



An early image of
the author digging
for bottles and
other treasures.



The Story of One Salve Jar

Based on a true story, The One Salve Jar is an excerpt from my book, The Field Guide to American Trash. It is my hope that this book introduces new diggers and divers to the great hobby of bottle collecting, and reinvigorates some who have given up, thinking there's not still great treasure to be found out there. There are pontiled bottles still in dumps, privies, and rivers just waiting for you!

By Bram Hepburn

In 1855, along a small river in Marston, New Hampshire, a family by the name of Foster had a log cabin-type “factory” where they manufactured some of the first American-made glass bottles by hand. They would toil away, blowing molten glass into cast iron molds, and use pontil rods and fine glassworking tools to create utilitarian and medicinal bottles for their customers. The Foster family was well-known for their bottle-making business, but they could never have known that each bottle they were making would be worth hundreds of dollars to collectors of Stoddard bottles a century and a half later!

One of these jars created there in Stoddard, New Hampshire, was part of an order from a Boston customer. The jar was packed into a wooden crate along with dozens of other empty jars, loaded into a horse-drawn wagon, and arrived days later at an apothecary supply store in Boston.

At the Boston apothecary, a doctor proprietor had a small vat of a waxy yellow salve made of chickweed and chamomile. It was his secret recipe, and he swore by the results.

The jar, along with the others, was carefully filled with the salve, sealed with a cork, and then topped with wax. Next, an impressive-looking paper label was wrapped around and pasted to the jar. Then the jar was set out with the rest of the jars, in an open warehouse with dark shelves that were stocked with other medicinal supplies.

Meanwhile, Dr. Benjamin Greene of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, had taken the two-day trip by horse and buggy down from the New Hampshire seacoast to Boston, to stock up on supplies for his drugstore back north.

Once in Boston, he'd load up his wagon with what he needed, including a dozen jars of salve, in the jars that were hand-blown in the glasshouse up in Stoddard, New Hampshire.

When Dr. Green arrived back home in Portsmouth a few days later, he told his stockboy to unload the wagon, and stock up the shelves with the new inventory. The filled salve jars then sat on the maple-top counter at the front of the store, in neat little rows.

At about that same moment, behind a two-story barn over in Exeter, about ten miles from Portsmouth, a white-bearded farmer was repairing a loose horseshoe on his plow horse. In haste, he whacked the side of his thumb, and let out a holler. It was mid-July, and there was no ice to be found anywhere (unless he wanted to wait fifty years).



A look at the final edit of the book cover.

The homestead was newly built, and there were no first aid supplies to speak of in the kitchen. The farmer sat down on a stump behind the barn, deciding whether or not he could continue plowing the field. He put in another hour, but that was all he could stand. He watered the horse, and went into the shade of his farmhouse, and fell asleep as the sun set, despite his throbbing thumb.

In the morning he decided to ride his horse over to Portsmouth for supplies, including something for his swollen and

cut thumb. He walked right into Dr. Green's pharmacy as soon as he got into town, and asked the doc for advice.

The farmer showed him his thumb and the doc gave him a jar of the medicinal salve, the one in the jar from Stoddard, New Hampshire, via Boston.

The farmer applied some salve right away, and got a bit of immediate relief. When he got back to Exeter, he added another dose. During the next few days, he wound up using the rest of the salve, and tossed the empty jar into the wooden trash barrel, just off the back of his porch.

He would usually empty that wooden trash barrel every Sunday morning on the way to church. He would load his wife and kids into the family horse carriage and lift the wooden trash barrel onto the back flat panel of the carriage. On the way down their dirt driveway, there was a spot at the corner of the property, where he would dump the week's trash over the edge of the rock wall, adding to a pile.

He practiced this same trash routine for about ten years, until the pile became unsightly, and they stopped. Instead, they began to haul the weekly family trash down to a village dumping area where it would be burned during the damp season.

That pile of trash behind the rock wall at the farmer's house stayed right there at the edge of his field, year after year. Leaves fell each autumn, and the discarded waste and tin cans in the pile began to rot and rust. The dump pile slowly, decade by decade, began to get shorter and compressed by gravity. It was gradually covered by six inches of a century of fallen leaves. Eventually you could barely tell that anything had ever been dumped there. Pretty much the only things that hadn't decomposed and disappeared were the glass bottles, including that little Stoddard-made salve jar.

Life in America moved on. Lincoln was assassinated. The Industrial Revolution, WWI, WWII, The Beatles, and 9/11 all

shook the world. But the little jar never moved an inch.

Then one morning, more than a century later, I'm in my apartment in Somerville, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. I had been a bottle collector and a bottle digger since I was a kid, but life had become too busy, and it had been some time since my last dig. I didn't really have time for a hobby.

But I laid in bed and realized I needed to get out of the city and go out to the country and go bottle digging, for old times' sake.

I drove up Route 95 towards Portsmouth, less than an hour away. I randomly took an exit marked Exeter, New Hampshire, and headed towards some open farmland. I saw an old abandoned farm at the edge of a field, with a rock wall leading into the woods.

At the spot where the wall entered the forest, along an old dirt path, I saw the remnants of some old buckets, and a few metal rings from old wooden barrels, sticking up out of the leaves. I began to dig with my potato rake, and started finding a great-looking batch of very old bottles, one after another.

After about twenty minutes, I reached my gloved hand down into the hole that I'd dug, and pulled up the most beautiful, twelve-sided, olive green, hand-blown salve jar you've ever seen!

It had been laying there waiting for me for 150 years, and the last person who touched it before me was a white-bearded farmer with a badly cut thumb.



The long-forgotten salve jar.