

Third Time's the Charm for Key West Bottler

By David Rakes

Various stories abound about pirates burying treasure on Key West, the last of a chain of islands jutting into the South Atlantic from the port of Miami, Florida. One far-fetched tale involved some late 19th century cellars dug for use of a soda water factory operated by Douglas Temple Sweeney.

Often called "D.T.," Sweeney died more than a century ago, leaving behind deep cellars local residents call "catacombs." He also left a few embossed soda water bottles. The problem with history is that certain facts can get lost in the annals of time and left to the imaginations, in this case Key West natives known as "Conchs." In 1954, sight-seeing guides entertained tourists by claiming the soda water works cellars were dug by pirates to store their booty.

However, the true story of the soda water factory and the man who built it shows more inventiveness and originality than any story about buried treasure. D.T. Sweeney was a man determined to be successful. He operated a hotel with attached restaurant, a billiard saloon and raced yachts for money for entertainment. Here is the real story obtained from libraries around the country:

Douglas T. Sweeney was born March 31, 1839 in New York City. His father's name is unknown, but mother Charlotte Sweeney was a druggist. D.T. and younger brother William were raised by their mother. In 1858, at the age of 19, D.T. left New York for Savannah,

Georgia to become an apprentice to prominent soda water manufacturer John Ryan. Ryan must have known the Sweeney family before he left New York. It is said he, "offered to teach the young man," the soda water business.

Sweeney was employed by Ryan for two years and left to set up his own soda factory in Columbus, Ga. It's probably just a coincidence, but Ryan had established a branch of his business in Columbus in 1858, six years following his establishment of the Excelsior Bottling Works in Savannah. Be that as it may, Sweeney's business failed after a year and he returned to New York. But in 1862 at age 23, Sweeney tried again, this time at 33 Norfolk Street in New York. His goal was to manufacture soda water and syrups. On July 23, 1864, he married in Manhattan to Margaret Emma Conner, the daughter of John Ryan. She was 21 and a native of Georgia and apparently had been married before. He was 24 and described as 5 feet, 6 inches tall, with blue eyes and a prominent nose and light-colored hair.

However, his business and marriage were interrupted by the Civil War. Sweeney closed his business and joined General Ambrose Burnside's Union Army corps as a "citizen" forage master. Burnside's troops conducted successful campaigns in North Carolina, East Tennessee and Virginia. His distinctive style of facial hair became known as "sideburns," derived from the general's last name. So D.T. worked as

SWEENEY'S HOTEL,
ON THE
EUROPEAN PLAN,
D. T. SWEENEY,
PROPRIETOR,
Key West, - - Florida.

Elegant Accommodations
FOR
GENTLEMEN.

TERMS: \$1.00 per Day, or \$5.00
per Week, for Rooms only.

Finest Bar and Billiard Parlor
IN THE SOUTH.
D. T. SWEENEY.

Sweeney's Hotel ad taken in a Key West paper

CAYO HUESO



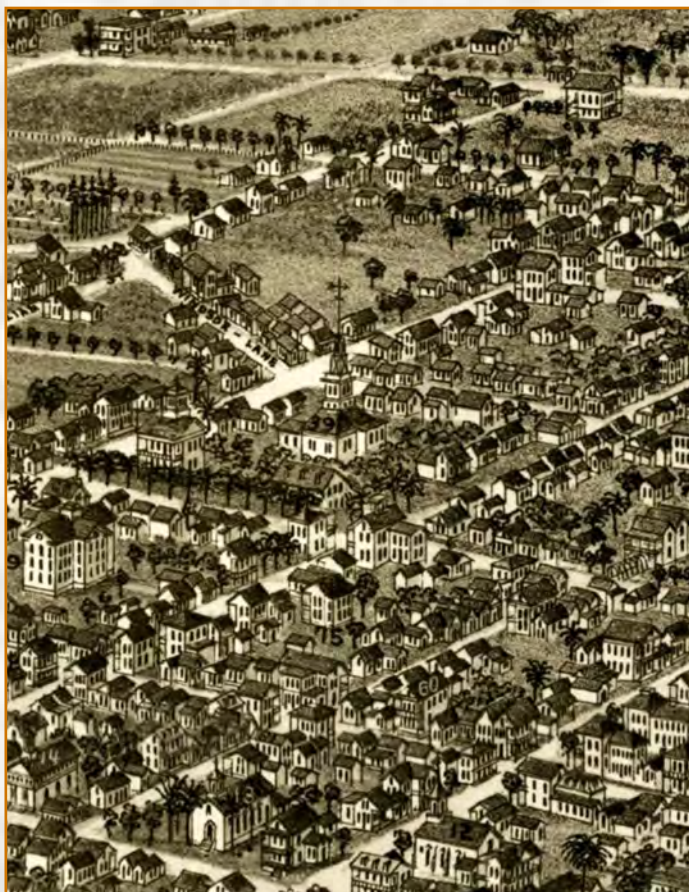
Sweeney bottles courtesy of Robin Lennon

51 52 90 MILES TO CUBA 53 54

55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65

KEY WEST F





This map of Key West shows the Sweeney bottle manufactory building in the center with the copula. Picture from "Vintage Map of Key West, 1884"

scavenger for the general for less than a year before returning to New York. D.T. reopened his business, even getting city approval "to keep a stand on the northwest corner of 59th Street and 6th Avenue" opposite a sentry box.

The 1870 New York City Census showed he was 31 years old, manufacturer of flavoring syrup. His wife Margaret "Emma" was 26 and they had a 9-year-old daughter, Minnie. D.T. had only two different forms of bottles and they were similar to those used by his former employer, John Ryan. One of D.T.'s bottles was cobalt blue in squat or pony shape and embossed D.T. Sweeney on the front and Philadelphia XX Porter & Ale on the back. The other bottle, considered very rare by collectors, was embossed D.T. Sweeney / New York on the front.

But records show that his business had met with only "tolerable success" so in October of 1874, he closed it and he and his family moved to Key West via steamer. They landed on the key on Nov. 13, 1874 and opened the first soda bottling works in the southernmost city of the U.S. His soda works establishment was located on Whitehead Street in the rear of the Cosgrove home. After only a few months the child Minnie died of yellow fever. He stayed on Whitehall Street until June of 1876 and moved to larger quarters on Solares Hill near Simonton Street between Elizabeth in the 600 block. At 18 feet above sea level, Solares Hill was the island's highest point.

The new Simonton Street soda water factory was 50 x 50 feet and



This is a close up of the same map showing numbers. Number 40 is the D. T. Sweeney Saloon and Billard

2 ½ stories high with a 4-story cupola. It was considered at the time to be Key West's tallest building because of its roof's huge cupola. A wing 20 x 25-foot was on one side and held the stables. Under the main building Sweeney had a deep cellar dug beneath the factory. "The cellar was cut out of solid rock, even the stairs," and used to store his wines, beers, liquors and mineral waters to keep them cool. The inside temperature was 80 degrees year-around. Top floor was equipped with six large fountain machines for making soda water. It was said the factory sported the island's first elevator. A mineral spring on the property was converted into a 24-foot-deep well (dug by D.T. himself) and the water used to manufacture lemon soda and sarsaparilla. During the fire of 1886, the famous gold service of William Curry was stored in Sweeney's cellars for safety.

Four years after building the soda water factory, D.T. purchased the surrounding property and built an "elegantly furnished" private residence. The dining room was decorated with scenes and designs. The Elizabeth Street home backed up to the factory's bottling plant. The home also had underground storage to keep his wines and liquors a bit cooler than those of his competitors. He supplied those to nearly all the island's residents, delivering the goods by wagons drawn by teams of horses.

It is no wonder he may have thought his third time in the business was the charm after finally making it big in the bottling business.

D.T. used four types of bottles for his sodas. One was an aqua

or aqua-blue gravitating stoppered bottle embossed D.T. Sweeney / Key West / Fla. Another was an aqua patented stopper with the same embossing. An aqua-blue blob topped bottle with D.T. Sweeney / Key West / Fla., embossed in a circular slug plate. The fourth bottle was likely a lager beer in amber, honey yellow and light green. In addition to being embossed as previously This Bottle Not / To Be Sold was embossed on the back. It is considered extremely rare with several of the ambers known among the 15 or so in existence.

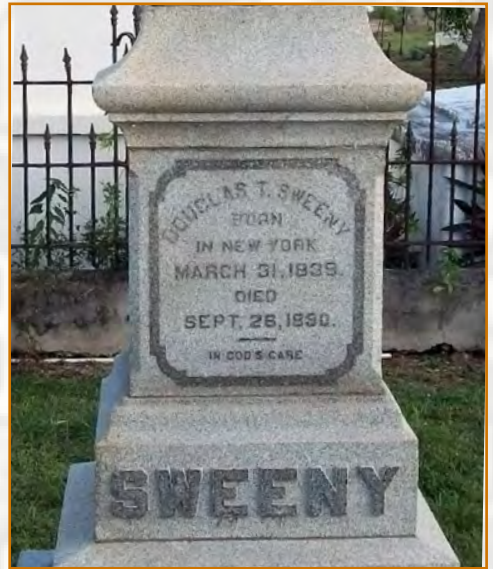
Key West's 1880 Census shows Sweeney to be 42 years old and still operating his business. In 1881, his wife Margaret died and was buried in the Key West Cemetery on Solares Hill. Two years later, D.T. married sixteen-year-old Florida native Mary Reike, daughter of Rudolph Reike, a lighthouse-keeper. Sweeney, then 44, was more than twice his bride's age. The Reike's were from Germany and had been in-route to Milwaukee but settled on staying in Key West. Sweeney and Mary had at least one daughter named Charlotte Larrango who lived on Elizabeth Street.

The energetic Sweeney ventured into other businesses, opening Sweeney's Hotel on Duval Street near the corner of Green Street. His operation was based on the European Plan (lodging only), but had a first-class restaurant attached. Also connected to the hotel was D.T. Sweeney's Saloon and Billiard Parlor. The 1885 census shows him as a saloonkeeper instead of a soda water manufacturer. He also was vice president of the short-lived Building and Loan Association formed in 1886 with John Jay Philbrick president. It was prosperous at first, but was out of business by 1892.

Other historical records show D.T. had other interests. He served as alderman for the city and was an active Board of trade member. In 1886, he campaigned for mayor, but was narrowly defeated. He was a member of the Island City Guards, a militia organized in 1888 and equipped with "1884 Springfield Rifles" from the Rock Island (Ill.) Arsenal. The company enjoyed a social life, holding semi-monthly balls at their armory and a grand dress or masquerade ball held for the city's elite. D.T. also owned a yacht he named "Margueretta" and raced against George H. Curry's yacht, "Myrtle," for a \$100 purse.

In 1890, Douglas T. Sweeney, 51, died and was buried in Key West Cemetery on Passover Street. This is a 13-acre burial ground surrounded by Angela, Frances, Olivia, Windsor and Passover streets, the latter where the cemetery gate is located. Sweeney's grave sports an elaborate, six-foot-tall headstone with the dates March 31, 1839 – Sept. 26, 1890.

Perhaps I'll visit Key West one day to see what has become of the soda water factory site. His name will surely live on through his collectible bottles which stand on as a reminder of how a man from New York made it big on a tropical Florida island. After two tries, he just never gave up.



Here is the full view and the close up of the Sweeney Cemetery headstone

SOURCES:

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