

## The Rogue and Roxbury Rye

by Jack Sullivan

(Special to the Potomac Pontil)

Behind many pre-Prohibition whiskey brands lie stories, but few have the soap opera quality of Maryland's Roxbury Rye. Its saga begins with its founder, George T. Gambrill, whose reputation as rogue and scoundrel seems to have pursued him throughout a long life.

Gambrill is a familiar name in Maryland. A 1973 genealogical publication records three hundred years of the family in the state. Many Gambrills, George included, were involved in the grain trade in Baltimore and elsewhere in Maryland. One observer called the extended family "a milling dynasty."

Born about 1845, George's first brush with the courts may have been in 1864 when, as a very young man, he was forced to declare bankruptcy, unable to pay a host of creditors. Later he would claim that he had been "drawn into the affairs of Gambrill Bros.," grain dealers, apparently naively, and that he had paid off his creditors by 1868.

By 1870, according to Baltimore city directories, he was back in business as a principal in Gambrill & Williar, grain dealers. Their offices were in the posh Eutaw House, a downtown hotel (Fig. 1) where Edgar Allen Poe is said to have written "The Raven." Ten years later we find George with another grain firm, Trail & Gambrill. Since wheat, rye and corn are the basis of whiskeys, it seems a natural move for him to branch out into distilling.



Fig. 1: Eutaw House - Baltimore  
He Registers Roxbury Rye

In 1893 he registered Roxbury Rye as a brand with the government, with a distillery in Roxbury, Maryland, a tiny town in Washington County, about twenty miles south of Hagerstown. An energetic salesman, he built Roxbury Rye into a nationally recognized brand in relatively few years. Gambrill merchandised Roxbury Rye in attractive quart bottles with embossed script that read: "Roxbury Rye...Geo. T. Gambrill...Baltimore, Md." (Fig. 2). A labeled pint from the distillery claims to be "The Purest Rye Whiskey in the United States." (Fig. 3). He also issued attractive back-of-the-bar decanters (Fig. 4).



Fig. 2: Roxbury Rye quart



Fig. 3: Roxbury Rye pint (left)

Fig. 4: Roxbury Rye decanter (right)

Before long the distillery was Maryland's sixth largest in terms of capacity. It also maintained impressive sales office in Baltimore at 115 West Baltimore St. In 1900 Roxbury Rye was important enough to be among a handful of American distilleries exhibiting at the Paris Exposition.

### Stolen Coal and Fatal Fires

But George found it difficult to play it straight. By 1901 he was back in court in a case brought against him by John Schooley who claimed that Gambrill had reneged on a deal to give him lodging, money and distillery warehousing space in return for overseeing the Roxbury operation. Schooley also claimed slander because of a letter allegedly written by Gambrill saying Schooley "stole my coal."

In addition to denying that the letter was in his handwriting, Gambrill made a bizarre defense claiming that he really wasn't in the distillery business since all his product for five years – 3,000 barrels of whiskey – had been promised to Steinhardt Brothers of New York (White Lily Rye) and that, in effect, the Steinhardts were running his distillery. The court rejected that notion and quickly found for Schooley. A 1902 appeal by Gambrill failed.

Meanwhile, Roxbury's Baltimore sales operation was taking a hit. On the afternoon of Jan. 4, 1901, a fire broke out in adjoining building and spread to 115 West Baltimore. According to a New York Times account, the Roxbury Rye Company, mostly from water damage, lost \$10,000 in inventory and its building was damaged to the extent of \$510,000. All losses were covered by insurance. The cause of the fire was unknown.

But a far more devastating fire would visit Gambrill's sales operation barely three years later. The Great Baltimore Fire of February 1904 (Fig. 5) destroyed its building and all the contents. Not long after, the Fisher Bros. Co., a local liquor distributor, claimed in ads to be the "successors to George T. Gambrill, distiller..." This firm first shows up in Baltimore directories in 1899. It too was displaced by the fire, moving temporarily to 406 W. Camden. By 1905 Fisher Bros. was in permanent quarters at 124 W. Baltimore Av. and advertising as "agents" for Roxbury Rye.



Fig. 5: Ruins of the 1904 Baltimore Fire

### Gambrill Down, Waldeck Up

In 1905 George Gambrill, who was running the distillery at Roxbury, re-registered the Roxbury Rye brand with the government, this time as a product of the Roxbury Distilling Co. He was still having problem keeping on the right side of the law. A grain speculator, he bet the wrong way on wheat prices, lost his shirt, and once again was unable to pay creditors. As a result he was hauled into court in 1910, accused of putting up the same whiskey as collateral for separate, forfeited loans totaling some \$500,000. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to four years in prison. Although he appealed, his Roxbury distillery was shut down and George exited the whiskey business.

Although Fisher Bros. Co. disappears from Baltimore directories about 1907, there shortly was another liquor company at the same W. Baltimore Street address. It was the Distillers Distributing Co., advertising "fine old liquors," and mentioning prominently its manager, J. W. Waldeck (Fig. 6). Like Fisher Bros., the firm featured Roxbury Rye, indicating that Gambrill had sold the brand name.



Fig. 6: Distillers Distributing Co. shot glass

Waldeck put new juice into advertising for the whiskey. He issued shot glasses (Fig. 7), cork pulls (Fig. 8), and even a thimble (Fig. 9): "Just a thimble full of Roxbury Rye," it reads. The base makes sure that we understand this is from Distillers' Distributing Co. (Fig. 10).

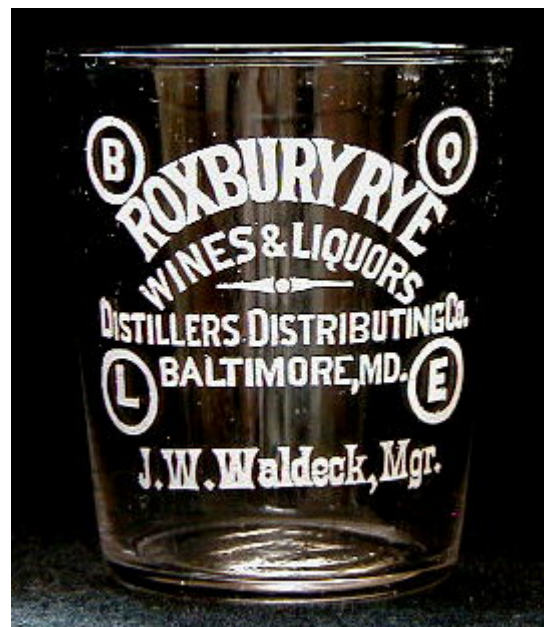


Fig. 7: Roxbury Rye shot glass



Fig. 8: Distillers Distributing Co. cork pull



Fig. 9: Roxbury Rye thimble - rim



Fig. 10: Roxbury Rye thimble - base

Waldeck appears to have broken away from Distillers Distributing about 1914 to start his own liquor company, called the J.W. Waldeck Co., located at 105 H. Howard St. He carried Roxbury Rye with him and merchandised other favorite Baltimore brands, including Bal-Mar Quality Rye, Ballard & Lancaster, and just plain Waldeck Rye.

### The End of the Story

Meanwhile, George Gambrill was filing motions left and right, appealing his conviction, much as he had against John Schooley. A dozen years later, for murky reasons, he still had not served a single day in jail. Instead, according to U.S. Census records, he was residing with his wife, Margaret, at 715 St. Paul and working as an executive with the Gambrill Grain Products Co. at 1311 Bolton St.

While awaiting the outcome of his legal battles, George watched the onset of Prohibition in 1920. The whiskey he created and brought into national prominence disappeared forever, as did the J.W. Waldeck Co. Finally in 1922, a judge quashed the fraud conviction citing Gambrill's frail health and advanced years (about 77). It may have been an old rogue's last con game: George managed to live another eight years in his mansion home, dying at the age of 85. In the end both he and Roxbury Rye had written their names into whiskey history and Baltimore lore.

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**References:** Material for this article was drawn from a variety of sources, principal among them Jim Bready's excellent article on Maryland whiskey for the Winter 1990 issue of the *Maryland Historical Magazine*. The illustrations in Figs. 6-10 are courtesy of Robin Preston and his pre-pro whiskey website ([www.prepro.com](http://www.prepro.com)).

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## Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

### MARCH 2 - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

The Baltimore Antique Bottle Club's 28th Annual Show & Sale (8 AM - 3 PM) at the Physical Education Center, CCBS-Essex, 7201 Rossville Blvd, Essex, Maryland. INFO: BOB FORD, PH: (410) 531-9459, E-mail: [bottles@comcast.net](mailto:bottles@comcast.net)

### MARCH 8 - BADIN, NORTH CAROLINA

The Uwharrie Bottle Club's 1st Annual Antique Bottle & Collectibles Show & Sale (Sat. 8 AM - 3 PM, Adm. Free; Set-up, 6 - 8 AM) at the Badin Fire Department, Badin, North Carolina. Tables (8 ft.) \$20. INFO: TODD MCSWAIN, PH: (704) 474-0552, E-mail: [mcswain8649@alltel.net](mailto:mcswain8649@alltel.net).

### MARCH 9 - TYLERSPORT, PENNSYLVANIA

The 14th Annual Bucks-Mont Bottle Show (9 AM - 2 PM, Early Buyers 8 AM) at the Tylersport Fire Company, 125 Ridge Rd, Tylersport, Pennsylvania. INFO: DAVID BUCK, PH: (215) 723-4048 or GREG GIFFORD, PH: (215) 699-5216

### APRIL 27 - HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA

The Historical Bottle-Diggers of Virginia 37th Annual Antique Bottle and Collectible Show & Sale (9 AM - 3 PM) at the Rockingham County Fairgrounds, (US Rt. 11 South, Exit 243 off I-81), Harrisonburg, Virginia. INFO: SONNY SMILEY, PH: (540) 434-1129 or E-mail: [lithiaman1@yahoo.com](mailto:lithiaman1@yahoo.com).

### MAY 18 - WASHINGTON, PENNSYLVANIA

The Washington County Antique Bottle Club's 34th Annual Antique Bottle Show & Sale (9 AM - 2 PM, Donation \$3) at the Alpine Star Lounge, 735 Jefferson Ave. (From I70, Exit 17), Washington, Pennsylvania. INFO: RUSS CRUPE, 52 Cherry Road, Avella, PA 15312, PH: (724) 345-3653 or (412) 298-7831, E-mail: [heidirus@gmail.com](mailto:heidirus@gmail.com).

### MAY 18 - BRICK, NEW JERSEY

The Jersey Shore Bottle Club's 36th Antique Bottle, Post Card & Local Memorabilia Show & Sale (Sun. 8:30 AM - 2 PM) at the Brick Elks, 2491 Hooper Ave (Old Hooper Ave) Brick, New Jersey. INFO: RICH PEAL 732-267-2528 or E-mail [manodirt@msn.com](mailto:manodirt@msn.com).

### AUGUST 8-10 - YORK, PENNSYLVANIA EXPO

The 2008 FOHBC EXPO (Fri. Seminars and Specialty Meetings in AM; Set-up, Early Adm. 1 - 5 PM, Banquet 6:30 PM; Sat. 9 AM - 5 PM, Early Adm. 7 - 9 AM; Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM) at the York Fairgrounds, York, Pennsylvania. 600-800 tables capacity for the largest EXPO ever! For consignments, contracts and INFO: R. WAYNE LOWRY, 401 Johnston Ct., Raymore, MO 64083, PH: (816) 318-0161, E-mail: [JarDoctor@aol.com](mailto:JarDoctor@aol.com)