

If you're ever in Memphis, Tennessee one of the most important places to visit is The Peabody Hotel. The establishment is world famous as "The South's Grand Hotel."

The Peabody was originally built more than 130 years ago. That's 30 years before the Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Memphis was opened in 1902, to become one of several pioneering Coke bottling franchises in Tennessee.

Coca-Cola's promotional association with "The South's Grand Hotel" did not come about until 78 years after the first bottling plant opened in Memphis. But that's getting ahead of the historical tale to be told here.

To begin with, it's interesting to note that Native Americans living in what is now Memphis, Tennessee had their first contact with Europeans, in 1541, when they encountered the Hernando De Soto expedition.

Not much is recorded about that first meeting but approximately 200 years later (1739) French explorers built Fort Assumption on the Memphis site. Then 56 years later (1795) the Spanish built Fort San Fernando de Las Barrancas in the same area. Just two years later the United States built Fort Adams and officially gained control of the area.

The city of Memphis was actually founded on May 22, 1819 by Andrew Jackson, John Overton, and James Winchester. It took 53 years before the first Peabody Hotel appeared on the scene. Col. Robert C. Brinkley built the original hotel.

Just prior to its opening, Brinkley received news of the death of his good friend, philanthropist George Peabody, whom he met on a trip to Europe. As a sign of respect for Peabody, who endowed George Peabody College in Nashville and contributed heavily to the disadvantaged

South after the Civil War, the new venture was named The Peabody.

The original hotel was built at the corner of Main and Monroe in downtown Memphis and was considered one of the finest in the South. It had 75 rooms with private baths, a ballroom, saloon and lobby. It cost a precious \$3 or \$4 a day for room and

meals and extra for a fire or gas light. The Peabody Hotel remained in the builder's family directly or indirectly for 96 years.

The Peabody was the place to see and be seen. Over the years it played host to such notables as U. S. Presidents, Confederate Generals, plantation owners, professional gamblers, important businessmen such as the owner of the local Coca-Cola bottling company, movie stars and other celebrities. The Peabody enjoyed success until 1923 when it closed.

Two years later, in 1925, a \$5 million new Peabody hotel, designed by architect Walter Ahlschlager, opened at its present downtown address – 149 Union Avenue. R. Brinkley Snowden, great-grandson of the original builder, owned the new hotel. The new 468-room hotel exudes a grand-dame charm and is still the place to see and be seen. It serves as the social hub for Memphis and the Mid-South elite.

Things went very well for the new property throughout the 1930s through the 1970s. In the 1970s downtown Memphis, like many urban areas, experienced a

social and economic decline. Businesses, retailers and shoppers soon left the area, causing all downtown to suffer. After several fires and changes in ownership, The Peabody closed (1975) once again.

After a six-year, \$25 million renovation, "The South's Grand Hotel" reopened on September 1, 1981. For collectors of soft drink memorabilia that is noteworthy because on that date, to commemorate the reopening of The Peabody, The Coca-Cola Company issued a commemorative tray (pictured here) that today commands a price of over one hundred dollars in the collector marketplace.

Also it's good for collectors to recall that The Coca-Cola Company used round and oval trays exclusively from the 1890s to 1910. From 1910 to the 1990s, most trays advertising Coca-Cola have been rectangular like Peabody hotel commemorative tray featured in this article.

End of story? No, no! If you'll look closely you will note that the commemorative tray features a pictorial rendering of some ducks. While the hotel is famous in its own right as an historic building with Mississippi Delta style architecture, it's the ducks that are, perhaps, even more famous than the historic hotel itself.

Indeed, every day at 11:00 a.m. in Memphis, at The Peabody, the "Duckmaster" escorts his fowl onto the elevator at roof level. When the group of five mallards arrives in the lobby of the hotel, a red carpet is unrolled, a John Philip Sousa march is played, and the flock marches from the elevator to the Italian Travertine Marble fountain, up a few steps and in they go.

At 5:00 p.m. they do it all over again—



only in reverse order. They jump from the fountain onto the red carpet and waddle to the elevator and head up to the "Duck Palace" for a good night's rest.

The size of the crowd trying to catch a glimpse of the comings and goings of the famous ducks sometimes numbers in the hundreds. The children often squeal with anticipation. Interestingly, the whole show lasts for only 20 seconds.

The tradition of The Peabody marching Ducks began in 1930. General Manager Frank Schutt, an avid sportsman, and a friend returned from hunting empty-handed. They decided to play a prank and put their live-duck decoys (legal at the time) in the lobby fountain. The reaction from the guests was nothing short of enthusiastic.

In 1940, Bellman Edward Pembroke, a former circus animal trainer, offered to help with delivering the ducks to and from the fountain each day and taught them the famous Peabody Duck March. Pembroke became the Duckmaster and served in that capacity for more than 50 years until his retirement in 1991.

Today's Duckmaster is Toby Carter. Mr. Carter delights in telling how the mallards are trained and cared for. Each set of five ducks is employed for just three months, after which they are "retired" to a local farm.

Past incarnations of the Peabody Ducks have toured in Louisville and San Francisco. They have even appeared as guests on "Good Morning America."

And, of course, the Peabody Ducks are permanently enshrined on the 1981 commemorative Coca-Cola serving tray!

Other Memphis landmarks:

1909 - W. C. Handy wrote the "Memphis Blues."

1916 - Clarence Saunders opened the first Piggly Wiggly store.

1954 - Elvis Presley gave his first concert in Memphis.

1958 - Stax Records, creator of the "Memphis Sound," was organized.

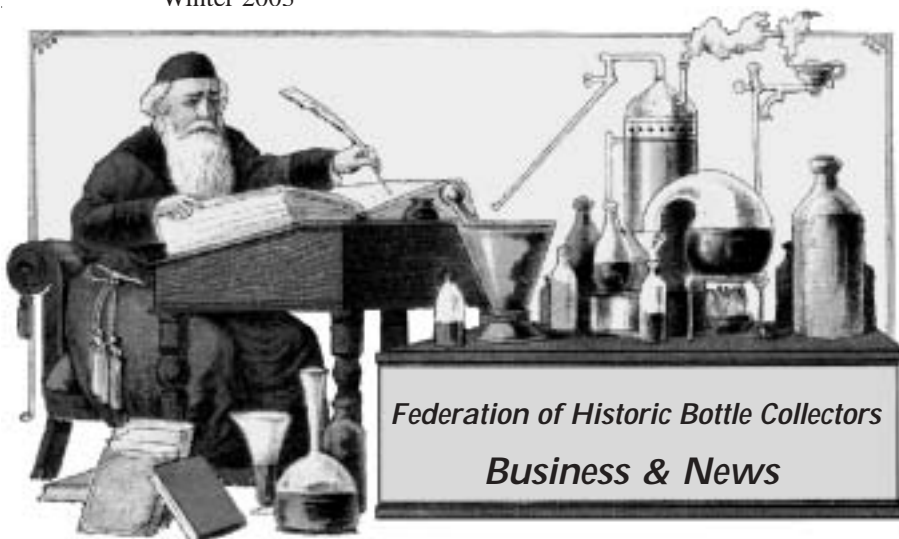
1972 - Federal Express Corporation was organized in Memphis.

1977 - Elvis Presley died at his Graceland home on August 16.

1982 - Mud Island Park and River Walk opened.

1983 - Redeveloped Beale Street, home of the Memphis Blues, was opened as a tourist attraction.

1991 - Memphis Pyramid was opened.



The Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors is a non-profit organization for collectors of historical bottles and related collectible items. Our primary goal is educational as it relates to the history and manufacture of historical bottles and related artifacts.

FOHBC Officers 2002-2004

President : Ralph VanBrocklin, 1021 W. Oakland Ave, Suite 109, Johnson City, TN 37604 Home (423) 913-1378 Office (432) 282-8393
E-mail: thegenuine@aol.com

First Vice-President : John Pastor, 7288 Thorncrest Dr. SE, Ada, MI 49301 (616) 285-7604
E-mail: JPastor2000@msn.com

Second Vice-President : Jack Hewitt, 1765 Potomac Ct., Lawrenceville, GA 30043 (770) 963-0220

Secretary : Ed Provine, 401 Fawn Lake Drive, Millington, TN 38053 (901) 876-3296

Treasurer : Alan DeMaison, 6583 Berkshire Dr. Mentor, OH 44060 (440) 255-3880
E-mail: violinbottle@aol.com

Historian : Richard Watson, 10 S. Wendover Rd., Medford, NJ 08055 (856) 983-1364
E-mail: rewatson@bellatlantic.net

Editor : Kathy Hopson, 1966 King Springs Rd., Johnson City, TN 37601 (423) 926-7160
E-mail: kathy@thesodafizz.com

Merchandising Director : Margie Williams, 1835 Oak Terr., Newcastle, CA 95658 (926) 663-1510
E-mail: margie@altarfire.com;
Fax: (926) 663-2030

Membership Director : Fred Holabird, 701 Gold Run Court, Reno, NV 89511 (775) 851-0837

Convention Director : Adam Koch, 10512 Northfield Rd., Northfield, OH 44067 (330) 467-1551

Business Manager / Subscriptions: June Lowry, 401 Johnson Ct., Raymore, MO 64083
E-mail: JarDocLowry@aol.com

Director-At-Large : Sheldon Baugh, 252 W. Valley, Russellville, KY 42276 (270) 726-2712; Fax: (270) 726-7618
E-mail: sheldonb@logantele.com

Director-At-Large : Norman Barnett, P.O. Box 38, Flat Rock, IN 47234 (812) 587-5560

Director-At-Large: Carl Strum, 88 Sweetbriar Branch, Longwood, FL 32750-2783 (407) 332-7689

E-mail: glassmancarl@sprintmail.com

Midwest Region Director : Rick Baldwin, 1931 Thorpe Circle, Brunswick, OH 44212-4261 (330) 225-3576

E-mail: rsbaldwin@worldnet.att.net

Northeast Region Director : Larry Fox, 5478 Route 21, Canandaigua, NY 14424 (716) 394-8958

Southern Region Director : Tom Lines, PO Box 382831, Birmingham, AL 35238 (205) 987-0650

Western Region Director : Kent Williams, 1835 Oak Terr., Newcastle, CA 95658 (916) 663-2030

Public Relations Director : Mike Polak, PO Box 30328, Long Beach, CA 90853 (562) 438-9209

E-mail: bottleking@earthlink.net

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