

U.S.A. Hosp. Dept.

By Frank Sternad

(Editor's note – this article was published in the May/June, 2009 issue of *Bottles and Extras* and is being reprinted in this issue in its corrected, readable format. Our sincere apologies for the error.)

When the Union Army's Standard Supply Table was revised in 1862 to meet the increased needs of the sick and wounded, it provided for more drugs than was furnished to any other army in the world. Supplying the great variety and enormous volume of medical supplies required significant changes in the Medical Department, which from almost every standpoint was inadequate to meet the unprecedented situation create by the outbreak of hostilities at Fort Sumter.

The stockpile of medical supplies at the main supply depot in New York was small, the War Department lacked adequate funds to buy more supplies at current market prices, and most of the manufacturers of pharmaceutical preparations were unprepared to meet the government's requisitions without delays. To compensate for these deficiencies, Surgeon General William A. Hammond directed in early 1863 that chemical laboratories be established at New York and Philadelphia for the preparation of extracts and tinctures, and for the repackaging of bulk drugs and supplies.

The laboratory set up at Astoria, Long Island, New York consisted of three buildings formerly occupied by a manufacturing chemist, John Hyer Jr. In Philadelphia, a brick warehouse at Sixth and Oxford Streets, formerly used by John Wyeth and Brother, was leased for five years. The imaginative

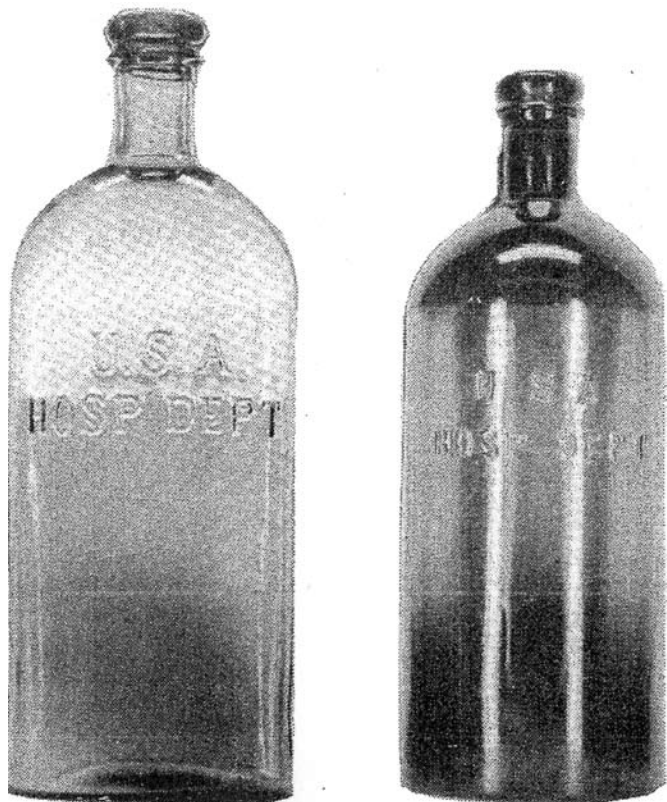


Figure 1 - Two U.S.A. Hosp. Dept. bottles

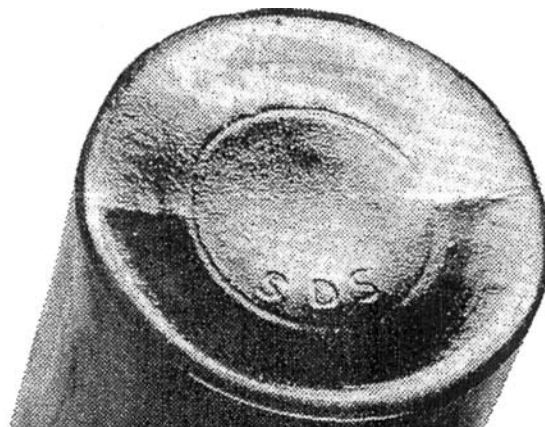


Figure 2 - SDS base embossing

Hammond identified the proposed laboratory as “a storehouse for drugs and medical supplies” and thereby saddled the Quartermaster Department with the rent for the building. Through other manipulations and juggling of official records and documents, he also made the laboratories “legitimate” expenditures for the Medical and Hospital Department funds. It should be mentioned that Surgeon General Hammond's good intentions, but lack of conformance to bureaucratic and military procedure, ultimately led to his court martial.

Operations at the U.S. Army Laboratory at Philadelphia began late in April, 1863 when it was assigned an allotment of Tarragona port wine for assay, bottling, and packing in wooden boxes. Military medicine of the time prescribed huge quantities of whiskey and wine for use in regular therapeutics; and one shipment received at the laboratory in August 1863 consisted of 250 barrels of whiskey and 1,000 gallons of sherry. Almost simultaneous with the first bottling operations was the manufacture of pharmaceutical preparations. Simple cerate, solution of ferrous tersulfate, ammonia liquor, blue mass, silver nitrate, and various powders were among the early items.

Intriguing relics of peak productivity at the U.S. Army Laboratories are the embossed bottles and jars that were chosen for packaging certain drugs. During the Civil War, these containers could be found amongst the stock of Union Army medicine wagons attached to each brigade, and on the shelves of Army hospitals – including those in many of the frontier military posts manned by the Army of the West.

The bottles were made from private moulds in Pittsburgh, “bottle headquarters” of America, at a price much lower than that charged by glassworks in Philadelphia (\$9 per gross for quart bottles in 1863). Two lathes for grinding glass bottle stoppers were purchased for the laboratory at Philadelphia. Most of the moulds were cut to read, “U.S.A. HOSP. DEPT.” (Figure 1), but variations exist in known specimens, e.g. “U.S. ARMY HOSPITAL DEPARTMENT”, and “U.S.A. MED'L DEPT”. The initials, “S D S” are found on the base of a quart size bottle blown in citron colored glass (Figure 2). The exact meaning

of these letters remains a mystery; most probably their significance was known only to the glassworks that produced the mould.

The most commonly employed embossed bottle was the cylindrical quart, standing some 9 1/2" in height, and ranging in color from aqua to apple green, olive green, citron, various shades of amber and cobalt blue. Medicines supplied in these narrow-necked or "tincture" bottles included alcohol, ammonia water, chloroform, castor oil, olive oil, turpentine, potassium permanganate solution, Labarraque's Solution (solution of chlorinated soda), and Sweet Spirit of Nitre (ethyl nitrate). Smaller cylinders, 6 1/2" down to 3" tall, in blue aqua, clear, emerald green, and black (deep red) have been found, as have cylindrical wide mouth jars, 4 1/2" to 7 1/2", in clear and aqua. Most unusual are small oval bottles, 1 1/2" and 4", in cornflower blue. Any of these embossed bottles, possibly with the exception of the quarts in common colors, can be rated "very rare"

The most abundant source of these bottles for collectors has been the abandoned Army forts located west of the Mississippi River. A large dump was normally situated near the post hospital, and it was into these areas that the currently prized

vessels were often discarded. Good collections of U.S.A. Hosp. Dept. bottles have been resurrected from the grounds of at least two forts in southern Wyoming: Fort Bridger (active 1858 - 1890) and Fort Sanders (1866 - 1882). Simplified plats of these posts (Figures 3 & 4) reveal locations of the hospitals (marked "H") as of a specific date. However, repairs and rebuilding were so frequent that layout of a particular fort often changed from year to year. Assuming that hospitals, like other post structures, also were subject to relocation and rebuilding over the lifetime of a fort, it is conceivable that as many hospital dumps were also founded.

Sources:

- Medicines for the Union Army, George Winston Smith, American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, Madison, WI 1962
- Old Forts of the Northwest, Herbert M. Hart, New York, 1963
- Old Bottle Magazine, "Pricing Guide", Pat Rogers, September, 1970

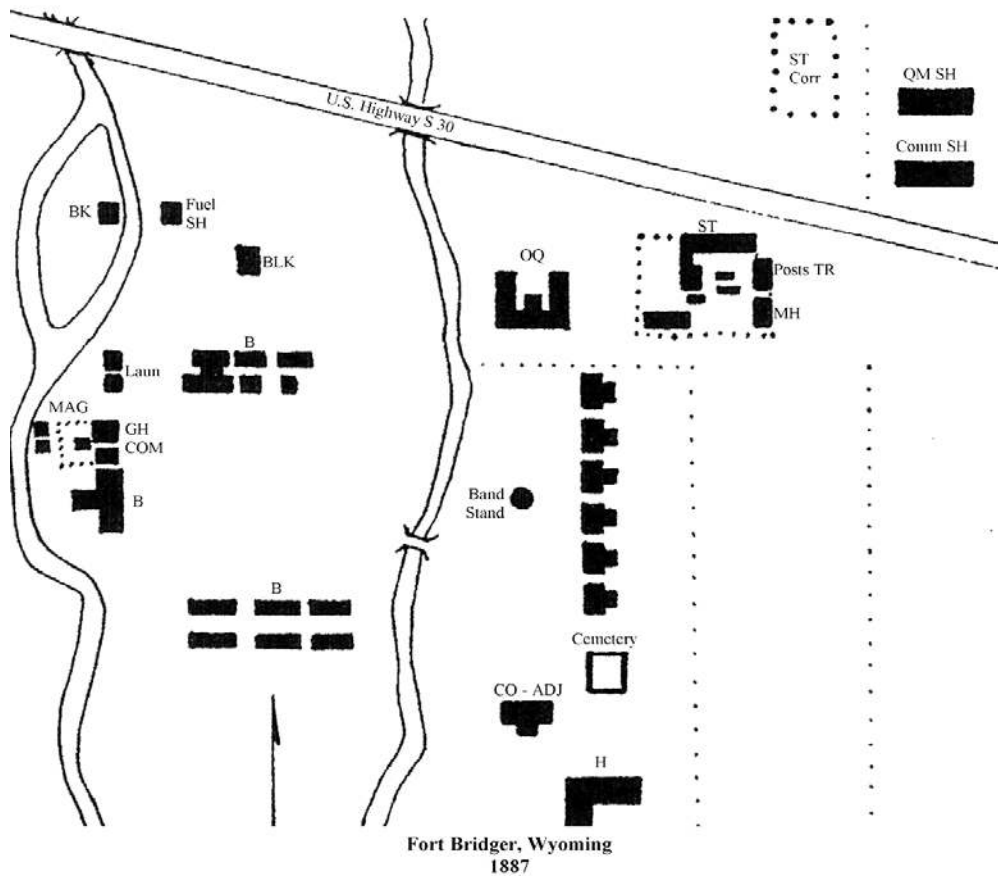


Figure 4 - Map of Fort Bridger

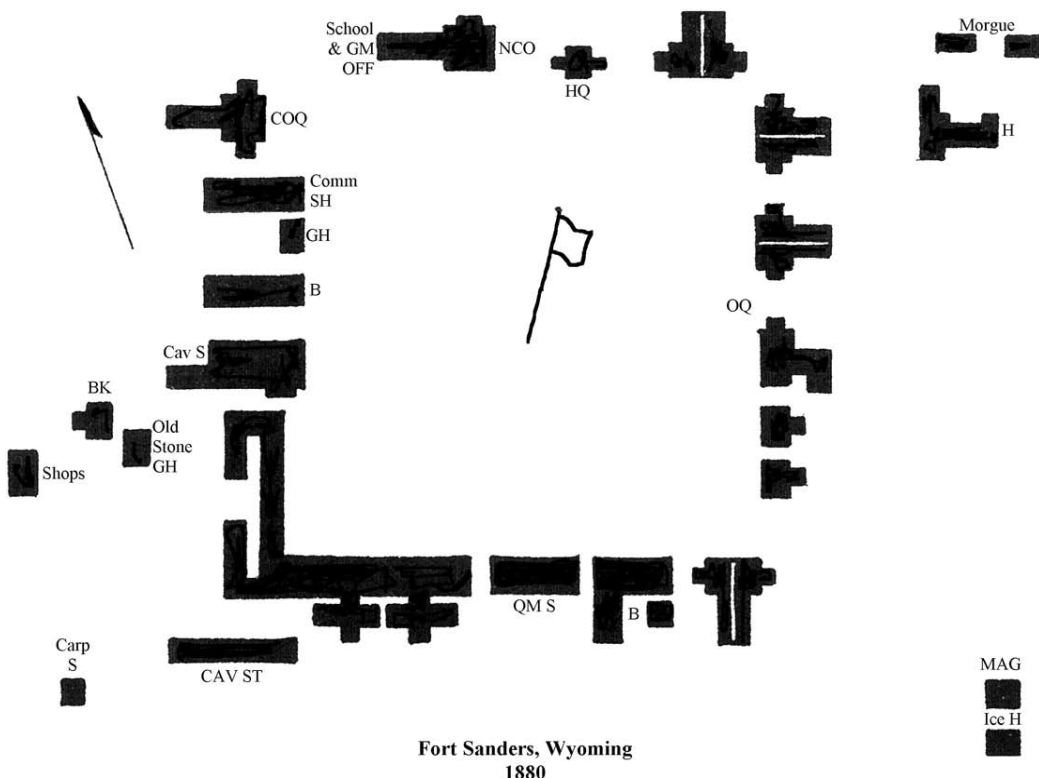


Figure 3: Map of Fort Sanders