

A Drink Into the Past



Figure 1. Beer or Root Beer Stoneware Salt-Glazed Bottle From Seneca Village, artifact found at the Wilson's family home. *Source: NYC Archaeological Repository* ||

Abstract

Seneca Village was home to African Americans trying to build a community and integrate into society. These families led typical lives and partook in normal activities. One of these activities was drinking alcohol. In the home of the Wilson family, a salt-glazed stoneware beer or root beer bottle was found. This bottle provides a passage into the 19th century production of kitchen items and drinking culture. Alcohol consumption is a major part of city life today, which began in the 18th century and was solidified in the 1800's. Methods and materials of production for beverage bottles had also evolved during this time. The story of this artifact connects today's city to the forgotten past and the city's everchanging history.

Central Park is a monumental landmark of New York City. It provides the concrete jungle with a backyard and the city would not be itself without it today. However, the creation of the park led to the displacement of a thriving Black community in the mid 1800s in Seneca Village.

Seneca Village was a place for Black people to prosper and integrate into society. Many of these families built a place to live without judgment and fear with people they are comfortable with. European immigrants also lived in Seneca Village and the community was built with them. A family that lived in the community was the Wilson family. In the family there was William and Charlot Wilson and their eight children. Among the many artifacts excavated from the site of their house was a D.L. Ormsby Salt Glazed Stoneware beer bottle. Although these types of bottles and beverages were fairly common during the mid 1800s, the bottle reveals a deeper connection to the city's neglected past.



Figure 2: Similar to the beer or root beer bottle from Seneca Village, it shows what the full artifact could have looked like in its prime. *Source: Doc's Crocks.*

The beer or root beer bottle is a reddish brown with black spots on it and has D.L-Ormsby pressed onto it. Made from clay, it obtained its name from it's hardness and density.¹ Stoneware was brought into North America during the 18th century by European potters; American stoneware was inspired by British and German stoneware.² The material was used for jugs, jars, and bottles. It was also mass produced in cities such as New York City.

¹ Georgeanna H. Greer, *American Stonewares: the Art and Craft of Utilitarian Potters* (Exton: Schiffler, 1981) 15.

² "North America Stoneware," Diagnostic Artifacts in Maryland, accessed July 25, 2021, <https://apps.jefpat.maryland.gov/diagnostic/Post-Colonial%20Ceramics/NorthAmericanStoneware/index-NorthAmericanStoneware.html>.

During the 19th century stoneware was considered the most useful and practical item to store all kinds of food and beverages, including acidic ones because of its durability and inexpensiveness to buy and make. Before stoneware became common, earthenware was used to cook and store food; but it was porous, which made it susceptible to leaks if not painted or glazed. Lead was used to glaze earthenware, but if it was exposed to acidic things for a long period of time the glaze would wear off and would lead to lead poisoning. At the time, glass was expensive and stoneware was the most practical option for kitchen storage and serving.³ The salt-glaze helped the bottle become more smooth and impermeable. Although it was used for storage, it was still unsuitable for cooking.

Mass production of alcohol had already begun during the time of Seneca Village. The beer bottle came from the Dorman L. Ormsby brewery located in Manhattan. The brewery ran for twenty-two years before closing.⁴ Since mass production of alcohol had already begun during the time of Seneca Village, beer bottles were relatively common and nothing out of the ordinary for its time, though the Wilsons did not have many alcohol bottles. But due to the temperance movement, today alcohol bottles and advertisements from the mid to late 19th century are difficult to find, making the beer bottle very valuable. It is considered a decorative and collectors piece today.



Left: 19th Century Earthenware Pipkin, these were used in pharmacies, the earthenware is rough. *Source: Science Museum Group*

Right: 19th Century Stoneware Wine Jars, compared to the earthenware, the stoneware is smooth and less porous. *Source: Lost Art*

³ Greer, 16.

⁴ “Dorman L. Ormsby Brewery – NY 457.1b: Old Breweries Information: Breweriana Values,” Old Breweries Information | Breweriana Values | Happy Beers!, August 22, 2013, <http://www.oldbreweries.com/breweries-by-state/new-york/new-york-city-ny-220-breweries/dorman-l-ormsby-brewery-ny-457-1b/>.

The bottle is also considered to possibly be a root beer bottle because at the time of Seneca Village, root beer was packaged similarly to regular beer. Alcohol has been a controversial topic in this country's history despite it being very common. In the 18th century it grew traction due to a lack of clean drinking water and milk. People resorted to drinking alcohol because it was clean and it became common to drink with every meal.⁵ People from all ages drank. As this continued, people started to drink for leisure and to unwind from the busy life in the growing city. Bars and saloons were also becoming more common with European immigrants coming to New York City in the mid 1800s and the drinking culture shifted into a more fun, relaxed, and casual thing to do very often. However, as these attitudes towards drinking became more common, there was pushback against them called the temperance movement. Mainly rooted in religious reasoning, the movement focused on the ban of alcohol because it went against religion and made people, most commonly men, revolt. The movement started in the 18th century, but won over many during the 1800s. As the temperance movement progressed, states began to ban hard liquor. Subsequently, the consumption of other alcoholic beverages, such as ale and beer, rose.⁶ Before prohibition started, Seneca Village was alive and thriving in the era which is why the beer bottle is very valuable. Despite many dwellers of Seneca Village following the Episcopal Church and Mr. Wilson's role as a sexton, religion did not seem to entirely impact Mr. Wilson's consumption of beer or root beer--though there were still not very many alcohol bottles found in their house.

⁵ Andrew Smith, *Gastropolis: Food and New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁶ Smith, 37.



An Illustration of a Beer Garden in the 19th Century. A lot of people, children running around and everyone is socializing, casual and fun atmosphere. Source: *Tenement Museum*

The beer or root beer bottle reflects Seneca Village's connection to the present. Residents of Seneca Village may have drank in similar fashion to how people drink today. People associate drinking beverages such as beer and ale with social gathering and casual hangouts. Even though drinking became more frequent due to necessity, it is known for helping people relax and socialize better. It started in the 1700s and people in the past have always made a valiant effort to keep it alive in America because people fought through prohibition. However, despite it being common in the mid 19th century, drinking was looked down upon depending on who the person was. Because the residents of Seneca Village were Black or immigrants, drinking gave them the connotation that they were poor and dirty. There were many stereotypes about drinking that remain fervent today. Evidently, the frequency and manner of alcohol consumption reflect on the social class of individuals regardless of the time period.

Historically, drinking played a significant role in the social culture of New York City. The beer bottle provided a connection between something so common then and now regardless of the time period which added to the socialization of alcohol consumption. Looking at the artifact we can see how mass production of bottles has changed and how consumption of alcohol varied as the years progressed. Seneca Village showed us how people from different backgrounds and hardships can integrate into society and lead fulfilling and common lives. Ultimately, Seneca

Village has shown a common narrative in history of African Americans being displaced and forgotten in order to uphold white supremacy.

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