

Curator's Choice

Bomb's Away! A Different Kind of Grenade

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In the early 1930s, diplomat Jefferson Patterson constructed a small beach cottage on his new country estate in Calvert County, Maryland. Patterson would stay in the cottage while his much larger Colonial Revival brick house overlooking the Patuxent River was being built. One of the features of the rustic cottage that survives to the present day were wall mounted fire grenades, designed to shatter and disperse fire-quenching chemicals when heated. Of course, these grenades have been supplanted by fire extinguishers, but they are a fun throwback to the early twentieth century.

A similar object, resembling an elongated light bulb, was discovered in a privy that was filled in the third quarter of the nineteenth century at the Schifferstadt site (18FR134) in Frederick County (Ballweber et al. 1997) and is now in the collections of the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab (Figure 1). At first, the function of this object was a mystery; it was similar in shape to some early baby bottles, but the thinness of the glass made this use impractical. The mystery was ultimately cracked by a lab volunteer who collects bottle and table glass.

Fire grenades, most common between the 1870s and the 1920s, were small (4" diameter) glass globes. While the Schifferstadt fire grenade is plain and more tear-drop shaped, many of the fire grenades manufactured in the United States were



Figure 1. Tear-drop shaped fire grenade from the Schifferstadt site (18FR134). The rounded base of this grenade indicates that it was probably mounted in a wall bracket and may have been a grenade that had a spring-loaded trigger that reacted to heat.

manufactured in the United States were molded in bright colors with ornate patterns depicting company names, stars and quilted backgrounds (Figure 2). The thin-walled vessels were designed to be thrown at the fire, shattering easily and dispersing chemicals that robbed the fire of oxygen (McCormick 2022). Their compact size made them easy to store and use in homes, businesses, trains, and even automobiles (Kohlstedt 2016). They could be deployed quickly when a fire broke out and since they were thrown, it was not necessary to get as close to the fire to use it (Figure 3).



Figure 2. A range of brightly colored and decorated orb shaped fire grenades from the late 1800s. From Antiquebottledepot.com.

Some grenades contained a mixture of salt water and sodium bicarbonate. The carbonic acid reputedly had forty times the extinguishing power of plain water (*Scientific American* 1884). Other grenades contained carbon tetrachloride—a toxic chemical that converted to deadly phosgene gas and hydrochloric acid when mixed with water (Kohlstedt 2016). Fire grenades fell out of use by the second quarter of the twentieth century as fire extinguishers become more common. They are highly sought after today by collectors.



Figure 3. Advertisements for fire grenades often showed women and children deploying them, demonstrating how easy they were to use. Image from Antiquetrader.com.

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