



## Names in the Glass

by Don Denzin

### A Devoted Virginian's Floating Coffin

*A lone Confederate soldier makes his way toward the water on an isolated bank of the Potomac River. His arms ache from the large object he drags behind, and he pauses, his ears straining for sounds beneath a concealing pre-dawn sky. The welcome silence allows his nervousness to drain, but only a little. Under orders and on a secret mission, he jabs sweat from his eyes, listens intently again, then finally pushes ahead. He makes his way without slowing until gravel gives way to mud at the water's edge.*

*He maneuvers his heavy burden to the front and the full outline of a coffin now grows visible in the darkness. He guides it into the shallows, then walks with it as it floats, gliding it into the languid river. He stops as cold water reaches his thighs.*

*Gripping the coffin's opposite sides, he pulls himself into the empty cavity. Even before its rocking steadies, he comes up to his knees, and retrieves a fence rail*

*lying inside. The slender pole bumps a coffin wall and the deep box lets out a boom, but with undeterred motion, he hoists the rail vertically over the river. He pushes down. It bites the mud. The strange vessel slides toward deeper water.*

*He begins to paddle. His arms establish rhythm and the ragged shoreline fades. The moment becomes peaceful as his ghostly silhouette slides on the skin of the sleeping river.*

Sound like the opening of a movie? Maybe it could be. But the scene is not available at Blockbuster. It is purportedly a true story, one that forms part of the fascinating backdrop behind our collecting hobby.

The Civil War soldier is Frank Hume, the man whose name appears on the pair of bottles pictured here. Hume (1843-1906) joined General James Longstreet's 21st Mississippi Regiment, becoming part of the Volunteer Southrons, in 1861. He participated in eleven major battles, received a wound at Gettysburg and later served as a signal scout under General J.E.B. Stuart. Hume's own memoir reports that he earned a personal commendation from General Robert E. Lee for the mission that started in the opening paragraphs. More about that later.

Importantly for bottle collectors, Hume returned home safely after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. Home was the Washington D.C. area, where civilian Hume first tried his hand at agriculture. The venture lasted only two years, and next he became a grocer in Georgetown. Finally, in 1871, he established his own wholesale grocery and liquor business.

Good fortune in battle now followed him into the world of commerce. Housed on Washington D.C.'s Pennsylvania Avenue near the Central Market, Hume & Co. prospered. The business doubtless marketed a range of products, and among them were an assortment of domestic and imported wines, brandies, and whiskey. Hume & Co. became the largest wholesale grocer in the District of Columbia.<sup>1</sup>

### Frank Hume Bottles

The pair of pint-sized bottles in clear glass represented here probably date from the late 1880s or 1890s when Hume's business flourished. With chamfered corners and embossed pictures, they are not typical of period "grocer's bottles" from Eastern states, and for this reason today's collectors recognize them as desirable. Yet they are probably not rare. Even if Hume's market included only the Midatlantic region, it seems likely many such bottles were blown because Hume's business lasted for several years.

The whiskey brands they advertised, Old Stag and Homestead, were complimented by other potables in the Hume product line, including Warwick Whiskey and Very Superior Old Rye. The author has not seen bottles embossed with these names, but references to them exist.

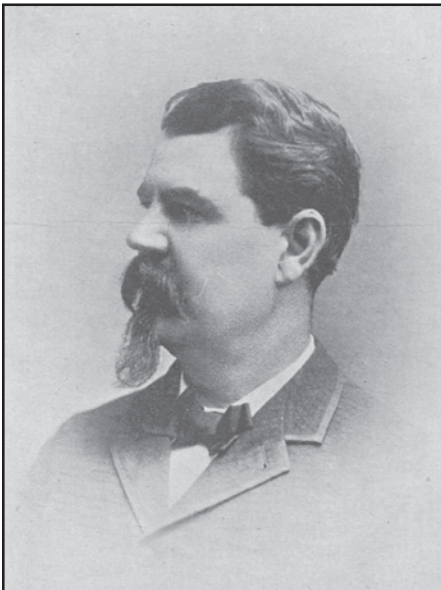
Interestingly, both bottles pictured in this article include the embossed word, "Compound." This is a reference to their original contents. At the turn-of-the-century, it was common practice for liquor distributors to enhance inexpensive whiskey or other alcoholic products by adding essences, oils, and even prune juice in a practice known as compounding. Perhaps Hume deserves credit because not all whiskey marketers were so forthcoming in revealing which of their products had been "improved" in this way. In any event, we may reasonably speculate that Homestead and Old Stag were less-than-premium brands.

### The Honorable Frank Hume

Since Hume commissioned the embossing of separate brand names on separate bottles rather than relying solely on less expensive paper labels and generic containers, it seems logical to conclude he believed he would sell substantial quantities of each kind of whiskey. Maybe he did. What is certain is that Hume sold substantial quantities of *something* because he grew wealthy, so wealthy, in fact, that he became a significant landowner and philanthropist.

His wealth and grocery business success led to other accomplishments. He became president of the Independent Steamboat and Barge Company and a director of the Fireman's Insurance Co. He also served on other boards, among them, the Washington Board of Trade where he vigorously but unsuccessfully advocated construction of a bridge linking Alexandria, Va. to Washington, D.C. Notably, he also entered public life at the State level. Now a resident of Alexandria, voters there sent him to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1889 and 1899.

His legacy extends even to this day. The area known as Hume Springs, near Alexandria, takes its name from him. The Hume School, a preparatory academy



Frank Hume, devoted Virginian. "Union soldiers on the Maryland bluff were treated to the spectacle of a lone rebel sitting in the middle of the river, paddling a coffin case with a fence paling."

originally housed in the landmark building now occupied by the Arlington Historical Society, received his major financial backing in the 1890s. (The father of eleven children, Hume may have understood this act of generosity in practical terms!) A stone monument at the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce bears his name. Its engraved inscription identifies him as "A devoted Virginian who served his native State in Civil War and Legislative Hall." Finally, although it does not bear his name, the 14<sup>th</sup> St. Bridge across the Potomac, a project he championed, was constructed after his death. Hume is buried in Ivy Hill Cemetery in Alexandria.

### The Rest of the Story

Frank Hume's experience in the coffin occurred in April, 1864. Already dramatic by its very nature, the incident must have had added poignancy for him for personal reasons. At the time, it is likely that death was no abstraction for Hume, and not just because he had become a battle-tested soldier. Frank and a brother, Charles Connor Hume, enlisted on the Confederate side in the Civil War. In the two years that followed, Union soldiers killed Charles Connor, and two additional brothers died in an epidemic. His father also died in the same period.

In a further twist, Frank Hume knew that Connor Hume had been killed on the banks of the Potomac River while on a covert mission for the same General, J.E.B. Stuart, under whom he now served. We can imagine how these circumstances swirled in his head before he entered that empty coffin on the Potomac River.

According to Civil War author and student, Carlton Fletcher, who has studied Hume's memoir, the young soldier reports that his instructions were to make his way behind enemy lines to Annapolis. There, his mission was to discover the intentions of General Burnside, whose troops bivouacked nearby. The endeavor began in a coffin because, with watercraft in short supply, members of Hume's corps furnished him with the only

improvised boat they could find. That coffins were so plentiful offers grim evidence of the savagery of the Civil War.

Historian Fletcher continues the story of Hume's adventure at the river:

Under cover of night, Hume started across, but he made poor time, and when the sun rose Union soldiers on the Maryland bluff were treated to the spectacle of a lone rebel sitting in the middle of the river, paddling a coffin case with a fence paling. From his luckless situation, they concluded that Hume must be a deserter. Hume was able to land and make himself scarce before they realized their mistake.<sup>2</sup>

What happened next is not entirely clear. Hume reached Annapolis only to learn either that General Burnside's intentions had been revealed already by another Confederate spy or that Burnside had departed for Virginia to muster with General Grant. In either event, the need for Hume's undercover exercise ended. He headed back for his unit, but not before stopping at a Washington portrait studio to have a photograph made. His memoir recounts that the studio's other customers "were all dressed in blue."

Returning to the river, Hume discovered that a local resident had transformed his original watercraft into a chicken coop. This time he located a legitimate boat, and made his way to Spotsylvania on the opposite side of the Potomac. Aborted mission or not, Hume's memoir reports that it was here that none other than General Lee offered personal thanks for the young signal scout's effort.

The story is fascinating. But is it entirely true? After all, while Hume's Civil War service is a matter of record, the details of his trip across the Potomac are apparently documented mainly in his memoir.

No one has asserted that Hume's memory was faulty, yet historians often suggest that all personal accounts are best understood in context. "Family history," Carlton Fletcher writes, referring to Hume's memoir, "is a genre in which a flattering fiction... always finds a welcome."<sup>3</sup>

Corroborating evidence for his memoir may never surface, but whether it does or not is probably of little consequence. At most, Frank Hume's unusual river crossing represents a footnote in a far larger epic. With or without additional information, it is enough to know he was a man of accomplishments. He served the people of Virginia in conflict, in the legislature, as a philanthropist, and thankfully for collectors of antique bottles, in the world of commerce.

If the floating coffin is long gone, the bottles still give material testimony to one of the contributions of Frank Hume, "devoted Virginian."

### References:

<sup>1</sup> Arlington County Library website: <http://www.co.arlington.va.us/lib/history/bicentennial/voices1860.htm>

<sup>2</sup> "Confederate Signal Scouts from Washington D.C.", Carlton Fletcher, *Signal Cipher Newsletter*, (Signal Corps Association Reenactor's Division, Glen Burnie, MD), Jan. 1998.

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to the author, Carlton Fletcher writes, "By the time Hume made his river crossing, Burnside was already two years gone from Annapolis, which tells me that, while Hume may indeed have crossed the Potomac in a coffin, it wasn't to gather intelligence about Burnside."

*The Compounder or Williams' Informer or Whiskey Buyer's Guide* G.C. Williams, St. Louis, 1898.

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**Left:** Homestead Whiskey from Frank Hume.

**Right:** Old Stag Whiskey. The bottle's embossing reads, "For the Sick Room or Side Board"