

QUICK IDENTIFICATION GUIDE TO BOTTLES

Bottles come in all shapes and sizes. Collectors look at a bottle's shape, top, bottom, color, age and condition when determining value. A bottle's nickname can come from its shape, contents, maker or the location associated with its manufacturer. Shapes and embossing often indicated content. For example, bottles holding poison could be embossed with a skull so the very texture would warn users of the contents. Bottles containing carbonated soda or mineral water tended to have thicker glass to withstand the carbonation and handling.



At a recent Jeffrey S. Evans & Associates auction in Virginia, a 12-inch high, yellow/olive green Dr. Henley's Western Bitters bottle, c.1868, sold for \$10,530. Bitters, the medicine of the last half of the 19th century, were a mixture of herbs, roots, spices, and barks that were blended with alcohol. Some ingredients, like opium or marijuana, are considered dangerous and illegal today.

FLASKS

Whiskey flasks were made in America between 1750-1860. Almost any historic flask is identified in the book *American Bottles & Flasks and Their Ancestry* by Helen McKearin and Kenneth M. Wilson. Collectors, dealers, auction houses and bottle price books identify flasks by the "McKearin number."

The **calabash flask**, like this Hunter-Fisherman pictorial example – 1850-1870, 9 1/4 inches high, sold for \$234 – is shaped like the gourd called a calabash. The hollowed-out vegetable was often used to hold water.



Coffin flasks often held liquor and had a hexagonal base that tapered at the bottom, resembling a coffin. This 9-inch-high, 1890 Herzberg's Gin pictorial flask with a flat-collar mouth was embossed with "Old Tom Gin" and a cat. It sold for \$94.



The **chestnut flask** is almost round and is named for the nut from the chestnut tree that grows in Europe and the United States. Chestnut flasks are small. This example is a 6 7/8-inch-high chestnut flask with a rolled lip. It brought \$164.



A **demijohn** is a large, bulbous, narrow-necked bottle. Demijohns range in size from one to 10 gallons and are often encased in wicker. A dark olive amber, c.1840, 18-inch-high demijohn in a bladder shape brought \$199.



A **jar** is a wide-mouthed cylindrical bottle made of glass or earthenware. The fruit or canning jar is the one most likely to be seen today. Its mouth will usually have a special lip for a metal closure or threads for a lid.

The most famous is the Mason jar with the words "Mason 1858." The "1858" is the date of the original patent, not the date the jar was made. Variations of the Mason jar were made long after the original jar, and the same date could be seen on the jars for more than 70 years. Most bottles with raised, embossed lettering were made after 1858, when John L. Mason patented his famous fruit jar. A 9-inch-high Mason jar from 1880-1900 sold for just shy of \$500. Notice the lid rests on the shoulders of the jar. There is no neck.



Blob-top bottles contained soda and mineral water. This c.1850 blue-green, 7 1/4-inch-high, Cable & Son Sarsaparilla & Soda bottle sold for \$819.



A **case gin bottle** is more or less rectangular, but slightly tapered. It was shaped to fit in a wooden shipping crate. The bottles sat flat against each other in the case. The shape was especially favored by the Dutch, who used it for bottles of exported gin. This trio of Dutch "black glass" (deep olive green) gin bottles, 1780-1830, auctioned for \$2,106.



A **lady's leg** is a bottle with a shaped neck that slightly resembles the leg of a woman. It was a trademarked bottle shape first used by Boker's Stomach Bitters, although other bottlers used it as well. A 12-inch-high, c.1875 Reed's Bitters bottle with a lady's leg neck sold for \$222.



INKS

Perhaps because so many ink bottles are unmarked, ink bottle collectors have given them descriptive nicknames. The names were inspired by the size, shape of the bottle – igloo, teakettle, turtle, umbrella, cone, figural – and sometimes the method of manufacture.

Umbrella inks have from five to twelve sides, rolled lips and open pontils. A lot of two 2 1/2-inch-high, c.1850, 8-sided umbrella ink bottles, one green and the other blue green, auctioned for \$141. The blue green example is pictured.



A c.1850, 7 1/4-inch-high, 12-sided **master ink bottle** embossed Harrison's Columbian Ink sold for \$211. A master ink bottle held a larger quantity of ink that was meant to be poured into smaller bottles or inkwells.



A geometric mold-blown **figural inkwell**, 1815-1840 and only 1 1/2-inch high, brought \$211.



FIGURAL

It is impossible to list the hundreds of types of "**figural**" bottles. Any bottle that is shaped like a recognizable person or object is a figural bottle.



FUN FACT

Milk bottles were made in this shape so that when the cream separated, it could be removed from the top of the bottle. Colors were used for health reasons of the day. This

c.1930 milk bottle (one of two sold together in a lot) brought \$152.

This **figural bottle** is in the shape of a sitting bearded man. It has Poland Mineral Spring Water around a monogram. Aqua with an applied sloping collar, the c.1890 11 1/4-inch bottle sold for \$105.



An 1875, 2 1/2-inch high, aquamarine **figural ink bottle** shaped like a schoolhouse sold for \$234.



Photos are courtesy of Jeffrey S. Evans & Associates, 2177 Green Valley Ln, Mt. Crawford, VA 2284. Its Feb. 28, 2020. *Winter Americana* auction is archived at JeffreySEvans.com