

Links to the Gold Rush: Soda Bottle

Artifacts from the Royal BC Museum Historic Archaeology Collection

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Artifact Numbers DcRu
123:22



Close-up showing scratched
initials "AP"

How did an 1850s to 1860s soda bottle from New York City end up in gold rush era Victoria? How was it associated with a prominent citizen and community leader who made his fortune in Victoria?

In 1983, Grant Keddie from the Royal BC Museum was excavating ahead of development on the site of the original Songhees First Nations village, across the harbour from present day downtown Victoria. Among the artifacts recovered was a most unusual find: an intact New York City soda bottle embossed "Dixon and Carson 41 Walker St, NY." This style of soda bottle was typically used in the 1850s and 1860s in the United States. What made this more than just a curious find were two small letters scratched on the front of the bottle: "A" and "P." The initials stand for Alex Phillips.

Who was Alex Phillips?

The following is a quote from the Jewish Museum of the American West:

"Besides being the first recorded Jewish person to arrive in British Columbia, Alexander Aaron Phillips was Victoria's first baker of "Passover Bread" (matzoh), which he sold all over Vancouver Island and the state of Washington."

Phillips arrived in Victoria in 1858, and by the following year owned and operated the *Pioneer Soda Works*. The company was named after a soda works of the same name in San Francisco.

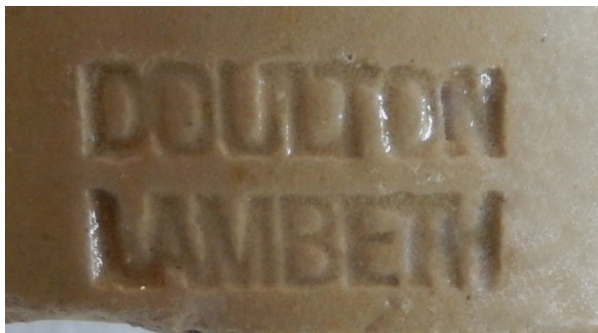
Phillips was born in London in 1818 and emigrated with his parents to Australia at the age of 11. In 1849, the young Phillips was drawn to California by the lure of gold, but spent his time learning the trades of baker and soda water maker in San Francisco. Later, the draw of gold had Phillips back on the move. This time, he set out for Victoria, not as a miner but as a skilled tradesman ready to invest and provide for the needs of thousands of newcomers.

Once in Victoria, Phillips was far more than just a skilled tradesman and business owner. He was the President of *Congregation Emanu-El* when the synagogue was consecrated in 1863 and a founding member of both the *Masons* and the *International Order of Odd Fellows* in Victoria. He was also a member of the *British Columbia Benevolent Society*.

ALEX. PHILLIPS,
PIONEER SYRUP, SODA & CIDER WORKS,
Peppermint and Ginger Beer,
FORT ST., NEAR BLANCHARD ST.,
VICTORIA, B. C.



Close-up of the text on the A. Phillips pottery bottle



Close-up of the text on the A. Phillips pottery bottle

What does the bottle tell us and why were his initials scratched on it?

The gold rush brought shortages of many kinds. In the case of this particular bottle, it likely filled shortages in the California and the British Columbia gold rushes. Historian Bill Wilson, co-author of *Pioneer Soda Water Companies of BC*, stated he has never heard of an eastern US soda bottle scratched with AP being found in British Columbia. However, he commented that there are plenty of eastern US soda bottles found in California, as soda manufacturers couldn't find enough bottles to meet demand and would obtain existing bottles from the east while waiting for their own orders to be filled.

Phillips maintained strong ties to San Francisco, where he could obtain most of his supplies within a reasonable time. One of the earliest known references to Phillips buying his supplies from San Francisco was the arrival of the steamer *Sierra Nevada*¹. Phillips is listed as a “consignee”, receiving a package of corks. Demand for his products in Victoria left Phillips scrambling for bottles, and he used his San Francisco contacts to get them. The Dixon and Carson bottle had likely been used and discarded in California, then collected and loaded

with other bottles destined for Victoria. Once there, the mixed batch of bottles from scores of other companies would be scratched with AP to show they were the property of Alex Phillips. A number of other Victoria firms, such as the *Victoria Brewery* (established 1858), were also scratching bottles to show ownership during the gold rush era.

Eventually, Phillips had his own bottles arrive, but likely continued to use recycled bottles for some time. The glass bottle, according to Wilson, may have been produced in a San Francisco glass house, but his stone ginger beer bottle was produced in Britain by the famous Doulton Lambeth Company. The impressed lettering states A. Phillips Victoria VI. “VI” stood for the crown colony of Vancouver Island. After the colonies were combined in 1866, most companies would switch to using BC or British Columbia. A special order for bottles like this could take months, if not more than a year, to reach the new colony, making recycling during the gold rush years a necessity.



These bottles were recovered from the Victoria Gorge, and are in a private collection.



About the author: Tom Bown originally worked for the RBCM before taking on a career in forest research. He maintained his passion for historic archaeology by volunteering with the Archaeological Society of BC and following his own research projects, some of which are now published. Since retiring from the federal government, Tom is assisting the RBCM in identifying related historic material.

¹ *British Colonist*, May 26, 1865, pg 3