

# The COVID Bottles of 2020

## Part 2

*By John Savastio*

*We left off last issue as John was digging on September 11, 2020. He had just found a large teal-colored bottle, a dazzling Stafford's Ink. In the interest of learning more about Stafford's, the following summary from Baybottles.com continues...*

### Yes, My Master

"After the purchase, the NYC directories list Stafford as a "stationer," located at 42 Cedar St. (1859-60) and later as "ink" at 84 Cedar St. (1860-61). Advertisements began to appear at this time for "Stafford's Combined Writing and Copying Fluid" and "Stafford's Perfumed Violet Ink." In early 1870, the business moved to 218 Pearl Street, where it remained until 1886, when he built a factory at 601 – 609 Washington Street. Per a feature in the 1888 *American Stationer*, 'It is a plain brick structure, five stories high, 75 feet wide and 80 feet deep. Including the basement there are six floors, all of which are used in the manufacture of Stafford's inks and Stickwell's mucilage. The establishment is fitted with the best machinery and appliances for turning out perfect and uniform goods.'"

"After Samuel Spencer Stafford's death in 1895, his son, William A.H. Stafford, took over leadership of the company (William had joined the business in 1872 at the age

of 16). The company incorporated in New York in 1903 with capital of \$250,000. Following William A. H. Stafford's death in January of 1911, his son, William S Stafford, assumed the presidency."

"The company continued to grow through the 1920s, but sales eventually declined. They're still listed at their long-time location (Office: 622 Greenwich and Factory: 609 Washington) in the 1960 Manhattan telephone directory. Stafford's was acquired by the R.T. French Company in the late 1970s."

While Stafford's story of building an ink empire is interesting, I have not been able to find a chronological history of Stafford's bottles. Where are the older 1860s and 1880s bottles? I don't recall ever seeing a Stafford's ink bottle that dates before 1880, nor are there any to be found online. Were the early bottles all unembossed? If so, there should still be labeled Stafford's ink bottles from this timeframe available. Any help solving this mystery will be appreciated.



**Figure 11:** A clean Stafford's master ink with the sun accentuating its lovely teal color.

### 40 Proof Shampoo

The very next day after finding the Stafford's master ink, in the very same hole, my good fortune continued. I had found a scarce local rectangular whiskey, and an Ayer's Cherry Pectoral, when around mid-afternoon, at close to eight feet down, the backside of a hair bottle revealed itself. I knew it was a hair bottle by its classic corset style design, and I was especially intrigued by its pure, extraordinary deep emerald color. Resisting my natural avaricious instincts that told me to go after the bottle like a construction worker with a jackhammer, the little angel over my shoulder instead prevailed upon me to play it safe. Thus, I very slowly and gingerly chipped it out as if it was a delicate ancient Egyptian artifact. When the bottle was finally released from its resting place of over 100 years, and I could see that it was indeed complete, my next obsessive thought was that it had to be embossed (as these cool hair bottles are too often blanks). And thus, when it was



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

finally in my hands, I rejoiced as I read for the first time the distinctive angled embossing: “RIKER / NEW YORK.!” (See Figure 12).

*Hair Raising Stories*, by Don Fadely, provides some background on Riker and his products: “William B. Riker was a patent Medicine Manufacturer in New York City starting around 1855. His business was at 353 Sixth Ave. from 1855 through 1868. His business was still active into the 20th century as Wm. B. Riker & Son. According to Devner, he was selling a hair preparation called “Riker’s Septone” at least as early as 1878 and at least as late as 1907. It was a product “for destroying dandruff germs.” Wm. B. Riker (or his sons) probably also sold “Riker’s American Hair Restorer.” He also marketed a product called “Riker’s American Face Powder.” William B. Riker & Son Company registered a Trademark for a Hair Dressing and a Dandruff Remover in 1907.”

I was also able to find a picture of a beautifully labeled version of my diminutive 4 and ½ inch bottle that reads as follows: “RIKER’S / SEPTONE / SOAP / 20% ALCOHOL / LIQUID GREEN SOAP / A SHAMPOO / 2 ¾ Fld. Ozs. / RIKER LABORATORIES, INC. / DISTRIBUTORS. / NEW YORK BOSTON.” (See Figure 13).

Ah, so now I know my bottle is the Septone Shampoo product for destroying dandruff germs, and it’s 20 percent alcohol. I guess the booze either killed the dandruff germs or got them really hammered!

## Peacock Blue

It was a gray overcast and calm day in the upper 50s in mid-October. The geese were honking loudly, which, perhaps

**Figure 12:** Ooh nice - the little emerald hair bottle is embossed!

**Figure 13:** An example of a fully labeled Riker’s Septone Shampoo telling us it’s 40 proof!

**Figure 14:** Straight on view accentuating the Riker’s corset shape.



counterintuitively, I find soothing. It was late morning, and I was still digging my way down when at around five feet deep a bottle with a distinctive hair tonic form and stunning teal blue color suddenly appeared in the bottom of my hole. As it lay there in the bottom of my pit, I recognized the shape and color instantly. The only question was whether it was an Ayer's Hair Vigor or a Hall's Hair Renewer. Within a zeptosecond it was in my hands and I read the embossing aloud: "AYER'S" / "HAIR VIGOR!" (see **Figure 15**). I was incredulous of my good fortune. I immediately got down on my hands and knees — no, not to pray — but to carefully sift through the dirt in a desperate attempt to find the coveted delicate blue glass stopper that goes with this bottle. Unfortunately, no luck with that. If anyone has a spare one, please PM me on Facebook.

Don Fadely's *Hair Raising Stories* tells us that, "In 1838 at the age of 20, James Cook Ayer started working as a clerk at Jacob Robbin's Apothecary Shop in Ledyard, Conn. He worked there for three years, learning the trade and studying chemistry as well. During this time, he studied the material prescribed by the Harvard College curriculum. He also studied medicine under Dr. Samuel L. Dana of Lowell, Mass. He apparently became so familiar with pharmaceutical chemistry and medicine that later the University of Pennsylvania awarded him with a "Doctor of Medicine" degree.

"In 1841, with the help of his uncle (James Cook), he bought the Robbin's Drug store and began to sell his own home remedies. He was very successful with his line of family remedies and paid off the store in three years. He eventually became a very rich man, owning his own factories as well as diversified investments such as sawmills in Florida and iron mines in Michigan.

**Figure 15:** Ah, it's an Ayer's Hair Vigor. First one dug in 50 years of excavating.

**Figure 16:** The cleaned Ayer's showing off its peacock blue color.



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 17: Nine feet deep in an ash dump on my last dig of 2021.

Figure 18: An attractive little teapot with Albany City Hall transfer headed for the knick-knack shelf.



Figure 18

“In the early years of its sale, Ayer’s Hair Vigor was in direct competition with Hall’s Hair Renewer. They were not in competition long though, because Ayer bought out Hall in 1870. Note that Ayer’s Hair Vigor and Hall’s Hair Renewer were very similar to each other. Early bottles for both products were oval, embossed only on the base, with tight wrappers around the entire bottles.”

Ah, but all that was to change dramatically. The 1908 *Ayer’s Almanac* made the following exciting announcement about the Hair Vigor: “The new bottle is of the finest and best flint glass, of a beautiful peacock-blue color. It is fitted with a practical and most unique patent shaker. The whole forms a decided ornament to any dressing table.”

In *A Century of Cures; Dr. A. C. Ayer & Co, Lowell, Mass, USA, A reference Guide* by Cliff and Linda Hoyt, the authors tell us the new teal Hair Vigor bottle was made from 1907 to 1913. From 1914 to 1930, the same shape and size bottle was machine made, and the color went to cobalt blue. However, the ABM cobalt Hair Vigors come in two variants, embossed and unembossed. Many of these cobalt blue bottles had their seams obliterated

during the manufacturing process and can be recognized primarily by the Owens bottle machine circle on the base.

This is an example of the newer bottle, with its classic Victorian hair bottle shape and extraordinary color, far exceeding its plain, aqua, base embossed predecessor in appeal to collectors (at least in my opinion). I’m thrilled with the bottle and hope to someday come across an example of its “most unique patent shaker” that I can crown it with.

## Finishing the Year in Style

I knew that Saturday, December 12, 2020 would be my last dig of the year. I have dug through winters in upstate New York before, but it means clearing off snow and ice, then chopping through up to two feet of rock-hard frozen ground with a pick-axe. That was fine in my 20s and 30s but at nearly 60 it is no longer in the cards for me. To cinch the deal, two feet of snow was forecast for later in the week (and we ended up getting every inch of it).

As this story illustrates, it had been a very productive year for this bottle digger, with several exceptional finds going on display in my bottle room. Thus, I was hopeful that this, my final, conclusive digging day of 2020, the year of the pandemic, would be a good one. It was day two for me in an excavation I had started the week before at an out-of-town location, tipped off by a friend. I was on my way down to the nine feet deep mark (see Figure 17), which is about as deep as I go by myself and still throw ash out of the pit. I had found a decent one-gallon cream-colored 1900s-era style jug in nice condition, but with no transfer or script that would set it apart. As I dug into the virgin ash sidewalls, starting from the bottom, and working my way up, I found a nice tiny teapot (see Figure 18) with Albany City Hall colorfully illustrated on it. That was going to look great on my knick knack shelf. Aside from that, I was going long spells without finding anything significant.



It was late in the day. The backfill resulting from my chipping away at the sides of the hole had reduced its depth to about six feet. I noted the nip in the air with each misty cloud of breath I exhaled in the setting sunlight. There was a vexing chunk of sheet metal on the side of the hole near my feet that I tripped over more than once, and it was time to get rid of the damn thing. Crouching down and grabbing it with both rawhide glove protected hands, and perhaps with a touch of rage as well, I used my leg strength to rip it out as I stood up. After tossing the accursed scrap to the side, I looked downwards where the flashing had been just a moment earlier and gasped in astonishment when I saw a small portion of a stoneware jug or crock exposed with blue slip block lettering. After patting myself to make sure this was not a dream, I took a picture (see **Figure 19**), and started video recording the dramatic event. Of course, the thought running through my mind was, "Please, please be complete!" As any digger can attest to, more often than not, big stoneware relics like this are typically not whole. However, as I carefully exposed more of the object, I soon discovered that the top was there. This was a very encouraging sign, and it also told me it was a jug, and not a crock (which was cool as I prefer jugs). The other indication that the jug might be complete was that it was really stuck in there, and even with well over half of it exposed, I still could not free it from the crunchy ash. Thus, I continued to carefully chip away at the olden coal cinders around it, until it gave way to gravity and gently fell two inches to the bottom of the pit. I immediately grabbed it and turned it around. The handle was there, and I saw no damage of any kind! Glorious! Next to read the blue block lettering: "J. DONOHUE" in an arch, with "WATERFORD, N.Y." in a straight-line underneath it (see **Figure 20**). There was also a large number 1 outlined at the top. Wow – I'd never seen it or heard of it, and it was local! I was overcome with joy and very, very grateful. As the sun was



**Figure 19**



**Figure 20**

setting, at the very end of my very last day digging in 2020, I quietly and solemnly celebrated this moment, my most exciting discovery of the entire year.

Early in the new year, at our annual bottle club's annual holiday party, the club's stoneware expert, Art Dell, took a look at my find. After assessing the artifact and its design (particularly the top), he felt that while the Fort Edward Pottery was a possibility, he was confident its manufacture could be attributed to the prolific West Troy Pottery, and its age to the 1870s to 1890s. And while they were

**Figure 19:** The annoying sheet metal was ripped away to reveal this stunning sight.

**Figure 20:** The day's dug jugs side by side.

scarce, he had seen a few, and in different sizes. I was happy to know a little more about this magnificent new piece in my collection. However, no one at the meeting, nor anyone I contacted through social media sites dedicated to stoneware, nor any website, could tell me anything about who P. Donohue was. I contacted the Waterford Historical Museum, who took the time to research their archives, and they had nothing.



Finally, after very extensive research on Ancestry.com, I found entries in the 1887 to 1895 Troy, N.Y. city directories for a Philip Donohue, wholesale liquor dealer, in Waterford, N.Y. The 1894 entry, typical of those from the other years, reads as follows: “Donohue, Philip, wholesale liquors, 74 and 76 Broad, Waterford, boards Morgan House, do.” While it’s possible Philip was also in business earlier and/or later than 1887 to 1895, I will go with the evidence I have at this time and assume my jug is from this timeframe. Given its appearance, I had thought the jug was older, but I am not an expert in stoneware. It’s possible Philip ordered the jugs in the first year or two he was in operation and was able to continue business with this inventory, thanks to customers who returned their jugs time and again for refills. Given the brevity of the directory entries, the many competitors he had in the wholesale liquor business, and the scarcity of jugs with his name emblazoned on them, I’m also concluding Philip never hit the big time.

He did hang on for at least nine years though, and I, as collector of historical glass and stoneware containers, am very grateful to him for his entrepreneurial spirit and perseverance. And I am thrilled to be the last person, for now, in the chain of events, and chain of ownership, that led to this jug eventually coming into my possession. It all started with Philip Donohue’s dream to start his own business and having the drive and wherewithal to make it happen. It also includes the West Troy Pottery and the craftsmen there who threw the jug on the wheel, glazed it, stenciled it, then fired it in a hellishly hot coal or wood fired kiln, where another worker shoveled in salt that vaporized and coated it in a beautiful shiny shellac. Once in Philip’s possession, the jug, full of his fine whiskey, would have been distributed to pubs and taverns and regularly returned for refill at Donohue’s establishment on Broad Street in Waterford. Finally, perhaps sometime after Philip went out of the business,

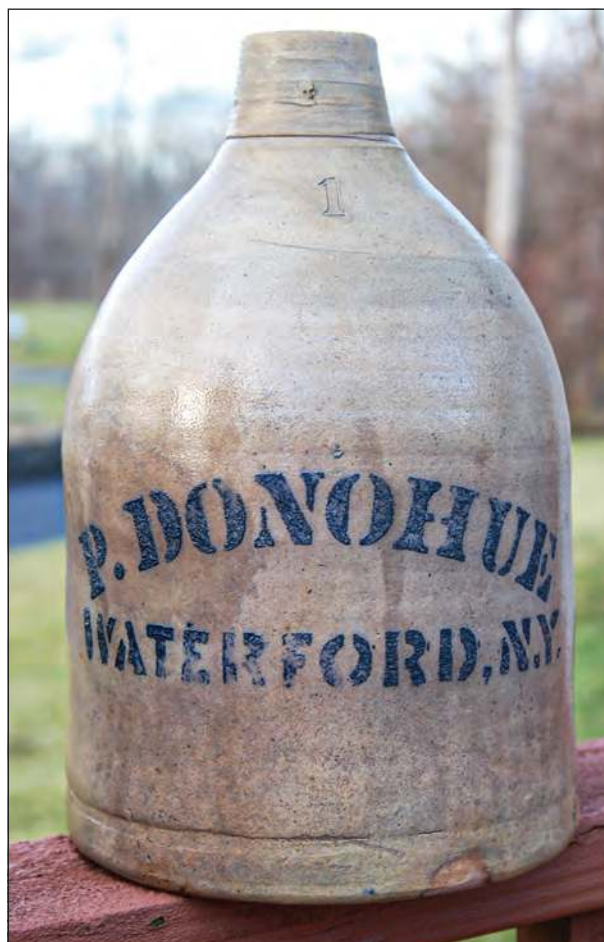
and the jug no longer had purpose, the penultimate owner carefully placed it in the ash bin. The garbage men of the day would have hauled it off to the city’s landfill where perhaps the ash surrounding the jug in the container protected it just enough when it was dumped to prevent any harm. Lastly, a piece of sheet metal was serendipitously laid down over it that shielded it from any subsequent damage, setting it up for my discovery over 100 years later. It is ruminations like these that bring our hobby to life for me.

## Conclusion

COVID made 2020 a tragic year and continues to do so into 2021. But thankfully, as I hope this story has illustrated, we bottle diggers have a fantastic hobby. It allowed us a wonderful escape from all the masking and other constraints put upon our everyday lives, and the opportunity to temporarily evade the heartbreak and sadness that affected so many.

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**Figure 21:** The virtually pristine P. DONOHUE jug glowing in the sun.