

THE LIFE AND LOVES OF S.T. SUIT: A JUG-FILLER'S STORY

by Jack Sullivan

Special to Bottles and Extras

Samuel Taylor Suit, who hobnobbed with presidents and founded a city that still bears his name, earned fame and prosperity by filling brown jugs with whiskey. But despite his many successes, he was haplessly unlucky in his love for three women. This is his story.

Suit was born in Bladensburg, Prince George's County, Maryland, in 1830, the son of Fletcher Suit, an innkeeper. At 14 years old he left school to work as an errand boy in a dry goods store in Washington, D.C. He and his father are said to have clashed over the refusal of the elder to pay for his son's further education. Young Suit thereupon left home as a teenager and struck out for himself in the American Middle West.

He settled first in Keokuk, Iowa and then moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where he found work at a distillery. Even at this early age he showed extraordinary business abilities and before long bought his own distillery, one that boasted the largest liquor warehouse in town. In Louisville, Suit found his first love, Sarah Ebenezer Williams, and married her when he was about 25 and she was still a teenager. She bore him one child and then at the age of 20, after only a few months as his wife, she died.

Sarah's death appears to have affected Suit deeply and shortly after he migrated to New York City. There he became involved in securities markets, eventually obtaining a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. Despite his lack of education, his business acumen brought him to the notice of important people. One of them was Arthur Wilmarth, president

of the Home Life Insurance Company of New York, a wealthy and important figure in the city. Through him, Suit met his second love, Wilmarth's daughter Aurelia. Eleven years his junior, she was known more for the fineness of her needlework than of her looks, which pictures of her bear out. Whether his motivation was love or money or both, Suit married the wealthy Aurelia at Dr. Thompson's Church in New York in December 1859, and thereby took a giant step up the social ladder.

Though this marriage officially lasted 20 years and produced one son in 1861, it apparently was contentious almost from the beginning and the couple spent long periods

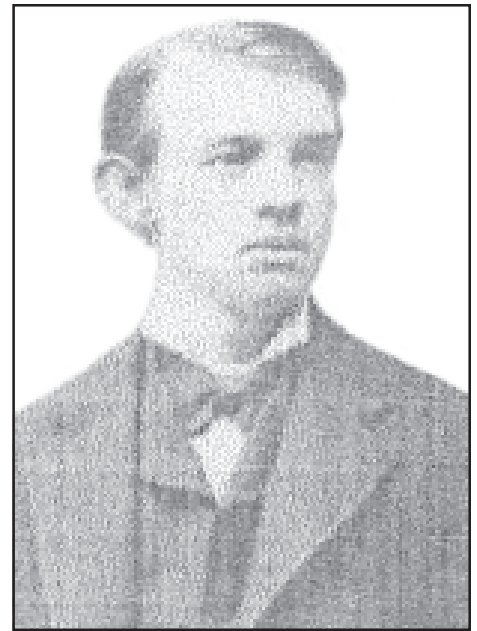


Figure 1: The young S.T. Suit



Figure 2: Aurelia Wilmarth Suit

ESTABLISHED 1839. S. T. SUIT, ESTABLISHED 1860.

ESTABLISHED -18- KENTUCKY, 1839. Fruit Grower and Distiller, ESTABLISHED -18- MARYLAND, 1860.

S. C. Patterson, Esq., SUITLAND, MARYLAND, Aug 24 - 1882.

Dear Sir: Thinking you would like a few bottles of Pure Old Signature for private and medicinal purposes, I write to say I have 2 boxes ready for shipment,

- 6 Bottles Old Sp. Whiskey, Distilled 1869,
- 2 Bottles Old Peach Brandy, with Honey,
- 2 Bottles Old Apple Brandy, with Rock Candy Syrup,
- 2 Bottles Old Cherry Brandy.

Twelve bottles as above, large size, 5 to the allow, All of my own Distillation, which I will sell at Fifteen Dollars per box, delivered by express, Charges prepaid.

The same goods bought at retail (if they could be had pure) would cost three times the price of which I offer them.

I refer you to the Certificates of the Board of Health of Washington City, D.C., on the reverse of this sheet, and will be glad to receive your orders, which shall have prompt attention.

I am respectfully,
S. T. Suit

Figure 3: Suit's promotion letter

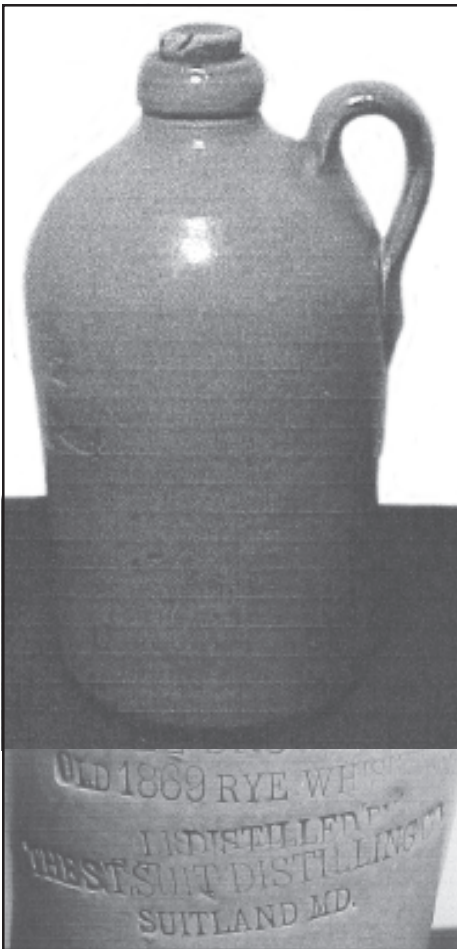


Figure 4: A Suit jug with impressed label

apart. Suit apparently was in the Union Army for a time during the Civil War. He was called "Colonel" thereafter but that title seems to have been nothing more than a Kentucky honorific.

After the war, about 1867, Suit, wife Aurelia, and their son migrated back to Prince George's County. He now had the money to purchase large tracts of land throughout the area. Among them were 450 acres at the periphery of the District of Columbia. He built a mansion there and called the place, "Suit Land." A small community grew up around the estate. Today, Suitland, Maryland is a bustling community of more than 30,000, the site of a number of U.S. government agencies, and adjoins sprawling Andrews Air Force Base.

In 1870, this Maryland entrepreneur opened a distillery near his home under the title, "S.T. Suit, Fruit Grower and Distiller." He produced rye whiskey and a range of brandies using apples, peaches and cherries from his own orchards. His letterheads and advertising also cited an earlier origin in Kentucky, with the date given as 1839 -- when the distiller himself would have been only nine years old. Suit may have been claiming the founding date for the distillery he bought in Louisville, a practice not uncommon in the

whiskey business.

Apparently because sales in the initial years were slow, Suit determined that selling his products by mail was the answer. But he needed a gimmick. In 1875, using his considerable political clout, he was able to get the chief health officer of the District of Columbia, Dr. P.T. Keene, to certify in that he had visited Colonel Suit's plantation distillery at Suitland to examine his various brands of liquor. Dr. Keene then provided the following testimonial:

"For Medicinal Purposes, its reliability as to strength and purity make it very desirable. Physicians will appreciate how important it is to their success in the treatment of diseases, as well as to the patient, that the stimulants they prescribe should be of a standard and unvarying quality, which desideratum Col. Suit's liquors appear to fulfill."

Armed with this ringing endorsement and an official looking certificate from the D.C. Board of Health, Suit initiated an advertising campaign. It featured chromolithographed trade cards and carefully crafted form letters. Shown here is an 1882 lithographed sales letter in Suit's handwriting to S. G. Patterson, "thinking you would like a few bottles for private and medicinal purposes." The distiller goes on to say he will sell and ship 12 bottles of various liquors, including six of "Old Rye Whiskey, Distilled 1869," for \$15. The same goods bought at retail, he says, would cost three times more. He ends by citing his "bill of health" from D.C. The letter ends with a

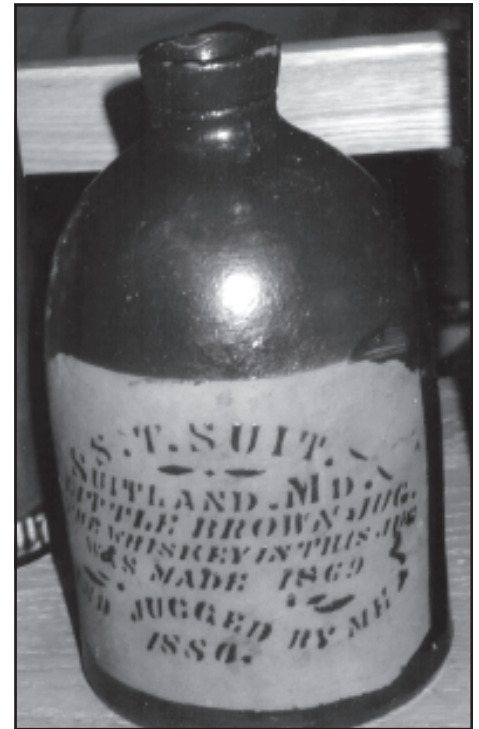


Figure 5: A Suit stenciled jug.
Photo courtesy of Dan Knode.

flourish: "I am respectfully, S. T. Suit."

The mail order campaign paid off. Suit had been successful in obtaining his own fourth class post office and had installed a relative, George T. Suit, as postmaster. Compensation for the postmaster was dependent on the amount of business. According to federal records, in 1875 the Suitland postmaster earned just \$17. But by

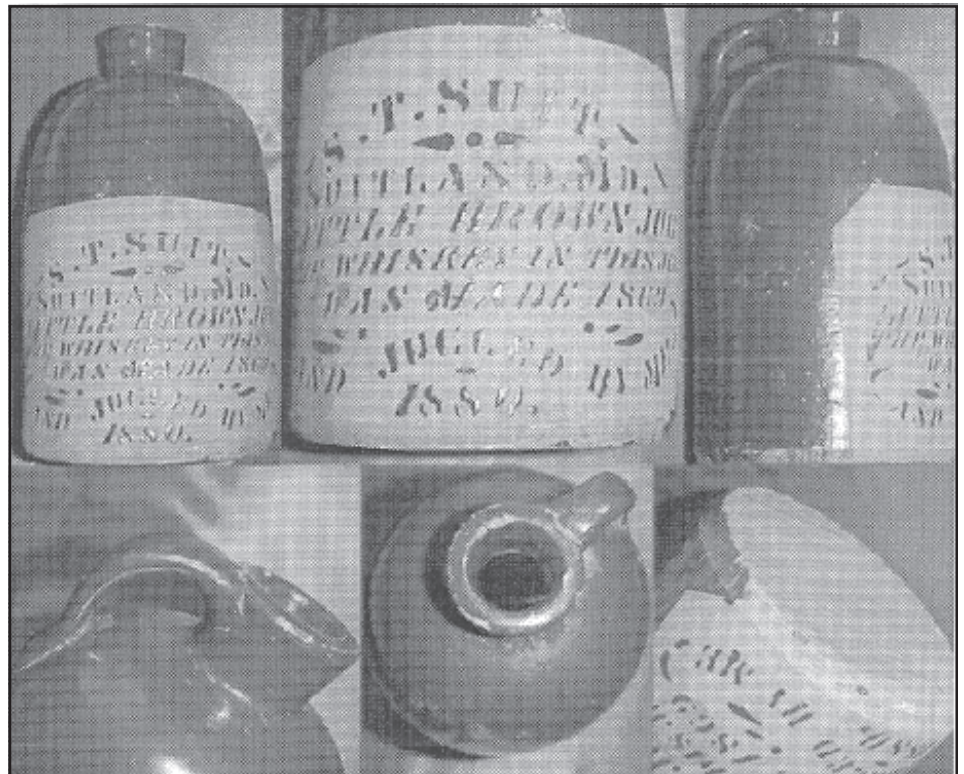


Figure 6: Multiple views of a Suit jug.

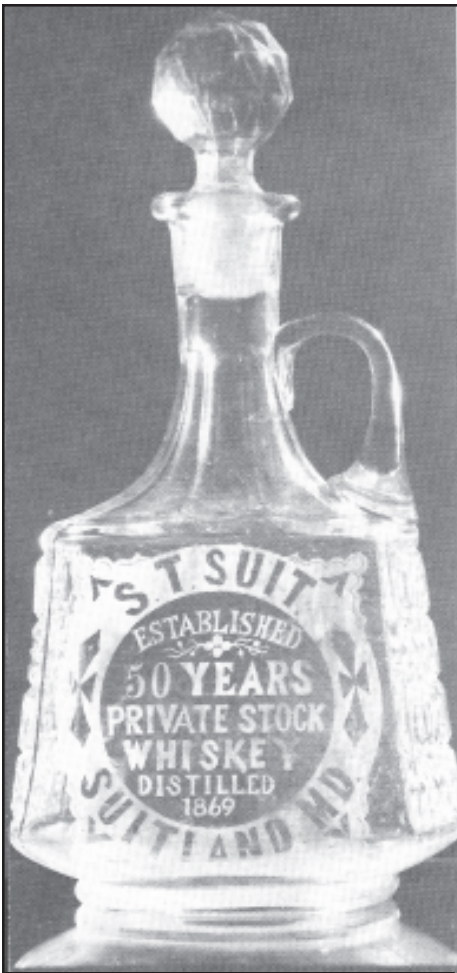


Figure 7: A Suit fancy decanter.

1879, the amount had jumped sharply to \$705 and by 1882 was \$1,091. According one report, the dramatic increase in postal revenues was largely due to the burgeoning mail order business for S.T. Suit's liquors, generated by his postal promotions.

Suit sold his whiskey almost exclusively in stoneware jugs with a range of glazes and labels. Some had yellow-orange bodies with



Figure 8: The mature S.T. Suit.

lettering impressed into the glaze; others had black letters transferred by a roller onto a cylindrical body and then glazed over. But the Colonel's most distinctive containers were his brown jugs, in which the only the top portion of the stoneware, including the handle, was glazed with Albany slip. The slip then was painted on a stencil that held the label. The final effect is both distinctive (almost no one else used it) and crudely attractive. At auction today, Suit jugs command anywhere from \$80 to \$400.

To a contemporary, critical eye, Suit's labels seem deceptive. For years they read: "Whiskey in this jug was distilled in 1869," indicating a considerably aged product. Later he would revise the message to: "Little Brown Jug...Whiskey in this jug was made in 1869 and jugged by me, 1879" (or "1880"). Given the almost two decades in which the distillery existed, it is inconceivable that all the whiskey sold was distilled in a single year. This Maryland entrepreneur was not adverse to cutting corners to make a dollar.

Whatever the drinking public thought it was buying, S.T. Suit's whiskey and brandies proved popular. His brown jugs are said to have accompanied hard-drinking pioneers as they traveled west. He also distributed fancy glass decanters bearing the Suit name and whiskey. These items have shown up all over America indicating their widespread distribution through the mails. Suit continued to grow in wealth and prestige and began to look outside the whiskey trade for outlets for his business energies.

In time the whiskey maker owned and operated the Spa Springs Hotel in Bladensburg, Maryland, and was acting president of the Anacostia Wharf & Docking



Figure 9: Rosa Pelham Suit.

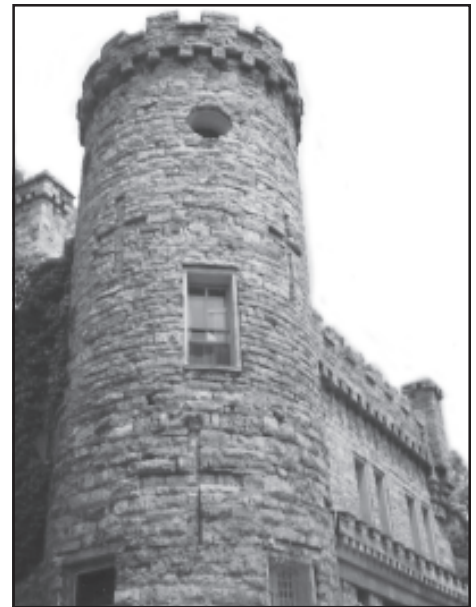


Figure 10: The castle today.

Co., the Washington & Chesapeake Railroad, and the Washington City & Point Lookout Railroad. As a baron of industry, Suit constructed a mansion appropriate to his wealth and power. Patterned after an English manor house, the structure had a fashionable mansard roof and a multitude of rooms. Here is historian Morris Fradin's description of Suit's house and grounds:

"The wine cellar was well stocked with products from his distillery nearby. A red sandstone archway from the same quarry that provided the stone for the White House and many other government structures graced the garden entrance. The graceful driveway to the Suit mansion wound through a private park dotted by sundials and birdbaths, where deer grazed and pheasants hid among exotic shrubbery and elaborate landscaping. The road curved past statuary imported from Italy and two artificial lakes kept stocked with fish; it passed outbuildings and carriage houses and stables for thoroughbred horses. These were cared for by an English coachman who even had a billiard table in his quarters!"

Suit's house and grounds were well appointed for entertaining. The Colonel had been the driving force for the construction of a new road through forestland to connect the District of Columbia with his Suitland, Maryland. The road conveniently ended at his estate. That made it easy for the Washington gentry to visit. Among them were President Ulysses S. Grant, soon-to-be President Rutherford B. Hayes, and Supreme Court Justice Samuel F. Miller. When a British High Commission came to Washington in 1871 to negotiate a Civil War claims settlement, the Englishmen and other dignitaries were entertained at Suitland with a ride to the hounds and a fancy ball at which the U.S. Marine Band played.

Suit continued his business activities, but also became interested in politics and served one term in the Maryland Senate from 1873-1877. "Help me and I will help you." was his campaign theme. According to reports, his influential friends also selected him for certain diplomatic appointments, including reputed ambassadorships in England. Our 14-year-old runaway had done well for himself.

In 1876, however, while Suit was serving as a judge of agriculture at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the Suitland mansion burned to the ground. The Colonel never rebuilt. One reason might have been the break-up of his second marriage. After years of conflict, Aurelia had left him about a year earlier, formally divorced him in 1879 and later remarried.

Before the divorce became final, Suit had met and fallen in love for the third time. Her name was Rosa Pelham, the daughter of an Alabama congressman. She was 17. He was 42. All his life the Colonel had a soft spot for young people. He raised a special breed of white ponies on his estate to be given as gifts to the children of his friends. Contemporaries portrayed him as very sentimental and loving. He particularly loved Rosa.

Because of the difference in their ages, the Alabama belle initially refused him. In 1883, after five years of Suit's pursuing her, the two met in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. When Rosa mentioned that she had always wanted to live in a castle, Suit pledged to build one for her if she would marry him. She agreed and three days later they were wed in Washington, D.C. In quick succession Rosa bore Suit three children.

At this time the Colonel was being drawn away from Suitland and his distillery by prospects for developing businesses at Berkeley Springs. For years the hot springs in that locale had drawn the rich and famous because of the reputed therapeutic qualities of the water. Three large hotels already graced the site but Suit envisaged even further development. His dream was to make Berkeley Springs a spa to rival any on the East Coast.

Thus he chose that locale in 1885 to create for Rosa her promised castle. An eminent American architect, Snowden Ashford, was commissioned to build the 13-room structure to the designs of A.D. Mullett, noted as the designer of the State, War and Navy Building on 17th St. in Washington -- now the Executive Office Building. Mullett designed it to be one-half scale of Berkeley Castle in England, the place where King Edward II had been murdered in 1327. The structure cost \$100,000 -- a whopping amount for those times -- and stood on Warm Springs Ridge, high above the town.

Crews of workmen, making 8 cents an hour, toiled for more than three years to put the giant blocks of granite in place as the structure gradually took shape. The local press reported that Suit had intended to move his family into the castle during the late summer of 1888. But suddenly on Sept. 1 of that year he died at his residence at 228 New Jersey Ave., N.E., at the foot of Capitol Hill in Washington. His gravestone says he was 58, but his death certificate gave his age as "56 years, one month, and 18 days."

Rosa, now a very wealthy 27-year-old widow, saw the castle finished and moved in with her three fatherless children, the youngest only one year old. She was an attractive woman, slender and blue-eyed. With the trappings of royalty, she became a noted giver of lavish parties. Her socialite friends called her, perhaps with some sarcasm, "Queen Rosa."

Although she had many suitors, Rosa never married again, reputedly because of a stipulation in Suit's will that if she did she would lose everything he had bequeathed her. That did not prevent this merry widow from spending nights with her men friends in the castle. One evening, following an argument with her, one of them fell -- or was pushed -- from the roof to his death. Legend says that as he fell he cursed the heiress and that he has haunted the castle ever since. Rosa herself eventually lost her money and her mind. In the 1920s she was evicted from the castle, went west with a son, and died there.

Meanwhile, with no one to tend his whiskey business, S.T. Suit Distillery went out of business well before Prohibition. One date given for its demise is 1888. Samuel Taylor Suit himself is buried in St. Barnabas Church Cemetery in Oxon Hill, Maryland., not far from Suitland. The little brown jugs that gave him fame and fortune are found in collections nationwide. Suit's castle, still highly visible as one enters Berkeley Springs on U.S. 522, remains a tourist attraction -- a famously haunted one -- to this very day.

Reference Notes: Some of the material contained here appeared in my earlier article in the Potomac Pontil, the newsletter of the Potomac Bottle Collectors. The quote from Historian Morris Fradin is from his "Mystery, History, and Romance of a West Virginia Castle," publication unknown, from the archives of the Prince George's Country, Maryland, Historical Society. Material linking postal revenues with Suit's liquor sales is based on an article by Diane DeBlois & Robert Dalton Harris called "Rural Maryland Entrepreneur." Again the publication, from the Historical Society, is not identified. Other material was found on a genealogical "Person Sheet" about S.T. Suit created on the Internet by Chris Dunmore, dated Dec. 2003.

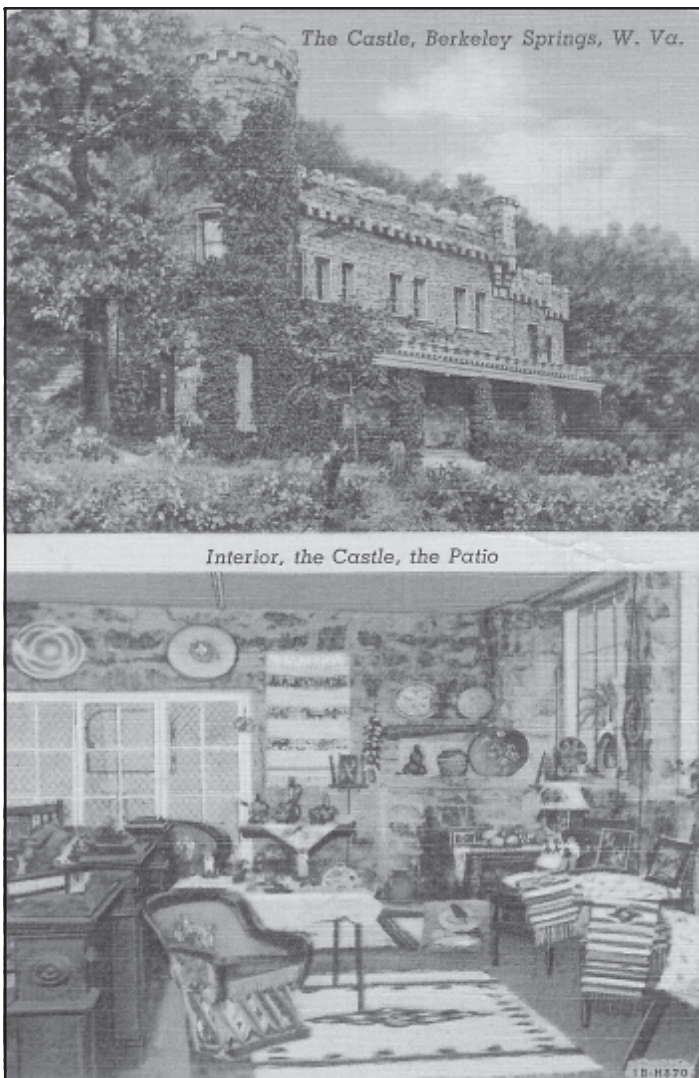


Figure 11: An early picture postcard of the Castle and interior.