Until the 20th century, the sale of medications in the United States was only lightly regulated. Prior to creation of the Food and Drug Administration in 1906 and the Federal Trade Commission in 1914, there were no restrictions on the types of claims that could be made about medication safety or effectiveness, nor were there limitations on the ingredients that marketed remedies could contain. Many opium- and alcohol-containing bottled medicines were widely available in general stores, and could be purchased without a prescription.

Freedom from the need to prove safety and efficacy, however, did not mean manufacturers were also immune from patent lawsuits—or from taxes. Beginning in 1862, “revenue stamps”—often printed privately by the manufacturer—had to be affixed to pre-bottled medications to designate payment of a tax on the product. Revenue stamps had been required for certain types of documents and for bottled liquor since the 18th century, but the use of these stamps was expanded in the early 1860s to include new taxes on tobacco, patent (proprietary) medicines, playing cards, perfume, and other “luxuries,” in order to raise funds for the US Civil War. Revenue stamps were often discarded when a product with the stamp affixed was used; those stamps that have survived remain popular among collectors, in part because of the variety of their designs.

One notable 19th century patent medicine company was J.B. Rose & Company, later known as The Centaur Company. J.B. Rose & Company was founded in 1871 and was part of the “Demas Barnes empire.” Demas Barnes (1827-1888) was a manufacturer who served as a US Representative from New York in the 1860s. Barnes started a wholesale patent medicine business in 1853 and later founded a series of companies that sold proprietary medicines. Barnes was among the first industrialists to request permission from the US Commissioner of Internal Revenue to create private revenue stamps in 1862.

In 1877, J.B. Rose (about whom little is known) left the company that bore his name and it was reorganized as The Centaur Company. Centaur became a pioneer in mass marketing and advertising, distributing millions of printed trade cards, running long-standing advertisements in newspapers and magazines, and painting the sides of hundreds of buildings. Numerous photographs taken at the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, for example, show buildings in the background bearing advertising slogans for Centaur’s medications. Centaur primarily sold two products: “Fletcher’s Castoria,” a senna-based laxative, and “Centaur Liniment,” a topical ointment for human and veterinary use.

After Rose’s departure, Charles Henry Fletcher took over as the head of the Centaur Company. Fletcher was born in New York City on Christmas Day in 1837, and had one full sister and two half-sisters. Little is known about his early life. At age 13, he went to work for a proprietary medicine company and eventually attracted the attention of Demas Barnes, who appointed him secretary of J.B. Rose & Company. Fletcher married Jemima Elizabeth Bright (1848-1932) in 1866 and they had five children, including three daughters who survived to adulthood.

In 1871, Fletcher and Rose bought the formula for a senna-based laxative named “Pitcher’s Castoria” from Dr Samuel Pitcher (1824-1907), an 1850 Harvard Medical School graduate who had a busy clinical practice in Hyannis, Massachusetts, and who had patented his eponymous laxative in 1868. Fletcher renamed the laxative “Fletcher’s Castoria.”

When the 17-year patent ran out on this cathartic laxative in 1885, Fletcher resorted...
to advertising to keep an advantage over competitors, including a notable North Dakota-based challenger, Heinsfurther & Daggett, who began manufacturing “Pitcher’s Castoria” in 1896, and distributing it in bottles that closely resembled Fletcher’s Castoria. Fletcher unsuccessfully sued Heinsfurther & Daggett numerous times. However, Fletcher’s advertising strategy proved successful and he became a wealthy man. When funding ran short for a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, Fletcher offered to construct the statue’s base in exchange for permission to advertise Castoria on the statue, but this offer was rejected. “Children cry for Chas. H. Fletcher’s Castoria” was one of the most widely recognizable advertising slogans at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1897, in gratitude to Dr Pitcher, Fletcher presented Pitcher with a 102-piece solid silver service set.

Fletcher maintained a home on the Upper East Side of New York City and also had a summer home (with seven bathrooms) in Belmar, New Jersey, where he was a member of the local yacht club. In 1908, he commissioned construction a 111-foot yacht named the Jemima F., III, which was at the time the largest motor-yacht in the world. In 1922, Fletcher died in Orange, New Jersey.

In the 1920s, the Centaur Company was bought by Sterling Drug, a company founded in West Virginia in 1901. In 1984, Fletcher’s Castoria was bought from Sterling by The Mentholatum Company, a health care products company founded in Wichita, Kansas, in 1889. Mentholatum was subsequently bought by a Japanese pharmaceutical company in 1988. “Fletcher’s Laxative for Kids,” modified from the original formula to remove alcohol, can still be found in drug stores in the United States.

In 1880, the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing began to print revenue stamps, ending the era of privately printed stamps. In July, 1883, the proprietary taxes that had begun during the Civil War (and which the government was reluctant to give up) finally ended. However, to help provide funding for the Spanish-American War, the use of private stamps resumed again from July 1, 1898-July 1, 1902. In 1898, patent medicine revenue stamps were in short supply, so many medicine manufacturers overprinted general revenue stamps with their own logos; Charles Fletcher’s signature (which would be trademarked in 1905) was overprinted on the stamps used for Fletcher’s Castoria. Revenue stamps were finally abolished by the Internal Revenue Service in 1967. The Centaur Company revenue stamps are catalogued as Scott RS204-205.