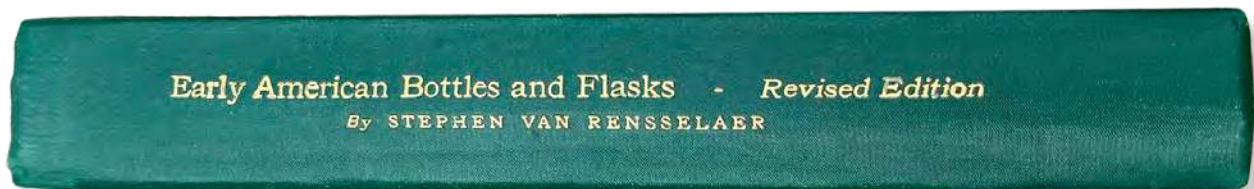


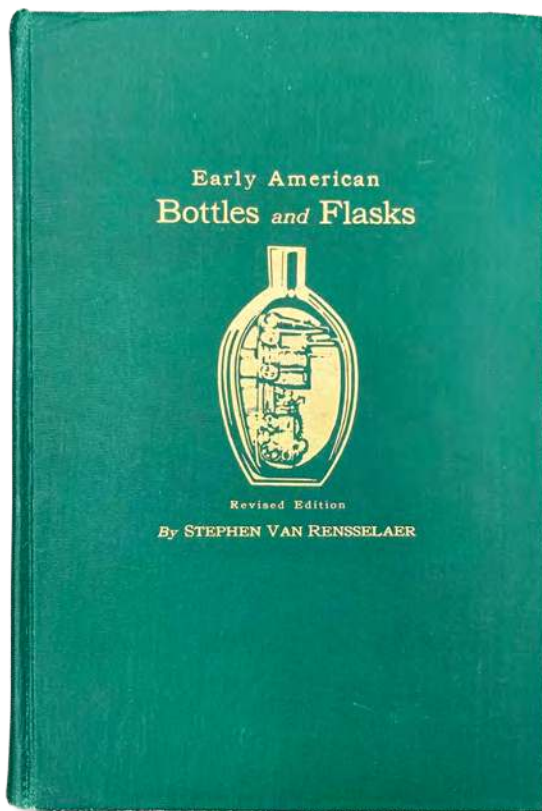
# Who was Stephen Van Rensselaer?

By Anthony Townsend

In July 1986, Dr. Cecil Munsey recommended to the FOHBC Board of Directors that the FOHBC provide an “Honor Roll” of people who have contributed significantly to the hobby of bottle collecting. One of the top three people noted at that time was Stephen Van Rensselaer.



[Fig 1] Early American Bottles and Flasks - Revised Edition by Stephen Van Rensselaer, 1926



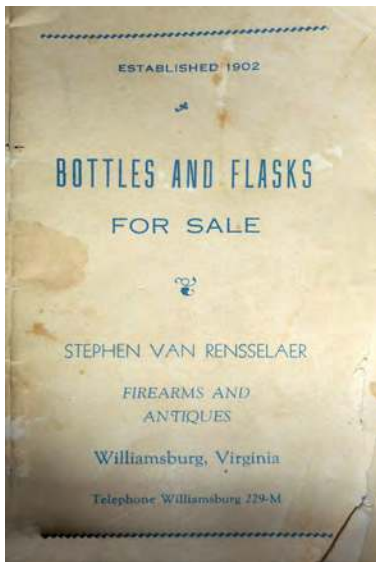
[Fig 1] Early American Bottles and Flasks - Revised Edition by Stephen Van Rensselaer. Published by Peterborough, NH, Transcript Printing Company, 1926. Black and white illustrations. 320 pages.

Stephen Van Rensselaer was one of the earliest individuals to collect and study historical bottles. His book *Early American Bottles and Flasks* was published in 1921 and was revised in 1926. [See Fig 1] By this time, Van Rensselaer was already an expert in early glass as he had likely been collecting and studying for quite some time. His research was nearly impeccable since he was able to interview former glassblowers, their wives, relatives, and others familiar with local history and tradition. I am sure he also acquired many bottle types, styles, and colors highly sought after in our hobby.

From Cecil Munsey’s research, we know Van Rensselaer owned most of Charles B. Gardner’s bottles, which is only half the story. Research has led me to find more information and further contributions to history as I have taken a deeper dive into Van Rensselaer’s life.

The Van Rensselaer’s, throughout history, were New England merchants during the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and Civil War. The family never lost the millions of dollars they made since the time he was born. Being an only son, he inherited it all. He must have been the Warren Buffet of his day! He enjoyed two things immensely—collecting firearms and collecting bottles, with firearms being his true passion. I do not think Stephen Van Rensselaer ever worked for a living. He had the most significant gun collection and bottle collection in the country.

What piqued my interest was an early bottle collection that was discovered in the Tidewater, Virginia area. This early collection contained many bitters and flasks in very unusual colors. The collection also included a booklet in some old papers with the cover reading “Established in 1902, Bottles and Flasks For Sale, Stephen Van Rensselaer, Firearms and Antiques, Williamsburg,



Virginia, Telephone Williamsburg 229-M.” [See Fig 2]

Apparently, Van Rensselaer once operated a bottle shop in Williamsburg, and I was shocked by this discovery. Still, there was some traceability between an extremely early intact bottle collection which had been purchased in Williamsburg.

Further research finds that Van Rensselaer’s gun and bottle shop building is still standing, having been

maintained and restored. This building is in Colonial Williamsburg near Christiana’s Tavern.

Another interesting thing I discovered is that the shop is located at the opposite corner from John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s summer home, which was occupied during the rebuilding of Colonial Williamsburg into the wonderful tourist attraction it has become today. It would stand to reason that these two millionaires would have known each other since their properties were only one block apart. Funds donated by the Rockefeller Foundation support the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

So, I called the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and Rockefeller Museum in New York several times.

I discovered that in the 1920s and early 1930s, representatives for Colonial Williamsburg bought over 500 items from Van Rensselaer for various Williamsburg museums. Included in this sale were 1700s seal bottles with famous English initials, such as King Carter, all British Governors, pistols, guns, and various other antique items shown in the Colonial Williamsburg Museum today. There are currently more than 600 rifles in the Capitol Building and the Powder Magazine. Could these items have been purchased by Rockefeller or one of his representatives through



[Fig 3] Lot 97. Double sided, octagonal advertising sign, for “Stephen Van Rensselaer, Fire Arms, Antiques,” American, 20th century, hardwood construction with all original paint and hardware, 35” h. by 35” w., slight age separation where the face boards are joined together, along with age cracking of black painted lettering.

Van Rensselaer since he had such an enormous collection?

In 2013, I attended the FOHBC National Antique Bottle Show in New Hampshire and was present at the Madness in Manchester Auction put on by Jim Hagenbuch of Glass Works Auctions. In the auction and the next to last item up for bid, was a two-sided wooden

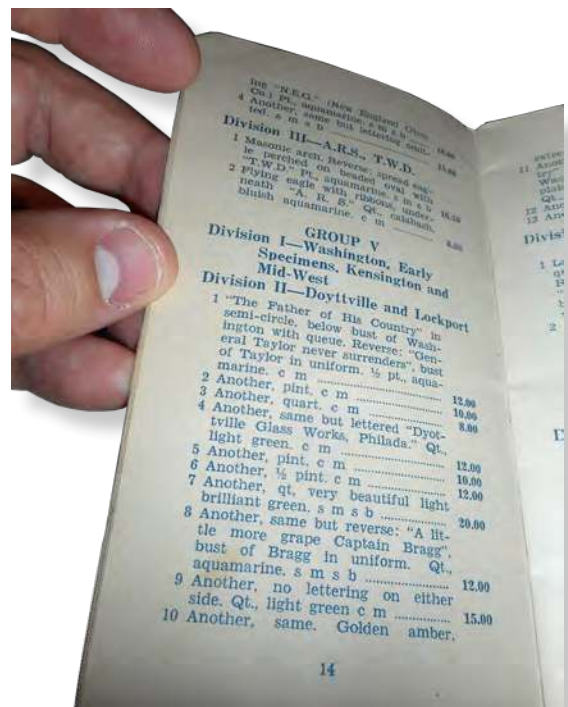
sign with metal hinges. The sign read, “Stephen Van Rensselaer Firearms and Antiques.” [See Fig 3] I was shocked again, as this sign highly resembles the hanging signs currently found in all the shops in Colonial Williamsburg. I wondered for years how rare bottles found their way into the colonial plantation heirs when they were not widely distributed in these areas or the Tidewater region. These plantations include Shirley, Carter, Bacon’s Castle, and Berkley.

Van Rensselaer died in the 1940s, selling likely the last of his collection to Charles Gardner, who was a retired employee from Enfield Rifle Company in New Haven, Connecticut. Many of these pieces are now in the hands of well-known collectors. Perhaps many of Charlie Gardner’s firearms are now in Colonial Williamsburg hands?

Stephen Van Rensselaer was a pathfinder in our hobby—probably deserving to be added to the FOHBC Hall of Fame. He owned one of the oldest bottle shops in the United States, conducted countless hours of research, and likely held the largest bottle collection of his time. He was likely the first to have a price list for his bottles—oh, for those prices! [See Figs 4 & 5]



21 [Fig 4]



[Figs 4 & 5] Pages from Bottles and Flasks For Sale.

