

# Deciphering A.M. Bininger

## Part 1: Abram M. Bininger

By Chris Bubash

Back in December 2016, I noticed an interesting ad from FOHBC Historian Jim Bender in *Bottles and Extras*. Jim was seeking some assistance with his upcoming book and asked: Did anyone know what the M. stood for in A.M. Bininger?

Loving historical mysteries, I began researching the question. Two months later, I finally discovered the answer: Merritt. In the course of that research, I accumulated an amazing amount of information on the entire family, and thought that now might be a good time to incorporate some of that information into an article on Abram M. Bininger, Abram M. Bininger, Jr., and Abram M. Bininger III. My goal will be to present new information, without unnecessarily covering much of what is already known and/or has already been published about these interesting individuals.

### The Beginning: Abram M. Bininger

One of the first mentions of A.M. Bininger that I was able to locate in print was in the 1838-1839 Longworth's New York City Directory. Abram would have been 38 at the time, and the proud parent, with Maria Long Bininger, 23, of a new baby daughter, Helen, born December 29, 1836. He was listed as a grocer at 53 Cortlandt (home 110 ½ Chapel), in partnership with Thomas Darling (Bininger & Darling). He must have been disillusioned with this partnership, as the 1839-1840 Longworth's New York City Directory lists him as a grocer, still at 53 Cortlandt (home 217 Varick), but now in partnership with Alexander Lane (Bininger & Lane). Though he remained



Announcement in the *New York Herald* on June 16, 1860 of the dissolution of the A.M. Bininger & Co.

at 53 Cortlandt until 1842, eventually moving to 100 Barclay from 1842 to 1850, there is no further mention of his business' name in directories for a number of years.

During this time, Abram Bininger's name appeared in the March 20, 1845 issue of the *New York Tribune*. An advertisement for Folger's Olosaonian reported that, "Other persons have experienced the curative properties of this medicine, and unhesitatingly pronounce it THE GREAT REMEDY. A.M. Bininger, 100 Barclay Street...and numerous other persons have been relieved from coughs of long standing, difficulty of breathing, &c. and have left their names as references at the office."

How nice to see Abram dipping his toes into the patent medicine pool, if only as a reference! Soon thereafter, he became the proud father of a new baby son, Abram Jr., born June 23, 1847. More on Abram, Jr. (and Abram III) later.

Abram Bininger was not the only member of A.M. Bininger & Co. to dip his toes into the patent medicine pool. In the February 17, 1852 edition of the *New York Herald*, 32-year-old A.M. Bininger & Co. clerk Chester Goodsell stated, in part, "Dr. Kellinger – My Dear Sir – It is indeed a source of great satisfaction to inform you of the wonderful cure perfected by the use of your remedy... I have, on several occasions, tried it for severe colds and cough, and it has always acted like magic with me, breaking up every vestige of the cough and cold in two or three days. In corroboration of this I refer you to Mr. A.M. Bininger, wholesale merchant, No. 323 Greenwich Street, with whom I have been employed for a number of years."

A.M. Bininger & Co. must have had a good relationship with Dr. Kellinger, as they continued to provide testimony in the ensuing years regarding the curative powers of Kellinger's Liniment, or Magic Fluid. The January 15, 1856 issue of the

*Brooklyn Times Union* reported that, “Dr. Kellinger is honored with a reference to Mr. A.M. Binger, so universally known throughout the United States and Canada, as an importing house. Hair gone 15 to 20 years was renewed by the fluid. The liniment cured his head clerk, Mr. Chester Goodsell, of a very alarming attack of Rheumatism, and also a deep-seated cold, with inflammation of the lungs, in less than three days. Call and see them. This is no milk and water evidence.”

Abram Binger’s business name, missing-in-action for a number of years, finally reappeared in the 1850-1851 New York City Directory, this time as A.M. Binger & Co. at 323 Greenwich (home 323 Greenwich). The following year, he moved to 329 Greenwich (home 329 Greenwich), where he remained until 1857. In addition to his occupation as a wholesale merchant, it appears that Abram Binger was employed as a director of several insurance companies, including, but not necessarily limited to, the Irving Fire Insurance Company, with offices at 285 Greenwich Street and 72 Wall Street, and the LaFarge Fire Insurance Company, with offices at the corner of Nassau and Cedar. It wasn’t clear from the newspaper notices the extent of his involvement in the day-to-day operation of those businesses.

Around this time, A.M. Binger formed a military company known as “The Binger Guard,” composed of fifty muskets, with the company’s so-called “attaches” being principally comprised of merchants doing business on the west side of the city. Officers included several A.M. Binger & Co. personnel, including John Bolton (his partner) as Second Lieutenant and Chester Goodsell (his head clerk) as Treasurer. In August 1853, the company made arrangements for a Grand Military Excursion to Niagara Falls. They departed from the company’s armory at the corner of Greenwich and Duane Streets, took the Erie Railroad Day-Express to Niagara via Canandaigua, and took apartments



Photo of 338 Broadway taken in 1912.

at the International Hotel upon arrival. The excursion was successful, though little further detail was provided in newspaper accounts.

A.M. Binger was apparently not content with his already busy life as wholesale merchant, director of multiple fire insurance companies, and head of the Binger Guard. Appearing in the September 16, 1854 edition of the *New York Herald* was this advertisement for the National Exchange Bank, A.M. Binger, Director: “This bank will be opened for business on or about the 15th of October next, at the new building, corner of Greenwich and Duane Streets (which the reader may

remember as the location of the Binger Guard’s armory). The subscription books will be opened at the bank, on the 25th inst., for such of the capital stock as at that time remains unsubscribed for. Prior to that date, subscriptions will be received at Messrs. A.M. Binger & Co.’s, 329 Greenwich Street.”

As A.M. Binger was involved with multiple fire insurance companies, it should perhaps not be a surprise that he was also involved with multiple banks. Appearing in the December 11, 1854 edition of the *New York Herald* was this notice for the Empire City Bank, A.M. Binger, President: “The office of this



bank having been rendered untenable by the fire of Saturday evening, the Directors give notice that they will procure another office for the bank in the same neighborhood, at as early an hour to-day as practicable, of which due notice will be given. All the valuable books and papers of the bank, and the entire contents of its vaults, are saved."

The Empire City Bank's troubles apparently continued, as the February 9, 1857 edition of the *New York Times* carried an article concerning the Superior Court trial of "The United States Trust Company of New-York, Receiver of the Empire City Bank, vs. Abram M. Bininger and John M. Bolton." It stated, in part, "This is another suit growing out of the suspension of the Empire City Bank. The suit was brought by the Trust Company as receiver, upon a note of \$2,000, made by the defendant, Bininger (who was President of the Bank at the time of suspension), and indorsed by the firm of A.M. Bininger & Co., composed of both the defendants..." Fortunately, the jury found a verdict in accordance with the facts for both defendants.

Perhaps due to these and/or other troubles, newspaper notices concerning A.M. Bininger seem to shift around this time (1857-1858) from banking and insurance to liquor production and supply, coincident with a change in address from 329 Greenwich to 17 Broad Street. In the July 10, 1858 edition of the *Buffalo Daily Republic*, an advertisement appeared promoting Bininger's Old London Dock Gin, A.M. Bininger & Co., Importers, No. 17 Broad Street, New York, where the gin was, of course, marketed as a safe and reliable medicine for family use. The notice, translated from old English, states in part: "The Public are assured that our London Dock Gin is a superior article, possessing all the virtues ascribed to it as a Medicinal Beverage, and deserving of their patronage, in preference to the suspicious decoctions emanating from irresponsible sources, and sold

under various pretentious names... Put up in quart and pint bottles, in cases of one and two dozen each, with our name on the bottles, and a facsimile of our Signature on the wrappers."

For those interested in the origins of Old London Dock Gin (the name and the product), the answer was revealed in the February 28, 1861 edition of *Berkshire County Eagle*: "This reliable house, for more than thirty-five years, has imported for their regular trade the famous 'Bininger's Old London Dock Gin,' so called from the fact of the first invoice having been purchased by them in England, in bond, in the London Docks (equivalent to our bonded warehouses), and now received direct from Holland (the original source of the superb gin) the entire product of one of the largest distilleries, which is made exclusively for them."

After a short stint at 17 Broad Street, A.M. Bininger & Co. relocated first to 338 Broadway, and then to 19 Broad Street, where the business remained for several years. An advertisement in the July 14, 1859 *Green Mountain Freeman* seems to imply that 19 Broad Street was A.M. Bininger & Co.'s retail establishment, and that 338 Broadway was their wholesale depot, however, I have not confirmed that to my satisfaction. Also appearing in the advertisement are the names of Abram Bininger's current partners in A.M. Bininger & Co., 27-year-old Rufus Wattles (the brother of Abram's son-in-law) and 23-year-old James W. Freeland.

Discovered in the June 29, 1860 edition of the *New York Herald* was a quite interesting and, to me, somewhat shocking, announcement having interesting implications for the A.M. Bininger & Co. story. Under "copartnership Notices" appeared the following announcement: "The firm of A.M. Bininger & Co. is this day dissolved by mutual consent - June 16, 1860. [Signed] A.M. Bininger, Rufus Wattles, James W. Freeland. The same business will be continued by Rufus Wattles and others, for the sale of the

#### From the Home Journal.

THE "BROAD STREET BININGERS."—The extensive warehouse of the well-known firm of A. M. Bininger & Co., Nos. 19 and 21 Broad street, is one of the features of our city. It occupies five spacious stories, besides cellars, sub-cellars and capacious vaults, filled with the finest vintages of foreign importations.

There are ample and well arranged rooms on each story for the storage of the several articles of merchandise, and the labor of the various operatives attached to the Institution. It is impossible, without being furnished with accurate statistical details, to form anything like a correct estimate of the labor required, the stock needed, and the capital employed in an establishment of such magnitude. To afford some idea of the appliances indispensable to such an enterprise, the writer, from unmistakable authority, obtained the annexed synopsis:—

The average sales of A. M. Bininger & Co's bottled goods amount to three hundred and eighty cases per day.

For washing and preparing bottles, bottling, labelling, &c. &c., there are constantly employed eighteen men and about forty girls and boys for lighter work.

The average cost of corks used in the establishment is upwards of four thousand dollars per annum; that of empty bottles is about seventy-five thousand dollars; packing boxes, thirty thousand dollars. Of the famous "Bininger's Old London Dock Gin," there are annually bottled about two hundred and twenty-five thousand gallons, with a rapidly increasing sale. In this estimate the sales from the large and varied stock of old Wines, Brandies, Rums, &c., in original packages, and other articles sold direct from the United States Bonded Warehouses, is not included, amounting in the aggregate to over one and one half millions of dollars.

The preparation of their numerous articles, and particularly their bottled goods, deserve something more than a passing notice. Their very appropriate and finely executed labels, their beautiful show cards, the unique and varied forms of their fancy bottles, evince a taste and decorative display admirably corresponding with the quality and excellence of their rare and extensive stock. Some of these delineations embrace many of the allegorical illustrations common to the times of fabled antiquity, and are in excellent keeping with the objects with which they are associated. The rich vases from which Horace and Virgil received the costly Falernian wine of the Augustine age, were doubtless highly decorated with representations of old Silenus and the Satyrs; and Michael Angelo and Raphael thought it not beneath the dignity of their cherished art to associate the graces of female loveliness with the infant Bacchus, as he laughingly held up to its gaze the rich clusters of the purple grape.

It is worthy of remark, that this venerable house have made a *specialty* of supplying the wants of druggists, physicians and Town Agents with their pure and wholesome liquors, and the fact that their list of customers embraces over four thousand Druggists, is conclusive evidence of their popularity with that respectable class of traders.

If this popular house was of recent date, and it was deemed expedient to extend its reputation by any display of public recommendation, it would be no difficult task to arrange in the most imposing forms, thousands of endorsements as to the excellence and variety of their merchandise.

Article in the April 20, 1861 *Burlington Times*.

same goods and merchandise, under the style and name of the old firm.”

Could this have been the end of Abram Bininger’s involvement with A.M. Bininger & Co.? Could all of the firm’s interesting bottles be the brainchildren of Rufus Wattles and/or James W. Freeland rather than Abram Bininger? Perhaps. But, in my opinion, not probable. Review of New York City Directories leads me to believe that Abram Bininger was back at the helm circa 1862, when Rufus Wattles and Alexander Gordon (Wattles & Gordon) and Frank Bininger (Bininger & Co.) opened a combined store at 15 Beaver Street, leaving Abram Bininger and A.M. Bininger & Co. behind to continue business at 19 Broad Street.

Over the next four years, the business address of Abram Bininger and the address of A.M. Bininger & Co. continued to move in lock-step from 19 Broad Street to 375 Broadway to 39 & 82 Walker Street. In 1866, A.M. Bininger & Co. joined Wattles & Gordon and Bininger & Co. at 15 Beaver Street, where all three businesses remained until 1870 when Frank Bininger (Bininger & Co.) exited the wine business and A.M. Bininger passed away. Except for a short-lived move to 10 Broadway circa 1876, Rufus Wattles and A.M. Bininger & Co. remained at 15 Beaver Street until the brand’s acquisition and removal to 47 Water Street in 1879 by Emanuel Eising of E. Eising & Co., distillers and wholesale liquor dealers.

But, back to our co-partnership dissolution notice. Assuming, just for a moment, that Abram Bininger had no further involvement with A.M. Bininger & Co. after 1860, what could he have done with his time? Perhaps he spent his time doting on his grandchildren, five of which were born to his daughter, Helen, and her husband, Alden Wattles, between 1859 and 1868. Nellie Alden Wattles was born in 1859, Abram Merritt Wattles was born in 1861, James Denison Wattles was born in 1863, Grace Wattles was born in 1866, and Alden Wattles, Jr. was born in 1868.

Unfortunately, fate prematurely claimed the lives of all three male children. James Denison passed away on August 22, 1863 at the age of 4 months and 15 days. As reported in the August 23, 1863 edition of the *New York Herald*, the funeral was held at the residence of his parents, 174 Dean Street, in Brooklyn. Similarly, Alden, Jr. passed away on September 25, 1869 at the age of 11 months and 19 days. As reported in the September 27, 1869 edition of the *New York Herald*, the funeral was held “at the house of his grandfather, A.M. Bininger, No. 167 West Forty-Fifth Street.” Finally, Abram Merritt Wattles passed away on June 17, 1902 from burns received in the St. Luke’s Sanitarium fire in Chicago on June 9, 1902.

Around this time, we again begin seeing notices mentioning Abram Bininger’s name in association with other enterprises. The July 11, 1864 edition of the *New York Daily Tribune* reported that the Exchange Fire Insurance Company, 170 Broadway, elected A.M. Bininger as one of its Directors. The November 10, 1865 edition of the *New York Herald* reported A.M. Bininger, Importer, 39 Walker Street, as one of the Trustees of the Newcastle Mutual Coal Company, 151 Broadway. The December 28, 1866 edition of the *New York Tribune* reported that the Irving Fire Insurance Company, 9 Wall Street, elected A.M. Bininger as Director. Regardless of any continued involvement in the liquor business, it’s clear he kept busy!

Abram M. Bininger passed away on October 14, 1870. The October 16, 1870 edition of the *New York Times* reported that, “Mr. Abraham Bininger, the oldest liquor merchant in this city, died at his residence, No. 167 West Forty-Fifth Street, yesterday morning, of paralysis of the brain. He has been ill only about two weeks so as to be confined to his house, but has been in delicate health for the past twelve years, though he has not been prevented, until his last illness, from giving his attention to business. He leaves a

—We have received a proposition from A. M. Bininger & Co., to insert an advertisement for them, and take in pay 12 bottles of their “Old London Dock Gin.” Of course we have no use for such an article, and declined their proposition. We notice the ad. appears in the last issue of the JOURNAL, and if we are not too inquisitive, we would like to know upon what terms.—Nashville Democrat.

Not at all inquisitive, neighbor—we took it for twelve bottles of “Old London Gin,” exactly, which we have use for; and if Bininger & Co. had offered the Democrat twelve cakes of “Old London Soap”—which you have use for—the proposition would have been accepted.

From the April 7, 1875 *Nashville Journal*.

son of the same name and a daughter. The wealth of Mr. Bininger is estimated at not less than \$250,000, the most of which has been accumulated in his business.” That is approximately \$5,000,000 today!

Washington D.C.’s *New National Era* was, however, not quite so kind in its assessment. It reported “A New York telegraphic dispatch announces the death of Mr. A.M. Bininger, ‘senior member of the oldest liquor house in America.’ What an epitaph! He may have been a rich man, and a perfect gentleman, a kind husband and father; but what mathematician can estimate the untold amount of unhappiness, sorrow, distress, wretchedness, woe, misery, and disaster that has been distributed to all parts of the land by that ‘oldest liquor house?’” I guess they weren’t thinking about the bottle collecting community when they wrote those words. If only they knew what a positive impact his bottles would make on the world!

In next month’s article, we’ll discuss the interesting (to say the least) lives of A.M. Bininger, Jr. and A.M. Bininger III. Will A.M. Bininger, Jr. prove to be the apple of his father’s eye, or the black sheep of the family? What did Abram, Jr. and Abram III make of their lives? Where are they now? The answers await.

#### PHOTOS (following page):

Three colorful Bininger Old London Dock Gin bottles and a Bininger Old Dominion Wheat Tonic.



