

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

May 2005

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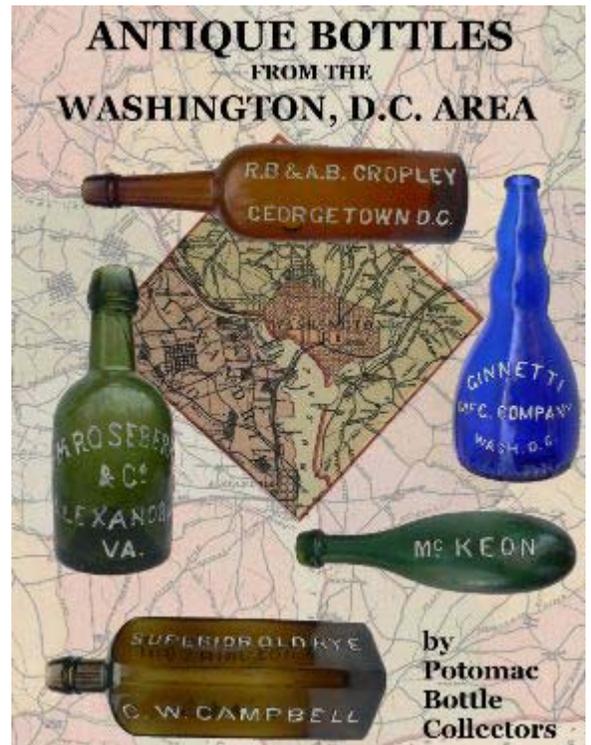
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Meeting May 31st

Please join us at 8 PM at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Bethesda. We will be making final decisions on the new edition of our book *Antique Bottles from the Washington, DC Area*, which will debut at our **June 26th Show**. We also have plenty to discuss concerning the show itself. We promise the meeting will not be “all work and no play.” Andy Goldfrank promises to lead an interesting discussion on digging.

Thank you to **Al Miller** for the proposed book cover (top right) and club logo (below). We will review alternative designs for the book cover at the May meeting.



Thank you also to **Larry Fox** for his kind mention of the *Pontil* in the newsletter of the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors. We will certainly have new readers due to Larry’s message.

Welcome to new member **Aidan Clawson**, who joined the club at our April meeting.

The “digathon” crew is at work in the photo at right. Read **Andy Goldfrank**’s article starting on page 2 to learn what they found.

We still have a few tables available for the June 26th show. Please contact **Jim Sears** or **Andy Goldfrank** if you need a table.



Meetings: 8:00 PM on the last Tuesday of each month in the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, 6201 Dunrobbin Dr., Bethesda, MD 20816.
President: Andy Goldfrank Vice President: Al Miller Secretary: Jim Sears Treasurer: Lee Shipman
Pontil: Jim Sears (email: searsjim@usa.net, PH: 703/243-2409) & Andy Goldfrank (email: amg_sticky@yahoo.com, PH: 202/588-0543)
Web Site <http://members.aol.com/potomacbtll/bottle2.htm> Maintained by Peter Rydquist: pehraug@aol.com

New York and New Jersey Digathon: Seven Privies in Seven Days

by Andy Goldfrank

It was once again time for the annual week-long digging pilgrimage to the land of pontil-laden privies. Previously in these pages, I told the story about one such dig in Philadelphia where we found three mechanical Haller fruit jar lids along with enough colored sodas and pontiled medicines for everyone to be happy. As you may recall, we unloaded the lids for a significant sum and the upcoming digging trip was to be paid from those proceeds. This is the story of our “all expenses paid” digathon.

A digathon, at least as we have coined the term, means taking a week off of work, gathering a few buddies addicted to privy digging, and hitting outhouses every day in a particular city or state. In the past, various members of our crew had done trips for a week straight in different places all over the Eastern Seaboard: Philadelphia, New York City (including Brooklyn, Staten Island and Manhattan), Vicksburg, Charleston, Richmond and Baltimore. We have learned the hard way that the trips are more productive if one does some serious planning and research in the form of lining-up dig sites, gathering historic maps of the spots, and having a back-up plan. And let me tell you, as experience also has taught us, if your crew is having trouble finding pits or pontiled bottles then tension can build and even explode.

As usual, our scheduled week for the trip was fast approaching and the plans for the privy digging trip were still up in the air. There was a location to pick and then flights plus a motel to book. We did know that the main full-time crew was to include the Denver digging boys, Marty Homola and Mike Saindon, along with Scott Jordan and me; in addition, depending on where the digging action was, we might be joined for at least part of the digathon by Adam Woodward, Winston Krieger, Dave Cutler and Pia Dickinson. As an aside, it takes a certain kind of digger to go on these adventures and not everyone survives or even wants to go on future trips. In some cases the issue is physical because you dig for at least ten hours a day for a whole week – backs give out, muscles hurt, and the weather can be miserable. In other cases it is emotional because some guys just can not cope with the different personalities and the intensity of being with the same people day and night for a week – digging all day, eating meals at odd hours, and sleeping in cramped motel rooms.

To plan our “all expenses paid” digathon, Scott and I had a number of telephone conversations about our various options since we had a couple of good sites lined up in New York City, Philadelphia, Albany, and Baltimore, but we were worried that no single place had enough pits for an entire week. For starters, there were a bunch of sites I had gotten permission for in Baltimore that had real potential. That is, real potential for Baltimore, because although there are a lot of privies to dig in Baltimore dating back to the 1700s, the outhouses do not consistently have the same quality and quantity of intact bottles one can find in other cities. Turning to Philadelphia, the last time we dug in the City of Brotherly Love there were a number of permissions that we had obtained but not checked out. These potential privies were behind

three occupied row houses in North Philadelphia and next to another hole that we had dug. The problem was that the pits were in a part of Philadelphia with shallow privies and considering the size of our digging crew, it would take less than two days to finish off these holes which meant we would then have to seek out other privies to dig.

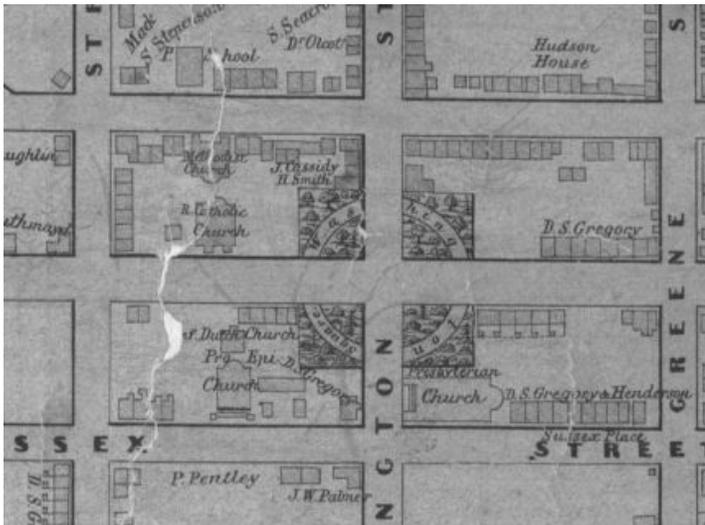
Further north, Scott had obtained permission behind an 1850s house and the neighboring lots in a historic district of Albany, New York. However, it was uncertain if these spots had been dug previously since we knew the Capital District had been heavily dug in the past. In addition, Scott and Dave had talked to a couple of local developers who invited them to dig on their lots in old Astoria and Flushing. We also contemplated digging in Connecticut simply because we had never explored there other than a couple of digs in Stamford. In the meantime, Adam got access to a couple of spots in Manhattan yet these were not a certainty and nailing down dates convenient to the owners was going to be difficult. When we talked about combining Manhattan and Albany for the week, Scott and I agreed it would be impossible to accurately predict our arrival time in Albany if we were digging privies in Manhattan that might be 20 feet deep and take two or three days to dig apiece. In addition, we were worried about hauling the digging crew a couple of hours away to Albany, booking additional hotel rooms, and then finding that our invitation to dig was for pits that were already dug.

Last, Marty and Mike had indicated that they wanted to dig in the New York area – but not quite in those words. During a conversation I had with Marty, it came out that the Denver boys thought the green, pontiled sodas we had found in Philadelphia were cool but that the ideal catch would be a sided cobalt soda (much like the Dearborns and Knickerbockers that adorn many a New York City digger’s shelves). Frankly, we were all leaning toward the Big Apple, however, if we did not have enough sites in hand it was going to be tough to find pontiled bottles of any kind. Permission in Manhattan is always difficult to obtain but as a fallback Scott and I knew that it was relatively easy to get last-minute permission to dig in Brooklyn, Staten Island and some of the cities in North Jersey. Then, on the eve of the deadline for booking motels and flights, Dave passed on a tip he had heard about a construction site in Jersey City where the blacktop was being scraped and the site preparation contractor might grant permission to dig the privies. After one last conference with both Scott and Marty, it was decided to gather in New York with the hope that all would fall into place. We figured that the mass of “maybe” sites in Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Jersey City would lead to a few successful privy digs.

On the Friday before Halloween, Marty and Mike flew into New York and I drove up from Washington, D.C. That night we gathered at Scott’s apartment and gawked at his recent finds which was inspiration for all. We also settled on a plan for the next day: we would start by checking out the spots in Queens (also near to where we could purchase wholesale-price work gloves in bulk) and then venture to Jersey City to look at the construction site. Adam was not available until the following week, so we had no word on the Manhattan permissions. Our hope was that the sites in Queens and Jersey City would occupy our time even if those sites never materialized.

Day 1: Queens and Jersey City

The next morning arrived too fast (since we had been up late talking about digging and bottles) but by mid-day we had ruled out the spots in Queens. This was because the structures were only from the late 1870s or early 1880s at best and, as Mike put it, “we were hunting pontils.” Dave then lead us through the maze of New York City highways, streets, bridges and tunnels into New Jersey where he proceeded to wind us through the endless urban grid of Hoboken and Jersey City. Eventually, we pulled alongside a construction site on Grand Street in Jersey City with a spectacular view of the skyline of Manhattan although that did not distract us for long. Every digger’s dream lay in front us: a construction site adjacent to a row of intact, Greek Revival style, 1830s row houses. This was a corner lot in the heart of the original planned part of Jersey City which was developed as an early suburb of New York (since the city was just a short ferry ride across the Hudson River) and, by the 1850s, this city was a center of industry for New Jersey. As I explained this to Marty, we noticed that the heavy equipment operator was closing up the fence for the weekend; apparently he had been expecting us (because of our local contact on the Jersey City Police force) and he quickly confirmed before leaving that we could look for bottles. He also added that another bottle digger had gotten in the way while he was running the track hoe, that he ran this guy out of the site, and that this other digger was not welcome anymore. Nodding, we all quickly stepped in with our probes and shovels.



1851 Dripps Map showing Jersey City dig site. Grand Street runs right to left in the center of this map, and the dig was on Grand between Washington Square and Greene Street.

Looking over the site, it appeared that this spot had been used as a parking lot after the structures on the site were demolished in the 1970s or 1980s. We did not have maps in hand at that point that specifically showed this block; however, we quickly honed in on the layout of the original structures. The corner of the site was partly excavated and foundation walls were exposed in the pit but these did not seem old enough to indicate there were pontiled bottles. At the other end, where the lot abutted the still-standing 1830s row, the remains of at least two more houses were evident where the parking lot was freshly scraped. These houses were old enough for pontil-laden pits, so

the only questions were (1) how many houses had once stood here and (2) how many privies remained undisturbed?

In the meantime, with Dave and Winston not sure what to do, Mike had gone to probe the back of the lot along the fence line which separated the backyards of the houses on the parallel street. Almost immediately he hit an ashy stone-lined pit and started a test hole. Marty, Scott and I, figuring there were more pits closer to the existing row houses, started probing and test holing along the fence line. In less than fifteen minutes, I had probed out another stone-lined pit. Marty started digging that hole while I probed out yet another pit. Once I determined that I had probed out side by side privies for two row houses, I paced them off and figured out how many pits were extant on the site. I tallied off the pits: there was one privy under the intact portion of the parking lot (which had architectural pieces on it), the two I had probed out, and the one Mike had hit. Based upon my pacing, there was another one between Mike’s and the first one I had probed. All told there were five privies waiting for us ... or so we thought.

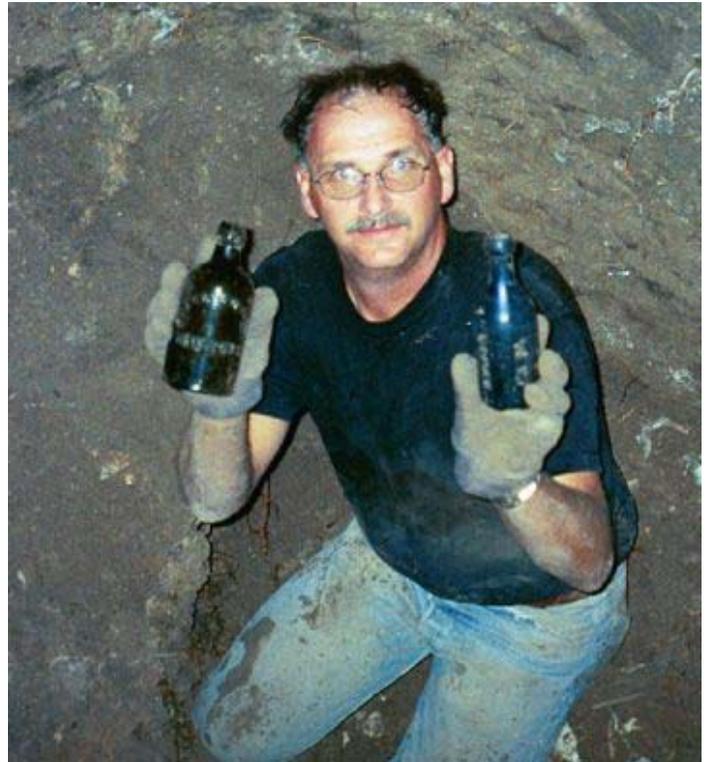
Since there were six of us, we split into two crews of three each to dig the privies. We knew that these pits would take a crew a day to dig and, between Saturday and Sunday, we could knock out four Jersey City outhouses. As we hauled in the tripods, buckets, ropes and other equipment, Marty continued in the first hole that I had probed out. I went over to see how Mike was doing in his privy and saw that he had about half the curved stone wall exposed. The only problem was that the pit was filled with turn-of-the-century cinders which usually means newer bottles or a thorough dipping leaving few bottles. After conferring, Mike and I filled his hole in and focused on the two holes that were closest to the 1830s row house. Marty and I continued in the pit I had probed out and the others tackled the new pit that was even closer to the existing row house.

Marty and I set up the tripod over the first privy and made decent progress despite the clay, ash and sand cap. Mike, Winston, Scott and Dave were doing the same on the second privy although their cap was much more dense, damp and heavy. (Marty had made the tripod we were using and had first tested on the Philadelphia digathon, while Winston had crafted another tripod based upon Marty’s design and was testing it out for the first time on this dig.) In addition, as we exposed the curved walls of both outhouses it appeared that this second pit was wider, by about a foot, making it almost 8 feet across. At about the 5-foot layer, I pulled out the first pontiled bottle of the trip, a tall, aqua “Rushton’s Cod Liver Oil” from New York. We called Mike over to join us as it was clear that we had broken through the cap and were now in a trash layer. Almost at the same time, Scott said that they had found a short W.E. Brockaway clay beer and an intact clay pipe. To say the boys were getting excited is an understatement.

Marty went into the first pit to clear off the rest of the cap layer; in turn, Mike and I were hauling and dumping buckets. Less than 20 minutes later, Marty asked for a digging stick and exposed the edge of a bottle. In short order, he pulled out a Patent whiskey and a Stoddard flask. In case the pit was scarce on finds, I jumped into the hole and, right where Marty stopped, the

digging stick rubbed against a bottle. Pushing the soil aside with my glove, I spotted a familiar edge and immediately urged Marty to come back into the hole and dig a little bit more. With a few quick strokes of the digging stick, Marty popped out an iron-pontiled, cobalt, 8-sided, "Boardman Mineral Water" from New York and a large, open pontil, "Professor Wood's Hair Restorative." Marty was delirious with joy and muttered that maybe it was time for them to pack up and go back to Denver because the digging could not get any better.

After a few pictures, Marty again climbed out of the outhouse and I proceeded to clean out the fluff. Working toward the middle of the hole, the digging stick hit glass. Brushing the loamy soil away, I exposed two large, unfamiliar cylinders. One was an dark olive green, saratoga embossed "F.H. Hecking's Mineral Waters New York" and the other was an over-sized, teal medicine embossed "Huff's Linament." Both were beautiful early 1860s bottles albeit smooth-based. Mike then came into the privy for his turn and found an aqua "Wheeler's Genuine Bitters" and a green "Clark & White" saratoga. Mike liked his finds; however, since they were likewise smooth-based, we told him to find another bottle. Within a few minutes, Mike's digging stick pried up a bottle – another iron-pontiled, 8-sided, cobalt soda from New York. Holding up the "Knickerbocker Soda Water," Mike and Marty were literally shaking with joy, because both had found in the first few hours of our digathon a cobalt, sided soda!



Mike with Mineral Waters



Andy digging the "W.W. Huff's Linament" and "F.H. Hecking's Mineral Waters / New York."



Iron-pontiled, cobalt, sided sodas ... what more could we want?



Teal green W.W. Huff's Linament

By the end of the day, Marty, Mike and I had added a number of cool artifacts from our 10-foot deep privy including a Royce & Easterly pot lid with the image of a shield and eagle, an oversized pipe in the shape of a hand holding the bowl, and a dozen of so smaller pontiled bottles. In contrast, Scott, Winston and Dave, struggled to maintain a positive attitude as their 11-foot deep pit was barren other than a few clay pipes. As daylight faded, all of us were filling in the holes, breaking down the tripods, and collecting the artifacts. Even with the clanging of shovels, I could hear Scott and Marty trying to cheer up Winston and Dave by saying that this was just the first day and there were a bunch of privies to dig in the coming days. Marty even stated "everyone is going to go home with a real good bottle before this dig is over." If you had asked me then, I would have cautioned that Marty's statement was a bold promise not likely to be

fulfilled. But then again, I absolutely would not have thought the Denver boys would each find a cobalt, sided soda in our first pit.



Royce & Esterly Pot Lid by Heimstreet of Troy, N.Y.



Carved pipe in the shape of a hand cradling a bowl.



Digathon Day 1 finds back at the motel.

Day 2: Jersey City

The next morning we returned and started on the next two privies. Everybody that had been digging the day before returned to the site, except for Scott who was selling at the flea

market on Columbus Avenue in Manhattan. Less than 30 minutes after arriving, we were visited by Jersey City's finest. Not only did they already know us, through Dave's and Scott's buddy on the Jersey City Police force, but they also knew we had permission to dig on the construction site. The only problem was that some neighbors had called and complained about our excavation – apparently Jersey City has a “no work on Sunday” rule. We were all shocked and disappointed. Without much talk, we broke down our tripods and hauled our gear back to the trucks.

As we loaded the tools and equipment and mulled over our options, a woman came out of the 1830s row house that abutted the site. She asked me what had happened; I explained that we were not allowed to dig on Sunday. Soon enough, Marty and I were telling our “neighbor” Pat about our hobby and how we get together for an annual digging trip. I suggested that her yard also had privies and, without hesitating, Pat invited us to look at her yard. Marty and I quickly grabbed a probe and abandoned the other guys. Walking into Pat's house, we were dumb-founded to learn that she and her family lived in one row house and, in an abutting row house, had their art studios. Beautifully restored and renovated, Pat and her husband had purchased these row houses as rotting, collapsing shells back in the 1970s, when noone wanted to live in Jersey City. We were even more awestruck after we walked into the back yard and saw that the two yards for the row houses backed up to another empty lot that served as Pat's driveway and garden area. Looking at each other, Marty and I communicated in silence and counted the three possible outhouses in the yard. We also realized that this was a pristine yard with a beautiful lawn and gardens.



Andy and Mike probing for pits in Pat's pristine yard in Jersey City.

Pat pointed out the location of one privy that she said had been a sinkhole when they had bought the shell and required filling; glancing in that direction, I knew this spot was not viable because a large bush sat in the middle of the possible outhouse. Using the probe, I quickly located the other two privies in the massive yard; one was in the middle of green turf and the other was half in the yard and half in a flower garden. After we explained what our process would be for digging these pits (i.e., cutting the sod, using tarpaulins and wood to protect the yard, bagging the soil, sifting the trash layer, seeding the grass afterwards, and sharing the finds), Pat without hesitation invited

us to dig the privies and also asked if her daughter could participate. Marty and I both had a quizzical look but Pat explained that her daughter, Kaia, was a recent graduate of media and film school in need of an interesting project. Simultaneously, Marty and I signed up our entire digging crew for anything that Kaia wanted – how cool would it be to dig this yard and have it recorded. And we figured that guys would not mind either. A little while later, Marty and I walked back to the car and announced to the digathon crew that “we cannot dig there.” And then Marty said, with a mischievous grin, “at least not today. We will be back tomorrow to dig TWO pits!” The guys looked stunned but the day was saved even if we could not go digging at that moment.

For the rest of that Sunday, we wandered around looking for sites to no avail but I suspect it was because we already had a permission lined-up for the next day. After dark, we ended up back at the construction site and noticed that someone was digging the privy furthest away from the 1830s row houses; this was the cinder-filled hole that Mike and I had rejected the day before. It turned out that this was the guy the track hoe operator had booted from the site. This rogue digger was throwing dirt out of the hole without a tripod, or even a bucket, and was about 7 feet into the hole. Curious as to what he was finding, I picked up my probe and walked to where he was heaving dirt. Looking down into the privy, it was apparent that he was still in cinders, not finding anything, and he had just hit water (which was strange since our holes were deeper and stayed dry the whole way down). He indicated that he was about to quit because he had not found a single bottle. After suggesting he should not quit on a hole without finishing despite the lack of artifacts, I offered to gently probe to see if there was anything in the pit. My probe hit one piece of glass and a couple of pieces of pottery; moreover, hard pan was just a couple feet away (and thus at least a few feet shallower than the other holes we had dug on the lot). Nonetheless, as I told this guy (and anyone who will listen), if a pit is old and open you might as well dig the entire privy. My illustration on point is a privy Scott, Adam and I dug that was virtually void of any bottles until the last shovel of dirt in the last corner when a yellow pontiled umbrella ink rolled out. I left the outlaw digger, went to dinner, and afterward we came back to see what he had found: one pontiled black ale. Oh well . . . at least Mike and I were glad we had skipped that privy.

Days 3 to 5: Jersey City and Manhattan

On Monday morning, Marty, Mike and I arrived first at Pat’s house where we parked our truck and unloaded our equipment in the lot used as a driveway and garden. The three of us probed out the two available privies and elected to dig the one in the middle of the yard first. We laid out the tarpaulins and some wood on the edge of the hole to prevent damage to the yard, then Mike and I started cutting the sod while Marty went to talk with the track hoe operator on the construction site next door to insure we could dig those privies as he exposed them. Soon thereafter, the rest of the digathon crew arrived and they continued to haul out the equipment. I started excavating a hole to find the outhouse’s stonewall. Once this was determined, we set the tripod up and the bucket bagging system. The night before, we had purchased a large number of heavy duty contractor bags for the cap dirt with the goal of bagging as much dirt as possible for a

clean, easy fill-in when we were done with the outhouse. The pit was big enough across that Marty and I were both able to dig and fill buckets side by side.



Andy starts on Pat’s first privy

The key was to make good use of all of the members of our digging crew (now composed of Marty, Mike, Dave, Winston, Scott, Pia and me). It was our hope that we could have two people in the hole at all times with one digging and the other filling buckets, a person pulling buckets to the surface with the tripod, a person dumping the dirt into a bag, and another hauling the bags away from the hole. This meant someone was resting and, as we quickly learned, answering on-camera questions raised by Kaia. As we quickly progressed down into the outhouse, the focus switched from bagging the cap dirt to sifting because artifacts were turning up with regularity. We soon started hitting the trash layer at about the 8- foot layer and this continued for a good 4 or 5 feet. There was a fair amount of bottles, with the criers being a broken amber Phoenix Bitters and green “S. Fine Blk. Ink” missing its flared lip, and pottery dating back to the 1830s including two large size blue-transfer chamber pot lids. At the same time, Scott and Marty kept returning to the construction site next door to check the progress of the heavy equipment. By the end of the night, we somehow had finished off the first pit in Pat’s yard. We never took a good tally of the bottles because we were working in such a frenzy to try and get the pit dug rapidly; instead, we just wrapped and boxed everything and left it on site.



What a shame: a broken pontiled Phoenix Bitters.

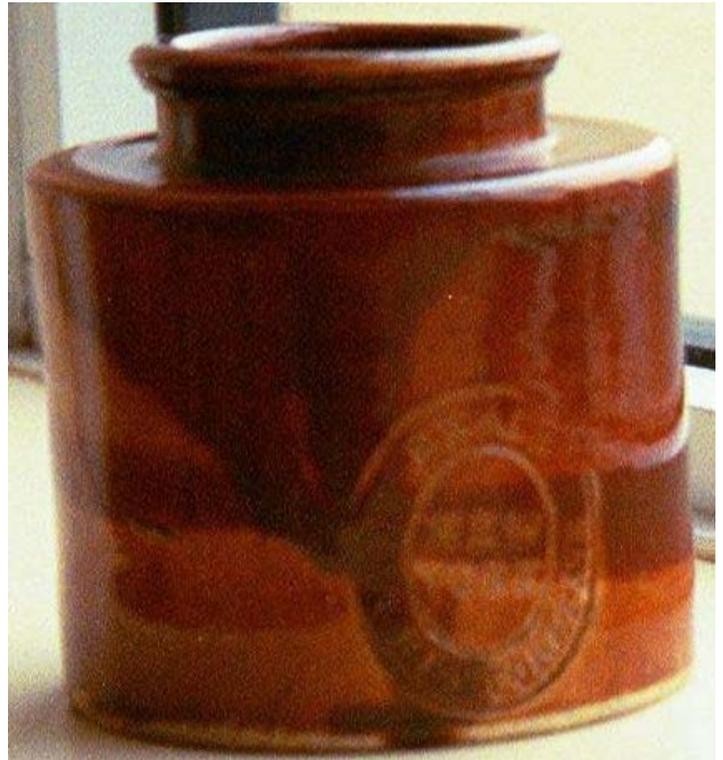
On Tuesday, we returned to fill the first pit and get into the second privy in Pat's yard and garden. We anticipated this would take us the entire day and into the night; in addition, we wanted to get into the last available privy next door in the construction site. The hitch was that almost from the top, this second privy in Pat's yard was loaded with bottles: lots of Jersey City medicines, sodas and food bottles from the 1870s to the 1890s in the top of the hole. Apparently this pit had settled and been filled over time with trash. This layer slowed us down considerably because we wanted to get all of these bottles out intact for the landowners (who wanted to keep some and give some away to friends). At about the 5-foot layer, the cap changed to pockets of ash and slabs of bluestone in the midst of clay, and there were occasional bottles from the 1860s. Marty pulled out an iron-pontiled cathedral aqua pickle that was exposed when Marty smacked his shovel against a bluestone slab which glanced against the arched shoulder of the pickle – to this day I am not sure how the pickle stayed perfectly intact. On that day, we also managed to dig a hole on the construction site with the track hoe operator's aid. We quit that night at about 10 p.m., once we hit the night soil with the idea of getting a fresh start in the morning.



Marty's giant iron-pontiled pickle in bed.

The next day, Wednesday, our goal was to finish of the privy, divide the finds with Pat and her family, fill the hole, tidy the yard, and load into Manhattan that night. Adam had showed up in the afternoon of the day before and confirmed our privy dig on Houston Street in New York; he also had obtained permission at another construction site near the entrance to the Holland Tunnel that needed to be dug as soon as possible. It was apparent that we would be exhausted at the end of the day. Moreover, this privy was not helping because, as we worked our way down, this privy did not stop – it was almost 18 feet in depth which was at least 5 or 6 feet more than the first privy in Pat's yard. The highlights of this second privy were in the bottom layer, that despite lacking in quantity did produce, for Scott, a wonderful glazed, redware jar stamped "Beale's Hair Restorative New York" and, for me, a complete Sperm Whale's tooth. An absolute hush fell over the crew and spectators when Scott and I brought these two artifacts into the light after 170 years of burial. There is no

doubt in my mind, and I recall Pat and Kaia agreeing with me, that here was a tangible connection to Jersey City's early days in the 1830s as the home of many a sea captain. There was also a dozen large bags of shards that we sifted, cleaned and sorted on site with the goal of Scott and Pia restoring the pottery at a later date. We also managed to find a fair amount of black glass in this hole and in the last privy from the construction site next door. Before the sunset, we had rinsed the bottles that came from Pat's pits and took pictures of the family with the finds. We filled the hole, hauled our equipment, packed the finds, and loaded our trucks until well after dark. As we said good night to Pat, who knew we were off to dig privies in Manhattan (with her daughter Kaia in tow), Marty and I confirmed that we would be back in the morning to rake the yard, re-lay the sod, and restore the garden while the other guys started on our Houston Street permission dig.



Scott's pottery jar stamped "Beale's Hair Restorative / New York."

To this day, I am not certain how Pat and her husband Kaare remained so calm. There were mounds of black bags, heaps of sifted dirt, tarpaulins all over, and piles of bottles and other artifacts stashed throughout the yard. Kaia repeatedly told us that her mother and father were fine with our work and tidiness, and enthralled by all of the history being extracted from their own backyard. The graciousness of this family was overwhelming. For example, although Pat liked the redware "Beale's Hair Restorative" she willingly gave it up once she became aware that Scott was enamored with his find. In return, I figured (although we will never find one again) that the Sperm Whale's tooth must be left with the owner's of this house. In the end, we also gave to Pat, Kaare and Kaia all of the newer c.1870s-90s bottles from the top of the second pit and split the remainder of finds which included a significant amount of black glass, aqua medicines, flint glass utilities, a couple embossed mineral waters and sodas, bone toothbrushes, pot lids, and other artifacts.



Kia, Kaare, and Pat (from left to Right) taking in the finds.

That night, after grabbing a bite of food, we headed into New York City to followup on Adam's lead. He had stumbled across a rapidly transforming site located near the intersection of Hudson, Laight and Varick Streets which also abutted a major access point into the Holland Tunnel. When Adam first walked into the site, after dodging the rushing cars bound for New Jersey, a burly construction foreman allowed him to survey the site for potential digging. The lot had been vacant for a number of years but clearly visible on the wall of an adjacent structure was the shadow of a two-story pitched roof building. Adam noticed the site was being excavated quickly and the crew was at the basement level of the buildings that previously occupied the spot. Initially, we were disappointed because it appeared that the neighboring structure, which is a massive late 1800s or early 1900s building, occupied (and, thus, destroyed) the former rear lots of the little houses whose privies we sought. But Adam persevered and returned later in the week to again check on the progress of excavation and to see if any privies or cisterns were exposed. He was rewarded when the crew popped the concrete basement floor and exposed a dark feature.

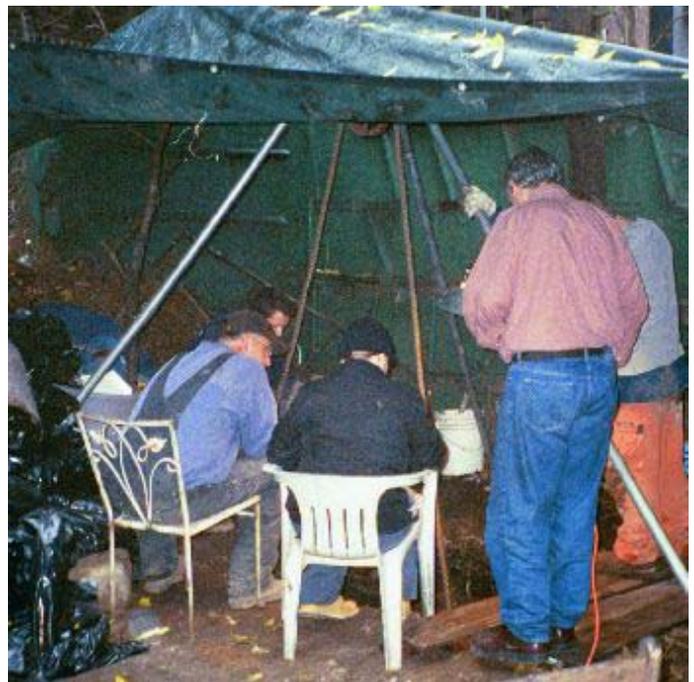


Due to the small window of time allotted our recovery efforts, Marty, Mike, Adam and Scott recovered the pit's relics in rapid succession while I watched our trucks. The privy was mortared brick box located below the basement floor and was about approximately 6 feet across and 4 feet in depth. It is likely that when the yards were built upon a new toilet was needed – what could be better than a basement outhouse. There was a nice variety of colored sodas and unusual shaped sodas, such as a tapered "Price, May & Co.", along with some quality embossed

medicines including a purple "Mrs. S.A. Allen's Hair Restorer." The 20 embossed bottles recovered were primarily from Brooklyn and Manhattan (both now boroughs of New York City and originally separate cities until 1898) but there were also bottles from Albany, New York (on the Hudson River about 170 miles north of the New York City) and Picton, Ontario in Canada. See "Tales of a Well Traveled Medicine," The Potomac Pontil, May 2004.

Days 6 and 7: Manhattan

Over the next two days, from 10 a.m. to 2 a.m. on both Thursday and Friday, we dug a monster stone-lined privy along one of New York's major thoroughfares: Houston Street. This outhouse ended up being over 8 feet across and almost 22 feet deep. In addition, prior to digging, we removed thousands of pounds of steel, iron and stone architectural relics from the yard and moved them to a lot down the street. Clearing the yard and hauling in our equipment took the better part of the Thursday morning and early afternoon with everything being carried through the owner's store. Moreover, once we started to dig, heavy rains descended upon us that required an elaborate tarpaulin rigging. When we quit for the day, it was almost 2 a.m., and we had progressed to 12 feet into the hole without finding a single artifact other than a smooth-based aqua soda. Upon returning to the site the next day, Friday, the owner of the site told us that they was hosting his birthday party that evening and we should dig throughout the festivities. Imagine the inebriated spectators, standing in the rain and mud along the edge of our hole, inquiring about every artifact, and carting out food to feed the diggers – it was quite a scene.



Digging in the rain in New York City.

The Houston Street privy had been dipped or cleaned a number of times. There were a lot of artifacts from the late 1850s to the 1860s in no discernable layers; plus, there were few pieces of the same pottery vessel and they were rarely in the same areas of the outhouse. The bulk of the bottles were broken or damaged

although we did extract a couple of keepers including a green, iron pontiled “Superior Mineral Water N Morristown, N.J.” and a neat concentric ring chamber pot lid. At the bottom, we uncovered a layer of pottery from the 1830s informing us that the bulk of the 1840s to early 1850s artifacts were missing from this privy. It was 2 a.m., on Friday night, when we wrapped up the dig and finished off the outhouse. We packed up the better bottles and prepared to meet the next day at Scott’s apartment to divvy out the bottles. Exhaustion practically oozed from our pores –that night, Mike and I both fell asleep without taking showers while waiting for Marty to finish his shower. It was quite an end to our seven days of privy digging.

The Big Pick

During the entire week of digging, we had saved our bottles (other than the many bottles given to the landowners) and on Saturday, we gathered for drink, food and the Big Pick. This is when we would split up the bottles from our week of digging. In order to understand how we would split up the finds, as a group we hashed out what we had accomplished in terms of digging, how folks had contributed throughout the week, and what bottles and other relics we had found.



**Mug-base, iron-pontiled
“Superior Mineral
Water/N/Morristown, N.J.”**

In Jersey City, we dug four outhouses (6 to 9 feet across and 12 to 18 feet deep) from the top down plus a pit with the aid of the track hoe for a total of five in Jersey City. In turn, New York gave us a massive pit (8 feet across & 22 feet deep) that we dug from the top down and another one in a construction site that was just 4 feet or so after the track hoe cleared the basement slab. Mind you, three of these pits were dug in pouring rain under tarps and most were dug all day and

until past midnight with lights because we were trying to dig as many outhouses as possible. We had tried to be as efficient as possible and in the fancy yards had a system for cutting the sod, digging with a tripod (or two at once), bagging all the fill dirt for easy return into the hole, sifting the entire use layer for artifacts and smalls, and then packing the holes. We dug in two nice yards with pristine lawns or gardens and, at the end of the dig, left them as we found them or as the owners’ wanted them – including restoring a sculpture garden, laying new sod, and replanting bulbs plus bushes. As for the construction sites, we worked deals with the site supervisors to expose the sides of the privy all the way to the bottom and then we cracked them open.

We all contributed in various ways. Everybody brought different assets to the dig ranging from site permission, muscle and time, experience, ability to find the pits, equipment, historical knowledge and so on. Usually, for a Big Pick, the most valuable

contributions are the guys who get the permissions and the amount of time spent but every digathon has distinct variables.



What to choose? Jersey City finds at the Big Pick.

However, for our “all expenses paid” digathon, the way we did the Big Pick for the better bottles started with the obvious: there were seven guys involved and four guys who dug everyday. Dave and Winston ended up digging at least three days each (although not on the same days). Adam only dug for two and a half days but nailed the Manhattan permission digs. Marty and I got permission for Pat’s yard in Jersey City; also, Marty and Scott talked the construction site operator into letting us dig that last privy while they were running equipment which evened out the score in terms of the weight usually given for getting a permission. (As an aside, and with hindsight, I now realize that we did not account for Pia’s contributions adequately other than that Pia and Scott ended up with the pottery and excess boxed bottles for resale – this was rectified on future digs.) In the end, the key factor for distribution was the amount of days that a crew member was involved in the digathon.



New York City finds at the Big Pick. So many pontils!

Looking at our recoveries, all told we had found about 400 bottles of which we put about 100 into the Big Pick. We had previously given away many finds to the landowners (1830s and 40s black glass cylinders, embossed pontiled medicines, pontiled utilities and foods, colored mineral waters, plus all of the post-1870 bottles). We also brought a couple of boxes to the Big Pick containing another 75 bottles: unembossed pontils or smooth-based bottles of which we had four or more duplicates since we figured everyone would get an example if they wanted. Plus,

there were other relics such as transfer pot lids, carved pipes, bone artifacts, pottery, marbles and other smalls. As a group, we decided that there were more than a dozen bottles with real collectible value (i.e., \$300 or more) and then another 25 bottles with decent value (i.e., worth more than \$50-100); therefore, our solution was to give the guys who dug every day an extra initial pick which would even out the entire haul for everybody. Thus, the first round was for the core everyday diggers (i.e., picks 1 thru 4) then every round after that was for all (i.e., picks 1 thru 7). In this case, the weighting to determine picks depended on the number of desirable bottles recovered and because we could make a good distribution, by generally assessing value and assigning shares based upon contribution, everyone would end up with at least one terrific bottle. If you have fewer quality bottles then weighting the rounds still addresses potential inequities but that is why we always prefer to do the pick after accumulating a bunch of bottles on a digathon – so that no one gets shorted.



Mike's pick is next ... what will it be?

Frankly, in any large digging crew, someone is always distressed about where they fall in this picking scenario and how it is determined; however, there was consensus that if we had split finds at the end of every day or made it dependent on the particular outhouse that the distribution would not have been fair. For example, on the first day, we dug two pits and the pit Marty, Mike and I excavated was loaded with good bottles while the pit Scott, Dave and Winston dug was void. Another example was when Winston worked for an entire day, preparing the site for digging and helping remove 12 feet of the clay cap from the Houston Street privy without a single worthy discovery. Our collaborative system attempts to account for an individual's involvement in an even-handed manner. This avoids penalizing diggers who do a lot more work and then do not get a decent bottle or crew members who are not there every day and are left with junk. The goal is to reward everyone for their contribution proportionately and to remove jealousy or greed by communicating about the picking system. Another key to the crew's satisfaction is to make the Big Pick a good time, to explain the weighting and discuss how to make it fair for all, and, perhaps most importantly, to remember that you are not going to get rich digging for bottles.

In our Big Pick, everybody came away with at least a couple of awesome bottles and some excellent ones too. I vividly remember, as I prepared to leave Scott's apartment that good moods filled the air and everyone was delighted with their recoveries from this "all expenses paid" digathon. Not a dime was spent on hotels, food, tolls, rental cars, and equipment – our biggest "expense" was time. Looking around, I saw Marty and Mike holding cobalt, sided sodas; Winston grasping a Stoddard flask and a couple of iron-pontiled DeMott's Porter & Ale; Adam fondling the mug base, iron-pontiled, Morristown, N.J. soda; Dave clutching some colored New York mineral waters and a debossed pot lid; plus, Scott and Pia examining the redware Beale's Hair Restorative and an 1830s fancy cologne. Although I could not hear what they were saying to one another, I could tell by their faces that they were thrilled with their finds. In turn, during my traffic-laden drive to Washington, D.C., I repeatedly looked at my sparkling teal Huff's Linament and perfect olive green Hecking's Mineral Waters (both lying on the seat next to me), and day-dreamed a privy digger's delight: seven privies in seven days.

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

June 2-4 - Grantville (Hershey), Pennsylvania

The National Association of Milk Bottle Collectors 25th Annual Convention (Thurs. - Sat.) at the Holiday Inn, 604 Station Road (Exit 80 off I-81), Grantville, Pennsylvania. INFO: **Ralph S. Rivo**, 686 Franklin St., Alburtis, PA 18011-9578; PH: (610) 966-2536, Fax: (610) 966-0368; E-mail: thepurplecow@erols.com; Website: <http://www.milkroute.org>.

June 3-4 - Lumberton, North Carolina

The Robeson Antique Bottle Club Annual Show & Sale (Fri. 3 PM - 9 PM, Sat. 9 AM - 3 PM) at the Farmer's Market & Expo Center, Exit 14 off I-95, Lumberton, North Carolina. INFO: **Richard Stephens**, 1830 Riverside Blvd., Lumberton, NC 28358, PH: (910) 738-6075, E-mail: rhstep@nc.rr.com or **Paul Veleni**, PH: (910) 738-3074, E-mail: cbxley@nc.rr.com.

June 12 - Millville, New Jersey

Wheaton Village Antique Bottle Show (10 AM - 4 PM) at Wheaton Village, 1501 Glasstown Rd. (Rt. 55 South exit 26), Millville, NJ. INFO: **Doris Abeling**, PH: (856) 825-6800 Ext. 104, E-mail: dabeling@wheatonvillage.org, Website: www.wheatonvillage.org.

June 26 - Cheverly, Maryland

The Potomac Bottle Collectors Annual Show & Sale (9 AM to 3 PM) at the American Legion Post 108, 3608 Legion Drive, Cheverly, MD 20785. Info: **Jim Sears**, 4211 N. 2nd Rd., Apt. 1, Arlington, VA 22203 PH:(703) 243-2409, Email: searsjim@usa.net or **Andy Goldfrank**, PH:(202) 258-2389, Email: amg_sticky@yahoo.com

July 16-17 - Adamstown, Pennsylvania

The 4th Annual Shupp's Grove Bottle Festival (Sat. 6 AM - dark, Sun. 6 AM - dusk) at Shupp's Grove, Adamstown, Pennsylvania. INFO: **Jere Hambleton**, 12 S. Eastland Dr., Lancaster, Pennsylvania 17602, PH: (717) 393-5175, E-mail: jshdetector@webty.net or **Steve Guion**, PH: (717) 560-9480.