

## EARLY AMERICAN ENGRAVED POWDER HORNS

by Crosby Milliman

### INTRODUCTION

The powder horn, like so many other players on the stage of life, did not become a star overnight. Uses for animal horns were conceived backstage at Genesis thousands of years ago, nurtured to meet certain necessities through the ages, finally to emerge upstage some 400 years ago in its most dramatic role. As a powder receptacle, it was a character actor to be sure but, nevertheless, shared the limelight with the advent of firearms.



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Since the beginning, animal horns have been used for accoutrements. Prehistoric daggers, pickaxes, dart heads, and handles, made mostly from the reindeer and red deer, have been found carved and engraved. Cattle horns followed and, in their natural shape, were used for blowing; reshaped, they were used as whetstone and vinegar holders (the mower's horn), and for knives and forks. Horn spoons, made as late as 19th Century in Scotland, were very common.

As hides were to the tanner, so were horns to the horner. After a fortnight of boiling in oil and roasting over a flame the horns of oxen, goats or sheep could be separated into layers, put into boiling water, and subsequently cut lengthwise with a thin-edged chisel. After more boiling the sheets of horn were placed in a wood cavity, with hot iron plates in between each sheet, and finally hardened in water. By steeping in water, sheets of horn could be welded at the edges. Such sheets were once used for window panes before glass became available. Thin sheets of horn also filled the sides of early lanterns, lighting devices which eventually became known as lanterns.

As receptacles, horns of the rhinoceros, for example, were used by the making cups which were believed to have medicinal value. In the Bible we read in First Samuel 16:13 where, "Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him (David)." A horn cup was commonly used to hold mead and ale, thus "to take a horn." Because of their imperviousness

to water (a characteristic which will become very apparent later), horns were also used as cups and canteens to keep liquids in or as salt, steel, flint and tinder containers to keep moisture out (see Figure 1).

### ORIGIN

Following its advent, gunpowder was carried in a variety of containers. They were made of practically every available material from metal and wood to hide and horn, and combinations thereof. A majority of the foreign containers were thus artificially shaped, formal works of art executed by professional engravers and carvers. Such a luxury could only be afforded by the wealthy. A few of these foreign flasks and horns were carried to America at the outset of exploration and colonization.

Lacking the means, the ever growing masses of settlers arriving in the New World had to resort to an expedient. In addition, the horns of English cattle and of those cattle raised in the colonies were generally inadequate. However, it was soon discovered that cattle horns of sufficient size (20 to 24 inches in length) could be easily and cheaply procured from the West Indies, Mexico and South America.

On his second voyage to America, Christopher Columbus had landed cattle in Santo Domingo. In 1521, during Cortes' conquest of Mexico, Gregorio de Villalobos introduced several calves on the mainland. These descendants of Spanish bovine stock were in time to become known as "Texas Longhorns," and be in sufficient number and of natural attribute to meet the demand.

The American powder horn illustrated here (Figure 2) consisted of a tough, fibrous material keratin, an albuminoid like human hair and finger-nails. Because of their natural curvature and sturdy, thin-walled construction, and particularly because of their imperviousness to moisture and heat, the larger horns were very practical, lightweight, comfortable to carry slung at the side, and ideally suited to the needs and budgets of the colonists. They were so sound that they neither molded nor decayed, would keep powder dry in the rain for days, would bounce rather than break, and would float on water when it became necessary, for instance, to ford a stream. Unique, the horn possessed all the requisites for carrying gunpowder secure and dry.

The largest commercial source of horns was the Bird family who operated a tannery in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Thomas Bird established the business around 1635 and immediately began to prosper from the King's

agents and provincial buyers of his leather and horn supplies.

Although classed as waste and admitted duty free with the purchased hides, each horn cost the Birds a penny to transport. They were sold in the rough for fourpence, or six to eightpence already trimmed and bored but presumably plain. The decorated powder horn of Thomas Chase, dated 1768, has inscribed on it the price of two shillings eightpence or about 50 cents.

High grade sporting horns made before 1825 are quite rare. Military horns, made before the Revolution, were issued gratis in the rough to both officers and the troops by either the king or the colonies in spite of the fact that the paper cartridge, which facilitated loading and increased the rate of musket fire, had become preferred. Militia laws listed cartridge boxes, but powder horns could be substituted. This option pleased the colonist because powder horns were cheaper and much easier to make than cartridge boxes and were somewhat more practical around the home. At times during the Revolution, however powder horns had to be issued to the patriots and Continental Army when the supply of cartridges, boxes and cannisters ran out. Even when available such containers could not always be protected from the elements and rattling sometimes betrayed the whereabouts of the wearer. Here again the horn proved its worth by being readily available, impervious to the weather regardless of season, and virtually noiseless. Of course, there were such firearms as the Pennsylvania rifle and the Ferguson rifle which could not use cartridges efficiently. The American rifleman, for example, had from experience carefully selected the caliber of his rifle and accurately determined the precise load, grain of powder, and patch material for maximum output certain conditions. Sometimes, as even today at the muzzle loading meets, the exact combination was a closely guarded secret among rival factions. Although the rifle took somewhat longer to load, some valuable time was made up by those riflemen with loading blocks which carried greased and patched balls suited to the particular bores of their rifles. By placing the block over the rifle's muzzle, each unit of patch and ball could be "punched" into the barrel and rammed home.

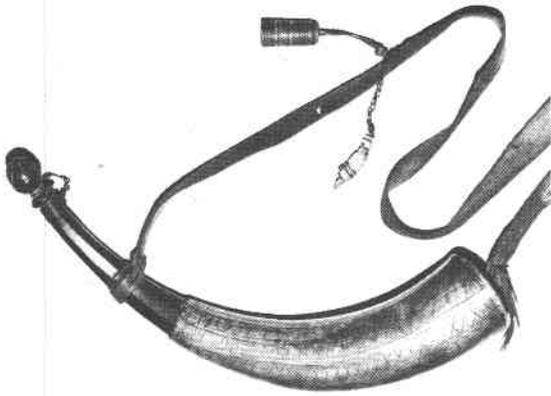


Figure 2: JOSEPH BARNS, Cape Breton, Dated during the siege of the French Fortress Louisburg and two days before it surrendered to Jeffrey Amherst.

Officers on horseback, and others who carried pistols, also carried powder horns much like the one illustrated (Figure 3) which is only ten inches long overall, or they used pocket horns or flasks. In special instances individuals would be presented with a horn. General Stark, for example, was honored with the gift of a finely engraved powder horn after the battle of Bennington by his admiring and appreciative soldiers. Finally, cannoneers oftentimes primed their pieces from powder horns.

#### PREPARATION

Starting with a relatively fresh and selected horn 18 to 24 inches long, the pith was removed (out of doors!) by boiling the horn in water containing, if anything, a little potash. The interior was wiped clean, an inch or two was trimmed from either end, and a hole was bored through the cavity from the tip end to form the spout. Depending upon the length and fullness of the horn, outer layers extending about one-third the horn's total length were removed leaving only spaced narrow bands to retain one end of the shoulder cord or strap (see Figure 2). Setting off this exposed recessed area often revealed in some horns the dark-colored inner layers which could be scraped, or shaved with a piece of broken glass, cleaned and polished pumice and oil to bring out a lovely green tone. With care the larger area of the shaped spout could be scraped thin enough to allow the wearer a view of the amount of powder remaining in the horn. Finally, a carefully shaped wooden plug, usually of pine, was fitted at the base of the horn and dampened as necessary to expand to a very tight fit. For insurance, and where the configuration allowed, melted beeswax and tallow, or even hamp, were used to caulk the seam. In almost every example a limited number of small holes were carefully bored near the basal edge of the horn and the plug was fastened in position with hardwood pegs. Occasionally, metal pins were employed and, later, tiny brads, roundhead tacks, and even very small screws.

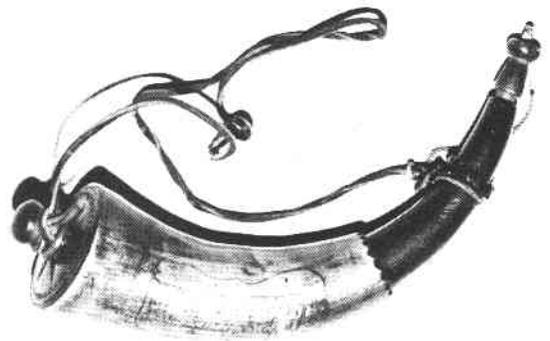


Figure 3: JOSEPH CASWELL, Roxbury Camps, November 18, 1775

Although the characteristic shape of the spout generally limited the means of cord or strap attachment to looping or thongs, there was a variety of ways developed by the individual makers in securing to the basal end. Quite often a simple hole would be bored on a bias near the upper edge of the horn through the plug. Artfully fashioned projections or lobes, with holes, were allowed for when the horn was trimmed originally.

However, these relatively narrow extensions, further weakened by engraving, quite often were snapped off and the owner had to resort to the previously described method of securing his horn. A simple expedient was to nail the strap directly to the base plug or tie the cord to a nail or some form of staple. In yet another imaginative variation the cord could be tied to a carved or turned knob in the center of the base plug, or a strap with a slit near its end could be slipped over the knob. These knobs are found carved as an integral part of the plug, but usually they were forced fit into a center hole. Some knobs were threaded and served also as stoppers to facilitate refilling the horn. Such a knob was a distinguishing feature on artillery horns.

#### CARRYING, REFILLING AND IDENTIFICATION

The small priming and pistol horns were carried in the pockets of breeches, hunting and saddle bags. However, the majority of the larger horns which saw military service were attached at the basal and spout ends to a cord or strap and slung from the shoulder. Loescher states that Rogers' Rangers hung their horns under their right arms by a belt from the left shoulder. The New York Historical Society has them worn under the left arm and suspended from the right shoulder. I am with Stephen Grancsay of the Metropolitan Museum of Art who called it a tossup based on his observations of the suspension holes, lobes and other attachment devices which appeared on the top side of the horns. Assuming that the horns were worn with the spout upward and pointing forward, my own observations of worn areas along the inside of the curvature have usually been the deciding factor. I say "usually" because it is possible to be fooled for a moment by a detached horn which could have been pointing either way while worn on a hunting bag. In any case, I believe that a great deal depended upon any initial instruction the wearer may have been given and the individual loading technique that he had developed from experience with his firearm, breech or muzzle loader. Left or right handed, the natural curvature of any horn fit the waist beautifully.

Generally, horns were filled via the spout using a funnel carved or turned from the tip of an untrimmed horn and employing a stiff quill for the tube. Ingenious makers threaded the inside lips of their funnels and thus the funnels served also as caps on the spouts of their powder horns. Settlers and townsmen normally filled their one-pound horns from much larger "family horns" of four to five pounds capacity which were hung up in their cabins and houses. Service horns were turned in to the powder wagon to be refilled from very large magazine horns by the sergeant in charge.

For positive identification and faster redistribution, many commanders issued orders requiring the owners to sign their powder horns. Usually pride of ownership had already made its mark. On the other hand, American riflemen were not prone to engraving their names or much of anything on the horns they attached to their hunting bags. They were not idle men, and the particular fear of reprisal upon their families because of the nature of their specialty can account for this. Although functional and compartmented (two horns sometimes being butted), most of the bags and horns were simply fashioned to suit the needs of the individual owner. Generally, riflemen were a more independent lot and assumed responsibility for their own needs. Their precise shooting and smaller caliber rifles consumed less powder than muskets and it was not necessary to refill their horns so often. As previously mentioned, the riflemen's horns were usually scraped just thin enough to be translucent thus allowing the wearer a convenient check on his powder supply. Consequently, because of the very thin walls, riflemen's horns were seldom carved or engraved for fear of weakening and leaking due to deep penetration with a knife or tool. Nevertheless, decorative base plugs, sometimes of cherry, and ingenious spouts, incorporating funnels and measures, were fashioned by the imaginative riflemen.

#### ENGRAVING

Why there seems to be a preponderance of American engraved powder horns of the French and Indian Wars, particularly of the 1756-1763 period rather than that of the Revolution, has been partially explained by the later widespread use of the cartridge box. Yet probably the most important factor was the great difference in environment. The Revolution offered very few sieges and only one or two large encampments of any significance. On the other hand, the fourth French and Indian War, with its long idle encampments during predominantly warm weather, most favored the production of powder horns by a large number of participants from all walks of life.

Early in the fourth French and Indian War, up to and including Braddock's expedition against Fort Duquesne, very little if anything was known of the region to be traversed by the army, to say nothing of the scarcity of intelligence on Fort Duquesne itself. Consequently, there was little or nothing, neither maps of the region nor a plan of the fort, which the soldiers and professional engravers could copy onto their horns.

Subsequently the campaigns moved back into familiar territory, including the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys, Lakes George and Champlain. These areas were already mapped and, in addition, engravings of the topography and settlements were available for reference. The better map horns were prepared for sale in the stores of nearly every center by professional horners, engravers, and gunsmiths. It is not too uncommon even today to come across a professionally made powder horn with a perfectly blank cartouche evidently made for the common market but for some reason never inscribed with an owner's name.

Whether amateur or professionally made, there was generally a better horn in every group of GI's to serve as a model for other horns. Likewise, there was usually a soldier who was either more willing or more talented than the rest who would personalize or otherwise inscribe individual horns in trade for whiskey or for standing watch. Occasionally, in the line of duty, the best engraver available would be ordered to prepare an officer's horn to serve as an indicator of general direction, landmarks, and settlements to be sought along the line of march on a pending assignment. Thus in most cases map horns are quite similar in character. The other, more personalized horns reflect the individual imagination of the original owners.

The professional engraver used a burin or graver, whereas the amateur used a needle embedded in a stick or more likely the point of his jackknife. The amateur was apt to cut and doodle as he went along, but the professional or more thoughtful engraver laid out everything in pencil on the surface, which had been polished with the palm of the hand using pumice and oil. The horn was held firmly in the engraver's lap by a strap (probably the engraver's belt) looped over the horn and under the pressure of the engraver's foot. Whether professional or amateur, the engraver checked his progress by rubbing the horn with his moist and dirty hands and thus bringing out the cut lines.

The completed engraving was set off with the weather-proof fillings of grease and either soot or gunpowder dust. Whenever available, vegetable oil was preferred because it hardened faster. Generally, the more professional horns can be distinguished by their use of color; however, the backwoods abounded in dye materials and it is not uncommon to see a lessor horn with filled-in lines and the surface stained. The verdigris of the camp kettle supplied the green and the kettle's bottom provided the black soot. Yellows came from the pith of sumac and from the gold thread in the swamps. Sumac berries furnished a russet red, and from raspberries and chokecherries came a brilliant red.

The subject matter of engraved horns includes the full gamut from peace and war, humor and tragedy to sea and land, politics and philosophy. I have in my collection a fine powder horn (see Figure 4) engraved ISRAEL DANE HIS HORN MADE ON BOARD THE SCHOONER SWAN, MAY THE 12 AD 1758. For many years before and after Dane's time practically every ship that set sail was armed and included powder horns in its equipment. In whiling away their time sailors often employed their knives and sail needles on horns. Thus it is not too uncommon to find full-rigged ships (Dane's own on the specimen shown) and fish as the favorite and prominent subjects. (It should be noted here that scrimshaw did not come into its own until the late 18th Century.)

Horns of a military nature show various fighting equipage rather than marine life and include the positions of forts, outposts and blockhouses all the way up the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys from New York to Quebec and Montreal. Such mid-18th Century designs suggested the work of men who not only served in the Royal Navy but on surveying expeditions as well. Such horns unfortunately are even less accurate than the maps they were oftentimes copied from, but they do indicate the importance evidently placed upon the early strategic points and defenses against the marauding French and Indians who were upsetting the tranquility of the colonists. Nautical subjects were included on similar map horns by occupation troops and besiegers who could see ships about them and laying at anchor out in the harbor. Known, very rare Louisbourg and Boston siege horns show such naval displays.



Figure 4: ISRAEL DANE, Schooner SWAN, May 12, 1758

in the deep detail enhances this horn, which is further set off by the line, THE CITY OF HAVANA ILLUMINATED AT THE EMBARKATION OF THE BRITISH TROOPS JULY 7TH 1763. It is interesting to note that Havana surrendered August 14, 1762 to a British force including 2,300 American provisional troops under General Phinias Lyman of Connecticut. By the Treaty of Paris in 1763, ending the Seven Years War, England



returned Cuba to Spain in exchange for Florida. Thus the 1767 date in the cartouche of the horn shown here reflects the service of the British army of occupation in both Cuba and Florida.

The more personal horns, like the one shown at the bottom of Figure 5, are particularly noteworthy because of the human interest that they suggest. This one was engraved by its owner, Robert Baird, at Lake George and is dated September 1, 1758. Included is the reminder STEEL NOT THIS HORN FOR FEAR OF SHAME FOR ON NIT IS THE ONER'S NAME and a favorite rhyme I POWDER WITH MY BROTHER BALL A HERO LIKE DO CONQUER ALL. The phonetic spelling on this horn is typical of the general, middle-class level of education during this period in America. Lexicographers and their dictionaries were as yet hardly known throughout the world, and one man's spelling was as acceptable as another's so long as they could communicate and get a message across.

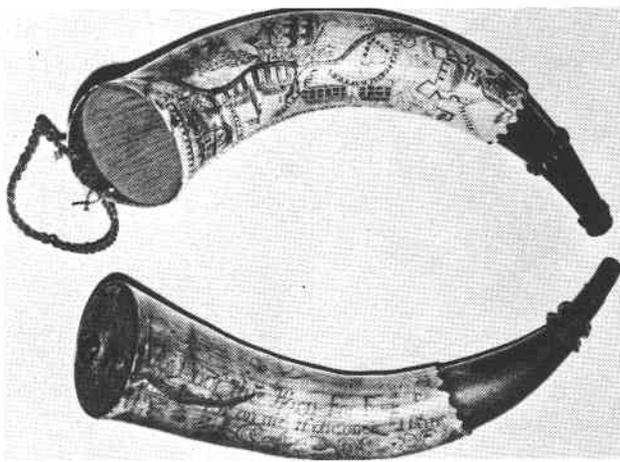


Figure 5: Havana, Cuba, July 7, 1763 (Top)  
ROBART BAIRD, Lake George, September 1, 1758 (Bottom)

The powder horn at the top of Figure 6 was undoubtedly engraved by its owner, Richardson Miner, whose name appears on the horn in relatively huge letters. Miner (1736-1797) was a goldsmith and clockmaker from Stratford, Connecticut. From April 5 to November 9, 1760 he was an armorer in the 2nd Regiment under Col. Nathan Whiting and saw action against the French up on the St. Lawrence River. This horn is dated August 29, 1760 at LeGalatte, an island in the river just above what is know known as Ogdensburg, N. Y. Vigilance and readiness are to be remembered by the engraved rhyme, SIR I I HOPE YOU HANT FORGOT, ALWAYS TO STRIKE WHEN TH' IRON HOT. It is interesting to note that Miner also served on the Brig DEFENSE as an armorer from March 13 to July 28, 1776.

The powder horn in the bottom of Figure 6 was profusely engraved by Nathaniel Selkrig at Fort No. 4, Charlestown, New Hampshire. It is dated March 15, 1758, and includes the following rhymes:

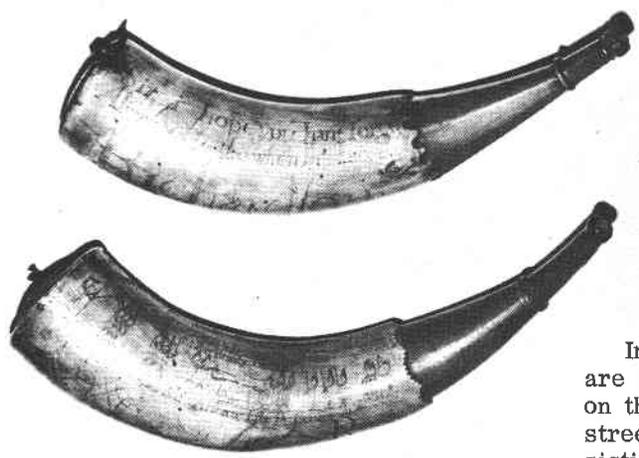


Figure 6: RICHARDSON MINER, Le Gallatte, August 29, 1760 (Top)  
NATHANIEL SELKRIG, No. 4, March 15, 1758 (Bottom)

I POWDER WITH MY BROTHER BALL  
A HEROW LIKE DO CONCOR ALL  
  
and  
  
DRUMS ABEATING COLLERS FLIEING  
TRUMPETHS SOUNDING MEN A DIEING;  
  
THESE ARE THE BLOODE AFFECTS OF WARS

In addition to the tragic sentiment suggested here, there are details of soldiers, their dress and equipment, depicted on this horn which are of considerable help to historians. A street firing scene is shown of two opposing forces each consisting of a sergeant holding a halberd, and carrying a sword, and three files of armed soldiers all in full dress and labelled MAKE READY, PRESENT, FIRE. Miscellaneous engraving includes a large AR (Anne Regina), two officers reviewing nine marching soldiers, and a mounted officer before six other cavalrymen all with drawn swords.

There were, of course, thousands of horns engraved to varying degrees, if at all. Too many have been casually discarded or have not withstood the ravages of time. Today they are highly prized items because they appeal to a wide variety of interests. Not only are they documents in themselves and offer to us an insight to the humor, the tragedy, the political thinking of the times but they are representative of a true form of American graphic art. For example, on September 25, 1759 at Crown Point, Alexander Oviat finally finished his lovely horn. It is a profusion of floral and scroll designs, and apparently he suffered some ridicule from his buddies for so spending his idle time, because he finished with this line of wit:

THE HORN IS DON SO MAKE NO MORE FON

and there were others:

MY HORN AND I  
HAVE WANDERED FAR  
FOR LOBSTERS (REDCOATS!), REDSKINS, DER & BAR  
FROM MASS TO HERE IN OHIA  
WE KEPT YE POWDR DRY

VAL PRENTICE

Some not funny at all:

TICONEROGUE FIGHT BEGAN AT TEN A  
AND ENDED AT FIVE A CLOCK  
AND THEIR WAS KILLED AND WOUNDED 2844

THE FITE BE GUN JULY THE 6A (1758 Lake George)  
AND WEE LORST 1947 MEN

Powder horns never completely faded from the American scene. They continued in favor so long as sportsmen carried loose powder, even though the cartridge and the breech-loading rifle ended the powder horn's military life. The metal flask came into vogue around 1830 and seemed to wipe out the use of horns. Nevertheless, horns were plentiful and inexpensive, and persisted to remain in existence right up to and including the present-day, stepped-up interest in muzzle loading competition and hunting.

I would be naive to think my collection and the examples brought forth here as being representative of the whole; however, I hope that what I have had to offer is of interest not only to powder horn enthusiasts but also to students of American craftsmanship and history. The more you study them, the more they "speak" for themselves of times long ago. Truly, "they are made-in-America antiques in a class by themselves."



Left - HORN CONTAINER for flint,  
steel and tinder.  
Right - ENGRAVED SALT CONTAIN-  
ER from New Hampshire.



Left - Carved 17th Century Turk's  
HEAD KNOT DRINKING VESSEL.  
Right - Plugged and Caulked 18th  
Century HORN CUP.

## FAKES

The best engraved horns are presently being valued in four figures; thus there is a monetary incentive to engrave genuine plain powder horns with names and inscriptions of historical significance. This is seldom a pleasant aspect of collecting to discuss; however, I offer the following list of what to be on guard for. I doubt that the list is complete, but here it is for what value it may be to you.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN FAKES

1. Engraving over scratched lines.
2. Modern base plugs.
3. No recessed area on the spout for the attachment of the shoulder strap. (More apt to be a forgery than horn with such a recessed area)
4. Horn scraped thin in isolated areas indicating that the original engraving has been removed.
5. Small parallel lines made by a rasp would seem to indicate that the original engraving was removed.
6. Lack of "f's" within early words instead of "s's".
7. Late tacks, screws or nails holding base plug in place. (Early base plugs were usually secured by iron or wood pegs).
8. Horns attributed to famous historical personages like Daniel Boone, Nathan Hale, Paul Revere, Robert Rogers, the Indian chief Tecumseh, and George Washington.
9. Map horns said to have been engraved by Paul Revere, and others alleged to have been engraved by early Rhode Islanders.
10. Marks of a turning lathe. (Originally many old horns were scraped lengthwise by hand).
11. Consistent depth, precise, evenly spaced marks made by modern engravers and modern (power) tools. Originally professional work was executed in fine outline with a sharp, pointed graver, and can be distinguished from the early crude work done with a jackknife. Occasionally decoration was pricked out with a needle.

### PRIMING POWDER FLASKS

