

## FARMER DISTILLERS OF MARYLAND

by Jack Sullivan  
(Special to Bottles and Extras)

The production of whiskey before the American Revolution was insignificant. Rum was the drink of choice for our rebellious forefathers. But rum had to be imported from the Caribbean and was expensive. What lay at hand in the U.S.A. were abundant fields of rye, wheat and corn. Recognition spread that a good way to add value to a ton of grain was to turn it into gallons of whiskey.

In rural Maryland whiskey-makers tended to fall into two distinct categories: local farmers and immigrants from Europe. Operating outside the thriving distilling center of Baltimore, these entrepreneurs began by depending largely on local sales of their "Maryland Rye" and other alcoholic potables. As we will see, several succeeded in forging regional and even national reputations for their brands.

The logic of a Maryland farmer becoming a distiller during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries is clear. Getting a ton of corn to market was expensive and the return could be low. The same ton turned into whiskey might bring ten times the return. In nearby Virginia, Farmer George Washington understood these economic realities and set up his distillery. (See my article in the Summer 2005 issue of *Bottles and Extras*). Less than a hundred miles from Mount Vernon, across the Maryland state line, two neighbors epitomized the farmer-distiller. They were Levi Price and Luther King.

### The Levi Price Story

Levi Price was born on October 22, 1835, in Frederick County, Maryland, in what was then the Urbana District, near the present community of Hyattstown. His father was Elijah Price, a well-known farmer who himself had been born in that locale. His mother was Sarah Ann Wolfe. There is little information on Levi Price's early life and education but he soon showed signs of being a canny businessman.

An article on Price in the Sept. 30, 1904 issue of *The Citizen* newspaper of Frederick City, claimed that when the

distiller launched himself into business in 1858 at the age of 23, he had only 93 cents to his name. His initial enterprise was to rehabilitate an old mill where he began a small flour milling operation. Its financial success apparently allowed him to woo and win Laura Virginia McElfresh of Hyattstown. Ms. McElfresh was related to an old and distinguished Virginia family with ties to Revolutionary War stalwarts. She would bear him ten children — three sons and seven daughters.

Price's milling venture proved so successful that in 1867 he had the financial strength to build a three story high distillery at the point where Bennett Creek crosses Green Valley Road. He seems to have succeeded rapidly in the whiskey trade. The 1904 newspaper states: "Levi Price has undoubtedly engaged in a business which he is well suited for, and long years of experience and an accurate knowledge of grain has helped make him what he is."

His picture, taken at the peak of his success, shows a steely-eyed resolve [Figure 1].

### Success Comes to Levi

In 1879 Price built the Green Valley



Figure 1: Levi Price - from *The Citizen* newspaper of Sept. 30, 1904

Flouring Mills and began manufacturing a product he called "Fine Family Flour," a product that commanded a substantial regional market. For a time he operated a general merchandise store in nearby Clarksburg [Figure 2]. He also bought up surrounding fields, no doubt to produce sufficient grain to supply his distillery and mill. Eventually he owned 525 acres of prime farm land.

But it was whiskey that made Levi rich.

His principal brand, called "Pure Rye Double Copper Distilled Whiskey," not only was popular locally but had a regional and eventually a national reputation.

Price's profitability may have resulted from some innovations he made in the

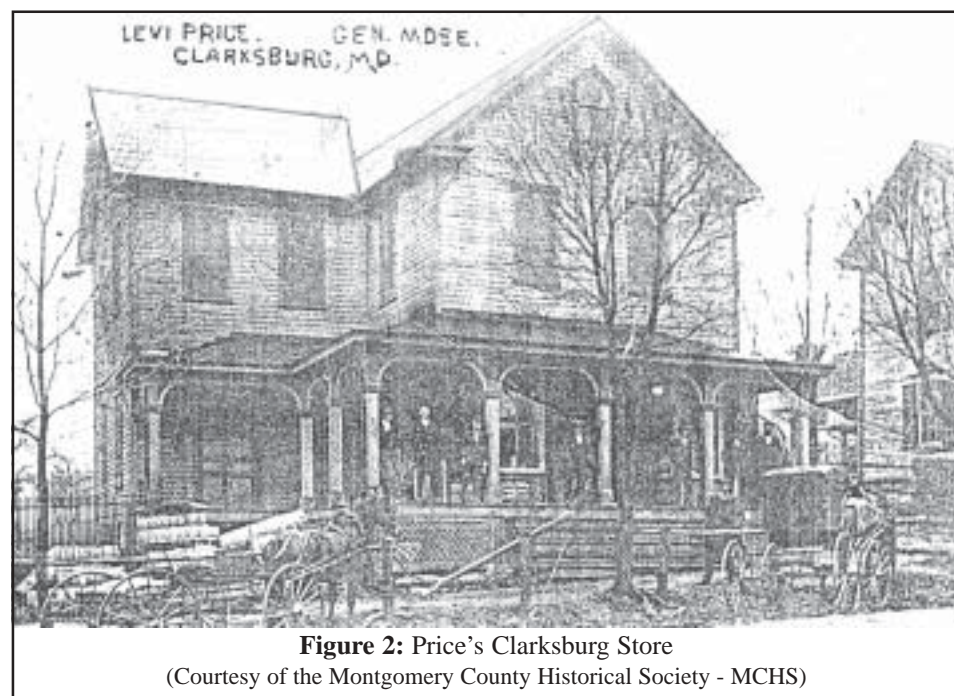


Figure 2: Price's Clarksburg Store  
(Courtesy of the Montgomery County Historical Society - MCHS)



**Figure 3:** Price's Distillery Road sign.

distilling process itself. He recognized that any form of adulteration led to objectionable tastes common in the newly made, "raw" whiskey of his day. By using care in the cleanliness of his process and perhaps a "secret" additive or two, he apparently was able to manufacture a product that had the taste and smoothness of an aged whiskey while being newly distilled. By eliminating most of the aging process, he saved money and was able to sell his whiskey for less than the competition.

In 1878, as sales rose and the production of his Maryland rye at an all-time high, Price talked the county into constructing a road that ever since has borne the name of his manufactory [Figure 3]. The road ran north to Ijamsville, Md., where a railroad station was located and south to Damascus in Montgomery County. There it linked with other roads that led to Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. Buyers from as far north



**Figure 4:** The Thistle Cottage.



**Figure 5:** The Levi Price house.

as New York City could take the B&O (now CSX) train to Ijamsville or Monrovia Md. and reach the farm distillery by horse and buggy.

To cater to these travelers, Price converted a cottage that stood near the distillery on Green Valley Road into the distillery office and an overnight guest house. By the time the whiskey had been tasted and business transacted, it often was too late for buyers to return to the evening train. They were offered a place to stay at the rear of the cottage. They also ate at the Price family table.

The cottage [Figure 4], which dates from the 1860s, still stands. It is known widely as "Thistle Hill" — perhaps because

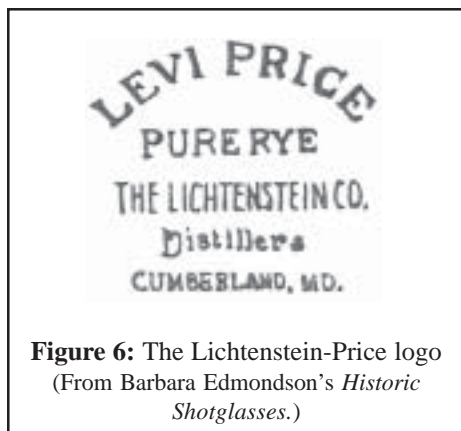
of its stained glass windows — and is on the Maryland historical register. It features an overly wide front door that may have been constructed to accommodate the barrels of whiskey being rolled in and out. It currently is being restored as part of a new housing development called "Distillery Manor." Near the cottage are the ruins of a barn that was used to house the horses needed to transport the whiskey barrels to the railroad stations.

Still standing is Levi Price's house [Figure 5], a large frame structure on the bluff overlooking the creek. Slave quarters made of field stone loom behind. The house has had a number of owners since Price's death and was restored once before in the 1970s. As is evident from the photo, it undergoing restoration again. The Levi Price house also is on the Maryland historical register.

#### **Enter Reuben Lichtenstein**

Although Price is reported to have invested heavily in his children's education (the equivalent of \$300,000 today), perhaps compensating for his own lack of formal schooling, none of his children appear to have involved themselves in the distillery operations. Preceded in death by his wife in 1902, Price died in 1909 at the age of 74. None of his progeny were willing or able to continue the business and it appears to have been sold quickly to another party - Reuben Lichtenstein.

Lichtenstein was not a farmer-distiller. Born in 1838 in Wolfersheim, Germany, Lichtenstein came to the U.S. at the age of



**Figure 6:** The Lichtenstein-Price logo  
(From Barbara Edmondson's *Historic Shotglasses.*)

14, settling in Virginia. He joined the Confederate cause and served as an infantryman in the 19<sup>th</sup> Virginia, part of General Pickett's Division in the Army Corps headed by General Longstreet. It may be assumed that Reuben first saw Maryland when the South invaded that state in 1863. He likely was a survivor of Pickett's ill-fated charge at Gettysburg.

After the war Lichtenstein moved to Cumberland, Md., married a local girl named Sarah Hirsch in 1868, and opened a liquor business that he headed the rest of his life. Like many other liquor distributors and dealers, he seems to have hankered to own a distillery. When the Price operation came on the market shortly after Levi's death, Lichtenstein purchased it. He also bought the Levi Price house, which he quickly resold. He directed the distillery from afar, living in Cumberland throughout his life. He hired a foreman, James Patrick Brown, known as "Gee," to handle day-to-day operations. Brown (1881-1930) continued to run the operation until the onset of Prohibition, living in the Thistle Cottage. Lichtenstein also is reported to have rebuilt and expanded the distillery. His marketing materials [Figure 6] named "Levi Price Pure Rye" as his flagship brand and cited it as the product of the Lichtenstein Co., Distillers, Cumberland.

Shown here is a paper labeled Levi Price quart brand whiskey that bears Lichtenstein's name [Figure 7]. The label claims that the distillery was founded in 1840. This clearly is a fabrication since Price would only have been five-years-old in that year. The bottle resides in the collection of Maryland whiskey guru, Jim Bready. Production always was small relative to the large Baltimore distilleries that could process up to 1,000 bushels of corn mash daily. By contrast the Price/Lichtenstein operation could only handle 35 bushels daily.

### The Fate of the Distillery: Two Versions

Although Reuben died at the age of 77 in 1916, before the onset of Prohibition, one or more of his five sons kept the operation going for the next four years. Here the picture grows murky about the fate of the distillery. Some locals say the family sold off its stored whiskey in the 1920s and ultimately the distillery was torn down.

A far more interesting fate is the one most widely believed in the area. When Prohibition ended, the story goes, the Lichtensteins attempted to put the distillery back in operation. The move enraged "Drys" in nearby Hyattstown, already smarting from Repeal. They set a wagon full of straw on fire in front of the Thistle Cottage and rolled it downhill into the distillery. It burned to the ground.

That is the account believed by local historian Edward Lee Knowles, who himself was a subsequent owner of the Levi Price house. To a reporter in 1978, he showed how the ground around the distillery site was full of charred wood, indicating a fire. This version also appears



**Figure 7:** A quart bottle of Levi Price Pure Rye Whiskey



**Figure 8:** Luther King  
(Courtesy of MCHS)

in a publication of the Friends of Historic Hyattstown. Called "Hyattstown Trails," it recounts the same fiery fate of the distillery. But even Knowles admitted that his search of local newspapers of that time revealed no mention of the distillery burning. Was it hushed up?

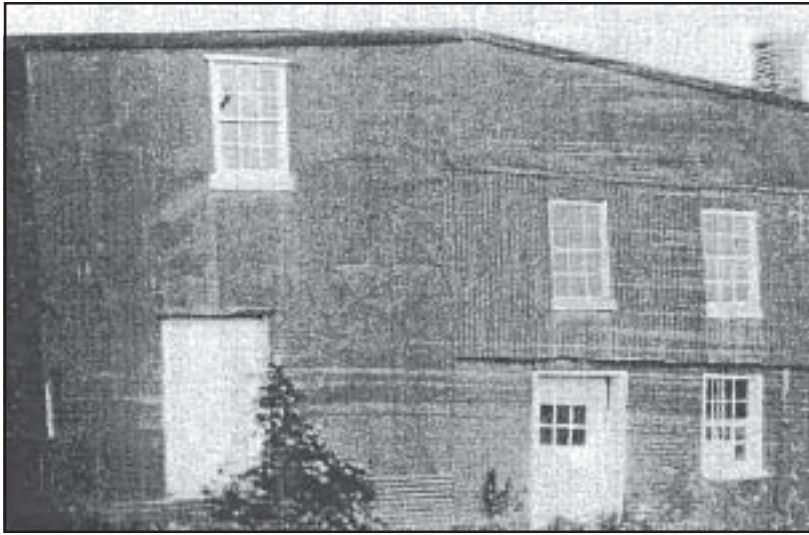
And so the mystery continues.

### Luther Green King

About three miles southeast from the Levi Price site, just inside the Montgomery County line, is the site where Luther Green King, our second farmer-distiller, cooked up his Maryland rye. Luther King [Figure 8] was the son of John Duckett King, an early settler and large landowner in northern Montgomery County. The family gave its name to the community of King's Valley and to Kingstead Road. John King, born in 1798, and his wife, Jemina Miles, had 13 children, most of whom lived to maturity and had large families of their own. Maryland historians assert that more than 10,000 people living today can trace their ancestry to this couple.

Born in 1825, Luther King was the fifth of John and Jemina's sons. Upon his father's death in 1858, Luther inherited an equal share in the estate's 217 acres, enough to begin a small farm. John King's will also remanded to Luther and his brothers ownership of two slaves.

Distilling may have been a natural step



**Figure 9:** King's Distillery (Courtesy of MCHS)

for Luther since he had manpower at his disposal and could easily buy rye grain from nearby growers. Thus he built the only distillery ever known to exist in Montgomery County. The site was near Clarksburg on Burnt Hill Road just off Price Distillery Road.

#### “Trouble Enough Indeed”

The distillery [Figure 9] was a three story structure, with an office for making sales and a loading dock where horse-drawn wagons could carry away barrels of whiskey. It was a modest operation, probably worked in close conjunction with farming interests. The clientele likely was a local one.

Collectors of Maryland whiskeys aver that they do not know of a labeled King-made whiskey bottle or jug. This suggests that Luther sold his stock to saloon-keepers who doled it out a drink at a time or filled containers brought in by their customers. Nonetheless, Maryland rye was the drink of choice for most of King's neighbors and trade probably was brisk. From time to time, King may even have found himself in competition with his close neighbor, Levi Price.

For much of his distilling career, King lived in a small log cabin near the business. His house was three bays by one bay with a small front porch and a foundation of local fieldstone. As he prospered financially, he built a much larger structure, a log house he named “Trouble Enough Indeed.” We can speculate that this was a reference to the frequency with which Luther King was a widower. After his first wife, Tabitha

Browning, whom he married in 1848, died, he married Mary Howe in 1873. With her death a few years later, he married again in 1899 when he was 74. Wife No. 3 was a much younger woman and his great-niece, Mary L. King. It was for her he built the new house. Despite the difference in ages, Luther and Mary had one child.

Besides whiskey, the great passion in Luther King's life was music. He lived at a time when every community prided itself on its brass band. Nearby Hyattstown bragged that its ensemble was “not to be excelled by any band in the county.” As a younger man, Luther had learned to play the trombone and was a member of the Clarksburg Band. Subsequently he formed a musical group

of his own, called the Kings Valley Band. It included at least six other members of the King family. A photo of the band taken in the early 1900s [Figure 10], shows Luther, back row, fifth from left, clearly its oldest member.

#### Luther King's Legacy

The spacious new home was not the only sign of King's growing prosperity. He was also buying land for farming purposes and came to own 176 acres, 70 of it fertile farm land. His wealth, however, primarily was generated by the distillery. At his death in 1909, King left a substantial estate. The principal item was 49,000 gallons of whiskey in bond — worth a fortune — representing five years of product (1904-1909). Also in his estate were 19 new whiskey barrels, 50 bushels of malt, and 90 bushels of rye. He left “Trouble Enough Indeed” to his widow, Mary, who later remarried. He willed the land on which the distillery sat to his brother John and the distillery itself to his grandson, John R. Lewis.

With Luther King's passing, whiskey production appears to have ceased almost immediately. We can speculate that the grandson was unwilling or unable to continue the operation. Today the distillery site is covered over with scrub trees, vines and weeds, at the southeastern edge of Little Bennett Regional Park. The only indication that it ever existed is a historical marker erected beside Burnt Hill Road [Figure 11], not far from the intersection of Price Distillery Road.



**Figure 10:** King's Valley Band (Courtesy of MCHS)



**Figure 11:** The Distillery site today.

### A German Farmer-Distiller: Melky Miller

Both Levi Price and Luther King were from Yankee stock whose families had been in the United States for generations. Our third farmer distiller was the native-born son of a family that settled in rural Maryland during the 1830s, part of a great wave of German immigrants looking for good land and opportunity. His name, like his brand, was Melky Miller.

Melky Miller was born either “Melchior” or “Melchoir” Mueller — his baptismal certificate gives the first spelling and his tombstone the second — in the mid 1830s. His father was Johannes Mueller, a German immigrant and farmer who arrived in the U.S. in the early 1830s. Soon after, Johannes married Christina Schwalb, the daughter of another German immigrant family, in Elk Lick Township at Somerset County, Pa. Melky was their firstborn, with a given natal year of 1833. In 1938 the family moved to Accident, Maryland, in what is now Garrett County (it then was part of Allegany County). The Muellers were industrious people and good farmers. They prospered. It is not clear when the family Anglicized its name to Miller; the practice was a common one particularly for immigrants seeking to assimilate into American society.

The town the family chose — Accident — is located near Deep Creek Lake the northern part of the county. According to historians the town can trace its unusual name to the year 1750, when King George II of England paid a debt to a colonist named George Deakins by giving him 600 acres of land in Western Maryland. Deakins sent out two parties of surveyors — each without the knowledge of the other — to find and survey the best land in that vicinity. When the surveyors reported back they found to their surprise that each party had marked off the same oak tree as



**Figure 12:** A street in Accident, Maryland, circa 1860.

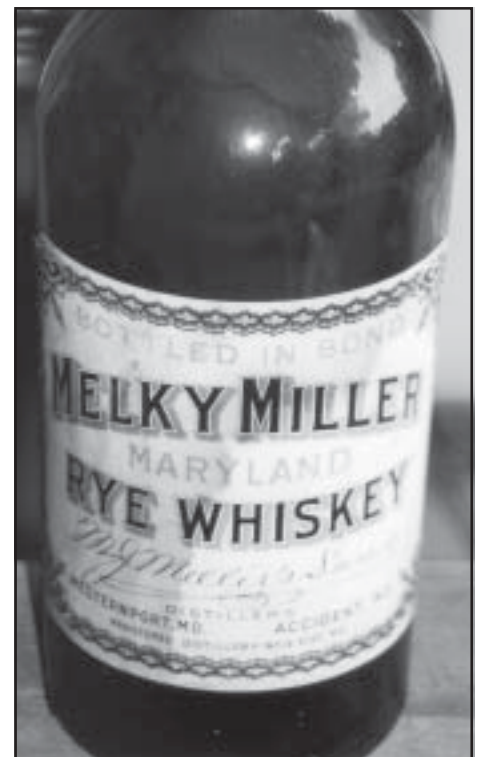
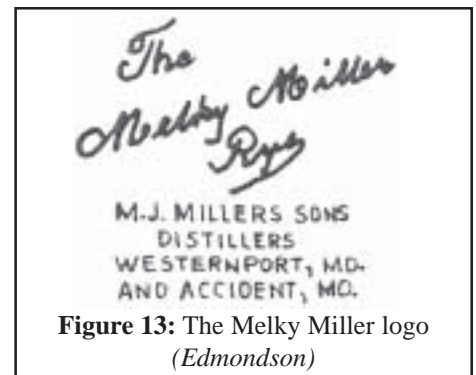
a starting point and chosen an identical 600 acres.

Satisfied that this land was prime, Deakin claimed it for himself as “The Accident Tract.” The name stuck with the small town (pop. 353) that grew up on it, a place of muddy streets and ramshackle buildings in the 1800s [Figure 12].

Little is known about the early life of Melky Miller. He clearly had experience of farming and at his death owned a large farm that stayed in his family for generations. He married a woman, Barbara, ten years his junior, fathered a family, and might have gone through life unremarked had he not in 1875, when he was about 42, opened a distillery in Accident. He had an evident genius for business and soon built Melky Miller’s Maryland Rye Whiskey into a highly respected local and regional brand. By the 1890s he had expanded his operations to the nearby town of Westernport Md., where he warehoused his liquor. As he took his family into the business, distillery name was changed to “M. J. Millers Sons, Distillers.” [Figure 13].

Although his production was even smaller than Levi Price — only 29 bushels of grain processed daily according to federal records — the quality of his whiskey was high.

The firm also was noted for the artistic design of both the jugs and the bottles in which it marketed its products. Figures 14 and 15 show two of the fancy paper labels he and his sons employed to market their product. The first



**Figure 14:** Label of Melky Miller’s Maryland Rye



Figure 16: Melky Miller ceramic jug.

advertises “Melky Miller Maryland Rye Whiskey” and features a fancy scrolled signature. The second depicts the word “rye” on a shield set amidst stalks of rye grain but is stated to be a blend — not pure Maryland rye. Miller also sold his whiskey in attractive gallon sized stoneware jugs [Figure 16].

Barbara Miller died in 1913 when she was 72, two years before Melky passed away in 1915 at the age of 82. They are buried in the cemetery next to Zion Lutheran Church in Accident. Their sons continued to operate the Melky Miller



Figure 15: Label of Melky Miller’s Rye, a blend.

distillery until 1919 when Prohibition closed their doors, never to reopen.

Foundation stones for the distillery warehouses can still be seen just off Miller Road (named for Melky) in Accident. His spacious home and farm have been in the family for many years and a recent resident was a great-grandson, William Aiken.

The American farmer-distiller clearly was a creature of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Even if the Price and King families had been interested in continuing to make whiskey after the deaths of their founders, production would have been short-lived through the coming of Prohibition. That event effectively terminated both the Melky Miller and Lichtenstein/Price distilleries. All were small operations and the Dry Years spelled their complete demise. In their place, U.S. and Canadian whiskey syndicates formed and created the system of a few large producers that have dominated the American whiskey trade for the past 70 years.

Material for this article was gathered from a number of sources. The Montgomery County Historical Society was very helpful in providing information on Luther King and Levi Price. Jim Bready graciously gave me permission to photograph Price and Miller whiskey bottles in his collection. Portions of this article previously appeared in the *Pontil* of the Potomac Bottle Club, Jim Sears, editor.



**A CANADIAN ODDITY – from the Bryan Grapentine collection**

I learned of the existence of a Hutchinson soda with a crown top 14-16 years ago from a Canadian collector. I had never seen one and was looking to buy one during that period of time. The long sought after bottle showed up recently on Ebay for sale by a Winnipeg, Manitoba collector.

The crown top bottle [above, right] is 1/8" shorter than the standard hutch. Both bottles have identical embossing – BLACKWOODS/ANY ONE FILLING BUYING/SELLING OR DESTROYING/THIS BOTTLE WILL BE/PROSECUTED/WINNIPEG.

The crowntop bottle must have been used for a short period of time when soda bottlers were switching from the Hutchison to crowntop bottles. It was probably much cheaper and faster to rework the Hutchison mold to a crowntop than to build a complete new crowntop soda bottle mold.

I do not know of any United States bottles made this way. If any reader knows of one, please send me an E-mail at [bpgrapentine@att.net](mailto:bpgrapentine@att.net).