

SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF THE BLACK'S INDIA PALE ALE BOTTLE FROM THE JOHN MARSH HOUSE, CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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During excavations at the John Marsh House, built in the mid-1850s, a glass bottle was found in the construction trench that still had a paper label mostly intact that said "Black's India Pale Ale." Over the next 30 years, efforts to learn more about this bottle were ineffectual. However, some recent serendipitous sleuthing made easier by the wonders of the internet finally brought the answers not only to where the bottle came from, but also to how it got to San Francisco and subsequently to its final resting place.

In recent decades, a popular type of ale known as IPA (for India Pale Ale) has been produced by a number of microbreweries in various parts of the world. However, India Pale Ale was originally brewed in England and Scotland beginning in the early nineteenth century (Steele 2012). The term "East India Pale Ale" was not used in print until 1835 (Steele 2012:26). The name derived from the proximity of the Hodgson Bow Brewery to the East India Company docks in London. Whereas this pale ale was initially developed for the lucrative market in British India, more brewers subsequently adopted the name for this ale and shipped it to other parts of the world.

The bottle was found at the site of the home of John Marsh (Figure 1), who was born in Danvers, Massachusetts, in 1799. He was a graduate of the Harvard College class of 1823 and trained to become a doctor at Fort Snelling in Minnesota. However, he got on the wrong side during the Black Hawk War (1832) and felt compelled to flee the country, traveling first to Santa Fe and then on to Mexican California (Lyman 1930). There he purchased the land grant known as Los Meganos in Contra Costa County. Marsh had bought the land in 1838 and used it to raise cattle. For over a decade, he lived in a modest adobe (Figure 2) on his property (Whitcher 1853). With the coming of the Gold Rush in California, Marsh became very wealthy selling his cattle to provide beef for the Argonauts. He married a woman named Abby Tuck and, with their shared New England background, they aspired to a grander abode (Figure 3). In 1854, Marsh began construction of a Gothic stone mansion with an Italianate veranda adapted to the heat of the Central Valley. Construction was completed in the fall of 1856. In the meantime, however, Abby Tuck Marsh had died (in 1855). John Marsh himself was murdered in September 1856, only a month after the completion of his Stone House.

While excavating in the "Keeping Room" (office) of the John Marsh Stone House, a complete bottle (Figure 4) with a paper label still mostly intact was discovered (Farris et al. 1988:66-67). It came from the builders' trench adjacent to an interior foundation wall. Although a published description of the construction of the house states that it was built during a flurry of activity from April to August of 1856 (Brennan and Batchelder vs. James Marsh and Seth M. Swain 1858:24), it is probable that the foundation was put in place slightly before then. Since the house was built in 1855-1856, it was believed that this bottle likely dated to no later than 1856.

The paper label states clearly "Black's ... India Pale Ale," with the word "Brewery" at the bottom, and at the top a portion of the name of the town in which it was brewed. The town name is hard to read but appears to end in either "port" or "croft." The bottle is 27.3 cm (10 ¾ in) high by 8.4 cm (3.3 in) in diameter. It was made of "black glass" using a 3-piece mold. The bottle held 24 fluid ounces. The neck of the bottle still has remnants of a foil wrapping. The artifact has been catalogued at the State Archaeological Collections Research Facility under the number P491-99-1.

For three decades, this bottle remained a mystery. Several of the most renowned glass experts in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain were contacted, but none were able to help with an identification. Recently, I consulted the California Digital Newspaper Collection (CDNC), a digital archive of a selection of California papers based at the University of California, Riverside, and finally was able to



Figure 1. John Marsh (Lyman 1930:frontispiece).

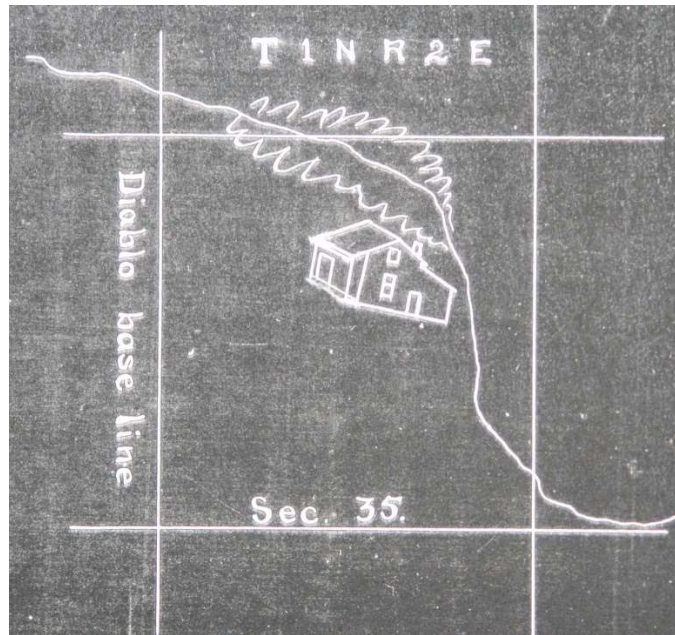


Figure 2. Detail of sketch of John Marsh Adobe from survey map (Whitcher 1853). Courtesy of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

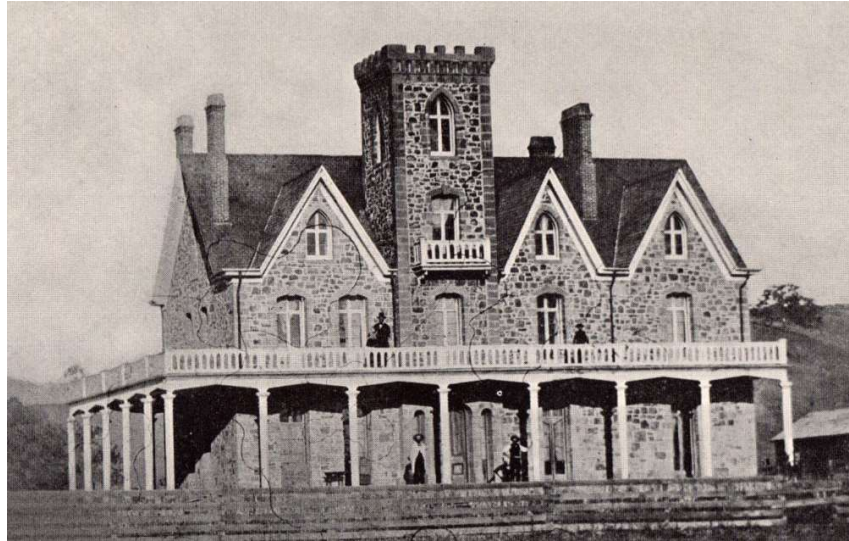


Figure 3. John Marsh Stone House in Contra Costa County (Lyman 1930:294).



Figure 4. Drawing of Black's Pale Ale bottle found at the Marsh House site. Drawing by Christina Savitski. Courtesy of California State Parks, State Archaeological Collections Research Facility.

locate notices for Black's India Pale Ale. They appeared in the *Daily Alta California* (1855c), a San Francisco newspaper, on several days in July 1855, with the earliest being July 4, 1855. The ad states that Cross & Company on Battery Street in San Francisco had for sale a variety of ales and porters, among which were "Black's E. India Pale Ale" in "casks of 8 doz. Each." In addition to the India Pale Ale, there were two other "Black's" products: Black's XXX Ale in hhds [hogsheads], and Black's XX Stout.

The ad further reported that the products had arrived aboard the ship *Tadmor* from Glasgow, Scotland. Another article stated that the *Tadmor* had left Glasgow on December 13, 1854 (*Daily Alta California* 1855a). This ad was the only listing I could find for the Black label, and while this product may have arrived at other times, its availability in mid-1855 is clearly established.

The City Directory for San Francisco for 1856 (there apparently is no 1855 directory), shows Cross & Company to have been located at 153 Battery Street. In addition, two individuals named Joseph Clark and John Wedderspoon were associated with the firm "Cross & Co. importers and commercial merchants, 153 Battery St." (San Francisco City Directory 1856:35, 40, 111). It was owned by Alexander Cross, a merchant who also had offices in Glasgow, Scotland (Alexander Cross 1857:57). Information about Cross & Co. appears in an advertisement of San Francisco Merchants in 1855 (*Daily Alta California* 1855b) which describes "Cross & Co., Commission Merchants, Iron Warehouse, Battery Street [San Francisco]. Represented by Cross, Wedderspoon & Co., Glasgow, and Cross & Co. Valparaiso." John Wedderspoon was born in Scotland in 1821 and emigrated to the United States, eventually arriving in San Francisco. Joseph Clark also emigrated to San Francisco and is listed as the bookkeeper for Cross & Co. (Alexander Cross 1859).

Further online research on the web site of a group called the Durden Park Beer Circle (1849) produced a brief article titled, "William Black's X Ale (1849)." The information provided states:

Perhaps the most well known historical brewing firm was that of William Black & Company of Aberdeen believed to have been established in 1803. The firm was laterally acquired in 1819 to become the Gilcomston Brewery and again by the Devanha Brewery Company Limited, registered as a limited liability company in 1910. Brewing finally ceased in 1930 after the firm was acquired by Thomas Usher & Son Ltd. of Edinburgh [<http://www.scottishbrewing.com/breweries/aberdeenandnortheast/aberdeenandnortheast.php>].

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thus, we have an answer to the mystery of this rare bottle from the John Marsh Stone House foundations. William Black and Company of Aberdeen bottled their India Pale Ale sometime in the early 1850s, and a consignment of the beverage, along with several other products of the Black Company, were shipped to California aboard the ship *Tadmor*, which sailed from the port of Glasgow on December 13, 1854. Upon arrival in San Francisco, the consignment was accepted by Cross and Company on Battery Street, which then advertised the products in the *Daily Alta California*. At this point, it is not known for sure whether it was John Marsh of the Los Meganos Ranch himself or, more likely, the workmen employed to build Marsh's new stone mansion who purchased the India Pale Ale. At any rate, someone brought a bottle to the construction site of the Marsh House, consumed its contents, and tossed the bottle into the foundation trench for one of the inner walls of the building, where it lay until being excavated in 1986. The bottle is currently on display at the McClellan, California, offices of the California State Parks museum and archaeological collections.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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House project: Kathy Davis, Larry Felton, Phil Hines, John Rumbing, and Rae Schwaderer. Heather Martin provided photographic images of the bottle. Thanks also to Peter Hanchett for obtaining the liquid volume of the bottle.

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