

The Frustrations (and Joys) of Baltimore Privy Digging

by Andy Goldfrank

{This article also appeared in the Potomac Pontil}



Shortly after moving to Washington, D.C. in 1997, I was honored to be invited to view a bottle collection assembled by a fine southern gentleman. Although he did not know me by name until shortly before we met that day, he graciously welcomed me into his home to show me his treasure trove of glass. It was there, while surrounded by antique general store cabinets filled with tens of thousands of colored sodas, labeled whiskeys, odd-shaped bitters, pontiled medicines and every other type of bottle imaginable in every color, size and shape known, that this gentleman started educating me in his slow, soothing drawl.

To this day, I can hear every word as though he is standing right beside me at this moment: “Andrew . . . it sounds like you are a digger . . . a real fine digger. Well . . . now that you’ve come to join us here in this area to do a little of digging, there are some things you really should think about. You see . . . forget

about digging in Washington, D.C. . . . you’ve got to head a little further north.” Not knowing where this conversation was headed my response was: “Frederick? Or old towns along the C&O Canal? Philadelphia?” This kind gentleman’s eyes and mouth crinkled in a fatherly smile and then he said, “Andrew . . . listen close . . . there’s this place in Baltimore diggers call Torpedo Alley. Do you know why they call it that?” Clearly I did not and quickly told him so. Continuing in his sugary twang, all the while nodding his head knowingly and pointing to a display

case, he said “A few years ago, when they were excavating for a new office building, every pit on that alley had at least one colored Baltimore torpedo . . . take a look here at this cabinet . . . you really should go dig a few.” Needless to say that display case had more than a few torpedos and they were in every color of the rainbow. In quick order those words “Torpedo Alley” became etched in my head and echo every time I venture off to Baltimore to dig privies.

The problem is that those words of inspiration have gotten awfully hard to hear; instead, another patented phrase has consumed them: “Where are all the whole bottles? Oh yeah, how could I forget . . . we’re digging in Baltimore.” This arises from the fact that since handling those glass egg- and round-bottomed colored bottles worthy of many dreams, I have dug over 100 privies in the heart of Baltimore without finding more than five bottles for my

collection, let alone a whole torpedo or tenpin from the city. I must admit my collecting interest is primarily pontiled or colored pre-1880 bottles but it is my opinion that if one dug the equivalent number of privies in any other East Coast city the results would be markedly different. Proof in point is that I dug a green, iron-pontiled tenpin embossed "Luke Beard" on one of my rare forays during this time frame to New York City. In addition, lest you think that I am incompetent Baltimore digger, I have found hundreds of Baltimore bottles just not of the age and type that I desire. The problem is rooted in the overly diligent honey dippers of Baltimore.



Before getting into that analysis of my failures to locate "Torpedo Alley," let me share with you a short history of Baltimore's development that has enabled diggers to hone in on the most likely areas to find these elusive torpedos and tenpins.

The future site of the City of Baltimore was a natural harbor on the Chesapeake Bay with a number of potential mill sites on the streams dropping over the fall line. Baltimore County's tobacco growers anxious to have a conveniently located customs house, along with farmers bringing cereal crops to the grinding mills built on these shores, were impatient with requirements that made them carry their goods to previously established ports. These landowners petitioned Maryland's governor for a customs house, and "Baltimore Town" was officially created by an act of the Maryland Colonial Assembly on 1729, and 60 acres were surveyed in 1730. Local entrepreneurs, conscious of northern Maryland's and southern Pennsylvania's grain fields, took advantage of Baltimore's

swift-flowing streams, a rarity in coastal Maryland. Shipwrights and merchants, preparing to carry flour milled on Jones Falls and Gwynns Falls to the distant reaches of the British Empire, settled along the fringes of the harbor. By 1768, the town had grown large enough to become the seat of Baltimore County.

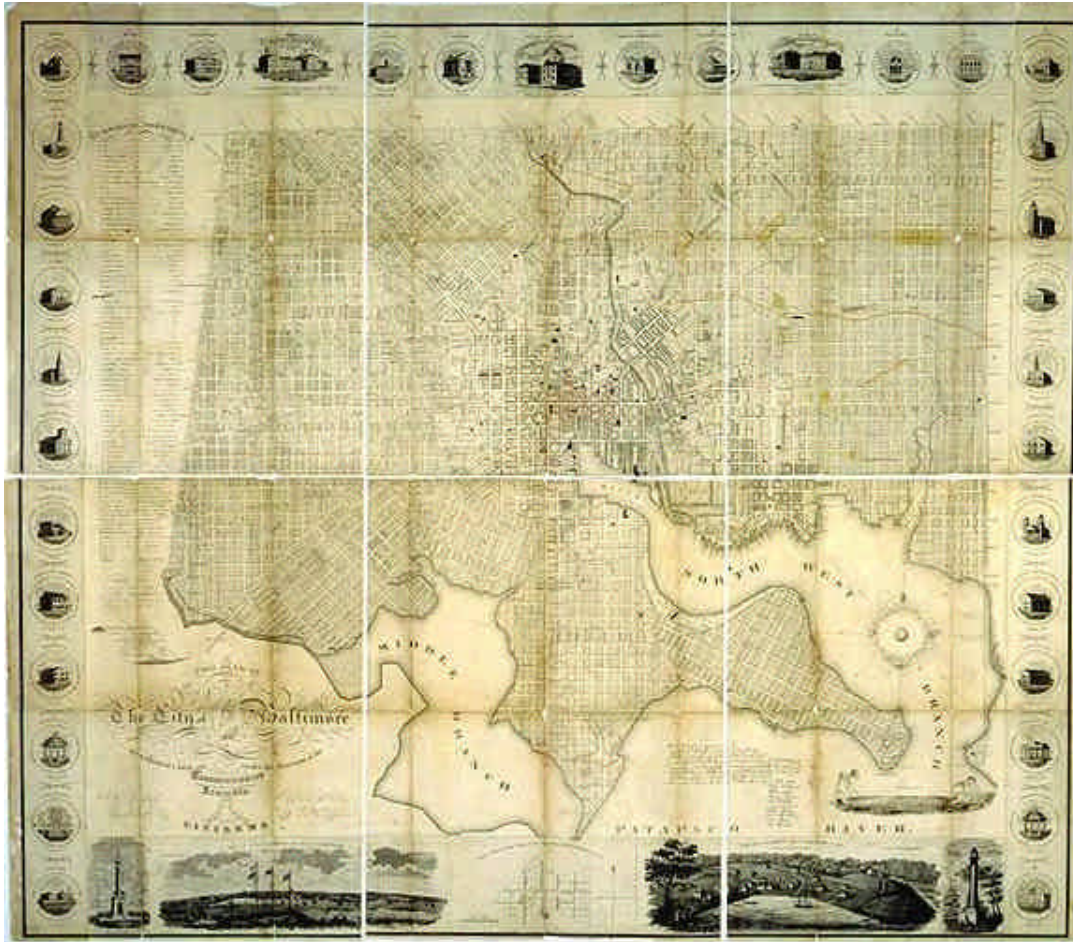
In 1773, Fell's Point was annexed by Baltimore Town situated around the inner basin. These communities were incorporated as Baltimore City along with Jonestown to the west in 1797. Jonestown goes back to the late 17th century, when David Jones founded a settlement adjacent to his mill on Jones Falls. Jonestown was incorporated as a community distinct from its neighbors, Baltimore Town and Fell's Point,

comprising an area bound by Front Street, High Street and the Jones Falls on down to about Pratt Street. While Baltimore Town and Fells Point were busy port centers, Jonestown was a residential area for the wealthiest people of the era who desired a life away from the hustle and bustle. In contrast, with deep water almost to its shoreline, Fell's Point from the beginning was a magnet for trade. It served as the original Port of Baltimore for over a hundred years, since the inner harbor basin was too shallow for ocean-going vessels. At the beginning of the 19th century, with immigration and economic growth, the population of Baltimore grew in both numbers and wealth. Baltimore played a crucial role in the War of 1812, when soldiers, stationed at Fort McHenry, successfully held off a British attack on Baltimore. (That victory for Baltimore was commemorated in a poem by Francis Scott Key which is familiar to all as our national anthem.). When the war ended in early 1815, the city was unscathed and

Baltimoreans resumed their vigorous foreign trade efforts.

During this period, a large annexation of land was authorized, bringing the total acreage of Baltimore to 8,448. The Board of Commissioners employed Thomas H.

By 1825, there were some 60 flour mills within a few miles of center city, as Baltimore became the second largest municipality in the United States. However, the frontier was pushing beyond the Appalachians into the vast and rich farmlands of western Pennsylvania, Ohio,



Poppleton "to survey the new boundaries, lay out streets in the annexed territory, select lots for public uses, and harmonize street names" His assignment from the Board dictated that the layout of the old part of the City was not to be changed; therefore, this section was mapped as is shown on his 1823 rendering. (Poppleton's suggestions for the development of Baltimore were followed quite closely during the next seventy years until a subsequent annexation in 1888.)

Indiana, Illinois and Missouri, threatening to leave Baltimore behind in its economic wake. Other ports were already making efforts to connect with the West: New York completed the Erie Canal in 1825, Philadelphia was organizing what would become the Pennsylvania Railroad, and even smaller cities like Richmond and Charleston were reaching westward. The State of Maryland concentrated its efforts on completing the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, designed to link the Potomac and Ohio

River valleys, but Baltimore supported an overland link in the form of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (“B&O”). Although the two competed for routes and freight, to the eventual ruin of the canal and the financial embarrassment of the state, Baltimore’s railroad reached

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027.html>).

Long considered a southern town, during the Civil War Baltimore was occupied by federal troops (who also seized the railroads and



Cumberland in 1842 and Ohio shortly thereafter.

Baltimore owed much of its early growth and prosperity to its desirable East Coast location situated between the agricultural riches of the South and the industry of the North. The addition of the B&O contributed by linking the rich farmlands of the West to a major Atlantic port that was further inland (and westward) than any other on the seaboard thereby attracting merchant shippers to Baltimore’s harbor from around the nation and the world, in addition to the regional shipping throughout the rivers of Maryland and Virginia. By 1850, the City’s population was over 169,000, with only New York having more people, and greater than the combined populations of the number 8, 9 and 10 cities (including St. Louis and Albany). (See “Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990” at

occupied Annapolis) to keep Maryland in the Union and to prevent Washington D.C. from being surrounded by Confederate states. The end of the Civil War found Baltimore suffering nearly as much as the cities of the former Confederacy. The collapse of the South’s economy naturally affected one of its leading ports of entry, as did the loss of many vessels during the war. The city gradually recovered helped by an influx of displaced Southerners, as well as by the tremendous amount of grain which the B&O brought to port from the West.

Although the story of Baltimore does not end in the early 1870s, for me there is no point to going much further since my focus is finding another “Torpedo Alley.” It is known that by 1888, Baltimore contained nearly 80,000 houses almost all of brick -- the vast majority of which were built before 1870. Baltimore has continued to show economic growth, however, the city has declined in population in recent decades. As

a consequence, the city retains many of its 18th and 19th century structures and provides plenty of opportunity for dedicated bottle diggers.



Typical development, during the period when torpedos and tenpins would have been used, occurred on the perimeter of the city, such as to the west of roughly where Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard is located, to the north of Fell's Point in Butcher's Hill, and in areas just east of the present day Patterson Park. For example, frame and brick houses of farmers and workers dotted Preston, Biddle, and Ross (now Druid Hill) before 1840; however, early urban housing was not built along Preston, Biddle, and Pennsylvania until the 1850s and along Dolphin until the 1860s. All over the city, developers eager to build housing as densely as possible, marketed three-story brick row houses to city merchants on large main street building lots with narrow twelve foot-wide alley homes (brick and frame shanties) behind these main streets. Slaves along with white and free black servants?drivers, stable men, and domestic workers?lived on the network of back streets.

The physical development of the city's structures is well represented on the Poppleton's Survey of 1823 (discussed above), the Sidney & Neff Plan of the City of Baltimore from about 1851, and E. Sachse, & Co.'s Bird's Eye View of the City of Baltimore dated 1869. The Poppleton Survey and Sachse Bird's Eye View are available on the internet at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/finder.html> and <http://www.mdhs.org/library/MappingMD/rm4.html> with a little effort. These maps are a boon to diggers who use them to identify areas likely to have privies containing bottles from the 1860s or earlier.

However, knowing where to dig a privy does not create a certainty that one will find old bottles or even any bottles at all. During the last four years, I have been involved in digging over 100 of these potential time capsules in Baltimore: wood-walled box privies up to 10 feet across and 12 feet deep; round, oval, square and rectangular brick-lined outhouses up to 35 feet deep and 8 feet across; and, barrel privies up to 12 feet deep (they were stacked on one another) and 4 feet across. The vast majority -- not including the deep brickliners -- pre-date the 1850s or had been dipped out to before that time period. Moreover, the multiple cleaning efforts often destroyed the few bottles that were left behind by the honey-dipper. It is common to find just a few shards of a rare pontiled medicine or the side of a tenpin soda and perhaps a lone pontiled unembossed utility bottle, at the bottom of a pit filled with 1890s trash.

In turn, older black glass era outhouses tend to have few intact bottles or other artifacts, often resulting in heaps of pottery, glass and clay pipes alongside one's holes. Many diggers piece together these artifacts; after all, if you are not finding bottles you have to bring something home for all the time spent

and it creates a meaningful record of the dig. My walls are covered with glue-backs of redware plates and transfer ware that are relatively easy to put together as long as one carefully extracts all of the shards from the pit. This is a nice reward for digging in

wealthier neighborhoods built in the 1860s the lots will often have only a brickliner and no other privies. Prior to our recent efforts, it was common practice amongst privydiggers to see if the artifacts get older within the first six feet of a large brickliner and then



Baltimore; however, the distressing thing is that these glue-backs are often the only positive results after digging a dozen privies. The paucity of glass results in the oft-repeated rhetorical statement: “Where are all the whole bottles? Oh yeah, how could I forget . . . we’re digging in Baltimore.”

In an attempt to buck this trend, recently, a group of diggers have decided to dig some of the deeper brick-lined privies that can be upwards of 30 feet deep in hopes of finding some good bottles. (The success of diggers in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh who email us pictures of tremendous bottle hauls is our primary motivation.). In Baltimore, it appears that in the areas which were developing in the 1860s contractors started to build round, deep brick privies as opposed to shorter wood-lined boxes or shallow oval brickliners. This is known because in the

abandon the hole if there are no signs of old stuff or if the cast-iron stack for the toilet is in the hole. To date our attempts at digging deeper brickliners have resulted only in bottles dating to the late 1870s at the earliest. These bottles have included some rarities, such as an unlisted cobalt master ink from New York, an early 1880s St. Louis Brewing Company amber beer, and some hereto unknown Baltimore blob beers, but generally the results have been extremely disappointing for the many hours of back-breaking work that are required.

In general, I was tempted to write off digging privies in Baltimore altogether and instead save my vacation time to take digging trips to other cities where my efforts were sure to reap better results. Then, while I was away on business, I heard rumors in the local digging circles of some decent

outhouses being dug in Baltimore. By the time I got back to the site, a construction job north of Little Italy, all the pits had been located and dug out. Also, the site had been bladed and then compressed with a roller destroying any remaining privies. Opportunity had come and gone for me but I thought here was a chance to renew my faith in Baltimore's privies so I tracked down the diggers to learn their tale.



As it turned out, the dig started out like many others in Baltimore. A construction site had appeared virtually overnight and permission had been secured to dig the outhouses. Chris Vaught and Phil Edmonds, ventured onto the lot and spotted bricks that appeared to have been dragged by the bulldozer. They immediately located the likely spot where these bricks came from and probed out 2 small brick-lined pits within a few feet of each other.

outhouses started about a foot below grade. Phil and Chris started removing ash and plaster debris from the first outhouse. Approximately 3 feet down out popped a olive-green porter shaped bottle embossed with a local brewer (F.&L. Shaum) and the name Baltimore Glass Works. Beside that bottle there were 2 other broken ones and a crude black glass "PATENT" whiskey. Less than a foot later the privy was completed. As Chris later said, "we were surprised at how shallow the privy was and even more surprised at the quality of the bottles." In a rarity for Baltimore, it appeared that this pit had not been dipped at all!

Hearts racing (they had whisked their finds off to the truck for safekeeping) and emotions running high, Phil jumped into the next pit that was 3.5 feet away and started to remove ash and wall debris again. At 2.5 feet, Phil extracted the next bottle – a rich olive-green "Boyd" torpedo from Baltimore! Chris immediately went to the truck to wrap the bottle and when he returned Phil was out of the hole, full of nervous energy, pacing and looking up at the sky. Jumping into the pit for the first time, Chris moved about 2 inches of soil and revealed the surface of a cobalt bottle. Extracting the bottle, it turned out to be a light cobalt tenpin embossed "C.A. Cole / Cole & Co. / C.F. Brown" in an oval on one side and "Baltimore / No.

118 / North Howard" in an oval on the other side. This was a rare privy laden with whole bottles and they were still only 3 feet in with at least another foot remaining (if it was like the last privy).

Chris brushed aside the pieces to some other broken embossed sodas that revealed a complete 8 inch tall green "Wm. Russell" of Baltimore fame. Minutes later Chris spotted the bottom of another tenpin, but this turned out to be broken with a missing neck. It was light green and embossed "McKay & Clark / Baltimore / Franklin." Moments later he recovered the neck which fit like a glove along with yet another torpedo. This last torpedo was a rich olive-green but despite Chris best efforts at the time (he kept rubbing the bottle to double check) it was unembossed. A "Kidder's Indelible Ink" followed as did two

“London / Mustard” bottles. One mustard was in a rich lime-green color. This pit also contained some early 1830s intact bottles including a rare light-green snuff and an unembossed black-glass half dollar. English patent medicine, along with A hand-painted Leeds style cup. To close out the hole there were a number of pontiled puffs and even an 1830s U.S. half-dollar.

Despite being a mere four feet deep, in all respects this was one rich hole!



In the past, I have asked Chris to regale me with tales of decent holes or pits with lots of broken shards as motivation yet those stories always seemed few and far between. Chris and Phil have both told me since that this was the “glory hole” they had been awaiting in their 20 plus years of digging privies in Baltimore. It appears that Chris and Phil finally have a tale for the ages. Perhaps the moral of excavating the outhouses of Baltimore, unlike most other cities, is that when one digs Baltimore privies they are usually bad but when they are good . . . well . . . you are in “Torpedo Alley.”