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An American Witch Bottle

"Uncanny Archaeology"

by Marshall J. Becker

Evidence for the practice of "white witchcraft" in colonial Pennsylvania

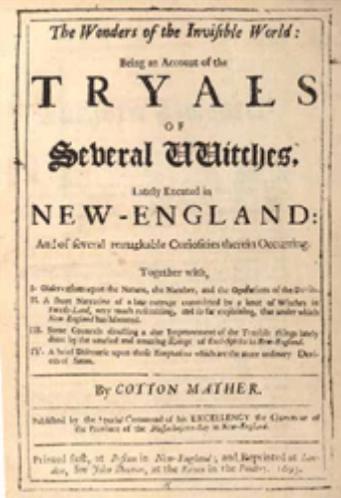


The Salem witch trials of 1692-1693 are well known. (Creative Commons)
An early publication on witchcraft, printed in Boston.

Witchcraft conjures instant pictures of sinister beings, malevolent magic, and eerie happenings. Almost every American school child has heard of the Salem witch trials, and belief in sorcery still prospers in the many cosmopolitan crossroads of contemporary America. But this long tradition of magic and ritual rarely has been recorded. Even more scarce are artifacts that provide tangible evidence for the existence of witchcraft practices.

A curious bottle unearthed during recent excavations in Governor Printz State Park in Essington, Pennsylvania, provides a glimpse of early American witchcraft--unique evidence of a special "white witchcraft" hitherto known only from England. This squat piece of glasswork with a bright gold patina over its dark olive color had been buried upside down in a small hole. Two objects were deposited under the shoulder of the bottle: a piece of a long thin bone from some medium-sized bird, possibly a partridge, and a redware rim sherd from a small black-glazed bowl. The bottle contained six round-headed pins and had been stoppered tightly with a whittled wooden plug.

What makes this bottle and its contents curious are their uniqueness; no other bottle with similar contents has ever been found in the United States. On study, it proved to be a type of "witch bottle" that is familiar from English contexts dating to the 17th century. Although the American example probably dates to the 18th century--the bottle was manufactured around 1740 and may have been buried about 1748--the parallels are clear enough to establish its functions as an anti-witch charm. Such white magic was practiced widely in colonial America, enough so, that Increase Mather (1639-1732), the well-known minister and author, inveighed against it as early as 1684. His son, Cotton Mather (1663-1728), advised in favor of its use in particular situations. Since Cotton Mather was the most celebrated of all American Puritans, his publications must have had widespread impact and reflected the attitudes of the day.



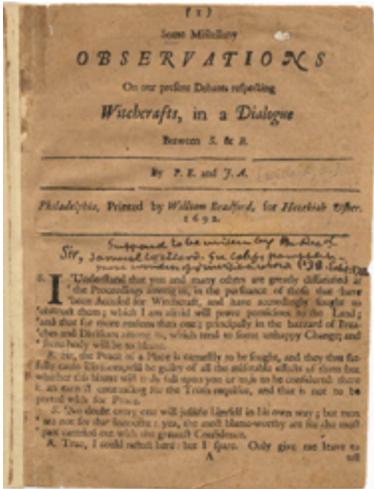
Cotton Mather wrote several works about witchcraft, defending the Salem trials in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*.

Witchcraft was regarded as a sufficiently serious problem in the early days of the colonies that various pieces of legislation were enacted against it. In May of 1718, Pennsylvania's legislators passed "An Act for the Advancement of Justice," which incorporated verbatim "An Act Against Conjuraction, Witchcraft, and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits" promulgated in England in 1685, the first year of James II's reign. This prudent legislation did not stem the tide, however, for as we learn from the work of Stevenson W. Fletcher, "Following an especially sever outbreak of the devilish machinations of witches in Chester County, in 1719, a commission of justices of the county court was empowered to enquire into 'all witchcrafts, enchantments, sorceries and magic arts.'" Even Governor William Penn presided over the trial of a witch at a meeting of the Provincial Assembly in 1684. With the coming of the urban-industrial revolution and the consequent spread of scientific methods, public concern with witchcraft began to abate. Although it lingered on in byways and in certain rural areas as it still does today, witchcraft had significantly diminished by 1800. There is very little artifactual or written evidence of it after 1720.



Witchcraft trials were not only a New England phenomenon. Pennsylvania governor William Penn presided over a trial in 1684.

A 1692 Philadelphia publication debating the pursuit of "those that have been accused of witchcraft."



The Essington witch bottle from the Governor Printz Park excavations conducted in 1976 on Tinicum Island in the Delaware River affords an interesting example of the perpetuation of witchcraft into the mid-18th century. This is the only such bottle which comes from securely established archaeological context. The bottle itself, its contents, inverted position, and placement next to the house where it was found all point to the magical powers such bottles were thought to possess. In general, witch bottles seem to have served two functions: they could serve as prophylactic amulets during the building of a house, or they could serve as countermeasures against special acts of witchcraft. In the former case, bottles generally were buried beneath thresholds or hearthstones or within the confines of structures. The 19th-century scholar Ludwig Hanselmann believed that witch bottles

were related to the early pagan custom of foundation sacrifices. When used as a device against witchcraft practices, they were buried either outside or thrown into a stream.



Swedish governor Johan Printz

The witch bottle from Tincum Island appears to be this second sort. It comes from a context definitely outside the original foundation of the house associated with it. This structure is believed to be the "Printzhof"--originally the residence of the Swedish governor Johan Printz, who, between 1643 and 1653, headed the first colonial government of what is now Pennsylvania. Printz had been sent to the New World to do business with the Lenape and Susquehannock and to lead Swedish traders on the South (now Delaware) River in wresting the trade with Native Americans from the Dutch. He settled on Tincum Island, 24 kilometers downstream from modern central Philadelphia, and built a residence in what is now Governor Printz State Park. While excavating the remains of this structure, we came upon the witch bottle which dates from a considerably later phase of the building's occupation. The land on which Printzhof stood passed from the Printz family into the hands of others and ultimately into the possession of Quaker settlers by the name of Taylor; the Taylors held the land until 1800 when this parcel was divided into three smaller units. In 1748, one of the Taylors, then resident of the house, may have planted the witch bottle during rebuilding of the old foundation.

Exactly why the bottle was buried remains open to conjecture, but the ethnohistorical parallels make the guesswork rather minimal. The Essington bottle was quite probably filled with urine when buried, and it is possible that the urine and six pins were boiled together before they were placed in the bottle. Such ingredients were antidotes to pain thought to have been induced by witchcraft. Urinary problems were common both in England and America during the 17th and 18th centuries, and it is reasonable to suppose their symptoms often were attributed to the work of local witches. The victims of bladder stones or other urinary ailments would have used a witch bottle to transfer the pains of the illness from themselves back to the witch. The pins or nails often were used to symbolize the victim's pain; the boiling of the ingredients served to redirect the sufferer's symptoms back to the witch. In some cases, this might in turn reveal the identity of the witch.

Such sympathetic magic betrays a primitive understanding of the laws of causality as well as bodily functions. Presumably, the victim's urine had become contaminated by "blood" from the witch, and the assembly of a witch bottle could convey the contaminant back into the witch's own system. In this case, the victims were regarding their urine as a waste product no longer integral to his or her body--the reverse of the practice in many credulous cultures, where urine, feces, nail parings, and hair clippings were regarded as vital parts of the body which had to be disposed of carefully lest malevolent people use them to deprive the owner of strength or health.

The Essington bottle contained six intact pins, probably because six is a number traditionally effective against witches; witness the six-pointed "hex" signs still in use today in rural parts of Pennsylvania. The potsherd has no parallels with other known

English witch bottles, but the associated bird bones are familiar, although not from specifically English examples. In parts of Europe, bird bones are often found in association with all types of vessels buried with magical items. Animal bones, however, are a long-standing ingredient in magical charms, and the presence of one beneath this bottle is not particularly surprising. The inverted position of the bottle also has many English parallels and doubtless symbolizes the reversing or "overturning" of the witch's intentions.



Sealed with a carved wooden plug (center), the Essington witch bottle contained pins (left), and was accompanied by a pottery sherd and bird bone (right). (Courtesy Marshall J. Becker)



The Essington witch bottle; deep "push-up" was a clue to its date (Courtesy Marshall J. Becker)

Compared with some English witch bottles, the American example has only modest contents. Quite commonly the pins found in English witch bottles were lodged in felt hearts. The pins even may have been arranged in magical patterns, for example, to form a hex sign. A bottle recovered from a construction site on Pottery Street in Suffolk, England, constitutes the richest witchcraft find. A stoneware bottle, in the usual inverted position, held a wide array of contents--some duplicated other Suffolk finds, but others were entirely unique. The bottle contained a piece of felt that had probably once been heart-shaped, six brass pins, human hair, and roughly 40 badly rusted nails of odd sizes. In addition to all of these traditional ingredients, it contained some more unusual objects including a common two-pronged table fork made of iron, more than 40 small fragments of glass, 24 brass studs with convex heads--possibly upholstery pins--and fragments of four flat wooden spills pointed at both ends and placed in the bottle last. This rather well-filled bottle had been stoppered with a plug of hard clay-like material exactly like another example found eroded on the banks of the Thames River in London. Analysis revealed that the Suffolk plug contained phosphate. The plug might have come from a trash heap or outhouse--or again, may have been originally permeated with the urine seeping out of the bottle. Over time the contents of witch bottles appear to have diminished in number until finally they contained only urine.



Six-pointed stars in an Allentown, Pennsylvania, hex sign

Glass or terracotta bottles, used as witch bottles, have an interesting history exclusive of their role in magical activities. The one found on Tincum Island was dark green covered with a bright gold patina, a result of its age and decomposition of the glass surface. This bottle also has a large, smooth "push-up" or indentation in its base. The shape of the bottle and the smooth surface

of the push-up help date the bottle as having been made some time between 1730 and 1750, a period when manufacturing techniques were becoming more sophisticated. But most of the English witch bottles which are similar in function to the Essington one are not glass bottles at all: they are largely bellarmines, a highly popular type of 17th-century stoneware container purportedly named after Roberto Cardinal Bellarmino (1542-1621), a well-known conservative theologian much despised in Protestant Germany where these vessels were produced. Bellarmine are distinctive because they are typically adorned with the figure of a bearded man resembling the face of a warlock, one probable reason for their use as witch bottles. Large-bellied and narrow-necked, bellarmine served as drinking jugs and were imported to London and East Anglia to the north of London in considerable numbers during the 17th century. They also may have been used in the fabrication of witch bottles simply because of their sturdy construction. (See "[Opening a Witch Bottle](#)" for an example of a bellarmine.)

Another variety of witchcraft container is the glass phial which turns up in 18th-century contexts as a charm against evil creatures. Steeple-shaped phials were also buried upside down and have many antecedents in pre-17th-century contexts. Similar charms, for example, were buried by the Saxons in "wall roots" or foundations, and are mentioned in the famous volume of medieval treatises gathered together as "Saxon Leechdoms." Leechcraft, the art of healing, began as a complex mélange of herbal knowledge, folk remedies, and magic. One particular transitional bottle, worth noting, dates to the last quarter of the 17th century and is a bellarmine with horseshoe-like impression in place of the usual bearded face. This type was probably made when English manufacturers were successfully challenging German producers of bellarmine, a time when the traditional form was beginning to degenerate. After 1700, the shape of these jugs continued to change until they became similar to modern-day tankards. One Suffolk piece dating to the end of the 17th century has a triangular stamp replacing the mask and is decorated with stylized medallions.

It stands to reason that the American witch bottle from Pennsylvania would have its closest parallels with London, since the mother country's influence on the colonies was strong and the Taylor family had its English origins in the Midlands. But what of England and the continent? While no direct relationship appears to exist between English witch bottles and magical charms found in Europe, there are many parallels. Jugs, pots, and other "magical" vessels have been recovered in Germany, Holland, and throughout Scandinavia. On the whole, these vessels are found empty. But odd items are often discovered in them, including animal bones such as bird bones. The best known Continental examples are 15th century in date, but the practices they represent persisted until much later on both sides of the Channel.



Detail from Claes Van Visscher's panoramic view of London in 1616.

Examples of witchcraft can be found in a remarkable variety of cultures and can be traced back to the very earliest phases of history. The 17th-century Englishman might seek to dispel a "weakness" by boring a hole in a living oak tree and placing his hair cuttings or nail clippings in it; or he might seek to cure himself of some ailment by burying his "water" in an ant's nest or by pouring it on a dung heap. Such primitive efforts to contend with human frailty may seem amusing to us now, but they represent the poignant efforts of a pre-scientific era to lessen real suffering. Indeed, to judge from the concentration of white magic charms in and around London during the 17th century, it is possible that the ailments which occasioned their use had become more frequent. Such an increase in pains and illnesses may have been the result of changes in diet or some other aspect of lifestyle. It is known, for example, that smoking increased significantly during this period, although there is no way of knowing that this habit was linked to specific ills related to witch bottles. Witches of the colonial era kept themselves busy on both sides of the Atlantic,

afflicting innocent people with discomforts and diseases. The strong belief in these witches traveled with our ancestors over the sea to America and persisted through the centuries.

Marshall J. Becker of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology is author of "An Update on Colonial Witch Bottles," *Pennsylvania Archaeologist* 75:2 (2005), pp. 12-23. This article was originally published in *ARCHAEOLOGY*, March/April 1980, pp. 18-23. References noted in the original publication included G. Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1708* (1914); S. Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Rural Life, 1640-1840* (1950); and E. Gummere, *Witchcraft and Quakerism* (1908).