

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

November 2006

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Meeting November 28th

Please join us at 8 PM on Tuesday, November 28th at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Bethesda for our monthly meeting. Please bring in bottles for show & tell. Guests and visitors are always welcome.

Next Meeting will be January 30th. **We will not have a December meeting due to the Christmas holiday.** There will be a December newsletter including an article by Jack Sullivan and a notice that club dues are due. Dues will remain at \$10 per year for individual or family and can be mailed to Jim Sears or paid at the club meeting.



Torrey Smith holds Samantha Goldfrank at September picnic



Adventures with a grill – Al Miller had owned this grill for several years but never got around to trying it out until the club picnic. After a fair amount of trial and error, we did end up with some excellent burgers and hot dogs.



Robert Banwarth runs the obstacle course at the club picnic while Daris Delph, Jenna Banwarth, and Kevin Banwarth wait their turns. The course was allegedly designed for the younger generation, but the fastest time was recorded by Joan Goldfrank.

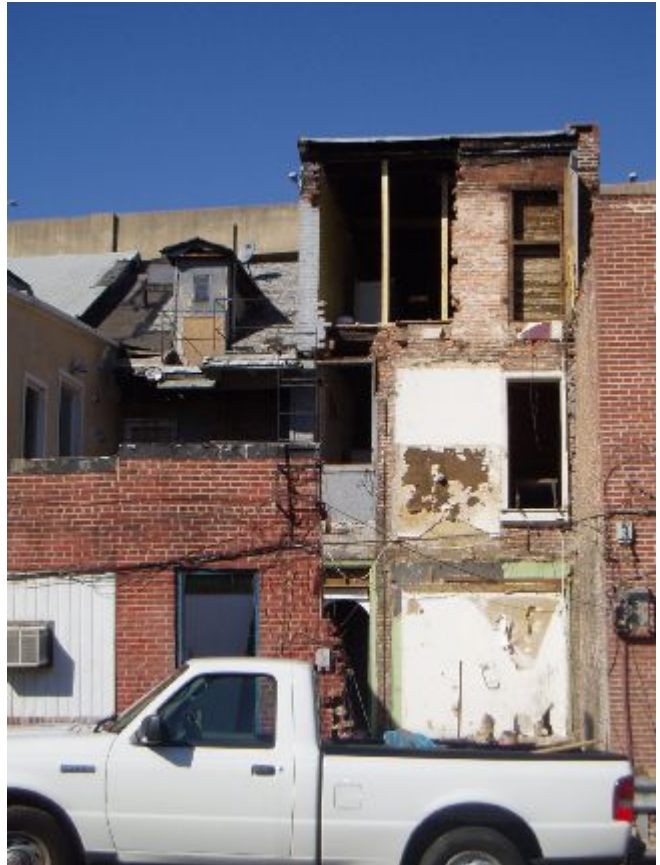
Meetings: 8:00 PM on the last Tuesday of each month in the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, 6201 Dunrobbin Dr., Bethesda, MD 20816.
President: Andy Goldfrank Vice President: Al Miller Secretary: Jim Sears Treasurer: Lee Shipman
Pontil: Jim Sears (email: searsjim@usa.net, PH: 301/588-2174) & Andy Goldfrank (email: amg_sticky@yahoo.com, PH: 202/588-0543)
Web Site: www.potomacbottlecollectors.org Maintained by Peter Rydquist: pehraug@aol.com

Oh Yeah... Digging a Pontiled Bricklined Privy in Baltimore

by Andy Goldfrank

A few months ago, Dodd Delph called me about a likely digging spot but there were two little catches – the site was in Baltimore and we would have to wait for the demolition crew to clear the back additions before we could dig. You might ask why the fact that the site was in Baltimore was a potential issue. Well, to put it simply, the privy holes in that city are not consistent producers the way pits are in other places like Philadelphia, New York, or even the small towns of Maryland and Virginia. There is some historical research which suggests that Baltimore had a strong privy dippers (outhouse cleaners) union into the 20th century. It is not unusual, in Baltimore, to dig the a privy behind an 1830s house in which all you show for a full day of digging are some crown top, pre-prohibition beers. On the other hand, what is unusual is to find in a Baltimore privy intact, embossed pontiled bottles. If you take a look at the digging stories by Chris Rowell, who regularly digs in Baltimore, on www.geocities.com/baltbottles/ you will see some excellent finds; however, what is not apparent is that for every dig worth writing about, Chris has dug perhaps as many as 100 privies. With all that said, any privy digger worth his salt knows that to find the bottles you gotta dig the privies wherever they are ... so all right, enough blab, here is the story of our latest dig.

The houses we dug behind appear to date from the early 1820s-30s with the biggest clues being the brick facades, simple lines, and the roof dormer window. We used a late 19th century insurance atlas to figure out the old lot lines and the dimensions of the structures; in particular we tried to figure out how far the structures had been extended into the backyard before the advent of plumbing. We eventually also determined that there were actually two different lots meaning there was potential for privies from two houses.



Dodd regularly went by the Baltimore construction site over the course of a couple of months and learned that the demolition crew was going to take the back wall down the Saturday of the Baltimore Marathon. We were concerned that folks would sneak onto the site so we arranged a dig at the last minute for that Sunday. Another complication was that Dodd had his parents in town from Ohio and I had my grandparents in from North Carolina so Dodd (after checking with the construction foreman) garnered permission to invite Chris Rowell along to help us dig the site and to ward off potential claim jumpers. (The site foreman had been adamant about only allowing Dodd dig on the site and apparently had ushered out another set of diggers that were at the site earlier in the week.) On Sunday, Chris was digging at a nearby location starting early in the morning and Dodd arrived at noon with his Dad after church. Dodd and Chris pinpointed a privy, which Dodd and his Dad dug as Chris had to leave for a few hours. Being a slacker (and also having just abandoned by grandma, wife and baby to go digging), I showed up shortly after 2:30. Dodd was already waist deep in a privy.





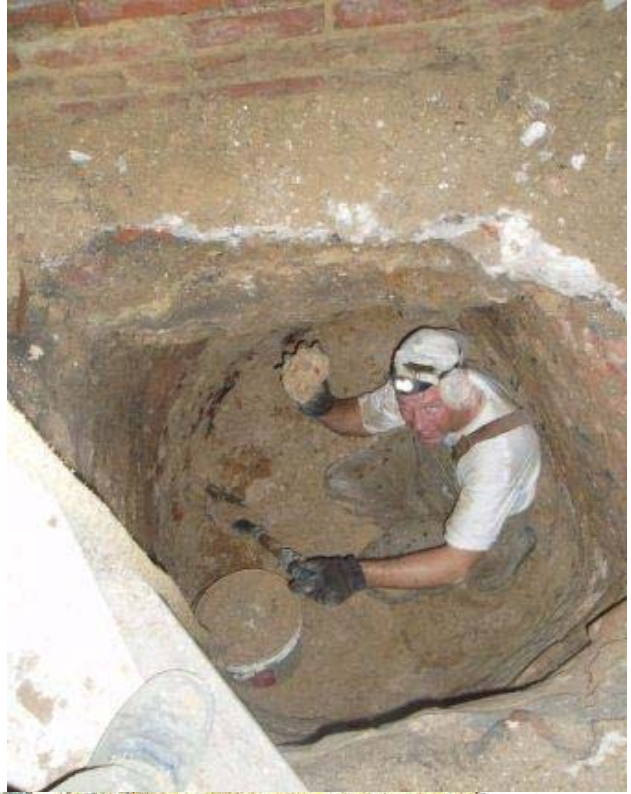
Dodd had uncovered a brick box atop a huge 5 foot wide wooden barrel. We knew it was a barrel because the straps were still there although the wood had long ago rotted away. This hole stopped at about 5 feet when it hit the top of a stone foundation from a house that had existed on this site in the late 1700s. And it had nothing in it at all. Dodd and I filled the hogshead barrel privy in and started looking for another hole. We hit one potential spot but it turned out not to be a privy and instead was an old water line. At that point Dodd realized he had to return his father to the family for dinner time. So there I was alone, clearing debris, popping holes in the decrepit concrete skim, digging test holes into a maze of old pipes, and running the probe in the hopes of hitting the second privy. As I was getting dazed and confused, Chris finally returned with that look on his face ...



Yeah, he had run around for the better part of the day digging into 5 other privies with the only finds being post 1900, pre-prohibition, crown top beers. Ugly! I told him that he did not need to stick around if he was tired since it was slow going, dark was already fast approaching, and the chance of finding another privy on the lot was fast slipping away. In short order, Chris put his digging gloves back on and was helping me look for another privy. Now it was our hope to find a brick lined privy, either round or oval, that had some depth to it. Soon enough we had finished off the test hole in the far corner only to locate a whole lot of nothing. Chris ran the probe back toward the middle of the lot and appeared to hit brick at 4 or 5 feet in depth. This was a good sign indeed but seemed strange that we had not hit anything from the opposite corner where I had first put in a test hole. Chris started raking back the demolition debris from the back, center of the lot and then yelled to get my attention.

Chris' efforts had revealed a hole in the thin concrete floor. This certainly was promising. After being unable to stick my head in to really get a sense of what was in the hole, I finally just jammed my digital camera into the opening and took a picture.

Upon inspection of the image, we saw stacked bricks that did not have mortar between them. We knew that we were in the privy. And the race against time was on. Dodd returned shortly thereafter, we set up the tripod and started hauling buckets of cap dirt out.



Cap dirt is the fill layer put in by the privy dippers, after the hole was cleaned out, to cut the smell of what remained and to fill the outhouse so it was not an open hazard. This cap layer was a mix of primarily clay, sand, and plaster wall debris with some ash mixed in at points. The layer was sterile of artifacts; however, the fact that it had sunk enough to create the cavity under the concrete was promising as this usually indicates either continued decay of organic materials (and I think you all know what that was!) or the dead weight of the heavy cap dirt on a lighter, loamy material (again, I think you all know what that was since this was a privy!). After a couple of hours, with not much to show for our efforts other than one heck of a dirt pile, Dodd came out and I went in to take my turn. About an hour later, I pointed out how there was darker soil clinging to the walls. This is usually an indication that when the cap dirt had been dumped into the center of the hole, some of the remaining liquid nightsoil had been splashed (or sludged) up against the sides – sort of like tossing a rock into a bucket of mud. We were about 9 feet into the hole and it appeared we were about to get into the trash layer. The only question was how old would the layer be, and I hoped it would be pontiled era since this was a deep bricklined privy behind an old house. Then a shard popped up that looked turn of the century and I was bit disappointed. Shortly after that I

pulled the broken side to a Mrs. M. Cox's Indian Vegetable Decoctin from Baltimore which comes both smooth based and pontiled. This was looking promising. And then, I popped up a cobalt soda which is a rare find for Baltimore indeed.



Over the next couple of hours, we dug a trash layer that was about 4 feet thick with a nice layer of broken and intact pottery and bottles. Chris was busy pulling buckets, all the while smiling because we found some decent bottles and they ranged in age from the 1820s to the 1860s. We ended up digging well past midnight and it took us another hour to fill the hole. But, there was something for everyone to take home even if we were getting back at 2 AM (and the ringing of the alarm clock was coming way too soon).



The bottles were a decent range of age and surprisingly, for Baltimore, there were even a few embossed ones too. We found three embossed, pontiled flint glass bottles including a Henry's Magnesia from England, a Carpenter's with a huge flared lip from Philadelphia (which I had never seen before), and one from France. Also recovered were some interesting aqua pontils including one embossed G.W. Andrews' Worm Syrup from Baltimore. Again, this is one rare Baltimore find especially in such nice condition – and with my name on it to top it off (which is why Dodd really twisted my arm and forced me to take it home). A little research after the dig led to this cool Andrews advertisement from the 1845 Baltimore business directory.



GEO. WANSEY ANDREWS,
PRACTICAL CHEMIST
 AND
APOTHECARY,
No. 5 BALTIMORE STREET,
 NEAR THE BRIDGE,
BALTIMORE,

MANUFACTURES THE FOLLOWING ARTICLES:

Hydrocyanic Acid, U. S. P. in oz. vials, with or without tin cases.	Citrate of Iron,
Iodide of Mercury, (proto and per,)	Tartrate of Iron and Potash,
“ of Sulphur,	Ammon. Tart. of Iron,
“ of Zinc,	Cyanide of Potassium,
“ of Lead,	Oxide of Silver,
Vallet's Protocarbonate of Iron,	Nitrate of Silver, in crystals,
Precip. Carb. of Iron,	Granville's Lotion,
Liquor Ferri Iodidi,	Hyd. Peroxide of Iron,
“ Hydriod. Arsenici, et Hydrarg.	Tannin,
Chloride of Zinc,	Distilled Spirit of Rosemary,
	Aqua Destillata, &c. &c.

Also, the following superior Extracts:—Ext. Conii, Ext. Hyoscyami, Ext. Belladonna, Ext. Aconiti, Comp. Ext. of Colocyath, made with ALEPPO SCAMMONY and SCOTCHINE ALOES. The Compound Fluid Extract and Concentrated Syrup of Sarsaparilla, as prepared by the proprietor, for several years past, by a peculiar mode of evaporation, contains all the medicinal qualities of the root, and has been used with the greatest success by many physicians in this city, of the highest respectability. N. B. All chemical preparations made to order. Physicians may depend upon having their orders filled with PURE and GENUINE MEDICINES, and put up with care and neatness.

But for me and my digging buddies, the finds still were not over. While digging this deep bricklined privy, which topped over 12 feet when we were done, we hand-sifted the trash layer and attempted to extract all of the artifacts in addition to the bottles. This meant that we pulled every pottery shard. It was out hope to learn what was in the hole for our records but also to piece back together a few pieces for display. The weekend after the dig, I spent one evening cleaning the shards that filled two compound buckets.



After giving them a good rinse and brush in a slop bucket in the sink, I laid the shards out to dry (all the while talking my digging buddy Scott through the dig and the finds as you can see from the red light on the telephone).



The next day, I picked out two of the bowls, which had all of their pieces, to glue. I carefully cleaned the edges getting rid of the dirt and any clinging chunks, then dried the pieces, and proceeded to glue with the blue tape as support so that I could do an entire bowl in one sitting.



I then sorted the shards by color, pattern, and texture. This made me realize that there were a large number of pieces from some extremely similar pottery sets. I recognized quite a few chamber pots (aka thunder mugs), both brown glazed redware and yellow bodied with bands. Also present were a number of yellow-bodied banded bowls plus blue and grey banded white-glazed bowls, and a worm ware mocha bowl. Likewise spotted in the mix were some blue feather or scalloped edged plates and saucers (which some folks have attributed as being indicative of Confederate sites for some unknown reason), along with sprig painted whiteware dishes, cups and bowls. Last there was a smattering of transferware in blue and black. It was a typical Baltimore privy that had a decent layer of pottery except for the atypical yellow bodied banded bowls. The bulk of this pottery dated from the 1840s to the 1850s.

Eventually, that night, I pulled out my blue tape and started putting these pieces back together. Just like your typical jigsaw puzzle, I was sucked into the effort and went on to be up way too late. However, I was pleased with my progress since I put together every bowl that had at least half of the pieces.



I think the results will look good on our shelves and served as a great reminder of the dig put together by Dodd along with wonderment as to who possible ate from these bowls sometime in the 1850s. Just imagine ...



Hope you enjoyed and good luck digging.



Some of Andy Goldfrank's digging finds are visible in the foreground of this view from the club picnic. The humans are Jack Sullivan, Mike Cianciosi, Richard Lilienthal, and Roland Longerbeam

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

November 26 – Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
 The Forks of the Delaware Bottle Collectors Association's 33rd Annual Bottle & Antique Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM, Adm. \$1; Dealer & Display set-up 6 - 9 AM, Early buyers 7:30 AM) at the Bethlehem Catholic High School, Madison & Dewberry Ave. (2 miles South of Rt. 22, Center Street, Rt. 512), Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Info: **Bill Hegedus**, 20 Cambridge Pl., Catasauqua, PA 18032, PH: (610) 264-5945.



Dodd Delph examines some jars.

MARCH 4 - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
 The Baltimore Antique Bottle Club's 27th Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 8 AM - 3 PM) at the Physical Education Center, Essex Campus, Community College of Baltimore County, 7201 Rossville Blvd (I-695, Exit 34, Baltimore, Maryland. Info: **Bob Ford**, PH: (410) 531-9459, E-mail: bottles@comcast.net; Website: www.baltimorebottleclub.org.



Andy Goldfrank takes over the grilling.