

The Folger House Dig

By Michael Dolcini

On consecutive July days, my digging partner, Chuck Erickson, and I located and dug two very old privy pits at a vacant site in Sacramento, Calif. The site had been the truck parking and mechanic's facility of a local dairy company. When the dairy closed its operations, the site was purchased with the intent of constructing dense "affordable" housing.

The buildings were razed and the blacktop removed, leaving only the densely packed gravel beneath to deal with. The gravel proved to be a formidable obstacle, necessitating the need to use a slam probe to penetrate to the original soil beneath. I had obtained permission from the demolition contractor to search for buried glass, so we began what was to become a two-year endeavor on the site. Many pits were dug by several other diggers as well as by me and my diggin' buddies.

Unfortunately, not all of the thick concrete was removed from the site, with three large piles left that covered much of the targeted lots. As it turned out, the original contractor was not promptly paid by the developers and he left the property. The site remained in this condition until a renewed effort by the developer, and a new contractor, initiated a complete cleanup of the concrete residue and removal of some underground concrete bulkheads.

By the middle of the year, the site was clean and fresh soil was exposed for the first time in a half century. Only then we could probe the lot where research indicated that a very early residence had been built. The home was constructed for and owned by a local merchant, Francis R. Folger, and was the residence of he and his brothers, Robert and Benjamine. Later, Francis married and the brothers moved elsewhere. In subsequent years, the home became a boarding house, remaining such until it was demolished.

A timeline of the residence and the subsequent privy pits excavated on the site of the long demolished Folger residence, northwest corner East and 11th Streets, Sacramento:

1854 - Folger, Francis R, Hardware merchant, 249 J, NY*, no res stated

1855 - Folger, Francis, reporter "Union", house E & 11th

1856 - Folger, Francis R, City reporter, Union, m 1 c**, res E & 11th; Folger, R.M., Crockery and Earthenware Merchant, res E & 11th

1857 - Folger, Benjamine, Merchant Crockery Store, 216 J & Folger, B.F., res E & 11th

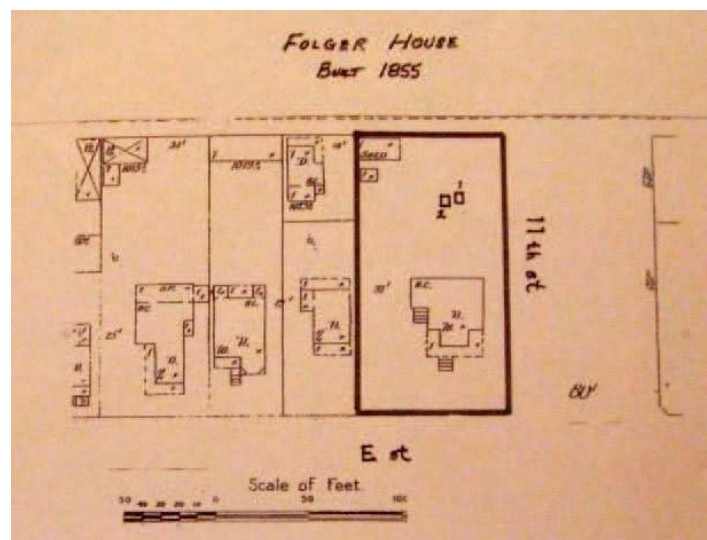
1858 - Folger, F.R., Reporter Daily Union

1859 - Folger, Mrs Julia A., Primary School Teacher, res cor E & 11th; Folger, Frank R, Reporter, Daily Union, re cor E & 11th

Frank and Julia remained at this location through 1871, at which time they moved to 11th & I streets. There was no further mention of B.F. or, R.M. Folger at any location. Perhaps the crockery store was sold and they moved elsewhere. Regardless, this will aid in explaining the great amount of broken crockery and earthenware that was recovered from two subsequent privy pits. The earliest would have dated from their initial establishment of residency at that location, possibly as early as 1854, but absolutely by the following year. All glass bottles from that privy had large tubular open pontil scars, with the exception of an English-made food bottle and another European small utility. Several broken whale oil lamps were recovered from the fill that comprised the use layer.

The second pit, also containing an amazing amount of broken crockery, would date from the years 1860 to 1865. This is evidenced by the glass bottles and other articles removed from the privy. Bottles with open pontil scars were mixed in with others that were blown by the snap case method, leaving a diagonal line across the base and no pontil scar. Interestingly enough, iron pontiled bottles were seen in both pits, primarily those which had been used as food containers; i.e., "berry" bottles and large cathedral designed "pickle" types. No soda bottles were found in either pit, but plenty of wine and liquor glasses, green ales, wine and champagne bottles, and a few smaller unembossed medical and spice bottles. Along with all the crockery were two early glazed jugs and shards of larger three-gallon butter churns. Both churns and shards were unmarked, but typical in both color and glaze, of early Sacramento pottery manufacturers.

Among the more "unusual" items found in the second pit was a glass breast pump. It was entirely blown by mouth, without the benefit of a mold, and must have been assembled while the molten glass remained on the blowpipe. Blown



* NY, state of origin

** married, one child

in mold breast pumps are often found, but undamaged specimens of this style are seldom been seen out here. Drat! The photo of the pump has disappeared from my files.

The following are photos of Pit No. 1, Circa 1855-60. On the way down. We always make an attempt to excavate all privies by first establishing the perimeter and digging as close to the edges as possible.



Finally, the beginnings of the use layer.



Unfortunately, as we all know, not all bottles are whole and undamaged.



Here's a undamaged sided utility. Thin "dime" lip, too



Nice big tubular pontil.



Another, much larger utility.



It's a JAMMER. No shovel shall enter here, it is all tool work from here on out.



Just another pontiled spice.



A fluted shoulder food.



Neat OP fluted sauce.



Iron pontilled base.



And here's the bottle that belongs to the IP base. A sweet "keystone" pickle that was the best bottle of the day



A growing pile of busted crockery.

It's all over and time to "fill 'er in." Broken glass and crockery abounding. The old detector is used to check the spoils for hidden metallic objects. You never know when the odd cent or double eagle will show up. Keeping the broken objects in one spot helps in clean up, too. Busted stuff goes in first, followed by the clean soil. Residential pits are typically shallow around here, rarely exceeding eight feet. This one was 4' X 4' X 6 1/2'. Easy to dig soft loamy soil. That's a good thing because the daytime temp was 100° by the time we finished and no shade. By the way, the Bennington spittoon in the foreground was perfect.



Many smashed peppersauces and spices



A few of the undamaged ones, a couple of iron-pontiled berry bottles and an open pontile spice.



Privy No 2, Circa 1860-65. Not too many photos of this one. Later and very sparse bottle wise.



"Bottle Killers." Broken butter churns, wine and drinking glasses and window glass.

More broken crockery. There was a gallon size demijohn in the hole that didn't have a chance. It's amazing that this jug survived the crockery onslaught. The ovoid form and dark brown glaze is typical of early

Sacramento pottery works. There were four of them on the outskirts of town at the time these privies were in use.

This jug is very similar to those produced by the Pacific Pottery Works, located at N and 30th

It is always a ton of fun to dig early privy pits, especially those that are loaded with goodies. Many 1850s and '60s pits are sadly lacking in the bottle department, probably due to the value of those for which a deposit was required. It's also amazing how some folks could break so many dishes and other crockery objects, not to mention the windows. As evidenced by the amount of wine bottles, as well as the number of broken glasses, the Folgers must have been enjoying a "Sundowner" or two. My kind of people, they left some interesting stuff for us to find 150 years later.

