

# The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

## May 2007

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### Meeting May 29th at 8:00 PM

Andy Goldfrank will talk about marbles he has dug. Other club members are encouraged to bring in any antique marbles they may have.

**Future Meetings:** We will meet at 8 PM on the last Tuesday of the month unless otherwise announced. The next meeting will be on **June 26<sup>th</sup>**.



The club considers the new layout of our web site ([www.potomacbottlecollectors.org](http://www.potomacbottlecollectors.org)) at the April meeting



Steve Charing waxes poetic about a cheap milk bottle.

## Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

### MAY 31-JUNE 2 - GRANTVILLE (HERSHEY), PENNSYLVANIA

The National Association of Milk Bottle Collectors' 27th Annual Convention (Fri.-Sun.) at the Holiday Inn in Grantville (Hershey, Pennsylvania). Commemorating the era of milk bottles and other related collectibles, as well as the milkman and their delivery vehicles. Members will transform the hotel into a weekend of nostalgia packed with buying, selling and trading. INFO: **NAMBC**, 18 Pond Place, Cos Cob, CT 06807, PH: (203) 869-8411 or [www.nambconline.org](http://www.nambconline.org).

### JUNE 1- 2 - LUMBERTON, NORTH CAROLINA

The Robeson Antique Bottle Club Annual Bottle, Coin & Collectible Show & Sale (Fri. 3 - 9 PM; Sat. 9 AM - 1 PM) at the Expo and Farmer's Market, 1027 US 74 East, Lumberton North Carolina. INFO: **MITCHELL McCORMICK**, PH: (910) 628-6245 or **BRET LEE**, E-mail: [dex@intrstar.net](mailto:dex@intrstar.net)

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](mailto:searsjim@usa.net), PH: 301/588-2174) & Andy Goldfrank (email: [amg\\_sticky@yahoo.com](mailto:amg_sticky@yahoo.com), PH: 202/588-0543)  
Web Site: [www.potomacbottlecollectors.org](http://www.potomacbottlecollectors.org) Maintained by Peter Rydquist: [pehraug@aol.com](mailto:pehraug@aol.com)

### JULY 21-22 - ADAMSTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

The 6th Annual Shupp's Grove Bottle Festival (Sat. & Sun. 6 AM to dark, Fri. Dealer Set-up 3 PM followed by Early Buyers 5 PM) at Shupp's Grove in Adamstown, Pennsylvania. INFO: **STEVE GUION**, E-mail: [sguion124@comcast.net](mailto:sguion124@comcast.net) or **JERE HAMBLETON**, E-mail: [jshdetector@webtv.net](mailto:jshdetector@webtv.net) or PH: (717) 393-5175.

### SEPTEMBER 9 - LEWES, DELAWARE

The Delmarva Antique Bottle Club's 15th Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM, Early Buyers 7:30 AM) at the Cape Henlopen High School, Lewes, Delaware. INFO: **PETER BEAMAN**, 28947 Lewes Georgetown Hwy., Lewes, DE 19958; PH: (302) 684-5055 or E-mail: [oldngnu@comcast.net](mailto:oldngnu@comcast.net).

### SEPTEMBER 16 - WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA

Apple Valley Bottle Collectors Club, Inc.'s 33rd Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM, Adm. \$3, 65+ free, Early Adm. 7:30 AM, \$10) at the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, Family Life Center, 1300 Opequon Ave. (just off Pleasant Valley Rd.), Winchester, Virginia. Over 40 dealers in antique bottles, milks, Coca-Cola, White House vinegar, postcards, table top collectibles, etc. INFO: **RICHARD M. VENSKOSKE**, 4496 Martinsburg Pike, Clear Brook, VA 22624, PH: (540) 247-4429.

### OCTOBER 6 - RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

The Richmond Area Bottle Collectors Association's 36th Annual Show & Sale (9 AM - 3 PM, Early Buyers 7:30 AM) at the Showplace Annex, 3002 Mechanicsville Tpk, Richmond, Virginia. INFO: **MARVIN CROKER**, PH: (804) 275-1101 or **ED FAULKNER**, PH: (804) 739-2951 or E-mail: [faulkner@antiquebottles.com](mailto:faulkner@antiquebottles.com).

# DC Bottle Detective

By Mike Cianciosi

Below are some shards from Washington, DC bottles. The puzzle is to figure out what bottle each shard came from. Answers will be in next month's newsletter.



# A Canny Yankee in a Rebel Town

By Jack Sullivan  
Special to the Potomac Pontil

As Alexandria, a Virginia town with strong Confederate sympathies, suffered under Union occupation during the Civil War, a youthful Yankee from New Jersey arrived in 1862 to sell whiskey to the thirsty troops. Five years later he would instigate a historic Supreme Court case against local officials. Despite this problematic start, he became Alexandria's mayor and a leading citizen while founding a liquor business that prospered until the advent of Prohibition. His name was Emanuel Ethelbert (he preferred "E.E.") Downham, seen here in maturity (**Fig. 1**).



E. E. DOWNHAM,

Fig. 1: Portrait of E.E. Downham

Downham is a fairly common English name, although our E.E. may also have had some German ancestry. Census records indicate that a substantial number of American Downhams were in the liquor business and his father, a native born American, likely was among them. Certainly E.E. Downham, whose natal year was 1839, was versed in the whiskey trade when he arrived in Alexandria at the tender age of 23 to set up shop amidst Southern sympathizers.

His promise as an "up-and-comer" must have been evident very early. In 1865, despite being a Northerner, he married Sarah Miranda Price, the daughter of George Price, a leading Alexandria merchant. The ceremony took place at the

Price mansion that stood at the northeast corner of Fairfax and Cameron Streets. The couple would be married for 56 years and produce four sons and a daughter: Henry, (1868), Francis, known as Frank (1870), Horace (1874), Robert (1876), and Maude (1878).

Downham's early business locations were on the lower end of Alexandria's King Street. Whether he truly was a distiller, making whiskey directly from grain on his premises, is open to question. More likely he was a "rectifier," someone who bought raw whiskey or grain alcohol from others, refined it, mixed it to taste, added color and flavor, bottled and labeled it. The resulting liquor was sold at both wholesale and retail. E.E. and his early partner, Henry Green, also dealt in beer and wine.

In 1867, in the wake of the Civil War, the Alexandria City Council, seeking to raise additional revenues, put a series of taxes on alcoholic beverages imported into the City from outside the state, thus discriminating in favor of Virginia-made products. When the young upstart Downham refused to pay the tax, the Alexandria City Council sued him and won. He appealed lower court decisions all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. At issue was an early test of the Interstate Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution. While the Court refused on a technicality to rule in favor of Downham, it asserted its right to hear the case, disputed by Alexandria, and claimed jurisdiction to overturn local taxes that violated the Commerce Clause. Thus *Downham v. Alexandria* (1869) became an important legal precedent, frequently cited in cases up to the present day.

Despite losing his suit against the City, Downham's political clout in Alexandria was growing. In 1868 Federal authorities issued a controversial decree that all distillers and rectifiers should purchase a standard hydrometer, a device called the Tice Meter, to measure the alcohol content of their products. (Mark Twain called it "a ten million dollar swindle.") Downham was one of a handful of liquor merchants who complied. When it was discovered that the Tice Meter often was highly inaccurate, the IRS rescinded the requirement. Downham induced his congressman in 1873 to introduce a special claims bill for \$650 to repay him its cost (**Fig. 2**). Although the bill died in committee, its introduction alone testified to his influence.

The following year, 1874, Downham sought and won election from Alexandria's Third Ward to the same City Council he had sued seven years earlier. He served there for two terms before seeking office on the Board of Aldermen and was elected there for five two-year terms. Following the sudden death of Mayor Smoot by heart attack at Christmas 1887, the Board met to select an interim mayor from among their number. On the sixth ballot, Downham was chosen. He was reelected in his own right in 1890, serving a total of four years, and then permanently retired from public office.

Throughout this period Downham continued his business in downtown Alexandria, beginning at 9 King Street and by 1881 moving to 13 King Street. Shown here is an 1885 ad with the latter address from E.E. Downham & Co. Wholesale Liquor Dealers. (**Fig. 3**). Four years later the firm moved to 107 King. It featured a menu of whiskey brands, among them was

**Printer's No., 2717.**  
**H. R. 3410.**

42<sup>ND</sup> CONGRESS,  
 3<sup>D</sup> SESSION.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

JANUARY 13, 1873.

Read twice, referred to the Committee of Claims, and ordered to be printed.

Mr. BRAXTON, on leave, introduced the following bill:

**A BILL**

For the relief of E. E. Downham, of Alexandria, Virginia.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*  
 2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*  
 3 That the Secretary of the Treasury is hereby authorized and  
 4 directed to pay, out of any money in the Treasury not other-  
 5 wise appropriated, the sum of six hundred and fifty dollars  
 6 to E. E. Downham, of Alexandria, Virginia, the amount  
 7 paid by him for a Tice meter under direction of the Internal  
 8 Revenue Department.

Fig. 2: Downham's Claims Bill

E. E. DOWNHAM,

H. GREEN.

E. E. DOWNHAM & CO.,

WHOLESALE

LIQUOR DEALERS,

No. 13 KING STREET,

ALEXANDRIA, VA.

Fig. 3: 1883 Ad for the Downham Firm

“Old Mansion,” which used an illustration of Mount Vernon on the label and on back-of-the-bar decanters (Fig. 4). Others were “Old Dominion Family Rye,” “Crystal Maize-Straight,” “Old King Corn,” “Mountain Corn” and “Old Triple XXX Maryland Whiskey” (Fig. 5). The flagship brand was “Belle Haven Rye,” with a well-designed label featuring heads of grain. (Fig. 6).



Fig. 4: Belle Haven “Mount Vernon” Decanter (at left)  
 Fig. 5: Maryland Triple XXX Whiskey Bottle (at right)  
 Fig. 6: Belle Haven Rye bottle

Shown here is a giveaway corkscrew with the slogan, “Pull for Downham Whiskey,” (Fig. 7). The instrument also cited prices. The cheapest drink was Old King Corn at \$2 a gallon. Mountain Corn was \$2.50 and Crystal Maize, \$3.50 a gallon. Old Mansion sold for \$1 a quart or \$11 for a case of 12. Downham promised to pay the freight on any order over \$2.50.

The whiskey business proved lucrative and Downham moved his family into a home at 411 Washington Street, the city’s most fashionable. It was a double house and he appears to have owned both sides (Fig. 8). His residence is the one with the white door.





Fig. 7: Downham Corkscrew



Fig. 8: The Downham Home

With time, E.E. Downham brought sons Robert and Henry into the business as he progressively became involved in other activities. In 1899, for example, he participated in a scheme to honor George Washington in Alexandria with a giant equestrian statue. The project required raising money around the entire United States. Citizens elsewhere apparently were not convinced of its need and the statue was never built.

In 1907 Downham involved himself in another grandiose project. He became an officer in an organization that aimed to turn Alexandria's Mount Vernon Avenue into "an Apian Way and a Westminster Abbey combined." It called for the street to be sectioned by blocks representing each State in the Union. The States thus honored, in turn, would finance buildings on their blocks that would feature their agricultural and manufactured products as well as state heroes. Hugely dependent on outside funding, once again Downham and his Alexandria booster friends got nowhere.

By 1915 E.E. Downham's principal occupation was president of the German Co-Operative Building Association, a building and loan organization at 615 King Street. The

Association boasted of its founding in 1868 and of being "thoroughly mutual and cooperative in its workings." In 1917, despite his German connections, he was chosen as one of three Alexandrians serving on the local draft board for World War I. Meanwhile, with E.E.'s financial backing, son Robert bought the Lee-Fendall mansion, the birthplace of Confederate General Lee, which still stands as a major Alexandria tourist attraction. Robert and Henry Downham by now were responsible for the day by day operations of the liquor business. By 1915 they had moved the company to 1229 King Street.

In 1918, Henry Downham died at age 50, leaving a grieving mother and father. In 1920 National Prohibition closed down E.E. Downham & Co. forever. Downham himself died a year later at his Washington Street home, age 82. His obituary in the local newspaper stated that his "long life of usefulness entitled him to the esteem and affection" of all Alexandria citizens.

During Prohibition, with liquor banned, his son Robert turned to a new business as a clothier, hatter and haberdasher to the town. Robert's enterprise does not appear to have succeeded and several years later he was recorded working as a clerk in another store. In 1936 the Lee-Fendall house was sold to John L. Lewis, the famous head of the United Mine Workers. In 1937 E.E.'s wife, Sarah, died of the complications of old age at 92, still living at the family's Washington Street address. Thus ended the saga of a Yankee whiskey peddler who won the heart of a Southern belle and eventually a Southern town.

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NOTES: The information on which this article is based was gathered from a number of sources, chief among them the Internet and the Alexandria Queen Street Public Library. The pictures of Downham and his Washington Street home are courtesy of the Library, whose researchers were helpful in gathering material. The pictures of the Belle Haven Rye bottle and corkscrew were provided through the courtesy of Richard Lilienthal.



Al Miller demonstrates the new club web site at the April meeting.