

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

November 2005

In this issue:

Can You Imagine a Brooklyn Privy with the Legendary Fireman Jack? by Marty Homola.....page 2
Upcoming Area Bottle Shows.....page 6

Meeting November 29th

Please join us at 8 PM on Tuesday at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Bethesda, Maryland.

Future Meetings

We will NOT meet in December due to the Christmas holiday. After this month, the next meetings will be January 31 and February 28.

Announcements

We are still selling copies of our price and rarity guide for Washington, DC bottles. See page 6 for more information.

The **Wilson House** opened a new exhibit on October 27 in partnership with the Brewmaster's Castle. "*No Temperance in It: Woodrow Wilson, Prohibition, and Brewing in Washington D.C., 1913-1956* examines Wilson's views on temperance vs. prohibition through the lens of the brewing industry in Washington, D.C. For more information see the Wilson House web site at www.woodrowwilsonhouse.org and the Brewmaster's Castle site at www.heurichhouse.org.

Club member **Mike Cianciosi** has an excellent web site that includes much information on antique bottles from Washington, DC and northern Virginia. Please see members.cox.net/chosi/bottles/.

We need club officers for 2006. If you or any member you know would be willing to serve as president, vice president, secretary, or treasurer of the Potomac Bottle Collectors, please let us know at the November meeting. If you are unable to attend the meeting, please send any information about potential officers to Jim Sears.

We are looking forward to the **Baltimore Antique Bottle Club's March 5, 2006 show**. Dealers should remember to send in their table reservations by December 15. There is a long waiting list, and we expect the renewal cut-off to be strictly enforced.

The Dulles Conference & Expo Center will host an April 2006 show focusing on Civil War artifacts. The organizers would like to include antique bottles in this show and have offered to provide dealer spaces at a special low rate. Contact Andy Goldfrank if you might be interested in participating.



Jack Fortmeyer, Marty Homola, Scott Jordan, Mike Saindon pose with their finds from a Brooklyn privy. See the story of this dig beginning on page 2.

Can You Imagine Digging a Brooklyn Privy with the Legendary Fireman Jack?

By Marty Homola

It had been a long hot summer in Colorado with just a few good bottle digs and only a couple of decent finds. So when I got a call from one of my buddies in New York, Scott Jordan, inviting me and Mike Saindon to join him and Andy Goldfrank, for a week-long “big city” dig, there was no need for Scott to ask twice. And to top off the invitation, “Fireman Jack” Fortmeyer, one of the best-known bottle diggers in the New York area was going to be part of the digging crew. Just the thought of digging with these New York bottle digging legends had my head dancing in anticipation of the good times ahead.

The weeks went by slowly, but the day finally came to leave for the East Coast. The plan was to fly to Washington, DC where we would rent a truck, stop by Andy’s house, load up with his digging equipment, and head to New York. By the time we finally arrived it was getting late and we decided to spend the night with Andy and his wife Joan (who cooked us one heck of a meal). The next morning, we were up at the crack of dawn ready to head to the Big Apple. After giving us travel instructions (on thirteen different maps) and packing the truck with his digging equipment, Andy pointed us out of his alley in the direction of New York City and wished us luck. We managed to get lost only twice, and spent almost fifty dollars in tolls, but Mike and I finally found our way to Astoria, New York (where Scott’s house or, better put, museum is located) by late afternoon.

After looking at all of Scott’s bottles and digging-related artwork, eating dinner and again talking bottles half of the night, we were pumped to dig. It was a long hot night (as we are Colorado boys not used to the humidity), and I was awake a bunch until the sun finally came up. Eventually we were on our way to Jack’s house in Brooklyn, which is a long drive through the city, dodging all the speeding cars with their horns blowing. Mike made some nifty NASCAR moves to get through the traffic, but we made it safely to our destination. We were greeted at the door by this tall, John Wayne look alike; I thought to myself, this had to be Fireman Jack. Next to him at the door was his understanding wife Doris. Following all of the introductions, Jack showed us a few of his colored New York soda bottles and, in particular, his neat cream sodas that adorned the windows in his newly restored 1840s house. It appeared to us (and was confirmed later by Scott and Andy since they had never even seen pieces, let alone whole examples of many of these cream sodas), that Jack’s cream soda collection is one of the most complete around.

It was getting late in the morning (after checking out Jack’s bottles), and our need to go digging was getting sky high, so the four of us piled into the truck and headed over to a potential dig. A few weeks before, Jack had spotted a double-wide, 1840s house being renovated on Degraw Street in Brooklyn – he thought getting permission would not be a problem. Now if you ask me, Jack is the master of getting permissions (and there were some pretty experienced diggers in this digging crew). He just unloads his thick Brooklyn accent which is combined with his status as a retired New York City fireman, historic maps of the site, and

pictures of previous digs – everybody is like putty in his hands. At the Degraw Street site it was no exception: Jack walked in, the project manager instantly remembered “Fireman Jack” (from another renovation where the Brooklyn boys had dug), and *in less than 25 words* with the owner of the house (who was their inspecting the work), Jack had obtained permission to excavate the privy.



With our probes in hand, we started probing toward the back of the lot which was rather large because the house was the width of two buildings. Nonetheless, within a few minutes, Mike and Jack were hitting the rock privy walls about two feet down and smack in the back center of the yard. Right away we started shoveling dirt in order to find the perimeter of the pit. After all the walls were found, it was clear that we had uncovered an oval rock-lined pit about eight feet by seven feet.

However, when we dug down about three feet, we stopped and realized that we had a problem. Hanging over the hole was a massive obstacle that we would have to contend with before we could go any deeper: an old steel clothesline tower; about twenty feet high, with a big ball of cement and rock at the base to keep it stable in the ground. Upon asking the general contractor, not only did we get permission to remove it, we were asked to use it as fill in the hole. Our problem was solved . . . sort of, as we now had to get rid of the tower. Digging around the ball of cement, Scott and Mike eventually got the tower pushed over. At that point, we all took turns smacking the sledgehammer on the cement and rock base until it was all busted up. Then we borrowed a Sawzall from the construction crew and cut the metal clothesline tower into three pieces to be used later for fill. Now it was time to get back to digging the privy.



In less than 10 minutes, we had set up our tripod with a large pulley and 20-foot length of thick hemp rope. All of the diggers on this crew agree that a tripod is a must (especially for us “older” diggers but even the “younger” ones) because it makes the job of digging these deep pits a breeze. The tripod that we designed and built is portable and breaks down into five foot sections for easy hauling in car or truck; in addition, the large diameter roofer’s pulley floats from a central pin and makes the five gallon buckets of dirt an easy pull out of the pit.



Getting to work, with me taking the first shift of pulling the rope, Scott, Jack and Mike were rapidly filling the buckets. We went through about six feet of privy fill and debris in no time. At about that level, we started to hit a few smooth base bottles. As we got deeper, Jack was filling the buckets down in the hole, I was pulling them to the surface, and Mike and Scott were emptying them on the ground away from the hole. Eventually, we all rotated our role switching from digging to pulling to dumping. At about the eight-foot level our first intact pontiled bottles appeared in the ashy fill mix that had lots of pottery shards, relics and broken glass.

Now that the reason for this trip was here, it was time for the Colorado boys (as Scott and Andy like to call us) to jump in the hole and slow the pace down a little. After we got into the hole, Scott threw us a couple of “digging sticks” so that we would not damage any of the fragile bottles. As usual as it sounds, this is a digging tool that Scott came up with a few years ago. It is used when you reach the bottle layer in a privy like you might do with a three-finger steel hand cultivator; however, this tool prevents scratches and avoids breaking any fragile bottles. This may seem strange – and I know, because it sounded funny to me too the first time Scott and Andy would not even let us dig in the nightsoil layer until we used a stick – and took some time to get used too, but believe me you can dig a lot faster and safer with the “digging stick.” What is the wonder tool? No more than a broom handle sharpened on one end. You can move four or six inches of layer at a time with the digging stick, picking out the big artifacts and intact bottles. The relics literally appear with the stick, as you use it in a rowing motion with one hand near the top and the other near the point, almost like corks floating to the surface in water. Then a digger shovels the dug fluff into a bucket to be pulled out of the hole (and later sifted for smalls).

Working our way though the glass and pottery shards carefully with the digging stick, Mike and I popped out in rapid succession a neat stamped German squarish stoneware ale bottle, a crisp cathedral pickle with a graphite pontil, and a rare aqua pontil embossed “Leroy’s For The Hair/ Paris.” Mike said with a big smile: “We’re in the pontils!” Jack and Scott were getting anxious for their turn in the hole, so in they came. It did not take long for them to find some nice bottles and pottery. Jack dug up an intact 1850s Bennington-style glazed pitcher. In turn, Scott dug a crisp pontiled umbrella ink and a rectangular pontiled aqua bottle that – upon Scott’s careful use of the back side of his glove to wipe off the dirt – was also embossed Leroy’s For The Hair. The reason for wiping the bottle with the back side of the glove is to use the cleanest side of the glove (with no dirt imbedded in it from all the digging) and to prevent scratching the glass.



The “Colorado boys” hold up a pontiled bottle and a German stoneware ale. A close-up of the stoneware bottle is above.



Scott Jordan holds up Bennington-glazed teapot dug by “Fireman Jack” Fortmeyer. Close-up of teapot is at top of next page.



As we rotated shifts a couple more times, we were recovering dozens of bottles. This pit was an intense and fun dig because there was so much in it. The only problem (if you can call it that) was that there was so much in the trash layer many of the bottles were broken from being tossed on top of each other back in the 1850s and 1860s – although there were lots of intact bottles and other nice relics. At the 13-foot level we were forced to quit that day, earlier than we had thought, and before we could dig the privy out all the way to the bottom. Apparently, the construction crew wanted to lock-up the site at 4 o'clock – the rest of the privy would have to wait for tomorrow. We covered the hole with plywood (to prevent folks from falling in) and went off to a nice meal in Astoria at the local Greek diner.



The next morning we met Jack at the site and decided that he should finish the last two or three feet of the outhouse. So down the ladder he went; Jack soon was moving the rich night soil and finding bottle after bottle. There were patent whiskeys, pontiled medicine, sealed wine bottles and much more. Bottles were everywhere in the black dirt, so Jack was sending them up in the bucket with the fluff. In last corner, as I peered into the hole, I saw Jack's digging stick reveal a cool 6-sided pontiled cathedral pepper sauce along with another squarish or bullet-shaped stoneware mineral water from Germany. The jug was the last intact relic in the hole. We made Jack clean every last bit of privy dirt out of the hole and, soon enough, the entire outhouse floor at

the bottom of this 15-foot stone-lined shaft was now fully exposed for the first time in over one hundred and sixty five years. Jack commented that this was the first time that he had ever taken out every bit of dirt from a hole in his many years of digging. Scott and Andy swear by this digging approach because they know you might miss good finds if you do not dig these all the way out – they emphasized this by telling us about the time they found a gorgeous yellow, pontiled umbrella ink in the very last bit of dirt in a privy that had not contained any other good bottles.



Now it was time to fill in the fifteen-foot deep hole but this was no ordinary fill-in. Scott and Andy always want to sift the entirety of the night soil in every pit they dig to find missed artifacts, and this time we caved in to their desires although we knew it would take a long time to fill the hole this way. Mike, Jack and I figured that we could look for the cistern or a second privy while they took their time. To accomplish this, we hung the sifting screen from the tripod over the hole thus allowing us to sift all of the dirt back down the hole (and *slowly* fill the pit). Andy did show up from Washington, just in time to help Scott with the sifting. Together they moved through the night soil surprisingly fast, finding a bunch of stuff in the sifter: small bottles, large cents and other coins, marbles, doll parts, glass and metal buttons, glass seals, and loads of pottery shards. Scott takes all of the shards home and pieces back together much of the pottery and uses the rest for his artifact artwork.



As the privy was being filled, Mike was probing and found the cistern to the house. We realized that we were digging a hole alongside rather than inside the cistern; therefore, we punched a hole through the rock wall and to our surprise there was no dirt as it was one big empty cavern. Andy crawled through the tight opening and slid down into the cylinder to check it out. Soon he gave us the word that it was empty without even a glass shard but that he was stuck as the base was much wider than the top and the walls sloped inward making it (according to him) impossible to climb out of the cistern. Realizing that Andy had spent too much time of late behind a desk, Mike and I hauled him out of the hole. As we patched up the side of the cistern and covered the hole, we also found the overflow for the cistern. This is often found in row house backyards and allows a cistern that is full to allow overflow of water into a pit that will drain into the soil. This overflow pit was rock lined, about four feet across and six feet deep, but had nothing inside so we covered it back over. Sadly, this yard yielded no more so we filled all the holes, raked the ground smooth, loaded the equipment in the truck along with five boxes of bottles, thanked the boss for letting us dig and told him we would be back tomorrow to give him and the owner a few of the finds.

Mike and I headed to the store to get some steaks for a barbecue at Jack's while Andy, Jack and Scott went back to get ready for dinner and clean up a bit. Over the next few hours in the backyard of Jack's 1840s row house, we ate a great meal (thanks to Jack's grill skills and Doris' salad and appetizer course), talked about past digs non-stop, and of course split up our treasures. We piled the bottles on a mound of dirt leftover from the privy that Jack and his son Eric had dug in the backyard earlier in the year; it kind of looked like a miniature ancient pyramid loaded with artifacts. The dirt pile contained aqua embossed pontils (such as six "Barry's Tricopherous for the Hair," three "Leroy's for the Hair," and a "Mrs. S.A Allen's World Hair Balsam"); a number of wine bottles with different seals; a small pile of embossed but clear French colognes ("Perine Guyot" and "Paris"); pontiled umbrella inks; different kinds of cathedral pickles, pepper sauces and utilities; German stoneware mineral waters; pontiled whiskeys, aqua early-1860s New York

sodas; white glazed potlids and mustards (including a red transfer Roussel's Shaving Cream); and lots of other utilities, wines, champagnes, and medicines. We also found some neat ceramics such as a Bennington-style teapot in great shape and a slip-glazed, redware plate that says "Lemon Pie."



After much negotiating, we decided to draw numbers so everyone would have a good pick. The hat was passed around and everyone blindly chose a folded piece of paper upon which a number had been written. That lucky fireman, of course, got first pick – and it should be that way since had gotten the permission, been such a great guy to dig with, and even offered his backyard as our restaurant. Seriously, it was a privilege to dig with Fireman Jack and learn from him every step of the way. Plus, there were about eighty or so bottles and pottery with lots of pontils to go around. This split was more than fair with everyone getting a few good bottles and some nice relics. Over all, this was one of the best digs that I have ever been on – not because there were lots of great bottles – but because of the digging technology that we all brought with us and shared on this dig. This dig was the ultimate lesson on how to dig a privy the right way and extract all that the outhouse had to give, plus making it easy, safe and another fun dig for the New York boys Andy Goldfrank and Scott Jordan, Fireman Jack Fortmeyer, and the Colorado boys Mike Saindon and Marty Homola.



Special thanks to all of the New York boys for a great time – I hope we can all dig together real soon.

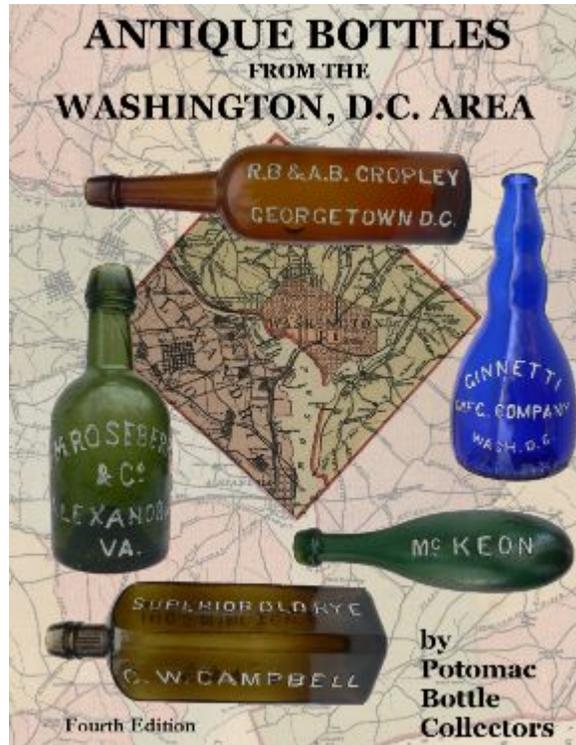
Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

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



Our book has been selling well, particularly thanks to Art Bentley's internet sales. At the October meeting Richard Lilienthal reported that 63 copies remained to be sold. These are available for \$20 at club meetings or for \$23.85 including shipping from Andy Goldfrank at 1421 Columbia St., NW, Washington, DC 20001-3315. We anticipate that the book will remain available at least through the March 2006 Baltimore show, but we could run out sooner if demand remains strong. The club has no plans to reprint the book, and we encourage members to get copies soon.

Well-known cure collector **John Wolf** wrote to the club after receiving his copy of our book. John is planning a book of his own on cure bottles, and he would appreciate historical information or copies of advertisements for any of our local cures. John also seeks cure bottles for his collection. He can use any embossed Washington, DC area cure bottle that has an original label or box except for the small Criswell's cure. He also seeks the following cures listed in our book even without labels:

- #16) ELIXER BABEK CURES MALARIA CHILLS & FEVERS (in aqua)
- #20) DR. STEPHEN'S ASTHMA CURE H.S. BARKER SOLE PROPRIETER, ALEXANDRIA VA
- #169) HARPER'S CUFORHEDAKE BRAIN FOOD, WASHINGTON, DC (6 inch size in aqua)
- #171) ROBT. N. HARPER CUFORHEDAKE WASHINGTON DC

Anyone with cure bottles or information is encouraged to bring items to John Wolf at the Baltimore show in March or contact him directly at
1186 Latchwood Ave.,
Dayton, Ohio 45405
(937) 275-1617
ohcures@yahoo.com