

Wisconsin Pottery Bottles

1840 to 1890

Pottery bottles were among the first bottles produced for Wisconsin soda and beer bottlers and merchants. The earliest were made in the 1840's, and more began to appear in the 1850's and 1860's. Pottery bottles peaked in the 1870's, and by the 1880's they were falling out of favor. While some were still used in the 1890's, by the turn of the century they had become obsolete.

Most pottery bottles were made by hand, turned on a potter's wheel. Some were made in molds using a process patented by Edwin Merrill and Brother in Ohio in 1847. A press was used to force clay into a two- or three-part mold to form the body of the bottle, then a pancake of clay was attached to the bottom. A spindle was inserted into the neck to flatten the bottom and press it to the bottom of the bottle. Bottles molded in this way were mostly 12-sided. Molded bottles were usually salt-glazed on the exterior and had a brown Albany-type slip glaze on the inside. Most were side-stamped with the proprietor's name or the business name with a custom stamp or with printer's type. Many Wisconsin clay bottles included the city or town name in the stamp. In other parts of the US the town name was usually left off since the bottles were used locally.



Most pottery bottles were salt-glazed stoneware. The kiln was fired to about 2,200 degrees which was sufficient to vaporize salt thrown thru an opening in the kiln. The salt vapors coated and fused with the stoneware and the heat vitrified the clay into a solid mass. Salt-glazing created a durable glass-like clear coating with a texture that sometimes resembled an orange peel. The salt glazing process was somewhat difficult to control. Factors such as temperature, location of the bottles in the kiln, the amount of salt added, the amount of time in the kiln, among others caused distinct differences in the

glaze, so color varied greatly from batch to batch. It is also common to find flaws such as scorch marks, turkey eyes, thin or thick glazes. Some stoneware bottles were dipped in a liquid glaze before firing such as Wolf, Schinz, Lockwood and others.

Some bottles were earthenware. These bottles were made from local clay and dipped in a lead-based glaze inside and out and fired to about 1,800 degrees. Earthenware bottles were less durable than stoneware so they chipped and broke easily and the glaze sometimes flaked off. The earthenware potters in Whitewater Wisconsin made bottles, but like most earthenware makers, they did not stamp them. A stamped bottle from Sheboygan brewer Thomas Schlachter was probably made by a nearby earthenware potter. Other marked earthenware examples include Atwell's Table Beer made in Portage, Wm Ehrman Root Beer made in Milwaukee and Wm. Mosier in Wautoma. Many of the earthenware potters probably made bottles but few survived. A broken earthenware bottle from the Baraboo pottery (1852-1857) was found at the pottery site.

The stamping process was problematic. Clay bottles with weak, crooked, or inverted stamps are not uncommon. Stamps were sometimes obscured by the glaze. Some bottles were marked more than once. One of the Charles Hermann & Co. potters was apparently illiterate, had bad eyesight or both. He used printer's type for stamps and almost every bottle he stamped had either spelling errors or incorrect letter substitutions, such as an "8" instead of "&" (Menk, Simonds, Grisbaum & Kehrein).

Pottery bottles were not decorated with cobalt but case markers were commonly used. Cobalt was applied to the shoulder or lip so the bottler to spot his bottles from among others in a case without pulling them out to read the stamp. Case markings used include a blue band around the shoulder (Husting and Gipfel), a blue lip (Werrbach, Liebscher), an "x" (Gray), vertical stripe (Henk), or a blue lip and shoulder (Munzinger). Graf & Madlener bottles used a cobalt flower as a case marker. In the 1860's, some bottlers enhanced the readability of their stamps by highlighting the stamp with cobalt. This practice ended by the 1870's.



Figure 1 Examples of case markers used to help bottles spot their bottles in a case.

The shapes of Wisconsin stoneware bottles are distinctly different from those of bottles from other parts of the U.S. and evolved over time. The shoulders were mostly rounded rather than square as commonly seen in eastern stoneware bottles, and the necks tended to be longer and more tapered. The style of the lip evolved over the years, from a mushroom shape on the earliest bottles to a tall square style in later years. They were closed with corks and most used a Putnam-style cork holder which was a serpentine wire bail that would swing up and over the cork to hold it in place. Most held up to about 12 oz. of liquid, while a small number were made in a larger 32 oz. size or a smaller 6 oz size. They were hand made so the actual capacity varied considerably. Bottlers referred to these sizes as "pint" or "quart" although they generally held less.

Most pottery bottles contained soda, at least that's what we call it today. Back then, the products usually put up in pottery bottles were called "small beer", which were brewed, low or non-alcoholic beverages such as root beer, lemon beer, ginger beer, sarsaparilla or near beer. There were exceptions - some bottlers put up mineral water, ale or other products. Markings rarely identify the contents. Many bottles from other parts of the US are stamped with the type of beverage in the bottle and most are non-alcoholic products. In Wisconsin, there is a bottle stamped "Root Beer", "Ginger Ale", a "mineral water", an "ale", and a "Table Beer".



Figure 2 Some Wisconsin bottles were stamped with product names. Here are some examples.

Most of the pottery bottles used in Wisconsin were stamped with the bottler's name. This was done because bottles were expensive and were refilled as many times as possible. Buyers were charged a hefty deposit that was refunded upon return of the bottle. Unlike most pottery bottles from the eastern United States, Wisconsin bottlers usually included the name of the town/city and state along with the proprietor's name. It is not known if paper labels were used on stoneware bottles. It seems likely that at least some did, but the only example I am aware of from Wisconsin is a whiskey from Watertown.

All of the Wisconsin potters that produced salt-glazed wares probably made bottles. Evidence suggests that the Charles Hermann factory in Milwaukee produced many of Wisconsin's stoneware bottles. They

were undoubtedly made by many other potters as well. Some have been attributed to the Gunther pottery in Sheboygan. The only known potter-signed bottles are from GUNTHER & BERNS of Sheboygan, WM. MOSIER from Wautoma and SPRAGUE & RUSSELL from Portage.

The main advantage that stoneware bottles offered over glass was that they were readily available locally. A small operator could deal directly with a local potter, could order in small quantities, and could get them made quickly and inexpensively. The alternative was to order glass bottles from an out-of-state glass manufacturer, where minimum order quantities were higher, lead times longer, and freight was expensive. It appears that none of the large Milwaukee brewers like Best, Pabst, Schlitz, Blatz, or Jung used stoneware bottles, although there is a Blatz branch bottle from St. Paul, Minnesota.

Why did Wisconsin bottlers switch to glass bottles? There are several reasons. Glass bottles were becoming more readily available and less expensive, especially after 1880 when the Chase Valley Glass Company opened in Milwaukee. Consumers could see what they were about to drink from glass bottles and it was easier for bottlers to make sure they were clean before refilling. Glass also offered the advantages of less weight and more consistent capacity.

Stoneware bottles reflect the primitive existence lived by early settlers. They were simple utilitarian vessels, yet they were extremely tough and durable. They could be used over and over, and often would not break even if dropped on a hard floor. Each bottle has unique characteristics of glaze, color, and form. They are not widely collected, are relatively available, and new varieties are constantly turning up. There are over 100 different varieties known from Wisconsin alone, far more if you include variants such as double stamps, color differences, sizes, etc. Stoneware bottles have always been one of my favorite categories of Wisconsin antique bottles.

This article is an updated version of an article first published on the Milwaukee Antique Bottle and Advertising Club.

Following is a list of all of the Wisconsin companies that I am aware of that used stoneware bottles.

J.B. Ferstl - Ashland	A.Z. - La Crosse (possibly made by the
Bartl - Beaver Dam	Kummerow pottery in Fond Du Lac)
Phillip Pointon's Baraboo Pottery (unmarked)	B. Atwell's Table Beer - Madison (attributed to
Fred Beck - Boscobel	Portage City Pottery)
G. Banse Co. - Cedarburg	H. Grove - Madison
Dr. Fricke - Cedarburg	Huchting Brothers - Madison
E.R. Hantzsch - Eau Claire	H & J. Schulkamp - Madison
J.H. Lockwood - Fond Du Lac (possibly made by	Hoyer & Shulz - (probably should be Hoier from
the Kummerow pottery in Fond Du Lac)	Manitowoc)
P. Stamm - Fond Du Lac	Phillip Altpeter - Milwaukee
Phillip Eckhart - Fort Atkinson	John Berg - Milwaukee
Wm. Weber - Grafton	Calgeer - Milwaukee
B. Niehoff - Iron Ridge (SE of Horicon)	Dickenson's Ale - Milwaukee
C. Gray - Janesville	John Enes - Milwaukee
S. B. Kupfer - Kenosha	Charles Gipfel - Milwaukee
Chatfield - La Crosse	Graf & Madlener - Milwaukee
G. Carl - La Crosse (Gustav Carl)	John Graf - Milwaukee

W.H. Gray - Milwaukee
Grisbaum & Kehrein - Milwaukee
Henk & Co. - Milwaukee
S. Hickey - Milwaukee
Hopkins & Co - Milwaukee
E.L. Husting - Milwaukee
L. Liebscher - Milwaukee
Liebscher & Berg - Milwaukee
Meeske & Hoch - Milwaukee
I.S. Meister - Milwaukee
F. Meixner - Milwaukee
Ch. Munzinger - Milwaukee
Jos. Pantz - Milwaukee
R.P.S. (R.P. Sanders Lill's Ale) - Milwaukee
Henry Schinz - Milwaukee
F. Schwartz - Milwaukee
Taylor & Bro. - Milwaukee
John Weissenberger - Milwaukee
L. Werrbach - Milwaukee
Wolf & Seward - Milwaukee
Jos. Wolf - Milwaukee
O. Zwietusch - Milwaukee
Meesow Detroit Ale - Milwaukee
Butterfield - Monroe
R. Schwalbach - Newberg
F. Hens - unknown city
Lobb & Bond - unknown city

North Lake Brewery- North Lake
JAH 1874 (J.A. Hanson root beer Oconto)
A. Schiffmann - Oshkosh
L. Schiffmann - Oshkosh (son of Anton)
Sprague & Russell - Portage (they were the
maker)
A.J.H. - Racine
H.C. Olson - Racine
AT (Racine area)
Wm. Weber - Racine
T. Schlachter - Sheboygan
Blatz - Milwaukee (St. Paul Minn.)
John Wellms - Wausau
Th Menk - Waterloo
Th. Menk - Watertown
A.C. Henk - Waukesha
Simons - West Bend
N. Eberl - Wisconsin Rapids
Whitewater - various potters in Whitewater
made bottles (unsigned)
Gunther & Berns - Sheboygan (stoneware
manufacturers)
Mosier - Wautoma (Mosier was the pottery
maker)



Figure 3 The bottoms of these bottoms have lines that are the result of cutting the bottle with a wire to remove it from the wheel. In the 1860's potters often used a pair of wires twisted together which created these lines. In later years potters used a single wire that resulted in a smooth bottom.



Figure 4 Bottle four from the left is stamped "TH GUNTHER / & BERNS / SHEBOYGAN." All of the others also have the period after the city, a practice possibly unique to Gunther. All of these were probably made by Gunther.



Figure 5 These bottles were probably made by the Charles Hermann pottery i Milwaukee. All are stamped with a similar printer's type and most have spelling errors, inverted letters, missing letters or other issues.



Figure 6 If you look closely you can see the stoneware bottles in the window of this 1860's wine & liquor dealer. The Lill's Ale bottles are among the few stoneware bottles used for beer. Most contained non-alcoholic brewed beverages like Root Beer, Lemon Beer, Ginger Beer or Sarsaparilla, which were called "Small Beer."

References

“American Stoneware Bottles – A History and Study” by David Graci

Bottle photos are from the collection of the author.