

The Perplexing AB Logo on Beer Bottles

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J.D. Douglas sent us photos of a cool – but perplexing – bottle that questioned our current thinking to that point. The base of the bottle was embossed “AB / 81” – a logo we had assigned to the American Bottle Co. with a date of 1905-1906 (Figure 1). The only examples we had found in the past had tooled finishes – where this one had an applied finish. The primary reasons we placed the mark in the



Figure 1 – AB - applied finish (J.D. Douglas)



Figure 2 – A.B. - Bottle House

American Bottle Co. period were 1) a similar mark was found on a base at the Tom Kelley Bottle House – built in 1906 (although the letters were much larger, made with a different font, and had punctuation); 2) our only examples had tooled finishes (commonly used on beer bottles after 1895); and 3) each example had the double stamps that we have typically found on bottles made during the ca. 1895-1914 period, often on bottles made by the American Bottle Co.

We made the assumption that the Tom Kelley bottle was an unusual version of the same AB logo – although that one had larger letters and punctuation “A.B.” than any of the other bases with that mark (Figure 2). All of the other information (tooled finishes and double stamps) confirmed that period. The Douglas bottle showed the same size and font of AB logo above a two-digit code – also found on all bases in our sample – except the one from the Tom Kelly Bottle House (Figure 3). However, the applied finish and a rough seam both suggested the 1880s – which calls for a reexamination of our assumptions (Figures 4 & 5).

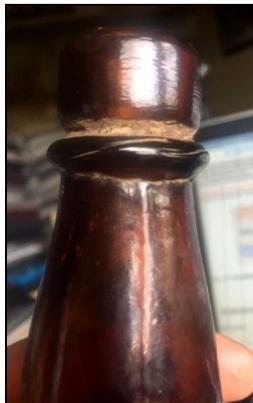


Figure 4 – AB finish (J.D. Douglas)

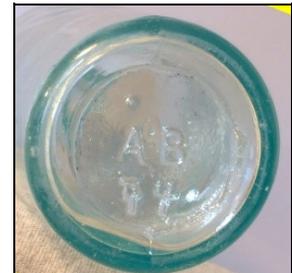


Figure 3 – AB - tooled finish

Increasing information indicates that Adolphus Busch was a real pioneer in beer bottle technology. He apparently used tooled finishes as early as 1890; whereas,

other glass houses continued to use applied finishes on beer bottles (*not* on other bottle types) until just about 1900. In addition, the Adolphus Busch Glass Mfg. Co. pioneered the technique that created the double stamp on bottle bases – again about 1890, at least five years ahead of the pack.

We had proposed that the Adolphus Busch Glass Co., in business from 1886 to 1892, had used the A.B.G.CO. logo for that entire period. Notice that the Douglas bottle had a double-stamped “B” just to the right of the “1” in “81.” This is the only case we have ever seen where a bottle had both a double stamp AND an applied finish. The double stamp was always associated with a tooled finish prior to this example.



Figure 5 – AB neck seam
(J.D. Douglas)

As noted above, this new bottle (if we can use that term for a bottle made in the 1880s) calls for a reassessment. Of greatest importance, the AB mark above a two-digit mold code (and possibly single-digit ones as well) could have been used by the Adolphus Busch Glass Co. rather than the American Bottle Co. *If* Adolphus Busch used the AB logo, he apparently did so, beginning in 1886, when he entered the bottle business under his own name. Since the mark shows up on bottles with both applied and tooled finishes, the logo was probably used for the first few years, likely no later than 1890 – *in this scenario*. If this were the case, Busch’s blowers apparently developed the technique that created the double stamp at the beginning of the firm and shifted to the use of applied finishes soon thereafter – probably by ca. 1888, a couple of year earlier than we had originally posited. The use of the A.B.G.CO. logo likely began ca. 1890 – *again, in this scenario*.

However, there are two flaws in this argument. First, the A.B.G.CO. mark is *much* more common on surviving bottles than the AB logo – suggesting that A.B.G.CO. should have been used for a longer period of time. While this could be subject to debate, the second point is that our entire sample of bottles with A.B.G.CO. basemarks had applied finishes, many with sharp lower rings, typically indicating a manufacture no later than the early 1880s (see the Adolphus Busch section for the relevance of the rings).

While this makes the use of the mark by Busch unlikely, it still leaves the applied finish on the bottle with the AB logo to be explained. An alternative explanation is that a single blower, working for the American Bottle Co. during the 1905-1906 period – for reasons unknown – attached a finish instead of applying it. He may have scooped up too little glass in his gather and blown a good bottle except that the neck was too short to tool into a finish. His simple solution: apply a gob of glass and add it to the top.

However, the Douglas bottle also exhibited marks on the neck that suggested a slight misfit of the mold halves (see Figure 5). That, coupled with the post bottom, applied finish, and two-part finish with rounded lower rings suggests that the bottle was made during the 1880s. The tooled finish on at least one other bottle, one with a virtually identical basemark, suggests that the bottles continued in production into the 1890s. This calls for a full review of our evidence.

Our entire sample of these marks consists of four examples: AB / 74; AB / 77; AB / 81; AB / ?; and A.B. with no number. Taking these one at a time:

AB / 74 – Bill Lockhart found this bottle on eBay and purchased it. He remembered that the bottle had a two-part finish. In the original American Bottle Co. section, we recorded that the finish was tooled and had a post bottom. The color was light aqua (see Figure 3). Unfortunately, the only photos we retained are of the base.

AB / 77 – Ayres et al. (1980) reported this base in their major study of Tucson beer bottles (Figure 6). Aside from a drawing of the base, they gave no further description of the bottle. They attributed the mark to the Adolphus Busch Glass Works 1886-1888. Drawings of other basemarks from the same level suggest the late 1870s-early 1890s period. When the Bottle Research Group examined the Tucson Urban Renewal collection, we did not find this bottle.

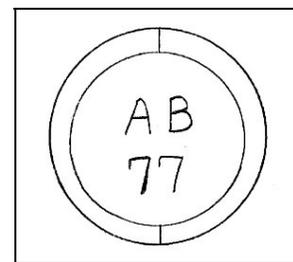


Figure 6 – AB base (Ayres et al. 1980)

AB / 81 – This was the bottle photographed by J.D. Douglas and discussed above (see Figures 1, 4 & 5). It had an applied, two-part finish with rounded lower ring, a post bottom, and rough seams on the neck – amber in color.

AB / 3? 8? 9? 0? – Paul Demmers reported this base fragment to us and contributed a photo. The base was dark amber in color, broken just below the initials (Figure 7). All that remains of the number or numbers was a nub of the first number (a 1?) and a crescent that could have been a 3, 8, 9, or 0. The finish was missing.



Figure 7 – AB fragment (Paul Demmers)

A.B. – This mark appeared on the base of a beer bottle used in the construction of the Tom Kelley Bottle House, Rhyolite, Nevada. The bottles were stacked between concrete with only the bases showing, so we do not know the finish. However, the base had a post bottom, generally in use prior to 1900. The bottle was aqua in color (see Figure 2).

The first four examples were all on post-bottom bases and followed the same pattern – AB / ##. The Douglas, Demmers, and Lockhart bottles had the same fonts and sizes of letters and numbers – and that was almost certainly true for the Ayres bottle as well. While the Lockhart bottle was light aqua, and the Douglas and Demmers bottles were a dark amber, most glass houses used both of those colors for beer bottles. The logical conclusion is that the bottles were all made by the same glass house during the same period – probably between the mid-1880s and the early 1890s.

This study dismisses our earlier identification of the American Bottle Co. as the user of the AB logo. As noted above, however, the production characteristics also fit poorly with the Adolphus Busch Glass Co. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, speaking through the mouth of his detective, Sherlock Holmes, said that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, is the truth. While that statement does not fit perfectly with this situation, we have now eliminated the most likely solutions, so we must seek a better fit. The only logical path left is that the initials “AB” must indicate a currently unknown glass house that specialized in beer bottles – probably one that was small and relatively short lived.

The Tom Kelley bottle is a red herring. For those who are not mystery fans, that means a clue that leads you astray. During the period when soda bottles with Hutchinson stoppers were popular (1880-1900), the bottles had to be packed upside down so that the leather seals would stay moist. Otherwise, they would leak the carbonation and go flat. To easily sort the bottles, many soda bottlers had the owner’s initials or those of the company embossed on the bases in

large capital letters, often with punctuation. The practice continued on crown-capped bottles into the 20th century up to the 1930s in some cases. The “A.B.” aqua base was very likely a soda bottle embossed with the initials of the owner of the bottling works. One caveat is appropriate here. Kelley scavenged bottles from all over to build the dwelling, so any given one – including the “A.B.” base – could have been much older than the 1906 construction date.

Future research should revolve around finding a small glass house that specialized in beer and/or soda bottles with “AB” initials. Since one of these found its way to Arizona in a deposit that contained several other beer bottles, it was either made in the West or had been used for one of the national brands, like the brews from Anheuser Busch. In the latter case, the glass house could have been anywhere, but the Midwest area would have been the most likely.

We followed this up with a search of the Dick Roller files for glass houses in the Midwest glass production belt (Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia) that had AB initials as part of the name. Finding no candidates – aside from Adolphus Busch, American Bottle, and a few that either did not fit the appropriate dates or made some other glass product – we checked cities that began with the letter A in all states. The results were nil. Even the few distant matches (such as the Anderson Flint Bottle Co. that only produced drug store bottles) could not have been the glass house we sought. The answer belongs to the future.

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