

# The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

*June 2014*

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## June 24 Meeting

Please join us at St. Mark's Orthodox Church in Bethesda at 8 PM. This is our last meeting before the summer break, and our theme will be summer bottles. Please bring bottles with summer patent dates for show & tell.



Views from the May meeting

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

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## Has Anyone Here Seen Kelly?

By Jack Sullivan

[Special to the Potomac Pontil]

Note: About a decade ago I featured the Phil G. Kelly Company in an article for the *Pontil*. In the ensuing years other images and information have come to light that suggested revisiting this Richmond, Virginia, whiskey man.

The Phil. G. Kelly Company first appeared in Richmond directories in 1905. It had 10 years of outstanding success, becoming the leading liquor dealer in the capital city of the Virginia Commonwealth. But just who was Philip Kelly? My research has yielded virtually nothing about the man behind the business. Moreover, a 2011 article about the company in the Richmond Times-Dispatch failed to provide any personal details.

The firm initially was located at the corner of 17th and Franklin Streets. A 1909 ad gives its next address as 1413 East Main St. and shows a three story building with the slogan “The House that Treats You Right.” (Fig. 1). Other ads claim the Kelly enterprise as “importers, distillers and distributors of fine liquors.” One Kelly flyer in 1913 purported to show his “modern distillery” (Fig. 2). Shown here, a barely legible sign on the building indicated that it was Registered Distillery #17 in District #2. A check of registered distilleries in Virginia failed to find such a distillery in District #2.



Fig. 1: Kelly's Richmond Offices

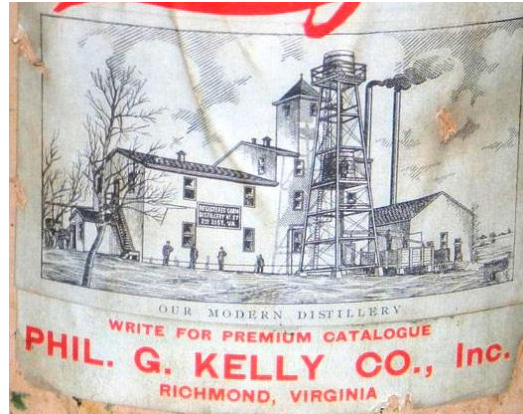


Fig. 2: Distillery Picture

Rather than owning a distillery it is likely Kelly had contracted for the output of one owned elsewhere. He likely was a “rectifier,” that is, running an operation that bought raw liquor from distillers, blended and compounded ingredients, bottled the results, slapped on a label, and sold it to the public.

The sign on the Kelly building claimed “distributors of straight whiskies.” The company also boasted that it handled only “straight goods...the pure food kind.” That may have been disingenuous. Kentucky bourbon distillers were seeking to have the government enforce the Pure Food and Drug Act against rectifiers on the grounds that they made only “artificial whiskey.” Kelly clearly was retaliating by claiming his whiskeys were “straight” and the pure food kind.

Kelly featured more than a dozen brands of whiskey, of which only one – its flagship label “Westover Rye” – was registered in 1905 with a Federal trademark (Fig. 3). Among other Kelly brands were “Huron River,” “Tide Water (Fig. 4),” “Money’s Worth and Climax Whiskey,” “Maryland Belle,” “Bankers Rye,” “Miss Tempting Rye,” “Old Tiverton Rye,” “Kelly’s Special Reserve,” “Virginia Queen Corn,” “El Maize Corn,” “Blue Ridge,” and “Donald Kenny Malt Whiskey.”



Fig. 3: Westover whiskey label





Fig. 4: Tidewater whiskey label

Kelly bottles, jugs and giveaways consistently have been popular with collectors in Virginia and elsewhere. For example, a fairly ordinary looking miniature pinch bottle of Bankers Rye (Fig. 5) sold on eBay in October 2006 for \$357. Kelly packaged his whiskeys in a variety of ways. Among them were labeled and embossed glass bottles (Figs. 6 - 8). Kelly ceramic jugs appear in more than a dozen variations, all prominently bearing his name (Figs. 9 - 11). My particular favorite is a blue and white miniature jug (Fig. 12).



Fig. 5: Banker's Rye bottle



Fig. 6: El Maize labeled bottle (left)

Fig. 7: Embossed flask #1 (right)



Fig. 8: Embossed flask #2



Fig. 9: Kelly ceramic jug #1



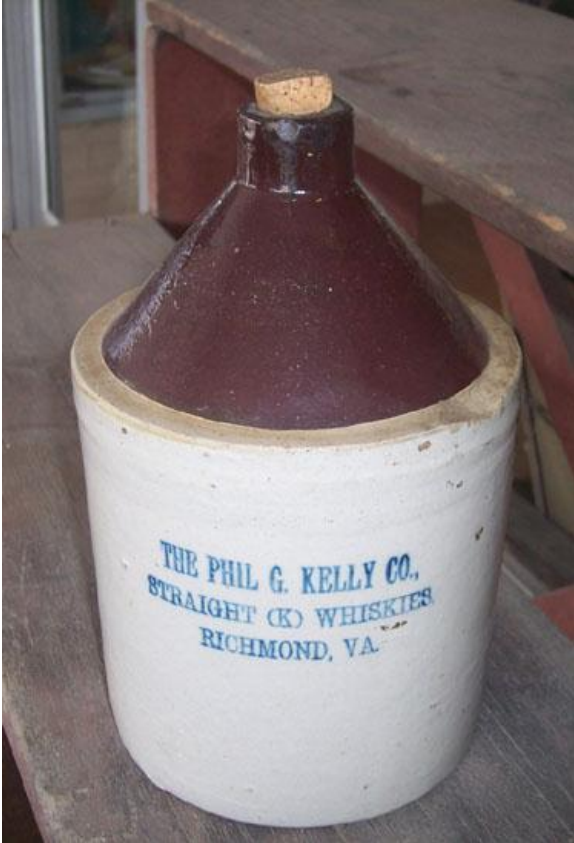


Fig. 10: Kelly ceramic jug #2



Fig. 12: Kelly mini-jug



Fig. 11: Kelly ceramic jug #3

As his business expanded Kelly bought out a competing whiskey dealer, the E.A. Saunders' Sons Company, a firm had been active in the Richmond liquor trade since 1885. Kelly added Saunders' brands to his own. Those included "Casey's Malt Whiskey," "Old Bob Burton Rye," "Old Fulcher Va. Mt. Rye," "Old Bumgardner Va. Mt. Rye," and "Possum Hollow Corn."

Strong in the mail order liquor business, Kelly promised to send his goods in neat, plain packages "with no marks to indicate contents." Kelly's whiskeys, for example, shipped in one, two or three gallon glass jugs packed inside a wooden case. A glass jug, his ad claimed, "constitutes the safest, cleanest and most up-to-date liquor receptacle." (Fig. 13). Another ad said of the glass container: "It's a beauty and you will say so when you see it."



Fig. 13: Mail order ad - 1913

Despite energetic efforts and business success, Prohibition was rapidly closing on Kelly. In 1913 the U.S. Congress passed the Webb-Kenyon Act that forbid any mail order sales of liquor into dry states. Kelly's business was severely affected. In 1915, the firm moved to 427-431 N. 18th St. in Richmond for its final year. After Virginia went dry in 1916 Kelly pulled up stakes and moved his operation to Baltimore, locating at the corner of Baltimore and Howard Streets. He does not appear to have prospered in Maryland as he had in Virginia and his firm disappeared in 1919 with the advent of National Prohibition.

There is an old British music hall song called: "Has Anyone Here Seen Kelly?" Part of the chorus goes: "Has anybody here seen Kelly? K-E-double L-Y. Has anybody here seen Kelly? Find him if you can!" Despite efforts to gain personal information about Phil. G, he remains an elusive figure. He operated for just about a single decade but managed over that brief time to become a Richmond whiskey kingpin whose legacy exists in myriad jugs, bottles, and other artifacts, including watch fobs (Fig. 14). Just who and what Kelly was, however, remains shrouded in time. As the song says, "Find him if you can."



Fig. 14: Thomas Jefferson watch fob

## Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

- June 21 Tallahassee, FL
- June 21 Tulsa, OK
- June 28 Reno, NV
- July 12 Leadville, Co
- July 12 Richmond, RI
- July 19 Houston, TX
- July 19-20 Adamstown, PA
- July 26 Birmingham, AL
- July 27 Altoona, IA
- August 1-3 FOHBC National in Lexington, KY
- August 17 Poughkeepsie, NY
- Sept. 7 Pekin, IL
- Sept. 13 Downieville, CA
- Sept. 13 Salt Lake City, UT
- Sept. 20 Santa Ana, CA
- Sept. 20 Indianapolis, IN
- Sept. 21 Westford, MA
- Sept. 28 Depew, NY
- Sept. 28 Richfield, OH
- Sept. 28 Batsto, NJ
- October 4 Richmond, VA
- October 5 Chelsea, MI



C. Peters Washington D.C. bottle displayed at our May meeting