

## **MINT IN THE MUCKLANDS**

*Imagining the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Peppermint Oil Industry in Lyons, New York*

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**Abstract.** National Heritage Areas are a relatively new typology of historic designation in the United States. These areas are not necessarily contiguous physically and are valued for many intangible reasons, as well as for their tangible resources. They have received a special distinction for their capacity to “tell nationally important stories about our nation.” It is important to consider what stories are being told, how, and by whom. This paper uses the town of Lyons, New York – a stop along the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor – as a case study and cautionary example for how heritage is an imagined construct. Lyons is celebrated as the erstwhile Peppermint Capital of the World, yet the town’s historic peppermint oil industry is widely misremembered, even by its own residents. This paper argues that National Heritage Areas have the potential for nuanced readings of the multifaceted and contested histories of cultural and geographical patterns of human settlement and industry.

A total of forty National Heritage Areas have been recognized by Congress since the designation’s inception in 1984. These regions have received a special distinction and their conservation, interpretation and related activities are managed by partnerships among federal, state, and local governments as well as by the private sector. National Heritage Areas are places “where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, ... important landscape arising from patterns

of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in them. These regions are acknowledged by Congress for their capacity to tell nationally important stories about [America]” (National Park Service 2008).

The Erie Canalway of New York State was designated a National Heritage Corridor in 2000. Constructed in 1825, it is considered the most commercially successful and historically significant canal ever constructed in the United States and led to the establishment of New York City as the country’s epicenter for commerce and finance. The 364-mile connection between Albany (on the Hudson River) and Buffalo (on Lake Erie) is also attributed with opening the American west for settlement and facilitating the transport of the agricultural bounty of the Midwest to the eastern seaboard for export to international markets; it reduced freight rates to just ten percent of their previous costs. Interestingly, the Erie Canal is thought to have been an ideological conduit for progressive movements, including abolitionism and women’s rights. Erie Canal tolls paid for its construction within a decade, but it was soon displaced by railroads, and the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959 further reduced its traffic and contributed to the economic decline of upstate New York.

The town of Lyons in Wayne County, New York, profited from its adjacency to the Erie Canal tremendously and rapidly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as did other places along the canal, but Lyons was the epicenter for the processing and export of essential oil of peppermint, one of Wayne County’s most lucrative early agricultural products. Geologically, Lyons sits within a drumlin swarm, a unique field of glacial deposits, a sculpted topography of uniformly shaped hills. The interspersed low areas, known as mucklands, have been intensively manipulated since European settlement in the late 1700s. Three different channels for the Erie Canal were dug around the south and east of Lyons, which connected the town to peppermint oil markets, and mucklands around the town were drained to agriculturally exploit the underlying fertile soil, in which peppermint thrived.

Unlike commodities such as lumber or apples, which were used for subsistence as well as export, peppermint at its inception was a cash crop. Brought to Lyons by peddlers from Ashfield, Massachusetts in 1814, peppermint production in Wayne County peaked in 1897 before being overtaken by Midwestern competitors. The last peppermint in Wayne County was grown some time in the 1930s. For this reason,

although it required intensive, laborious cultivation and necessitated significant ecological manipulation, not many people, today, remember how peppermint was actually grown. However, in the tradition of commemorating a regional agricultural product now practiced in many central New York towns, Lyons residents celebrate the Peppermint Days festival every summer and have determined peppermint to be emblematic of their heritage.

In Lyons, peppermint is a theme which is being used as a way to boost town pride and promote tourism. These efforts are primarily pursued through tangible means and are represented by the town's annual Peppermint Days festival, the antique bottles used by the local industry, which are coveted by local collectors, and the historic Hotchkiss Essential Oil Building, which housed the distilling and bottling operations of one of the town's most successful peppermint entrepreneurs.

Most agriculturally-themed festivals in central New York feature foods still grown in the area. Exhibits show examples of the produce and what can be made with it, such as cider and apple pies at an Applefest. Peppermint Days in Lyons is unusual, because mint is no longer grown there as a crop. This is somewhat of a problem for the festival's organizers, celebrants, and vendors; unless you stop by the Wayne County Historical Society's tent for a brochure, or make your way two blocks uphill to their museum, or a couple of blocks downhill to the canal to see the Hotchkiss building (neither of which is on the festival brochure's map), you probably won't understand the origins of the Peppermint Days theme. Or, as a woman running the Seneca Silk Soaps crafts booth asked, four days into the festival, after staying up all night making more bars of peppermint soap she sold out of the day before, "Why peppermint?"

The peppermint theme is expressed, for the most part, only decoratively. Red and white striped ribbons, candy canes, round lozenges, and annual flowers can be found in store windows, on front porches, hanging from street lamps and in municipal garden beds. Images of blue peppermint bottles portrayed like the familiar Absolut vodka ads, captioned "Absolut Peppermint," are printed on t-shirts. Conveniently, this red, white and blue scheme invokes the American flag as well, and so the mid-July festival blends easily into the aesthetic of Independence Day celebrations. The town square, with its American flag-festooned gazebo in the center, is the focal gathering place. The most popular components of the festival are a large fireworks display, "Thunder over the Erie," and the antique tractor and car exhibits. It is ironic that the tractor show, next to the fireworks, is the main public draw for the peppermint festival. By the time tractors were available to farmers in the 1920s hardly anyone in

still farmed mint locally. The Lyons peppermint industry was conducted by hand and by horse.

The town's peppermint heritage is also reified via a small community of local antique peppermint bottle collectors, one of whom, Richard Kelley, had to change the wattage of the bulbs in his living room bottle collection display case because it was so enormous and bright it was hazardous to drivers passing his home. Kelley can date a bottle from its markings and color: amber, cobalt, sapphire, peacock blue and variants of those, which are the most unusual and the most valuable. Many have their labels intact and trace changes in the industry leadership during its heyday. Kelley's collections and those of several other residents were begun with bottles retrieved when the Hotchkiss building was cleared out. Anne Hotchkiss, the great-granddaughter of the Lyons "Peppermint King," inherited the business in its last years when it distilled mint imported from other locales, donated the building to the county for use as a museum and offered the bottles inside to local antique collectors. She also archived over 140 years of the Hotchkiss family business ledgers, ephemera and correspondence (more than a hundred boxes) at Cornell University, and gifted a former peppermint field to the Bergen Swamp Preservation Society; in doing so, she has preserved sources which represent opportunities for future interpretations, with the potential to bring more insights to the story. The lesser known stories of smaller peppermint farmers will not so easily be remembered. A Wayne County high school student, Linda Gaylord, interviewed former farmers in 1965 and also researched the locations of many of the Wayne County stills, which becomes particularly valuable in light of the scarcity of other documentation.

If, during the festival, you make your way down to the former Hotchkiss building, which is currently operated on a limited basis by volunteer staff, you would hear a version of the oft-repeated Hotchkiss story. The widely circulated narrative proclaims that Hiram Gilbert Hotchkiss (known as H.G.) was the founder of the American essential oil industry and that the Hotchkiss International Prize-Winning Essential Oil Company produced the purest, best tasting peppermint oil in the world for 140 years. H.G. was "Peppermint King" and Lyons the "Peppermint Capital" of the world.

When H.G. was 18, the story goes, he was running a general store with his brother Leman. They accepted peppermint oil, which local area farmers distilled in teapots on their stoves, in trade for store goods. Peppermint oil was then commonly used medicinally in the home, to ease stomach and headaches among other ailments, and it was mostly imported

from England. During the 1830s the brothers stockpiled the oil in the cellar of their store. In 1837, H.G. decided it was time to take the 1,200 pounds of oil they had amassed and turn a profit. H.G. shipped jugs of the oil on the Erie Canal to New York City, where the essential oil brokers turned up their noses; oil originating from what was still considered the frontier was, to their minds, likely to be adulterated or of otherwise poor quality.

H.G. returned to Lyons with the oil via the Canal, and repackaged it more glamorously. He used cobalt blue glass bottles (manufactured in nearby Clyde for ink), and had paper labels printed that stated the oil was “Guaranteed Pure.” He shipped it again on the canal, but this time onward to Hamburg, Germany, which was the commercial center of essential oil production, with technologies for testing and certifying products. Authorities in Hamburg not only declared it among the purest in the world but negotiated a purchase price and placed orders for more. Thereafter, the peppermint oil industry in Lyons and its surrounds became so successful that many local farmers paid their mortgages with it and Erie “canawlers” as they were colloquially known, knew they were nearing the town when they smelled the mint in the air.

But where did the farmers, in this story, obtain the mint they distilled to make the oil they sold to Hotchkiss? The local myth is perhaps best expressed in the words of a local high school student who wrote in a history paper that “Once the low, swampy lands along the Ganargwa (Mud) and other Wayne creeks had been absolutely worthless. Now, the County’s farmers learned that the land could be reclaimed and that the rampant, unheeded mint which grew in profusion there could be tamed. A new and lucrative pursuit had been discovered which brought the Ganargwa farmers an undreamed of prosperity, enriched Wayne County, and rendered Wayne famous in other lands” (Gaylord 1965).

The industry began, so goes the myth, when resourceful farmers turned to peppermint’s abundance in the streambanks and gathered it, free for the taking, and with ingenuity turned it into something useful and valuable, *peppermint oil*, and converted it – first, into goods traded at the Hotchkiss’ general store, and later into cash for mortgage payments. The problem with this narrative is that *Mentha x piperita*, the cultivar of mint from which peppermint oil is distilled, is a sterile non-native plant. Other varieties do not have peppermint oil’s unique properties, nor the yield of oil that would make it worthwhile to distill.

It is not known when or how the peppermint hybrid was achieved, an herbarium specimen was collected by the English botanist John Ray, in 1696. Peppermint was admitted to the London Pharmacopia in 1721. By

1796, a hundred acres of mint were in cultivation in medicinal herb gardens in Mitcham, England (Landing 1969). Distillation of peppermint oil for commercial purposes originated in England in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century; it became, and remains, the most extensively produced and utilized aromatic essential oil.

*Mentha x piperiata* grows specialized stems called stolons, which spread in all directions near the soil surface and send up new growth at their nodes. It is propagated using pieces of these stolons. The idea of farming peppermint can almost seem comical. Known to be invasive by gardeners, it hardly seems necessary to cultivate it intentionally. To grow mint for the purpose of extracting essential oil, in fact, necessitates large acreages managed in very particular ways. Furthermore, the amount of oil peppermint will yield declines every year until the stolons are dug up and replanted somewhere else.

Europeans brought mint stolons with them to the colonies, to grow as a garden herb, but they relied on importing vials of peppermint oil from England for medicinal purposes until the first colonial commercial area developed in Ashfield, Massachusetts, sometime in the late 1790s.

Even the industry in Ashfield was formidable enough to require the importation of ample stocks of *Mentha x piperita*. Ashfield was also a major distribution center for small wares, including peppermint oil and other essences, which itinerant peddlers sold in the colonies. These peddlers traveled throughout New England and far into the new country's frontier: English vials of peppermint oil were discovered in a Native American gravesite near Galesburg, Michigan, in 1820, and it is this peddling culture that introduced peppermint growing to Lyons (Landing 1969).

Almost a decade before H.G. Hotchkiss and his brother Leman were working in their father's general store, another pair of brothers, Archibald and Nahum Burnett, plotted the cultivation of peppermint oil near Lyons. Archibald was one of the itinerant peddlers from Ashfield, and while working in the New York colonies he met and married a farmer's daughter in Phelps. His brother Nahum, back in Massachusetts, encouraged Archibald to return and partner with him in the booming peppermint business. Archibald persuaded Nahum to join him in Phelps instead; he already knew the soil and climate conditions would be even more opportunistic. Archibald and Nahum Burnett both had farms near Lyons along the Canandaigua Outlet in 1814, planted mint stolons they brought from Ashfield, and distilled it in equipment they built themselves; H.G. was only four years old at the time (*Lyons Republican* 1919). They and the mint they brought weren't the only transplants from

Ashfield, either: “When it was discovered that the mint flourished along the Outlet, produced more oil and required less cultivating than in Ashfield, the peppermint growers of Massachusetts began to move to the new locality ... The loss of so many prosperous families was a severe blow to Ashfield and the peppermint industry of Vienna [Phelps] thrived as the Massachusetts venture waned” (Landing 1969).

In the Midwest and Northwest regions of the U.S. peppermint oil production is acknowledged as an introduced commercial endeavor, originating from New York and New England, and England before that. Why hasn't a straightforward narrative about mint always been told about stolons having arrived with colonists, along with the knowledge of how to grow them and distill oil from the leaves? Through continued cultivation and propagation by division, improvements in cultivation and distillation techniques, and with an eye for available fertile wetlands, some colonists within certain regions developed and expanded mint oil production as a profitable industry.

This differentiation might seem subtle but it is important. Embedded in these early origin stories are notions about friendly cooperation with native America and Native Americans, a pastoral romantic idea of working with the land to harvest its bounties that doesn't involve massive impact and change. Colonists, like the mint, are portrayed as adaptive and well-suited to utilizing these new lands. There is significance to saying that mint was found growing wild rather than the idea that it was bought, brought, divided, sold, spread, and cultivated with intent and foreknowledge.

On the latter end, when local histories and tourist brochures reproduce the notion that even today you can find it wild in the county, they romanticize and naturalize the reality of the intense ecological interventions necessary for peppermint oil production. Realities such as the fact that streams were redirected, dammed, dug, cleared, and otherwise controlled for agriculture and transportation are forgotten. The reality of peppermint's propagation by root stolons and human hands disappears as well.

That the Seneca so recently hunted, gathered and fished in this landscape, seasonally, cyclically, and in conjunction with their own agricultural methods seems denied too. Pretending that colonists utilized the land in similar, yet more profitable ways justifies colonialism. Perceiving the plant as unheeded is akin to viewing the land as unimproved, an ideology which reinforced colonial entitlement.

This paper is merely an excerpt of a much larger project that countered, on many levels and at different scales, the peppermint heritage

narratives mostly offered by popular stories, local histories, and industry narratives, one that took into consideration changes in the landscape which both predate and follow the peppermint industry. Peppermint played a significant role in the colonization of Lyons, by: providing a means for small farmers to see an immediate cash return on a commercial crop, thereby contributing to the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture; motivating the purchase and drainage of marshlands surrounding Lyons and in Wayne County; and further enriching an upper class that determined, in many ways, what got constructed in Lyons and where, as well as what would be remembered about its era.

Peppermint represents the movement of material culture (root stock) and cultural knowledge (plant cultivation and oil distillation) from its 18<sup>th</sup> century origins in England to new colonies in North America (first documented in western Massachusetts), where abundant wetlands proved advantageous for its production. The industry continued to seek these same conditions at greater scales as it passed through Lyons and moved westward. Expanding the Lyons story to include this movement challenges representations of place which tend to focus on “the discrete at the expense of continua, things at the expense of encounter, and results at the expense of tendencies” (Massey 2005).

During the 1890s and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the explosion of gum and toothpaste manufacturing, new commodities flavored with peppermint oil, incited a demand for much larger acreages that vaulted mint growing over New York to the vaster mucklands of Michigan and Indiana.

The spatial diffusion of the peppermint industry is self-evident in its representations in places where it grew. As earlier discussed, the industry in Ashfield, Massachusetts, is barely documented or remembered. In Lyons it is often represented through nostalgia and focuses on the remnant buildings and bottles left long after peppermint was no longer grown in the area. In Michigan and Indiana, descendents of peppermint farming families are able to recollect and describe their experiences of planting, weeding and harvesting by manual methods. Farmers in Indiana can also recall the 700-800 other farmers in peppermint in the 1930s; today they number around 75.

In western Massachusetts and in New York, mint was generally grown on wet portions of topographically variant farms as part of diverse operations. Today, vast, flat expanses in Oregon and Washington are irrigated in industrial-scale operations that produce nothing but peppermint. As George Henderson has written, “we are dealing with

phenomenon that, while leaving their traces in individual locales, are themselves constituted at much larger, even dizzying, geographical scales” (Henderson 2003). The world supply of peppermint oil in 1876 was approximately ninety thousand pounds. By comparison, in 2005 Washington and Oregon produced eighty percent of the world’s peppermint oil supply of seven million pounds (USDA 2006). Which is why today, in Lyons, New York, peppermint is a heritage festival and in Albany, Oregon it is a multimillion dollar industry.

The built environment of Lyons was constructed in service to the production and export of commodities, including peppermint, which were extracted from a surrounding region, central New York, at a time when it (briefly) represented the growing edge of America’s frontier. The dramatic success of these enterprises largely contributed to the flourishing of the New York, and American, economies. Yet, as the country expanded westward, the imperative to build and produce shifted with it, leaving behind vestigial remnants of an economic vitality that was only temporary. Culture and capital are both constantly changing and moving, and have great agency in shaping places as they move. This study sought to amplify rather than mute these changes.

A focus on peppermint was intended to *narrow* the scope of a study of the town of Lyons, as part of a geologically, ecologically, historically, economically and culturally unique region deserving of more extensive study. Peppermint itself expanded the inquiry, however, to include reflections on the cultural invisibility of specialized process commodities which have their own spatiotemporal momentum and which heavily influence patterns of land use.

Popular historical stories about colonized American landscapes have actually tended to be versions of creation myths that depend on the idea that prior to European settlement it was unshaped land abundant with unused resources. David E. Nye has written about this phenomenon as particularly exaggerated in post-revolutionary America where the utilization of land-shaping technologies (the mill, canal, railroad and dam) are “woven into national narratives” which justify and naturalize the colonial presence and impact (Nye 2003). Therefore, studying and interpreting cultural landscape change can counter these stories, while also deconstructing the complexities of how and why these ideologies evolve, persist or are resisted.

As David Nye has also written, “Landscape is thus defined not as natural, but as cultural. It is not static, but part of an evolving set of relationships. Landscapes are part of the infrastructure of existence, and they are inseparable from the technologies that people have used to shape

land and their vision” (Nye 2003). Landscapes themselves shape cultural and personal identities, but so do how landscape are represented. These narratives become a powerful determinate of collective memory and they get projected back upon landscapes, which then become mnemonic devices for them. In other words, the stories themselves govern what is noticed and understood about landscapes. Closer readings which deepen these stories, it follows, expand how we experience landscapes.

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