

Wine and temperance



Perspective photos of the artifact. (Photos courtesy of the NYC Archaeological Repository.)

**Abstract**

This study follows the creation of the dark green glass bottle in 18th century Britain through the development of the early 19th century American temperance movement to present day reflections of the link between consumer and social patterns. Found in the 2011 excavation of the Wilson family's home in present day Central Park, this artifact is a broken off bottom of a wine bottle. The bottle has a base diameter of 7.7 cm, includes an iron pontil mark, and has a rounded heel. It was most likely in use during the early 19th century, which coincided with the beginning of the American temperance movement, which began by advocating for moderation but then complete abstinence from alcohol.

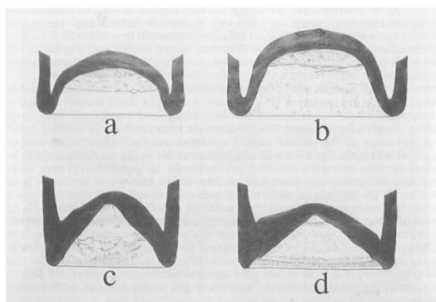
**Introduction**

In 2011, an archeological excavation of a small section of Central Park (just off of 86th and Central Park West) uncovered remnants supporting the existence of Seneca Village, an early 19th century, thriving neighborhood of predominantly people of African descent, who were

displaced by the now-hallmark green space of New York City.<sup>1</sup> On the plot of land that once belonged to the Wilson family, among many artifacts, archaeologists discovered a broken off bottom of a dark green wine glass bottle. From the Wilsons' close affiliation with the All Angels' Episcopal Church and the beginning of the American temperance movement to international and domestic trade through American consumption, Black consumerism, and the 19th century material social hierarchy, this study aims to untangle the complicated implications of the presence of alcohol in Seneca Village.

### Technical Details

Before coming to America in the mid 19th century, the first Industrial Revolution swept through Britain from 1760 to 1830.<sup>2</sup> Introduced during this period was the durable dark green wine glass, an improvement of the traditional bottle, due in part to the technological advancements in furnace design and increased caloric efficiency.<sup>3</sup> The most prominent aspect of the artifact is the heel, which is the part of the bottle where the body curves into the base. While there were three to four common heel shapes at the time, this bottle has a rounded heel with the “straight body line gradually curving into the pushup,” the pushed-up portion inside the bottle.<sup>4</sup>



Drawings of different types of heel shapes; figure a. shows a bottle with a rounded heel. (Photo courtesy of Olive Jones, “Cylindrical English Wine and Beer Bottles, 1735-1850,” *Studies in Archaeology, Architecture, and History*: 95.)

<sup>1</sup> “Seneca Village Project (2018),” NYC Archeological Repository, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://archaeology.cityofnewyork.us/collection/map/seneca-village/project/seneca-village-project-2018>.

<sup>2</sup> “Industrial Revolution,” Britannica, last edited May 21, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution>.

<sup>3</sup> Olive Jones, “Cylindrical English Wine and Beer Bottles, 1735-1850,” *Studies in Archaeology, Architecture, and History*: 11. <http://parkscanadahistory.com/series/saah/cylindricalbottles.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, “Cylindrical English Wine,” 91.

As evident by the mark at the bottom of the kickup (also called the pushup), this bottle was formed by hand and held in place by an iron pontil, standard of the bottles manufactured at the time. Bottles with iron pontil marks, with minute exceptions, were formed through the sand pontil method, in which “glass is gathered on the end of an iron rod... is dipped in sand, and is then applied to the base of the bottle... When the sand pontil is detached it leaves behind a large circular mark with bits of glass or sand embedded in the pushup.”<sup>5</sup> Since both the rounded heel and iron pontil mark were so characteristic of the 19th century bottle it leads me to believe that this artifact was a common bottle. Additionally, while distilled alcohols tended to be bottled at a local level, wine tended to arrive in North America already bottled, contributing to my hypothesis that this artifact was a standard English, 19th century commodity.<sup>6</sup>

Though iconically associated with wine, these dark green bottles could have also sold or been refilled and repurposed to hold other liquids, such as linseed oil, turpentine, fruit juices, drinking water, vinegar, spa waters, and castor oil.<sup>7</sup> However, we will be focusing on this artifact through its presumed association with alcohol.

### **Social Meaning**

In conjunction with the technological advancements that made mass-productions of bottles possible, the lack of clean and safe drinking water and milk contributed to the increased consumption of alcohol during the late 18th and early 19th century.<sup>8</sup> During this period, seen as “the heaviest drinking era in the nation’s history,” it is estimated that an American drank four

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, “Cylindrical English Wine,” 103-104.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, “Cylindrical English Wine,” 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Reckner and Brighton, “Free From All,” 71; Jones, “Cylindrical English,” 17.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Smith, “The Food and Drink of New York from 1624 to 1898,” In *Gastropolis: Food and New York City*: 40. <http://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/senecavillage/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SMITH-Food-and-drink-of-NY.pdf>.

gallons of alcohol per year.<sup>9</sup> However, between 1830 and 1850, the two decades within which Seneca Village would be destroyed and Central Park raised, that number dropped to one gallon.<sup>10</sup>

At the start of the 19th century, the early American temperance movement advocated for moderation, but soon adopted the message of complete abstinence from alcohol.<sup>11</sup> While the American temperance movement would later become synonymous with the Protestant church and female activists, it started among urban, northeastern industrialists, who were worried that casual drinking in the workplace would hinder productivity, and it appealed primarily to the middle and upper classes, who were worried about the growth of the working class.<sup>12</sup> The elitist message of the temperance movement gave way to nativism and racism in which alcohol became associated with poverty, the working class, and minority and immigrant groups.<sup>13</sup> While the Wilson family and the majority of Seneca Village was of African descent, there was a notable Irish and German population. Their stereotypical association with alcohol would have further separated Seneca Village from other American middle class neighborhoods, even though increased alcohol consumption in these communities could be seen as an economic improvement resulting from an increase in disposable income. Additionally, while drinking at saloons and pubs was generally limited to the working class, those in the middle and upper class who did drink, would have drunk in private, muddling the socioeconomic depiction of Seneca Village as a shanty town, because the wine bottle was found in the Wilson family's private residence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Collins, "In Vino Vanitas? Death and the Cellarette in Empire New York," *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*: 60. <https://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COLLINS-In-Vino-Vanitas.pdf>; Paul Reckner and Stephen A. Brighton, "Free From All Vicious Habits': Archeological Perspectives on Class Conflict and the Rhetoric of temperance," *Historical Archeology* 33: 66. <https://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/RECKNER-and-BRIGHTON-Free-from-all-vicious-habits.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, "The Rise of the Saloon," *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*: 37. <https://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ROSENZWEIG-ch.-2-the-rise-of-the-saloon.pdf>.

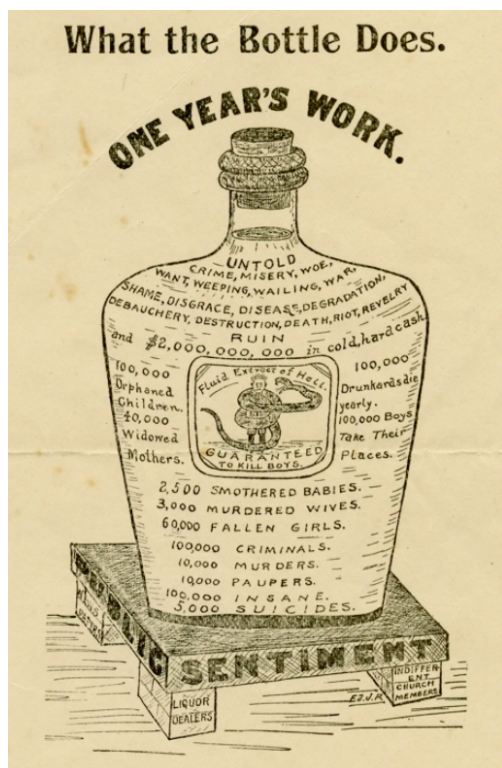
<sup>11</sup> Reckner and Brighton, "Free From All," 66.

<sup>12</sup> Reckner and Brighton, "Free From All," 66.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Chrzan, "Alcohol: Social Drinking in Cultural Context," 71-72.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenzweig, "The Rise of the Saloon," 51.

The Wilson family's apparent ownership of alcohol is further complicated by their close relationship with the All Angels' Episcopal Church, and William Wilson's, the father, occupation as a sexton. It is important to note that while the actions of the Protestant Church, in context of the temperance movement, can be viewed as anti-Catholic, All Angel's Church in Seneca Village was interracial, allowing for the Catholic Irish and German population to attend, hence highlighting possible differences in ideologies from other Protestant Churches. In shifting the argument for temperance from personal, physical health to sin, the religious sector of the temperance movement intersected with the capitalist interests of industrialists and racists beliefs of nativists to connect alcohol with moral corruption and degradation.



Pamphlet published by the Virginia Anti-Saloon League.

(Photo courtesy of VCU Libraries.)

## Conclusion

As our society becomes more globalized and dependent on mass-produced items, the social and ethical entanglements with this system are often not highlighted, specifically, when it

comes to ownership. Though over a century ago, we can look to the period between the Civil War and the 1920s to highlight the racism ingrained in American consumer culture that was prevalent during Seneca Village and continues to now. Post Civil War, “the vast majority of American born whites and European immigrants alike embraced the illusion of a classless consumer culture in which opportunity was available to white citizens alone.”<sup>15</sup> Especially in developing urban areas, such as New York City, the distinction between races, ethnicities, and immigration statuses was integral to upholding racist and classist social norms. Though consumerism has been more or less democratized, like class, it may still reflect racist trends that are not always explicit. Whether implicitly or systematically enforced, classes (turning into socioeconomic position and disposable income, and thus material consumption), are built off of social patterns that tend to affect people similarly who share a race, ethnicity, or immigration status. This is not to excuse generalizations and stereotypes, but instead to recognize inherent differences in the way people are able and allowed to participate in 18th through 21st century, American capitalism. When analyzing artifacts, specifically from Seneca Village, in today’s world, it is important to not make quick assumptions that feed into a single, historical narrative; such as how a wine bottle, presumably consumed during the temperance era, was not a sign of moral corruption or divergence from mainstream culture, but evidence of economic improvement and cultural homogeneity.

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<sup>15</sup> Paul R. Mullins, “Race and the Genteel Customer: Class and African-American Consumption 1850-1930,” *Historical Archaeology* 33: 22.  
<http://teenthinkers.bgcdml.net/senecavillage/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MULLINS-Race-and-the-genteel-consumer.pdf>.

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