

Bitter January Digs

By Jeff Mihalik



Digging in the Tri-State area during 2007 did not produce many good results. Although we had plenty of permission on properties of decent age (pre-Civil War to 1880s), Rick and I only dug a couple historical flasks and a decent bottle here and there. We were hoping for better luck in 2008.

We had been trying to get permission on a couple of properties for several years. Both were pre-Civil War brickers, one a well kept mansion, the other a possible store front that was currently being used as a tri-plex.

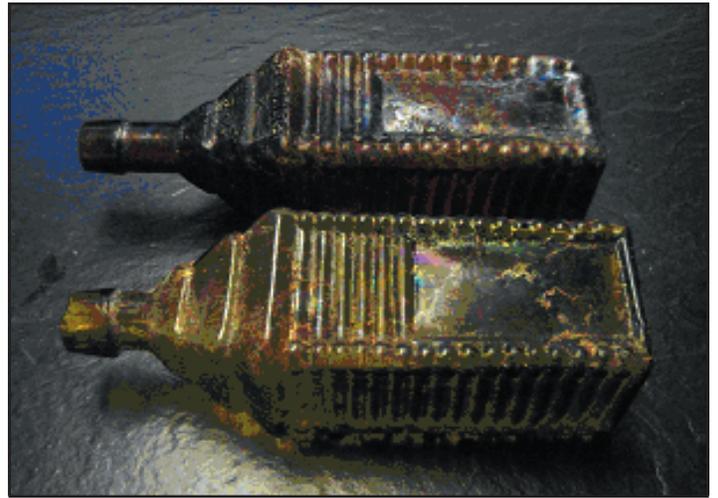
Both properties had large backyards, however, each had paved driveways that led to garage/carriage homes. We were very hopeful that we could find a privy in the portion of the yards that were uncovered.

Rick was very persistent and finally arranged to talk with the owners of the brick mansion. Needless to say, he was persuasive and permission was granted. We probed the lot on one occasion and could not find any potential privy locations. Knowing how

hard finding the older privies can be, we went back after a rain when we knew that probing would be easier. Rick's expertise in probing paid off and we pinpointed a likely spot next to a rather larger oak tree. On a blustery New Year's day, we met at the site to celebrate our first dig of 2008. The wind was howling so hard that we had to use bricks to keep the tarps in place until we could fill some containers with dirt to hold them down. Snowflakes were in the air and it seemed like we were the only people in the whole neighborhood outside. Maybe everyone else was still recovering from the celebration the night before. After digging a few feet, I yelled to Rick that it looked like a stoner. That really helped get us going and stay warm from the excitement of possibly finding pontiled artifacts. Everything we saw in the fill layer pointed to an older pit. When we hit the trash layer, the first bottle we found was not pontiled but at least blown in the mold. At about the six-foot level we really started to find some decent artifacts, the first good one being a half-pint clasped hands flask. After I found a couple more, it was Rick's turn into the pit. Shortly after, he uncovered a nice Hostettler's in yellow-amber. After a couple more nice finds, I finished the hole off. While scraping the walls of loose dirt, a nice emerald-green Carter's ink fell out along with several local druggist bottles. In all, we found seven flasks, of which three were without damage. Not a bad start to 2008.

Since we could not find another privy on this lot, I suggested to Rick that we go and at least probe the other property, and if we found a privy, then maybe he could ramp up his efforts to get the permission. The other lot was fairly closeby. After about 20 minutes we located a good feeling privy. Good feeling meaning not loose uncompacted dirt but older feeling compacted soil. Usually, the tighter feeling holes are older (of course there is always the exception). Rick finally obtained permission and we scheduled the dig for the coming Saturday. The pit turned out to be a very crudely-made stoner. Long story short, it was dipped and filled sometime around the turn-of-the last century. We did recover several local bottles. Before we left that day we probed two more privy locations. One of the spots was right where the homeowner told us to look. I think it may have been the glass that was in the dirt surrounding this location. Both locations felt ashy and not like old compacted soil.





Another week went by and the weather was again looking bad. Forecasts were in the teens with snow for the coming Saturday. A couple emails back and forth and we agreed to wait for some better weather (yeah right!). Rick's next email had the subject title of "Reconsidering digging." I couldn't agree more...so we planned to meet early





that Saturday at the site. We were really fortunate in that this pit was right up next to a garage, but not underneath. Even though this spot probed loose, you can never know what's underfoot until you dig. After removing the sod, I started to clear out some of the overburden. I wasn't a foot down

when I saw the first bottle: an aqua blown utility bottle. That was good news as we were half expecting clear 1920s glass. Another shovel of dirt and I saw another hint of aqua. Using my hand to wipe some of the dirt away, I was staring at an eagle. It turned out to be a Pittsburgh double eagle

flask. Wow, right in the fill! I never have been this fortunate to see such a nice artifact that high up in the pit. Soon, I uncovered a quart amber blob beer from Allegheny, Pa. (old north side of Pittsburgh). We were really starting to get excited now since the first bottle was not a stray. Wild with anticipation, I started to use a scratcher and gently raked the fill. Nothing came out and I hit a clay cap. At this point Rick says, "This is one of those Wishart's Pine Tree Cordial age pits." I glance up and grin as I never have dug one but always admired these green tree beauties. Moments later I see more glass, and can you believe it, it's a Wishart's!

The bottle next to it appeared to be a Hostettler's but upon freeing it, it was unembossed. Oh well! Now it was Rick's turn in the pit. It wasn't long until he had his first of many bottles. A nice clasped hands flask. This was followed by another double eagle, only this one was the crude federal-style eagle with no town name. Rick started to find shards of bitters, hoping for a whole example. By this time his parents had arrived to see what was happening and Rick got out of the pit. I jumped in and soon hit a pocket of glass, all bitters! The first couple bitters came out broken. These included a Constitution Bitters and Drakes cabin. But then it happened, bitters, bitters and more bitters. Bitters to the right, to the left, under me, behind me, I started to get dizzy.

I was handing bottles up to Rick at a pace that we have never experienced. A whole Constitution, several St. Drakes, Maynard's Star Bitters, Jackson's Home Bitters, Hostettler's. Who ever lived in the house during this time period (most likely Civil War era) didn't have a preference as to what he was drinking. Before I got out of the pit, I also uncovered an Ogden Porter (iron pontil), The Cure for Fits and a cobalt shot glass. I saved about 1/2 to a 1/3 of the bottle layer for Rick. Carefully digging, through not much more was coming out. As he approached the far wall, he started to find more glass. A couple more bitters came out including a McKelvy's Stomach Bitters, Pittsburgh Pa. Just as he was finishing up, and just to top off this fantastic dig, one final bitters came to light, a nice yellow St. Drakes! Rick has been digging for over ten years and me for about eight and we both agreed that this has to be the best dig we'd ever had, and maybe the best bitter January dig anyone else has ever had.

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furnace, but the source used may not be correct.

¹¹ This is certainly an inflated figure for a single tank, although both tanks could have been making green glass at the time, and the "42" could mean the combined total.

¹² Barrett (1997:131), however, stated that the firm installed the first narrow-mouth machines (also O'Neills) in 1911, although this may reflect the earliest record he found.

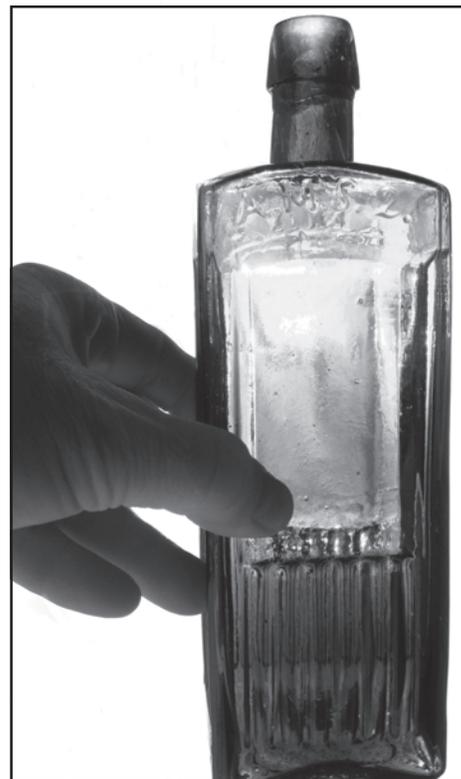
¹³ Wilson's descriptions, while adequate for the 1980s, leave something to be desired. The "blue" for the bottle color is almost certainly aqua, and the one-part finish was certainly applied, not tooled.

¹⁴ This brings up an interesting conundrum. Even though Kearns-Gorsuch was listed under its own name until 1937, it appears that Hazel-Atlas advertised products made by the Kearns-Gorsuch factory in its catalogs at least as early as 1930. Alternatively, identical bottles may have been made by both the Zanesville factory and another Hazel-Atlas plant.

**A Bitter January Dig, by Jeff Mahalik
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List of finds:

- 1 - "Dr. J. W. James India Bitters"
- 3 - "Home Bitters / Jas. A. Jackson & Co. Proprietors / Saint Louis, Mo."
- 4 - "St. Drakes 1860 Plantation X Bitters" 6-log variant (one yellow-olive)
- 1 - "St. Drakes 1860 Plantation X Bitters" 4-log variant
- 6 - "Maynard's / Star Bitters" (one olive-amber)
- 1 - "Constitution Bitters / Seward & Bentley Buffalo, N.Y. / AMS2 / 1864" (yellow-olive)
- 1 - "McKelvy's / Stomach Bitters / Pittsburgh, Pa." aqua
- 1 - "LQC Wishart's / Pine Tree Tar Cordial Phila / Patent (Pine Tree) 1859" green
- 1 - "The Cure For Fits / Dr Chas T. Price / 67 Williams St. New York" clear
- 1 - Flask, "Pitts McC & Co" pint, double eagle
- 1 - Flask, pint, double eagle
- 1 - Flask, "Union clasped hands" half-pint
- 5 - "Hostetter's Bitters" (two yellow-olive)
- 1 - "Wm Hoffman 73 Federal St. Allegheny, Pa." quart blob beer, amber
- 1 - Fluted shot glass, cobalt blue



- 6 - Cylinder whiskeys, shades of amber to yellow-olive, 2 marked "L&W" on base
- 1 - Ogdens Porter
- 1 - Stoneware dog bowl



"You dug them out of an old WHAT?"