

This fine article by Kevin A. Sives, and published here by permission of the author, provides a greater insight into the fascinating life of the Thomas W. Dyott, the person responsible for creating the treasured GI-14 (Firecracker) flask. Again, we are grateful to Mr. Sives for his special consideration.

Dr. Thomas W. Dyott – A True Renaissance Man

By Kevin A. Sives

Bottle and flask collectors remember a lot of things. They can see a bottle that they have only heard about, and tell you who dug it, when, where, and sometimes even tell you who the previous owners were. They remember the dates a glasshouse was in operation, and even the dates that sons, brothers, or grandchildren entered the business. But of course, they are also specialists. A medicine bottle collector, for example, probably never heard of the name “Jared Spencer” and conversely, the name of Dr. Porter isn’t very recognizable to a flask collector. But there is one name that medicine, flask, soda, beer, advertising, and even glasshouse scrip collectors know and that name is Thomas W. Dyott, M. D.

I’ve done several articles over the years about Thomas W. Dyott’s contribution to historical flasks, about his extensive use of advertising, and about how he tied various products together under a common name, building brand loyalty, but I realize that I’ve neglected to write about the man himself. To correct that, let me now write about Thomas W. Dyott, Renaissance Man.

THE EARLY YEARS

Because during his lifetime, Thomas W. Dyott was just considered an ordinary business man, there exists very little first hand documentation concerning his date and place of birth, what his early life was like, or even the date of his arrival in Philadelphia. Helen McKearin, in her landmark book, “Bottles, Flasks, and Dr. Dyott” went through extensive advertisements, obituaries, etc.; to determine the few certain facts that we know about Thomas W. Dyott and even some of these facts are just a little ambiguous.

To start off, Thomas W. Dyott was born in 1777 in England (or possibly Scotland). He immigrated to Philadelphia some time between 1795 (when he would have been 18 years old) and 1805 (when he would have been 28), with Helen McKearin favoring the 1805 end of the spectrum. And quite likely his travels took him from practicing medicine in London (or at least working for a pharmacist there), to the West Indies, and finally to Philadelphia.

During his lifetime, Thomas W. Dyott himself claimed to be the grandson of the celebrated Dr. Robertson of Edinburgh. Unfortunately, not only is there no evidence that he was Dr. Robertson’s grandson, but also there is no record of a Dr. Robertson practicing in Edinburgh during the time. The only other tidbit of information about Thomas W. Dyott’s life during this period is a statement made by one of his intimates, claiming that Thomas W. Dyott served an apprenticeship to an English druggist, who taught him the art of making boot-blackening.

COMING TO AMERICA

So armed with those sketchy details, the next major event in Thomas W. Dyott's life is his immigrating to the United States. By his own claim, he arrived in Philadelphia in 1805. Soon thereafter, he set up a practice as a doctor and began selling medicines of his own invention. One of the myths that has sprung up surrounding Thomas W. Dyott was that he arrived in America with no money in his pocket, began concocting boot black at night, selling it by day and somehow establishing himself as a prominent businessman in a matter of a few short years.

Probably more closer to the truth is that Thomas W. Dyott arrived in America with little money, but instead was carrying a pocket full of formulas for various medicines with which he was familiar in England. Then he either found the resources to begin manufacturing his medicines himself, which he sold to druggists, or, even more likely, he found employment with an existing druggist, who provided him with the facilities to begin to manufacture his medicines.

BIRTH OF A DOCTOR AND MEDICINE MAN

Once Thomas W. Dyott found some customers for his medicine, he immediately began to extensively advertise his medications in the local papers and very soon after this he attached the word "Doctor" or "M.D." to his name. Although there's no indication that he attended medical school, at this period in our history, many doctors became such through apprenticeships with physicians or druggists. So calling himself a Doctor certainly added to his prestige and undoubtedly helped the sale of his medicines, doing so wasn't considered an illegal or immoral act at the time.

Now being a self proclaimed Doctor, he set up an office where he began to receive patients for treatment. So not only was he selling medicine, but he was also holding office hours, and treating patients for various complaints. Of course, I'd be more than willing to bet that he was also prescribing some of his own nostrums for those patients who had complaints for which Dr. Dyott had cures.

Regardless of whether Thomas W. Dyott came to America poor or with money in his pocket, by late 1806 he was already advertising that he had a Patent Medicine Warehouse operating in Philadelphia. By 1809, he had American made bottles blown in his own mold, which was embossed, "Dr. Robertson's / Family Medicine / Prepared / only by / T. W. Dyott". Later in the same year, obviously flushed with success, he moved to a new and larger facility at 226 North 2nd Street. His expansion continued to intensify, resulting in his having in place 14 agents in 12 towns and cities in 7 states. This number continued to grow, with 41 agents in 36 towns in 12 states by 1820. By 1814, in New York State alone, he had agents in 14 towns.

On September 3, 1811, he moved to 137 2nd Street, and soon expanded to 139 as well. This address became known, forever onward to Dyott collectors, as the North East Corner of 2nd and Race Street. During this period, he continued to have a medical practice as well as selling his medicines. His particular emphasis in his practice was for anyone requiring aid for debility and any species of venereal disease (I guess some things never change).

During the War of 1812, Dr. Dyott's business continued to boom, helped no doubt by an embargo being placed on imported British goods, thereby giving him a virtual monopoly. During and soon after the war, he began to expand his business southward. His brother, John, moved to Charleston, South Carolina, and opened another large warehouse there.

In addition to dispersing medicines at his warehouse, Dr. Dyott soon began to expand into other wholesale and retail items, such as glassware, china, Queensware, household items, lamp black, beeswax, soap and candles. Of course, the warehouse had bottles for sale for use by druggists and doctors and for preserving items in households. In addition to his own brands of medicines, he also began selling medicines from competing companies. Thus the Northeast Corner of 2nd and Race Streets became the Wal-mart of today, supplying everything and anything.

FROM DOCTOR TO GLASS MAN TO FAMILY MAN

During the war years, the 'old' Kensington Glass Works closed. James Butland and James Rowland had operated these works since about 1800. Robert Towars & Stephen Leacock originally built the Works about 1771. These works had provided Dr. Dyott with his bottles, vials, and other glass items he used in his medicine business as well as sold from his warehouse. (See Appendix I for a brief chronology of the various glass works located in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.)

At this point, Dr. Dyott was without a supplier for his glass bottles. In order to help relieve this situation (and of course to serve as a potential investment for him), he among others, invested in the Olive Glass Works in Glassboro, New Jersey. By the fall of 1817, he was not only the sole agent for the Olive Glass Works, but also Gloucester Glass Works (Clementon, New Jersey), and the Port Elizabeth, New Jersey Union Glass Works. About 1821, he became affiliated with the 'new' Kensington Glass Works built by Hewson and Connell near the 'old' Kensington Glass Works. These works, he referred to as the Kensington Glass Factories, and they would eventually become part of the famous Dyottville Glass Works.

Although he was thrown into the glass business in order to supply his other business needs, Thomas W. Dyott became a glass man with gusto, but he still found the time for his personal life, during this time of business expansion and economic recession. In 1815, he got married. Whether he attacked his married life like he did his business life is open to conjecture. But he did; however, have a son named John, in October 1816, and added Thomas W. Dyott, Jr. in 1822. So let us say that Thomas W. Dyott obviously prescribed to the old axiom about “all work and no play”. We have no record of how his private life affected his public life, so whether he married to have heirs, married for love, or married for political reasons, I guess we’ll never know.

THE GLASS MAN BECOMES A GLASS MOGUL

This is the beginning of the period when the famous Kensington flasks were produced, and also the period when Thomas W. Dyott’s first brush with financial problems began. From October 1822 until possibly 1824, Thomas W. Dyott carried on his business activities under a trustee arrangement created by his creditors. Never a financial genius, he ran up overwhelming debt, and let his uncollected payment skyrocket, until his creditors took over his business. However, knowing that their only hope of ever receiving their monies was to let Thomas W. Dyott continue his business, his creditors didn’t seize his assets. Apparently with others helping him manage his money, he was able to repay his creditors, and resume ownership of his life late in 1823 or early in 1824. Having dodged the proverbial bullet, and back on secure financial footing, he took off like a madman. He started to advertise again, with a vengeance. And no longer carrying such commodity glass as vials and window glass, he was establishing himself as the king of mold blown bottles.

Some of the most artistic, heavily embossed historical and pictorial flasks ever made, were made at the Kensington Glass Works, under the supervision of Thomas W. Dyott, from about 1822 to 1830. The quality of the engraving in the molds, the colors used in the glass, and the historical significance of many of the subjects, makes these flasks highly sought after by collectors. Another insight into Thomas W. Dyott’s character can be seen from the fact that not only did he immortalize various historical figures on these flasks, but he also chose to create one with his picture and name on it.

By June of 1828, there were three separate factories at Kensington. Another one was added a year later. Finally, in the fall of 1833, a fifth and final factory was built by the time that Thomas Dyott had purchased the Kensington Glass Works from James Rowland, Jr. Its five furnaces had about 400 employees, of which 130 were apprentices. At this point, in late 1832 or early 1833, Thomas W. Dyott renamed his works the “Dyottville Factories” or “Dyottville Glass Factories”.

By March of 1831, Thomas' brother, Michael B. Dyott arrived from England, and took over the job of superintendent of the glass factories. But no matter who was running the factory, they would forever bear the mark of Thomas W. Dyott. Enlarging on a concept developed in European factory communities, the glass factories at Dyottville developed into, what in the 1960s would be called a "commune".

Certainly men that were forward thinking, the Dyotts required all apprentices to attend school and chapel. Employees also were encouraged to attend public worship at the factory's church. In addition, all employees were required to abide by the following rules:

1. "No swearing, improper or abusive language.
2. \$5.00 fine or, optional with the proprietor, dismissal for breaking the rule prohibiting liquor on the premises.
3. \$5.00 fine for striking or mistreating an apprentice.
4. \$5.00 fine for disobeying the orders of a superior.
5. Use of all fines to purchase for the Dyottville Apprentices' Library.
6. Immediate notification of the superintendent in case of a journeyman's illness, so another could take his station in the factory, and, in case of an apprentice, report to the principal teacher.
7. Personal cleanliness and "necessary ablution" before meals, school, and church.
8. Strict prohibition of every species of gambling.
9. Leaves of absence given to apprentices, from which they had to return before sundown, unless permission included an extension of time."

This commune idea went beyond just morning prayers, to encompass everyone participating in calisthenics, formal education, and even small children becoming indoctrinated in the glass production process by doing tasks that were commensurate with their ages.

Like most people who subscribe to ideas which we consider "ahead of their time", there was much contemporary opposition to the ideas of the Dyotts. Some folks considered the ideas too far a field, and said that they would never work, and that Thomas W. Dyott

should be driven out of business. Whereas others, who considered the Dyotts ideas too far a field, said that they would work too well, and felt that Thomas W. Dyott would drive them out of business.

In spite of opposition, the Dyotts experiments were not only financial successes, but also socioeconomic successes. But too much success coupled with Thomas W. Dyott's desire to expand, ultimately lead to his downfall.

FROM GLASS MOGUL TO BANKER TO BANKRUPT

About 1835, an epidemic swept the country and many prominent business people caught the disease. Unfortunately, Thomas W. Dyott was one of those businessmen. The epidemic was banking, and Thomas W. Dyott's lack of banking experience did not deter him from jumping into this business with both feet. On February 2, 1836, he started a Savings Fund, with an old friend, Stephen Simpson as cashier. However, Simpson failed to secure a bank charter from Pennsylvania. By May, having deposits totaling \$13,000, Thomas W. Dyott opened his Manual Labor Bank at the former location of his drug warehouse (which had moved to 139 Second Street). Part of the reason was to encourage his workers to save money, and partially to have more financial control over the notes that he issued to raise capital for his glass house.

What Thomas W. Dyott did not count on, however, was a general economic collapse. This happened on May 11, 1837, when, in Philadelphia alone, eleven banks locked their doors because of overruns and panics. Not immediately affecting the Manual Labor Bank, because it was a private bank, Thomas W. Dyott made a dangerous step at this point, by issuing small denomination notes, from 5 cent to 3 dollars. Although intended to keep the wheels of business moving, while other banks had closed, this act was illegal by banking laws in effect at that time. This would come back to bite him on the assets!

The general economic decline continued, and finally by the beginning of November in 1837 the Manual Labor Bank began to suffer a run on assets, based on rumors that Thomas W. Dyott was about to close his doors. And quicker than you can say "self-fulfilling prophecy", he needed to file for bankruptcy protection. In most cases, bankruptcy protects the filer from his creditors. But in this case, his creditors were so unhappy, that they brought charges of fraud and swindling against him.

Thomas W. Dyott's financial dealings during the many years of his various business enterprises were put under scrutiny. His lack of banking and financial experience, coupled with his convoluted business dealings during the years, finally snagged him. The end result was that 11 indictments of fraud were leveled against him and they culminated in his being sentenced to prison for 3 years on seven of the charges, beginning on June 1, 1839

And much like today, by use of the appeals process, he was released from prison, after having served a little less than two years at the Eastern Penitentiary. He was released on May 10, 1841, after having received a pardon from Governor Porter. After being

released from prison, he was promptly re-arrested as a debtor, and sent to the Debtor's Apartment at the Moyamensing Prison. On May 24th, Thomas W. Dyott was finally released, after a friend, Daniel Mann, assumed a guarantee for his debts. Having lost his bank and glass empire while in prison, Thomas W. Dyott continued to work in the drug stores of relatives until his death at the age 83 in January, 1861.

LIFE AFTER DR. DYOTT

Dyottville did not die with Thomas W. Dyott's bankruptcy. After remaining idle from 1838 until about 1842, the fires were re-lit, and glass production began. Of course, there were no longer any Dyotts involved in the business.

Under various owners and managers, Dyottville continued to make bottles and flasks, in addition to some other 'flint' glass items. About 1848 or so, the Dyottville factories went wild with flask production, with the many variations of the Washington/Taylor flasks being the major item manufactured.

But the staples of the glass business at the time (and of Philadelphia diggers to this day), were the soda and beer bottles, made by the hundreds of thousands. In addition to the squat soda or beer bottles, many more thousands of different colored, cylindrical, whiskey bottles with "DYOTTVILLE GLASS WORKS" EMBOSSED AROUND THE BASE WERE PRODUCED.

The factories of Dyottville continued in operation, off and on, until 1923, when it finally closed its doors.

SUMMARY

So there you have it, a brief discussion of the lives of one of Philadelphia's preeminent pioneers in the marketing and manufacturing of medicines and glass. In most regards, Thomas W. Dyott was a visionary. He never let his lack of experience or finances stop him from trying new things in the business world. If something didn't work, then try something new. But unfortunately, he didn't temper his vision with reality, and he ignored banking laws and impending financial disaster. So in spite of him being so far ahead of this time, he was ultimately a human being, with a human's frailties. Much like many of the heroes he honored on his historical flasks.

APPENDIX

A chronology of the several glassworks in the Kensington Section of Philadelphia.

- 1771 Oct. Robert Towars (skinner) & Stephen Leacock (watchmaker) leased land in Kensington to build a Glass Works.
- 1772 Nov. Isaac Gray and John Elliott, Sr., two merchants, along with John Elliott, Jr. (brush maker), and Samuel Elliott (tanner) bought out Towars & Leacock.
- 1773 Jan. An advertisement appeared stating that the glass works was complete.

- 1774 Workmen obtained from Steigel's defunct Manheim Glass Works.
- 1775 Feb. Advertising for sale: decanters, case bottles, bitters bottles, pocket bottles, wine, cider, and all kinds of table ware.
- 1777 Apr. Glass works closed, Philadelphia occupied by British.
- 1780 May. Isaac Gray & Thomas Leiper bought out former owners.
- 1783 Glassworks back in operation, but soon closed.
- 1784 No glass works in operation through 1790.
- 1789 Sept. Philip Stimel possibly rented the works, and began glass production, but for only a very short time.
- 1798 Apr. Christopher Trippel & Co rented glass works from Leiper, and began glass production.
- 1799 Jan. Company opened a store in Philadelphia to sell wares.
- 1800 Mar. Joseph Roberts, Jr., James Rowland (iron merchant), and James Butland (merchant), purchase glass works from Leiper.
- 1802 Jan. Roberts bought out by other two partners.
- 1812 Feb. Glass works operated until this date, when the Kensington Glass Works held an auction to sell off coal and inventory of glass.
- 1815 Sept. James Rowland bought out James Butland, but glass works still not producing a product.
- 1816 Hewson, Connell, & Company announced they were about to build a new glass works 'on the lot adjoining the old glass works in Kensington'.
- 1821 In one of Dr. Dyott's advertisements, he referred to the 'Kensington Glass Factories', which suggests that the 'new' Kensington works had expanded to encompass the location of the 'old' Kensington works.
- 1832 James Rowland died, and James Rowland, Jr. inherited the glass works.
- 1833 Jul. Thomas W. Dyott purchased the Kensington works from James Rowland, Jr. for \$ 12,000, and incorporated it as Dyottville.

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