

The Rookie Dig

By Andy Goldfrank

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About five years ago, my wife and I were waiting for a friend, Meredith Miller, to meet up with us at our loft before we were headed off to a party. Meredith had never been to our place before and when she first walked in, she was immediately drawn to the thousands of bottles and artifacts displayed in every window opening. Even though we were late for the party, we talked about my collection for almost an hour before their connection to the historical past, how to find them, the methods for dating them, the collecting community, and a million other bottle topics.

As you might expect, I do not mind talking about bottles. And most people do not mind listening but their interest usually stops there. They may go so far as expressing interest in tagging along with me on a dig someday, and my response is always the same: anyone is welcome to join me on a dig but getting permission for a site is often last minute so one would have to commit the night before to getting up at the crack of dawn the next day, staying out until daylight fades, undertaking intense physical labor, returning home with sore muscles and covered in mud, and accepting the possibility (especially if in Baltimore) of returning home empty handed. Not many make it past this litany without losing interest, and those who have are filed away in my mental Rolodex to invite next time a dig pops up and we need an extra body. Frankly, such an opportunity does not come around often and when it does, the timing is usually 8 p.m. on the evening before we are scheduled to start at 6:00 the next morning. But I ask, and not until last fall did a single soul ever accept my last-minute invitation. Meredith was the first to follow through.

One Friday night when we were all out for a couple of drinks after work, I received a call on my cell phone from Peter Rydquist informing me that our crew was short a body for the next day's dig. Sitting at the bar, I told Meredith about the opportunity and asked if she might be interested. She committed without hesitation to an all-day

adventure. Before the end of the evening, however, we ended up having to cancel the dig for reasons that now escape me and Meredith's chance to go on her first expedition was wiped out. Meredith continued to express an interest in my bottles, attended the annual Potomac Bottle Show, and even quizzed one of my digging buddies whom she had met one evening.

Ultimately, my guilt about snatching away this digging opportunity from such a willing rookie compelled me to plan another dig that definitely would include Meredith.

A few months after that first invitation, and after collaborating with Peter to identify a decent digging location, Meredith

and I set out early one day for Catonsville, Maryland. Catonsville is a town on the outskirts of Baltimore, which had always caught my eye as a potential digging spot. A few years ago, Phil Edmonds and I spent a morning scouting out the town for likely places to ask permission. As we drove around, Phil shared some of his knowledge about the town, from the use of the Spring Grove Hospital as a ward for injured troops during the Civil War to the age of the old main thoroughfare to tales of prior digs. Over the next couple of years, I read up on the history of Catonsville in the event that we ever decided to test our luck for finding bottles there.

In 1805, a westbound county road, which had been opened in the 1780s by the Ellicotts of Ellicott City between their Patapsco River flour mill and the town of Baltimore, became designated by the state legislature as the Frederick Turnpike. (Today, that route is known as Frederick Road or Maryland Route 144.) In about 1810, Richard Caton, a joint owner of the nearby Baltimore Iron Works Company, began developing property along the roadway under the authority of his father-in-law Charles Carroll, a signer of



the Declaration of Independence. The area he developed became known as Catonville and by the 1830s, the spelling was changed to the now-familiar Catonsville. By the 1840s, due to Catonsville's location along the turnpike, the geography of the land, and the difficulty involved in



making the journey by horses and wagons, the town became a popular rest stop for travelers. This natural and convenient resting place attracted businessmen to the area and spurred the growth of the community.

During this same time period, Catonsville's beautiful rural landscape, combined with the

conveniences of a developed area, helped to attract a major component of this growing community's population before wealthy Baltimoreans. Wealthy Baltimore families came to Catonsville to escape the summer heat of the city by building large estates in the community for use as summer homes. The presence of these seasonal residences generated employment opportunities for both white and black working-class residents, which further ensured community stability and growth. Over the years, many of the summer residents turned into permanent contributors as the town continued to grow and new innovations in transportation were making Catonsville an even more attractive and convenient location to live. Ultimately the businessmen, the wealthy families, and the working class of the community combined to create the unusual dynamic of Catonsville's population.

An impetus in this transformation from a transient to permanent community was the establishment of a horse-car line in 1862. In addition, from the 1850s to the 1870s, the Spring Garden Hospital, located on the outskirts of the town, was slowly constructed and ultimately helped attract traffic and workers who would reside permanently in the area. In 1884, the Catonsville

Short Line Railroad, with a steam engine pulling passenger and freight cars through residential land to a terminus on Frederick Road, made Catonsville more accessible to and from Baltimore, further contributing to the village's growth.

In the 1890's an electric trolley line replaced the horse-car lines and connected the town with downtown Baltimore, making Catonsville a prime location for early suburban development. Eventually, with the advent of major highway building following World War II, which bypassed the community and slowly eliminated the use of the once-bustling streetcars, Catonsville lost its perch on a major thoroughfare and became a small suburban town situated on the edge of Baltimore. It is for this reason that much of the character, layout, and architecture of the center of Catonsville that existed before 1920 remains intact today and also why it is listed on the National Register of Historic Sites. These factors no doubt make it an interesting digging spot.

Meredith and I were scheduled to meet Peter along the main drag in Catonsville near the bakery so we could pick up a quick breakfast and hot drink. Arriving at the construction site less than fifteen minutes after devouring our breakfast, we hopped out and started examining the ground with the hope of seeing an exposed privy, cistern or dump. The area was littered with clues for any privy digger, in the form of porcelain doll parts, pieces of blown bottles and pottery, and spreads of ash. Meredith picked up a couple of whole bottles that rested on the ground



surface, and we quickly focused on an area that appeared to be undisturbed. There was evidence of some older buildings that were now long gone which paralleled the roads surrounding the construction site. Peter and I began probing along one potential

property line and soon hit a large pocket of coal ash and fill

As she progressed, she expanded the hole and hit a layer of clay, indicating that we were not in a pit. Peter then began

probing in the test hole and ended up hitting the walls of a privy less than two feet away. Slowly, we exposed the walls of the pit, which were stone, circular and about four feet across. The top layer of dirt was a mix of light and dark coal ash along with metal from stoves and barrel bands. At the side of the hole where we uncovered the coal ash was a tile drain pipe; evidently, someone had converted the privy into a catch basin for water and back-filled the pipe trench with coal ash sometime after 1920. Peter started in the hole and then I followed. Shortly after I got in, bottles from about 1910 to 1920 started pouring out. We then sent Meredith into the hole.

Less than two minutes later, the rookie uncovered her first bottle and it was a fitting one, a local milk quart embossed AWILTON FARM DAIRY / GEO. J. ZAISER / CATONSVILLE, MD. This find would ensure that Meredith would never forget the location of her first bottle, her first dig,



and her first privy. We found a few more milk bottles in both pints and quarts along with 20 or so other bottles of the same vintage. Peter then ran the probe in to check the depth of the hole and determined that we needed to setup the tripod, as the hole was at least another six feet deep. The bottles we found at the top were sitting on a layer of roofing tar which took us some time to penetrate and pry out. Below the tar was a spongy layer of dirt, ash, and a mass of roots from a recently cleared tree. Peter cleaned out the hole until he hit water, at which point he started a smaller hole for bucketing the water. As he neared finishing the hole, Peter revealed the top of a bottle sitting against the wall, which looked like an ammonia top. He tried to pull the bottle out but it held fast as it was literally locked in from all the tree roots. Ten minutes later, he was able to extract an intact one-and-a-half gallon demijohn in aqua with a tooled lip. Little did we know that Meredith's first bottle recovery and Peter's demijohn would be the highlights of the dig.

Six hours later, as darkness fell, we were about five feet deeper into the privy with nary a good bottle in sight. The digging had been slow and tough because the hole was wet which required bailing and was filled with roots which made it difficult to get a shovel into the dirt. The bottles

got older as we went deeper into the hole at a rate of about 2 or 3 years every foot, with a bunch of Baltimore pre-prohibition beers and other food bottles, both blown and machine made. About eight feet down, we neared the bottom layer which was composed of stones mixed with nightsoil; everything was blown but was shattered. There

were a number of interesting broken embossed whiskey flasks from Baltimore but none of the older bottles we were hoping to find. It became apparent that the privy was not much older than the late 1890s. Nonetheless, we managed to extract some doll parts, buttons, and marbles. Throughout the day, Peter and I both observed that the rookie was holding up her end remarkably well before hauling the heavy buckets of dirt and water around with ease, tugging on the tripod chain without hesitation, and enjoying the bottle talk. She was a true asset to the dig. As we filled in the privy, Peter and I

concurred that there was no way we could have dug that pit without Meredith's help.

That evening, as I dropped off a dirty and exhausted Meredith at her apartment, she told me that she had a good time and was interested in doing it again. I must admit that I was pretty sure that she was offering nothing more than polite courtesies, but a few days later, I overheard a conversation between my wife Joan and Meredith about the Catonsville dig and Meredith repeated a number of times how much she enjoyed digging; she even admitted that she might be hooked. I certainly was impressed because, frankly, this was a tough and physical dig with rather meager results in terms of bottles. Meredith's enthusiasm for bottles no doubt was real. It was clear that not only did she enjoy finding a neat bottle but she also relished the hunt itself even if the haul was minimal. This put a smile on my face because the reason I became addicted to bottle digging was not solely the end result of putting cool bottles and other relics on my shelves, but more significantly the search for those time capsules of the past. I thought to myself, welcome aboard rookie, you're in for a fun ride.