

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

October 2005

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Picnic September 24th

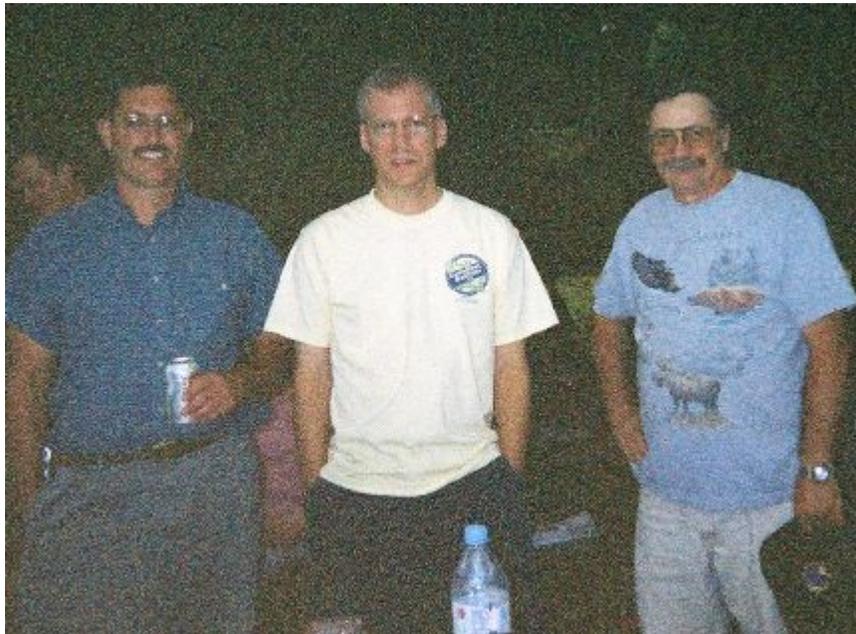
Please join us at 8 PM on Tuesday at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Bethesda, Maryland. This is our first regular meeting in four months, and we look forward to exchanging recent digging and collecting stories.

Future Meetings

We will meet on the last Tuesday of November, which is the 29th. However, we do not expect to meet in December due to the Christmas holiday.



Lynn and Jim are shown at our September picnic



John Krause, Mike Ciancosi, and Roland Longerbeam hang out at the picnic. Thank you to Lee Shipman for the picnic photos. Thank you to Roland for bringing the pie.

The Maryland Farmer-Distillers

By Jack Sullivan
Special to the *Potomac Pontil*

The production of whiskey before the American Revolution was insignificant. Rum was the drink of choice for our rebellious forefathers. But rum had to be imported from the Caribbean and was expensive. What lay at hand in the USA were abundant fields of rye, wheat and corn. Recognition spread that a good way to add value to a ton of grain was to turn it into gallons of whiskey. Often the farmer who grew the crop did the distilling. In an earlier article, I described George Washington's venture in Virginia. Less well known are the farmer-distillers of Maryland. Two of them – near neighbors – epitomize the type. They were Levi Price and Luther G. King.

The Levi Price Story

Levi Price was born on October 22, 1835, in Frederick County, Maryland, in what was then the Urbana District, near the present community of Hyattstown. His father was Elijah Price, a well-known farmer who himself had been born in that locale. His mother was Sarah Ann Wolfe. There is little information on Levi Price's early life and education but he soon showed signs of being a canny businessman.

In an article on the distiller in the Sept. 30, 1904, *The Citizen* newspaper of Frederick City, the anonymous author claimed that when Price launched himself into business in 1858 at the age of 23 he had only 93 cents to his name. His initial enterprise was to rehabilitate an old mill where he began a small flour milling operation. Its financial success apparently allowed him to woo and win Laura Virginia McElfresh of Hyattstown. Ms. McElfresh was related to an old and distinguished Virginia family with ties to Revolutionary War stalwarts. She would bear him 10 children – three sons and seven daughters.

Price's milling venture proved so successful that in 1867 he had the financial strength to build a three story high distillery at the point where Bennett Creek crosses Green Valley Road. He seems to have succeeded rapidly in the whiskey trade. The 1904 newspaper states: "Levi Price has undoubtedly engaged in a business which he is well suited for, and long years of experience and an accurate knowledge of grain has helped make him what he is." His picture, taken at the peak of his success, shows a steely-eyed resolve (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: From *The Citizen* Newspaper of September 30, 1904

Success Comes to Levi

In 1879 Price built the Green Valley Flouring Mills and began manufacturing a product he called "Fine Family Flour," a product that commanded a substantial regional market. For a time he operated a general merchandise store in nearby Clarksburg MD (Fig. 2). He also bought up surrounding acres, probably to grow sufficient grain for his distillery and mill. At his death he owned 525 acres of prime farm land. But it was whiskey that made Levi rich. His principal brand, called "Pure Rye Double Copper Distilled Whiskey," not only was popular locally but had a regional and eventually a national reputation.



Figure 2: Price's Clarksburg Store, Courtesy of Montgomery County Historical Society (MCHS)

Price's profitability may have resulted from some innovations he made in the distilling process itself. He recognized that any form of adulteration led to objectionable tastes common in the newly made, "raw" whiskey of his day. By using care in the cleanliness of his process and perhaps a "secret" method or two, he apparently was able to manufacture a product that had the taste and smoothness of an aged whiskey while being newly distilled. By eliminating most of the aging process, he saved money and was able to sell his whiskey for less than the competition.

In 1878, as sales rose and the production of his Maryland rye at an all-time high, Price talked the county into constructing a road that ever since has borne the name of his manufactory (Fig. 3). The road ran north to Ijamsville, MD where a railroad station was located and south to Damascus in Montgomery County. There it linked with other roads that led to Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. Buyers from as far north as New York City could take the B&O (now CSX) train to Ijamsville or Monrovia, MD and reach the farm distillery by horse and buggy.



Figure 3: Price's Distillery Road Sign

To cater to these travelers, Price converted a cottage that stood near the distillery on Green Valley Road into the distillery office and an overnight guest house. By the time the whiskey had been tasted and business transacted, it often was too late for buyers to return to the evening train. They were offered a place to stay at the rear of the cottage. They also ate at the Price family table.

The cottage (Fig. 4), which dates from the 1860s, still stands. It is known widely as “Thistle Hill” – perhaps because of its stained glass windows – and is on the Maryland historical register. It features an overly wide front door that may have been constructed to accommodate barrels of whiskey being rolled in and out. It currently is being restored as part of a new housing development called “Distillery Manor.” Near the cottage are the ruins of a barn that was used to house the horses needed to transport the whiskey barrels to the railroad stations. Still standing is Levi Price’s house (Fig.5), a large frame structure on the bluff overlooking the creek. Field stone slave quarters loom behind. The house has had a number of owners since Price’s death and was restored once before in the 1970s. As is evident from the photo, it is undergoing restoration again. The Levi Price house also is on the Maryland historical register.



Figure 4: “Thistle Hill” Cottage



Figure 5: The Levi Price House

Enter Reuben Lichtenstein

Although Price is reported to have invested heavily in his children’s education (the equivalent of \$300,000 today), perhaps compensating for his own lack of formal schooling, none of his

children appear to have involved themselves in the distillery operations. Preceded in death by his wife in 1902, Price died in 1909 at the age of 74. None of his progeny were willing or able to continue the business and it appears to have been sold quickly to another party – Reuben Lichtenstein.

Lichtenstein was not a farmer-distiller. Born in 1838 in Wolfersheim, Germany, he came to the U.S. at the age of 14, settling in Virginia. He joined the Confederate cause and served as an infantryman in the 19th Virginia, part of General Pickett’s Division in the Army Corps headed by General Longstreet. It may be assumed that Reuben first saw Maryland when the South invaded that state in 1863. He likely was a survivor of Pickett’s ill-fated charge at Gettysburg.

After the war Lichtenstein moved to Cumberland MD, married a local girl named Sarah Hirsch in 1868, and opened a liquor business that he headed the rest of his life. Like many other liquor distributors and dealers, he seems to have hankered to own a distillery. When the Price operation came on the market shortly after Levi Price’s death, Reuben purchased it, along with the Levi Price house which he sold shortly thereafter. Evidence is that Lichtenstein directed the distillery from afar, continuing to live in Cumberland. He hired a foreman, James Patrick Brown, known as “Gee,” to handle day-to-day operations. Brown (1881-1930) continued to run the operation until the onset of Prohibition, living in the Thistle Cottage. Lichtenstein also is reported to have rebuilt and expanded the distillery. His marketing materials (Fig. 6) named “Levi Price Pure Rye” as his flagship brand and cited it as the product of the Lichtenstein Co., Distillers, Cumberland.



Figure 6: Lichtenstein-Price Logo
From Barbara Edmonson’s *Historical Shotglasses*

Shown in Fig. 7 is a paper labeled Levi Price quart brand whiskey that bears Lichtenstein’s name. The label claims that the distillery was founded in 1840. This clearly is a fabrication since Price would only have been five years old in that year. The bottle resides in the collection of Maryland whiskey guru, Jim Bready.



Figure 7: Quart Levi Price Pure Rye Whiskey,
from the Collection of Jim Bready

The Fate of the Distillery: Two Versions

Although Reuben died at the age of 77 in 1916, before the onset of Prohibition, one or more of his five sons kept the operation going for the next four years. Here the picture grows murky about the fate of the distillery. Some locals say the family sold off its stored whiskey in the 1920s and ultimately the distillery was torn down.

A far more interesting fate is the one most widely believed in the area. When Prohibition ended, the Lichtensteins attempted to put the distillery back in operation. The move enraged “Drys” in nearby Hyattstown, already smarting from Repeal. They set a wagon full of straw on fire in front of the Thistle Cottage and rolled it downhill into the distillery. The distillery burned to the ground.

This is the account believed by local historian Edward Lee Knowles, who himself was a subsequent owner of the Levi Price house. To a reporter in 1978 he showed how the ground around the distillery site was full of charred wood, indicating a fire. A publication of the Friends of Historic Hyattstown. Called “Hyattstown Trails,” recounts the same fiery fate of the distillery. But even Knowles admitted that his search of local newspapers of that time revealed no mention of the distillery burning. Was it hushed up? And so the mystery continues.

Luther Green King

About three miles southeast from the Levi Price site, just inside the Montgomery County line, is where Luther Green King, our second farmer-distiller, cooked up his Maryland rye. Luther



Figure 8: Luthor King, Courtesy of MCHS

King (Fig. 8) was the son of John Duckett King, an early settler and large landowner in northern Montgomery County. The family gave its name to the community of King’s Valley and to Kingstead Road. John King, born in 1798, and his wife, Jemina Miles, had 13 children, most of whom lived to maturity and had large families of their own. Maryland historians assert that more than 10,000 people living today can trace their ancestry to this couple.

Born in 1825, Luther was the fifth of six sons. Upon his father’s death in 1858, he inherited an equal share in his father’s 217 acres, enough to begin a small farm. John King’s will also remanded to him and his brothers ownership of two slaves. Distilling may have been a natural step for Luther since he had manpower at his disposal and could easily buy rye grain from nearby growers. Thus he built the only distillery ever known to exist in Montgomery County. The site was near Clarksburg on Burnt Hill Road just off Price Distillery Road.

“Trouble Enough Indeed”

The distillery (Fig. 9) was a three story structure, with an office for making sales and a loading dock where horse-drawn wagons could carry away barrels of whiskey. It was a modest operation, probably worked in close conjunction with farming interests. The clientele likely was a local one. Collectors of Maryland whiskeys aver that they do not know of a labeled King-made whiskey bottle or jug. This suggests that Luther sold his stock to saloon-keepers who doled it out a drink at a time or filled containers brought in by their customers. Nonetheless, Maryland

rye was the drink of choice for most of King’s neighbors and trade probably was brisk. From time to time, King may even have found himself in competition with his close neighbor, Levi Price.



Figure 9: King’s Distillery, Courtesy of MCHS

For much of his distilling career, King lived in a small log cabin near the business. His house was three bays by one bay with a small front porch and a foundation of local fieldstone. As he prospered financially, he built a much larger log structure, a house he named “Trouble Enough Indeed.” We can speculate that this was a reference to the frequency with which Luther King was a widower. After his first wife, Tabitha Browning, whom he married in 1848, died, he married Mary Howe in 1873. With her death a few years later, he married again in 1899 when he was 74. Wife No. 3 was a much younger woman and his great-niece, Mary L. King. It was for her he built the new house. Luther and Mary had one child.

Besides whiskey the great passion in Luther King’s life was music. He lived at a time when every community prided itself on its brass band. Nearby Hyattstown bragged that its ensemble was “not to be excelled by any band in the county.” As a younger man Luther had learned to play the trombone and was a member of the Clarksburg Band. Subsequently he formed a musical group of his own, called the Kings Valley Band. It included at least six other members of the King family. A photo of the band taken in the early 1900s (Fig. 10), shows Luther, back row, fifth from left, clearly its oldest member.



Figure 11: King’s Valley Band, Courtesy of MCHS

Luther King's Legacy

The spacious new home was not the only sign of King's growing prosperity. He was also buying land for farming purposes and came to own 176 acres, 70 of it fertile farm land. His wealth primarily was generated by the distillery. At his death in 1909, King left a substantial estate. The principal item was 49,000 gallons of whiskey in bond – worth a fortune – representing five years of product (1904-1909). Also in his estate were 19 new whiskey barrels, 50 bushels of malt, and 90 bushels of rye. He left "Trouble Enough Indeed" to his widow, Mary, who later remarried. He willed the land on which the distillery sat to his brother John and the distillery itself to his grandson, John R. Lewis.

With Luther King's passing, whiskey production appears to have ceased almost immediately. We can speculate that the grandson was unwilling or unable to continue the operation. Today the distillery site is covered over with scrub trees, vines



Figure 11: The Distillery Site Today

and weeds, at the southeastern edge of Little Bennett Regional Park. The only indication that it ever existed is a historical marker erected beside Burnt Hill Road (Fig. 11), not far from the intersection of Price Distillery Road.

The farmer-distiller clearly was a creature of the 18th and 19th Centuries. Even if the Price and King families had been interested in continuing to make whiskey after the deaths of the distillery founders, their production would have been short-lived through the coming of Prohibition

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

November 6 – Elkton, Maryland

Tri-State Bottle Collectors and Diggers Club 33rd Annual Show & Sale, (9 AM to 3 PM), at the Singerly Fire Hall, Routes 279 & 213 (I-95 exit 109A), Elkton, MD. Info: **Dave Brown**, PH: (302) 738-9960.

November 13 – Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Pittsburgh Antique Bottle Club's Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM – 2 PM, early admission 7 AM) at the Ice Garden, Route 51 North (I-70 exit 46B), Rostraver Twp., Pennsylvania. Info: **Bob DeCroo**, 694 Fayette City Rd., Fayette City, Pennsylvania 15438, PH: (724) 326-8741 or **Jay Hawkins**, 1280 Mt. Pleasant Rd., West Newton, PA 15089, PH: (724) 872-6013.

November 20 – Greensboro, North Carolina

The 4th Annual Greensboro Antique Bottle, Insulator & Collectibles Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM, Adm. \$1; Dealer setup 6-9 AM, early buyers 7:30 AM) at the Farmer's' Curb Market, 501 Yanceyville St., Greensboro, North Carolina. Info: **Reggie Lynch**, P.O. Box 13736, Durham, NC 27709; PH: (919) 789-4545; Website: www.antiquebottles.com/greensboro.

November 27 – Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Forks of the Delaware Bottle Collectors Association's 32nd Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM – 3 PM, early admission 7:30 AM) at Bethlehem Catholic High School, Madison & Dewberry Ave., Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Info: **Bill Hegedus**, 20 Cambridge Pl., Catasauqua, PA 18032, PH: (610) 264-5945.

March 5, 2006 Baltimore, Maryland

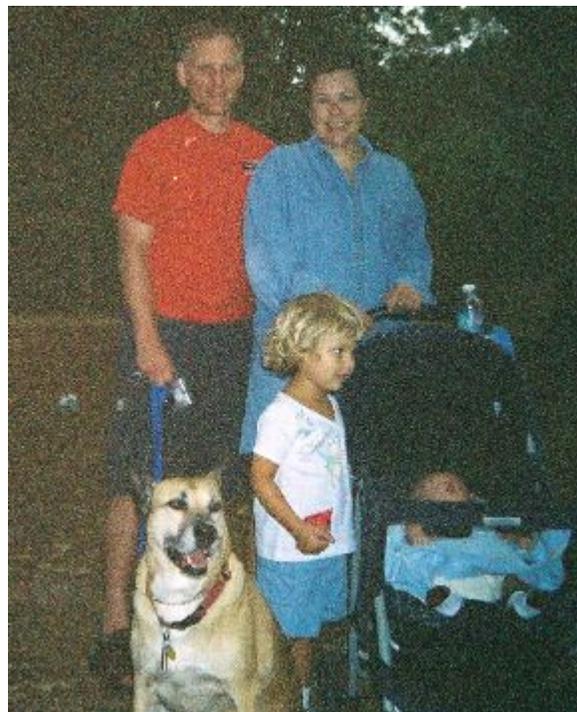
Baltimore Antique Bottle Club 26th Annual Show & Sale, (8 AM to 3 PM), at the Physical Education Center, Essex Campus Community College, 7201 Rossville Blvd, Baltimore, MD. Info: **Bob Ford**, PH: (410) 531-9459, email: bottles@comcast.net



Al and Bill Steidel show their wares at the Richmond Bottle Show.



Libby Croker displayed glass paperweights at Richmond.



Al Miller and family enjoy our September picnic