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Tabasco Brand Pepper Sauce Bottles from Avery Island, Louisiana

ABSTRACT

Archaeologists investigating sites inhabited after 1868 often find bottles that once contained Tabasco brand pepper sauce, manufactured by McIlhenny Company, Avery Island, Louisiana. Detailed information about these bottles is difficult to obtain from the literature. Archaeological research on Avery Island has provided relative dating information about these bottles that will be of interest to historical archaeologists.

Introduction

Archaeologists who study late 19th- and 20th-century sites often find artifacts that are identifiable in form and function but are difficult to date. Objects that fall within this category are the bottles used by McIlhenny Company, Avery Island, Louisiana, for their world-famous Tabasco brand pepper sauce. These bottles are ubiquitous on late 19th- and 20th-century sites due to the popularity of Tabasco brand pepper sauce, even finding its way to Howard Carter's table inside Tutankhamen's tomb. Although minimal information on these bottles is available (Starry 1971; Zumwalt 1980), three years of archaeological and historical research on Avery Island has yielded new information about them that will help archaeologists provide dates for these bottles.

Avery Island is located in extreme southern Louisiana in Iberia Parish. The island has been continuously inhabited since the 1790s and a number of industries have been operated there, including sugar plantations and a salt mine (Orser 1987; Babson and Orser 1989). Without doubt, however, the most famous industry of Avery Island is that

which grew up around the production of Tabasco brand pepper sauce.

Tabasco brand pepper sauce was first produced commercially on Avery Island, then called Petite Anse Island, after the Civil War. The pepper *Capsicum frutescens* var. *tabasco* made its appearance on the island in 1849 or 1850 when a resident of the island, Edmund McIlhenny, received seeds from a friend who had recently returned to New Orleans from the Mexican War (U.S. District Court 1917:31; Schweid 1980:59; Andrews 1984; Conaway 1984:76; Gullede 1986:4). McIlhenny planted the seeds in a garden on the island, liked the taste of the peppers that were grown, and began experimenting with producing a sauce from them. The idea of producing sauce from peppers was not entirely new in south Louisiana, because at least one innovative plantation owner had developed a hot sauce during the 1840s to season his food and to administer to his slaves as a cholera preventative (*New Orleans Daily Delta* 1850). When the Civil War came to south Louisiana in 1863, the McIlhennys fled the island, leaving their property and their *Capsicum* plants behind (Osborn 1966). The plants, however, survived the Union attack on the Confederate salt works and the subsequent federal occupation of the island.

The McIlhennys returned to Avery Island after the war and Edmund McIlhenny continued his experiments with pepper sauce, eventually settling upon an acceptable formula. McIlhenny produced this sauce for his family under the name "Petite Anse Island Sauce" (McIlhenny n.d.:2). Island tradition maintains that McIlhenny eventually gave some of this sauce to the federal administrator for Avery Island who in turn passed it on to his brother, the head of a large wholesale grocery house (*Baton Rouge State Times* 1936). This wholesaler was able to find a number of buyers for the new sauce (Schweid 1980:61) and McIlhenny sent his first shipment of 350 bottles (tradition maintains in second-hand perfume bottles) out of Avery Island in 1868. McIlhenny's father-in-law and owner of Avery Island, Judge Daniel D. Avery, did not want the name of his island used for a commercial business. Thus McIlhenny renamed his sauce "Tabasco" after the Mexican province

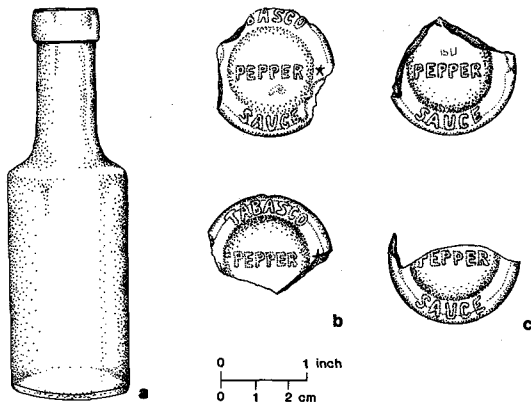


FIGURE 1. Bottles from the Laboratory and Marsh House: a, McIlhenny's Glass Bottle form; b, starred embossment; c, starless embossment.

because he liked the way it sounded (McIlhenny n.d.:2).

By 1869 several thousand bottles of McIlhenny's hot sauce were produced on Avery Island and sold for one dollar each (Conaway 1984:76). This sauce was produced at a building known as the Laboratory from 1868 until about 1909 when a new factory was constructed in another location on the island (Ries 1968:21).

Tabasco Brand Pepper Sauce Bottles

Four types of Tabasco brand pepper sauce bottles are currently known to exist. These bottles have three morphological characteristics that make them distinctive: overall shape, bottom embossment, and sprinkler top form.

The first type of bottle is made in the patented "McIlhenny's Glass Bottle" form (Figure 1a). This clear glass, mouth-blown bottle is identifiable by its steeply recurvate shoulders and its patent lip. The base of these bottles was formed in a two-piece, cup-bottomed mold used for small-to-medium-sized bottles after about 1850 (Jones and Sullivan 1985:44–45). The bases exhibit one of two possible embossments. One embossment consists of the words "TABASCO*/PEPPER*/SAUCE"

(Figure 1b). The word "TABASCO" curves along the top of the embossment, the word "PEPPER" is flanked by two stars and extends straight across the middle of the bottle, and the word "SAUCE" curves along the bottom. The other embossment is like the first but does not include stars (Figure 1c). The reason for the distinction between the "starred" and the "starless" varieties is unknown, but the stars may be meant to mimic those that originally appeared on the early bottle labels (U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals 1922:33).

The second bottle type is a small, clear-glass, mouth-blown bottle with a patent finish, recurvate shoulders, and a body formed in a two-piece, cup-bottom mold. The embossment reads "TABASCO/McILHENNY/SAUCE" with "McILHENNY" occupying the center (Figure 2a). A related bottle type has the same McIlhenny's Glass Bottle shape, but has a long neck and contains two bands of small, raised squares between raised ridges extending around the bottle. The embossment on this type simply reads "McILHENNY" extending across the middle of the base (Figure 2b).

A third bottle type is a small, machine-blown bottle with a narrow, threaded sprinkler top, rounded shoulders, and an embossment reading "TABASCO/McILHENNY/SAUCE" (Figure 3a). In this embossment "TABASCO" curves across the top, "McILHENNY" extends across the middle, and "SAUCE" curves along the bottom. A single number is placed between "McILHENNY" and "SAUCE." On one of the bottles, a "T" in a triangle is located between "TABASCO" and "McILHENNY" (Figure 3b). This mark may be the manufacturer's mark of the Turner Brothers Company of Terre Haute, Indiana, used between 1915 and 1929 (Toulouse 1971:490). The triangle on the Tabasco brand pepper sauce bottles, however, is straight-sided, while the sides of the triangle in the Toulouse (1971) example bow outward. For this reason, an exact association of the Tabasco brand pepper sauce bottles with the Turner works cannot be confirmed.

The Tabasco brand pepper sauce bottles that are currently used by McIlhenny Company are made of clear glass, have rounded shoulders, an integral

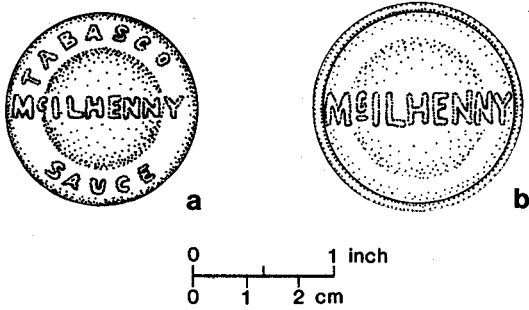
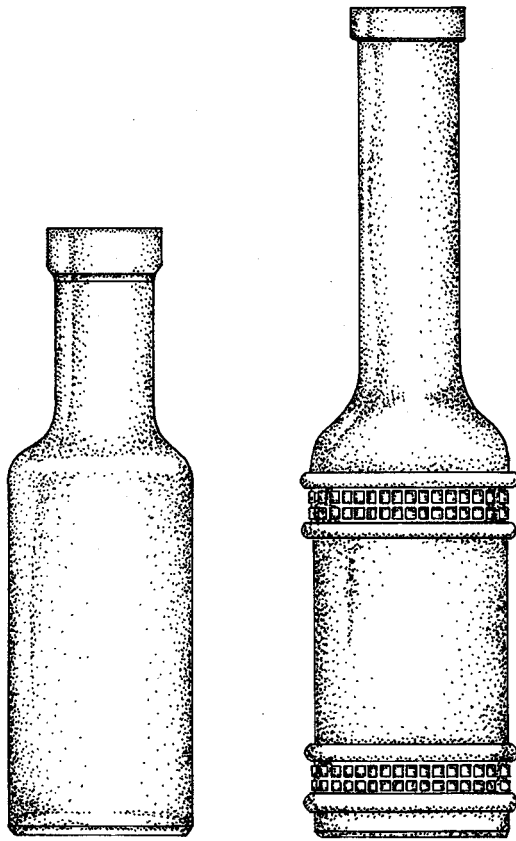


FIGURE 2. Bottles from Jumbalaya Bottle Dump: a, McIlhenny Glass Bottle form with embossment; b, modified McIlhenny Glass Bottle form.

sprinkler top, and a continuous-thread finish. The embossment on these bottles reads “TABASCO/ BRAND/PEPPER SAUCE,” with “TABASCO” curving across the top of the embossment,

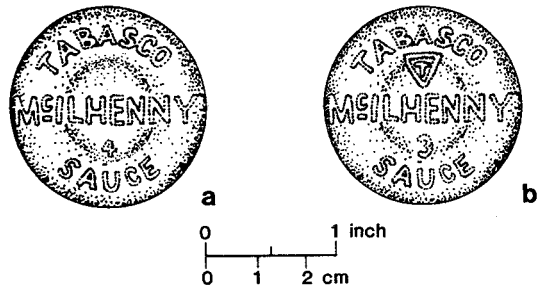
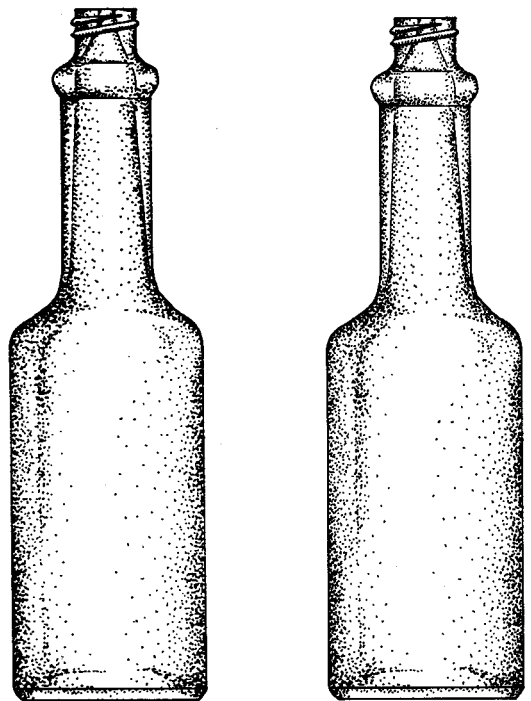


FIGURE 3. Bottles from the Dragline Ditch Site: a, Tabasco brand pepper sauce with continuous-thread finish and integral sprinkler top; b, continuous-thread finish with possible manufacturer's mark.

“BRAND” extending across the center, and “PEPPER SAUCE” curving along the bottom (Figure 4). These embossments also contain a number in the same location as in the third bottle type.

Sprinkler Tops from Tabasco Brand Pepper Sauce Bottles

In addition to differences in the bottles themselves, distinct differences also occur in sprinkler

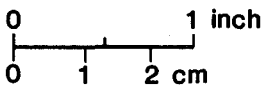
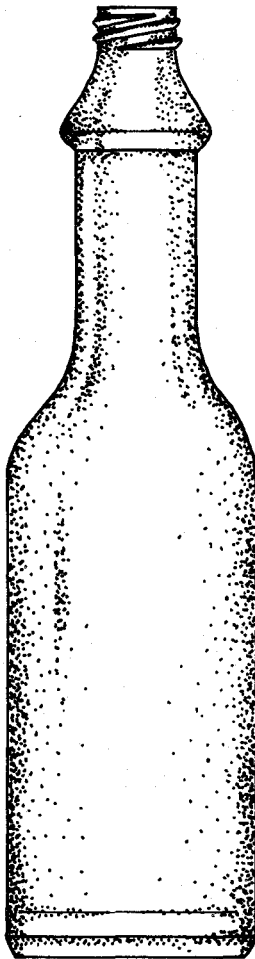


FIGURE 4. Modern Tabasco brand pepper sauce bottle, as used in 1989.

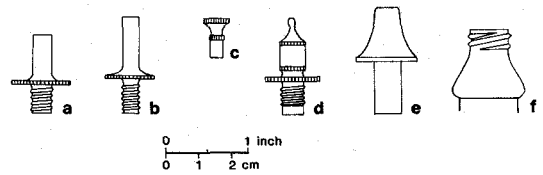


FIGURE 5. Sprinkler top forms: a–b, lead alloy forms; c, lead alloy stopper; d, lead alloy form with lead alloy cap; e, white porcelain form; f, modern continuous-thread finish.

top forms. Five types of sprinkler tops have been identified.

The first type is made of a lead alloy (Figure 5a, b). These tops are detachable, measure up to about 1.16 inches (2.95 cm) long, and contain three elements: a straight, smooth neck; a round, flat projection with tiny striations around the edge for gripping; and a straight, threaded section which probably was encased in cork or other material. This kind of sprinkler top was associated with a stopper made of the same material that could be inserted into the sprinkler top (Figure 5c). This stopper has the same tiny striations as the sprinkler top.

The second type of sprinkler top is made of the same lead alloy as the first type and is morphologically similar, except that it has a shorter stem (Figure 5d). The total length of this sprinkler top is .85 inches (2.16 cm). A distinctive difference between this sprinkler top and the previously described type is that this top includes a cap that is placed over the sprinkler top rather than inside it. This cap is straight-sided, has a small, bulb-like finial on its crown, is .56 inches (1.42 cm) long, and .34 inches (.86 cm) in diameter at its widest point.

A third type of sprinkler top is composed of a single piece of white porcelain (Figure 5e). This top exhibits a long, unglazed, straight shaft that is not threaded, a projection extending around the top, and a sloping neck. The neck and the flared projection exhibit a clear glaze. The unglazed portion probably was encircled by a cork sleeve. This top is 1.28 inches (3.25 cm) long and .77 inches (1.96 cm) in maximum diameter.

The final type of sprinkler "top" is not detachable, but is produced as an integral part of the bottle (Figure 5f). This type of top has a continuous-thread finish.

A Typology of Tabasco Brand Pepper Sauce Bottles

All of the bottles described above, with the exception of the presently used type, derive from archaeological deposits from four sites on Avery Island. These bottles extend in time from 1868 to the present, or throughout the entire existence of the McIlhenny Company's Tabasco brand pepper sauce industry.

The bottles having the distinctive "McIlhenny's Glass Bottle" form, the "TABASCO/PEPPER/SAUCE" embossment and the lead alloy sprinkler tops were located at the Laboratory and at Marsh House, a 19th- and 20th-century residence associated with the Laboratory (Orser 1987; Orser and Babson 1989). Since the Laboratory (Figure 6) is the first location in which Tabasco brand pepper sauce was manufactured, the obvious suggestion is that this bottle form and embossment were the types first used by McIlhenny Company.

Historical records indicate that McIlhenny's Glass Bottle was used from 1868 to 1931. A copy of a letter to the American Sauce Company, dated February 26, 1904, states that the recurvate-shouldered bottle had been used by Edmund McIlhenny's company "during the last thirty-five years." In concurrence with this statement, E. A. McIlhenny testified in 1917 that this bottle form had been used "since 1868." These bottles were apparently made for McIlhenny Company by Whitall-Tatum and Company in Millville, New Jersey, although the Illinois Glass Company of Alton, Illinois, also made Tabasco brand pepper sauce bottles temporarily in the 1890s (U.S. District Court 1917:3, 73-74, 227).

The earliest associated sprinkler top is probably the type that incorporates the inserted stopper; the next in date is the smaller top with the sleeve-type cap. This last stopper form is known to have been used in the early 20th century because it appears on

the cover of a McIlhenny Company recipe book printed in 1913 (Rorer 1913). This sprinkler top form, therefore, probably dates to the use of the Laboratory, or from 1868 to about 1909 and perhaps slightly later.

The bottles having the McIlhenny's Glass Bottle form, the "TABASCO/McILHENNY/SAUCE" embossment, and the porcelain sprinkler tops were found on the surface of the Jumbalaya Bottle Dump Site (Figure 6). This site, although recognized as an archaeological site in 1988 (Babson 1989:101), has been well known on Avery Island for many years as a bottle dump. All of the bottles found at this site had slightly chipped lips, suggesting perhaps that they had been discarded as a unit. These bottles may constitute a shipment that was damaged as the bottles were being brought to the Laboratory from the Avery Island railroad station located in the Avery Island salt mine village (Babson and Orser 1989), or they may have been discarded en masse when the Laboratory was abandoned in the first decade of the 20th century. The sprinkler tops and the bottles appear in different loci of the site and their association, although likely, cannot be concretely established. These types of bottles and tops probably date from around 1909 until the 1920s or 1930s.

The bottles distinguished by the integrated sprinkler top and the "TABASCO/McILHENNY/SAUCE" embossment were found at the Dragline Ditch Site (Figure 6). This site was discovered in 1988 during the expansion of the present, or third, McIlhenny Company factory, and no extensive archaeological research was conducted there. These bottles, however, were found in association with 20th-century artifacts, including a Depression glass cup and a sherd of decal-decorated whiteware (Babson 1989:98). These bottles are machine blown, a process that entirely replaced mouth blowing in the United States by the late 1920s (Miller and Sullivan 1984), and have continuous thread finishes, a finish not standardized on bottles until shortly after 1924 (Lief 1965:27-28). The possible Turner Brothers mark on one bottle may indicate the manufacture of this bottle between 1915 and 1929 (Toulouse 1971:490), but this conclusion must remain tentative. In any case, this

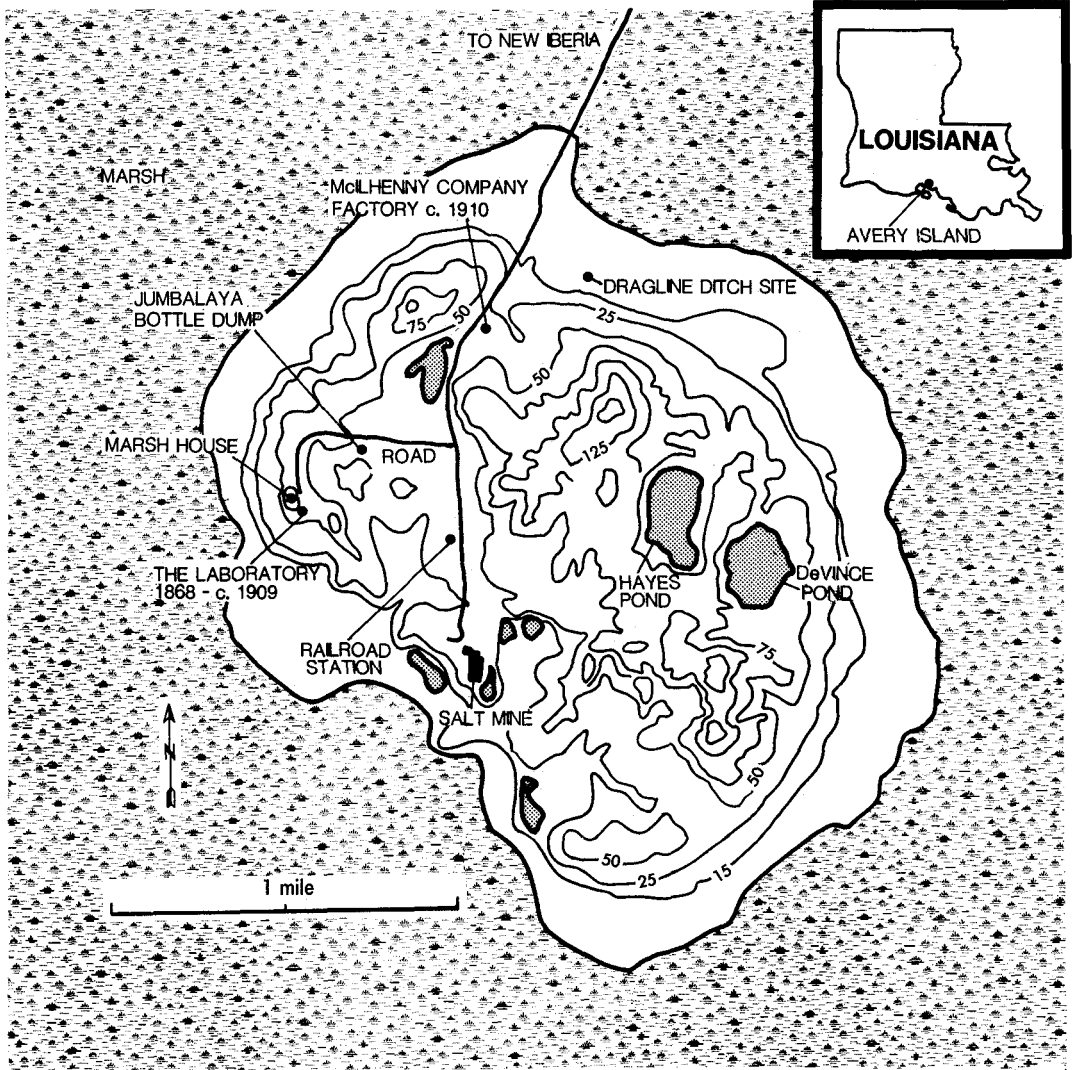


FIGURE 6. Avery Island, Louisiana, showing sites and locations mentioned in text.

bottle form superseded McIlhenny's Glass Bottle in the 1930s when its patent was acquired on February 24, 1931 (U.S. Patent Office 1931). These bottles, like those from the Jumbalaya Bottle Dump, carry the "TABASCO/McILHENNY/SAUCE" embossment.

The modern bottle is similar in form to the bottles found at the Dragline Ditch Site, the embossment being the major difference. The conclusion seems warranted, then, that the modern bottle

form has been in use since 1931, but that the embossments have varied. The embossment found on the Dragline Ditch bottles may constitute the earliest "modern" embossment to appear on Tabasco brand pepper sauce bottles.

Conclusion

This brief report is presented as a preliminary statement about Tabasco brand pepper sauce bot-

tles as they have been found at archaeological sites on Avery Island, Louisiana. These findings must be considered tentative because extensive documentary research in the McIlhenny Company archives has not been accomplished. These archives are now in the process of being organized and inventoried and they are not presently available to researchers. Nonetheless, the archaeological research on Avery Island has provided a rough chronology of bottle forms and sprinkler top designs that should aid archaeologists who find Tabasco brand pepper sauce bottles and sprinkler tops in archaeological contexts. This rough chronology should be expanded and refined as detailed documentary research is accomplished and more archaeological research is undertaken.

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