

North Carolina Inventors: Caleb Davis Brandham

Series: North Carolina Inventors



Pharmacies such as the one in the N.C. Museum of History's exhibit *Health and Healing Experiences in North Carolina* served carbonated beverages like Pepsi-Cola. Photo credit: N.C. Museum of History

No matter how old you are, “you’re in the Pepsi generation.” Before the cola wars, Britney Spears, or the Pepsi 400 at Daytona International Speedway, Pepsi-Cola was part of American culture. When Pepsi was invented in 1898, people bought carbonated sodas at the local drugstore. The beverages we think of as soft drinks were considered medicines at the turn of the twentieth century. They were used to treat everything from stomach problems to lack of energy. Pharmacists experimented with different ingredients and came up with flavored syrups for ginger ale, root beer, Coca-Cola, Dr. Pepper, and other beverages that we still sip today.

Carbonated water was added to these syrups to make soft drinks at the drugstore’s soda fountain. People in small towns and big cities gathered at soda fountains

to meet and catch up on the latest news, and great-tasting beverages helped to attract more customers. Some drinks became so popular that pharmacists made extra syrups to sell to other drugstores.

Pepsi-Cola’s inventor, Caleb Davis Bradham, was born in Duplin County on May 27, 1867. Bradham attended local academies and then moved on to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for three years. He left that school to study medicine at the University of Maryland, but he had to drop out when he ran out of money. Later he returned to Maryland to study pharmacy. After completing his degree, he opened a drugstore in New Bern.

Like other druggists of his time, Bradham concocted different syrup mixtures for his store. Brad’s Drink, as Bradham’s friends called it, was the favorite beverage of his customers. He eventually renamed the drink Pepsi-Cola for the pepsin and cola nuts in the syrup recipe. In 1902 Bradham hired a manager for his pharmacy and began devoting more time to marketing his popular product. Pepsi-Cola expanded quickly, and by 1909 there were more than 250 Pepsi bottlers in twenty-four states. By 1915 the company was worth more than one million dollars!

But disaster soon struck. The price of sugar, one of the main ingredients in Pepsi-Cola, quadrupled when World War I erupted. Bradham bought a large amount of sugar when that happened because he thought the price would continue to rise. Instead, sugar prices went down drastically after his purchase. He also lost money when he invested in a new bottling method that failed to pay off.

In 1923 the Pepsi Cola Company declared bankruptcy. Later that year Roy C. Megargel, a Wall Street broker, bought the Pepsi trademark, business, and goodwill for \$35,000 and formed the Pepsi-Cola Corporation.

Although Caleb Bradham's luck ran out, his invention lives on. After more than one hundred years, "it's the cola" not just in North Carolina and across the country but around the world.