

# A City's Fame: Hunter Baltimore Rye

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Special to the *Potomac Pontil*

“There is no article made in Baltimore that has done more to spread the fame of the city as a commercial centre than has Hunter Baltimore Rye.” From *Baltimore: Its History and Its People*, published in 1912.

That high praise for their liquor must have been eye candy for the William Lanahan family, by 1912 one of the prominent families of Baltimore, whose fortunes and social standing were built on making the first whiskey to call itself Baltimore Rye.

Not that the founding father, William, was shanty Irish when he founded the business. While there is scant information about his life, he is said to have achieved some wealth and influence by 1860 – the eve of the Civil War – when he began producing and selling a whiskey he first called Hunter Rye and, soon after, Hunter Baltimore Rye.

## “The American Gentleman’s Whiskey”

From the beginning, the brand exhibited aristocratic pretensions: The label and ads featured a man dressed in fox-hunting garb astride a horse set to gallop with the hounds (Fig. 1). Subsequent branding featured a horseman with top hat and the slogan: “The American Gentleman’s Whiskey.” (Fig. 2). This pitch clearly was attempting to appeal to the upper classes or people aspiring thereto.



Figure 1 - An early Lanahan ad

In 1870, say the earliest city directories, Wm. Lanahan & Son already was doing business at 20 N. Light Street. The company was at that location in 1904 when the great Baltimore fire destroyed its building. It relocated at 205-207 Camden shortly thereafter but got permission to rebuild at its old location after the widening of Light Street. In 1906 the family firm resumed business in a newly constructed building at 20 Light St. Its three story facility, known as the Lanahan Building, loudly announced its purpose with the word “whiskey” in prominent letters on its face (Fig. 3) It also proclaimed Wm. Lanahan & Son as



Figure 2 - Hunter Baltimore Rye label



Figure 3 - The Lanahan Bldg. at 20 Light Street

“distillers.” Jim Bready, the noted expert on Baltimore whiskey, insists that the Lanahans actually were “rectifiers,” who took alcohol distilled by others, mixed it with other ingredients and merchandised it.

Although the firm marketed other whiskeys, among them “365,” Bodega, and Hunter Bourbon, Hunter Baltimore Rye was its flagship brand. The Lanahans embarked on a major advertising campaign, painting its logo and huntsman on the outfield fences in major league baseball parks in New York and Chicago as well as in Baltimore. Several years ago when a building was torn down at Broadway and 64th St. in Manhattan, the heart of the theater district, it uncovered a huge, colorful ad for Hunter Baltimore Rye (Fig. 4).



Figure 7 - Hunter Rye paperweight

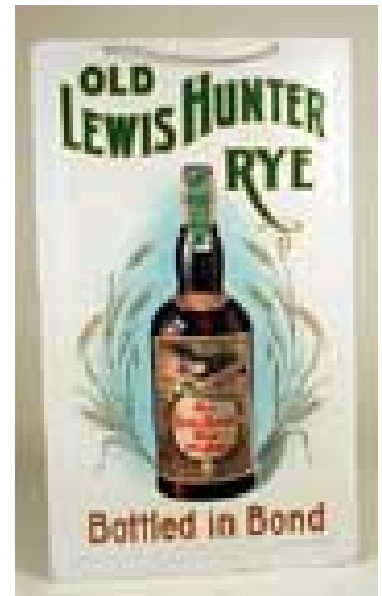


Figure 8 - Hunter Rye salt & pepper

Figure 9 - Sign for Old Lewis Hunter Rye (below)

Never shy about extolling the virtues of their whiskey,

the Lanahans advertised Hunter Baltimore Rye as “The Perfection of Aroma and Taste...the Leading Whiskey of America.” Perhaps recognizing that its appeal as a “gentleman’s” whiskey might have a negative effect on potential female customers, their rye also was touted as “particularly recommended to women because of its age and excellence.”



All this hype worked. Hunter became the largest selling rye whiskey in America, bringing the praise from the 1912 book that opens this article. Others were not so sure of its benefits. In 1900 Robert M. La Follette, the governor of Wisconsin, was pressing his opposition controlled legislature to pass an elections reform bill but action was blocked during a night session of “wild carousals and debauchery” not seen in a Wisconsin legislative hall even in frontier days. Mrs. La Follette later wrote: “The Assembly floor was a sight to behold. Just in front of the tier of desks was an empty bottle marked “Hunter’s Rye.”



Figure 4 - The off-Broadway sign in NYC

### Marketing Genius

Unusual for the time, the Lanahans employed a sales force of six men who traveled the country marketing the whiskey and signing up local distributors. In 1896, for example, Christy & Wise of Sansome St. in San Francisco advertised themselves as sole agents for Hunter Rye. As was common with brands seeking national attention, the Lanahans issued a wide range of advertising items. Among them were including nips, including a miniature ceramic teapot (Fig. 5) and a glass bottle in the shape of an oyster shell (Fig. 6). It issued at least three varieties of paperweights. A scalloped one declared Hunter Baltimore Rye “unexcelled in purity.” (Fig. 7) Other Hunter give-aways were salt and pepper shakers (Fig. 8) and playing cards (Fig. 9).

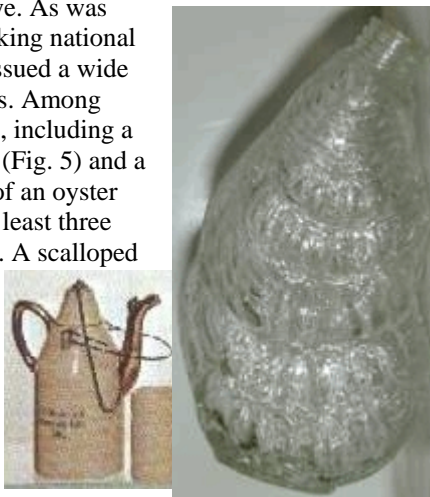


Figure 5 - Hunter Rye ceramic teapot nip (above left)

Figure 6 - Hunter Rye glass oyster shell nip (above right)

## Hunter Rye Goes Global

Having conquered America, the Lanahans looked abroad to expand their markets. In London in the program of a performance of “Sherlock Holmes” Hunter Rye was advertised as “The Popular American Whisky.” (Brit spelling) – the lone Yankee booze sold at the Duke of York Theater that season.

In 1902 the firm tried to get a concession from the imperial court of China. Letters to that effect exist from Wm. Lanahan & Son to Gen. Thaddeus S. Sharretts in Shanghai. Sharretts had been appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1901 to negotiate with the Government of China on the import of U.S. goods. The Lanahans’ effort may have paid off. A Hunter sign in Chinese recently sold on Ebay. Another Asian port in which Baltimore rye found a place was in Manila, the Philippines. A photo exists of American soldiers of the 8th U.S. Infantry, in the islands to put down an insurrection, swigging down quarts of Hunter Rye during their off-duty hours.

With success came competition. Many other whiskeys began to call themselves Baltimore rye – even products made hundreds of miles from the Maryland city. Moreover, in 1895 the Shields-May Company of Cincinnati issued its “Hunter’s Own Bourbon” and Sherbrook Distillery of the same city had its “Hunter’s Lake” whiskey. From Lair, Kentucky, came the brand “Old Lewis Hunter Rye. In likely reaction to these presumed copycats, the Lanahans registered “Hunter Rye” with the government as a trademark in 1890 and again in 1905; and “Hunter Baltimore Rye” in 1898 and in 1908.

Wm. Lanahan & Son and its brand survived for 59 years, a long corporate life in the turbulent history of Baltimore whiskey-making. By the time the doors to the operation finally closed in 1919 with the coming of Prohibition, the Lanahans had moved into the world of banking and high finance. One Lanahan became a governor of the New York Stock Exchange. Another achieved a measure of fame by marrying Scottie Fitzgerald, the only child of author F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. Those Lanahans moved to Washington, D.C., where they were a glamour couple during the 1950s and 1960s.



Figure 10 - 1930s pint bottle of Hunter Rye

The Hunter Rye name survived Prohibition having been bought by one of the big whiskey cartels. Shown here is a post-Pro pint bottle with the familiar horseman trademark (Fig. 10). As late as 1942 the brand was being advertised in national magazines, as shown here (Fig. 12). The brand subsequently faded from view and remains today only as a reminder of the whiskey-making family that put Baltimore rye on the map.

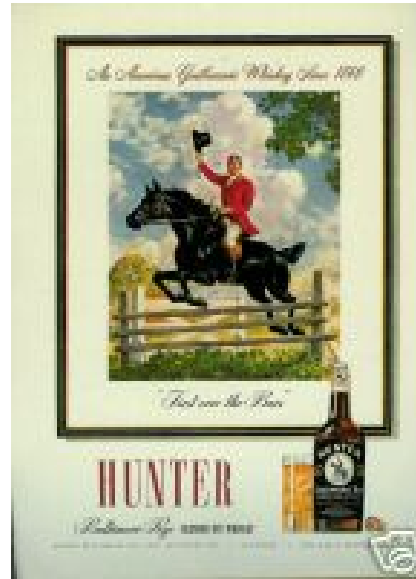


Figure 11 - 1942 national ad for Hunter Rye

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NOTES: Material for this article has been gathered from a wide range of sources. A key one was the article by Baltimorean Jim Brady entitled “Maryland Rye: A Whiskey the Nation Long Fancied – But Now Has Let Vanish” that appeared in the Winter 1990 issue of the *Maryland Historical Magazine*.

