

# Whiskey Rogues: Duffy and Gambrill

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Special to Bottles and Extras

Distillers Walter B. Duffy of Rochester, New York, and George T. Gambrill of Baltimore, Maryland, probably never met during their lifetimes. But their stories bear striking similarities and they surely would

directory lists Duffy as a distiller and rectifier of alcohol, "French spirits" (brandy), malt, wheat, rye and bourbon whiskeys.

The 1880s were a time when patent medicines began their meteoric rise in popularity by aggressive advertising and other ploys. Many whiskey makers began to advertise their wares as being "for medicinal use" without being specific as to the ills they were meant to remedy. Duffy took a different approach. He decided to straddle the divide between selling the 15 cent saloon shot and hawking his booze as a cure for specific diseases. Thus, early in the 1880s was born the Celebrated Duffy's Malt Whiskey, which Walter advertised as the "greatest known heart tonic." He also claimed that his product could cure consumption (tuberculosis), bronchitis, dyspepsia (chronic indigestion), and even malaria.

Duffy Failure: Creditors Looking for Mr. Duffy and Looking in Vain." A complicated financial deal had failed, one of Duffy's partners was headed for Honduras, and he himself was lying low. Duffy's plant in Maryland went into receivership in 1887 and he fled back to Rochester, leaving behind a howling mob of creditors.

Despite this setback he remained president of the Rochester Distilling Company (**Fig. 2**) and continued to produce his purported anti-malaria liquor. The success of Duffy's Malt Whiskey as a cure almost certainly helped solve Walter's bankruptcy



**Figure 1** - Walter B. Duffy

have recognized in one another the incontrovertible fact that each man was a "whiskey rogue."

Let's begin with Duffy, seen here in maturity (**Fig. 1**). His story begins in Canada where he was born in 1840, about two years before his father Edmund emigrated to Rochester, New York, and opened a cider refining business. It was a successful enterprise. Edmund soon expanded into selling "wines, liquors, cordials and cigars." In an 1861 ad he also claimed to be a "rectifier" -- that is, a refiner and blender of whiskey.

The elder Duffy eventually brought young Walter into the business and left it to him when he died during the 1870s. Walter in the meantime had served as an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War and had married in 1868. Upon inheriting the company he promptly expanded the business into other products. In 1881 a Rochester business

## In and Out of Trouble

In 1884 Duffy left Rochester for Baltimore, a brash young man "hoping to cash in on Baltimore's prestige," according to one author. He set up a large rectifying plant downtown and contracted for ad space across all 1,684 pages of Wood's 1886 Baltimore City Directory to proclaim: "Duffy's Pure Malt Whiskey!....Cures Malaria, Price One Dollar Per Bottle...Sold by Druggists, Grocers and Dealers." He also launched Maryland Star Rye Whiskey in three grades. This onslaught, however, left the Baltimore drinking public considerably less than impressed.

Sluggish sales soon landed the overextended entrepreneur in financial hot water. On November 16, 1886, the New York Times headlined: "The



**Figure 2** - Rochester Distilling logo



**Figure 3** - 1898 Rochester Distilling letterhead

woes. What Duffy had failed to sell in Baltimore began to attract a national clientele.

Before long Duffy was looking once again to expand outside Rochester. This time he headed west to Kentucky. There, in 1887, George T. Stagg with other local whiskey men had incorporated the Stagg and O.F.C. (Old Fire Copper) distillery in a brand new facility at Frankfort. When Stagg retired because of ill health in 1890, Duffy purchased a majority interest. In 1892 he was elected president of the corporation. A 1898 letterhead depicts the Rochester rectifying plant and the Frankfort facility, now called the O.F.C. and Carlisle Distillery (**Fig. 3**). Reflecting these two properties, Duffy later would call his business holdings "The Kentucky and New York Company, Distillers."

In 1890 Duffy merged his cider-making operation with that of Samuel R. Mott, a Bouckville, New York, businessman who also had started a

cider business in 1842. The resulting entity was known as the Duffy-Mott Company, Inc., with its principal processing plant located at first in New York City. That company, in which Duffy had a major interest, increased its assets, product lines and markets nationwide. It eventually moved to Hamlin, New York.

With a guaranteed supply of Kentucky whiskey from Frankfort for his



**Figure 4 -**  
Tromley Rye  
shot glass



**Figure 5 -**  
Seneca Chief  
shot glass

Rochester rectifying and blending facility, Duffy introduced a number of other liquor brands. They included Tromley Rye (**Fig. 4**), Seneca Chief (**Fig. 5**), Genesee, Kentucky Raider and Elite whiskeys. These were regional labels; the flagship brand remained Duffy's Pure Malt Whiskey. Its owner energetically marketed it to a wide audience, placing his advertising in national magazines and major newspapers all over America.

### Hiram Cronk Testifies -- and Dies

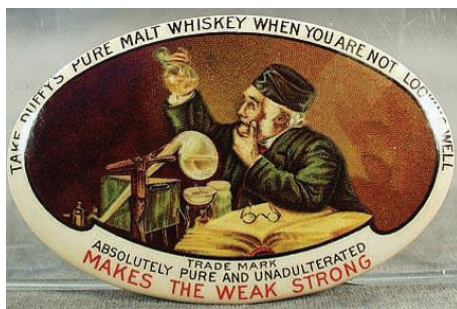
One of Duffy's most celebrated ads featured Hiram Cronk of Ava, New York. At 105 years old Hiram was accounted the last surviving veteran of the War of 1812. Cronk was quoted saying: *"For many years Duffy's Pure Malt Whiskey has been my only medicine. I take a dessert spoonful of the tonic three times a day with my meals, and when I go to bed. I am thankful to Duffy's for it gives me a good appetite and keeps me strong and well in my old age."* His daughter confirmed that Hiram was "keen in mind and rugged in strength" thanks to Duffy's. Ironically, two weeks after the ad ran in the Washington Post of April 30, 1905, it was followed by a Post news story reporting Cronk's death. Hiram got a hero's



**Figure 6 -** Hiram Cronk funeral scenes

funeral in New York City (**Fig. 6**). Whether Walter Duffy attended is unknown.

Duffy's unsupported claim that "malt whiskey" really was medicine even convinced some Temperance advocates. Duffy backed up his fiction by concocting a story that his remedy was made from a formula worked out fifty years earlier by "one



**Figure 7 -** Duffy oval hand mirror

of the World's Greatest Chemists." The distiller featured a trade mark of the bearded scientist who apparently had discovered this wonder liquid. Shown here on the back of a giveaway

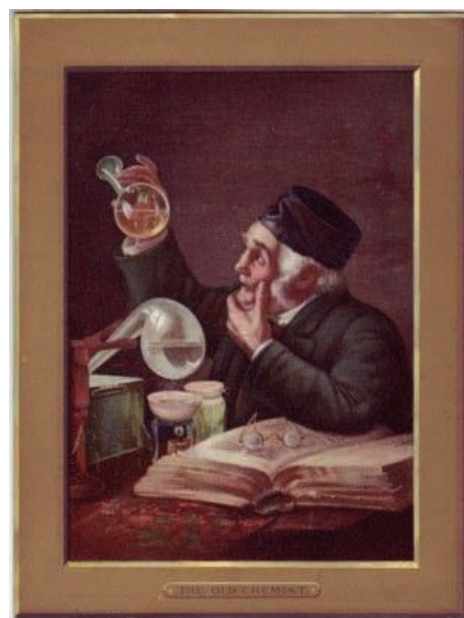


**Figure 8 -** Duffy trade card



**Figure 9 -** Duffy ink blotter

hand mirror (**Fig. 7**), the old gent also appeared on Duffy's trade cards (**Fig. 8**), blotters (**Fig. 9**), posters (**Fig. 10**), and a paper label that was applied to the base of each bottle (**Fig. 11**).



**Figure 10 -** 1904 Duffy poster

Duffy insisted that his product was protected from infringement by "low grade impure whiskey" by "the Pat-



**Figure 11 -** Duffy paper label

ented Bottle--Round, Amber Colored, and with Duffy blown into the glass." (**Fig. 12**). Bottle diggers all over the country regularly find them. A cache of five recently





**Figure 12** - Duffy embossed quart bottle



**Figure 13** - base of bottle with patent notice

surfaced in Sacramento, California, far from Rochester. The bottle also featured a patent number on the base (**Fig. 13**). To validate his therapeutic claims, Duffy gave away glass medicine spoons rather than shot glasses (**Fig. 14**).

### The Feds Do Duffy a Favor

Enter Washington, D.C. officialdom. In order to help pay the expenses of the Spanish American

War, Congress had passed a special tax on patent medicines. On July 5, 1898, the Commissioner of Internal Revenue, N.B. Scott, wrote to the local collector of revenues in Rochester ruling that: "Duffy's Pure Malt Whiskey, is by being advertised as a cure for consumption, dyspepsia, ma-



**Figure 14** - Duffy "medicinal" spoon

laria, etc., liable to a stamp tax as a medicinal article...." A background memo elaborated that although Duffy's contained nothing but distilled spirits, it was a patent medicine "by the manner in which it is presented to the public." The ruling decreed a tax of two cents per bottle. We can imagine Commissioner Scott laughing about sticking it to Duffy as he signed the order.

Historian Gordon Wood once wrote: "*History does not teach lots of little lessons. Insofar as it teaches any lessons, it teaches only one big one: that nothing ever works out quite the way its managers intended or expected.*" Certainly Walter Duffy well understood that big lesson. To the chagrin of numerous federal officials, he exploited the unplanned-for to his considerable financial benefit.

In reality, the Feds did Duffy two enormous, if unintended, favors. Estimates are that before it was repealed after the war, the stamp tax cost him about \$40,000, not an inconsiderable sum. At the same time, however, it exempted him from hundreds of thousands in federal and state liquor taxes and allowed him to advertise with some legitimacy as "the only whiskey recognized by the Government as medicine" -- a claim that turned out to be worth millions.

Even Samuel Hopkins Adams, whose series of articles in *Colliers Magazine* in 1905-1906 led to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, admitted that Duffy was partially justified in his claim of Federal recognition of his whiskey as medicine. Nevertheless, this famous "muckraker" took particular aim at Duffy's product, because of its claims to "cure" and its inferiority even as whiskey. He also exposed as phony newspaper

testimonials to its healing effects by alleged clergymen and Temperance workers. Nevertheless, Adams' revelations failed to dampen sales.

### Dr. Wylie's Frustration

The first head of the Food and Drug Administration, Dr. Harvey W. Wylie (**Fig. 15**) similarly sought to



**Figure 15** - Dr. Harvey W. Wylie

shut Duffy down. He ended frustrated with Washington bureaucratic foot-dragging: "*I stated that Duffy's Malt Whisky was one of the most gigantic frauds of the age and a flagrant violation of the law, and that there was no necessity that we delay at all in the matter.*"

After his pleas for prosecution were ignored for two years, the doctor denounced the "*determined efforts of my colleagues to protect Duffy's Pure Malt Whisky from being molested either by seizure or bringing any criminal case against the maker.*" Dr. Wylie left office in 1909 without ever having laid a glove on Duffy.

The only official to win a case against the distiller was Duffy's fellow Irishman, Patrick W. Cullinan. As the New York Commissioner of Excise, Cullinan in 1905 went to court claiming that Duffy's was nothing more than sweetened whiskey and subject to state liquor taxes. The company countered with eleven physicians, four of them members of the Rochester Health Department, who swore their belief that the whiskey contained drugs that made it real

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medicine. The New York Supreme Court, however, ultimately supported Cullinan and made the drink subject to the liquor tax. This proved to be only a slight setback to Duffy as the profits continued to roll in.

### Duffy Becomes a Multimillionaire

As a result of this soaring success, the formerly bankrupt Walter Duffy now was on his way to becoming a multimillionaire. His first wife, Theresa, had died in 1885 and in 1892 he married Loretta Putnam, a woman with an artistic bent and a taste for fine furnishings. She filled their sprawling Lake Avenue mansion (Fig. 16) in Rochester -- described as "palatial" -- with a lavish assemblage of antiques and paintings. When some items went to auction in 1913, the auctioneer's catalogue exclaimed: "What wealth!

The mansion and its furnishings particularly were on display to the city's bluebloods at the 1907 marriage of a daughter, Harriet Jane Duffy, to the son of a railroad executive. The ceremony was held in the private chapel of the Catholic bishop of the Rochester diocese. The bishop also presided over the nuptials. The wedding breakfast was held in the Duffy's Lake Avenue home. According to a contemporary press account: "The house was beautifully decorated with Killarney and American Beauty roses and Japanese lilies. Dossenbach's Orchestra furnished music."

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Duffy became one of Rochester's leading business figures. He was

president of the Flower City Bank and the German American Bank. He was a principal stockholder in an enterprise that owned hotels and theaters, including the Rochester Hotel (Fig. 17), the National Theater in Rochester and the Schubert Theater in New York City. He also was a director of the Pfaunder Company, which manufactured glass-lined tanks for storing and transporting beer and other products. Ignoring the fraudulent source of his money, a 1902 book entitled "Notable Men of Rochester and Vicinity" prominently featured his photo.

At his death, age 70 in 1911, the New York Times, which earlier had highlighted his bankruptcy, called Duffy "one of Rochester's best known business men and financiers" and listed the many companies on which he held executive and director positions.

### After Duffy's Demise

With Walter's death Duffy's Malt Whiskey underwent significant

tiny. As an ad (Fig. 18) from 1915 indicates, Duffy's got the message. It makes no claims beyond being a "tonic stimulant" and a "household remedy." Moreover, the name of the firm has been changed to the Duffy Malt Whiskey Company.

Prohibition brought still other alterations. The word "whiskey" now became anathema. So Duffy's became a tonic. The operation moved to Los Angeles and the name changed to Duffy's Laboratory, Ltd. Even the depiction of the Old Chemist changed on the label of the bottles (Fig. 19) as did the embossing (Fig. 20). The product itself appears to



Figure 19 - Duffy Malt Tonic bottle



Figure 18 - 1915 ad for Duffy Malt whiskey



Figure 20 - detail of Tonic bottle embossing

changes. Dr. Wylie had warned the patent medicine industry that using the word "cure" in advertising would subject products to particular scru-

have remained essentially whiskey: The alcoholic content was



Figure 16 - Duffy mansion at 116 Lake St.



Figure 17 - Hotel Rochester (postcard)



listed as “not over” 40 percent. Forty percent alcohol is 80 proof, similar to bourbon.

Whether the “Dry Police” eventually caught up with Duffy’s Malt Whiskey is not clear but by 1926 the company that Walter built was forever out of business. Nevertheless, Duffy himself had gone from bankruptcy to riches, helped immeasurably by his ability to profit by the fumbling of his adversaries.



**Figure 21** - Gambrill's Mill  
Monacacy, Maryland

### Meet George T. Gambrill

Behind many pre-Prohibition whiskey brands lie stories, but few have the soap opera quality of Maryland's Roxbury Rye. Its saga begins with its founder, George T. Gambrill, whose reputation as a scoundrel seems to have pursued him throughout a long life.

Gambrill is a familiar name in Maryland. The patriarch of the Gambrill clan was Augustine Gambrill, a plantation owner and one of the founders of Anne Arundel County in Maryland. Another ancestor was James Gambrill who bought the grain mill at Monacacy, Maryland, in 1856 (**Fig. 21**) only to find it 10 years later the centerpiece for a Civil War battle. A 1973 genealogical publication records three hundred years of the family in the state. Many Gambrills, George included, were involved in the grain and milling trade, principally in Baltimore. One observer has called the extended family “a milling dynasty.”

Born about 1845, George's first brush with the courts was in 1864 when, in his late teens, he was forced

to declare bankruptcy, unable to pay a host of creditors. Later he would claim that he had been drawn into the affairs of Gambrill Bros., his grain dealer relatives, and being young and



**Figure 22** - Eutaw House,  
Baltimore

naive, made the fall guy. Besides, he avowed, he had paid off his all creditors by 1868.

In 1870, according to Baltimore city directories, George was back in business as a principal in Gambrill & Williar, grain dealers. Their offices were in the posh Eutaw House, a downtown hotel (**Fig. 22**) where Edgar Allen Poe is said to have written “The Raven.” Ten years later we find George with another grain firm, Trail & Gambrill. Since wheat, rye and corn are the basis of whiskeys, it seems a natural move for him to branch out from grain to grain alcohol as an ingredient in spirituous liquids. By the 1890 census he is recorded as a distiller.

### Gambrill Rides Roxbury Rye

In 1893 Gambrill registered Roxbury Rye as a brand with the government, with a distillery in Roxbury, Maryland, a village in Washington County about twenty-three miles from Baltimore. Despite being located in Maryland, he incorporated the company in West Virginia, probably to avoid taxes. An energetic salesman, Gambrill built Roxbury Rye into a nationally recognized brand in relatively few years. He merchandised his liquor in attractive quart bottles. Shown here is one with original label featuring George's initials in a logo (**Fig. 23**). The bottles themselves were embossed in script that read: “Roxbury Rye...Geo. T.

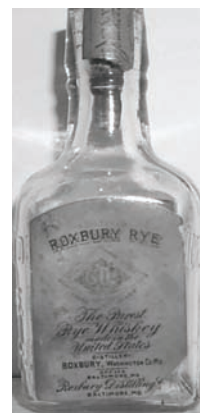
Gambrill ... Baltimore, Md.” (**Fig. 24**). A labeled pint from the distillery claims to be “The Purest Rye Whiskey in the United States.” (**Fig. 25**) Gambrill also issued embossed mini bottles (**Fig. 26**) and at



**Figure 23** -  
Roxbury Rye  
labeled quart



**Figure 24** -  
Roxbury Rye  
embossed  
bottle



**Figure 25** -  
Roxbury Rye  
labeled pint



**Figure 26** -  
Roxbury Rye  
Mini bottle



**Figure 27** -  
Roxbury Rye  
decanter

least one attractive back-of-the-bar decanter (**Fig. 27**).

Before long Gambrill's distillery was Maryland's sixth largest in terms of capacity. It also maintained impressive sales offices in Baltimore at 115 West Baltimore St. In 1900 Roxbury Rye was important enough to

be among a handful of American distilleries exhibiting at the Paris Exposition. Gambrill prospered. Married by now to Margaret, he fathered a son he named after himself. Junior would go on to Yale University, graduating in 1907. Life was good for George.

### Stolen Coal and Fatal Fires

But Gambrill continually found it difficult to play it straight. By 1901 he was back in court fighting a case brought against him by a man named John Schooley. Schooley claimed that Gambrill had reneged on a deal to give him lodging, money and distillery warehousing space in return for overseeing the Roxbury operation. Schooley also claimed slander because of a letter allegedly written by Gambrill saying Schooley "stole my coal."

In addition to denying that the letter was in his handwriting, Gambrill made a bizarre defense claiming that he really wasn't in the distillery business at all since his entire product for five years -- 3,000 barrels of whiskey -- had been promised to Steinhardt Brothers of New York City and that, in effect, the Steinhardts were running his distillery. The court rejected that notion and quickly found for Schooley. A 1902 appeal by Gambrill failed.

Meanwhile, Roxbury's Baltimore sales operation was taking a hit. On the afternoon of Jan. 4, 1901, a fire broke out in an adjoining building and spread to Gambrill's Baltimore Street offices. According to a New York Times account, the Roxbury Rye

Company, mostly from water damage, lost \$10,000 in inventory and the building was damaged to the extent of \$510,000. All losses were said to be covered by insurance. The cause of the fire was never discovered.

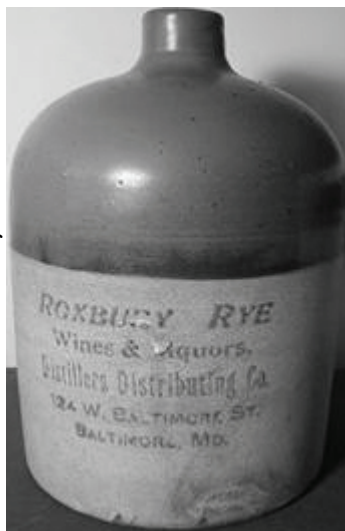
But a far more devastating fire would visit Gambrill's sales

operation barely three years later. The Great Baltimore Fire of February 1904 (**Fig. 28**) destroyed his building and all the contents. Not long after, the Fisher Bros. Co., a local liquor distributor, claimed in ads to be the "successors to George T. Gambrill, distiller...." This firm first shows up in Baltimore directories in 1899. It too was displaced by the fire, moving temporarily to 406 W. Camden. By 1905 Fisher Bros. was in permanent quarters at 124 W. Baltimore Av. and advertising as "agents" for Roxbury Rye.

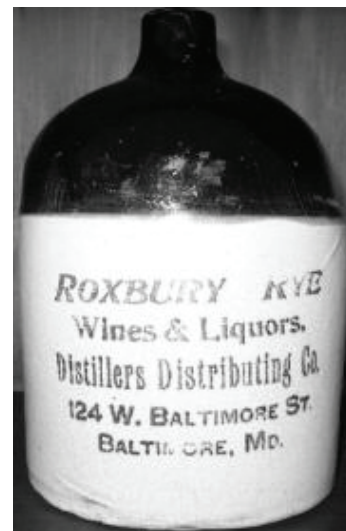
### Jail Time for George?

In 1905 Gambrill, still running the distillery at Roxbury, registered the rye brand again with the government, this time as a product of the Roxbury Distilling Co. Once again George was having problems keeping on the right side of the law. A grain speculator, he bet the wrong way on wheat prices, lost his shirt, and once again was unable to pay creditors.

The special master in bankruptcy for the case was a distinguished Baltimore lawyer named John Hinkley, who twice was elected National



**Figure 29** - Roxbury Rye tan jug



**Figure 30** - Roxbury Rye brown and white jug

Secretary of the American Bar Association. Hinkley had the goods on Gambrill. His written opinion described the financial shenanigans Gambrill had accomplished to swindle his creditors, chief among them the Merchant's Bank of Baltimore, an institution with a "hard nosed" reputation.

Hinkley concluded that the financial losses added up to something more than mismanagement. They were out and out fraud. As a result Gambrill was hauled into court in 1910, accused of putting up the same whiskey as collateral for separate, forfeited loans totaling a half million dollars. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to four years in prison. Although he appealed, his Roxbury distillery was shut down and George exited the whiskey business. He sold the brand name to other Baltimore interests. As a result Roxbury Rye continue to be sold until Prohibition (**Figs. 29, 30**).

### The End of the Story

Meanwhile, Gambrill vigorously was resisting going to jail. He filed motions left and right, appealing his conviction, much as he had against John Schooley. A dozen years later, for murky reasons, he still had not served a single day behind bars. Instead, according to U.S. Census records, he was residing comfortably with Margaret in a four-story Balti-



**Figure 28** - Baltimore file photograph



more row house in the 700 block of St. Paul Street, shown here in a contemporary photo (**Fig. 31**). He also



**Figure 31** - Townhouses  
at 711 - 715 St. Paul St.  
Baltimore, Maryland

was working as an executive with the Gambrill Grain Products Co., located at 1311 Bolton St.

While awaiting the outcome of his legal battles, George watched the onset of Prohibition in 1920. The whiskey he created and brought into national prominence disappeared forever. Finally in 1922, a judge quashed the fraud conviction citing Gambrill's failing health and advanced years (about 77). It may have been the old fellow's last con game: George managed to live another eight years, dying at the age of 85.

Despite Duffy's brief and disastrous foray into the Baltimore whiskey scene, it is unlikely that he and Gambrill ever met. The two years Walter was in the city, George was hard at work in the grain trade. But their careers had remarkable similarities:

Both came from well-off families in whiskey-related businesses.

Both suffered bankruptcy early in their careers and emerged unscathed.

Both built a whiskey brand into national prominence.

Both had government officialdom frequently hard on their heels.

Both showed exceptional abilities to evade attempts to punish them for

alleged misdeeds.

Both died rich men.

Finally, both wrote their names in whiskey history as among the American distilling industry's most colorful and successful rogues.

That is why, with mixed emotions, we remember the lives of Walter B. Duffy and George T. Gambrill.

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**Notes:** The information for this article was researched from a wide range of internet and printed sources. Prominent among them were the New York Times online archives. A compilation of Samuel Hopkins Adams' articles on the patent medicine industry, called *The Great American Fraud*, similarly is available online. The pictures of Walter Duffy and his mansion are through the great courtesy of the Rochester and Monroe Country Public Library. Among principal sources on George Gambrill was Jim Bready's excellent article on Maryland whiskey for the Winter 1990 issue of the Maryland Historical Magazine. Portions of this article appeared earlier in the Potomac Pontil, newsletter of the Potomac Bottle Club.

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