

Glass from the Past: Glass Laboratory Equipment Unearthed on MSU's Campus

Jasmine Smith

Michigan State University, Campus Archaeology Program

Introduction

The Campus Archaeology Program 2015 Field School excavated a historic trash pit located behind the Hannah Administration building. A total of 5 units were excavated, producing a wide variety of artifacts, including laboratory glass. This year I studied the laboratory glass to identify the different types we found and to better understand the reasons for its inclusion in the trash pit. By researching this laboratory equipment CAP hopes to find out what it was used for, where it came from, and to create a typology for use on future campus excavations.



Jasmine Smith excavating in Unit D at Summer 2015 Field School

Terms

Bleb Test Tubes: Test Tubes with a bubble shape at the fused end. This bubble is referred to as a “bleb”.



Mapping Unit D Wall - Pictured Alissa Lyon, Jasmine Smith, Kristin Doshier, and Pa Vang



Excavating Unit D: Pictured Jasmine Smith and Michael Plasterer

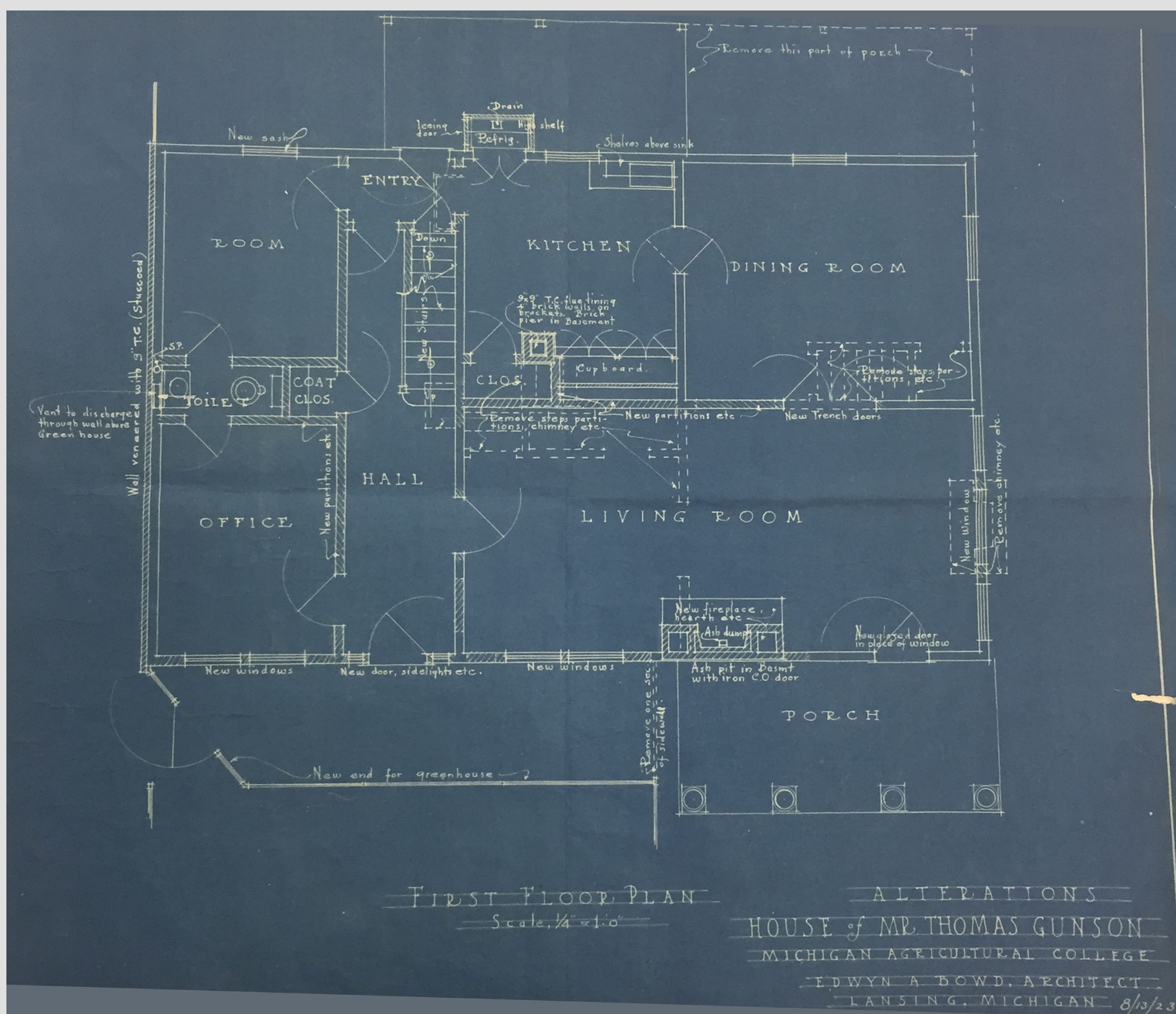
Background

Based on research conducted at the MSU Archives, CAP archaeologists believe this site was likely used as a dumping ground to increase the height of the river bank. It's believed that the refuse originated during the renovations of a former faculty house that was located where the West Wing of the Main Library currently stands. The house belonged to Horticulture Department faculty member, Professor Thomas Gunson. An experimental green house was attached to his home which could be the explanation for the laboratory glass.



Gunson Residence and attached greenhouse. Image courtesy of MSU Archives and Historical Collections, onthebanks.msu.edu

Professor Gunson was employed at MSU as the foreman of grounds, and later as a horticulture professor from 1891 until his death in 1940. He maintained residence in this house with his first and second wives the entire time. His obituary in the January 1941 MAC Record describes him as, ... “the gardener, the counselor, the philosopher, the honest citizen”. Blueprints located in the MSU Archives indicate that major renovations occurred at the residence and greenhouse in approximately 1924.



Gunson Residence Remodel Blueprint - Note New Greenhouse Wall in lower left section. Image courtesy of MSU Archives and Historical Collections. Photo by Lisa Bright

In this blueprint you can see where the greenhouse was attached to the rest of Gunson's home. Renovations of the greenhouse could be the result of the laboratory glass we found in the assemblage behind the Hannah Administration Building.

Why Study Lab Glass?

Scientific research has always been a significant part of what makes MSU a renowned research institution. Identifying the types of laboratory glass found on campus broadens our knowledge of what students and faculty were using in the past and what types of experiments they might have performed. While most of the artifacts we find give us a look into the domestic life of students and faculty, this laboratory glass gives a look into the classroom experience. The Gunson assemblage is not our first instance of finding lab glass on campus and probably will not be our last.



Women working in chemistry laboratory. Date unknown. Image courtesy of MSU Archives and Historical Collections, onthebanks.msu.edu

The image above and below show MSU students working in chemistry laboratories. In both pictures you can see various types of glass equipment. The photo below was taken around the same time that Professor Gunson's greenhouse would have been in use. It is likely that similar equipment would have been used for experimentation in both the horticulture and chemistry departments. These images are a great example of how what we've found in the assemblage might have been used in a lab setting.



Class of 1898 circa 1895. Image courtesy of MSU Archives and Historical Collections, onthebanks.msu.edu

Gunson Lab Glass Artifacts

As the cataloguing process continues, CAP interns have identified equipment such as beakers, stir sticks, syringe stoppers, microscope slides, and a wide assortment of test tubes. Images courtesy of Lisa Bright.



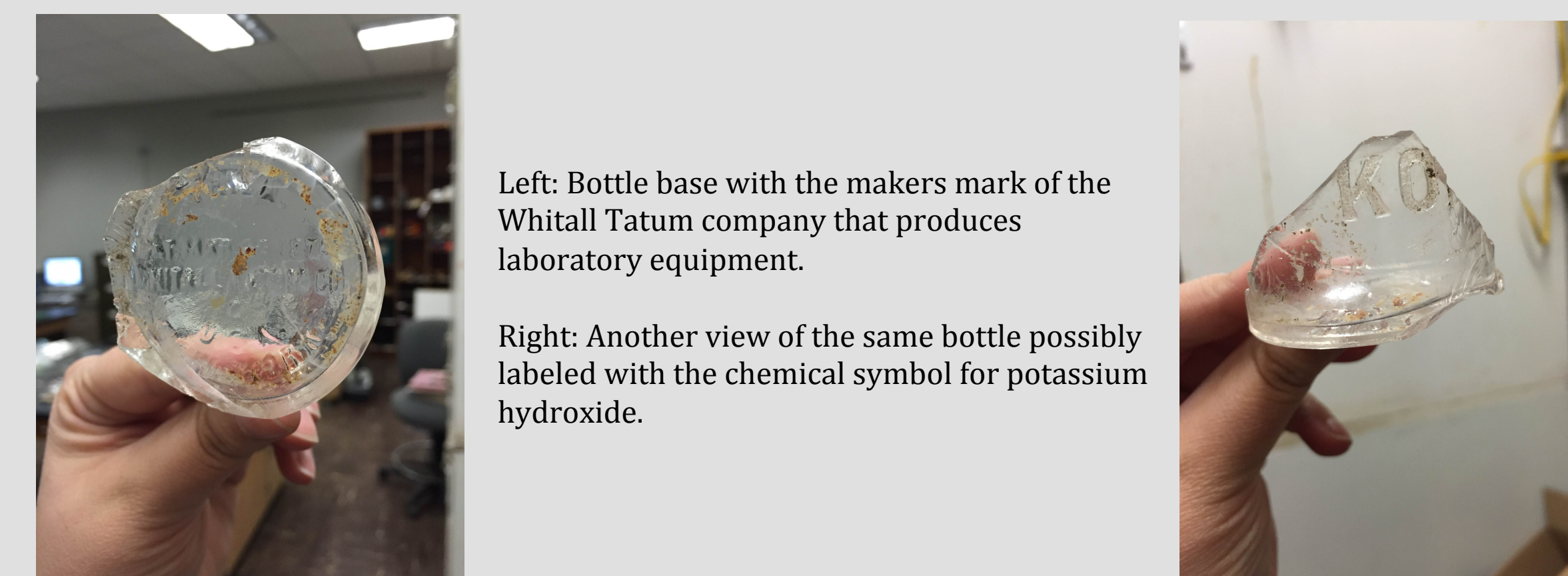
Left to right, labeled glass shards, glass stir sticks



Left to right, various sizes of test tubes including bleb-ended test tubes, curved glass tube, glass shards with numbering



Left to right, syringe stopper, microscope slide, beaker lip with makers mark of the Schott Genossen company.



Discussion

The Campus Archaeology Program has unearthed laboratory glass from MSU's campus during several previous excavations. Since MSU is a historically important research university (especially in the agriculture field) it is expected that more glass equipment will be discovered as CAP continues to dig on campus. Studying the large amount of glass recovered from the Gunson Assemblage last summer will help us know what to expect when encountering these artifacts in future excavations.

Works Cited

Bolas, Bernard. *A Handbook of Laboratory Glass-Blowing*. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1921. Print.