

Curator's Choice

The Allure of French Perfume

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Any trip to a Rite Aid or the pharmaceutical section of a big box store will yield row upon row of brightly-colored bottles and jars containing beauty products that guarantee to make our hair thicker, our skin more luminous and our teeth pearly white. We might walk into the store for a simple roll of toilet paper, but leave with a bag bulging with the promise of good health and sex appeal. The populace of early 19th-century Baltimore was apparently no less susceptible to similar product promises of their own time.

A privy associated with the Bull's Head Tavern site (18BC139) in Baltimore yielded these two colorful examples of early 19th-century tin-glazed ointment pots. Ceramic vessels of this type were used by apothecaries, perfumers and dentists to hold a variety of cosmetic and medicinal products, including tooth powders and ointments that often contained interesting ingredients, like bear grease or even beeswax (Houghton and Priestley 2005:7, Victorian 2014).

While the majority of tin-glazed ointment pots were plain, each of the Bull's Head Tavern pots had been stenciled in French with the names and addresses of Parisian businesses. One pot is labeled Delacour, P.f./R. De Richelieu/au coin celle d/Menars, Paris, translated as "Delacour, Perfumers/ Richelieu Street at the corner of Menars, Paris". In the first half of the nineteenth century, Rue de Richelieu was one of the most fashionable streets in Paris (Rue de Richelieu 2014).



Figure 2: Early 19th-century tin-glazed ointment pot found in privy at the Bull's Head Tavern site (18BC139) in Baltimore.

The other ointment pot, marked Fab.que de Demarson,/ Parf.r Brevete/ R. De la Verrerie/No. 95. a Paris, indicates that the patented product inside was made by the Demarson perfumers, located at 95 Verrerie Street in Paris. This perfumer was established in 1815 as Demarson, and later went by a variety of names, most recently Plassard (Obscure French Perfume Companies 2014).

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Figure 1: Early 19th-century tin-glazed ointment pot found in privy at the Bull's Head Tavern site (18BC139) in Baltimore.

The wearing of scent to mask offensive body odors has a history stretching back at least as far as Biblical times. Perfume received official recognition in 1656 from the French with the establishment of the Guild of Glove and Perfume Makers (Dugan 2011). Although once restricted to the wealthy, perfume products began to come into wide use in the nineteenth century (Briot 2011). French perfume today carries a certain cachet; the names Guerlain, Chanel, Coty and Balmain are among the many French perfume houses sold today in the United States and many of these companies are over a hundred years old. One hundred thirty nine perfume houses were recorded in Paris in 1807; these manufacturers were supplied by large flower farms located primarily in Grasse or Cannes (Briot 2011).

A government report on the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition stated "The names of Paris and France are somehow synonymous with elegance and beauty, and the visitor who was familiar with the name of the French scientists in medicine, surgery, and pharmacy was not disappointed when he visited the French section... It was not hard to discover that in the line of perfumes France took the lead" (Humphrey 1901:1351-1352). Just as today's consumers equate French products with style and elegance, the presence of these French perfume pots apparently meant the residents at the Bull's Head Tavern site did too.



Figure 3: The interior of an English pharmacy, circa 1825. Coloured etching by H. Heath, Wellcome Image Library. <http://marinni.livejournal.com/456482.html>.



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