

HILTON HEAD ISLAND

A Connecticut Yankee from Norwich moved south at the height of the Civil War, settling on Hilton Head Island off the South Carolina coast where he opened a dry goods store about 1862.

He had plenty of potential customers, most of them friendly because at the time the island was occupied by 13,000 Union troops whose numbers eventually increased to 40,000.

Once Boasted of Yankee-Made Soda Waters

By David Kyle Rakes

Embossed
"John Knechtle
Hilton Head"
soda water bottle



Union soldiers breaking bread and enjoying coffee.
Notice the bugle and cymbals.

Union soldiers at Coosaw Ferry. The battleground of January 1,
1862 is in the distance. Port Royal Island, South Carolina, circa 1862

Charles William Dennis may have been among the several sutlers who arrived to set up shop on the island and provide troops with much-needed sundries and supplies. One could purchase nearly everything at C.W. Dennis & Co. at No. 4 Sutlers Row: clothing, boots and shoes, playing cards, tobacco, butter, and cheese. Even metallic coffins. The latter was much in demand because they were air-tight so victims' bodies would not decompose before reaching cemeteries back home. They also were equipped with transparent "viewing plates" so grieving relatives could take one last look at the faces of beloved ones before burial.

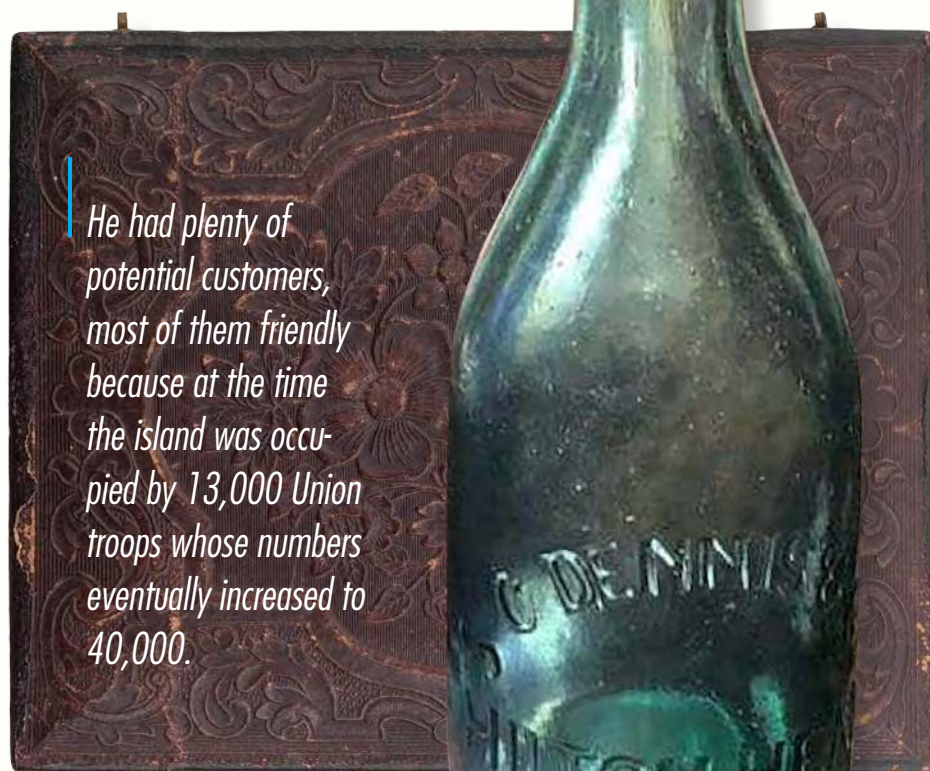
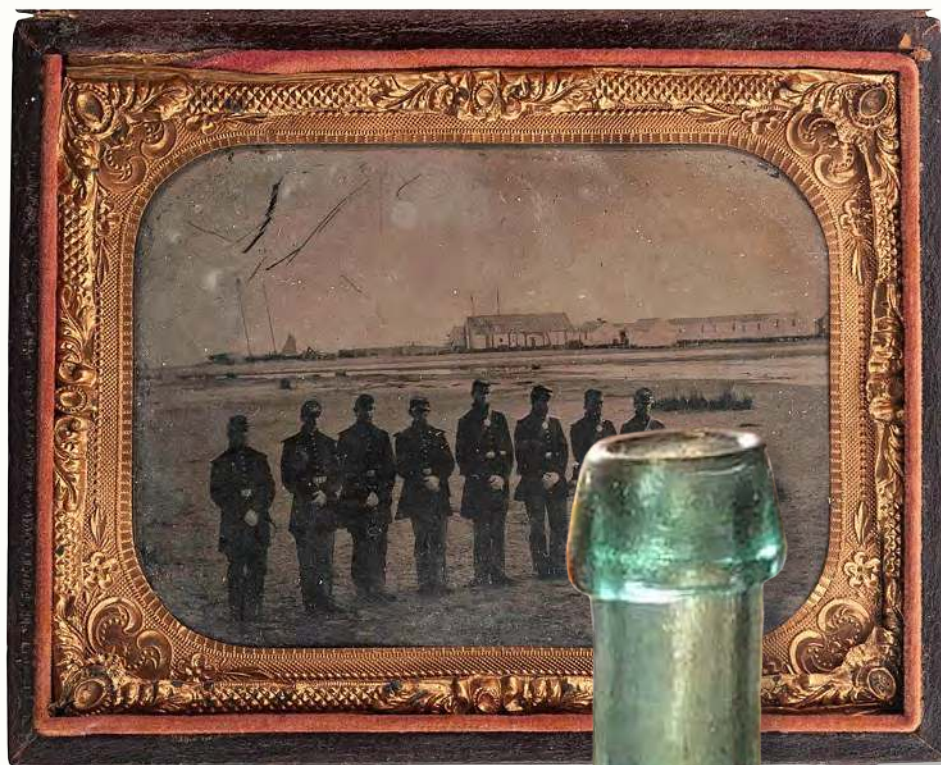
The influx of federal troops also caused a rise in the population of Port Royal, the name given to Hilton Head Island only during the occupation. The city boasted of a post office, two weekly newspapers, four hotels, numerous saloons, a tattoo parlor, theater, bakery, butcher shop, and dry goods stores.

A later business address for Dennis was No. 5 Merchants Row, according to some of his newspaper advertisements. Dennis has a co-partnership with N. S. English and J. G. Richardson until the partnership ended in 1863. There also was an ice cream shop located inside his business. Operated by B. F. Skinner, "the very best of cream by the plate, quart or gallon (is) always on hand."

There also was a soda water manufacturing apparatus in his store, but this Dennis was not the bottler. That position was occupied by his first cousin Samuel C. Dennis, of Norwich, Conn. who may have been a soda water bottler up North. He may have been lured South by his cousin whose own business was thriving and offered a great opportunity for a profitable venture to his relative.

In this writer's opinion, there is the possibility of a different scenario: Samuel may have stayed in Norwich where he owned and operated S. C. Dennis & Co., a dry goods store located at the corner of Main and Union streets. While there, he could have purchased bottles manufactured by one of the many New England glasshouses in existence at the time and shipped them by steamer to cousin Charles on Hilton Head. He also may have shipped dry goods and other products available only in the North during the war.

Quarter plate tintype depicting eight Union soldiers in uniform standing in a row on a beach. Their kepis appear to have crossed cannons and possibly a number 3, tentatively identifying the men to the 3rd Rhode Island Heavy Artillery which were stationed at Hilton Head Island.



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Embossed
"S. C. Dennis & Co.
Hilton Head S. C."
soda water bottle

Be that as it may, Samuel's soda was sold in 7 ¾ inch high bottles in a light teal blue color and embossed S. C. DENNIS & CO. HILTON HEAD S.C. The bottles are considered extremely rare because less than a dozen are known.

When the war ended in 1865, Charles Dennis, perhaps feeling homesick, put the business up for sale with the value of the goods listed at \$150,000. At the same time, he sold a 330-acre plantation located along the Broad River on the Beaufort County mainland. In 1866, Charles headed home from Hilton Head aboard the steamboat *Granada*, wound up in New York where his father had settled, and remained there until his death on April 15, 1911, in Kings Ferry, New York.

The bottler, Samuel C. Dennis, continued running his Norwich store until 1872. He died June 4, 1874, in New London and is buried, alongside his wife Elizabeth Morgan Dennis, in the Cedar Grove Cemetery in New London, Conn.

A half-brother of Charles, George H. Dennis may have operated a saloon and billiards parlor on Hilton Head during the Union occupation. He advertised three billiard tables for sale during the time Charles was selling his store. Sadly, George never returned home, reported to have been lost at sea on May 8, 1867.



Yankee soda bottler John Knechtle (pronounced Nettle) of Swiss ancestry left his family in New York City to try his luck on the island. Knechtle had joined the Union war effort with a permit authorized by Union General Milton Smith Littlefield (1830-1899) to open a business selling soda water, ice cream, and syrups. His bottles came in two variations (pictured to the left), each cobalt blue: 7 ¼ inches high with blob tops. One was embossed

JOHN KNECHTLE HILTON HEAD. The other was embossed JOHN KNECHTLE HILTON HEAD S.C.

After the war, the large-scale military occupation ceased: most troops returned to their northern homes. The island population dropped to a few thousand people and the island name changed back to Hilton Head. So Knechtle moved his soda water business some ten miles inland to the city of Beaufort. Both the 1870 and 1880 *Federal Censuses* show that John was working as a soda water manufacturer and perhaps he was selling ice cream, too.

In 1895, Knechtle sold out and moved to Bartow, Polk County, Florida as a soda water manufacturer. He was 76 years old. Sanborn maps show his business was on the corner of Main Street and Florida Avenue. He is also listed as the owner of an ice cream parlor on the corner of Main Street and Wilson Avenue but, by 1901, only the soda water business is listed. Unfortunately, no bottles from his establishment have ever been found.

Oddly, during that time, John's wife, Margaret, claims to be a

widow living with daughter Maggie in Brooklyn, New York. The latter was working in a shoe-fitting store. Since her husband was still among the living, the scenario suggests some friction between the couple existed. After Margaret died on January 15, 1901, John returned to live with daughter Maggie and her husband, Richard Botyer, a bakery foreman. John died on March 3, 1912 and was buried alongside his wife, Margaret, in Brooklyn's Greenwood Cemetery.

POSTSCRIPT: By 1970, Hilton Head Island had become a tourist attraction and resort known for its golf and its fishing. Bottle collector, Bobby Hinely, who now lives in Newnan, Georgia, was on the island with his mother who operated a shop on the southern end of the island. One day, Bobby heard about someone finding soda bottles on the then-undeveloped northern end. Piqued by the report, Bobby dug in the marshes for eight years, uncovering hundreds of bottles, but only two cobalt blue John Knechtles and four S. C. Dennises. There may be more of those sodas buried beneath the muck, but that area is now off-limits and a charge of trespassing awaits those foolish enough to dig there.

SOURCES:

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John Knechtle, 1895 and 1901 Sanborn Maps of Bartow, Fla.

John Knechtle, 1905 and 1910 Federal Census, N.Y.

John Knechtle death record, 1912, Certificate Number 4633.

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Bottle images: Jamie Westendorf, David Kyle Rakes and the Internet

