

## Distillery History Mystery: Worker's Boot



*Lost boot dating from mid-nineteenth century*

This is the first in an occasional series on “history mysteries” involving the Distillery District – strange artifacts, events, discoveries, disappearances, and unresolved questions that may intrigue casual readers and researchers alike.

Among the more surprising, and mystifying, artifacts found at the Distillery District was a single, dirty, old shoe. Unfortunately, nothing beyond the object itself was known – who owned it, where it was found, or even how old it was.

Given the impossibility of answering the first two questions – who owned it and where it was found – we focused on determining how old it was and what sort of person might have owned it. After all, a shoe is a very intimate, personal object, and a lost shoe provides an evocative link to the past.

Close examination of the “shoe” revealed that it was made of leather, had lost its heel, had a much worn and repaired leather sole, and had a strange “string” attached. It also had a square toe and ankle-high shaft. The sole was nailed – or “pegged” – to the upper part by small, irregular metal nails. Consultation with curator Elizabeth Semmelhack at the Bata Shoe Museum revealed that the relatively small shoe was definitely a man’s work boot. The string was not a lace, but a remnant of “piping” that had covered a long seam, suggesting that the boot’s original, high shaft had been cut-down to the present size.

Why the boot had been cut-down and why the piping remained are both good questions. Perhaps the upper section of the boot proved too uncomfortable for the work performed by its owner and was therefore cut-off. Or, perhaps the sole was so worn-out that the upper leather was cut away to be used for some other purpose – even to repair other shoes. Perhaps one person’s no-longer-wanted high boot was cut off and sold for another person’s work boot. Shoes, and their materials, were valuable and not to be readily thrown-out, especially at the time when this boot was probably made.

When was the Distillery Boot made and worn? In terms of dating, the most important clue is the metal “pegging.” According to Ms. Semmelhack, pegging

of this sort would have been common in Toronto between about 1845 and 1865. Before then, the sole would have been hand-stitched to the upper part, and after that it would have been machine-stitched by the new McKay sewing machine. The square toe suggests the 1840s, but the metal (rather than wood or rubber) pegs suggest a slightly later time.

Around the time this boot was worn, Gooderham & Worts was a young, but well-established and growing business. In 1845, James Gooderham Worts joined his uncle William Gooderham to form Gooderham & Worts; the company's first wharf was built; and distillery buildings were sprouting up around the old (now wingless) windmill tower. In 1865, the Stone Distillery had been in operation for five years, and the west side of Trinity Street was built up by the Maltings and Kiln Building. The east side of Trinity Street, however, was still supporting a cattle business.

One final question arises: is the fact that only one boot was found significant? Perhaps not. But perhaps, as Ms. Semmelhack pointed out, it is. In mid-nineteenth century Ontario, a single, preferably old, shoe was often buried inside the walls of a new house for good luck. A nice thought.



***Gooderham & Worts Distillery around 1855  
attributed to John Colin Forbes  
Note low, workers' houses in background***

Many thanks to Elizabeth Semmelhack, Curator at The Bata Shoe Museum, for dating the Distillery District boot.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, [sg@thedistillerydistrict.com](mailto:sg@thedistillerydistrict.com).

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit [www.distilleryheritage.com](http://www.distilleryheritage.com).