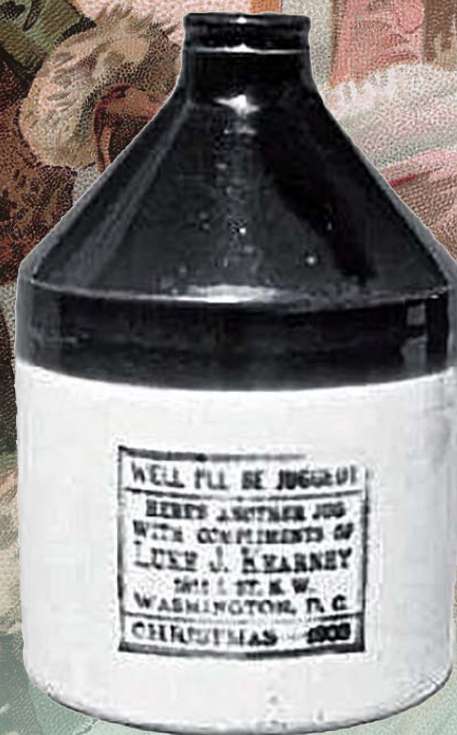


# Luke Kearney and "Keeping Christmas"

By Jack Sullivan



(Fig. 1). The earliest seems to have been issued in 1900. It's underglaze label read: "You are not left...Not by a Jug Full"...Compliments of...Luke J. Kearney... Christmas 1900."

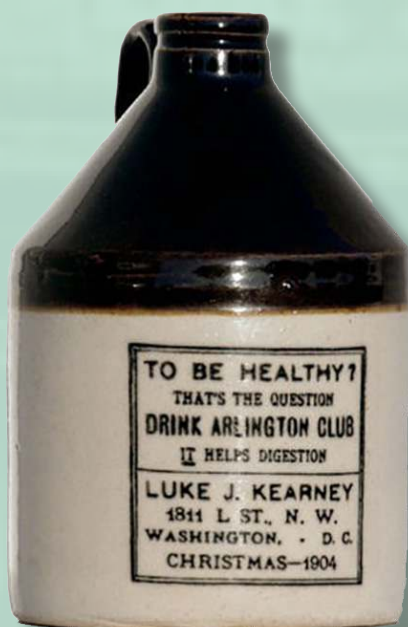


(Fig. 2) A couple years later the Washingtonian employed a personal motto: "Well I'll be Jugged...Here's Another Jug with Compliments of Luke J. Kearney."

As the presence of the coronavirus pandemic seems likely to continue into 2021, the approach of the Holiday Season seems problematic. In countering any pessimism, the example of Luke Kearney, a Washington, D.C. saloonkeeper, should be kept in mind. Despite the personal tragedies that beset him, he was notable for giving away at the holiday's small jugs of whiskey with upbeat mottos. In the words of Charles Dickens, Kearney "knew how to keep Christmas."

Kearney's giveaways were distinctive. Virtually all were two-toned stoneware mini-jugs about 5 and 1/2 inches high. More important, each year had a new slogan -- something for the drinking public to ponder while draining the modest contents of the jug. The earliest seems to have been issued in 1900. Its underglaze label read: "You are not left...Not by a Jug Full"...Compliments of...Luke J. Kearney... Christmas 1900." (Fig. 1). It was followed in 1901 by "Another Jug Full...Compliments Of...." In 1902, Kearney used the slogan: "While We Live - Let's Live." Later

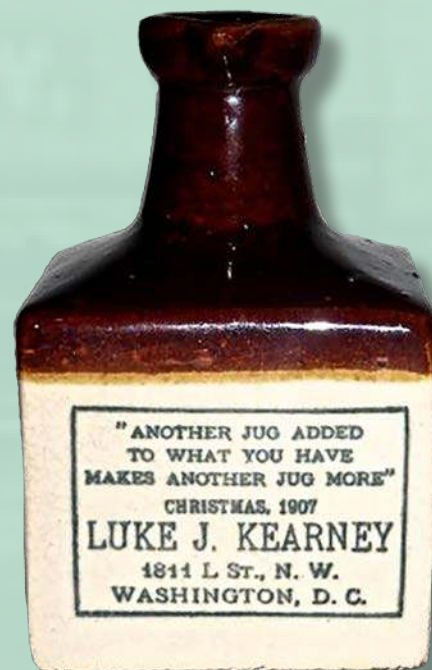




(Fig. 3) The 1904 version was "If You Try Me Once, You Will Try Me Again."



(Fig. 4) A squared jug with the simple question: "Is Everybody Happy?... Christmas 1906...Luke J. Kearney"



(Fig. 5) "Another Jug Added to What You Have Makes Another Jug More"

ceramics would add the address of his saloon at 1811 L Street in the District of Columbia.

The next year the Washingtonian employed a personal motto: "Well I'll be Jugged...Here's Another Jug with Compliments of Luke J. Kearney." (Fig. 2) The 1904 version was "If You Try Me Once, You Will Try Me Again." He also issued a second version in 1904 (Fig. 3). It contained a verse that says:

**"To Be Healthy?  
That's the Question;  
Drink Arlington Club  
It Aids Digestion."**

Although I have yet to identify a giveaway for 1905, Kearney issued two items in 1906. One bore the enigmatic motto, "As I Go Up the Hill of Prosperity, May I Never Meet a Friend." The second 1906 stoneware is a squared jug with the simple question: "Is Everybody Happy?... Christmas 1906...Luke J. Kearney" (Fig. 4). The 1907 issue reads "Another Jug Added to What You Have Makes Another Jug More" (Fig. 5). After 1907 the Christmas jugs ceased.

What must be understood are the multiple personal tragedies Kearney was undergoing during this same period. In October 1894, Luke at the age of 26 had married Catherine Croghan of similar age in the District of Columbia. Their first child, a girl they



(Fig. 6) Kearney not only poured whiskey over the bar, but he also sold package goods in bottles elaborately embossed with his name and address.





(Fig. 7) Shot glasses advertising Arlington Club Whiskey, a brand registered to the Hellman Distilling Co. of St. Louis.

named Mary Helen, died in infancy in 1896. Their next three children, Nellie, Mary, and Luke Jr. were born healthy. Then tragedy struck again in 1905 when a second son, Joseph, died in infancy. Then came the final blow. Catherine, Luke's wife of ten years, died in 1906, age 37, leaving her husband to raise three small children. Luke never remarried.



(Fig. 8) The saloonkeeper brushed with a celebrity in 1903 when he accepted a check written by Harry K. Thaw

Kearney was the product of Irish parents who had immigrated to America before his birth. His father found a job as a government watchman, working for 50 years in Washington, D.C. He and his wife, Mary, had a family of six children. Among them was Luke, born in 1868. The family lived at 3331 O Street in Georgetown.

The source and length of Kearney's education and early business career are shrouded in time. A 1900 city directory found Luke and his family living above his L Steet saloon. Sanborn fire maps of the time show the building as a two-story brick structure 25 feet wide and extending rearward almost one-half block to an alley. Today it is the site of a large office building.



(Fig. 9) Thaw was the young socialite who shot famous architect Stanford White over the showgirl, Evelyn Nesbit, known widely as "The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing." The trio is shown here, Thaw at right



Kearney not only poured whiskey over the bar, but he also sold package goods in bottles elaborately embossed with his name and address (Fig. 6). He gave out shot glasses advertising Arlington Club Whiskey, a brand registered to the Hellman Distilling Co. of St. Louis (Fig. 7).

The saloonkeeper brushed with a celebrity in 1903 when he accepted a check written by Harry K. Thaw (Fig. 8), possibly a customer. Thaw was the young socialite who shot famous architect Stanford White over the showgirl, Evelyn Nesbit, known widely as “The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing.” The trio is shown here, Thaw at right (Fig. 9). A sensation of its time, the murder has spawned a number of books and more than one motion picture. I assume Kearney framed the check over the bar.

Kearney suffered a financial blow in 1917 when the United States Congress, in a hypocritical vote, legislated prohibition of alcohol sales in the District of Columbia. He was one of the local whiskey men who testified against the bill before a Congressional committee. It did no good and he was forced to shut the doors on his saloon. The 1920 federal census found Kearney at the age of 56 living in a four-story townhouse at 1809 North Capitol Street (Fig. 10). He was recorded having no occupation and living with his three surviving children, now grown.

Luke died in 1933 at the age of 65. He was buried with his wife Catherine, his parents and other family members in Holy Rood Cemetery situated just above Georgetown. It is a predominantly Irish Catholic graveyard associated with the Jesuit parish of Holy Trinity Church. Most of the burials took place from the mid-19th century into the early years of the 20th. As can be seen from the damage done to the Kearneys' marker (Fig. 11), today the cemetery is in very sad repair. Numerous gravestones have been damaged or overturned.

In the grip of Covid-19, as we contemplate a possibly bleak Holiday Season, we can take an example from Luke Kearney, who could face heartbreaking personal losses and still demonstrate generosity and optimism in the mini-jugs he created and gave away. I for one will be saluting him at the holidays as an individual who “could keep Christmas” by taking a nip from a jug of my own.



(Fig. 10) The 1920 federal census found Kearney at the age of 56 living in a four-story townhouse at 1809 North Capitol Street



(Fig. 11) Kearneys' marker, today the cemetery is in very sad repair. Numerous gravestones have been damaged or overturned.

