



Permissions Permissions but *Nowhere* to Dig!

by Jeff Mihalik

Seems like it's been way too long since I wrote a digging article. Truth be told, it was hard going in 2018. I did have a couple better digs (which I will get to shortly) but a majority of the digs in 2018 just didn't pan out very well. We had everything thrown at us. Dug pits that were too new. Dug pits that were the right age, but not a lot of bottles thrown in. We dug some great ancient pits that had all the good signs like

1. They were not dug before (that's the first hurdle)
2. The pit had a nice layer of trash on the way down like feather edge pottery shards, shoes, bones
3. Didn't have a bunch of bricks or other debris that hindered digging
4. Were wet but not sloppy wet or water filled

But, again, these pits just either didn't have any bottles (which happened more than once) or only had broken shards of what would have been great bottles (1830s-40 ales, swirl flip, colored sodas, marked flasks, etc.).

On one of the better digs in 2018, I had to start the digging by myself. Thaddeus had some repairs to the roof of his historical home to take care of, but I wanted to take advantage of the cooler temperature in the morning that day (the temperature got into the 90s that day, so 76 in the morning felt cool). After digging for about an hour, I was 3 feet down and hit a large boulder. It took me about 30 minutes to dig around it, get it to start breaking free, and to flip it over several times until I got it to the pit edge then heave it out. It was for sure probably right at my limit. Once the boulder was removed, I could finally start to open the hole up. Within a couple minutes (and still just a little over 3 feet down) a dirt covered bottle falls out the wall and hits into some small rocks



Stoneware beer bottle just peaking out



Fragments of early ancient bottles, would be highly desirable finds



A super nice Butlers Ink from Cincinatti

that were in the pit. I wasn't worried as being so high up it probably was going to be some junk bottle. But when I picked it up, I see it's a soda; then cleaning it off, I see the name and know it's pre-Civil War and pontiled! Within a minute I see several other bottle bases and start digging them out. I get a broken Piker, then a large bottle which turns out to be a very desirable iron pontil medicine (Bretlingers Alternative) mostly undamaged (did have a stress crack in the neck area, which appears to be in making as another example I know of has the same damage in the same location).

Then I see some of a stoneware base and pull that out: it's a pre-statehood beer (Pharr & Winterholler) in great shape. By this time, I've been digging for 3 hours and maybe 4 feet down. Thaddeus finally makes it over and immediately we find another stoneware beer (so we each got one). A couple common bottles come out then nothing.

I probe the hole and it goes another 5 feet so Thad and I start to open it up some (the overburden was all rock and brick). We made it down to the bottom in one small spot and hit another trash layer, but this one was very ancient! The first couple shards were a Flora Temple in color, a piece of a Fairview Glass Works flask, and half of a BP&B half pint scroll. By now I had been digging for over 6 hours and had to get back home to take care of some commitments. Given how big the pit was and all the overburden, not to mention it was over 90 degrees by now, we decided to fill it in and come back. Ouch. Yeah, it's still bugging me now as we are still waiting to get back to that one. When I didn't have any digs going on, I would even catch up with some other local diggers to check them out. Here's John Leonard with a bucket full of you know what! And again with a nice open pontil Butler Ink from Cincy.

So what about all these permissions with nowhere to dig? Well, first off, I have permissions in 4 states and to top that off I have located privies in all 4 states. But (yes there is always a but) in one state the privy is so large that it will take at least 3, if not 4, people to dig, and to coordinate all the people with the schedule of the property owner just hasn't worked out yet (the privy is on a 1830 mansion in a town in Kentucky). So that hasn't worked out YET! (FYI, I have another great permission in the area behind another mansion but haven't located that privy yet.)

In Ohio, we found several privies and dug one of them. It was full of water starting at the 4-foot level. After bailing out water forever (6 garbage cans full), we realized that an old leach bed had



A nice centinential clay pipe with the Liberty Bell on it

encroached into one side of the pit and was full of water (at least it was clean). We did find several 1870's era Ayers and 1 pontil sided puff (maybe an ink) but never could get the water down so we had to fill it in. We found 3 other features in the two yards next door, but one had water to the top (and was at least 7 feet deep). The other feature had water at the 4-foot level when we tried to dig it, so had to fill it in. Just way to much water right now in this town to dig. Locally here in Pennsylvania, I have another great permission at a former mansion. A neighbor, who is friends with the landowner, showed me a likely spot for the privy and, wham, we believe we found a 4-seater! The owner is very old but never home (guess she likes going out every day to do errands and get out of the house). So, after 5 attempts at getting final permission (the neighbors who I know already have a verbal from her that it's cool to dig, but she wanted to meet me), I'm still waiting on the green light for that dig.

In West Virginia, I probed out 3 nice pits behind a large mansion and I do know the owners very well. However, they lease it out and don't want to hassle the current tenant. I'm slowly working on lining that one up. So, as you can see, I have permission and more permission, know where a bunch of privies are, but for one reason or the other, just can't dig them at this time. But you bet I'll give an update in 2019 on how these all pan out. So for now (January 2019 as I write), digging locally in the shallow privies here, I've been able to stay busy, but mostly finding 1900 stuff. I did get a cobalt ink, a teal and a San Cura from Titusville Pa, and about 60 common clear bottles. Oh yeah, how about this Bicentennial pipe with eagle, liberty bell and shield on reverse dug locally (repair by Jim Healy). So that's what I have so far this year to keep me going. In addition, I've been meeting a lot of very nice people, providing historic maps to a lot of the owners where I have been digging, and making plans to meet more folks in some prime historic towns in the coming months. Keep on keeping on!



A very desirable iron pontil medicine Bretlingers Alterative

