

COLUMBUS' JOHN RYAN BRANCH

opened earlier than thought

By Bill Baab

Research into many subjects has never been easier, thanks to Internet sites like Google, digital newspaper archives, Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps of the 19th century and even surviving members of families involved in early businesses.

Find the right sites and totally unexpected information will be revealed in what some call “Eureka Moments,” as in “Eureka! I have found it!”

Allen Woodall in 2019 decided to become a collector of antique Columbus, Georgia bottles so he visited other collectors to learn just what was out there from his hometown. One of those collectors was Tom Hicks, of Eatonton, Georgia. He has been a collector of antique bottles since the early 1960s and specializes in early Georgia and Alabama examples.

It just so happened that he owned two rare John Ryan sodas from the Columbus Branch established by the pioneer Savannah bottler who also established branches in Augusta (1866) and Atlanta (1867). So Woodall celebrated his own “Eureka Moment” when he was able to purchase the two rare cobalt blue sodas, the rarest with an embossed capital “R” on its back.

Collectors have always thought that Ryan had established his Columbus Branch in 1867, but thanks to research conducted by John M. Ahearn II, a Columbus librarian, the branch was established in 1858 just six years after Ryan had opened his Excelsior Bottling Works in Savannah. Woodall had engaged Ahearn to help find original Columbus bottling sites through old newspapers and other records.



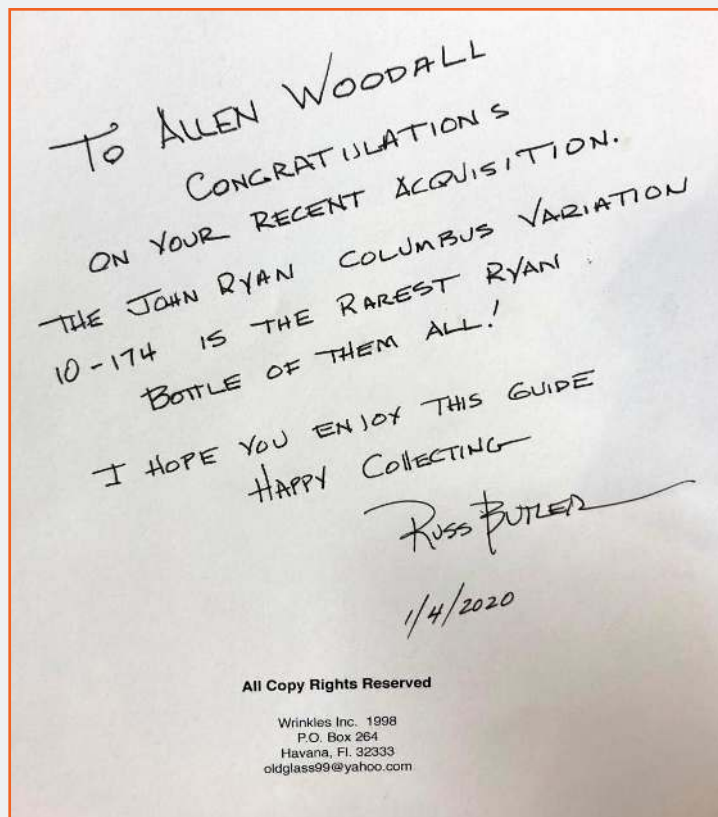
Close up of the front of the John Ryan Columbus bottle



Close up of the back of the John Ryan Columbus bottle, with a large R



John Ahearn holding his John Ryan Columbus branch bottle



Russ Butler autograph and nice inscription to John

Ahearn noted his task would not be easy due to the fact a majority of newspapers and maps was burned by Union Army Major General James H. Wilson. After the Civil War Battle of Columbus, much of the city's industrial infrastructure was destroyed in retaliation against the South by northern forces. But Ahearn had access to post Civil War maps at the Chattahoochee Valley Library in Columbus. He learned the Ryan branch site at the corner of Oglethorpe and Randolph streets is now on present day 12th and Front streets.

Ahearn's "Eureka Moment" came when he discovered a John Ryan ad dated June 5, 1858 in a copy of the old Columbus Sun. The advertisement read: "Something New in Columbus! A soda water bottling establishment has been opened at deGraffenried's Corner opposite the Post Office where the subscriber will be happy to receive orders for an article of Soda Water which CAN NOT BE SURPASSED! Fourteen years Practical Experience not only in preparing Soda Water, but in constructing Apparatus for its preparation, should entitle me to the confidence of a discriminating public. Six years established in Savannah, Ga., where I will continue the same business, this being a branch to be conducted in the same style as my Savannah house. (s) John Ryan. N.B. (note at bottom): Our wagon will pass around DAILY to customers."

Ahearn was not able to locate Ryan's business in Columbus until 1882. His business agent at the branch was Francis Early Slaughter, sometimes called Early. But Slaughter's name does not appear in city directories until the 1873-74 edition. His address

was listed on Oglethorpe "below the bridge." There is the distinct possibility that Slaughter served during the Civil War so he was not present in the city. Ryan's branch may not have been in operation during the war years of 1861-65. The manufacturer of Ryan's bottles was the Philadelphia Glass Works while another northern business manufactured his bottle corks. Those sources would have "dried up" during the war.

Earliest and rarest of the Columbus Ryans has a large "R" embossed on its back and John Ryan/Columbus, Ga., on the front. It is undated. The other Columbus Ryan shares the same name and city embossed on its front, but is dated 1883. There is no "R" on the back. It, too, is considered rare, probably because the business closed when Ryan died in 1885.

The Atlanta branch also shut down, but the Augusta branch, also called the Excelsior Bottling Works, continued to operate when its manager, Edward Sheehan, took over and in 1880 established the soda bottling works under his name. Meanwhile, the popularity of Ryan's many bottles lives on in today's collectors because of their vivid colors of cobalt blue, emerald green, yellow, red, pink and amber.

NOTE: Researcher John M. Ahearn II wishes to thank his wife, Brianna, and Allen Woodall, Daniel Bellaware, Blythe Moseley and the Columbus Public Library Adult Services staff and Genealogy Department for their support.

