

The Civil War Roots of Coca-Cola in Columbus, Georgia

By

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The roots of the world's most famous soft-drink can be traced to the final battle of the Civil War that took place on April 16, 1865 on both sides of the banks of the Chattahoochee River at Columbus, Georgia. The battle of Columbus occurred *after* General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse because the telegraph lines had been destroyed and the word of the armistice had not reached Columbus. "Not a word reached me," wrote Union General James H. Wilson who led the attack on Columbus, "indicating that Lee had surrendered."¹ The inventor of Coca-Cola was an officer who fought in that last battle. His name was John Stith Pemberton. Pemberton served in the Confederate army for almost the entire duration of the Civil War.² During the battle of Columbus, Pemberton served as Colonel in the local mounted cavalry guards. He rode out to the bank of the Chattahoochee where he encountered cavalry under the command of Union General Wilson.³

The weapon of choice in the cavalry was the saber.⁴ A musket was incredibly difficult to manage on horseback, especially the muzzle-loading variety. Most cavalrymen relied on their swords and pistols in battle. The pistols, which normally fired six shots quickly, became empty and useless in the midst of an

How do you know all this? (State fully and clearly.) *Was an Eye Witness*
After he was shot & cut with a Saber I caught the bit of
the blade of his horse & took charge of the horse, while he fell in
front of the saddle to keep from falling off

18. When and where did *John Stith Pemberton* die?
1887 - In Atlanta Ga

19. Where did he reside at his death and how long had he been a resident of Georgia at his death?
Atlanta Ga - was born in Georgia & lived in Ga all his life

20. Do you of your own knowledge know that applicant is the lawful widow of *John Stith Pemberton*?
I do

21. Has she remained unmarried since her soldier husband's death, and is now his widow? *She has*
never married again & is still his widow

John Pemberton's Confederate Pension detailing his war wound, by an eyewitness.

¹ General James H. Wilson, quoted by Charles Misulia, *Columbus Georgia, 1865: The Last True Battle of the Civil War* (University of Alabama, 2010), 19-20.

² Testimony of J.D. Carter, *Mrs. Clifford Lewis Pemberton's Confederate Widow's Pension*, Fulton County, State of Georgia, Approved April 22, 1901.

³ Charles Misulia, *Columbus Georgia, 1865: The Last True Battle of the Civil War* (University of Alabama, 2010), 153. John M. House, "The Battle of Columbus almost cost us Coca-Cola," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, April 16, 2011.

⁴ Roman Johann Jarymowycz, *Cavalry: From Hoof to Track* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), 57.

engagement. Pemberton found himself in an equestrian sword-fight with Union cavalry. According to the closest eyewitness, Pemberton was both shot and slashed in that encounter.⁵ The wound from the saber to his torso was life-altering. It left a scar that he would carry for the rest of his life, though he grew weary of talking about it.⁶

The pain from a wound of that character and magnitude was treated with morphine, if available—and morphine was available to Pemberton.⁷ Even before the war, Pemberton was a chemist and a druggist. He had easy access to a multitude of substances including morphine.⁸ Morphine addiction was so prevalent among veterans of the Civil War that it was labeled the "soldier's disease."⁹ Small wonder that Pemberton admitted he became dependent on morphine.¹⁰ His addiction was corroborated by several of his contemporaries.¹¹ As a pharmacist, he was acutely aware of the dangers of his morphine addiction.

Socrates asserted that "necessity is the mother of invention."¹² So it seemed to be for John Pemberton. As an inventor, Pemberton had a personal motive for discovering a "substitute" for the hazardous opiate upon which he and so many of his comrades had become dependent.¹³ Consequently, shortly after the Battle of Columbus, Pemberton began to experiment with various medicines that were opium-free. These experiments took place at Pemberton's Eagle Drug and Chemical Company, a laboratory located on the west side of Broad Street between 11th and 12th streets in Columbus, Georgia.¹⁴ By 1866 he began to advertise a concoction that he called "Globe Flower Cough Syrup." In the advertisements for this medicine, Pemberton described the formula as "free from opium... a remedy to meet the urgent demand for a safe and reliable medicine."¹⁵ This concoction, however, did not prove to be the formula that would spread the world over.

Pemberton's advertisements from the era leave no question that he dispensed numerous soft-drink syrups at his drug store in Columbus.¹⁶ The significant elements in Pemberton's most famous formula were the cocoa (coca) leaf and the kola nut. When and where Pemberton first mixed the world's most famous formula has been debated. The author of his wife's obituary in 1909 was one of the earliest sources to address the question. That author wrote, "Dr. Pemberton, while a resident of Columbus, invented the formula of Coca-Cola."¹⁷ Coca-Cola's historian, Phil Mooney, concurs with that source insofar

⁵ Testimony of J.D. Carter, *Mrs. Clifford Lewis Pemberton's Confederate Widow's Pension*, Fulton County, State of Georgia, Approved April 22, 1901, p. 3, accessed September 9, 2012, Georgia Archives Virtual Vault.

⁶ Clifford Lewis Newman to Mary Elberta Lewis Newnan, 1929, in the Pemberton Archives; cited by Mark Pendergrast, *God, Country, and Coca-Cola* (hereafter *GCCC*, Basic Books, 2000), 472.

⁷ Stephen Maisto, et al, *Drug Use and Abuse* (Thomson Learning, 2008), 231.

⁸ Pendergrast, *GCCC*, 25.

⁹ Maisto, 231.

¹⁰ Pendergrast, *GCCC*, 41.

¹¹ The corroborators were J.C. Mayfield, Sr., Diva Brown, and A.O. Murphy, cited in Pendergrast, *GCCC*, 474.

¹² Plato, *Republic*, book II, 369C

¹³ Pendergrast, *GCCC*, 25.

¹⁴ Pemberton's Drugstore was located at 93 Broad. The current location is derived using the Sanborn Fire Maps.

¹⁵ J.S. Pemberton, Macon *Telegraph*, May 10, 1866 *inter alia*.

¹⁶ Cf., Columbus *Enquirer*, July 28, 1866.

¹⁷ Atlanta *Constitution*, September 30, 1909.

as the drink was initially formulated in Columbus.¹⁸ A 1973 researcher specifically identified 1867 in Columbus as the coordinates of drink's birth.¹⁹ A CNN report in 2011 indicated that the "prototype recipe" for Coca-Cola was devised in Columbus.²⁰

However, since it wasn't until the 1870s that coca leaf and kola nut were widely imported by American pharmacists, it seems unlikely that anything closely resembling Coca-Cola was dispensed in Columbus prior to 1870. But proving a negative is nearly impossible.²¹

In 1874 a doctor named W.H. Bentley "employed coca as a means of curing the opium habit apparently with excellent results."²² To Pemberton, that result was the fulfillment his quest. Consequently, Pemberton devised his own version of a coca-based European drink called *Vin Mariani*. Pemberton called his formula "French Wine Coca" and said that it was a "great blessing" to the "unfortunate who are addicted to the morphine or opium habit."²³ Like Dr. Bentley, Dr. Pemberton was convinced that coca was a wonderful substitute for the dangerous drug to which he became addicted: morphine, an opiate. Pemberton said,

I am convinced from actual experiments that coca is the very best substitute for opium... It supplies the place of that drug, and the patient who will use it as a means of a cure, may deliver himself from the pernicious habit.²⁴

Pemberton also said "I wish it were in my power to substitute the Coca and compel all who are addicted to the use of opium, morphine, alcohol, tobacco, or other narcotic stimulants to live on the coca plant... It is perfectly wonderful what coca does."²⁵ Pemberton patented his "French Wine Coca" in Atlanta in 1885.²⁶ When a local prohibition was enacted in 1886, the alcoholic element was removed and the result was Coca-Cola.

Pemberton's most famous contribution to the world was more than just an act of entrepreneurship. It was the product of a chemist's quest to detox himself from a war-wound induced addiction. In retrospect, cocaine as substitute for morphine turned out to have similar, if not more hazardous risks. But Pemberton did not admit these hazards.²⁷ For Pemberton, Coca was a safe alternative to opium. He perceived it was the Holy Grail at the end of his quest. Cocaine's addictive abilities were not well known at the time and

¹⁸ Phil Mooney, quoted by Tim Chitwood, "Columbus helped make Coke's success 'the real thing'" in the Columbus *Ledger-Enquirer*, March 28, 2011.

¹⁹ Jim Ragsdale (UPI), "Innocuous Mixture Started by Georgia Pharmacist in 1867," *Redlands Daily Facts*, December 19, 1973, p. 14.

²⁰ "Guess What's Turning 125," CNN Ireport, May 7, 2011.

²¹ Frederick Allen to Richard Gardiner, May 8, 2012 and May 12, 2012. Frederick Allen wrote the history of Coca-Cola titled *Secret Formula* (Harper, 1995).

²² *Therapeutic Gazette*, 1880, p. 253.

²³ John Pemberton, *Atlanta Journal*, March 14 & 18, 1885.

²⁴ John Pemberton, *Atlanta Journal*, March 10, 1885.

²⁵ John Pemberton, quoted by Pendergrast, *GCCC*, 26

²⁶ Trademark no. 12,257, registered May 19, 1885.

²⁷ Pendergrast, *GCCC*, 26.

Pemberton categorically denied that there were any.²⁸ Still, coca did not seem to do the job he had hoped for himself.²⁹

Before he died, Pemberton sold his formula for Coca-Cola to Asa Candler. Candler sold the drink to Ernest Woodruff and W.C. Bradley, both natives of Columbus, Georgia. Those men were marketing geniuses who turned the product into an international sensation by devising such ideas as the "six-pack."³⁰ In succeeding generations their families became two of the principal philanthropists of the Columbus region, providing a large share of funds for such institutions as Columbus State University.

Counterfactual history is inherently speculative and should never be asserted with certitude. But given the clear connection between Pemberton's wound, his morphine addiction as a result, and his desire to find a formula to liberate himself from his addiction, one can reasonably argue that the battle of Columbus was a necessary domino in the causal chain that led to the origination of Coca-Cola. Had the word of Lee's surrender reached General Wilson prior to the battle, it is unlikely that a battle would have happened near Columbus. And if there had been no battle, John S. Pemberton would not have been slashed with a saber. If there were no wound, there may have been no need for the morphine treatment that resulted in Pemberton's addiction. Had he not been addicted to morphine, he perhaps may not have been dedicated to the quest that led to the formulation of Coca-Cola. If Coca-Cola were non-existent, Columbus, Georgia would be a very different place today (as would Atlanta). Not only would many of its most prominent families be less prominent, but the various institutions tied to its success, such as Columbus State University, might not be what they are.

Some question why the Civil War remains a conspicuous feature of many Southern towns and cities. Here is one obvious reason. The war's consequences and effects left marks that are still seen everywhere—such as in the can of soda I drank at lunchtime, as well as in the success of the university where I teach.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ In 1888, the year of his death, Pemberton was still a morphine addict. Pendergrast, *GCCC*, 43.

³⁰ Coca-Cola Company, *The Chronicle of Coca-Cola*, Chapter 3, "A Man Named Woodruff" (Atlanta: Coca-Cola Co., 2012).