

# The Bevan Brothers: Three Lives in a Bottle

By Jack Sullivan

The mid-19th century amber bottle shown here (Figure 1) is accounted a singularity with nothing like its shape and decor before or after in American whiskey annals. It was the product of the Bevan Brothers — Ebenezer, Thomas and Benjamin — immigrants from Wales who during their foreshortened lives fashioned a thriving liquor business in East Central Pennsylvania and established their reputation for fair dealing.

The Bevans originated in Blaenavon, a town in southeastern Wales, lying at the source of the River Afon Lwyd in historic Monmouthshire County. Shown here as it looked in the 1800s (Figure 2), parts of the Blaenavon are now a U.N.-designated World Heritage Site. The brothers were the sons of Philip and Rachel Lewis Bevan. Ebenezer, born in 1824 was the eldest, followed by Benjamin, 1826, and Thomas, 1828.

Receiving their education in the schools of Wales, the Bevans also had some work experience behind them when they immigrated to the United States during the late 1840s. They settled in Pittston, a town in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, situated between Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. It gained prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a bustling anthracite coal mining city, drawing a large portion of its miners from European immigrants, many of them from Wales.

The early years in Pittston for the brothers may have been in the mining industry. Benjamin (Figure 3) possibly drawn by

the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, then left the family and went to California in 1849. Whatever his occupation there, when he returned two years later he had sufficient cash to help set the brothers up in business. Thus in 1852 the wholesale wine and liquor house of "E. & B. Bevan" was born.

The eldest brother, Ebenezer, was the president of the firm and owned the building that housed it. The structure was two stories, and covered a site of fifty feet of front and 135 feet in depth on Pittston's Main Street (Figure 4). It was capable of holding multiple barrels of liquor. As recorded in a press report, the Bevans' company prospered, achieving "a splendid reputation throughout northeastern Pennsylvania, both for the character of its transactions and the quality of its work." The 1860 census put the net worth of the brothers at the equivalent today of a half million dollars.

While also dealing in imported and domestic wines, brandies, and liqueurs, the brothers were specializing in whiskey. Pennsylvania was rife with distilleries, many making rye- and corn-based liquor. The Bevans were buying their products by the barrel, likely "rectifying" (i.e. blending), and selling whiskeys said to be "remarkable for strength and purity." Although many U.S. liquor dealers were content to market their wares with labels on plain flasks and quarts, the Bevans determined to issue their "I.X.L. Valley Whiskey" in a more costly uniquely shaped, embossed glass container. They possibly designed and definitely commis-

sioned a Pittston area glassworks to craft the special bottle that opens this post.

Blown in a mold and bearing a pontil scar, the whiskey bottle features a small cylindrical base with a larger octagonal paneled body tapering at the shoulders into a long neck and applied double collared mouth. The embossing features the name of the whiskey and company along with four five-pointed stars. There is a pontiled base (Figure 5). The color varies from a brilliant amber to darker hues (Figures 6,7,8).

As they were growing their liquor trade, the Bevans also were having personal lives. Not long after his arrival in America, Ebenezer wed Jane Rowlands, a woman six years his junior, in Carbondale, Pennsylvania. Accounted "a woman of beautiful character," Jane, like her husband, had been born in Wales. They would have seven children, three boys and four girls. Meanwhile, Benjamin had married Mary Ann Jones, a Pennsylvania-born woman seven years younger. They would have eight children, four boys and four girls. The two Bevan families lived next door to each other in Pittston. According to the 1860 census, Thomas Bevan, still unmarried at 32, lived with Ebenezer's family.

The Bevans increasingly were being recognized as progressive, civic minded additions to the town and surrounding region. Said the *Wilkes Barre Times Leader*: "From the year 1852, the family of Bevan has been a prominent one in this community and has done its share in procuring the development of Pittston's capabilities



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4

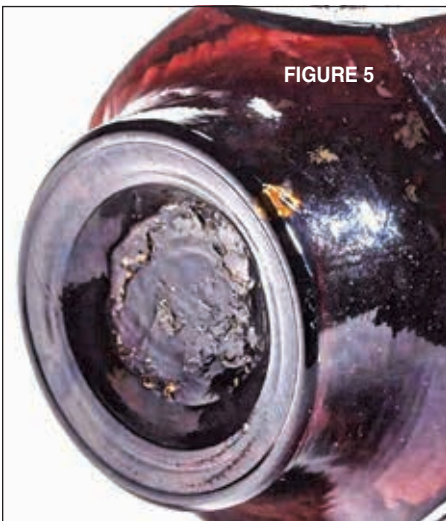


FIGURE 5

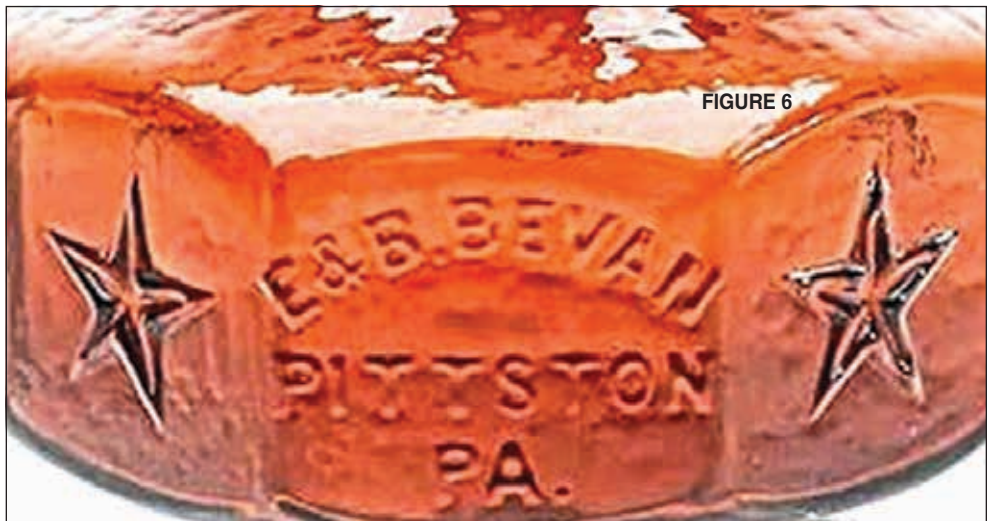


FIGURE 6



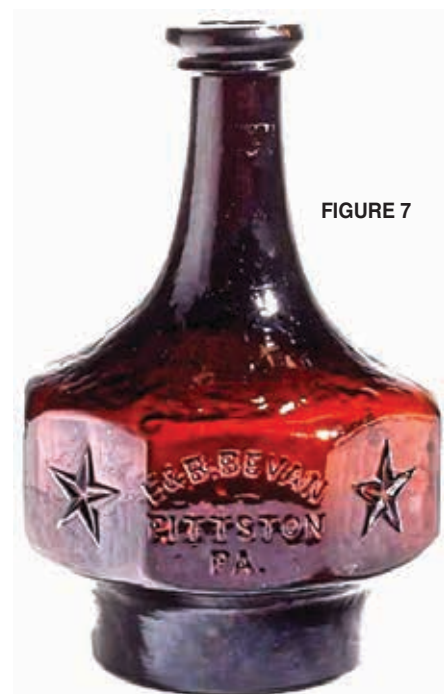


FIGURE 7



FIGURE 8

and resource.” Unfortunately, the brothers had limited time to enjoy their joint prosperity and local acclaim.

Ebenezer was the first to go. At the age of 44 in 1868 he died while still guiding the fortunes of E. & B. Bevan. With his extended family grieving by his graveside, Ebenezer was buried in Pittston’s Forty Fort Cemetery (Figure 9). At the time, four of his children were still minors. His widow married again, perhaps to have a

father for her children, and became Jane Watkins. Almost immediately Benjamin assumed control of the business, renaming it “B. Bevan & Bro.”

That brother, Thomas, who had been part of the firm from the beginning, was said to be “widely known and respected throughout the county.” For the next eight years he worked beside Benjamin at the liquor house as the business continued to prosper. He also married. Throughout his life, however, Thomas had been plagued with depression. The crisis came in April 1876, when he left home one morning and was found three hours later hanging from a beam in the Bevan & Bro. Company warehouse. Age 48 at his death, Thomas was buried near Ebenezer in the Forty Fort Cemetery (Figure 10). He left behind a family of five young sons.

With Thomas’ death, Benjamin became the sole proprietor and the company name changed to “B. Bevan.” This brother expanded his entrepreneurial skills to other areas, and for a time was president of the Niagara Engine Company and a director of the Pittston streetcar line. Benjamin’s health began to fail late in 1880 and took a turn for the worse in January 1881. He rallied sufficiently to witness the marriage of his eldest daughter but died several days later, leaving three minor children. His obituary in the local paper, accounted Benjamin as “a man generally esteemed for his genial manners and kindly nature.” At the time of his death he was 54 years old, and was buried near his brothers (Figure 11).

At Benjamin’s death ownership of the liquor house devolved to his widow, Mary Ann Jones Bevan. She was assisted in managing the firm by C. W. St. John, a son-in-law, who continued to operate the business successfully for a number of years. The last directory entry that I can find for the liquor house is 1888. The legacy of the Bevan brothers, three immigrants from Wales, is embodied in the iconic whiskey bottle that bears their name. Eagerly collected, one recently sold for \$2,691.

**Notes:** Key information for this article was a piece on the Bevan liquor business that appeared in an October 1888 issue of the *Wilkes Barre Times Leader* and the newspaper obituaries of Thomas, Benjamin and Ebenezer’s widow, Jane. Matt Wheeler, a descendant of Thomas Bevan, provided me with additional information, the portrait of Benjamin and the photo of the company, for which I am most grateful.



FIGURE 9

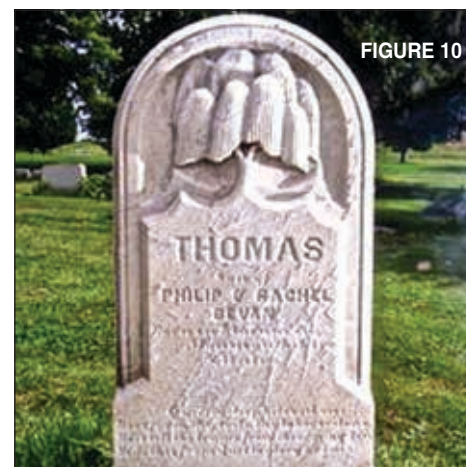


FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11