

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors Serving the National Capital

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January 2002

January 29th Meeting

Annual Contest: We will hold our annual bottle contest at the January meeting. Yes, we did say we would have the contest last time, but this time we really mean it. Categories are collector, junior collector, digger, shard, and go-with. Entries may be anything acquired since last year's contest except that the digger of the year award is limited to bottles actually dug by club members. Shards may include "tear jerkers" broken during shipment, cleaning, or accident as well as dug items.

Bottle Show: There will be a **brief** discussion of ideas for our 2002 bottle show at the January meeting. **Lee Shipman** has volunteered to host a board meeting if a longer discussion proves necessary. We have identified **June 23rd** as a possible show date that would not conflict with either the June 8th Richmond bottle club picnic or the June 16th Millville, New Jersey bottle show.



Above: Phil Godwin at the November meeting with a cathedral pickle

Vice President *Still* Needed

Lee Shipman will run our January meeting since President **Matt Knapp**'s wife has a baby due. We still need someone to take the VP post. Please contact Matt Knapp (mknapp@erols.com) (301) 698-5925) or Lee Shipman (plannerlee@earthlink.net) (301) 229-2005).

Dues Due

Several of you will see labels indicating that this is your final issue of the *Pontil* unless dues are paid. Please ignore this warning if you have recently sent dues to treasurer **Ken Anderson**. The dues are \$10 per person or family, and Ken's address is 4028 Williamsburg Court, Fairfax City, VA 22032-1139.

Is it Worth Digging the Deep Baltimore Brickliners?

Jury's Still Out.

by Andy Goldfrank

Busy, busy, busy . . . between work and travel for the holidays there seems to have been little time for writing an article for this month's newsletter let alone time to actually go digging. On top of that my few pictures of current efforts have not yet been developed; therefore, this month's article will actually be a digger's summary report on our excavations of the deep, brick-lined privies of Baltimore.

As reported in *The Potomac Pontil*, September 2001, a group of Washington and Baltimore metro area diggers have decided to excavate some of the deeper brick-lined privies that can be upwards of 30 feet deep in hopes of finding some quality glass. This group has committed to digging these mammoth holes to see if the conventional wisdom -- that Baltimore's deep brickliners are not worth excavating -- holds true. In Baltimore, it appears that in the areas developed after 1860 or so, the builders started constructing round, deep brick privies as opposed to shorter wood-lined boxes, hog barrels, shallow oval or square brickliners. Often times in these "newer" neighborhoods (i.e., built in the 1860s), the lots will have only a deep, round brickliner and no other privies. Past practice by local bottlediggers was to see if the artifacts get older within the first six to nine feet of a large brickliner and then abandon the hole if there were no signs of older relics or if the cast-iron stack for the toilet remained in the hole. An additional deterrent is that to dig deeper is back-breaking work, special equipment is needed (e.g., tripods, chains, block and tackle, buckets, and ladders), and a larger crew of diggers is necessary. Nonetheless, over the last six months we have garnered a committed group of diggers, collected and tested the right equipment, and attempted a significant number of "deep" digs.

The first two deep outhouses we dug under the guidance of some Pittsburgh diggers near the Shot Tower north Little Italy. The Pittsburgh crew brought their equipment and we dug the two 25 foot deep pits to their bottoms. Both privies had about 10 feet of cap dirt tossed in to seal the privy after its last use, which then gave way to a heavy black muck that contained bottles and artifacts. These privies, however, were a disappointment because although



old and crude the pits had been dipped or cleaned out in the 1880s with the end result that there were no early bottles. The recoveries did include some rarities (an unlisted cobalt master ink from New York, an early 1880s St. Louis Brewing Company amber beer, and some hereto unknown Baltimore blob beers), but generally the results were insufficient for the many hours of back-breaking work by at times half a dozen diggers.

The next effort was a real learning experience since the Pittsburgh diggers (and their wisdom) had returned home to Pennsylvania. A old church in the heart of downtown Baltimore gave us permission to explore a brickliner in their parking lot. We soon ran into difficulty and eventually never even finished the privy. The problem was that we did not have the know-how, the right equipment, or even a sufficient amount of time. Our block and tackle was actually a pulley that was too small, the bucket clip was the wrong size and difficult to manipulate, and the rope kept slipping. In addition, using a rope instead of a chain was a serious mistake because it is much harder on the hands, slips the pulley's track more frequently, does not provide a clean knot for the bucket clips, and gets slick with moisture and mud. On top of these problems, we were not experienced and physically not in shape, nor did we have a system worked out as to who should be in the hole, who should pull the rope, and who should switch buckets and dump them, which led to confusion and poor timing. To solve these problems, Peter Rydquist obtained a quality block and tackle while Phil Edmonds refurbished the tripod and purchased 50 feet of chain and the right clips.



Early last fall, we tackled three large diameter brick-lined privies that were originally 30 feet deep on a West Baltimore lot. The first one showed signs of being extremely fruitful because the first five feet was pure ash and trash containing a couple dozen local blob beers and steamers including an Eigenbrot Adonis Pale Beer, an Oriental Brewing, and the usual assortment of Gunther, Phillips, Bauerschmidts, and others. After these initial discoveries we hit fill dirt that contained pockets of ash for the next 20 feet but few bottles; in fact, there were less than 25 additional bottles and by the time we approached the bottom there were so few artifacts the hole was impossible to date. We never even hit a nightsoil or use layer as the outhouse must have been totally cleaned out. In contrast, the other two privies definitely had different owners and/or patrons because these pits were loaded with bottles all the way down. The tops of both privies were filled with pure ash and bottles for at

least five feet that dated from the 1930s and rapidly aged. By the time we hit the fill dirt which also contained trash the period was about 1910-15. One pit had over a hundred and forty crown-top beers. There were so many beers that Peter Rydquist and Tom Salvatore stacked two pillars of bricks and filled the space between with beer bottles to fashion a wall of glass. Both pits eventually gave way to nightsoil layers that likewise produced a steady stream of



bottles and other artifacts. In general, these digs were of sufficient quantity and quality to label them worthwhile; however, the privies again did not have the age we were hoping to find. The better artifacts included a crockery Sandkuhler's beer, interesting fruit jars (e.g., Gem, Mason's 1858 with an embossed "6", Millville Improved and others), an 1880s yellow ware spittoon, a large variety of patent medicines and local drugstore bottles, a neat brown-glazed whiskey jug, and an amber strap-sided flask with an embossed anchor. Our final assessment was that the pits were constructed and used after 1885 as indicated by the quality



of the brick, the larger hole diameter, the depth, and the lack of evidence of older material in that hole. Nonetheless, we had a good time digging these outhouses and everyone went home with some neat bottles.

The next three brick-lined privies we tackled were only about 15 to 20 feet deep but were more narrow and of crude brick construction – these were clearly older than those we had previously dug in that West Baltimore neighborhood. One of these digs was covered in greater detail in the November 2001 issue of *The Potomac Pontil*, where I described how I finally found my first Warner's Safe Cure in a pit that Chris Vaught suggested we tackle. The other two privies were from houses that were on the same block, appeared to be almost identical in style and shape, and seemingly constructed at the same time. The critical distinction between the two is that the one was cleaned out in the late 1880s and used until 1910 while the other was never dipped and was capped in the early 1890s. The hole with the newer artifacts had a couple dozen local clear embossed whiskeys and drugstores, some blob beers including a Pabst Baltimore Branch, and an interesting variety of hair product and patent medicine bottles. The other outhouse started out with a six foot fill layer that contained trash and about 30 bottles from the early 1890s including an amber strap-sided "Farber's of Baltimore" flask, a "Lauterbach's /since 1857" drugstore, and other embossed local material. Below this trash fill was a layer of wood that was directly on top of nightsoil, which started out with bottles from the early 1890s. The outhouse appeared to age a few years every foot or so; the bottom contained bottles from the 1860s. This hole did not have anything exciting but it did produce amongst other artifacts, a pontiled figural cologne, a flint glass "X. Bazin," a pontiled "McMunn's Elixir of Opium," a crockery wax sealer, numerous umbrella inks, a few local hinge-mold druggists (just missing pontils), a crude Saratoga Dressing and even a squat 1860s "XX Porter and Ale" from New York. One heartbreaker was a crisply embossed Pittsburgh double eagle flask that had the shoulder knocked out on the brick wall of the privy.

Shortly after New Year's Day, we obtained permission to dig three brick-lined privies in Fell's Point. These were shared outhouses that straddled the property line for six houses that appeared to have been built in the 1860s or earlier. There was a brick box on top that was approximately seven feet across which went three to four feet deep, and then tapered into a central round brickliner that was another 12 feet deep or so. We dug these on successive weekends in the snow (and found that the third privy had been dug in the late 1970s-early 1980s according

to the newer genre of artifacts in the pit) with weak results. The first two pits were evidently old but one had been repeatedly dipped up to 1900 and the other was cleaned out in the early 1880s. We did manage to extract a few neat bottles including a "Dr. Petzold's Genuine German Bitters" (Ring/Ham P79), a double-collared Warner's Safe Kidney & Liver



Cure (evidently that Warner's curse is gone!), and early 1880s bottle embossed "Strychnine Poison." Also found were some large Bennington glazed marbles, a few short-stem red-clay pipes with unusual patterns, and two intact bisque doll heads with their glass eyes. The most disappointing fact was that the outhouse excavated by other bottlediggers had not been dipped as the throwback dirt was laden with pottery and broken bottles from the 1850s-60s; however, this was only demonstrative of "what could have been" and is motivation that with perserverance we will hit a good pit.



Two tearjerkers were an iron-pontiled “Morning Star Bitters” from Baltimore and a teal tenpin embossed “C.A. Cole / Cole & Co. / C.F. Brown” in an oval on one side and “Baltimore / No. 118 / North Howard St.” in an oval on the other side. Comparing the results of these two types of privy digging (wood-liners versus deep brick-liners) makes me wonder which quote is more apt regarding our commitment to dig deep brick-liners: Dan Quayle’s “If we don’t succeed, we run the risk of failure” or Thomas Edison’s “Genius is 1

The latest brickliner dug was in West Baltimore behind an 1860s rowhouse. This turned out to be a mild letdown because, despite the fact that the privy walls were caked with a layer of nightsoil starting near the top and the outhouse appeared to have been built at the same time as the house, it had been dipped clean to the bottom around 1900. There were close to two dozen whiskey bottles (half pint medicine flasks and fifths) but only a few local whiskeys and drugstores that were embossed including an unlisted half pint “Isaac Rogers / Wines and Liquors / 205 Pine Street /Baltimore.” This privy was different from many others in that the bottom five feet was a dry, spongy material similar to a fiber mat which left the bottles in sparkling mint condition. The layer was composed of small sticks, straw, pieces of wallpaper and thousands of peanut shells. This brought vivid images to our minds of some old man sitting on his outhouse seat using the facilities, enjoying his time munching on peanuts and sipping his whiskey.

percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.” Notwithstanding such thoughts, the results after the first ten or so deep outhouses were sufficiently encouraging to sign us up for another ten deep brick-liners in the hopes that maybe we will hit one or more that have the right combination of age, quality and quantity. Until then, as promised, I will keep you updated.

All told, we are not convinced the deep brick-lined privies of Baltimore are worth digging. These holes require larger crews of at least three or four guys, lots of stamina and energy, and plenty of time. The results are mixed with most pits enjoyable to dig but generally not of the age we desire, nor did they contain a sufficient quantity of decent bottles to make everyone happy. During this same time period, we also found a number of wood-lined pits in the same neighborhoods with decent results including potlids, claypipes, marbles and some excellent pontiled sodas, inks, medicines and ales -- stories are forthcoming in future issues of *The Potomac Pontil*.



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. Good luck searching, Andy.

DC Bottles on Ebay

Despite the current weak economy, a couple of unusual DC bottles have brought high prices on Ebay lately. A lovely 7 ¼ inch tall emerald green torpedo bottle marked **McKeon & McGrann** on one side and **Washington D.C.** on the other side sold for \$836 even though it had a few chips.



More surprisingly, an 8 inch tall clear medicine bottle brought \$300. This bottle is marked **NATIONAL CAPITAL MEDICINE CO. WASH. D.C.** , and it bears a picture of the Capitol building.

