Curator's Choice

Spittoon

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In 1980, prior to building the Federal Reserve Bank, an archaeological dig was performed in which artifacts were found that originated in the 1830s to 1850s. In the privy found near Sharpe Street many artifacts were recovered, with one of the better preserved ones being a spittoon.

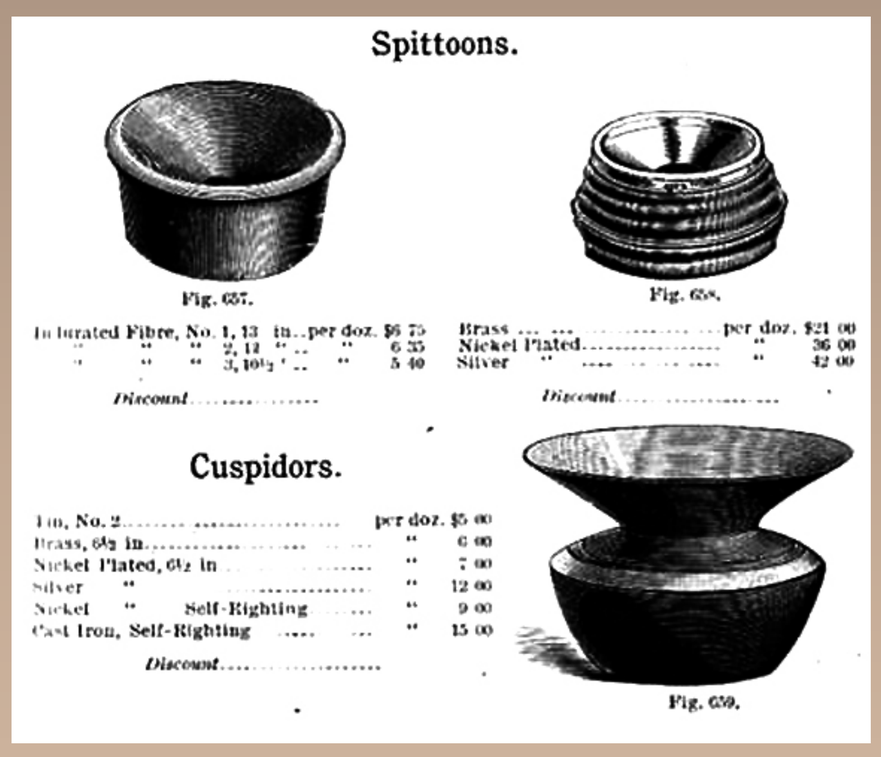
The spittoon found in the privy was 4¾" tall, 10" in diameter and made with a gray salt glazed clay body. The clay body would first be fired to 1600 to 1800 degrees, and then have salt glaze applied. The designs were painted on before firing, using a cobalt mixture.

Side view of the mended spittoon found in a privy at the Federal Reserve Bank Site.

Top view of the mended spittoon found in a privy at the Federal Reserve Bank Site.

Chewing tobacco hit its height in popularity by 1890 when the average American chewed more than 3 pounds per year. But what rises eventually falls. Chewing tobacco was no exception. German microbiologist Robert Koch showed that spitting contributed to the spread of consumption, or tuberculosis. With that, chewing tobacco slipped from popularity and by the turn of the century, anti-spitting laws were passed in major cities, removing spittoons from public places (1).

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked an increased glorification of the rural, natural man and a rejection of sophisticated, industrial society. Consequently, the "pretentious culture of dainty boxes" - snuff - was rejected and dipping tobacco became extremely popular. By the mid nineteenth century, it was very common for public places - saloons, stairways, court rooms, etc. - to have spittoons. In fact, Charles Dickens, while visiting America in 1842, described a court room where a spittoon could be found by the feet of almost everyone in the room, including the judge, the lawyer, the jury, and all of the spectators. Spittoons were found in the stairways of a medical college accompanying signs requesting that students use spittoons as to not "discolour the stairs." It would come as no surprise that Dickens would later refer to Washington as "the headquarters of tobacco tinctured saliva."



Examples of spittoons and cuspidors from a sales catalog.

Chewing tobacco was even more popular among baseball players. Players found that chewing increased saliva, helping to lubricate mouths that had become dry in the dusty diamond. And when the leather glove became popular in the 1870s and 1880s, the players also found that spitting could be used to soften the leather (1). Pitchers believed that spitting on baseballs before pitching would decrease the air drag, in turn improving their aerodynamics and speed. These notorious pitches were referred to, quite appropriately, as "spitballs" and were permitted up until 1920 (2).

References Cited

1.http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2009/11/why_do_so_many_baseball_players_chew_tobacco.html

2.http://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Spitball

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