

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors Serving the National Capital



September 2003

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Meeting September 30th

Please join us for our monthly meeting – program to be announced.

Thank you to everyone who helped with our show

Our club's recent show was the result of great effort by many of our members, and any attempt to list all those who helped would surely be incomplete. I appreciate the efforts of everyone who distributed fliers, set up at the show, and helped clean up afterwards. Nonetheless, I would like to acknowledge a people in particular. Thank you to **Lee Shipman** for renting the show room and tables, buying refreshments, planning the layout, plotting dealer tags for the tables, and taking the show picture below. A huge thank you to **Torrey Smith** and **Joan Goldfrank** for running the admission table all day. We appreciate the Baltimore Antique Bottle Club lending us their signs, and I want to thank **Andy Goldfrank** and **Peter Rydquist** for setting them up and taking them down again. Former club member **Dennis Arcoraci** donated Bicentennial Pepsi bottles for the show give-away table. Finally, **Al Miller**, **Roland Longerbeam**, and **Richard Lilienthal** all pitched in before the show opened, and their efforts included making coffee and name tags as well as setting up tables.

Jim Sears



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: Matt Knapp Vice President: Henry Fuchs Secretary: Jim Sears Treasurer: Ken Anderson
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Brooklyn, New York: The “Just Us” Dig

By Andy Goldfrank

In mid-August 2003, early on the Saturday following the Potomac Bottle Show, I woke up sore but satisfied. As I lay in bed, I reflected on the previous ten days I spent preparing for the bottle show, rehabilitating the sunroom in my house, competing in my softball league’s playoff tournament, working a few days to pay the bills, and even digging a privy in Brooklyn, New York. During that time, I experienced moments when I felt like a chicken running around without his head, but my wife Joan and my digging buddy Scott Jordan kept me energized and enthused. Joan’s tolerance of my obsessive hobby, as she is not a bottle digger or collector, is remarkable; her support even went so far as her working the admissions table at the bottle show for an entire day. In turn, Scott came down three days before the show to help me demolish the drop ceiling in the sunroom and then took the lead on plastering and painting as I got diverted by softball and setting up for the bottle show. Scott also manned my table at the show after I departed for my softball team’s playoffs. In the end, Joan was rewarded with a bright and cheery, renovated sunroom (which had not been updated since the 1930s) and a championship trophy. Scott, on the other hand, simply asked that he and I spend a couple of days digging in New York – just the two of us, a request gladly granted.

Scott is a remarkable digger who has excavated more privies than most of us have ever dreamed about. But he is much more than a bottle digger – he is an artist who has incorporated his creative talents into one of the most interesting collections I have ever seen. The walls of his two-bedroom apartment in New York City are covered with treasures from digs that date back to his childhood: one wall is blanketed with a couple dozen restored red slipware plates; another is filled with shelves of black glass and stoneware from as early as the 1600s; and yet another shoulders shelves of colored pontiled bottles along with a large display cabinet that is loaded with Revolutionary War relics ranging from buttons to bar shot. In addition, every window is a kaleidoscope of colors: one opening is a melange of scarce cobalt and green pontiled sodas; another consists of master inks from puce to olive to amber; a third opening reflects nothing but yellow flasks, bitters, medicines, sodas, pickles, and other bottles. And all of this is only the



Scott Jordan displays a collection of restored redware

tip of the iceberg. Other walls display scores of beautiful collages made of shards and unique artifacts collected from favorite digs over the years, as well as clever compositions such as a cast iron boat in a sea made of green and blue glass or bisque dolls with dresses derived from 1850s transfer ware plates. Delicate pottery recovered from the depths of privies, some of which required painstaking restoration, graces other shelves. Scott’s oil paintings, on both canvas and bottles, of Manhattan’s modern skyline (visible from his Queens apartment) and of historical images (such as the old Five Points made famous in Martin Scorsese’s [Gangs of New York](#)) are interspersed. Scott’s home is a workshop, an art studio, a museum.

In addition to being an incredible collector and artist, Scott is also a close friend with whom I have spent countless hours conversing, creating, drinking and eating. His kindness and faith in humanity is unmatched by any person I have ever met; he is quick to offer help and even faster to forgive one’s faults. When I lived in New York, Scott and I got together every chance we could and we always had a good time, whether it was researching the history of a site at the public library, eating a fantastic meal in an off-beat ethnic neighborhood, or carefully excavating a privy in the hunt for historical artifacts from bygone eras. Now that I live almost 300 miles away, our digs together are less frequent and, unlike the early days, usually include other guys from New York, Colorado, Mississippi or the Washington, D.C. area. Scott’s request was that we dig a pit together, just the two of us, much like the days when I lived in New York. His interest in a dig for “just us” was not simply because we are friends who have not spent

much time together of late but also because the two of us approach a digging expedition with the same energy, sense of mission and appreciation for history – in other words, we are high energy diggers who can knock out a huge privy alone in a couple of days while making sure we meticulously extract every bottle, each pottery shard for potential restoration or collages, and every relic. Our approach overwhelms the stamina and patience of many of our digging buddies which means that we do not often get to tackle a privy in this manner.

So the day after the Potomac Bottle Show, Scott and I woke up early, completed the finishing touches in the sunroom and headed to New York. Instead of Manhattan, we decided to focus on Brooklyn. A

month earlier, on a dig with Scott’s childhood friend Zachary Miller, we had discovered a site on the border of East Brooklyn and Williamsburg and secured permission to dig at least five abutting yards adjacent to a decaying wood frame house from the 1860s. We headed to the spot off of Skillman Street which was opened in 1838 for traffic between Wallabout Road and DeKalb Avenue. Although Skillman Street existed early on from the waterfront near the Brooklyn Navy Yard inward, many houses just a few blocks away near DeKalb were not built until the late 1850s, at the earliest, because it was not until 1853 that DeKalb Avenue was opened to replace the rutted track that ran through the farm of Henry Boerum. In fact, it was not until 1860 that the Brooklyn City & Newtown Rail Road Company was



This 1866 map by A.J. Johnson shows the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Skillman Street is near the E in East Brooklyn at the bottom middle of the map.

charted to run horse cars over a portion of DeKalb and the nearby Myrtle Avenue. In turn, engineer Julius W. Adams – who provided the framework upon which modern sewerage is based – was commissioned in 1857 to sewer the City of Brooklyn. This historical framework illustrates a classic problem faced by bottle diggers in the outer boroughs of New York City: although a neighborhood may date from the 1850s and 1860s and thus be old enough for outhouses, development was piecemeal as was the decision to hook into the sewer system which resulted in some houses being constructed with privies and others being connected to the city sewer system.

Scott and I approached the lot knowing that a number of pits in the line of wood rowhouses on Skillman Street had already been excavated but we decided to probe and try test holes along the remainder of the row and, if we came up empty handed, tackle the brick rowhouses on the Avenue. Our previous privy digs on the lot indicated that these structures were built about the same time that plumbing was showing up in the area and we feared that the more expensive brick structures on the abutting lots would not have had privies but instead would have been linked to the sewer system when constructed in the late 1860s. Less than five minutes into the dig, we experienced a bad omen as my probe tip pulled off some five feet below the surface; fortunately, there was an extra tip in my backpack and a local welder made sure it would not pop off. Four sweaty hours later (and after burning my finger on the probe tip that was still hot from being welded), our trepidation was confirmed when countless test holes and probing revealed a lot of yellow clay but no outhouses on either the Skillman Street row or behind the brick rowhouses on the Avenue. As a last resort, before moving on to another site, Scott and I decided to try one last abutting yard which we had avoided up to that point due to the bulldozed dirt and debris that was piled four to five feet high above the original ground surface, combined with with Scott's spotting of an active bird's nest in a bush on the same pile the first time we inspected the site a month earlier. Now, upon closer inspection, it was apparent that the nest was abandoned.

As Scott and I faced the massive mound at this last potential spot on Skillman Street, I turned to Scott and said that we would dig one last test hole and if we did not hit the privy, we would move on. Scott

concluded without hesitation. An hour later, after moving a mountain of debris, we finally touched the intact original backyard layer and started probing. Our best estimate was that we should be sitting just inside the front wall of the privy – if it existed – but to our dismay the probe hit only clay and no privy stones. Flipping around in our test hole, I gave the probe one last try. To my surprise, I tapped a stone and then, after changing the angle of the probe, effortlessly buried the probe to the handle in ash. Scott and I exchanged smiles without a word – we knew we were in an undug privy. And then it dawned on both of us that because of the depth of the other privies we had dug at this site on previous visits plus the four to five feet of bulldozed debris on top of the this particular pit, our hole would probably be more than 15 feet in depth. We got to work immediately so we could make decent progress before darkness fell. As we tossed rubble and garbage aside and started pushing off the dirt overburden, we realized that the back lot boundary was five feet shorter than the abutting lots which explained why the privy was not in line with the other pits we dug the prior month. It also cleared up why this privy was directly under a flattened chain link fence. Eventually, before we even hit the walls of the pit, we set up the tripod and started hauling buckets of soil out of the hole. At the close of the day, we were eight feet below the surface but less than three feet into the privy, meaning there was plenty of digging to do the next day. The stone-lined pit was round and about 4.5 feet across. Our finds up to that point included a “Patent Pending” Bixby (indicating a pre-1883 date) and a crude Wyckoff Union Bluing, along with an 1890s blob beer from Pulaski Street in Brooklyn that was near the top of the pit.

The following morning, on our ride to Brooklyn from Scott's apartment in Queens, we speculated about the likelihood of recovering any decent bottles. We had surmised from our previous digs in the neighborhood that the pits in this neighborhood were either dipped or cleaned out a number of times and also were simply not old enough to have more than a few potted bottles. As an aside, I have often talked with other East Coast privy diggers about the lack of bottles in such pits dating from the 1870s or even early 1880s. For a while, I thought this was because my experience was limited to areas that stopped using privies by the 1870s (i.e., Manhattan), but even when I have found undisturbed pits that contained

artifacts from the 1850s to 1890s in other cities, the layers from the 1870s and 1880s generally did not have as many bottles. This pattern is occasionally broken but it is my theory that the tough economic times of the 1870s, as headlined by the Panic of 1873, contributed to the lack of bottles from this era; consumer products simply were not oft purchased and vigorous recycling programs for bottles were in place. Although our expectations for the “just us” pit were not high, it was our hope that we would recover at least a few bottles from the 1860s and 1870s.

We resumed digging at about 10:00 the following morning, as our arrival was delayed by an overturned truck on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. The fill in the pit was a mixture of ash and light colored soil. As we progressed downward, darker gray patches of dirt started to show up on one side of the privy which contained a couple of clear 1870s cosmetics embossed “Gourand’s / Oriental Cream / New York” and Norwegian cod liver oils embossed “P. Moller / Ol Jecor / Gador Ver/ Christiania.” About an hour



later, at a depth of approximately 11 feet from the surface and about 6 feet into the privy, we finally cleared out all of the fill. Pounding the dirt in the hole with the palm of my hand, I heard a nice hollow sound indicating that there was at least a few feet of nightsoil and that our chances of finding some bottles were relatively high. Such a sound comes from the difference in the compactness of the soil in a privy when compared to undisturbed earth. Scott noted that it was time to fetch the digging stick. Early on, I learned from Scott that a sharpened pool cue or broom handle is the best tool for digging in the artifact layer because it allows you to work through dirt, bricks and bottles relatively fast without damaging any bottles, pottery, or other treasures you might come across. Within a few minutes, I exposed two more cosmetic bottles and heard the squeal of wood over buried glass. At that point, I suggested to Scott that he get in the hole with me because it appeared that there were a fair number of bottles just under the surface. To check my suspicions, I used my hand to push aside a square foot of loose dirt from one side and exposed at least a dozen bottles including inks, medicines, utilities, cosmetics, cod

liver oils and bluing. Scott scurried down the rope bringing along the camera.

In a matter of minutes, Scott and I lifted a dozen intact bottles and exposed another layer with at least ten more bottles. Scott pulled out a crude Dr. Hostetter’s Stomach Bitters embossed “S. McK & Co.” on the base and a large three-piece mold master ink in green, both of which were nested in the midst of a number of common bottles such as Atwood’s Jaundice Bitters, H.T. Hembold’s Genuine Fluid Extract, RRR Radway & Co., Dr. Jayne’s Tonic Vermifuge, and Husband’s Calcinated Magnesia. Most of these were embossed and all appeared to date from the early 1870s. We came across a pile of at least two other crude Hostetter’s that apparently were tossed into the privy intact but shattered on impact. Next to this sad pile of glass was a brilliant green Dr. Townsend’s Sarsaparilla likewise broken. As we kept moving dirt out of the way, layer after layer of glass and pottery appeared, unlike in the neighboring privies.



We uncovered a number of large, crude aqua pharmacy or medicine bottles including a “Dr. H.A. Tucker / Brooklyn” and a “Barnes & Sommerville / 43 Bowery” from Manhattan. The latter bottle we had never seen before. Other aqua medicines of note included a “Sauter & Gaus / German / Worm

Compound” and an “Uncle Sam’s / Cough Cure.” Also mixed in were crude condiment and food containers such as a cathedral pickle, a barrel mustard, olive oils, Lea & Perrins, and a set of pontiled crystal oil and vinegar bottles. Other artifacts included clay pipes, doll parts, slate pencils and slates, a bone and ebony domino, a child’s toy porcelain pocket watch with gold lettering, marbles and a lice comb – it was apparent that children once lived in the long-gone rowhouse. I climbed out of the hole to pull buckets of dirt while Scott continued to dig. Scott then extracted a wonderful cream soda type bottle (essentially a 5 inch tall or miniature squat blob soda) in amber that was heavily embossed on both sides. One side read “Hyatt & Co. / Patent Jan. 5th 1869 / New York” while the flip side said “Cod Liver / Oil / Soda Water.” This was a bottle we had never heard of, let alone seen, and confirmed that we had finally excavated an early 1870s privy in New York City that contained dozens of bottles.

The next foot was almost void of artifacts and after bucketing out the loose dirt, Scott and I switched places to allow me an opportunity to finish out the pit. I scooped out a small hole along one side to see how much was left in the pit and immediately discovered a couple of 1860s squat sodas indicating that there was an older layer down below the 1870s layer. From the change in bottles, Scott guessed that maybe there was a switch in landowners but after uncovering a couple of broken nursing bottles, he concluded that the occupants did not change but rather the residents must have started out relatively poor (having just purchased a new house), began to have children, and slowly accumulated some wealth. The artifacts we uncovered traced the children’s growth from toddlers to school-age children – there were nursing bottles, dolls, lice combs, slate pencils and a writing board, a porcelain pocket watch, marbles and other relics indicating the development of a family. We also surmised that cod liver oil was a popular commodity in the household as we recovered such bottles from at least four different manufacturers including the Peter Moller’s imported Norwegian variant we discovered at the top of the garbage layer.

There was a little less than half of the last foot of the pit left when I exposed the shoulder of what I thought was a whiskey. Using the digging stick, I exposed the dark bottle and realized that it was wider or more stout than most whiskeys. Prying it from the ground,

I was delighted to see that I had uncovered an olive quart mineral water from Missisquoi Springs in Sheldon, Vermont. The irony was that the previous month’s issue (July 2003) of Antique Bottle & Glass Collector had an excellent article on “Mineral Waters of the Green Mountain State” by Don Fritschel who noted that in 1868, the Missisquoi Springs shipped 15,000 cases containing 24 bottles – one of which ended up in a Brooklyn, New York privy miles away perhaps that same year. After recovering the mineral water, I asked Scott if he wanted to come in but he insisted that I finish the hole. Shortly thereafter, after finding a couple of crude shoe blackings bottles and a pontiled paneled puff, I found another aqua 1860s squat. This soda was unusual because, although from a downtown Brooklyn manufacturer, it was embossed “Deuell Brothers / 94 / Powers St. / L.I.” Thus, despite the soda plant being located in an area that at the time was recently annexed by the City of Brooklyn, it was embossed with a Long Island address – an excellent way to close out the dig as it was a good looking squat that readily takes one back to a markedly different era in Brooklyn’s history.



Scott and I lined up our bottles on the dirt pile, called over the landowner to show him our recoveries, snapped a few pictures and then realized it was almost 5 p.m. This pit, which we thought would be a wrap in less than three hours, was almost 16 feet deep and had already occupied seven hours of the day. As we filled in the outhouse, Scott and I talked about how the pit may never have been dipped but rather just filled in the mid-1870s thus leaving over 60 bottles dating from the 1860s to the 1870s. After two full days of digging in 90 plus degree temperatures, despite being exhausted and not having uncovered any exceptional bottles, we agreed that this was one fun dig for “just us.”



The Skillman Haul

Hope you enjoyed this column. Any comments, suggestions, or questions, please let me know either by calling me at 202/588-0543 or by emailing me at amg_sticky@yahoo.com. Good luck searching, Andy.

Roland Longerbeam displays jars and antique Mudge canners at the July meeting



Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

OCTOBER 4 - RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Richmond Area Bottle Collectors Association's 32nd Annual Show & Sale (Sat. 9 AM – 3 PM, early admission 7:30 AM) at the Showplace Annex, 3002 Mechanicsville TrnPk., Richmond, Virginia. INFO: JUDY FOLES, 12275 Cedar Ln., Ashland, VA 23005, PH: (804) 798-7502, E-mail: judyfoles@mail.com

OCTOBER 12 - BEDFORD, PENNSYLVANIA

Bedford County Antique Bottle Club's 26th Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM – 1 PM, early admission 7 AM) at the Bedford County Fairgrounds, 4H Building, Bedford, Pennsylvania. INFO: LEO McKENZIE, PH: (814) 623-8019 or SALLY CORLE, PH: (814) 733-4598

NOVEMBER 2 - ELKTON, MARYLAND

Tri-State Bottle Collectors & Diggers Club's 31st Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM – 3 PM) at the Singlerly Fire Hall, Routes 279 & 213 (I-95 exit 109A), Elkton, Maryland. INFO: WARREN CAVENDER, PH: (302) 998-0690.

OCTOBER 26 - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

The 5th Annual Great Mid-Atlantic Bottle, Paper & Advertising Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM – 3 PM) at the Maryland State Fairgrounds, I-83 (north of Baltimore), Timonium, Maryland. INFO: **HOLIDAY PRODUCTIONS**, P. O. Box 845, Abingdon, MD 21009 or **BILL THOMAS**, PH: (410) 538-5558.

NOVEMBER 9 - GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

Southeast Bottle Club's 2nd Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM – 3 PM, early admission 7:30 AM) indoors at the Farmer's Curb Market, 501 Yanceyville St., Greensboro, North Carolina. INFO: **DAVID JACKSON**, PH: (336) 288-2677 or **REGGIE LYNCH**, P. O. Box 13736, Durham, NC 27709, PH: (919) 789-4545, E-mail: rlynch@antiquebottles.com, Web site: <http://www.antiquebottles.com/greensboro/>.

NOVEMBER 9 - PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

Pittsburgh Antique Bottle Club's Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM – 2 PM, early admission 7 AM) at the Washington Township Fire Hall, I-70 exit 43, Fayette City, Pennsylvania. INFO: **BOB DECROO**, 694 Fayette City Rd., Fayette City, PA 15438, PH: (724) 326-8741 or **JAY HAWKINS**, 1280 Mt. Pleasant Rd., West Newton, PA 15089, PH: (724) 872-6013.

NOVEMBER 30 - BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA

Forks of the Delaware Bottle Collectors Association's 30th 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.

