

# Charles Wharton Jr. Was “Master of Chestnut Grove”

by Jack Sullivan

*“The Wharton family is known for their political and mercantile influence in Philadelphia and surrounding regions in Pennsylvania” — Wikipedia entry*

The distinguished family into which Charles Wharton Jr. was born in 1816 could trace its roots back to Westmorelandshire, England, and early American colonialists who settled in Pennsylvania. His heritage included some of the most noted business and political figures in Philadelphia history. Yet this Wharton’s claim to fame was selling whiskey. Because he did so in spectacularly colored bottles, most embossed “Chestnut Grove” (Figure 1), his name today is considerably more familiar to bottle and glass collectors than to historians.

Why this blueblood turned his attention to selling liquor is lost in the mists of history. His business address was 116 Walnut Street, a five-story building (Figure 2) where a sign announced “Chestnut Grove Whiskey,” and “Chas. Wharton Jr., Sole Agent.” He almost certainly was blending and compounding this whiskey on his premises from supplies obtained from Pennsylvania distilleries. Unlike other rectifiers who produced multiple brands, Wharton appears to have preferred to be the master of just one — “Chestnut Grove.”

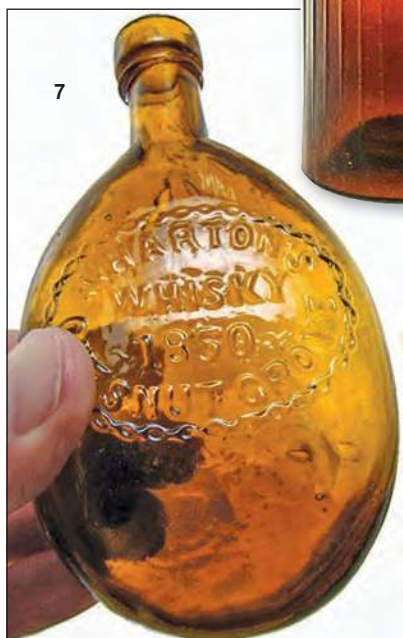
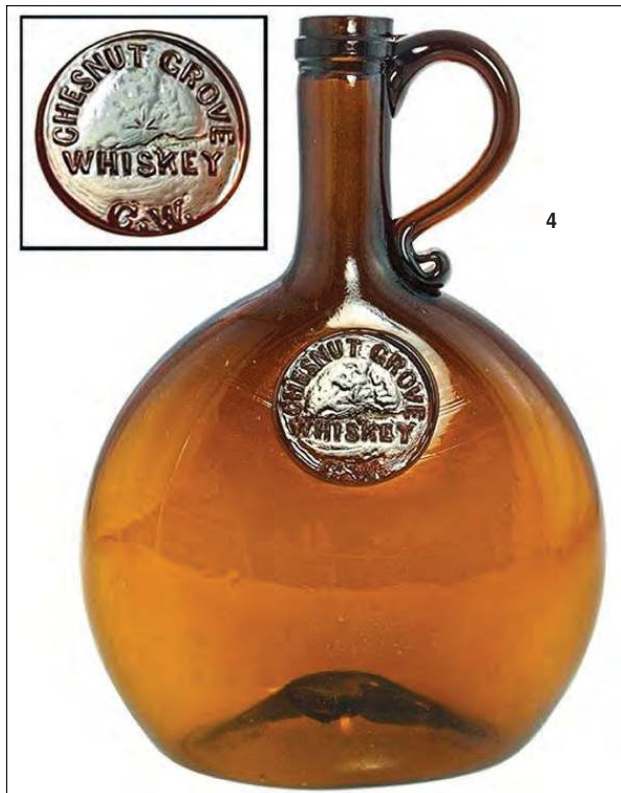
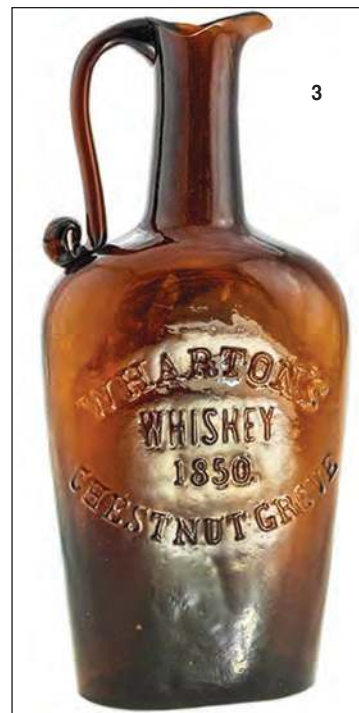
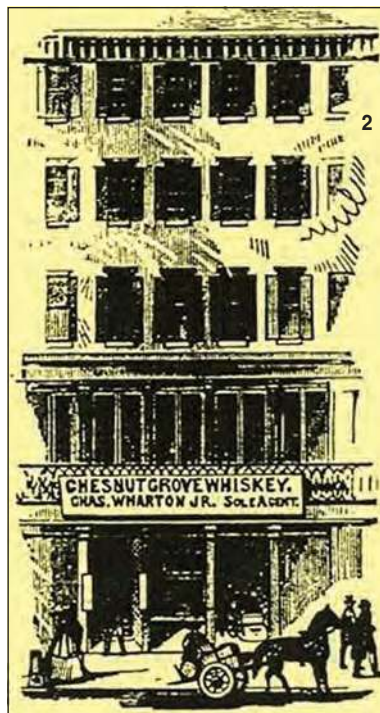
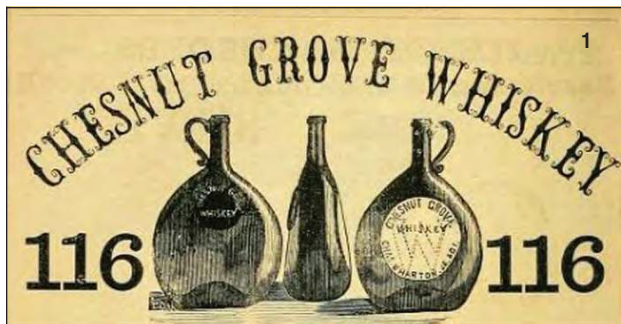
From the outset the proprietor had determined that a key to success was to package his whiskey in attractive glass

bottles, often embossed with his name and the date of his founding (Figure 3). One example is an ewer-like container that appeals to collectors for its unusual shape and distinctive pouring lip. Wharton also featured a round bottle carrying an applied seal that read “Chestnut Grove Whiskey” and his initials (Figure 4). Another distinctive Wharton quart container of a rich amber hue displays fluted sides and a hanging medallion label (Figure 5). Wharton also issued “pumpkin seed” flasks with rounded bottoms, in cobalt (Figure 6) and amber (Figure 7). The labels on these bottles are surrounded by an embossed chain.

The manufacture of the bottles is attributed to the New Jersey-based Whitney Glass Works (Figure 8). This company was founded in 1838 when Thomas H. Whitney bought out an existing glassworks and renamed it “Whitney and Brothers.” Later Whitney’s two sons, Thomas and Samuel, joined their father in the business. In time the company became known as the Whitney Glass Works and developed into a major operation. During the 1850s and 1860s, when Wharton engaged the Whitneys’ glassworks, it was at its peak of perfection in the coloration of glass (Figure 9).

Given the number of Chestnut Grove bottles extant, Wharton’s whiskey must have found a substantial customer base. His liquor dealership appears to have been in business about 30 years. Directories record a move from the Walnut Street address to 236 North Second Avenue in 1878. The building that still stands at that address is only three stories and considerably smaller than the Walnut Street structure that served Wharton for 28 years. All directory references to the company end in 1880, when the proprietor would have been 64 years old. His advancing age and the possible lack of a successor among his children may have caused him to shut the doors on his Philadelphia establishment.

Wharton died on July 10, 1886, just short of his 70th birthday. By that time his wife, Mary, and four of his children had died, leaving six progeny to mourn his death. He was buried in Philadelphia’s Laurel Hill Cemetery alongside Mary. Unlike Wharton family members whose lives have been chronicled by historians of Pennsylvania, the record is relatively silent about Charles. He is remembered primarily through the rich trove of glass flasks, decanters and other bottles the “Master of Chestnut Grove” has left posterity.



**NOTE:** The majority of bottle images shown here are through the courtesy of Ferdinand Meyer V, former president of the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors, from his Peach Ridge Glass website.