

Curator's Choice

Spit Take: Cuspidor versus Spittoon

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Today, if you are caught spitting in public, you can get a ticket but back in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the practice was much more widely accepted. Before the automated production of cigarettes began to become more common in the early 20th century, chewing tobacco was one of the most common means of enjoying this drug. Not only would partakers in this practice not want to swallow the tobacco leaves, the chewing generated a lot of fluid which would also need to be spit out. Thus, a common sight, both in private homes and in public spaces like saloons, banks, office buildings, barber shops and courtrooms, were receptacles for receiving these expectorations (Figure 1).

These receptacles were called spittoons and cuspidors. The English language use of the term cuspidor dates back to the early 18th century, from the Portuguese word cuspidouro, meaning "place for spitting." Today, the terms spittoon and cuspidor have become largely interchangeable (Owlcation 2020), but as recently as the late 19th century, the terms referred to very differently shaped vessels. The 1893 Handlan Company catalog (Figure 2) shows a spittoon as a low circular vessel with an integrated top that sloped towards a small central hole. Spat tobacco juice would run down the sides and into the spittoon. Rockingham, a ceramic with a mottled brown and yellow glaze, were popular as spittoons, since the glaze helped mask the spit (Figure 3). An oval opening along the side of the vessel was used to empty the tobacco juice. A cuspidor had a taller profile, with a bowl-shaped base, a funnel-shaped opening and a pinched neck.

The cast iron cuspidor shown in Figure 1 was found in an early 20th-century privy in Baltimore at the North Exeter site (18BC135). The base of this cuspidor is very heavy to keep it from being easily tipped and spilling its disgusting contents. This so-called "self-righting" cuspidor is the most expensive cuspidor offering in the 1893 catalog.

See the blog *The Rise of "Smallish Cigars" – How Cigarettes Became the World's Most Popular Tobacco Product* for more about the history of automation in the cigarette industry, <https://jeffersonpatterson.wordpress.com/2020/02/12/the-rise-of-smallish-cigars-how-cigarettes-became-the-worlds-most-popular-tobacco-product/>



Figure 1: Cast iron self-righting cuspidor from Baltimore's North Exeter site (18BC135).

References Cited

Handlan Company
1893 Handlan Company catalogue. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Handlan_Spittoons_1893.jpg
Owlcation
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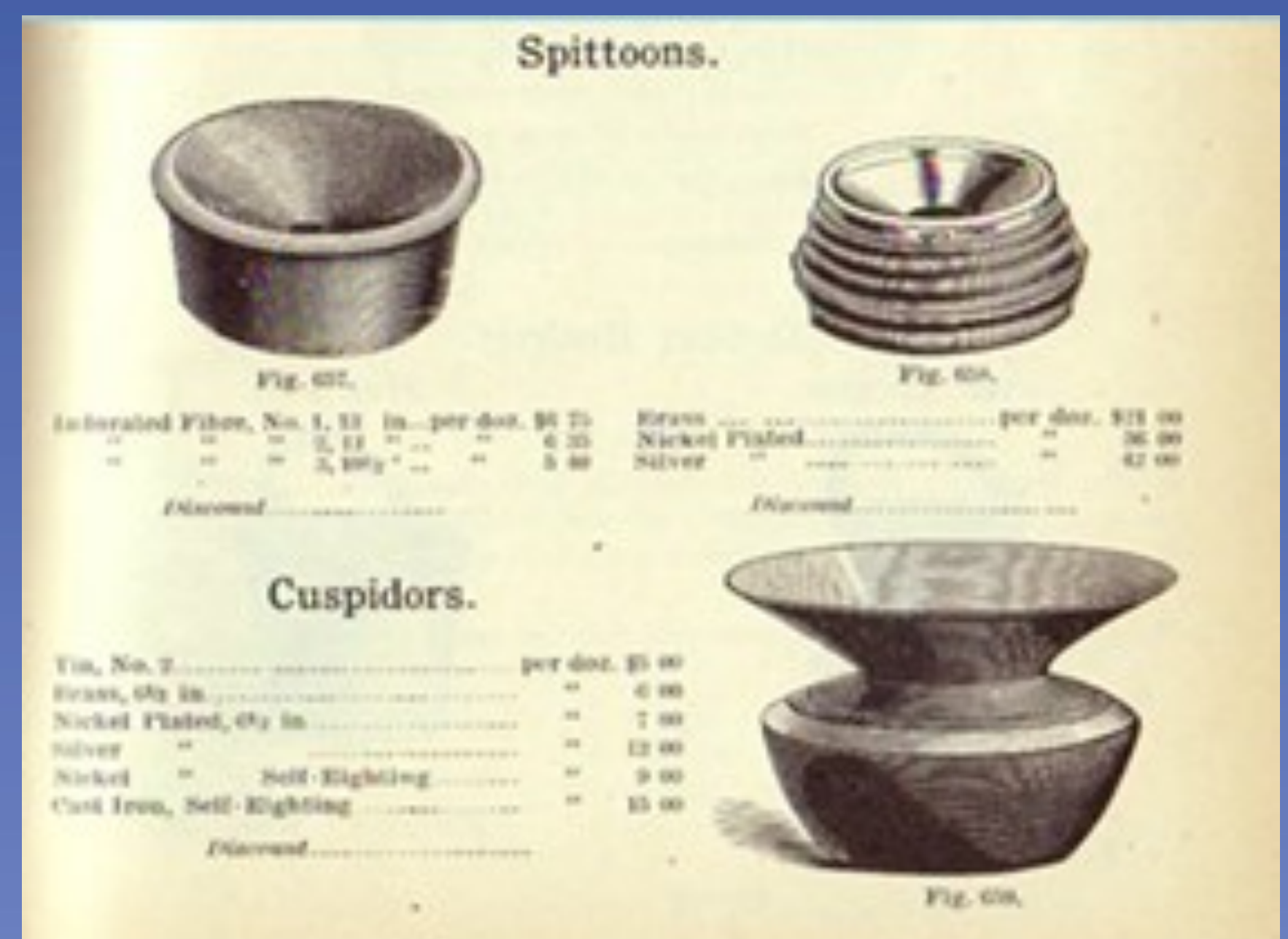


Figure 2. Catalog page from 1893 Handlan Company catalog, illustrating the difference in shape between a spittoon and a cuspidor.



Figure 3. Rockingham earthenware spittoon owned by the author. The mottled glaze on this type of ceramic was good at hiding spit stains.



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