

# The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors Serving the National Capital



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December 2001

**No Meeting This Month – Happy Holidays to All**

Next meeting will be January 29<sup>th</sup>.

## November Meeting

**Matt Knapp** held a “guess the bottle price” contest at the November meeting. **Bob Ford** (shown sitting in the center of the picture here) guessed or knew the most recent Ebay prices. Although we did not attempt our “collector of the year” contest, we did have a few nice items for show-and-tell. **Peter Rydquist** proudly displays a US Hospital Department bottle (below, right), while the amber Mason jar (below, left) is a recent acquisition of **Roland Longerbeam**.



## Vice President *Still* Needed

No one has yet agreed to serve as vice president of our club. Since the traditional role of our VP has been to maintain a list of upcoming meeting topics, we now need other members to help arrange programs. Please contact Matt Knapp ([mknapp@erols.com](mailto:mknapp@erols.com)) (301) 698-5925 with ideas for speakers or other programs.



## Pieces of History Show Up in the Most Unexpected Places

by Andy Goldfrank

Every bottle dig is an opportunity to touch a piece of history and to place excavated objects in the context of the historical events that surrounded them when last part of the everyday fabric of life. Prior to getting back into privy digging sometime in the mid-1990s, my passion was metal detecting which also allowed me to hold artifacts from bygone times. Starting in 1978 or so, I scoured houses, parks, military sites, meeting groves, and schools in New York's Hudson River Valley where, with a little luck in researching and some persistence in getting permission, there were plenty of sites to metal detect. My focus was on finding coins from colonial times to before our nation's centennial; however, I was not inclined to bypass opportunities to detect military sites such as Civil War artillery emplacements in Maryland, the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium where Napoleon was finally defeated, or the occasional Revolutionary War encampment sites that were falling prey to the expansion of suburban housing in New York's Westchester and Putnam Counties. Each of these sites yielded pieces of history in the form of lead musket balls, escutcheon plates, numbered and letter buttons, friction primers, hat and collar insignias, and pieces of guns. Now that I have stopped using my metal detector on a regular basis (and focus almost exclusively on bottle digging) one would think my collection of military artifacts would not grow. But that is not the case. Privy and dump digging, in the New York area and Washington/Baltimore region, has allowed me to uncover additional military artifacts: a number of Civil War era state seal buttons from Virginia, New York and elsewhere, Union eagle buttons, a circa 1800 flintlock pistol, a bronze spike stamped U.S.N.Y.W. from the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C., a martingale, and lots of bullets ranging from musket to minie balls.

Last month, my digging buddy Scott Jordan from New York visited me so that we could explore Baltimore after learning that excavators at a construction site near Fell's Point had exposed late 18<sup>th</sup> century docks and cribbing. In the side of the construction pit, Scott and I exposed a large trash heap composed almost entirely of broken black glass rum bottles that dated from 1800 to 1815. We excavated for hours in the hopes of pulling out a whole bottle without any luck. At the end of the day, I was collapsing the side of our hole when out rolled a black, lime-sized object. Picking it up, I realized it was made of cast iron. As I turned to Scott, and before I could even say a word, he excitedly said "that's a cannonball from a rail or swivel cannon." Not only was this my first artillery



shell but it also dawned on me that this most likely dated to the War of 1812. My next thought was about the battles that encompassed where we were digging over 185 years earlier.



That evening Scott and I rummaged through my history books to familiarize ourselves with the War of 1812 and its impact on the region. After the American Revolution ended in victory at Yorktown in 1781, a

second war with Great Britain broke out in 1812 over impressment, trade issues, and territorial expansion. Early in the conflict, the United States won naval victories in the Atlantic and on Lake Erie, but by 1814 the British was effectively blockading the American coast. In late August of that year, British soldiers and sailors landed at Benedict, Maryland, trekked towards Washington, defeated an American force at the Battle of Bladensburg, and captured the nation's capital. The British burned the White House and the Capitol before marching back to their ships. During their departure they arrested Dr. William Beanes of Upper Marlboro, said to be responsible for the arrest of British stragglers and deserters, and imprisoned him on a British warship. Friends of Dr. Beanes asked Francis Scott Key, a Georgetown lawyer, and John S. Skinner of Baltimore to go to the British and secure the doctor's release. Reaching the British squadron, Key and Skinner conferred with Major General Robert Ross, who promised to release Dr. Beanes. There was only one caveat: an attack on Baltimore was about to begin and the Americans were to be detained aboard a "flag of truce" ship until the conclusion of the engagement.

Baltimore in 1814 was extensively fortified from land-based assaults and water access was guarded by Fort McHenry, located on a narrow peninsula on the Patapsco River. On September 11, 1814, the British fleet appeared off North Point where they landed 5000 men without resistance and advanced toward Baltimore. A force of 250 Maryland militiamen marched out to meet and delay the invaders. The British troops continued to move toward Baltimore and unsuccessfully attempted to flank the fortifications that protected the city. At the same time, sixteen British vessels advanced toward Fort McHenry. Cannon and mortar fire was exchanged between the fort and the ships. The British ships took serious hits and retreated beyond the range of Fort McHenry's guns. In a last ditch attempt to prevent access to Baltimore by water, the Americans sank a number of ships in the North West Branch of the Patapsco River.

On September 13, in a meeting with officers, the British army general proposed an attack on Baltimore's land defenses a few hours after midnight in concert with a naval bombardment of Fort McHenry followed by the ships occupying the city's harbor. However, the naval admiral informed all that the North West Branch was shallow, only the lightest vessels could approach Baltimore, and even these could be blocked by ships which sank in the channel. (Apparently the British did not know that the Americans had already blocked the river.). Therefore, beyond attacking and trying to silence the guns of Fort McHenry, the mighty British navy could not otherwise

assist the army. The British commanders reconsidered and decided that attacking the land fortifications would result in heavy casualties which they could not afford because other military operations, including an attack of New Orleans, were slated. Instead, the British would withdraw from its positions and move back to the ships under cover of a naval bombardment.

On the afternoon of September 13, the British began the artillery assault of Fort McHenry and other coastal batteries that continued through to the early hours of the next morning. Fort McHenry's troops suffered some casualties but miraculously a shell which struck the fort's powder magazine did not explode. The response from the Americans was curtailed by the continuous bombardment, pouring rain, and the retreat of the British ships beyond the range of the fort's artillery. Rare and intermittent fire from Fort McHenry led the British to assume they had silenced the fort's cannons; thus, when three British ships moved closer to the fort the Americans opened fire, scored consequential hits, and drove the British ships out of range. Before dawn on September 14 the rain stopped, British ground troops retreated, and the naval bombardment ended. Within a few hours, the last of the attacking force was sailing away from Baltimore.

As the British fleet departed, the commander of Fort McHenry lowered the storm flag (displayed on the fort's flagpole throughout the rainy night of the bombardment) replacing it with a flag of the United States. The flag measured 30 x 42 feet and flew from a flagpole about 90 feet high. Francis Scott Key, aboard the "flag of truce" ship eight miles away, saw the large flag flying over the fort and knew at once that Fort McHenry had not surrendered. Inspired by the sight, he began to compose a poem on the back of a letter. Some 36 hours later, the truce ship carrying Key, Dr. Beanes, and Skinner reached Baltimore, and the Americans were released. Key took a room in the Indian Queen Hotel and revised the draft of the poem he had written. The next day he showed it to his brother-in-law, Captain Joseph Nicholson, who urged that it be published. Copies were printed on handbills at a local newspaper office over the weekend and were distributed to everyone at Fort McHenry. Originally called "The Defense of Fort McHenry" the title was changed soon thereafter to the now famous "Star-Spangled Banner."

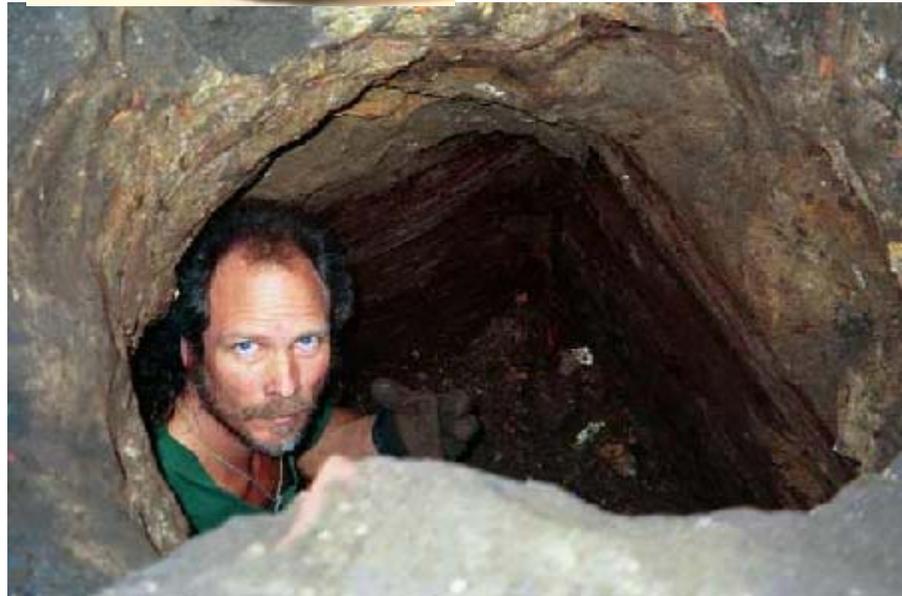
Now normally that would be the end of my story, but for the fact that the next day I, along with Phil Edmonds and Tom Salvatore, took Scott to dig some privies at some house sites in Fell's Point. Earlier in the week, Tom dug on the lot (which the archaeologists had not deemed significant and worthy of a dig), finding one privy that dated from the 1830s



to the 1860s. Upon arriving at the site with Scott, we immediately located another pit that appeared to predate the one Tom excavated. As Phil punched holes in the hard soil of the site looking for another privy, Tom, Scott and I systematically dug, pulled buckets and sifted the outhouse's soil. The privy was laden with pottery and black glass dating from 1800 to 1830, but as usual for this time period virtually all the bottles were smashed. One exception was a



1790s black glass bottle that had a small piece missing from the shoulder. Rain arrived and we used whatever cover we could find. Shortly thereafter as I was sifting the last buckets of dirt from the privy a superball-sized object started rolling about on the screen. Hefting it, I realized in my hand was yet another cast-iron projectile from the War of 1812 era. Turning to the guys, I relayed to them the historic military events (which Scott and I had honed up on the night before) that took place in Baltimore and Fell's Point some 185 years before. It also made me realize that one just never knows what piece of history is going to show up when you go bottle digging.



Hope you enjoyed this column. Any comments, suggestions, or questions, please let me know either by calling me at 202/588-0543 or by emailing me at [amg\\_sticky@yahoo.com](mailto:amg_sticky@yahoo.com). Good luck searching, Andy.