

Who was the Philadelphia druggist who sold a popular brand of root beer?

Charles E. Hires

At the Centennial Exposition, which opened in Philadelphia in May 1876, root beer was first introduced to the nation by Philadelphia druggist Charles E. Hires. Hires moved to Philadelphia as a teenager and worked in a local pharmacy until he had enough money to open his own business, which he eventually did at Sixth and Spruce Streets. He married (twice), had several children, and lived, for a time, on an estate on Marion Station, Pennsylvania.

To make his drink stand out at the Centennial Exposition, Hires supposedly marketed his “root beer” as a health beverage and temperance drink. He began selling it as a boxed mix to which buyers needed to add water, sugar, and yeast. It took the public a few years to accept Hires’ concoction, but by 1880, these home-brewing kits proved successful. Hires soon realized that he could make more money by selling a prepared beverage. He began producing a bottled version of the drink in the 1890s that became a hit. Hires Root Beer is the oldest commercially available root beer in America and is produced today by the Dr. Pepper Snapple Group.

In HSP’s Trade cards collection (#3138) are several examples of those published for Hires’ Root Beer in the late 19th century. The society also has an extensive collection of papers pertaining to the Centennial Exposition (#1544), some of which highlight the many inventions shown off during the festivities.
