

# From Wine to Blood: The Story of Charles Axt and his Catawba Wine

By Paul Chance

Most of us who dig bottles realize that each bottle or artifact we find has a direct link to our past. The majority of the bottles are plain and unembossed and little information can be obtained from them. However, when they have names on them, they can open doors to the past and tell a whole story. How many times have we said to ourselves, "If only they could talk," or "think of the stories they could tell!"

This story starts with my acquisition of a bottle that turned up in a flea market in Savannah, Georgia. Reportedly dug in Savannah, the bottle is a "hock" wine style with an unusually large, crude flared top. Hock wine bottles are usually of no interest to me, but this one was a bit different. Embossed on its base was CHARLES AXT'S CATAWBA."

A Google search quickly turned up quite a bit of information about Charles Axt and his Catawba Wines. But after a 2-1/2-hour drive from my home near Savannah to Crawfordville, Georgia, visiting the town's historical society and meeting Robert Hendrick proved to be intriguing. He is past president of the Crawfordville Historical Society and serves on its board of directors.

According to notes discovered in the Crawfordville Deed Book F, the Rhineland-born Axt emigrated to Ohio in the 1840s, accompanied by a young man he called his son. Axt moved to Augusta in 1848, then settled in Crawfordville where he established a five-acre vineyard. By 1869, the vineyard had grown to 264 acres.

At that time, the monoculture of destructive farming practices



**Paul Chance displays his flea market find. (Photo by Bea Baab)**



**Here's a closeup of the base of the hock wine embossed Charles Axt Catawba. (Photo by Bea Baab)**

resulted in erosion of cotton farmers' lands and farmers were in desperate need of a cash crop. Axt, speaking in broken English, was able to convince farmers that he could plant and supervise a quarter of an acre vineyard on their land, tend it for three years for a fee of \$50 a year, and at the end of that time deliver 350 gallons of wine. After five years, he said, an acre thus treated would yield 2,500 gallons of wine.

He began management of vineyards in the rolling hills of the Piedmont without startup capital. Georgia's vineyards contained the usual southern grapes such as the Herbemont and Lenoir, but Axt was partial to the Catawba variety. He began to master the English language as well as his wine-making. He established vineyards near Dalton in north Georgia as well as in South Carolina and Alabama. His home vineyard would have been located along the western edge of Crawfordville north and along the Georgia Railroad where the community called "Friendship" is located today.

In 1855, he won a silver cup for his Catawba Wine at the Atlanta Fair. And according to an article in *Trends in Southern Agriculture, 1840-1860*, during the early 1850s "Axt entered into a contract with planters in South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama to teach the skill necessary for establishing the new enterprise. Securing expert assistants, his success exceeded expectations. By 1857, Axt's 'Still Catawba' wines had become well known in local markets. Sealed in specially made hock bottles bearing attractive labels, this wine of 1857 vintage sold in Cincinnati two years later at a higher

price than some of the famous Ohio wines – a fact which brought some degree of consternation to Ohio growers.”

An advertisement in *The New York Times* on November 28, 1856:

The Belgian horticulturist Louis E. Berckmans, who had migrated from New Jersey to Augusta, Georgia to operate a nursery there, described the prospect:

“In places where no corn or rye will grow, I have seen many a goodly acre covered with Catawba and Warren grapes, and yielding from four hundred to six hundred dollars, in soils abandoned as unfit for every other cultivation. South Carolina and Georgia will soon awake to this new enterprise and acres upon acres of land not worth five dollars are going to be converted into vineyards to supply the union with wine, equal if not superior to any Hock or Madeira.”

Some time in the 1850s, Axt began advertising in the *Southern Cultivator*, a semi-monthly magazine founded by J.W. and W.S. Jones and devoted to Southern agriculture. The editor of the magazine referred to Axt as “the itinerant grape missionary.”

“Wine mania” was a popular movement in the South with large and small vineyards being developed to compete with Northern vineyards. A general convention of wine growers met in a Baptist church in Aiken, South Carolina in August 1860. The group became the Southern Wine Growers’ Association, presided over by James Hammond, a former South Carolina governor.

One of the issues was to determine exact botanical descriptions of grape varieties and the naming of different



**The bottle rests in front of crude gravestone marking the final resting place of Charles Axt. (Photo by Paul Chance)**

wines. This was complicated because the same grape grown in a different area would produce a different taste. The convention had to not only distinguish between “Catawba” and “Warren,” but also provide the place name, brands or private names, if needed.

In the same year, Georgia produced 27,000 gallons of wine. Just five years after the Civil War in 1870, production was reduced to 21,000 gallons. The war had a detrimental effect on wine production as it did all agriculture in the South, but it did not make it extinct. Love of wine making revived during the post-war years, but it would take many years for it to regain its popularity that was enjoyed before the conflict.

Tragedy struck during the early morning of February 11, 1869 when Axt was brutally murdered in his bed in his home, which stood on the edge of Crawfordville on the Lexington road.

His body was discovered (still warm) by his Negro servant and housekeeper, Susan Ann Moore. She

summoned a neighbor, Benjamin F. Moore. Only other person in the house was Henry Axt, a natural son who had joined his father on the trip from Germany and who was legitimized by adoption. Henry was found in a distraught state, “walking to and fro in his room,” which adjoined that of his father. Benjamin Moore came and later swore, “I found Mr. Axt lying on his bed near the center on his back with his head on the pillow, his hands on his breast as if asleep. I felt of Mr. Axt and found him warm. His throat seemed to be cut to the bone (he had bled copiously) and the blood had run off the bed into a gallon jug which was near half full. There was an indentation on his skull (sic) about 3 inches above the left eye, as if done with a hammer or small ax.”

The hatchet was later discovered on the front “plaza.” It had been rubbed with dirt to rid it of bloodstains. A coroner’s jury convened later that day. Foreman Joseph F. Nelson



found that Axt "came to his death by someone unknown to us feloniously and maliciously striking him on the forehead and cutting his throat with some heavy and sharp instrument. And we further find that Henry Axt either committed the fould (sic) deed, or was accessory to it. (From the records of Taliaferro County Superior Court, 1869). Henry was brought to trial, but was cleared largely through the legal counsel of Alexander H. Stephens, who had been vice president of the Confederate States. Also suspected was the Negro woman, "Edy Ann," who had borne Charles Axt four mulatto children, but she was never brought to trial. The murderer was never found. It is worth noting that in the deed book Henry Axt deeded a; 300 acres pf his father's land to Alxander Stephens on Feb. 24, 1869.

It wasn't commonly known where Charles Axt was buried, but Wiley Jones says in his book, *Rest in Peace: A Cemetery Census of Taliaferro County* (Wilkes Publishing Co., Washington,

Ga., 1984, Page 82), that there are reputed to be two unmarked Axt graves at the western end of Crawfordville behind and across the road from the Georgia Wood Preserving Company. Mr. Jones said that a stone marked "Axt," but with no dates, was found when the census of the Crawfordville cemetery was done.

I was able to locate Axt's tombstone. One night, I couldn't sleep, so I got up and started researching more about Charles Axt. I thought that if he died in Crawfordville, his grave shouldn't be too difficult to find. He should be buried either on the property, or in the local cemetery. A quick Google search placed him in the Baptist cemetery in plot g20j!

The two graves were located in a wooded area of Crawfordville down a dirt road near the railroad. The C. Axt tombstone is roughly cut and the name hand-carved. The graves are outlined by bricks as markers around the square area of each body. There is a small iron rail fence around the two graves. Could

these graves be those of Edy Ann or her sons that Axt fathered? Henry Axt's grave was not found.

I placed the hock wine bottle on the grave and took a few photos. It was a chilling experience, I'll admit..

Questions arise: What became of the silver cup he won at the Atlanta Fair, the murder weapon, and other physical evidence of his existence? What was the motive for the murder?

No one will ever know.

#### SOURCES:

A History of Wine in America from the beginnings to prohibition, Vol. I, by Thomas Pinney

Deed Book F, Pages 593-594, Taliaferro County, Georgia, furnished by Robert Hendrick

Deed Book F, Pages 580-581, Taliaferro County, Ga., furnished by Robert Hendrick

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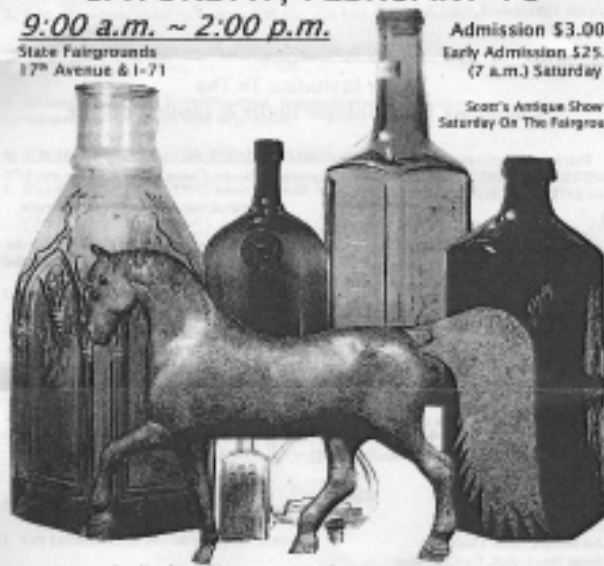
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