
Archaeology and the Production of Hoosier Spirits

Brewing and distilling are long-standing traditions in America. Native Americans were known to have their own beer, and evidence of distilling has been found at Mount Vernon, home of George Washington, and Jamestown, one of the first European colonies in the Americas. What was once an alternative to drinking poor quality water has become a source of local pride and specialization in the modern era. As more new producers take up residence in historical buildings and utilize historical recipes, the modern world of Hoosier spirits is distinctly tied to our past.



Embossed beer bottle from Indianapolis Brewing Company. Image courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society.

At the time of Indiana statehood in 1816, only two breweries formally existed in Indiana (Kohn 2016). Located at opposite ends of the state, the New Harmony and Richmond breweries were literal pioneers in what was to become a booming industry in the Hoosier state. Interestingly, the first brewery in Indianapolis (Wernweg & Young, est. 1834) was located at the corner of West and Maryland Streets – just down the block from the current location of the Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology (DHPA).

Archaeologically, Indiana has not seen the same number of formal investigations into historical breweries and distilleries as other states. For example, extensive archaeological investigations have taken place at Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, Kentucky. In 2016, unique structural components were located under a floor in a building on the distillery campus during renovations, and archaeologically investigated. The archaeologists' attention to detail and Buffalo Trace's willingness to take the time to properly investigate the structural remnants allowed the archaeologists to interpret the find as being the original fermenting tubs from the 1883 O.F.C. Distillery, or what is now known as "Bourbon Pompeii." At least one of the tubs was restored and bourbon is being produced using techniques from the early days of the distillery (Palas 2019).

What we do know archaeologically about the Hoosier spirit industry comes more from historical records and material culture, or "breweriana," as is it fondly called (Fahley 2009). Breweriana can include bottles, trays, signs, glassware, and other advertising materials or objects used in the production of Hoosier spirits. Finding these artifacts at a site tells us about the distribution and use patterns of these commodities. A bottle does not have to be found at a store or manufacturer to tell you where it came from, how old it was, or what it may have contained. In fact, finding a specific bottle somewhere unlikely tells us *more* information about consumption and distribution patterns than finding it at the source of manufacture. Historic records include advertisements, newspaper articles, recipes, ledgers, letters, and other records that not only tell us about the businesses that produced these goods, but how people felt about them. Just like today, word of mouth and a positive review were likely to boost sales and popularity of a product.



Some bottles have their manufacture and content information incorporated as part of their design. This glass bottle base shows a distiller number ("D-388") and bottle maker (the H-and-anchor motif represents the Anchor-Hocking Glass Company) as well as other identifying information. In this case, the markings tell us the bottle once held whiskey and most likely dates to c. 1940. Photo courtesy of DHPA.



"FEDERAL LAW FORBIDS SALE OR RE-USE OF THIS BOTTLE." After the end of Prohibition, this text was required on all liquor bottles dating from 1935 through 1964. Photo courtesy of DHPA.

SPECIAL PLACES AND BRANDS OF HOOSIER INTEREST

These companies are highlighted here because of their ties to Indiana history, applications to archaeology, and also their commitment to link modern products to the past. This list is by no means exhaustive, and we encourage you to check into local producers in your area for more selections!



"Old Quaker" whiskey bottle recovered from 12-Mo-1083. Photograph by Rachel Wonders, Applied Anthropology Laboratories, Ball State University.

OLD QUAKER

The glass bottle depicted here was discovered during archaeological investigations in Indiana's Morgan-Monroe State Forest during a Ball State University project funded in part by a grant from the National Park Service's Historic Preservation Fund Program, which is administered in Indiana by the DHPA. It was manufactured in 1935 and used for "Old Quaker" brand rye whiskey. Old Quaker was manufactured at a distillery in Lawrenceburg. This distillery was founded by the Squibb brothers in the mid-late 1800s and represents one of Indiana's first commercial distilleries. The presence of this bottle half a state away from its bottling site illustrates the distribution of the product in post-Prohibition Indiana.

HARMONIST TAVERN/BREWERY

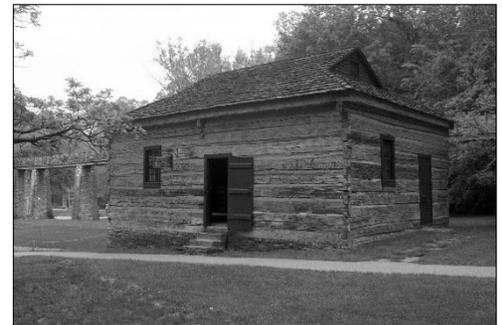
One of the first breweries in Indiana was associated with the Harmonist settlement in New Harmony. The Harmonists were a Utopian society that settled in Posey County between 1814 and 1824. As one of the few communities on the frontier, they immediately settled into developing a tavern, brewery, and distillery to satisfy the needs of travelers in the area (Strezewski, n.d.). The Harmonist beer, a German-style dark lager, was well received by patrons. In the early 2000s, beer enthusiast Douglas Wissing worked with collections managers from New Harmony State Historic Site, German translators, and modern brewers to transcribe the Harmonist recipe into one that could be reproduced (Wissing 2010). Today, Great Crescent Brewery in Aurora has revitalized the original Harmonist recipe and produces the Great Crescent Harmonie Bier in honor of this original Hoosier brew.

FRENCH LICK

Before the vast popularity of corn whiskey, apple brandy was one of the nation's most popular spirits. The hills of southwestern Indiana were once dotted with brandy distilleries, and this area of the state was the largest producer of apple brandy for forty years – roughly from 1877 through 1914. Today, the beverage has been relaunched by Spirits of French Lick (West Baden, IN). Their Old Clifty Hoosier Apple Brandy pays homage to the Old Clifty Distillery in Campbellsburg, IN, owned by Henry Robertson and a major producer of apple brandy from 1818-1904.

SPRING MILL

The historic Pioneer Village at Spring Mill State Park was once a functioning town that was founded in 1814 by Samuel Jackson (see E.Y. Guernsey's 1931 publication for a detailed history of the park property). The village's defining feature is its massive stone mill, used for grinding corn into flour. Often, when there are mills, there are excess grains to distill, and a distillery was constructed on site c. 1824. By this time, the land had transferred to the management of Hugh and Thomas Hamer, who were successful in the corn whiskey industry. Their product was regularly shipped as far as New Orleans. Distillation of spirits was a constant at Spring Mill, even as people moved away and the town slowly shut down. The last distilled spirit produced at the site was a batch of apple brandy in April 1896 (Evans 1987) before the town sat empty for decades. Today, the Hamer brother's product is seeing a comeback thanks to the West Fork Whiskey Company (Indianapolis, IN). This new product is primarily composed of corn grain with a small amount of barley, which would have been similar to the original Hamer recipe.



The reconstructed distillery at the Pioneer Village at Spring Mill State Park. Photo courtesy of IDNR-DHPA.

THE HOOSIER SPIRIT IS ALIVE IN HOOSIER SPIRITS

The modern movement away from large scale production of beer and spirits and the focus on local craft is not a new one. It started in the 1980s and has only continued to become more popular. Some researchers attribute this phenomenon to a rising interest in neolocalism – meaning taking an interest in local commodities, experiences, or traditions that connect a person or group to a particular place (Schnell and Reese 2014). As we saw with the previous examples, there is a definite desire to connect the modern production of beer and spirits to Indiana’s history. Sitting down with a pint of Great Crescent Harmonie Bier that is local *and* has a story is appealing to today’s consumers. Sipping a dram of apple brandy while visiting the hills of southern Indiana has a different feel to it once one knows that Indiana was a major producer of the spirit in a past century. These historic brews and spirits make the consumer feel like they are part of something special – real products made by real people with real histories. Archaeologically exploring the materials associated with historical Hoosier spirits is one way to help strengthen this tie to the past.

Written by Rachel Sharkey, Research Archaeologist, 2021

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