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The Vernor's Story: From Gnomes to Now  
Lawrence L. Rouch  
<https://www.press.umich.edu/10869/>

# From Wooden Kegs to Soda Fountains

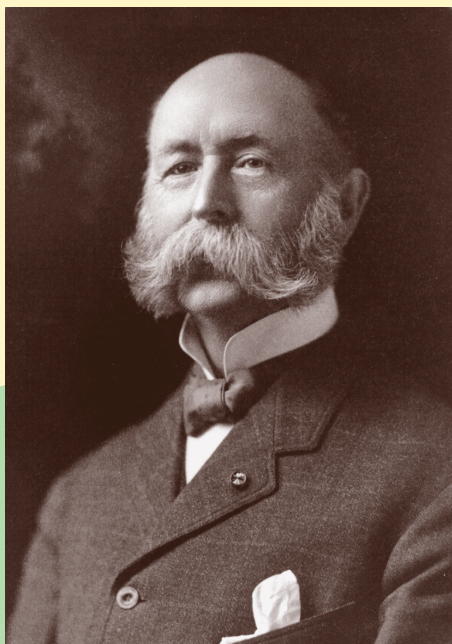
## **The Beginning of Vernor's**

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# Founding Father of Detroit's Drink



**James Vernor I**

Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library

**Ask** someone who grew up in Michigan about childhood memories of favorite foods, and before too long you'll hear about Vernor's Ginger Ale. You'll hear about the ultra-fizzy bubbles in

**Yep, I**

***in Michigan (since 1951). Vernor's . . . used to taste much more tart rather than the sugary flavor that is made now (not in Detroit). But it still makes the best ice cream float in the world! Vernor's will make your children strong and your man a big-bellied couch potato.***  
**—Lisa**

the drink that made unsuspecting children sneeze, about frothy Boston coolers made with Vernor's and vanilla ice cream, hot mugs of Vernor's on icy winter nights, and small glasses of Vernor's dispensed by loving parents to soothe upset tummies.

The smells and tastes and sights of childhood remain some of our most intense memories, and the pale gold, gingery fizz of Vernor's Ginger Ale and the jolly gnome who served as corporate mascot remain fond recollections for many who call Michigan their home state.

The gnome has since disappeared from the scene, but today's green and gold bottles and cans, proudly labeled "Barrel Aged, Bold Taste" and "The Original Ginger Soda," celebrate a pioneering product that survives even in today's tough soft-drink market.

This ultra-fizzy, gingery-tart soda pop is the oldest soft drink in the U.S., with devoted fans across the nation who search grocery store shelves and beseech visiting relatives from Michigan for a stash of their beloved "real" ginger ale. In fact, a popular Internet quiz states that one sure sign of someone from Michigan is placing an order for ginger ale and expecting Vernor's to be served. The story of Vernor's and its corporate growth in Detroit is a part of Michigan history, dating back to the days just after the Civil War when a pharmacist named James Vernor invented his unique ginger soda that came to be known as Detroit's Drink.

James Vernor was born on April 11, 1843, in Albany, New York. His father, a bookkeeper, was descended from a monied family



**Detroit artist William Moss painted the Bob-Lo ferry *Ste. Claire* docked at the foot of Woodward with the Vernor's factory in the background. The electric “Vernor’s” sign was a well-known landmark until the destruction of the building in the 1950s.**

*Detroit's Traditions*, by William Moss, courtesy of Martha Polacsek of Captain of the Fleet, Inc.

from northern England and Ireland, the Vernors (or Werners), who had arrived from Germany with William of Orange in the 1500s. Early in the 1700s brothers John and Samuel immigrated to Albany, where John operated an inn. He and his wife, Martha, had seven children, the oldest christened John, following a family tradition of naming one son John. A grandson of John and Martha fathered James, who became the founder of the Vernor's Ginger Ale Company.

When James was five his family moved to Detroit, which in 1848 was a town of about 55,000 growing on the riverbanks.

Little is known of James's early childhood other than that he attended the Old Capitol School (named for its quarters, the original Michigan State Capitol Building), where one of his first paid jobs was lighting the schoolhouse stoves at daybreak. This earned him a small salary and prefigured his lifelong work ethic. As a teenager, James ran errands for the Higby and Stearn's Drug Store, later the Frederick Stearn Company. With his zeal for packaging and delivering, he soon advanced to junior clerk, a lofty position for a boy his age, and eventually received training at the drugstore in chemistry and pharmacy. The Vernor's Ginger Ale formula may have occurred to him as he worked with potions in the drugstore basement.<sup>1</sup>

Two legends have been passed down about the origin of Vernor's Ginger Ale. In the first, James Vernor is said to have developed the first batch while working at Higby and Stearn's, storing it in a small oak keg where it brewed while he served in the Union Army. Returning four years later, he discovered his drink had matured to that "deliciously different" flavor. In the other version, Vernor carried the idea

*I'm originally from Detroit. Whenever I was sick and home from school, Dr. Allison used to come over and give me a shot, telling me that he would be back the next day if I hadn't cured myself by then. (Remember house visits?) To prove that he wasn't totally evil, he would tell my mother that I could have all the Vernor's I wanted. . . .*  
—Frank W. Donovan

in his head throughout the war and first brewed the formula after returning to Detroit and establishing his own drugstore.

The first legend is more exciting and nicely fits the "Aged 4 Years in Wood" claim that the company promoted since its beginning, but the second is more plausible. James would probably not have





**The young James Vernor in his Civil War Union Army uniform before going off to the war**

Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library

left his experimental keg of soda in an employer's basement while going to war. James's son said in 1936, "I suspect that all through the war he carried in his mind that formula for the soft drink," implying the formula had not yet been mixed while Vernor was at war.<sup>2</sup> A 1962 interview with James Vernor Davis, president of



the company from 1952 to 1966, also dismisses this theory.<sup>3</sup> The one certain part of the story is the aging in oak barrels over four years. Somehow, Vernor discovered that this developed the flavors he wanted, and the company still uses this method today.

Whether he developed his successful beverage before the Civil War or after, Vernor's strong work ethic may have led him to enlist in 1862, or perhaps he joined the Union Army out of a sense of duty and adventure.<sup>4</sup> He enlisted in the Fourth Michigan Cavalry, which assigned him as a hospital steward because of his drugstore experience.

On New Year's Day, 1863, after having served the last year or so in the Union Army hospital units, James was captured during a battle at LaVergne, Tennessee, by Wheeler and Wharton's Cavalry. Released within a few days and captured again on January 5, he managed to escape this time and make his way into Murfreesboro, near a Confederate POW camp and the site of fierce fighting. The Union Army finally took this city from the Confederate Army, and Vernor emerged from the attic where he had hidden for three days.

Vernor often credited the war with strengthening his discipline and drive. The army was quick to recognize his merits, promot-

ing him to second lieutenant and giving him command of his unit, Brigade Company M, in 1864. In the final year of the Civil War, the Fourth Michigan Cavalry found its place in history by capturing Confederate president Jefferson Davis and his family on May 10, 1865. When James Vernor was mustered out of the Union Army in July of 1865 he returned to Detroit, where he used his discipline and drive in developing “Detroit’s Drink.”

The soft-drink industry originated in Europe at least as early as the sixteenth century with the popularity of mineral water as a healthful and curative drink. The discovery of its natural fizz led to the hunt for an artificial method of introducing fizz into water as early as the middle 1600s. The most common production method of this period was treating chalk with sulfuric acid and capturing the gaseous product. This gas had not yet been identified as carbon dioxide and was given distinctive names by different manufacturers. Consumers drank the popular bubbly waters to cure everything from dyspepsia to gout.

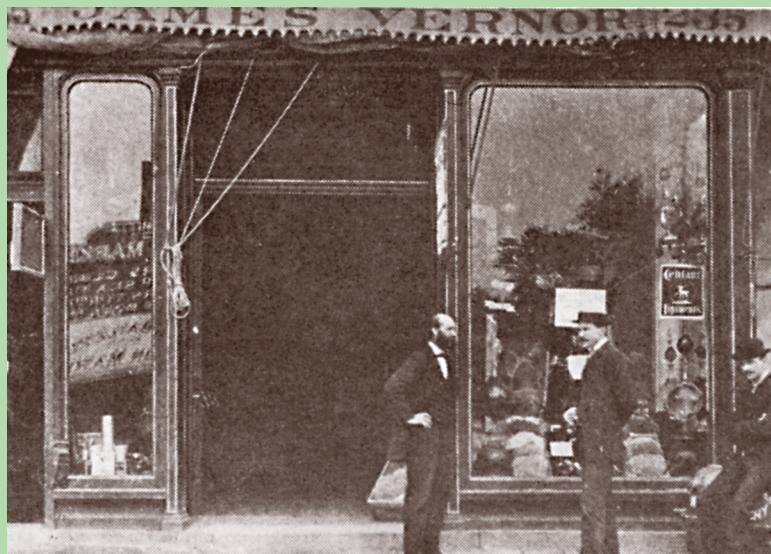
Mr. Bewley’s Julep, developed about 1767 by Richard Bewley of Norfolk, England, was probably the first commercial soda.

Many natural mineral waters contained undesirable impurities, which helped the popularity of manufactured ones.

Most of the early formulas contained various salts, mainly soda, potash, lithium, or barium salts, which led to the terms *soda* and *soda water*

*My dad used to give me Vernor’s when I was sick, but I didn’t like it because it was too fizzy. So he solved that by using two half-full glasses and pouring the Vernor’s back and forth to defizz it for me until I would drink it.*

—Corinne Kiefer



### The pharmacy at 235 Woodward Avenue

Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library

for these beverages. Storage problems and lack of convenient carbonation methods were the main obstacles to these early efforts. Only around 1782 did Lavoisier identify the fizz or “fixed air” in mineral water as carbon dioxide. The addition early in the 1800s of syrups and flavorings to these popular tonics gave them a new popularity as refreshments.

Manchester apothecary Thomas Henry founded the first commercial carbonated water manufacturing operation in 1764, but Jacob Scheppe, a German watchmaker and amateur scientist, developed the first commercially viable method around 1783.<sup>5</sup> His bottled beverage was a success, and when Victoria became queen in 1837 she granted Scheppe's & Co. the Royal Warrant of Appointment (still valid) as purveyors of Her Majesty's soda water.<sup>6</sup> Scheppe's and others faced challenges in bottling that

would not be met until machine-age refinements of bottle-capping, but when successfully stoppered, these mass-produced drinks opened with a distinctive popping sound. This familiar sound led to the slang terms of *pop* and *soda pop*.

*I still drink Vernor's Ginger Ale when da tummy don't feel too good. It helps. —Ken (from "da UP")*

Interest in mineral water spread to the colonies, where suppliers tapped springs to meet the growing demand. A source of water at Saratoga, New York, believed by the Mohawk Indians to have healing powers was "discovered" by the immigrants from Europe, and many entrepreneurs sold it under different labels. Another well-known source was Poland Springs in Maine; its waters, like Saratoga's, are still available in stores today.

By Vernor's time, novel beverages were proliferating as his fellow pharmacists and others throughout the country concocted thousands of new tonics, some wholesome, some both harmless and worthless, and some toxic. Promising to cure anything from baldness to dementia, these tonics might contain anything from opiates to arsenic, even uranium. Alcohol appeared in many formulas, enough to preserve the beverage and often enough to inebriate the consumer. Atlanta tonic purveyor John Styth Pemberton added cocaine (then a common ingredient in patent medicines) to his formula. Pemberton served in the Civil War near where James Vernor's group captured Jefferson Davis. His concoction, Coca-Cola, would fare better than his Confederate cause.

The antebellum bottling industry in the U.S. comprised about 150 companies. By the early 1880s there were over five hundred,

by 1890 at least 1,400, and by 1900 almost three thousand. In 1900 these companies bottled \$25 million worth of nonalcoholic beverages a year compared with about \$800,000 in the mid-1800s. James Vernor entered the industry just as it began to take off, finding his new career after his service in the Civil War.

Upon returning to Detroit, Vernor quickly resumed work in the pharmacy business, opening a drugstore on the corner of Woodward Avenue and Clifford Street with Charles L'Hommedieu.<sup>7</sup> They bought their own carbonation equipment and began dispensing their own soft drinks.

Whether Vernor had retrieved his legendary wooden keg at the end of the war or actually began formulating his ginger ale at this point, this was the beginning of the Vernor's empire.

Ginger ale had its origins in ginger beer, which appeared as early as 1790, when it was first produced by a brewer named William Pitt in England. Two beverage firms in the home of Vernor's ancestors, Grattan (of Belfast) and Cantrell and

Cochrane (of Belfast and Dublin), developed ginger ale around 1852. Who developed the formula first is in dispute, but both companies may have developed their drinks to take advantage of mechanical carbonation. Ginger beer relied on natural carbonation, and its cloudiness made it less appetizing to look at than ginger ale. As the so-called Dublin and Belfast ginger ales became the favored drink of the era, many Irish and British firms began

*It's strange, but the two foods indigenous to Michigan which I enjoy most are both quite dangerous. Vernor's ginger soda is infused with a powerful form of carbonation that causes painful paroxysms of coughing if inhaled. The other, rhubarb, is a delicious vegetable which also happens to be quite poisonous if the wrong part is eaten. The fact that some of my fondest childhood memories are established around these hazardous comestibles probably explains a great deal about the person I've grown up to be.*  
—J. Parish



**The original Vernor's Pharmacy. This drawing appeared in many promotional materials.**

to export them to thirsty Americans. By the late 1800s ginger ale imports to the U.S. amounted to over 300,000 bottles per year, worth nearly half a million dollars.

Early soda expert Charles Herman Sulz relates that ginger ale formulas generally contained extract of ginger, ginger oil essence,



**James Vernor II**

Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library

and lemon and rose essences with traces of tincture of capsicum (the fiery pepper-derivative that also gives many personal defense sprays their punch) often added for additional pungency.<sup>8</sup> Other makers added different spices and fruit flavorings. The Belfast-style ginger ales contained ginger root, nutmeg, cinnamon, orange peel, and vanilla among other ingredients.

The exact formula for Vernor's Ginger Ale is a mystery to those outside the company. One writer claims it is a "mixture of nineteen ingredients, including two kinds of ginger root, a type of cayenne pepper, and vanilla," with the ginger and pepper extract percolated through grain for ten days and then placed in oak barrels to age over four years before the final mixing and bottling.<sup>9</sup> An early formula for the final mix published in a newsletter celebrating the company's centennial called for four



ounces of aged extract, eight pounds of sugar, an ounce of citric acid, and nine gallons of water.<sup>10</sup> A formula in the *Standard Manual of Soda and Other Beverages* by Dr. Emil Hiss in 1897 calls for nine pounds of granulated sugar, four ounces of a solution of citric acid, and ten gallons of water.<sup>11</sup> Further directions state that the fountain operator was to dissolve the mixture in cold water, strain it through a cloth into the fountain, and charge it with carbonic acid gas to 120 pounds.

James Vernor was the first licensed pharmacist in Michigan, and he held to precise scientific standards in the production of his ginger ale. Vernor insisted on only the finest ingredients, in exactly the specified amounts, to ensure consistent good flavor.

The uniform quality and unique blend of flavorings and spices proved popular with consumers, who noticed the strong ginger snap most of all. The formula also included a touch of vanilla, which added a slightly sweet flavor without being overwhelming. The capsicum and the forceful fizz were responsible for Vernor's well-known ability to cause sneezing or even a case of the hiccups, but that didn't stop the new beverage from growing rapidly in popularity.

The Woodward Avenue location was a smart choice, and Detroit had grown up around it by 1870. Vernor soon bought out his partner, and by 1873 his business was solid. He married Emily Walker Smith that same year, and in 1877 James Vernor II



**An ad from when  
the pharmacy had  
become more of a  
general store**

was born, followed in 1880 by Emily Louise Vernor. Within a few decades the son would build the business into a huge success.

By 1895 the drugstore had become more of a general store, and Vernor's Ginger Ale had become a household name in Detroit as distribution reached many local outlets. Almost every pharmacy had a soda fountain from the 1890s to the late 1950s. The allure of Vernor's drink had become legendary in the city, and sales were growing rapidly.

The successful pharmacist discouraged his son and namesake from studying to become a pharmacist. When he was still a teenager, James Vernor II entered his father's business, and in 1896 they closed the drugstore to pursue the soft-drink industry full time. A small ginger ale brewery was established a few doors from the original pharmacy, and Vernor and his nineteen-year-old son began the full-time manufacturing of Vernor's Ginger Ale. At first the business had just three workers: the two Vernors and a horse named Dick who pulled the delivery wagon. All three worked long hours to meet the growing demand for their deliciously different drink.

The Vernors faced local competition from Cronk and Kirtz, makers of sarsaparilla-flavored Dr. Kronk's. To the south, in Dayton, Ohio, a firm called Sachs, Pruden, and Company was bottling America's Favorite Ginger Ale. The Vernors and their ginger ale prevailed; neither competitor's product is available today.

The closing of his pharmacy and the success of the ginger ale business also provided the opportunity for James Vernor Sr. to pursue his continuing interest in city politics and a long secondary career of public service. His local fame due to his popular beverage was nearly surpassed by his reputation as a controversial politician and public servant. Vernor's interest in city affairs may initially have been a response to the frequent flooding of

the basements of his and neighboring businesses as a result of inadequate city sewer systems. Not getting any satisfaction from the alderman in his district, Vernor ran successfully for alderman himself in 1888. A member of the Michigan Republican Party, he served as a Ward Two alderman and as a member of the Detroit Common Council for twenty-five of the next thirty-five years until his resignation in January 1924, attending to business and other interests during his years off.<sup>12</sup> It was not long after his first victory before the sewer service improved.

*Remember going down to the Woodward plant on a hot summer night and getting a Boston cooler: ice cream and Vernor's? Yum, yum.  
—Sonya Grieves*

Vernor's political career included many confrontations with Detroit mayors and members of the city council, as well as notable achievements for Detroit and contributions to the city. He advocated for and then helped create the city railway system that replaced horse-drawn carriages. Vernor urged private ownership of the transportation system, believing that public ownership would breed corruption and inefficiency. Mayor Pingree disagreed, and a great deal of animosity developed between the two. When the issue came to a vote, only Vernor opposed the mayor; this eventually cost Vernor his elected position. After that Vernor and Pingree spoke little to each other beyond what was necessary for city business. This battle became well known to the electorate, and Vernor was voted out of office mainly for opposing city-owned transportation. Despite this setback Vernor reentered public office as an elected member of the common council in 1904.

He is also credited with building a modern water filtration

system in Detroit, applying his soft-drink business clean-water expertise to the city's needs. The removal of the old Central Market, another of Vernor's causes, further modernized Detroit by allowing for expansion of its business center.

Of course, financing all of these improvements for the city and its people required taxation. Fortunately the tax base continued to grow, but Vernor was not opposed to raising taxes for a reasonable cause such as education or improvement to infrastruc-

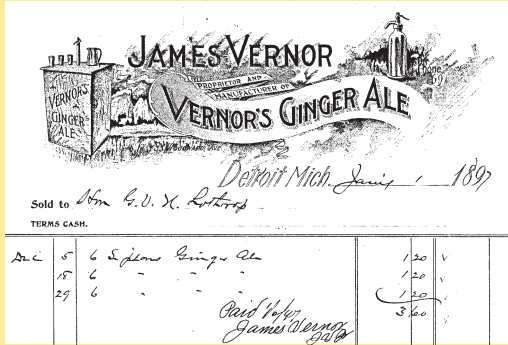
ture. He said that taxes "are unpleasant but necessary for obtaining desired benefits. I am of the opinion that taxpayers are not quite so much concerned about the amount of taxes as they are concerned about resulting benefits. Money properly expended is never wasted."<sup>13</sup>

*"I am a Red Wings fanatic. Raised in Detroit, there is nothing better than sitting down to watch a hockey game on TV with a Vernor's in hand. Except being there!"*

*—Kim Delmar Cory*

In a reelection bid in 1921

Vernor was a strong advocate of education and was called the "Father of Civil Service" for supporting laws to reform the civil service. City workers up to that time had been mostly political appointees, serving at the whim of the current political machine. After the reforms, these workers would be secure in their positions only as long as they performed their jobs adequately. Vernor also helped raise the salaries of the city's teachers, seeing that attracting and retaining good teachers required competing with the industries growing in the city. Besides helping secure property for new school buildings as Detroit's population expanded, Vernor supported a compulsory education law that required students to stay in school until the age of eighteen. He had originally opposed compulsory education



**A Vernor's invoice from 1897, signed "James Vernor, Jr."**

because it left no room for the possibility of a student having to go to work full-time to support a family that may have lost its primary breadwinner. He changed his mind when a form of relief for the poor became available in the city. To recognize his support of educational issues, an elementary school in Detroit was named in his honor.

Vernor's political career was not uncomplicated or selfless, and some of his decisions and uses of influence on the common council appear to have been motivated by his own personal financial interests and those of his friends. One example occurred in 1915 when a proposal came before the council to establish a municipal ferry service to Belle Isle and Windsor, Ontario, across the Detroit River. The proposal put the terminal at the foot of First Street and would have routed foot traffic off Woodward Avenue and away from Vernor's retail store.<sup>14</sup> Vernor managed to kill this proposal, arguing that the proposed development was illegal. When this same proposal came before council a second time with the support of the city attorney and many others, Vernor led a coalition to defeat it again. Eventually a ferry service to Windsor was established at the foot of Woodward, which was more conducive to increased traffic past Vernor's store.