

# The Potomac Pontil

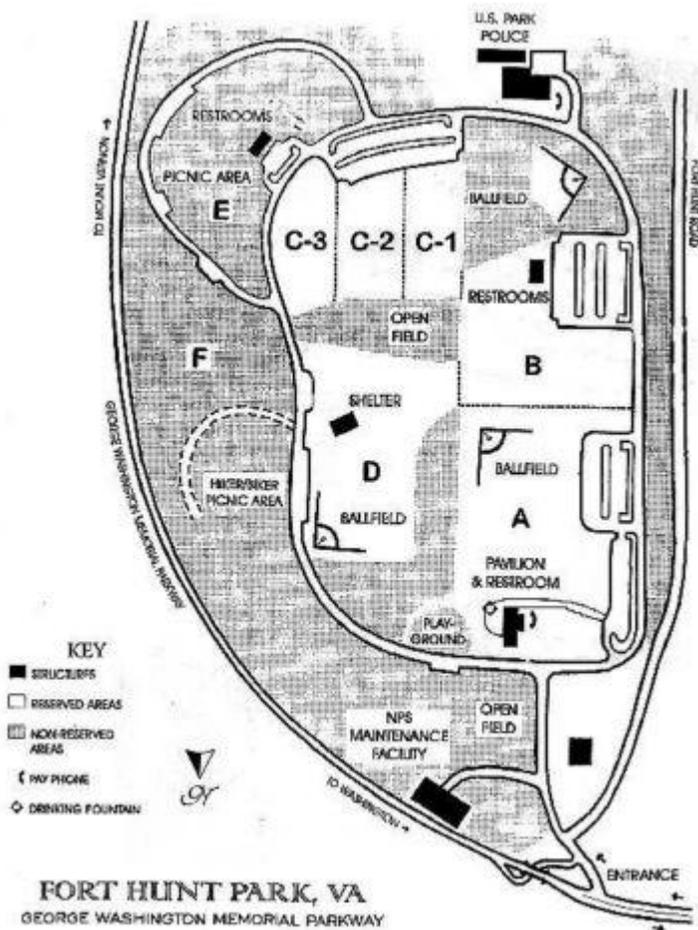
The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

*Aug-Sept 2010*

In this issue:

A. McGinnis and the Great Whiskey Heist by Jack Sullivan.....page 2  
Upcoming Area Bottle Shows.....page 5

## Picnic September 25th (Picnic Takes the Place of Regular September Meeting)



These are some show & tell items from the June meeting, but we couldn't figure out exactly what the center bottle was.

Please join us at 1 PM on Saturday, September 25th for our club picnic at Hunt Park in Alexandria, Virginia. The club will provide hamburgers, hotdogs, and soft drinks. Members are encouraged to bring a dish to pass, but everyone is welcome regardless of whether you have food to contribute. We would enjoy seeing any visitors and guests who wish to join us. If you happen to have a large number of guests coming, please contact Jim Sears so that we make sure we have enough food for everyone.

To minimize confusion, we are scheduling the picnic for the same time and place as last year's picnic. We will meet promptly at 1 PM in the picnic area marked E on the map at right. Please note that this map is a bit unusual in that north is at the bottom.

We do want to see bottles at the picnic. Members are particularly encouraged to bring along summer finds for show & tell.

**Directions:** Fort Hunt Park is located 5 miles south of Old Town Alexandria along the George Washington Memorial Parkway (parts of which are also called Mount Vernon Highway and Washington Street) in Fairfax County, Virginia. To reach this road from Washington, DC, cross the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge south toward Virginia, and take the exit for Mount Vernon/National Airport. To reach it from the Beltway in Maryland, take the very first exit after the Wilson Bridge. To reach it from the Beltway in Virginia take exit 1 North, go to the first traffic light and take a right on Franklin Street; go about 3 blocks and take a right on South Washington Street.

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: 609/472-5473) & Andy Goldfrank (email: amg\_sticky@yahoo.com, PH: 202/588-0543)  
Web Site: www.potomacbottlecollectors.org Maintained by Al Miller: www.potomacbottlecollectors.org/contact.php

# A. McGinnis and the Great Whiskey Heist

By Jack Sullivan

[Special to the Potomac Pontil]

In early January, 1926, as many as 50 men entered the government-held liquor warehouse of the McGinnis Distillery near Baltimore and hauled away 71 barrels and 32 cases of aged rye whiskey, with a present day value of more than half a million dollars. It was the kind of bold caper that Arthur McGinnis, founder of the distillery and 21 years dead, might well have admired.

Arthur himself was a bold man. An immigrant from Ireland he began his American career during the 1870s as a wagon driver, like the one shown here (Fig. 1), working out of the east side of Baltimore. His intelligence and “go getter” attitude brought him to the attention John B. Brown, the owner of a successful liquor outfit that he had founded in 1869. The company flagship brand was Brown’s Malt Whiskey which the owner merchandised as a health invigorator (Fig. 2). Brown hired McGinnis in the mid-1880’s and taught him the liquor business.



Fig. 1: Photo of an Irish wagon driver

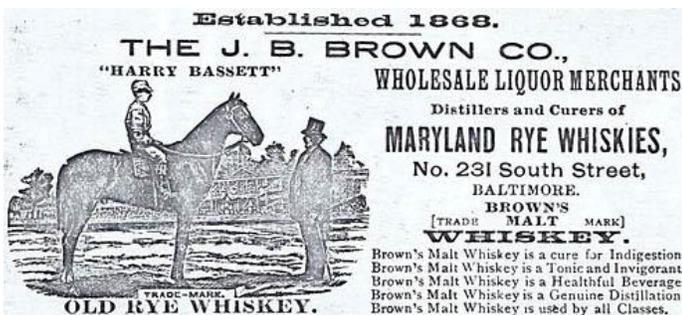


Fig. 2: J.B. Brown ad, 1891

Although Brown had several sons, either they were uninterested in the whiskey trade or McGinnis elbowed them out of the way. In any case within a few years the name of the firm became Brown, McGinnis & Company. Moreover, McGinnis’s three sons – John, James and Patrick – became involved in the business. By 1904, Brown’s name had disappeared entirely and the A. McGinnis Company of Baltimore emerged.

## The Distillery at McGinnis Siding

Reorganizing the company and bringing in other investors, Arthur McGinnis built a brand new distillery adjacent to the Western Maryland Rail Road at a place that came to be called McGinnis Siding. It was located four miles from Westminster, Maryland, but Arthur chose to call the site “Carrollton.” This identified the location with John Carroll, the state’s signer of the Declaration of Independence, but really never existed. The company offices remained in Baltimore, first at 208 Lexington Av. and then in the American Building downtown (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: American Building in Baltimore

Almost from the beginning, the whiskey business was successful and McGinnis Rye enjoyed strong regional sales. In 1905, the State Tax Commissioner set the taxable value of distilled spirits for the A. McGinnis Co. at \$13,368. By 1907 that figure had grown to \$21,496, and by 1909 had jumped to \$62,760. Even with this growth the McGinnis distillery was among Maryland’s smaller operations, able to process only a modest 250 barrels of mash per day.

The product was bottled in a range of containers. McGinnis labeled quarts could be found in both clear (Fig. 4) and amber (Fig. 5). Both bottles were embossed with the name of the distillery (Fig. 6). McGinnis Pure Rye also came in a flask (Fig. 7) and an embossed miniature bottle (Fig. 8). The firm issued merchandising items including shot glasses. One attractive example simply has the name etched in script (Fig. 9). Another included a more elaborate firm logo, as shown in a drawing (Fig. 10).



Fig. 4: McGinnis Quart (left)

Fig. 5: Amber McGinnis Quart (right)



Fig. 8: McGinnis clear miniature



Fig. 6: McGinnis embossing (left)

Fig. 7: McGinnis amber flask (right)



Fig. 9: McGinnis shot glass



Fig. 10: McGinnis logo, drawn from shot glass

### Arthur's Recklessness Is Revealed

Meanwhile, in November 1905 Arthur was injured in an accident and after lingering for a few weeks, died. His death triggered not only tumult at the A. McGinnis Co. but a legal dispute that fractured his family. The attempt to settle his estate required investigation of the balance sheets of the distillery. Except there weren't any. As his son James later testified, Arthur "carried a bank book and a little stub. He carried the bank book in his pocket and the cashbook in his head. That is how he ran the business."

As a court determination later stated, McGinnis's business was a success but: "The financial part of the concern was managed in a most loose and careless fashion." Arthur's recklessness engendered legal actions that pitted Mary McGinnis (probably his widow) and son James against son John and other investors. After the case reached the Maryland Supreme court, a settlement was made among the McGinnises.

What happened then is not entirely clear even to their descendants. Apparently James and John mended their differences. Brother Patrick entered the picture as a whiskey executive. A Baltimore company called McGinnis Brothers was created in 1905 and existed along side the A. McGinnis & Company until Prohibition shut both of them down. At the time the distillery was still operating and its warehouses were full of aging whiskey. The facility was put under U.S. Government guard and the product was extracted in small amounts to be sold for allowable "medicinal purposes." That was the situation until January 6, 1926.

### The Great Whiskey Heist

On that fateful winter afternoon, according to witnesses, three men, earlier seen ice skating on a nearby pond, suddenly confronted a government guard named Charlie Thompson. They drew pistols and tied him up. The next to be trundled was an 80-year-old man who had wandered by the scene looking for his lost cat. In time some seven guards and watchmen were shackled and a gang, estimated at from 40 to 50 men, made themselves at home in the distillery for a full 15 hours.

The robbers not only were professionals, they knew something about whiskey. Sampling on each floor as they went, a time consuming process, they passed up the newer barrels on lower levels of the warehouse to get the well seasoned booze on the seven and eighth floors. Taking all night, by dawn they had loaded five trucks with 71 barrels of the oldest whiskey and 32 cases of bottled stock. The total value of the liquor at the time was estimated at \$90,000 – well over a half million dollars today. Federal officials later traced the trucks, now accompanied by mobsters in automobiles, south to Mexico.

A subsequent hearing by a Federal grand jury in March 1926 deteriorated into a finger-pointing exercise. The stolen whiskey and the men responsible for the robbery seemingly had evaporated into thin air. Suspecting an inside job, the U.S. District Attorney grilled guards and nearby residents relentlessly

but to no avail. The head of the Maryland Anti-Saloon League launched a bitter attack on Federal officials blaming "too much temporizing and too much politics" for the looting.

In April of that year, a Baltimore man named James Geisey of Baltimore and six accomplices were charged with the crime after being caught transporting carloads of beer into Baltimore via railroad. The record does not reveal if they ultimately were found guilty. Nevertheless, taking no more chances, Federal officials moved the remaining whiskey to another location and, in October 1926, brick by brick, tore down the distillery that Arthur McGinnis had built, and sent the building materials to New York.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Notes:** This article and the illustrations were drawn from a number of printed and Internet sources. Information on the heist and its aftermath were drawn from two articles that appeared in March 1998 in the Carroll County (Md.) Times.

\*\*\*\*\*



Bob ford displays an Owl Drug bottle in an unusual shade of blue.



Bob also brought these scarce blue Adlam jars to the June meeting.

# Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

**SEPTEMBER 17 - 22**

**HARRISBURG,  
PENNSYLVANIA**

The All-Dairy Bottle & Collectibles 13th Annual Show & Sale, (Fri. 12 noon to 5 PM, Sat. through Wed. 8 AM to 5 PM), at the Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex & Expo Center, Harrisburg, PA. Info: **GARY GOJSOVICH**, PH: (717) 635-5067 or **LOLLY LESHER**, PH: (717) 787-2905.



**SEPTEMBER 19 -  
WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA**

The Apple Valley Bottle Collectors Club's 36th Annual Show & Sale (9am - 3pm \$3, early admission at 7:30am \$10, seniors 65 and over free), at the Mount Carmel Baptist Church, Family Life Center, 1309 Opequon Ave (just off Pleasant Valley Rd), Winchester, VA. Info: **Richard Venskoske**, 2038 Chestnut Grove Rd, Winchester, VA 22603, ph: (540) 247-4429

**SEPTEMBER 26 BATSTO, NEW JERSEY**

New Jersey Antique Bottle Club (NJABC) Batsto Annual Show & Sale, (9 AM to 3 PM), at the Wharton State Forest, Batsto, NJ. Info: **JOE BUTEWICZ**, PH: (732) 236-9945, or **PAUL DELGUERCIO**, PH: (609) 352-7104 or email: paulhavoc@comcast.net

**OCTOBER 2 - CHESTERFIELD, VIRGINIA**

The Richmond Area Bottle Collectors Association's Annual Show & Sale (9am - 3pm, early admission 7:30am \$10), at the Chesterfield County Fairgrounds, 10300 Courthouse Rd, Chesterfield, VA 23832, Info: **Marvin Croker**, ph: (804) 275-1101, email: RichBottleClub@comcast.net or **Ed Faulkner**, ph: (804) 739-2951

**NOVEMBER 7 - ELKTON, MARYLAND**

Tri-State Bottle Collectors and Diggers Club's 38th Annual Show & Sale (9am - 2pm), at the Singerly Fire Hall, Routes 279-213, Elkton, MD. Info: **Dave Brown**, ph: (302) 738-9960, email: dbrown3942@comcast.net.

**NOVEMBER 21 GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA**

The Greensboro Antique Bottle, Pottery & Collectibles 9th Annual Show & Sale, (9 AM to 3 PM) at the Farmer's Curb Market, 501 Yanceyville St., Greensboro, NC. Info: **REGGIE LYNCH**, PH: (704) 221-6489. www.antiquebottles.com

**NOVEMBER 28 - BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA**

Forks of the Delaware Bottle Collectors Association's 37th Annual Show & Sale (9am - 3pm with early buyers 7:30am) at the Bethlehem Catholic High School, Madison & Dewberry Avenues, Bethlehem, PA.

Info: **Bill Hegedus**, 20 Cambridge Pl, Catasauqua, PA 18032, ph: (610) 264-5945.



Roland Longerbeam shows a wide-mouth Lightning jar, which is very rare in amber. Roland acquired this jar last year and recently had it cleaned.



Mike Cianciosi is rarely seen in club photos because he is usually the guy taking the pictures. He brought some crown-top sodas to the June meeting.