

# Archaeology at the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Shop

Between 1982 and 1989, Alexandria Archaeology conducted a series of excavations in the cellar of the *Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Museum* at 105-107 South Fairfax Street. City archaeologists and volunteers excavated two brick-lined shafts, portions of the old earthen floor, and half of a trash pit that predated the brick buildings housing the Apothecary Shop. The thousands of artifacts found at this site were analyzed in the Alexandria Archaeology laboratory.



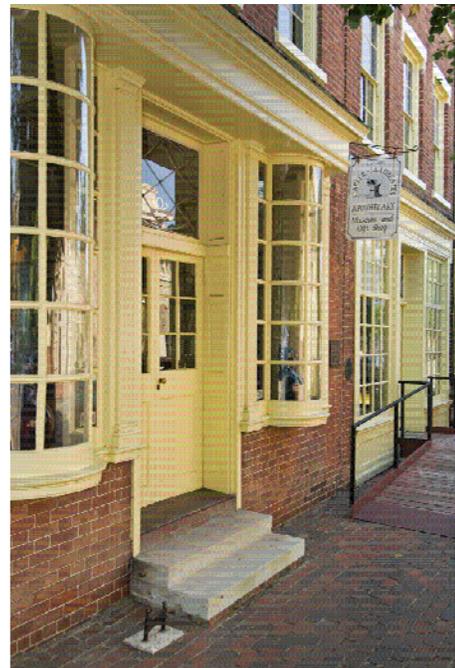
This site provided a unique opportunity to study artifacts from archaeological contexts in relation to those still on the shop's shelves. Primary sources were a key to research of the Apothecary shop. These records, found in the shop when it closed in 1933, included account books, letters, bills of sale and receipt books. Along with records from the shop, documents of the Alexandria Water Company proved useful. The piped water this company supplied resulted in the abandonment of the shop's well which was then filled with trash.

The Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Shop opened in 1796 and closed in 1933. Soon after, the Apothecary became a museum. In 2006, following renovation of the historic building, the museum became a property the City of Alexandria, Virginia, and one of the Historic Alexandria Museums.

## Site History

The Apothecary Shop looks much the same today as it did when it was opened by Edward Stabler in 1796. The building at 107 South Fairfax Street was built in 1774. Stabler first rented it in 1796 and purchased the building in 1805. Stabler purchased the adjoining building (105 S. Fairfax) 1829. The Apothecary Shop eventually grew into an important business and social institution for patrons such as the Washington, Mason, Custis and Lee families.

Edward Stabler was born in Petersburg, Virginia in 1769, the youngest child of devout Quakers, Edward and Mary Robinson Stabler. As a young man, he was apprenticed with a tanner, but then went to work at his brother William's apothecary in Leesburg, where he learned his profession. Edward moved to Alexandria in 1792 where he established his own apothecary. The site of his first shop not known, but it may have been located only a few doors south of the present location.



In 1794, Edward married his first wife, Mary Pleasants and they had five children before her death in 1806. Their eldest son, William, became a druggist and in 1808 was working with his father. In 1808, Edward remarried Mary Hartshorne, with whom he had 11 more children. In 1835, Stabler's daughter, Mary Pleasants Stabler, married a young druggist from England named John Leadbeater. John Leadbeater became the partner of his bother-in-law, William Stabler in 1844. When William died in 1852, John Leadbeater bought the business. His son, Edward Stabler Leadbeater and his descendants became the proprietors of shop.

Lawrence Fawcett, who worked in the packing room of the Wholesale Department in 1912, described the Leadbeater establishment as it appeared at that time; A retail shop on the first floor for the sale of drugs, herbs and extracts; the second story was used for wholesale and bottling; the third floor was for storage. A third building, to the south, was used to make extracts, flavors and liniments. On the second floor was the wholesale department, which was the largest part of the business.

Many of the retail sales were to customers who visited the shop on foot and carried their purchases with them. Later delivery boys on bicycles or horse-drawn wagons delivered orders to local destinations. By 1912, the Leadbeaters kept the largest stock of drugs in the Washington area and are believed to have served six or seven states. The Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary was one of the oldest drug stores in the United States in continuous operation by one family in 1933.

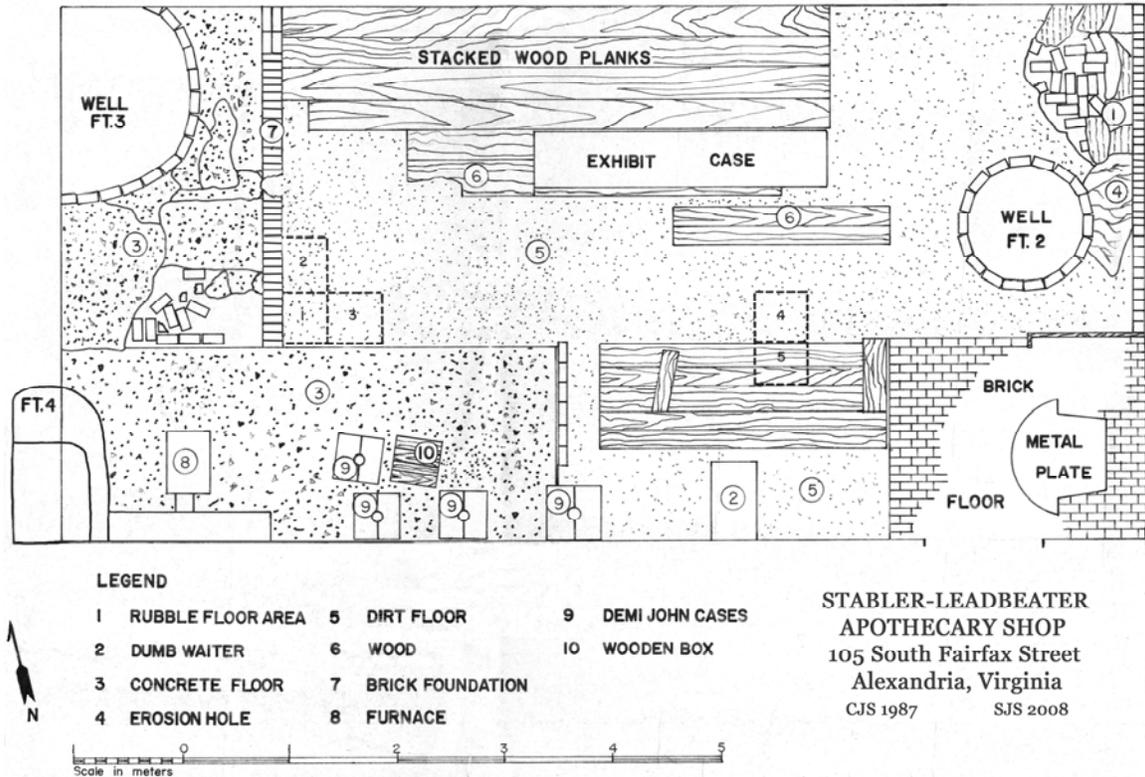
Many products were bottled at the Leadbeater drug warehouse and marked with paper labels, hundreds of which remain in drawers on the upper floors of the shop. Others from the 1880s were embossed with the name of the product or manufacturer. Some of the more interesting bottles found in the excavations were embossed "Gargling Oil," "Witch Cream" and "Lubin Parfumeur Paris." Gargling Oil was a "liniment for man or beast", used as a topical treatment for horses and other animals, and was manufactured from 1833 through the early 1900s. Witch Cream was for acne and to brighten the complexion. Lubin's perfumes were first made in Paris in 1798, but the distinctive Lubin perfume bottles were made in America by the Wittal Tatum Company in the 1880s.

**More on Edward Stabler:**

- Edward Stabler: Apothecary and Abolitionist
- A Brief History of the Stabler Family and the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Shop. Virginia Jenkins. 20 pp. (\$3)
- Edward Stabler, A Kind Friend and Counselor. Virginia Jenkins. 1986. 32 pp. (\$8)

## Excavation

The study of the Apothecary Shop was enhanced by the opportunity to research building construction, particularly basements, from this time period. A site datum was established on the earthen floor of one of the pair of buildings that made up the shop. A grid was established and excavation of squares and the various features was begun in a systematic manner.



## The Cellar Floors

The cellar of the Apothecary shop consisted of packed earth, with areas of wooden planking. A one-meter and five half-meter square test pits were excavated in the dirt floor. More than 2,000 artifacts were recovered. At 105 South Fairfax Street there were over 1,000 fragments of window glass and numerous nails, screws, wires, nuts and bolts, and general structure debris that one would expect in a cellar. Other artifacts included an eyedropper, two marbles, buttons, a brush handle, part of a hacksaw, corks, two pills and some crystalline chemical substances. In addition, over 200 animal bone fragments were found, along with numerous fragments of bottle glass and ceramic sherds.

## Well 1

Feature 1, a well excavated by Alexandria Archaeology in 1982, is located in the center of the basement of the older portion of the shop at 107 South Fairfax Street. It remained open almost to its original depth of about ten feet, with only one foot of fill at the bottom.

The 480 glass fragments and 45 ceramic sherds found in this well dated from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These were pieced together, or crossmended, into 80 glass and four

ceramic vessels. A newspaper fragment dated 1914 was found on the surface of the trash deposit. The small number of artifacts in this feature indicate that they may have been disposed of during a clean up of the shop in 1914 (the date of newspaper found on the surface), or shortly thereafter, rather than gradual disposal over the 30-40 year period during which most of the artifacts were manufactured. Almost all of the artifacts were storage vessels that would have been used in the apothecary.

## **Well 2**

Feature 2 is located near the front wall of the basement of 105 South Fairfax Street. This brick-lined shaft was completely filled with soil and artifacts. Excavation was halted after the surface was cleared because the soil contained quantities of unidentified chemicals that were potentially hazardous. A soil remediation company has since removed any potentially hazardous soil from this feature and the basement floor.

## **Well 3**

Feature 3 is a brick-lined shaft situated underneath the rear basement foundation of 105 South Fairfax Street. A brick arch spanned the opening. About one-third of the shaft extends beyond the building wall and has a brick, chimney-like downspout. The feature was not lined with plaster as are cisterns. Thus, it probably is a well that had its water supply supplemented by the collection of rainwater. This well was excavated to a depth of two meters (six feet), and a probe showed that the fill continued for at least another meter. Excavation of this well was also halted when odorous chemical substances were encountered in the feature. The lowest levels excavated contained artifacts discarded in the 1880s.

Thousands of artifacts were recovered from Feature 3. The upper levels contained turn-of-the-twentieth century artifacts similar to those from Feature 1. These upper levels went to a depth of nearly four feet. This portion of the well contained late nineteenth and early twentieth century stoneware jugs, glass bottles and corks as well as a few late eighteenth century artifacts that may have been found in the basement and discarded in the well during cleaning or minor building renovations. After a soil level containing few artifacts, the nature of the artifact assemblage changed. Most of the artifacts recovered from the lower levels were pharmaceutical and cosmetic bottles from the 1880s. There were also a few eighteenth century bottle fragments, and ceramic ointment pots, metal syringes, glass measuring beakers and other shop-related objects from this period.

## **Trash Pit, Feature 4**

Feature 4 was a trash pit probably associated with a building that stood on the site before the brick structures were built in 1774. It was located under the foundation. Feature 4 was fairly shallow and not lined with brick as were the other features. A large quantity of plain creamware teabowls and saucers had been discarded into the trash pit, along with fragments of several plain creamware plates, the spout of a teapot, portions of two delft punchbowls an earthenware bowl, a fragment of German porcelain, a glass wine bottle and a flask. The lack of pearlware, an English ware first manufactured around 1775, confirms that this feature predates the 1774 building.

## Faunal Finds

Six hundred and fifty animal bones were recovered from the wells and the basement floor. Many of the bones were probably the scraps of the shop workers' meals, and included beef, chicken, sheep and pork bones. Several rabbit, turkey and fish bones and one bone each of raccoon and muskrat were recovered. The majority of bones recovered from the cellar floor and top levels of the wells were those of rats – common inhabitants of early Alexandria. One human molar was found in a cellar floor test pit. Leadbeater was known to have extracted teeth in his Apothecary, and the molar provides archaeological confirmation.



*Office of Historic Alexandria  
City of Alexandria, VA*