

Hotel Soda Bottler In the Deep South

By David Kyle Rakes

George Charles Gemenden was a native of Hesse Darnstadt, Germany. Born on Nov. 11, 1811, he decided to emigrate to the United States in the early 1840s when he was about 31 years of age. He and his wife Catherine, and a possible son Henry also native to Germany, settled in Philadelphia.

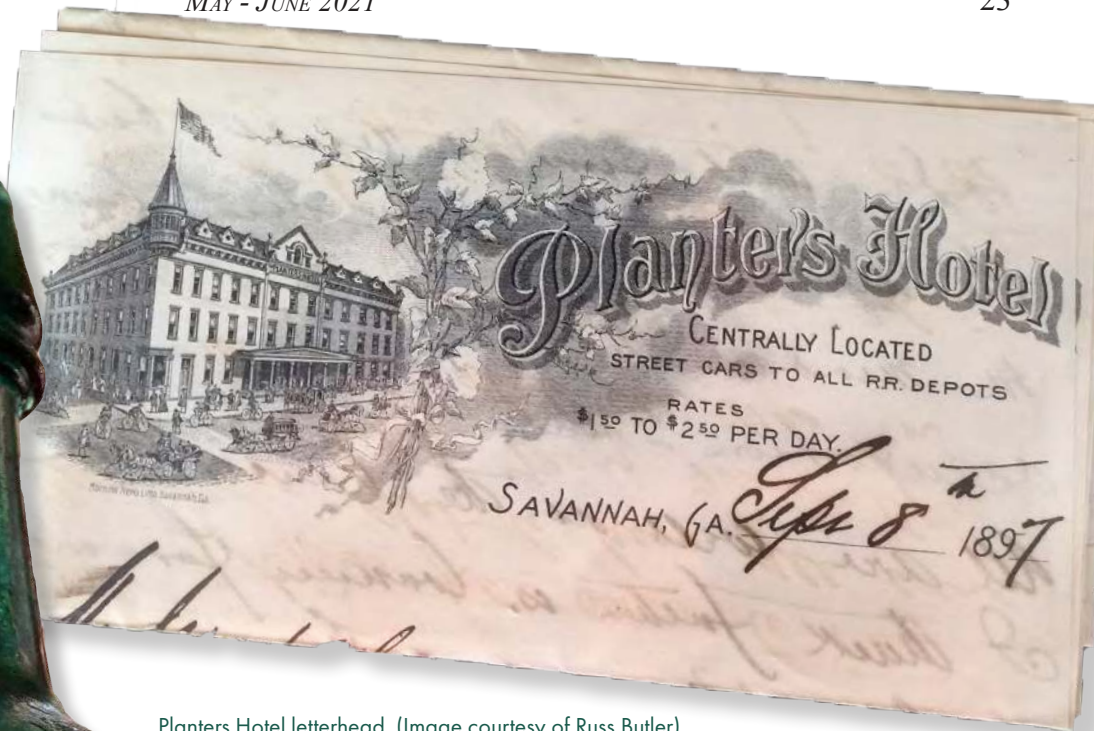
The couple were for sure the parents of two children, a son George Alex and a daughter Cassie. Records show George became an American citizen while in Pennsylvania. He was in the shoe manufacturing business, but for unknown reasons, the family moved to Savannah, Georgia in 1851.

He started his Southern business as a soda water manufacturer, a business in which he had plenty of competition. Many of those bottlers already established in the port city were of German descent, including August Meyer, Thomas Maher, George Ebberwein, Frederick Meincke, Henry Kolshorn, Henry Kuck, Henry Lubs, Theodore and Henry Rober, L. Glindé (a.k.a L.G. Linde), J. Manke, Phillip Heller, Charles Umbach and Albert Von Harten.

Gemenden's soda water bottling business was soon producing a large number of beverages such as lager beer, porter ale, brown stout, cordials and, of course, soda water. The latter was sold in a variety of bottles in different shades of green and are iron-pontiled. Two of the bottles are called "Eagle Sodas," each sporting an eagle and shield on their fronts and Geo. Gemenden / Savannah / Geo. on their backs. Another type is embossed George Ch / Gemeunden (sic) on the front and Brown/ Stout on the back. His misspelled name appears to be commonplace for many of his bottles.

In 1856, Gemenden sold half of his bottle business to bottler Phillip Heller for \$1,400.85. The other half was sold to Fanny Silber, a wealthy entrepreneur. The seller had an inventory listing his assets included in the sales and also provides a closer look into his operation.

Planters Hotel, George Gemenden, Savannah Georgia Soda bottle
(Courtesy of Mike Newman)



Planters Hotel letterhead. (Image courtesy of Russ Butler)

The list verbatim:

“One horse, two mules, one wagon, one two-horse wagon, ten vinegar barrels, four fountains, one bottling machine, one soda pump with gasometer, one copper soda water apparatus, four and a half barrels of Porter, two barrels of lager beer, three other barrels of lager beer, two barrels of Porter, seven cordial stands, one copper kettle, fourteen vinegar steamers, fixtures and shed, one lot of cooper tools, forty-three-dozen syrup bottles, two-hundred forty-nine dozen soda bottles, twenty-three dozen porter bottles, twenty-six and a half dozen lager beer bottles, nine-hundred and thirty-four assorted bottles, three-hundred thirty-six London porter bottles, one lot of tin patches, two kegs, two stoves, two and a half barrels of marble dust, twenty-five dozen cordial bottles, thirty-two dozen soda water with bottles, one-hundred seventy-four pounds of twine, thirty-eight gross of bottles, eight dozen London Porter, one-hundred thirty-nine gross of corks, twenty gallons of cordial, three-dozen bottles, two pounds of different kinds of oil, one barrel of sugar, one steam soda fount and thirty soda water boxes.”

There was a lot of duplication in the listing, but what was surprising was the total number of bottles – 11,272 with almost half sodas. Perhaps many were unembossed. The vinegar may have been used in the cider-making process, but could have been mixed with the marble dust to produce carbon dioxide inside the generator. Cooper tools were used in barrel-making.

Despite the sales, Gemenden stayed in the soda water manufacturing business for another two years with partner Charles A.H. Umbach. After a year elapsed, Heller was joined by the Robers, C. Clark and F.W. Headman in a sale of their firm to John Ryan.

The city’s most famous soda water bottler was Irishman Ryan who, unlike his competitors, eventually estab-

Planters Hotel, George Gemenden, Savannah Georgia Soda back side of bottle (Courtesy of Mike Newman)



Here is the front and back version of the George Gemenden "Eagle Soda," Savannah Georgia Soda bottle

lished branches in Atlanta, Augusta and Columbus, Georgia. His original Excelsior Bottling Works was established in Savannah in 1852 and pretty much dominated the city's soda water scene.

That could have been the reason for Gemenden's sell-out, although more probably he wanted to devote more time to the hotel he had purchased in 1857.

The Planters' Hotel was built before 1840 on the corner of Barnard and Bryan. It was located next to Market Square and near the Savannah River with its ports full of sailing ships.

After two owners, including William Wilson who operated the hotel from 1842-61, Gemenden began learning the hotel business, emerging as sole owner by 1862 and improving the place's amenities. He placed an early ad: "New Bathing House at the Planters' Hotel. Prices: Single Bath \$.25, Six Tickets \$1.00."

Image of George Charles Gemenden's signature from the Chatham Co. Liquor Dealers book, (image courtesy of Russ Butler)

The place prospered and by 1862 he had added a restaurant, saloon and an oyster bar in the hotel basement. The saloon was reported to have "a capacious wine vault" in which was stored "innumerable casks, barrels, tierces, tuns, bottles." Gemenden also "directly imported Rudesheimer, Aschmunhauser and other Rhine wines, together with liquors from all countries, lager beer and sweitzercase straight from where they know how to make it."

In 1861, Gemenden had advertised his new saloon as "The New Oyster and Refreshment Saloon, under the Planters' Hotel," and boasted it was "well-provided with Oysters, Game, Fish, Etc."

Only one bottle, the Planters' Hotel, was made at this time for Gemenden and it is rare, with less than 50 known. They are one of the few sodas in the U.S. featuring a hotel name in the embossing. According to some research only four other bottles were made for early hotels; Old White Bear (circa: 1844-1846), Regatto House (circa: 1846-1848), Kouli Kahn Hotel (circa: 1848-1851) and Hause Hotel (circa: 1850-1854). Gemenden's Planters' Hotel is the most well-known of the hotel bottles.

During the 1860s, he made many trips to Europe to purchase the finest wines and liquors and often left soda bottler Phillip Young in charge in his absence.

In 1868, his daughter Cassie married Herman L. Schreiner, a well-known German-born concert solo pianist and "one of Savannah's best known business men." Herman was proprietor of Schreiner's Music House with branches in Macon and Savannah, a book and music dealer that often performed at the Savannah Theater. In 1874, Cassie died of unknown causes at the age of 24. Schreiner married again and eventually returned to Germany. However, he got sick on the return voyage only to make it to his German home place to die.

Interestingly, Henry Gemenden, the possible son of George, who showed up on the 1860 census of Savannah working as a barkeeper at Planters' Hotel, was a clerk in 1871 for Herman L. Schreiner at

Orange and St. Gaul Streets.

By 1870, the hotel was doing so well that Gemenden's real estate was valued at \$10,000 and personal estate at \$2,500. The census taker that year listed George, his wife, Catherine, and son George



Planter's Hotel on a postage paid Planter's Hotel envelope (Image courtesy of Russ Butler)



Here is a picture of the Planter's Hotel key. (Photo by Russ Butler Havana)

Alex. The census also listed 57 others who lived in the hotel.

It is not known how many rooms were in the hotel, but an educated guess is between 30 and 60. Some years ago, a Planter's Hotel copper skeleton door key with attached star-shaped copper plate with room No. 33 turned up. That's a great go-with.

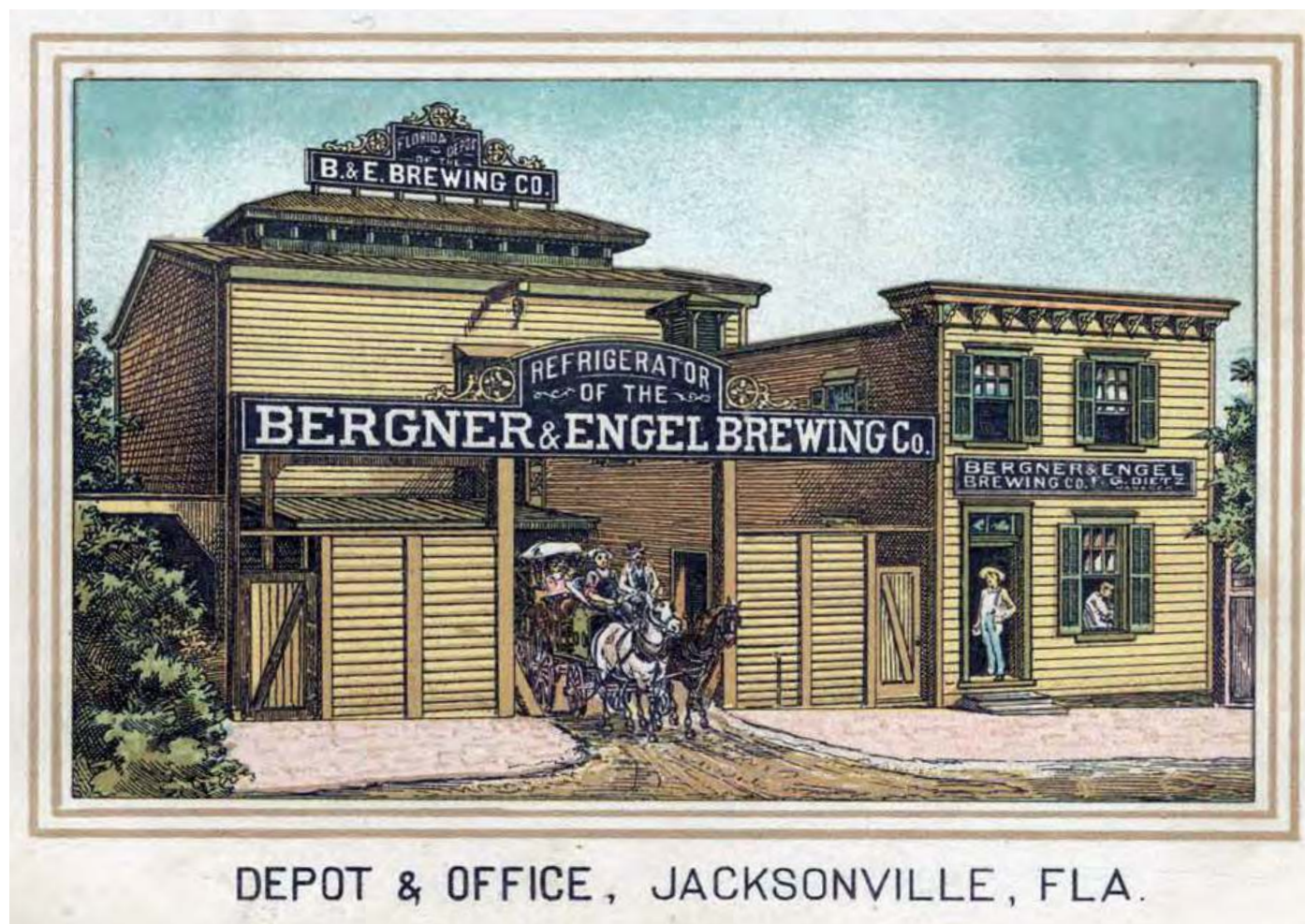
In 1874, Gemenden listed the hotel for sale, advertising it "with a three-year lease and privilege of five years. The hotel is in thorough order and enjoys an excellent run of customers."

Gemenden seems to have sold the hotel by 1877 for he and his son George Alex are in the saloon business together as G. C. Gemenden & Son, selling lager beer and liquor at corner of St. Julian and Whitaker.

In 1880, George Charles is listed as a manager for the Savannah depot of one of the country's largest breweries, Bergner & Engel Brewing Company of Philadelphia. Beer brewed in Philadelphia was being shipped in large barrels to out of state depots and offices in Washington D. C., Norfolk and Richmond, Va, Trenton, Sea Side City, Atlantic City, N.J., and Jacksonville, Fla. Gemenden at his same place on St. Julian and Whitaker was putting the beer into his own bottles to sell them.

In 1882, George Alex Gemenden shows up as a manager for Bergner & Engel Brewing Company at 89 West Bay, Jacksonville, Fla. It is not known how long George Alex was in Jacksonville, but a soda and beer bottle was made for him while he was selling beer for Bergner & Engel Brewing Company. By the year 1886, he is back in Savannah.

On March 1, 1882, George Charles Gemenden resigned his position with Bergner & Engel Brewing Company. When he stepped down Charles Kolshorn, a former employee of Gemenden, took over with his brother. Bergner & Engel Brewing Company was in business for 41 years, opening in 1879 and closing in 1920.



Here is an image of the Bergner & Engal Brewing Co., Gemuenden worked at for a while



There are six known Gemunden embossed bottles from this era, four were made for George Charles and two for George Alex. All are smooth-based and likely had blob tops sealed by Lightning-type stoppers.

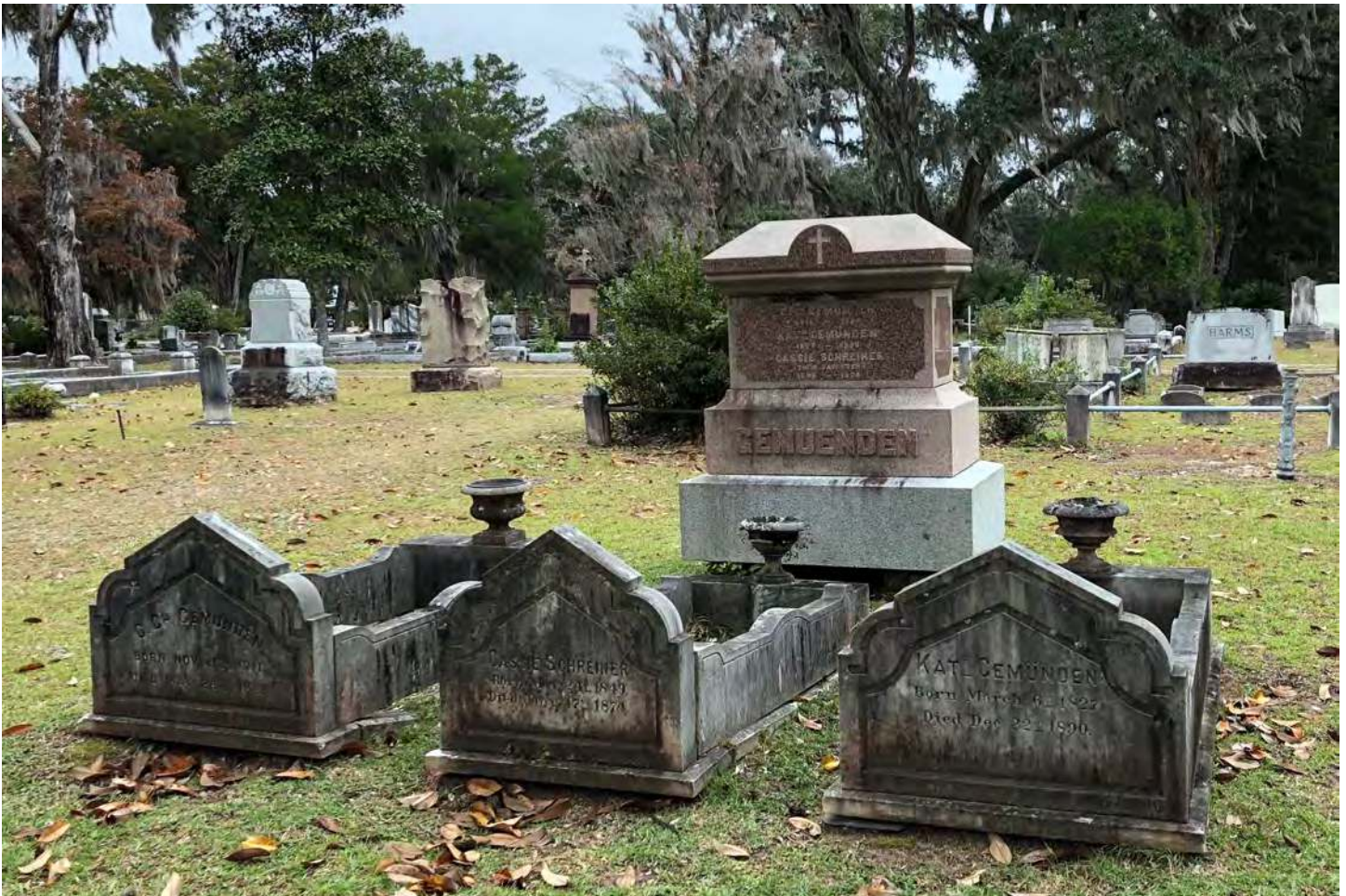
The known examples: Aqua Geo. / Ch. / Gemunden (sic) / Lager Beer / Savannah Geo. on the fronts and This Bottle / Is Loaned / Only on the backs. Another aqua embossed on the front G. Ch. Gemunden (sic) / Lager Beer / Savannah, Ga. and on the back This Bottle Is / Loaned Only.

His colored beer bottles came in "7-Up" green or a light gray green and are embossed on the front "Geo. Ch. Gemunden (sic) / Savannah, Ga., and on the back "Lager Beer." The last known beer bottle also is Aqua and embossed G. Ch. Gemunden / Savannah Geo. with nothing on the back.

George Alex has an aqua blob top soda bottle with a round slug plate embossed "G. A. Gemunden / Jacksonville / Fla.", on front and "This / Bottle Not / to Be Sold," on the back. The other bottle is a beer, it is tall, cylindrical and embossed in an oval plate "G. A. Gemunden / Jacksonville Fla. / on the front, and "This Bottle / Not To / Be Sold." Both these bottles seem to be fairly scarce.

Savannah directories show George Charles Gemunden continued operat-

(Left) These bottles are from George Alex Gemunden of Jacksonville, the son of George Charles Gemunden. The first is an aqua blob top soda, the second a beer. Pictures courtesy of Tod Von Mechow website sodaandbeers.com



Gemuenden family burial lot

ing a beer bottling and saloon business from 1883-1886 on the corner of St. Julian and Whitaker and his residence was listed as 60 Broughton. He had been at this location for almost a decade. However, Gemunden only lived a few more years. His son George Alex seemed to have run the saloon the last two years before it went out of business. George Charles, wife Catherine and George Alex last living residence was 60 Broughton Street.

Gemunden passes away on May 26, 1888, and is buried in the Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah. He is buried along-side his wife Katherine Gemunden (1827-1890) and daughter Cassie Schreiner (1849-1874). He had been a prominent resident of Savannah for 37 years.

SOURCES:

With special thanks to Russ Butler, Havana, Fla. and Corey Stock, Jacksonville, Fla. without their research and records this story could not have been told in its entirety.

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