



ISSUE NINE : WINTER 2018
OPEN RIVERS :
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

INNOVATIONS

<http://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is of tending water and listening at Water Bar in Greensboro, North Carolina, courtesy Shanai Matteson, Works Progress, and Water Bar & Public Studio.

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Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community is produced by the [University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing](https://www.libraries.umn.edu/) and the [University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study](https://www.umn.edu/advanced-study/).

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ISSN 2471-190X

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PRIMARY SOURCES

THE STORY BEHIND A NASSAU BOTTLE EXCAVATED AT HISTORIC FORT SNELLING

By Nancy Buck Hoffman

For millennia, Native American people traveled and traded on the Mississippi River. When colonial powers moved into North America, they quickly saw the importance of controlling transportation and the movement of goods on the river. In 1820, The United States government established Fort Snelling at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers to protect American fur trade interests in the region and to gain a foothold in the western territory that would become Minnesota.

The fort served various military functions until 1946 when the army decommissioned the site. By the 1950s, only four of its original buildings remained standing. In 1956, public interest in preserving what remained of the fort and rebuilding the site to its original appearance led to excavations conducted by Minnesota

Historical Society (MNHS) archaeologists. Over the course of 17 years, from 1965 to 1981, their work provided invaluable evidence for an accurate reconstruction of the site. The research also produced over 600 cubic feet of collections. Because the research focused on documenting construction techniques, the artifacts did not get a lot of attention. In addition to the sheer volume of material, paper catalogs made it hard for later researchers to tackle any kind of analysis.

Pat Emerson, Head of Archaeology at MNHS, decided this valuable collection needed to be made accessible. In 2013, she applied for and received a state grant to inventory the collection and create electronic records for the artifacts. I have been lucky enough to spend the last four years working on the inventory and getting to know the fort through its material culture.



Historic Fort Snelling from Round Tower. Image courtesy of the author.



*Collection of ceramic sherds from the Nassau Selters bottle.
Digital image Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society and Nancy Hoffman.*

You would not be surprised by the majority of artifacts found during the excavations: broken bits of glass—primarily from bottles that held alcohol, uniform accessories, and pieces of tobacco pipes. Other objects clearly have fascinating stories to tell. An artifact that intrigued me the first moment I saw it was a ceramic water bottle from Germany. Why, in the land of 10,000 lakes, would anyone import water from Europe in a heavy stoneware bottle? The answer lies in mid-nineteenth century attitudes towards health and the power of commerce.

The bottle (actually a collection of ceramic sherds) has a circular seal stamped just below the shoulder. On it, the word “SELTERS” surrounds the image of a crowned lion standing on its hind legs. Stamped below this are the words “HERZOGTHUM NASSAU.” These marks identify the former contents as mineral water from the Niederselters spring in the Duchy of Nassau located in the modern state of Hesse, Germany. The spring produces naturally carbonated water. It has been known for hundreds of years and by the late eighteenth century, the water was bottled and exported world-wide. By the nineteenth century, it was so well known that one of our generic terms for carbonated water, seltzer, derives from Selters.

Export of Selters water to the United States may have begun as early as 1846 [p. 119, The Bottles of Old Sacramento]. The Duchy of Nassau ceased to exist in 1866, when it was occupied and absorbed into the Kingdom of Prussia. That means our bottle must have arrived at the fort sometime between 1846 and 1866.

Fort Snelling had a good supply of potable water throughout the nineteenth century. A well at the fort provided drinking water, but the volume proved insufficient, so it was supplemented with barrels of water delivered daily via horse cart from Coldwater Spring. Even the Mississippi River water was relatively clean up through the 1850s. Clearly, there was no need to replace or

supplement the local supply of fresh water, and this would have been prohibitively expensive in any event.

So what did Selters water have that Minnesota water did not? Simply put—bubbles. “Taking the waters,” either by bathing in them or drinking them, was a long-standing health practice by the mid-nineteenth century. Mineral water was widely regarded as an effective cure for a host of ailments. An 1839 treatise titled, “ON THE GENERAL LOCALITIES, NATURE, AND USES, OF MINERAL WATERS” included this passage:

“Dr. T. Thomson says, that the Spa waters may be termed either acidulous or chalybeate, for they are a combination of both. Their effect is stimulating, and they promote the secretions, especially with respect to the kidneys and the skin. The general effect of the carbonated waters is stimulant, and they are even capable of producing a certain degree of transient intoxication, they are also useful in bilious affections, and as an agreeable drink in fevers, but are injurious in cases of flatulency or indigestion.”

In an age of dangerous patent medicines, mineral water was probably one of the few cure-alls that did no harm. Other observers noted that the sparkling water mixed well with alcohol, a quality that expanded its appeal to anyone using alcohol, medicinally or not.

Archaeologists found the bottle in an enclosure behind the sutler’s store. Sutlers were civilian merchants appointed by the army to sell goods to soldiers at set prices. These would largely consist of specialty items the government did not provide. The sutler at Fort Snelling also served as the postmaster during this period, making the store an important point of connection to the rest of the world. The area behind the store probably served as living quarters for the sutler or his clerk. In addition to this bottle, fragments of two other identical bottles were recovered from



A similar selters bottle from Niederselters from the 19th century. Photographer Volker Thies. CC BY-SA 3.0.

the same area. A later, nearly complete Selters bottle was also found there. The enclosure behind the store and the store itself seem to have been social gathering places at the fort. The mineral water could have been merchandise for sale in the store or may have been consumed by the sutler. The bottle certainly didn't get too far from the store regardless of who consumed it. This discard pattern is similar to the one seen for a common nineteenth-century patent medicine, Essence of Peppermint. Approximately three-quarters of all the Essence of Peppermint bottles identified at the fort were found in and around the sutler's store.

Only robust water transportation systems made import of water from Germany possible, first across the Atlantic and then up the Mississippi from New Orleans. Once it reached the United States, it could also have been sent by rail to

Saint Louis or La Crosse, Wisconsin and then by steamboat to Fort Snelling. Franklin Steele, the entrepreneur who served as Fort Snelling's sutler from 1840 to 1865, owned a share in a steamboat company by the mid-1850s. This would have allowed him to make money on the transportation as well as the sale of items shipped to his store.

Selters water was a luxury in nineteenth-century America no matter how you calculate its value^[1] and small luxuries were the sutler's stock-in-trade. Whether Selters water was consumed as a medicine or a mixer with alcohol, it is exactly the kind of good the sutler's customers sought out to brighten their lives in Minnesota. The bottle is one of many artifacts that demonstrate how even people living in and near Fort Snelling were connected to the global commercial network in the mid-nineteenth century.

Footnotes

[1] I had difficulty finding a reliable price but it seems to have run from \$4 to \$12 per bottle in 2017 dollars. See https://www.parks.ca.gov/pages/22491/files/CA_State_Parks_Archaeological_Report_Vol20_BottlesOldSacramento.pdf and https://archive.org/stream/saturdaymagazinoounkngoog/saturdaymagazinoounkngoog_djvu.txt.

Recommended Citation

Hoffman, Nancy Buck. 2018. "The Story Behind a Nassau Bottle Excavated at Historic Fort Snelling." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 9. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/the-story-behind-a-nassau-bottle-excavated-at-historic-fort-snelling/>.

About the Author

Nancy Buck Hoffman studied archaeology with Dr. Janet Spector at the University of Minnesota. She has worked with archaeology collections and museum data management for over 25 years at both the Minnesota and the Wisconsin Historical Societies.