

Back to Baltimore's Deep Brickliners

by Andy Goldfrank

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Privy digging in Baltimore is not for the weak and timid. Persistence, hard work, and knowledge are critical, but even with those three qualities, when it comes to Baltimore, one also needs to be just plain lucky. Prior newsletters have talked about my many digging jaunts in Charm City (see *The Potomac Pontil* issues of September 2001, November 2001, January 2002, February 2004, and others or the articles available at www.baltimorebottleclub.org/newsletter.htm) and have relayed the general lack of quality uncovered compared to my privy recoveries in New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. It is universally accepted among local diggers that excavating an outhouse in Baltimore that produces more than a dozen blown bottles is an exceedingly rare event. Nonetheless, in large part because it is the closest major city to where I live, I continue to tackle these outhouses with only the hope of uncovering some fine adventures as opposed to quality bottles. This is another such tale.



At the end of March, after leaving a meeting of the Baltimore Antique Bottle Club, Phil Edmonds and I checked out a construction site in downtown Baltimore just a few blocks from Oriole Park at Camden Yards. As we shined our flashlights on the rubble and earth of the site through the perimeter chain-link fence, Phil and I were approached by two Baltimore patrol officers who ran our driver's licenses and warned us not to be tempted to dig without written permission from the construction contractor. After repeating "Yes, sir" and "Absolutely, officer" several times, Phil and I left the pit and accepted the fact that we had to write off this site for good. It was then that I spotted a sign on the fence announcing the construction general contractor, a familiar name indeed.

The next day, I attended the birthday party of my friend, Buddy Nutwell. He and I share a common passion: we love collecting old things. For years, Buddy has scoured antique fairs and auctions for rare and interesting collectibles ranging from automobilia to stained glass. Buddy and his son, Gary, had previously joined me on bottle digging expeditions with mixed results; however, we had never gone privy digging. The moment I saw Buddy and Gary at the party, I told

them about the site Phil and I had stumbled upon and our friendly warning from Baltimore's finest – Buddy, who has worked with the general contractor of the site on various projects throughout the Washington Metropolitan area for over a decade, immediately said

he would do what he could to get us into the site. Two weeks to the day later, Buddy picked me up at 5:30 in the morning to dig on that site.

Upon reaching downtown Baltimore, we were joined by Phil and Dodd Delph. Even at that early hour, we were greeted by a cigar-smoking, Harley-Davidson shirt clad project manager. He immediately informed us that the spot we wanted to dig was off limits because it was now behind a retaining wall, and that the remainder of the area we were eagerly sizing up had been back-filled almost five feet. We attempted to probe in one area that was partially excavated and found no signs of an outhouse. Pulling out my maps, which I had obtained from the Library of Congress the previous day, I surmised that the row of outhouses we wanted already had been excavated and back-filled with rubble. Frankly, we were out of luck with nothing to do for the rest of the day.

Phil and I consulted – since both Buddy and Dodd were novices at privy digging – on what to do next. Were we going to call it a day (really, an early morning) or were

we going to try our poor luck elsewhere in Baltimore? Eventually, we both recalled a bricklined pit in West Baltimore which was rumored to have been dug 5 years ago to a depth of ten feet but was never completed. Apparently, the diggers who tackled the hole were overwhelmed by the pit's size and depth (as it was almost 6 feet across) and discouraged by the fact that when they hit ten feet they were still finding predominantly machine-made bottles; plus, the hole



probed out at least another six feet. This privy dig was abandoned by those bottle diggers with the thought that one day they might return with the proper tools and a few more members on their digging crew. Phil and I not only figured that any claims of proprietorship had long since expired but also, and perhaps more importantly, realized that rapidly approaching urban renewal and construction in that section of West Baltimore threatened to obliterate any chance of this pit being excavated to the bottom. We approached Dodd and Buddy with the choice of finishing that hole or trying to line up a fresh one somewhere unknown. We promised no good bottles just the opportunity to dig a hole that was guaranteed to produce some bottles. Without hesitation, they chose the partially dug pit. I recall one of them supporting their decision by suggesting that a partially dug pit would be a lot easier than starting from scratch – little did the rookies know.

In West Baltimore, it appears from the contents of the privies we have dug that in those areas developed after about 1860 or so, builders started constructing round, deep brick privies as opposed to shorter wood-lined boxes or hog barrels and shallow oval or square brickliners. Oftentimes in these Anewer@ neighborhoods, the lots had only one deep, round

brickliner and no other privies. When digging these deep pits, the practice is often to see if the artifacts get older within the first six to nine feet of a large brickliner and then abandon the hole if there are no signs of older relics or if there is a cast-iron stack for a more modern (circa 1900) toilet in the hole. Another deterrent in digging a deep pit is that the back-breaking work requires special equipment (e.g., tripods, chain or rope, block and tackle, buckets, and ladders) and a larger crew of diggers.

When we arrived at the site, we noticed that the house we would dig behind dated from the late 1850s which suggested that there was the possibility of finding some older bottles if the outhouse had not been completely dipped at some point in the past. Recently, I read that Baltimore had a strong privy dipper's union that prevented the wholesale replacement of privies with a sewage system until the 20th Century, unlike virtually all other major cities on the Eastern seaboard from Charleston to Boston. Apparently, the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904 (see www.mdch.org/fire/) prompted the modernization of the city's sewer system. The completion

of this overhaul did not occur until well past World War I for many of the poorer neighborhoods in Baltimore. Thus, we were not surprised to uncover dozens of broken machine-made bottles as we started to re-dig the outhouse.

After two hours of intense digging, our progress was not impressive because the fill used by the previous diggers was not all dirt but rather a mix of anything they could get their hands on to fill this massive hole. Carpets, plastic bottles, an air conditioning unit, roofing materials, and gobs of other modern trash made for slow digging. It was not until after Noon that we finally hit a pocket of undisturbed privy dirt. To our dismay, the nightsoil contained a couple of broken machine-made Bauerschmidts. We could hardly stomach the fact that almost 10 feet deep in the hole we were still finding bottles that dated from just prior to Prohibition.

Buddy looked like he was about to pass out from heat exhaustion, and Dodd was stunned that after so many hours of hard labor the bottles were no older than those found in your typical farm dump. At that point, Phil and I realized that we needed to have an experienced digger in the hole because we had to start moving the dirt at a much faster pace. Otherwise we were going to



be digging well into dark when the neighborhood's open-air drug market would kick into full swing. The thought of being in the midst of strung-out addicts and trigger-finger dealers was not something we desired. So into the hole I went for the next 5 hours.

About twenty minutes after I entered the pit, I finished removing the last of the back-filled debris and sunk my shovel into fresh, undug material. Immediately out of this layer came an interesting machine-made Gin-Gera soda embossed with the image of a bear holding a tray of drinks in perfect condition. The next 10 feet of dirt produced about 20 buckets full of bottles.

The machine-made, crown-top beers and sodas soon gave way to blown crown-tops and eventually transitioned to blob- and Baltimore loop-top steamers and beers. In addition, we found a variety of embossed medicines, strap-sided flasks, local pharmacy bottles, and inks. As the bottles continued to pour out of the ground we slowly went back into the early 1890s. We pulled out a couple variants of blob beers by Kuszmaul intricately embossed with ram's and goat's heads, some fancy Eigenbrot Adonis blob beers, and even some plain but rare Columbia and Berger blob-top beers. A Moffett embossed flask graced our pile of intact bottles, as did a handful of J.C. Hummer, Posner, and Gilbert pharmaceuticals. With only a couple of feet left in the hole, Phil and I held out for the hope that we would break into the 1880s and beyond, perhaps even into the pontiled bottle era. But it was not to be, as the bottom two feet consisted of the same assemblage of bottles and pottery, perhaps from

the late 1880s yet more likely from the early 1890s, as evidenced by the turtle, cylindrical and cone inks we extracted. After flipping the last bit of dirt in the bottom of the privy, in my delirious and physically drained state, my first inclination was to climb out of the 20-foot hole, but I soon came to my senses and requested the chain ladder to extract myself from the pit.

All told, our bottle count was well over a hundred even after we removed the common blown and machine-made crown-top beers. There were 22 different blob and loop beers and sodas totaling almost 40 in number; a dozen local pharmacy bottles; and another dozen and a half medicines such as Jaynes' Expectorant, Radway, Rubifoam for the Teeth, Panopeton, Armour & Co. Digestive, Piso for Consumption, and Insectine. There were also perfumes, fruit jars, Bromo Seltzers, and dozens of cool little trinkets ranging from golf ball-size Bennington marbles to intact Parian statues and glazed pitchers. By the time we filled the hole, packed the trucks, and changed for our ride home, darkness had set in. Although we all wished the pit had gone into an



older time period (especially Phil and me), there was no doubt in any of our minds that we had made the right choice to finish this outhouse. The novice privy diggers, Buddy and Dodd, were evidently exhausted beyond belief but also exhilarated with their tremendous contributions toward this 20-foot privy dig. We had dug for almost 14 hours, found scores of decent blown bottles, and shared in a fulfilling Baltimore bottle digging adventure – one can't ask for much more from a dig in Baltimore.

