BITTERS in the auction because it was "from the famous Burton Spiller collection and what really makes it is the provenance. Everyone knew Burt was a very picky collector and his stuff sold for big bucks because they knew they were getting a great example of whatever he owned. What might be a \$3,500 cabin bottle will go a lot stronger because it has the Spiller sticker. It's an identifying mark that what you are getting is a top specimen. People know where it came from and no matter what I say, it's already been said in the catalog it originally sold from." Auctioneers also add value by means of a thorough examination

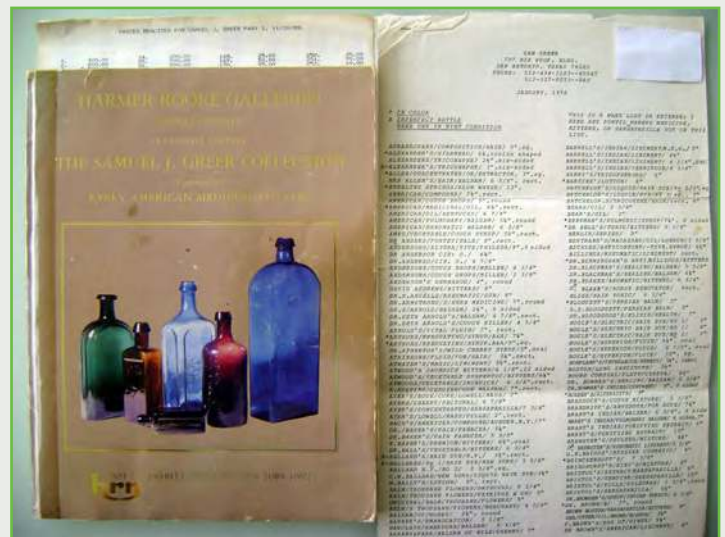


This nondescript bottle contains many value enhancers that tend to increase its desirability but lacks many enhancers that would make it even more popular among collectors. It is mainly the embossing that increases collector interest to a high level. The embossed words of interest are: INDIAN, HEMP, BITTERS, and GREEN CREEK, N.J. This bottle would also be sought by collectors of medicine bottles, slug plate bottles, and manganese (purple) bottles.

The bottle would be even more valuable in a color other than its light purple or if it had a greater size than 6 inches. Only the mouth shows evidence of hand tooling and very few bubbles can be seen. There is no pontil and it dates to about the late 1800s. It is not a beautiful bottle.

For me the bottle's main value is sentimental. It was dug in Cape May County in the 1960s by my uncle, George McConnell and my cousin Jimmy. My uncle traded this bottle to me from his very large collection for a bottle from my collection and I intend to give it to his grandson George someday.

and authentication process. For example, an unknowing collector may want to sell a reproduction of a figural antique bottle such as DOCTOR FISCH'S BITTERS, BROWN'S CELEBRATED INDIAN HERB BITTERS, and NATIONAL BITTERS. Clevenger glass items can be mistaken for older originals. Selling such a reproduction through a reputable auctioneer would be rare. Bottle buyers depend on reputable auctioneers and dealers to identify or weed out reproductions. Buying such authenticated examples from a reputable dealer or auctioneer brings provenance to the bottle and satisfaction in knowing that the bottle is genuine, is free of hidden damage or repairs, and that the accompanying bill of sale or sticker will enable an easier sale of the bottle at a future date. Auctioneers will reject problem bottles. In fact, Norman Heckler who is a bottle, flask, and early glass collector, auctioneer and appraiser, has stated that it "happens every week, every month" and Jeff Wichmann of American Bottle Auctions says he



Who would not want a bottle from this collection? In 1988 and 1989 some 1,820 bottles were sold from the Sam Greer collection by the Harmer Rooke auction company. Some are being resold from time to time and many still bear the original "GREER COLLECTION/ HARMER ROOKE/NYC" sticker containing the bottle lot number. I'll bet the sticker brings the seller more money when offered for sale. In fact, I've often tried to win one at auction but always bid too low. These stickered bottles were always worth more than I estimated.



DR. CHANDLER'S JAMAICA GINGER
ROOT BITTERS. 1860-80. R C127. Applied top, smooth base. This is another Chandler's in a light to medium yellowish green. If you have the amber example, you just have to have the green one, right? Seriously, this is another gorgeous piece that is in a color you don't see often. Not mentioned because frankly you don't see it much is the embossing above the name, which reads, CHAS. NICHOLS, J. & Co. PROPS. This example has just a hint of wear around the middle barrel ring but is overall in super condition. Lots of bubbles and overall appeal, grades About Mint 8. Est. \$5000-8000. MB \$4000. Ex. Frank Kurczewski and Joe Wheeler collections. Possibly only three known in this color.

As part of writing this article, I was able to speak with a number of antique bottle auctioneers. Most seem to have a generally positive view about bottle provenance and it can be noticed in their auction catalog descriptions. For example, the green CHANDLER'S bottle photo is from an American Bottle Auction catalog and supplied by Jeff Wichmann, who says that he tries to cite previous owners whenever possible.

93. Pattern Molded Bottle, 24 ribs swirled to the right, Midwest America, 1815-1830. Club form, brilliant medium sapphire blue, applied round collared mouth - pontil scar, ht. 7 5/8 inches; (very light exterior high point wear). Similar to MW color plate V, #3. A rare and most desirable bottle which has been treasured by many noted collectors. Fine condition. Ex George S. McKearin collection, ex Arthur Barrus collection, ex Norman C. Heckler collection, ex Bill Pollard collection, Dr. Charles and Jane April collection. \$6,000-12,000



The blue bottle is a scan I took from a Norman C. Heckler & Company auction catalog. Its description recounts the many previous owners of the bottle. Except for his live bottle sales, Norman also emphasizes bottle provenance, which he characterizes as "terribly important and critical."

John Pastor, of American Glass Gallery and publisher of Antique Bottle & Glass Collector magazine, confirmed that it is important to know the provenance in an important collection. I agree and though I do not have an important collection, I have often noticed that in auctions and bottle sale listings of lower priced bottles, provenance is often missing. Perhaps the seller believed it was not worth doing or no one would be interested.

often must reject reproductions from unknowing clients.

Bottle provenance should begin or continue with the acquisition of a bottle. Where a bottle is found can be important. When a



This is a mystery flask that I bought in a thrift store. Is it an old flask from the 1800s, or is it a reproduction? If I purchase a similar bottle from a reputable bottle auctioneer or dealer, I would have little need to worry because they have the experience and knowledge to identify and sort out issues like authenticity, condition, and rarity. eBay, however, does not authenticate a listing and many bottle listings on eBay are posted by amateurs. As an eBay buyer, you must be able to authenticate your purchase. If dissatisfied, the seller may or may not set things right. On the other hand, a reputable auctioneer would routinely search for repairs and hidden damage. The bottle looked like a reproduction to me but I bought it anyway due to its low price. Though most collectors can recognize a reproduction, a sticker from a reputable dealer or auctioneer can instill confidence into a prospective buyer. Both Jeff Wichmann of American Bottle Auctions and Norman Heckler of Heckler Auctions say that they commonly have to reject reproductions found in lots submitted for auction.

bottle is dug, found, or recovered, note taking can begin at that time. Sadly, in these situations, there is also lost provenance. Long ago, when the bottle was discarded, previous ownership and use history likely was lost. Sometimes evidence from the bottle will help. For example, if no wear marks are found on the base, and if it is found in a large landfill, the bottle would likely have been used once by an unknown person and then thrown away. If found in a privy or in a wall cavity of a house, the bottle would likely have belonged to the owner of the property, his family, or his employees. If heavy wear marks are found on the base of the bottle, it would have repeatedly served as a valued utility bottle. Wear marks on colorful figural bottles may be common because they were too pretty to throw away or been on display in collections for a long time. Perhaps wear marks exist on a medicine or wine bottle because it was reused for storage of homemade whiskey or wine, pharmacy use, or may have had use in the kitchen or the barn. A soda, beer, or mineral water bottle would have been reused many times as it went back to the company to be refilled. A typical antique bottle would not usually acquire any wear marks with its normal intended first use in the house and, once emptied, would often pass to another owner for reuse and perhaps a rougher life. If we start at the very beginning, more lost provenance would include a typical bottle being produced by the glasshouse, sold to the product manufacturer who filled it, and then the bottle would be sold to a distributor

who sold it to a store who sold it to the customer. This lost provenance adds to a bottle's mystery.



It was a happy day for me when at an estate sale I saw this mint pontiled, blueish, JOHN WINSLOW... bottle. I needed no provenance, bottle description, trusted seller, or pricing guide for me to realize it was a genuine antique bottle. Its price was only \$4 and I began its provenance then and there. I just wished that the seller could have offered some more information about the bottle to add to its provenance.

Though some doubt it, the future of antique bottle provenance should be positive as bottle prices increase. If a buyer is paying thousands of dollars for a bottle and the seller can provide evidence of previous ownership going back for years, then more buyer satisfaction and interest is generated. Even lesser-known collections will become more involved with provenance but at present it is with the higher end bottles that provenance really makes a difference. The lower end bottles are numerous and not often thought of as candidates for the process. As times change, provenance may someday be important mainly because collectors just want to be part of its process and be known and remembered because of it. As bottle collecting becomes more sophisticated, provenance would become more important due to personal choice. Collector satisfaction is increased by knowing who the previous owners were. There is, however, a limit to the value of bottle provenance because of the relative ease at which antique bottles are recognized as genuine. In contrast, provenance in art collecting is essential because paintings can be offered for sale for millions of dollars yet be expertly faked. A solid trail of ownership records, restoration history, photographs, news stories, and auction history must be present before any seller will receive top dollar for an important painting. Although provenance may be important to bottle collectors, auctioneers are using it to bring higher prices to sellers and more knowledge and satisfaction to buyers. By increasing his services to both buyer and seller, the auctioneer demonstrates his worth to the bottle collector.



I was very happy to purchase this bottle twice. In March of 1979, Murray Yanofsky first sold this bottle to me. Then in 2002 I sold it and many other bottles to raise cash. Over the years, I very much regretted selling the bottles. However, in August 2006 I saw a familiar looking bottle on eBay with my bottle sticker on it. I was able to buy back the bottle and it now has a great story behind it. For me, a bottle couldn't have better provenance than this.

