

Curator's Choice

J.C. Baker's Genuine Essence

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In the 19th century, one pharmaceutical remedy popular among the masses was essence of peppermint. Peppermint essence as it was also called, was generally sold as a mixture of pure peppermint oil in alcohol in a 9:500 ratio due to the potency of the oil, but could also be found in a mixture with 47 times the strength. Peppermint oil was obtained by distilling it from freshly picked peppermint leaves, grown on vast plantations in England, France and the United States.

The essence was used as a sort of cure-all remedy, and was advertised to help with stomach pain, flatulence, nausea, sickness, headaches and many other ailments, and sold for as much as four dollars for a mere one ounce bottle. Peppermint essence could also be used as flavoring in baking and candy production to produce mint flavored sweets. Many people would take medicine "swimming on a glass of peppermint water," which was simply water mixed with a bit of the essence, in order to combat the less-than-appealing taste of the time's other medicines. It was so common a remedy in and of itself that it could be found sold out of a barrel on the streets.

This bottle in particular was filled with peppermint essence manufactured by J.C. Baker, a pharmaceutical company of the time. The bottle is a "blake" style bottle, characterized by the height, rectangular shape, and taper of the top of the bottle. It is a mold-blown bottle, meaning a lump of molten glass would be placed on a tube, placed in a bottle mold, and then blown to fill the mold. This is evident by the "pontil scar" on the bottom of the bottle, which is caused by the removal of the blowing tube.

The bottle is embossed with the lettering "Genuine Essence" which was labeled as such to assure consumers that the contents were genuine essence of peppermint oil. The bottle itself is manufactured by the Whittall Tatum Company, a popular bottle manufacturer of the time, established in 1806 in Millville, New Jersey and closed down in 1938.



Complete example of a Genuine Essence bottle, (Private collection).



Partially mended bottle that was found in Baltimore during an excavation in the old Otterbein neighborhood.



J.C. Baker's Genuine Essence bottle found in Baltimore during an excavation in the old Otterbein neighborhood.

Found in Baltimore during an excavation in the old Otterbein neighborhood, this specific bottle was probably used for the aforementioned reasons and can be compared to some over-the-counter products today. Peppermint essence is still used as a remedy today, but only for small issues such as stomach problems, although it can and is used sometimes to induce labor in pregnant women. While it is still sold as a remedy, it is in no way as effective a "medicine" as once thought, but is nevertheless one of the few medications of the time period that actually had an alleviatory effect.

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