

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

April 2014

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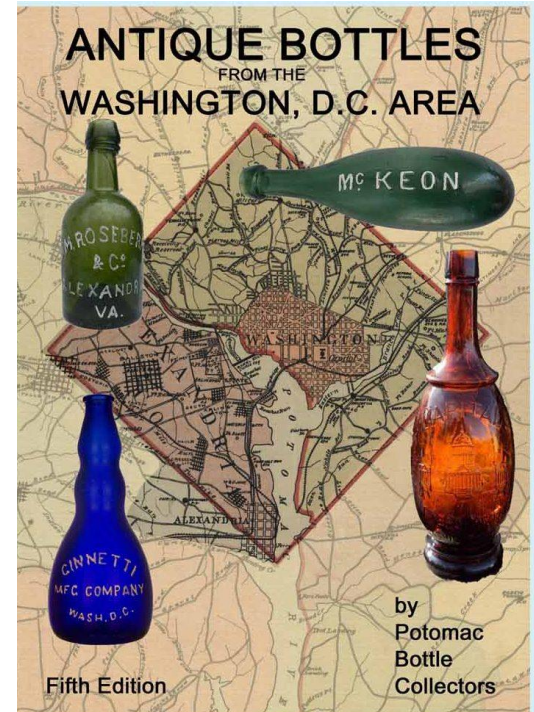
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April 29 Meeting

We will be meeting at Bill Porter's house this month to see his fantastic Coca-Cola bottle collection. Please join us at 8 PM at 1329 Grandin Ave., Rockville, MD 20851.

Price Guide to Washington, DC Bottles Available

The new edition of our club book on antique bottles from the Washington, DC area is now available at club meetings for \$30. Over 500 bottles have been added since our previous edition. The new book is 224 pages long and includes brief histories with city directory entries. Thank you to Mike Cianciosi and Richard Lilienthal for their effort on this book.



Bill Porter displayed a group of Hires Root Beer bottles at our March meeting including a couple of unusual examples with Coca-Cola Bottling Company markings. The script "Coca Cola" marking shown below was normally not allowed on bottles that contained other beverages. We look forward to seeing many other unusual Coca-Cola items at our April meeting.



Meetings: 8:00 PM on the last Tuesday of each month January-June, October-November; picnic in September.

President: Andy Goldfrank

Vice President: Al Miller

Secretary: Jim Sears

Pontil: Jim Sears (email: searsjim@usa.net, PH: 609/472-5473) &

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Web Site: www.potomacbottlecollectors.org

Maintained by Mike Cianciosi (chosi@cox.net)

John Wedderburn Peddled False Hopes and Whiskey

By Jack Sullivan

[Special to the Potomac Pontil]

In the District of Columbia during the pre-Prohibition era John Wedderburn, both patent attorney and liquor dealer, sold dreams of wealth to would-be inventors nationwide and booze to Washingtonians. His legal work got him disbarred; his whiskey made him rich. This is the Wedderburn File.

The Wedderburns are an old and distinguished family with roots in Scotland and England. The heritage includes a bountiful list of lords, knights and clan chiefs. The family motto is an unusual one in its negative tone. In Latin it reads “Non Degenor,” meaning “Not Degenerate.” It remains to be seen if John Wedderburn lived up to this less-than-lofty standard.

He was born in Washington, D.C., to George Chase and Virginia Mary Lawrence Wedderburn in 1869, not long after the Civil War. Of his early life and education, little is known other than by some means he obtained a license to practice law. When about 23 years old he married Beulah Fox, a girl of only 17 at the time of their marriage who had been born in Missouri. They had one daughter, Virginia, born in 1891.

Wedderburn first emerged in the public record during the mid-1880s when barely out of his teens. Obviously a very canny lawyer and one looking “to make a fast buck,” he established the John Wedderburn Company with the apparent intent of using the Patent Office as his personal cash drawer. By virtue of conning newspapers all across the country into running his ads at discount prices in exchange for “stock” in John Wedderburn & Co., he was able to tout his services, as shown here, to a nationwide audience (Fig. 1).

Wanted—An Idea Who can think of some simple thing to patent?
Protect your ideas: they may bring you wealth.
Write **JOHN WEDDERBURN & CO.**, Patent Attorneys, Washington, D. C., for their \$1,800 prize offer and list of two hundred inventions wanted.

The 1800s were the age of American invention and thousands of would-be Thomas Edisons responded to Wedderburn’s promise of wealth and the possibility of winning a “\$1,800 prize. For an initial \$5 he said he would see if the invention had already been recorded. Inevitably he would find it had not and advise: “There is no doubt that your invention is a very valuable one and that good money could be made out of the same if properly handled.” Handled, that is, by

Wedderburn. He routinely said the sale of a patent could be worth \$5,000 to the inventor.

After collecting an additional \$20 to process the patent application, which in the vast majority of cases he never obtained, if the client seemed to be “a vein easily mined,” Wedderburn sent a letter informing the inventor as follows: “We take pleasure in informing you that the Board of Awards has selected your invention for special merit and our name will appear on our Roll of Honor for last month for the Wedderburn prize.” The letter was accompanied by a medal, shown here, a pitch for more money, and an assurance that the invention “promises to be exceedingly profitable to you” (Fig. 2).



Wedderburn’s \$1,800 prize was never awarded. He later contended that “an \$1,800 prize offer would not be understood to be an offer of an \$1,800 prize.” Federal authorities did not buy that. They asserted that far from helping his clients become wealthy he was milking them for all he could get. In reacting to Wedderburn’s scheme authorities employed a special investigator. In an exhaustive report, he was unsparing in his opinion of Wedderburn’s “Honor Roll” Letter: “There probably could not be a more unblushing fraud perpetrated by the use of the same number of words than crops out of this communication.” Found guilty of “gross misconduct” by the Commissioner of Patents in 1897, Wedderburn was disbarred from doing business with the Patent Office.

But the patent business was not the only gambit that Wedderburn had going from his offices at 618 F Street NW in the District. In 1891, the press reported that the San Francisco Examiner was establishing in Washington an “Examiner Bureau of Claims.” The owner of the Examiner was William Randolph Hearst, one of America’s most powerful publishers. He promised that the Bureau would handle claims before the U.S.

Court of Claims for a standard modest fee instead the 50 percent of awards charged by many claims agents. To head this seemingly philanthropic effort Hearst chose none other than John Wedderburn, hailed as a man who had ferreted out “gigantic contract frauds” at a California Naval Yard for the Secretary of the Navy.

Before long, however, Hearst would regret his decision. In 1894 he went to court asking that the Examiner Bureau of Claims be declared bankrupt and asking that Wedderburn be restrained from further “intermeddling with its affairs.” In his bill of particulars against the Washingtonian, Hearst claimed that Wedderburn had mismanaged claims, created a large indebtedness, improperly used money for his personal expenses, and – most egregious – bilked Hearst’s own mother out of \$8,000.

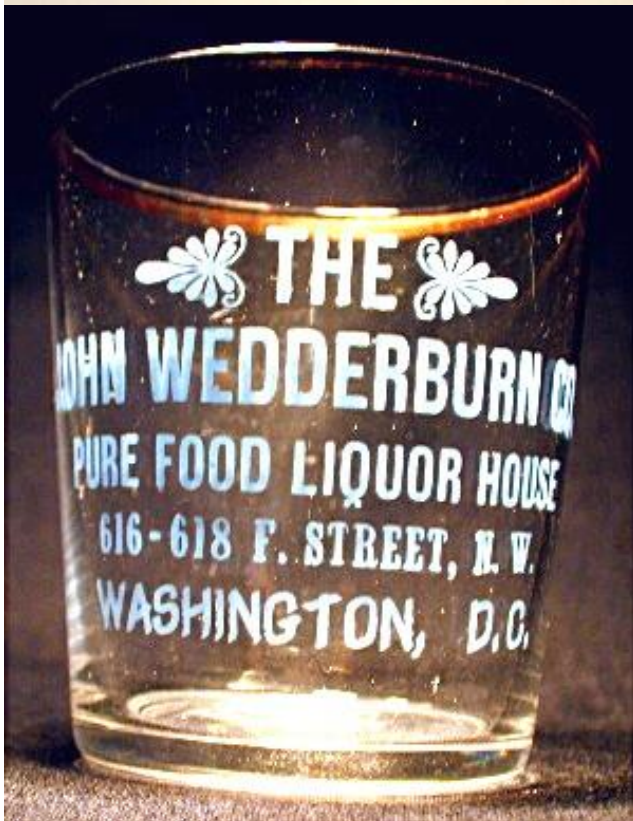
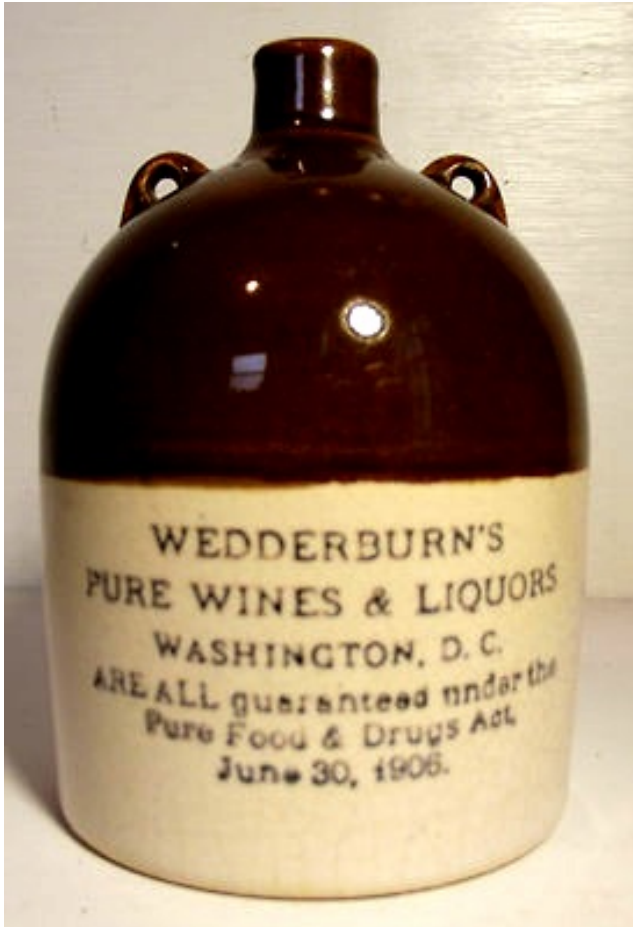
The 1900 census found Wedderburn living at 2208 Ruskin Avenue in Baltimore, with his wife, Beulah, and their daughter. No occupation was recorded for John, now 33 years old and apparently out of work. That would change within the next several years as Wedderburn, despite being disbarred and disgraced, decided to enter the DC liquor business, setting up John Wedderburn’s Pure Wines & Liquors at his old F Street address.

Shown here are two Wedderburn whiskey bottles, a clear pint and an amber quart (Figs. 3,4). Without labels his bottles showed appropriate embossing (Figs. 5,6). He made no pretense that they were straight bourbons, merchandising them as “a modern improved whiskey” made from “pure grain distillates.” It is clear he was operating as a “rectifier,” that is, compounding and blending raw whiskeys with grain alcohol to achieve more mellow flavor. The labels indicate that over time he was raising his prices from \$2.00 a gallon to \$2.25. In addition to his “Wedderburn” brands of whiskey and rye, he also featured other proprietary labels, including “Hallmark,” “Karlans Club,” “Over - Wood,” “The J. W.,” and “Three Points.” As a patent attorney (disbarred) he saw the benefit of trademarks, registering the Wedderburn brand in 1904 and others within a decade.



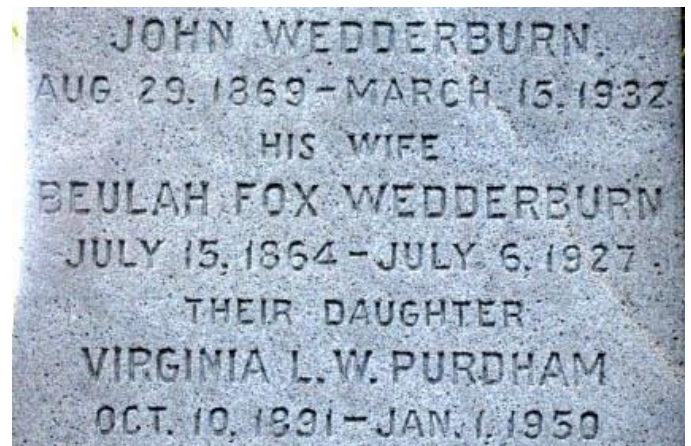
Wedderburn made use of ceramic jugs for his products, chiefly for wholesale (Fig. 7). As many other D.C. liquor dealers did, he also gave away pottery mini-jugs (Fig. 8) to favored customers, each holding several swallows of his whiskey. He also furnished saloon carrying his brands with thin-walled etched shot glasses (Fig. 9). On many of his ads and giveaways, Wedderburn emphasized the word “pure.” His, he claimed, was the “Pure Food Liquor House.” His wines and liquors were “...ALL guaranteed under the Pure Food & Drugs Act of June 30, 1906.” In matter of fact, they were nothing of the sort. Unlike proprietary drugs, the Act exempted most wines and liquors. State purity laws obtained for them but because the District of Columbia was a federal city, there were none. What Wedderburn was putting into his products is anybody’s guess.





For all his notoriety Wedderburn apparently knew how to job the political system in the Nation's Capitol. Probably because of his largesse he was said to have many friends and acquaintances among congressmen and senators. They may have been a principal source of demand for his alcoholic products, easily shipped from F Street up to Capitol Hill. Political connections may also be the reason that in 1915 Wedderburn's ability to practice patent law was restored.

Showing up in D.C. business directories as a liquor dealer first in 1906, Wedderburn apparently had just a little over a decade to operate and flourish before Congress in 1917 declared D.C. "dry." During that period, however, he marketed a number of brands and left behind hundreds of bottles, jugs and giveaway items. The coming of Prohibition seems to have ended Wedderburn's entrepreneurship. The 1920 census found him living in the District of Columbia at 810 North Carolina Avenue. Although still only 51 years old, no occupation was listed for him. He did not show up in the 1930 Census. Wedderburn died on March 15, 1932, at the age of 64. He was laid to rest in Plot B of Washington's historic Rock Creek Cemetery (**Fig. 10**). There he shares a gravestone with his wife, Beulah, and their daughter Virginia, while other Wedderburn relatives are buried nearby.



John Wedderburn probably did live up to his family motto. No "degenerate" was he. He may have more than earned other negative words heaped on him during his lifetime, however, such as "fraud" and "charlatan" (Commission of Patents) or "a man lacking in integrity and honesty" (Hearst). It is unfortunate that he did not leave a memoir. My hunch is that he had many more tales to tell.

Note: The case for disbarment against Wedderburn was made in a lengthy document, now on the Internet, from the Commissioner of Patents. It included a detailed report by the special investigator of how Wedderburn operated to extract patent-related money from gullible inventors. The photographs of bottles and jugs shown here were provided by Dr. Richard Lilienthal, a leading collector of DC bottles.

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows



April 26-27 Old Greenwich, CT
 April 26 Salisbury, NC
 April 26 Aiken, SC
 April 27 Rochester, NY
 April 27 Harrisburg, VA
 May 3 Gray, TN
 May 4 Antioch, IL
 May 4 Utica, NY
 May 17 DeFuniak Springs, FL
 May 18 Coventry, CT
 May 29-31 Grantville, PA (Milk Bottle Collectors Assoc.)
 May 30-31 Butte, MT
 June 7 Ballston Spa, NY
 June 14 San Diego, CA
 June 21 Tallahassee, FL
 June 28 Reno, NV
 July 12 Richmond, RI
 July 19-20 Adamstown, PA

May 10 Mansfield, OH
 May 18 Washington, PA
 May 24 Richmond, RI
 May 31-1 Santa Rosa, CA
 June 7 Raleigh, NC
 June 14 Smyrna, GA
 June 21 Tulsa, OK
 July 12 Leadville, Co
 July 19 Houston, TX
 July 27 Altoona, IA

August 1-3, 2014 FOHBC National Show in Lexington, KY

The Brick, New Jersey show is cancelled.



Roland Longerbeam brought jars and inks to our February meeting. Below is a close-up of his inks.



Jim Sears showed a couple of small bottles that he recently bought at the Baltimore bottle show.



Mike Cianciosi displayed Arlington Bottling Company bottles in an array of colors at our March meeting.