

JOHN G. OLDNER - THE MINER'S PROTECTOR

By Eric McGuire

Personal Life

John George Oldner was born about 1818 in Virginia – probably Petersburg, and he married Octavia Spark there on March 16, 1842. The young couple had their first child on December 6, 1842, but the event was marked by tragedy, Octavia dying while giving birth. The infant survived and was named Philip Octavius Oldner, thus honoring the mother he would never know. His first name was in honor of Octavia's father. The bereaved John Oldner buried his young wife in the family plot at Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, Virginia. John had a fine obelisk stone erected which marks the final resting place of Octavia, but the warm, moist Virginia summers have been harsh on the soft marble and the inscription has nearly melted away. One side notes, "This monument is erected as a tribute of respect by her devoted husband."



The grave stone of young Octavia Spark Oldner at Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, Virginia. (1)

Philip Octavius Oldner served the Confederacy in the Civil War, enlisting May 26, 1862, was wounded at Fredericksburg, Va., and again at Gettysburg where he was captured in early July 1863. He died from

his injuries on July 20, 1863.(2)

John G. Oldner soon married for a second time. His new wife was Anne Smith, daughter of John H. Smith. The couple was married April 15, 1843, in Richmond, Virginia. Their first child, a son, John G. Oldner, was born in Dinwiddie County, Va., about 1848 and died January 27, 1850. He is buried in the family plot at Blandford Cemetery, Petersburg.

Their second child was Anna Elizabeth Oldner, born about 1850 in Virginia, and married James Melvin Stuart in Manhattan, New York, on April 26, 1875. Stuart was a railroad conductor in New York City.

The Oldners gave birth to yet another son who was given the distinction of being named after his father. Their second John G. Oldner was born about 1851 in Virginia, and died May 22, 1891, in Queens, New York. This son married Hellene Murray in New York and distinguished himself as a successful cotton broker and member of the New York Cotton Exchange. Living as a widower he died after being thrown from his carriage on Grand Street in Brooklyn, New York, leaving three children, Peter Murray Oldner, Helen Oldner and John G. Oldner. The executor of his will was directed to erect a sarcophagus and a granite monument 25 feet tall over his remains. (3) The cotton broker's youngest child was the third John G. Oldner in direct succession. He was born in New York City on August 19, 1879 and died there on April 6, 1909 – just 30 years old. This John married Mollie Mullin on June 20, 1901, in New York, and also produced a son named John G. Oldner, who was born in New York on April 2, 1901, but died June 15, 1902.

The fourth child of John and Anna Oldner was Hibernia Teresa Magdalin Mary Oldner, born about 1852 in New York. She married Louis P. Pabon, a resident of Bordeaux, France, on March 10, 1869, in New York City. Pabon partnered with his father-in-law in the

liquor business in 1870, but after that date he apparently returned to France with his new bride.

Their fifth child, and the youngest, was Octavia Marie Oldner, born about 1856, in Virginia. She married Aurelian Bauny in the Church of Saint Eulalia, in Bordeaux, France, on October 16, 1890.(4) She was likely living in Bordeaux with her sister and brother-in-law, Louis and Hibernia Pabon, prior to her marriage there.

Business Life

John G. Oldner first appeared in the record in a partnership with John Digges in Petersburg, Virginia. The 23-year old budding entrepreneur exhibited the business pluck and energy that was to drive him for a number of years to come. He seemed willing to sell anything for a profit – even slaves – as his early advertisement attests. His general business model was to purchase goods, probably at bargain prices, and stock them for sale. Whatever didn't sell in a reasonable period of time was auctioned off. From his early beginnings, Oldner noted that liquor was a profitable commodity and it consistently became a major component of his inventory. Oldner also preferred to work with a partner, which likely gave him a higher degree of freedom and trust than working solely with employees.

AUCTION AND COMMISSION NOTICE.
The subscribers have this day associated themselves together, for the purpose of conducting a General Auction and Commission Business, under the firm of
OLDNER & DIGGES.
Their Store is in the "Mechanics' Hall," on Sycamore street, where they are prepared to attend to sales of Dry Goods, Groceries, Hardware, Horses, Slaves, &c. &c. They will also attend to sales of Administrators', Trustees' and Commissioners'. Any article of goods consigned to them will receive prompt attention. Liberal advances made upon Goods, when required, intended for public sale.
In conclusion, they merely state, that their business will receive their individual attention, and hope to merit a share of public patronage.
JNO. G. OLDNER,
JNO. H. DIGGES,
Petersburg, Va. July 30, 1841.
References —
Edwin James & Co. } Petersburg, Va.
L. F. Hicks,
Davenport & Sturdivant,
Rev. A. J. Lavenworth,
Reid & Anderson,
Charles & Geo. Reid, } Norfolk, Va.
Lloyd W. Williams,
Haynes & Goodrich,
Innes & Brother, and John N. Gordon, Richmond, Va.
Aug 1—copy 5

John Oldner established his first business in his home town of Petersburg, Virginia, but advertised as far away as Boston, Massachusetts. (5)

franchises along the waterfront of San Francisco belonged to the city. Haley was a well known ship's captain and undoubtedly held some sway in pushing the bill as far as it got. Immediately after their loss, Haley was appointed port warden, but Oldner remained quiet in the record.

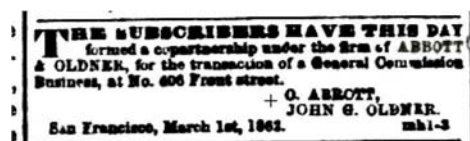
Oldner's name was present in San Francisco during 1860 but only in the form of advertising for his alcoholic beverages. He had arranged with liquor merchant John Flanagan to sell OLDNER'S DELTA EYE OPENER, HOLLAND GIN TONIC, MINER'S PROTECTOR RYE WHISKY and OLDNER'S SCHIEDAM AROMATIC SCHNAPPS in San Francisco. Several different advertisements were inserted into San Francisco newspapers from May 1860 to May 1861 by Flanagan.

Wednesday Oct 27 1845		1845	1846
12	gas butter	36	26 13
5	1/2 Cotton Cloth	74	26 13
6	Spice butter	3	26 13
1	Cake Soap	3	26 13
1	Can. T. Brandy	11	26 13
1	do. Whiskey	3	26 13
1	do	10	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	7	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	27	26 13
4	gas City Brand	28	26 13
2	1/2 Can. Brandy	20	26 13
1	1/2 Whiskey	2	26 13
1	Coffee (Can)	20	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	5	26 13
1	Cake Soap	3	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	5	26 13
3	Can. Whiskey	5	26 13
1	gas City Brand	28	26 13
2	Spice butter	3	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	2	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	32	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	3	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	10	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	10	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	27	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	20	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	4	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	7	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	4	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	7	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	30	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	3	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	4	26 13
1	Can. Whiskey	3	26 13
1	Can. Brandy	10	26 13

There were no more directory listings for John G. Oldner in New York, and in fact, the U.S. census record for 1870 lists Oldner as a “Ret. Merchant.” This abbreviation could mean “Retail” but more likely refers to “Retired.” It is most likely that Oldner went back to his home in Virginia shortly after 1870 and died there, before 1880.

To further reinforce Oldner's interest in the Western market, he sailed from New York on May 21, 1861, aboard the *North Star*(7) and arrived in San Francisco in June 1861 on the steamship *Sonora*(8). Oldner soon entered into partnership with a local commission

merchant named Oscar Abbott.



The partnership notice between John G. Oldner and Oscar Abbott appeared in the San Francisco Bulletin, March 1, 1862.

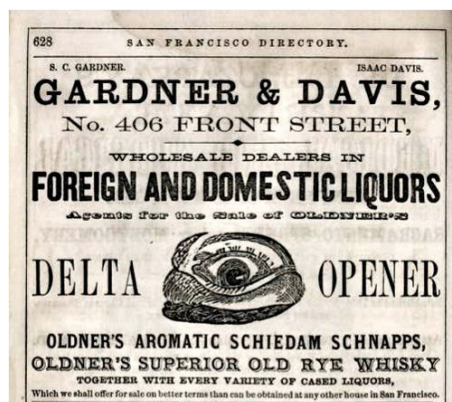
This partnership appeared to function solely for the sale of Oldner's products. Flanagan was no longer agent and Abbott & Oldner advertised the liquors directly. A few products were no longer present and some were added, which highlights the persistent marketing efforts employed, however, the mainstay items were likely the DELTA EYE OPENER, MINER'S PROTECTOR WHISKY and OLDNER'S SCHIEDAM SCHNAPPS.



Abbott & Oldner's advertisement for Oldner's liquor products as it appeared in the Daily Alta California, (San Francisco, CA) April 2, 1862)

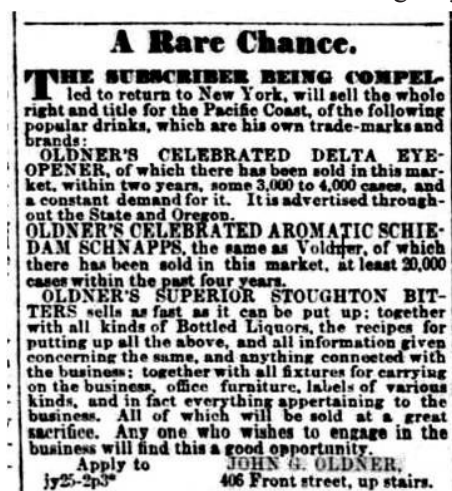
Prior to the establishment of the partnership, Osborn Abbott was listed as a commission merchant in the 1859 San Francisco directory. In 1861, he was a bookkeeper with Sullivan & Cashman (commission merchants). After the end of the partnership in 1863, he was listed as a Stock and Exchange Broker, along with Sanford C. Gardner. Abbott continued in the business of stock brokerage until he retired in May, and died June 17, 1884.

Somewhat confusing, and also of interest and importance in the sale of Oldner's products was yet another partnership – Sanford C. Gardner & Isaac Davis, who advertised as agents for Oldner in the 1862 San Francisco Directory.



It is likely that Gardner & Davis were agents for Oldner, succeeding John Flanagan, from the end of 1861 to the formation of the partnership of Abbott & Oldner in March 1862.(9) The 1862 San Francisco directory advertisement for Gardner & Davis was probably purchased prior to the formation of the Abbott & Oldner partnership, thus creating the appearance of two concurrent businesses being sole agents for Oldner's products.(10) It should be noted that both partnerships were located at the same address, No. 406 Front Street, further confirming a probable transition from one partnership to the other.

Regardless, it was not long before the partnership of Abbott & Oldner was dissolved and Oldner soon faced the challenge of returning to New York. In July 1862, he advertised his impending departure from San Francisco and offered for sale the Pacific Coast agency



Beginning with this advertisement that appeared in the San Francisco Bulletin, July 26, 1862, John G. Oldner advertised to the public of San Francisco that he would soon be leaving the West.

for several of his products, including the Eye Opener and Schiedam Schnapps.

Conspicuously missing from his offer was his Old Miner's Protector Rye Whisky. It may be concluded that Oldner wanted to keep total control of that product for himself; however, no more advertisements could be found for any of his products on either the West or East Coast. One may also deduce that it was not a popular product and he removed it from his active list of marketed items. In fact, he ceased to advertise all of his brands, which leads one to conclude that Oldner probably gave up the idea of selling his own brands in his business activities.

The Bottles

The first embossed bottle, with which John G. Oldner was associated, was VOLDNER'S AROMATIC SCHIEDAM SCHNAPPS. If this product is reminiscent of UDOLPHO WOLFE'S AROMATIC SCHEIDAM SCHNAPPS, it is no coincidence. Conceived under the partnership of Burnett & Oldner, it was one of many brands of gin that copied the immensely successful Udolpho Wolfe. The similarity between "Oldner" and "Voldner" is too great to go unnoticed. Since no one named Voldner could be found to be connected with the firm, it is most likely that the "V" was added to Oldner's name to give the gin a stronger connection with Holland – just as Francis Cassin tried with his obvious knock-off gin called VonWolfe's Scheidam Schnapps. That brand landed Cassin in immediate hot water with the legal system when Udolpho Wolfe took him to court. With the suspension of Burnett & Oldner in September 1857, as a result of the "Panic of 1857," the brand was sold to Emile Goulard, a wealthy French liquor dealer living in New York. Udolfo Wolfe succeeded in obtaining an injunction against the sale of Voldner's Schnapps for awhile, but it was overturned in October of 1859.(11) From its beginning a huge amount of Voldner's Schnapps was shipped to San Francisco to quench the insatiable thirst of the hard drinking West. Shipments

began as early as May 1857. S.C. Shaw was the first sole agent for the Pacific Coast and in June 1862, French-born San Francisco commission merchant and liquor dealer Bernard Eugene Auger became agent.



The last agent for the Pacific Coast for Voldner's Aromatic Schiedam Schnapps was Bernard Eugene Auger. (12)

By the end of 1864, the Voldner brand was no longer the powerhouse that it previously was and except for warehoused cases, few were still selling on the market. Although no proof has been found to date, it is assumed that the brand was extinguished about this time.

Voldner's Schnapps bottles are



found with both improved pontil and smooth bases, further supporting that the bottles were made during that transition period in glasshouse technology. The gin was always shipped in cases, suggesting it was already bottled in New York and then shipped to market, especially the Pacific Coast, where it enjoyed its greatest popularity. To be sure, it found itself in other markets but the largest numbers of excavated bottles appear to be found in California.

With Voldner's Schnapp's no longer within his control, and pursuing business as a single proprietor, Oldner wasted little time in creating yet another brand copied directly after his own name. Oldner's Aromatic Scheidam Schnapps never achieved the success of Voldner's Schnapps, and appears to have disappeared from the market shortly after Oldner returned home from his stay in San Francisco.

The most fantastically embossed bottle known to have been associated with John G. Oldner, and the real motivation behind this article, is "Superior Old Rye." A handled jug containing one-half gallon of liquid, its amazing embossing contains a central figure of two miners and notes that the contents of the bottle "IS THE MINERS PROTECTOR." This rare bottle has been the center of much speculation over the years. Specimens have reportedly been found on both the East and West coasts, which has made it difficult to trace its intentional market. Certainly miners were active in the coal fields of the East, in the region of Pike's Peak, in the gold mines of

California, in the predominantly silver rich mines of Nevada, and in the gold-bearing region of the Fraser River Area of British Columbia during the period this bottle would have been produced. The bottle could not have been blown on the West Coast since it predates the successful production of glass there.

Perhaps the most significant printed reference to the intended market for this product came with the advertisement of John Flanagan in San Francisco (see above). In reference to Oldner's Rye, the advertisement in the San Francisco newspapers states it was intended for "our market." This is a common reference to the isolation that the West Coast experienced during its early years, especially prior to the unifying effect of the establishment of the

stock there when he returned to New York in 1862. The product was not a high demand item. No advertisements for the product were found for either coast after Oldner's sojourn to San Francisco. (13) (Note: The bottle was included as Item No. 2189 in the Charles Gardner collection auction catalog.)

The most heavily advertised



product belonging to Oldner during the period of 1857 – 1862 was OLDNER'S DELTA EYE OPENER. Many printed sources were consulted and Oldner was the only proprietor identified who was selling a product by the name of Eye Opener during this time. It was first advertised throughout the



East Coast in the Fall of 1859.

Although purely speculative at this point in time, the only bottle with this name affixed that could be attributed to Oldner is the example shown below. Other later Eye Opener bottles are known but appear to be too late for Oldner's product.

Until a labeled example is found, this bottle is only attributed to Oldner with guarded optimism. Known examples of the bottle appear to have a western European origin – perhaps Scandinavia or Belgium, and very similar in appearance to the P.F. Herring ribbon seal bottles – but made for the English speaking market. If any reader knows of a labeled example, please let the world know.

END NOTES:

1. Photo and cemetery documentation courtesy of Mandy G. at www.findagrave.com.

2. Philip is buried at Loudon Park National Cemetery at Baltimore, Maryland, where his grave stone is erroneously inscribed PHILIP E. OLDNER on a new stone that was transcribed from the original nearly unreadable marker.

3. The Sun (New York, N.Y.), June 2, 1891. Oldner is buried in Calvary Cemetery, Queens, N.Y.

4. New York Herald (New York, NY), October 26, 1890

5. The Atlas (Boston, MA) August 4, 1841.

6. The Library of Virginia, Chancery Records, Index No. 1854-016. <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/chancery/>

7. Sacramento Daily Union, June 6, 1861

8. San Francisco Bulletin June 14, 1861

9. Flanagan eventually retired from the liquor business. He experienced a bizarre death in San Francisco on July 30, 1880. He told his wife he had taken a large amount of morphine and would die. She thought he was kidding but when Flanagan began to fail she called for two doctors who pumped his stomach, but it was too late. Daily Alta California (San Francisco, Calif.) July 31, 1880.



transcontinental railroad in 1869. Unless evidence to the contrary is uncovered in the future, it must be conceded that Oldner's Rye was conceived and bottled in New York and primarily shipped to San Francisco for the Pacific Coast market.

The specimens that may have been found on the East Coast could well have been the result of Oldner liquidating his remaining