

# A Brief History of the Word "Aquarium"

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WEBSTER'S New International Dictionary (1947) gives two definitions of the word *aquarium*:

"1. An artificial pond or a globe or tank (usually with glass sides) of water, in which living aquatic animals or plants are kept.

"2. A place or establishment for the care and exhibition of such aquatic collections."

The term had a different meaning, however, when it was first taken from the Latin for use in English.

In Latin *aquarium* is the neuter, singular form of *aquarius* and means a watering-place for cattle (Lewis and Short, 1892). The masculine form, *aquarius*, can mean (1) a human water-carrier; (2) a conduit-master, that is, an inspector of conduits or water pipes; or (3) the Water Bearer, eleventh sign of the zodiac. The word still exists in English with the latter meaning, of course.

The first English use of *aquarium*, in a quite different sense from that in Latin, was apparently made by botanists, who employed it as a name for a place utilized for growing aquatic plants. The botanical dictionaries of Colin Milne (1770) and James Lee (1765 to 1794) do not mention it, and this would indicate that it was not in usage by that time, but in an American dictionary of 1848 *aquarium* appears, described as "An artificial pond with gardens for rearing aquatic plants," and *The Imperial Lexicon of London* (1852-1853) defines it as "A place in gardens set apart for aquatic plants."\*

Philip Henry Gosse, the British naturalist who did much to popularize the hobby of keeping fishes in the home, has often been credited with first employing *aquarium* in the sense that we use it today, and even with originating the word. A careful study, however, has revealed that not he, but an English botanist, Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, first used *aquarium* to mean a container for keeping animals as well as plants. In a book published in 1852, Ward devoted one section to the "Aquarium for fish and plants." This was the time when the idea of "balancing" plants and animals within small tanks first came to the fore. Previously, fish had often been maintained at home in tanks or globes, but without plants. When aquatic plants were becoming an integral part of the setup, it was quite natural to extend *aquarium* to cover the new assemblage. As early as July 10, 1852, an account of "The Parlour Aquarium" appeared in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*.

Gosse apparently adapted the term *aquarium* independently of Ward. He first used it in 1853 in both an article and a book. (The year before, although writing on the same subject, he did not do so, speaking instead of "glass vases," "vessels" and "vivaria.") Gosse (1854) has explained how he came to choose *aquarium*:

\*The first reference to the word *aquarium* I have found in America is in W. T. Brande's "A Dictionary of Science, Literature, and Art . . .", New York, 1844. This defines it as "A place in gardens, in which only aquatic plants are grown."

"A neat, easily pronounced and easily remembered significant, and expressive term is so advantageous, that it is worth taking some trouble to select the best. For the subject . . . some have chosen the word Vivarium, and I have myself occasionally used it. The only objection to it is that it lacks distinctness of signification. It literally means any enclosure in which living animals are kept; and the ancients used it to signify a park, a rabbit-warren, and a fish-pond. . . .

"To avoid this indefiniteness others have used the term Aqua-vivarium. The objection to this is its awkward length and uncouthness, which render it unsuitable for a popular exhibition or domestic amenity.

"I have adopted the word AQUARIUM, as being free from the objections which lie against the other two. . . . The term had already been in use among the botanists, to designate the tanks in which aquatic plants were reared; and the employment of the same term for our tanks is not forbidden by the character of the service to which they are put, since this is not an alteration, but only an extension."

It was Edwin Lankester (1856) who championed *aquavivarium*. He objected to *aquarium* because it already had a definite meaning in Latin. *Aquavivarium* had been suggested to him by Charles Knight, editor of the *English Cyclopaedia*, while Lankester was writing an article on the subject for that compendium.

From the very start *aquarium* proved the more popular word. Hibberd (1856), Warrington (1857), Sowerby (1857), Humphreys (1857), Bishop 1858 and Harper (1859) all preferred it. Butler (1858) and Edwards (1858) popularized it in the United States. Its first appearance here was perhaps in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, September 5, 1857. In Germany, the first record of it I have found is in the magazine *Die Gartenlaube* in 1854.

The word *aquarium* was applied to the first public exhibition of fishes and aquatic invertebrates very shortly after it was opened in London in 1853. Since this consisted simply of a series of small, standing tanks, similar to those found

in homes (all housed in a conservatory-like building in Regent's Park), the adoption of *aquarium* as its name was not at all farfetched. At first it was called "Fish-house," "Aquatic Vivarium" and "Aquavivarium" as well as "Aquarium," but only the latter appellation eventually prevailed. This was the world's first public aquarium, and all such exhibits were so designated until about 1938, when the word *oceanarium* was coined for a new kind of exhibition of marine life at Marineland, St. Augustine, Florida.

According to Webster's, there are two acceptable plural forms of *aquarium*: *aquariums* and *aquaria*. At the New York Aquarium, we use the former to indicate more than one institution or building, while the latter is reserved for more than one tank or container, large or small.

Webster's New International Dictionary lists three other words closely associated with the term *aquarium*. The first is *aquarist*, spelled *aquariist* by that may be more correct etymologically, I maybe more correct etymologically, I have yet to see the name of "One who keeps an aquarium" so spelled in any item of the extensive popular and scientific literature. Usage can be expected eventually to make the contracted spelling the correct one.

Also listed is the adjective *aquarian*, "Of or pertaining to an aquarium." This word is rarely used today. At one time it was employed as a noun, synonymous with *aquarist* (Paul & Hibberd, 1857; Mellen, 1918). As a noun it could be confused with an entirely different definition of the word, "One of several sects in the early church . . . who used water in the Eucharist because they regarded wine as evil." *Aquarian* is employed as an adjective by Jones (1858)

and West (1865). The latter apparently coined a new word when he called those who maintain aquaria, *aquarianists*.

Even rarer than *aquarian* is *aquarial*, given as synonymous with it by Webster's. The Boston Aquarial and Zoological Gardens were established in the early 1860's, and this is the only use of the word with which I am acquainted.

These are highlights in the history of the word *aquarium*, and they help explain some of the confusion that has arisen over its origin and usage. Another word might have caused less trouble. But Gosse was right: a neat, easily pronounced term is highly desirable. Suppose that instead of *aquarium*, the term used by Edward Jesse had been accepted. Then, like him, we would be keeping a *piscatorium*. What would we be, *piscatoriists*?

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