

# Curator's Choice

## Not an Average Day in Collections: A “Golden Medical Discovery”

By: Megan Kearns,  
Collections Assistant

Each day brings new discoveries in archaeological collections. While rehousing the Poplar Island Reclamation Project artifacts, I came across an intriguing medical bottle. Bottles rarely survive intact in archaeological collections as they are often discarded after being broken, so they end up in the archaeological record. Otherwise, post-depositional processes break the bottle. This bottle was a unique case as it was collected from the surface of the beach on North Point Island (18TAX5). Imagine my excitement when I pulled an intact, aqua glass bottle embossed with “Dr. Pierce’s Golden Medical Discovery.” The bottle has a Davis lip finish, and the principal investigator’s lab dated it to 1874-1894 (Fehr et al. appendix V 1996, 7). I was curious who this Dr. Pierce was and whether his medicine was snake oil or an effective drug.

It turns out Dr. Pierce was an innovator in the field of early American patent medicine. As the name suggests, patent medicine originally referred to medical products that individuals patented to protect their formulations. The term now refers to the numerous proprietary medicines hawked in America once English imports no longer brought in enough profits compared to American formulas (Tharp 1988, 7). Dr. Pierce took advantage of a gap in the market to great success.

Ray Vaughn Pierce began his career producing patent medicine in Buffalo, New York in the late 1860s. The so-called doctor may not have earned a medical degree! He alleged that he graduated from the Philadelphia University of Medicine and Surgery despite not completing the necessary coursework. Evidently in 1865, he did earn an MD from



Figure 1: Aqua medical bottle collected in North Point Island survey. The face is embossed “DR. PIERCE’S GOLDEN MEDICAL DISCOVERY.” The sides are embossed “BUFFALO N.Y.” and “R.V. PIERCE M.D.,” respectively.

the Eclectic Medical Institute of Cincinnati. Pierce, like other eclectic practitioners, believed that traditional medical interventions were not safe, and that people should turn to natural remedies (Gevitz 1990, 164-5). His Golden Medical Discovery purportedly cured any number of chronic conditions, including tuberculosis, arthritis, and malaria. He provided no scientific evidence of these “cures” besides user testimonies which were always positive (Gevitz 1990, 167). It seems likely that the medicine was useful only as placebo. In addition to patient testimonies, Pierce wisely employed newspaper and magazine advertisements to spread the word about his products (Gevitz 1990, 165). Much like drug companies today create commercials advertising their medications, Pierce’s creations entered the public consciousness through his ubiquitous advertisements. And his legacy lives on, at least in the archaeological records, through the embossed bottles. This bottle shows how practicing good museum collections management allows for new discoveries, even in 25+ year old collections!

### References Cited

- Fehr, April, David S. Robinson, Martha Williams, John L. Sediell, Jack Irion, and Donald Maher  
1996 *Phase I Terrestrial and Marine Archeological Surveys for the Poplar Island Reclamation Project and Phase II Investigations of Site 18TA237 and Six Marine Anomalies, Talbot County, Maryland.* Prepared for GBA-M&N A Joint Venture.
- Gevitz, Norman  
1990 “Dr. Pierce’s ‘Golden Medical Discovery’: A ‘Prince of Quacks’ in the ‘Queen City.’” *The Journal of Medical Humanities* 11, no. 4 (December): 163-177.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01138999>.
- Tharp, Brent W.  
1988 “Elixirs, Drops, Powders, and Pills: The Origins and Foundations of the American Patent Medicine Industry.” MA thesis, The College of William and Mary, VA.

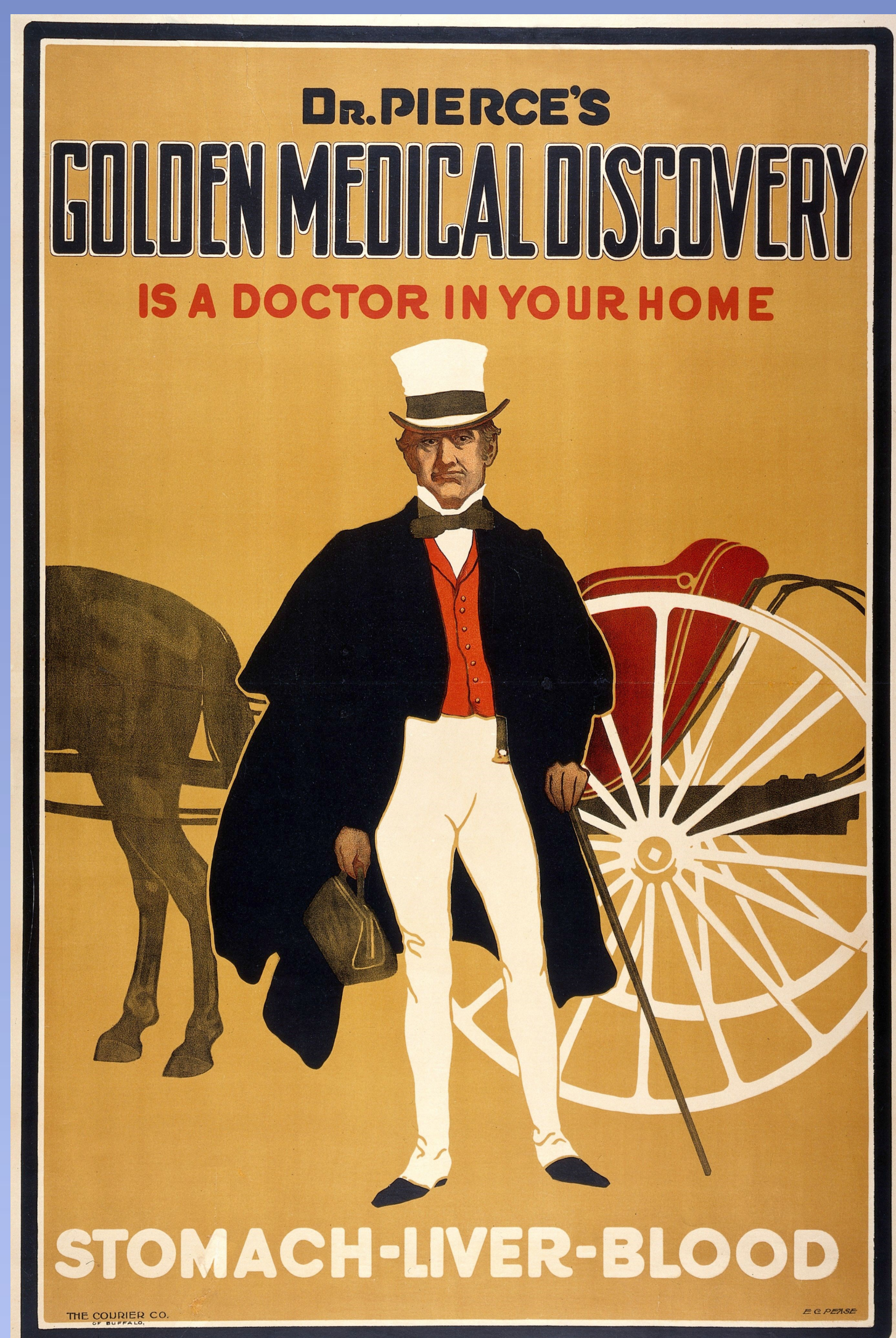


Figure 2: A 1910 color lithograph by E.C. Pease for Dr. Pierce’s Golden Medical Discovery. The ad underscores Pierce’s belief that people should have the choice to treat their medical conditions at home. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.



10515 Mackall Road  
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685

Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the  
Maryland Historical Trust, an agency of the  
Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

