

Hopewell's Bottles

By Kathryn Swanson

Hopewell is a small town in eastern Virginia with a population of about 22,000 people. Located south of Richmond at the convergence of the James and the Appomatox Rivers, the city has a rich history that includes prehistoric Native American settlements, Colonial plantations, Civil War stations, and beyond. Today, the residents of Hopewell take pride in their city's heritage and frequently donate artifacts they have unearthed in the area to the Historic Hopewell Foundation. In the Foundation's collection is a large number of glass bottles dating to around the first half of the 20th century. Due to the nature of these donations, little is known about the bottles' provenience, yet, taken together, the artifacts indicate a great deal about Hopewell's past and the changes in product and industry history that occurred on a large scale during the early 1900s.

Hopewell's History as Indicated by the Bottles

Of the 125 bottles analyzed, only approximately 2% dated to before 1900. Given this small sample size, these earlier bottles do not yield much useful information. However, this small percentage could be indicative of Hopewell's history, as it was a very small town between the Civil War and the 1910s and not yet the industrial "boom town" it would become.

In 1914, the DuPont Company built a dynamite factory in Hopewell, causing the city to suddenly blossom (www.ci.hopewell.va.us). This growth pattern is reflected in the collection of bottles, as 70% of the bottles date to between 1905 and 1925. A minimum of ten different makers and at least thirteen different locations of manufacturing are represented in this number. It follows that the increase in the number of bottles, the range of manufacturing locations, and the number of makers indicate the city's increasing growth and its reputation as an industrial center. Hopewell was becoming recognized as a valuable consumer center because of its rising population and increasing industrial growth, and more glass products were being shipped to the city. In addition, the increase in number of bottles can be explained because the more people there are in an area, the more material culture and trash, such as bottles, can be found.

After World War I, the DuPont Company left Hopewell, and the city's growth stabilized somewhat (www.ci.hopewell.va.us). A number of large manufacturing giants moved to the city after this, maintaining Hopewell's industrial image. The collection reflects this pattern to a degree. Twenty-nine percent of the bottles date from post-1925, again representing ten different makers and eleven different locations. The discrepancy in the number of bottles can most likely be accounted for by collector bias. Many of these bottles are more recent and are therefore likely to seem less interesting to the average person who would not take the time to collect them. The broad spectrum of makers and locations again reflects Hopewell's population and industrialization.

Product History as Indicated by the Bottles

The types of bottles in this collection reflect the overall product history of the times. While the sample from the pre-1905 period is too small to be useful, those from the other periods

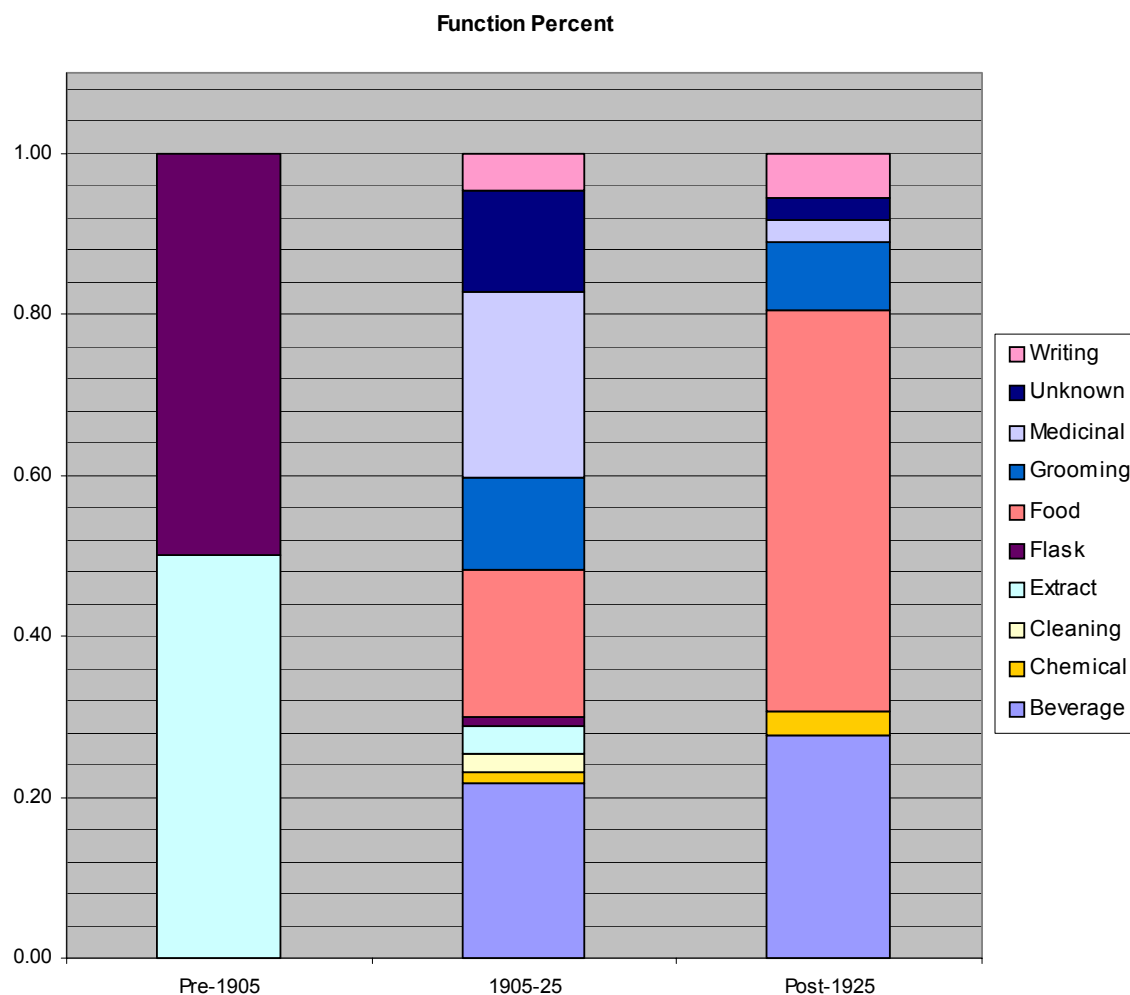


Fig. 1

provide a great deal of information. Bottles dating from between 1905 and 1925 indicate the broadest range of functions (Fig. 1). The sample from the post-1925 period reflects a fairly narrow range. This difference reflects the discontinuation of some products, such as extracts and certain cleaning solutions, as well as increases and decreases in the popularity of other products (Fig. 1).

Bottles used for food preparation and consumption and for medicinal purposes reflect the greatest change between the two later periods. Food bottles represent 18% of the total number of bottles between 1905 and 1925. After 1925, the figure changes dramatically to 50%. This matches a shift in cooking trends. During this period, an increasing number of people were beginning to buy more pre-made foods rather than making everything themselves. This results in more packaging, which is shown through the increase in the number of food-related bottles. The percentage of medicinal bottles also shows a great difference between the two periods. In the 1905-1925 period, 23% of the bottles were used for medicines. The figure falls to a mere 3% after 1925. This correlates with an increase in food and drug laws in 1938 (Encarta.msn.com). Several of the bottles were used for patent medicines, which

were made illegal through this legislation. These laws would have resulted in a decrease in commercial medicinal bottles, as evidenced by this collection.

Despite these dramatic changes, several categories remain somewhat constant. Beverage bottles constitute 22% of the sample dating between 1905 and 1925. After 1925, the number of beverage bottles rise to only 28%, indicating that the industry was relatively stable through these periods. In addition, bottles that contained grooming products, such as wavesets, remained relatively constant, representing 11% of the 1905-1925 sample and 8% of the post 1925 sample.

Industry History as Indicated by the Bottles

A trend in greater industrialization can also be seen in the bottles. Around 1903, machine-made bottles became common in commercial use, creating a huge boom in the glass bottle industry (Jones, 1989). As this industry developed, there were more bottle manufacturers in varying locations. In addition, more makers were beginning to mark their products with a maker's mark, or logo, identifying their company. The Historic Hopewell Foundation's collection clearly illustrates this. All of the bottles in the small sample dating to pre-1905 are unmarked and are from unknown locations. These bottles were not made from fully-automatic machines (Jones, 1989), signifying that they pre-dated the period of fast growth in the glass bottle industry. Consequently, the makers did not feel the need to label and identify their bottles.

The bottles from the 1905 to 1925 sample, however, reflect the industry's growth. An increasing number of bottle manufacturers made it a common practice to identify their bottles with maker's marks during this time. Through this mark, the location where the bottle was made can often be established (Toulouse, 1971). In this sample, at least ten different makers and thirteen locations are represented. These bottles indicate the continuing development of the industry, however, as not every manufacturer identified his or her work. Fifty percent of the bottles in this sample have no maker's mark while 33% of the sample is from unknown locations. This discrepancy can be accounted for by the fact that many of the bottles had embossed product labels rather than maker's marks, indicating the location of the product's company.

The post-1925 sample further indicates the growth of industry. Again, at least ten makers are represented and the bottles come from a minimum of eleven locations. Only 14% of the bottles from this sample have no maker's mark and 11% are from unknown locations. It follows, therefore, that an increasing number of manufacturers were marking their products, perhaps because of an increasing amount of competition from other glass bottle manufacturers. This sample also implies that makers were specializing the type of bottles they manufactured. Fifty-nine percent of this sample was made by the Hazel-Atlas Glass Co. (Toulouse, 1971), which made a majority of the food bottles discussed above. Interestingly, no bottles from this company appear in this collection in the other date ranges, suggesting that the company took advantage of the rise in the popularity of prepared foods in the post 1925 period.

The Historic Hopewell Foundation's collection of bottles provides interesting information on a variety of topics. While the sample from the pre-1905 period is most likely too small to reveal much useful information, it is indicative of the city's small population and the pre-industrial period of the area. The sample from between 1905 and 1925 reveals a great deal

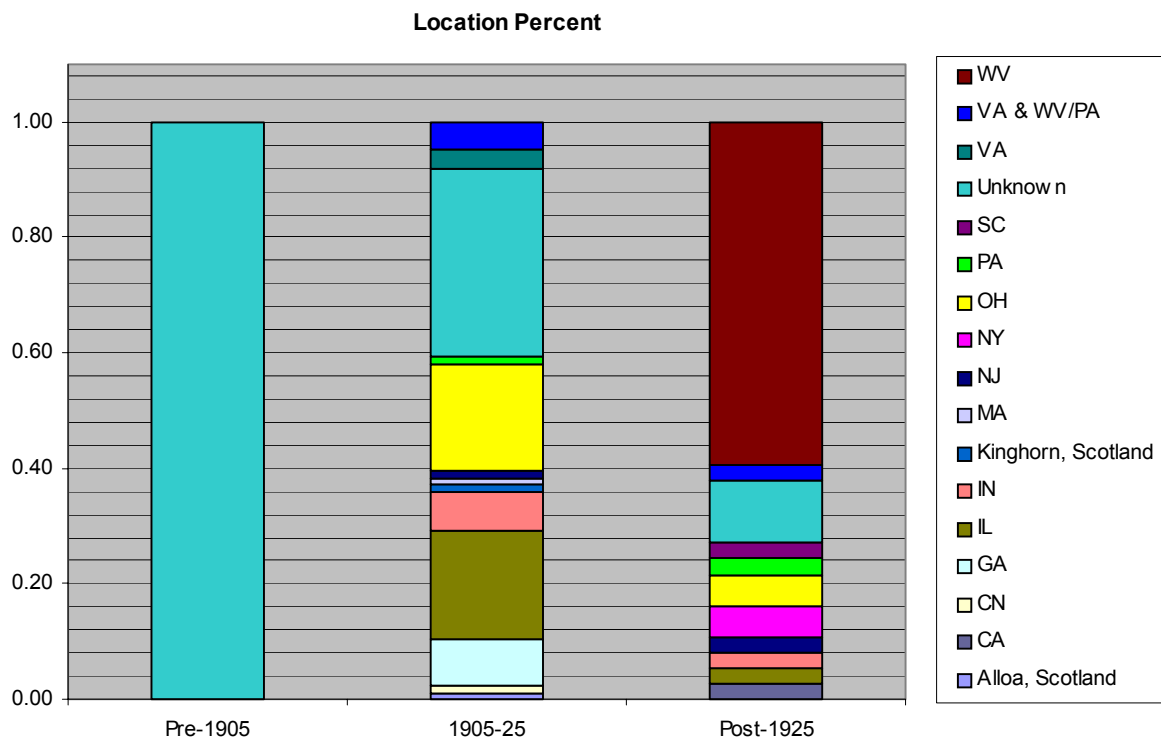


Fig. 2

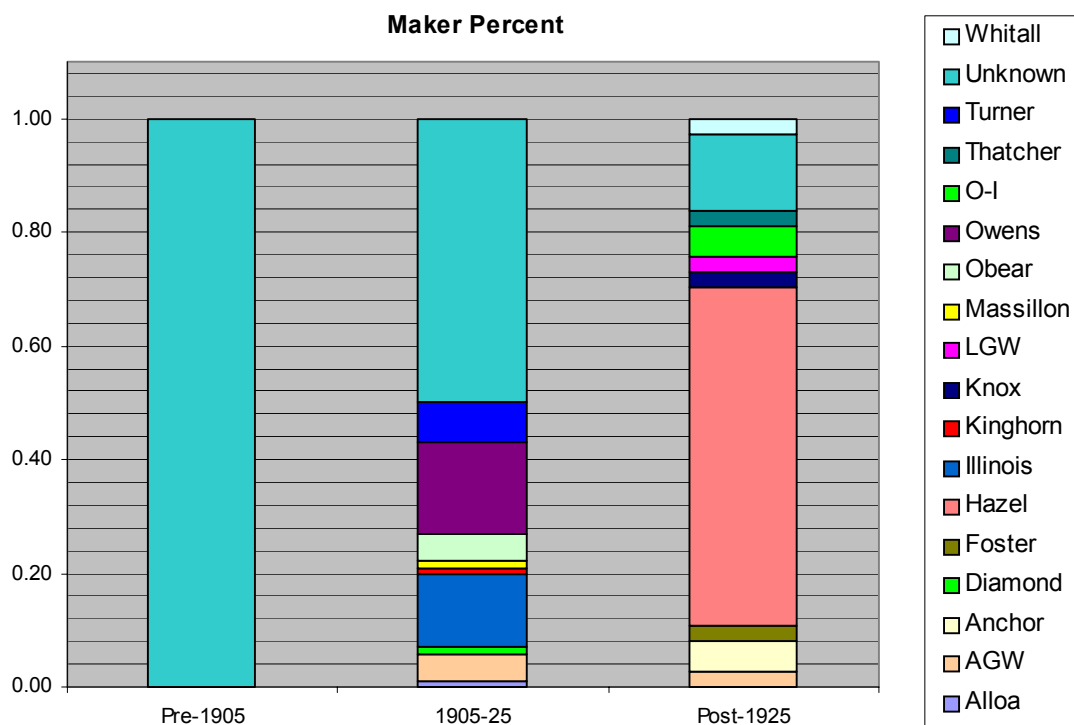


Fig. 3

about the products, industry, and Hopewell during that time. Taken with the post-1925 sample, dramatic changes can be seen in product types and industry development. Collector bias must be accounted for, however, in the post-1925 sample, as many of these bottles are fairly modern and therefore likely to be considered worthless. This study has yielded fascinating data about the history of Hopewell, product history, and industry history.

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