

Christmas Isn't Just for Kids!

by Andy Goldfrank

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About a year ago, in my endless quest for pontiled bottles, I was roaming the cobblestone streets of Fell's Point looking for digging spots when a demolition notice posted on the facade of a 1920s concrete slab-floor commercial garage and industrial space caught my eye. Rather quickly, I jockeyed my car into a parking spot and wandered over to examine the site. As I walked over, I memorized the names of the streets surrounding the site so that I could check the location on historical maps. Now a reader might wonder about my interest in a relatively new building when my search is for older, pontiled bottles. First of all, this structure was located in the midst of buildings dating back to the 1700s near the original City Dock and there likely had been older structures on the same lot. Second, a close examination revealed that the building was sitting on a poured concrete slab-floor without a basement which meant that any privies on the site most likely were not disturbed when the older buildings were razed and the 1920s garage constructed.

That night, a review of an 1850s map indicated that between 4 and 6 buildings had been located on the odd trapezoid-shaped lot -- this appeared to be a prime spot. The only problem was that in the coming months I was scheduled to work for long periods of time in Florida meaning that I would not be around to monitor the site or get in on much of the digging. Not wanting a good site to go to waste, I passed on the potential site to a few of my digging buddies.

Over the next six months while the building was demolished and then vacant, a number of us (including yours truly in between trips to Miami) managed to locate and excavate almost 10 privies dating back to the early 1700s with decent results. My



best finds were all damaged or in extraordinarily sick condition and included a cobalt star or scalloped umbrella ink, a "P. BABB / BALTo" soda, and an aqua medicine embossed "Kelly's Patented Mineral Water." Others found comparable pits with pontiled sodas, medicines, and utilities but in general there was nothing outstanding. As predicted, the privies were all intact beneath the garage's concrete slab floor; however, the site was impossible to probe due to a layer of hard-packed fill and the only way to locate an outhouse was to dig test holes. Moreover, because of the odd shape of the lot, it was hard to predict where the privies were

located. By the middle of December, the consensus amongst our group of diggers was that there could be additional outhouses on the site but absent testing every square inch they would be but absent testing every square inch they would be difficult to find – we decided to start focusing on other sites.



Shortly thereafter, Christmas rolled around; my wife Joan and I headed off to New York to spend time with family and friends over the holidays. During this week, I turned off my cell phone so as to have a relaxing time away from the office. As we headed back toward Washington, we planned on staying with Joan's brother in Cherry Hill, New Jersey for a night or two. In order to coordinate arriving at his house, I turned on my cell phone, saw there were messages and was checking my voice mail when I heard a strange message from Tom Salvatore. In typical fashion, he had left a hurried message that he had dug another privy on the Fell's Point site "yesterday," that he had sent me some "cool" pictures, and that he wanted me to call. I then checked the time stamp on the message and realized that he must have dug a privy on Christmas Day. "Hmmm ... this should be interesting," I thought to myself as I wondered how Tom managed to excuse himself from familial duties with his wife Mia and their two boys on Christmas of all days. In answer to my musing, as follows is his tale of his Christmas Day dig

as told via email and orally, and the short answer is simply that if nothing else Tom is one persistent and lucky guy.

Tom says that he "woke up on December 25th and conducted Christmas with Mia and the boys." After the normal stresses of a Christmas with two little boys, Tom told me that he "was later granted some dig time, which I quickly

accepted and ran out the door. My intent was to down to Baltimore to inventory the city for new projects and sites and getting back early enough that the wife wouldn't get too antsy." Tom's first inclination was to revisit the Fell's

Point site, despite the consensus that it was played out, and give it one last try. He later told me: "I walked up to the middle of the lot and drove my shovel into the dirt and bit into wood on the first push. Sure enough there it was, a solid wood wall. There was no doubt that it was a privy."



Following the rotted board, Tom discovered that the pit had been filled with brick rubble for almost three feet. After a couple of hours, he started finding 1880s Baltimore sodas. It appeared that the privy had never been cleaned out and when probed the pit was loaded with privy soil for another four feet. After taking another



foot out of the 4' x 4' square, and discovering 15 more 1880s blob sodas, Tom hit another layer that contained pontiled era relics. Immediately, Tom pulled out a green iron-pontiled P. Babb soda from 1853-57 and as he said "a bottle that alone usually constitutes a great dig in Baltimore. I literally skipped like a schoolgirl with the soda off to my truck and then back to the hole." Within a minute Tom popped out another soda: an iron-pontiled Superior Soda Water with an embossed eagle, shield and crossed flags in cobalt! Back to the truck Tom went. Returning to the outhouse, he shortly thereafter extracted a "Wm. Russell" torpedo from Baltimore. Tom later noted that this was "the first torpedo that I ever saw." Not wanting to waste time, Tom focused on digging and unearthed another group of sodas including four more Baltimore sodas in a row. There was nothing Tom could do so about these trips to his storage site (i.e., his vehicle); thus, as he put it: "It was time to go back to the truck, get a drink and return as fast as I can to the hole. And then the next bottle was

another Superior Soda Water but in amber ... again it was back to the truck time." After that trip he jumped into the hole and flipped out a light blue or sapphire "Polk & Co." ten-pin soda from Baltimore. Unbelievable ... Tom retold the story by noting "it was back to the truck and time to throw some water on my face because I am so excited." As he was cleaning out the corners of the privy box, Tom "cranked out a pile" of miscellaneous aqua pontiled utilities, medicines, and even some transfer-laden Havel, Roussel and X. Bazin Beef Marrow pots and lids. In their midst, he also found

pried a wood board out and stumbled upon "another twin privy with another cubic yard of brown gold!"

In his desire to extract more treasures quickly, Tom violated a cardinal rule of digging and elected to tunnel over to the other side leaving a layer of unstable



bricks hanging over him. He later wrote in an email: "I chose this over digging the hole out from the top down and it was a decision that I would soon regret." After clearing the wood wall from the second privy box, Tom saw the bottoms of three open-pontil bottles. One of those was an open-pontiled Stoddard 12-sided ink. Again it was "back to the truck time." Returning to the outhouse, Tom was scratching out a bottle every few minutes

and "getting further from daylight than I really should but the bottles kept coming." He started filling a 5-gallon compound bucket in his tunnel and carrying it out one bucket at a time. A short time later his fingertips were just touching a bottle that felt like another ten-pin. At last Tom managed to get his hand on the bottle and then a brick hit him in the head. ("And hard."). As he was scrambling out of the cave he had crafted, the whole brick-laden roof collapsed and Tom was hit "hard" twice more. Somehow, he managed to extract himself but now his hole was filled in with bricks. More importantly, the ten-pin was under the pile of rubble and Tom had visions that his poor decision-making to not dig the hole from the top might have broken a rare and beautiful bottle after it had been preserved for over 150 years.

Tom decided to collect his thoughts plus call his wife and tell her that he was alive and well albeit just barely. He also took some aspirin because his head was pounding as evidenced by the three lumps which were rapidly expanding on it. A half an hour later he had gathered himself sufficiently to focus on the task of cleaning out the pit when he realized that buried beneath the fill was his shovel, probe and scratcher. Persistent to the end, Tom remembered that he had a spare army-trenching shovel in his truck. The work of undoing his mess took over an hour but shortly thereafter the bottles were pouring out of the hole. It was another 45 minutes before Tom located the business end of his buried shovel "but the ten-pin was nowhere to be seen." Tom continued digging bottles in the remainder of the privy, including the vicinity of where he thought the ten-pin was located without success. As he was finishing up the pit, Tom yanked on his shovel and pulled it from the pile to

revealed the pontiled base of the ten-pin. In a stroke of pure fate, the shovel had protected the bottle from the bricks crashing down. Shortly thereafter as the sun set on that extraordinary Christmas Day, one persistent and extremely fortunate grown-up kid walked his last bottle to the truck: an intact hat-topped teal green C. A. Cole ten-pin from the late 1840s-early 1850s.

Tom's Final Tally of Bottles & Relics

1 cobalt & 1 amber "SUPERIOR / SODA WATER" with embossed eagle, shield and crossed flags sodas (IP)
 "C.A. Cole / Cole & Co. / C.F. Brown // Baltimore / No. 118 / North Howard St." teal green hat top ten-pin (IP)
 "Polk & Co. / Barnum's / Building // COR. Fayette / & St Paul St / Baltimore MD" sapphire tapered top ten-pin (IP)
 "Wm. Russell // BALT" light green torpedo
 2 "P. Babb" teal sodas (IP)
 "P. Babb" aqua soda (IP)
 3 "Wm Russell" dark green sodas (IP)
 "McKay / & / Clark / BALTo // B." teal (IP)
 "McKay * BALTo // B." dark green (IP)
 "John Clark / F.P. / BALTo // C" dark green (IP)
 "TWITCHELL / T / Phila" dark green hat-top
 "TWITCHELL / T / Phila / SUPERIOR MINERAL WATER" blue teal
 5 unmarked green squat sodas. (IP)
 "C. HONEBERGER" 10" saltglazed crock
 honey amber star or scalloped umbrella ink (OP)
 stoddard amber 12-sided ink. (OP)
 30 or so misc steamer type blob sodas (all Baltimore)
 25 unmarked misc OP utility and medicine bottles
 "Lyon's Kathiron for the Hair" (OP)
 "Davis Pain Killer" (OP)
 5 Genuine Beef Marrow pots with lids (Roussell, Hael, and X.Bazin)

