

“The Bad Boys of Baltimore” & Monticello Rye

By Jack Sullivan
(Special to *Bottles and Extras*)

Known as the “Bad Boy of Baltimore,” H.L. Mencken was the most influential American commentator of the first third of the 20th Century. He was a man of strong opinions, pro and con, about almost everything. (Figure 1) One of his strongly positive views was of Maryland rye whiskey. Of those, the brand that most often came first to his mind — it was his father’s all time favorite — was Monticello Rye.

Crichton Originates the Brand

This rye whiskey was the original product of Malcolm Crichton, who was born in Illinois about 1840, the son of a Scottish-born wholesale grocer. Grocers in the Midwest at that time almost always distilled and sold their own whiskey. Young Malcolm might well have learned the trade from his father. How he gravitated east is unclear but by 1865, at the age of 25, Crichton was engaged in whiskey making from a site near Holliday and Bath streets in Baltimore. About the same time he married Antoinette Kennedy of that city. She was the daughter of John Kennedy of Hagerstown, Md., and through her mother was related to the influential McPherson clan of Baltimore. She would bear Crichton five sons.

Clearly an enterprising young man, Crichton took over a defunct distillery once run by Joseph White. He rebuilt the facility and began producing a whiskey he called “Monticello Rye” (Figure 2). Baltimore already had its Mount Vernon Rye — named after the home of George Washington. That may have inspired Crichton to appropriate the name of Thomas Jefferson’s Virginia home for his liquor. Crichton also claimed in his advertising, without proof, that the date of origin for his brand was 1789 — half a century before his own birth.

Calamity struck on July 24, 1868. That was the date of the Jones Falls Flood, Baltimore’s greatest natural disaster of the 19th Century. The water rose to 12 feet downtown. Among the casualties was Crichton’s distillery, washed away by the rushing waters. Once again he rebuilt, this time aided financially by Charles E. Dickey,



Figure 1: A caricature of H. L. Mencken



Figure 2: Monticello ad, Crichton Distilling

the owner of a nearby meter manufacturing company.

The location at 136 Holliday would be the home of the M. Crichton & Company distillery for the next 20 years. City directories indicate that in 1880 the firm moved its sales and management offices to 57 2nd St. in Baltimore, then in 1886 moved to the Fireman’s Building at the northeast corner of South and Second streets. Other Crichton facilities were located at Foundry & Holliday and 415 N. Holliday. In 1881 he registered the name “Monticello Rye” with the federal government.

Enter the Cahn Brothers

When Malcolm Crichton died in 1890, it appears that none of his sons — William, James, Arthur, Malcolm or McPherson — were interested or equipped to take on the business. It was sold to two Baltimore brothers, Bernard and Jacob B. Cahn. Bernard earlier had been in the liquor business as a partner in the Cahn, Belt Co., located on Lombard Street. It produced the

popular Maryland Club Rye. Upon purchasing the Crichton properties, the Brothers Cahn in 1892 renamed them The Monticello Distilling Co.

Some early confusion seems to have existed regarding who owned the rights to the brand name. Another Baltimore firm, the Thomas G. Carroll & Sons Co., about the same time began to produce a Monticello Whiskey under its own label (Figure 3). It was a well-established whiskey merchandiser with popular local brands, Baltimore Club and Return Rye (Figure 4). In 1906, perhaps in self-defense, the Cahns reregistered the Monticello Rye brand with the U.S. government.

If name competition bothered the Cahns, it was not evident in their vigorous merchandizing of Monticello Rye. The pair lost little time in supplanting Crichton’s logo (Figure 5) and issued a series of

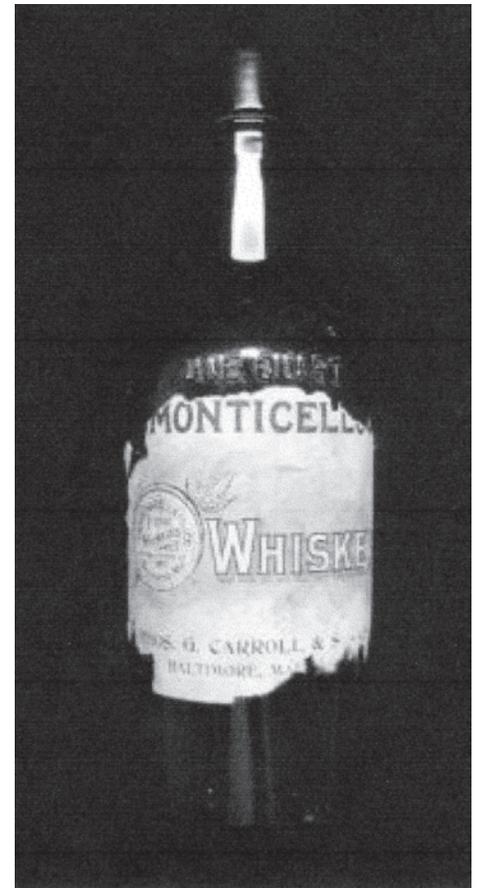


Figure 3: Monticello Whiskey, Thomas G. Carroll & Sons Distilling



Figure 4: Carroll & Sons Return Rye shot glass



Figure 5: Monticello Distilling Co. logo

advertising items touting the brand with the slogan: "It's All Whiskey!" (Figure 6) This also began a period of closely identifying the product with Thomas Jefferson and his home (Figure 7).

Perhaps the most colorful Monticello Rye item was a lithographed tip tray (Figure 8). It measures 6 1/8" x 4 1/2" and shows a hunting scene with horses, hounds, and servants serving hunters, riders and guests in front of Jefferson's Virginia home. Marked on the rim of the tray is "Monticello, Special Reserve, It's All Whiskey" and on each side is "Thomas Jefferson, Pres. U. S. 1801-1809." There is also a sign on a tree in the scene advertising the whiskey. The bottom of the tray (Figure 9) continues the sales pitch. It states: "It's Pure. It's Aged in Wood, Bottled at Distillery #1 Dist. of Md., Guaranteed Best on Earth."

Mencken, like others of his time, was fond of standing at the bar to, as he said, "toss the bartender for the drinks." Monticello Distilling obliged the practice by issuing a token that could be flipped to decide who paid (Figures 10, 11). Jim



Figure 6: Monticello Rye ink blotter ad

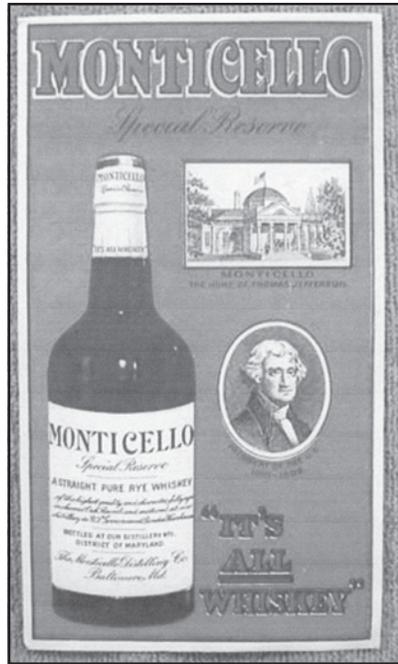


Figure 7: Monticello ad, with Jefferson



< Figure 10: Monticello Rye token - heads



Figure 11: Monticello Rye token - tails >

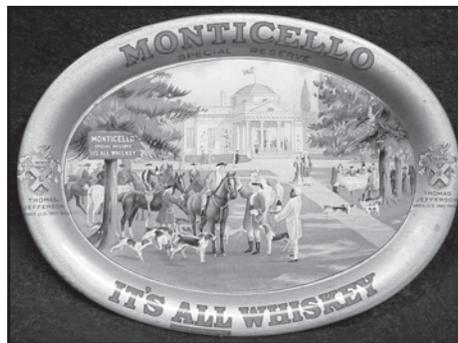


Figure 8: Metal tip tray showing Jefferson's home



Figure 9: Bottom of the tip tray

Brady, the historian of Baltimore whiskey, says that the Monticello distillery was adjacent to City Hall in Baltimore (Figure 12) and in summer when the windows were open, there being no air conditioning in those days, aromas of the whiskey-making would waft through city offices — obviously fomenting thirst among the clerks.



Figure 12: Postcard view of Baltimore City Hall

Health of the Menckens

This was a period of rapid growth, as Monticello Rye became a popular regional and then national brand. Its ads also trumpeted the medicinal value of this rye whiskey. The value was clear to the Mencken family physician, Dr. Z. K. Wylie. According to Mencken, the good doctor “believed and taught that a shot of Maryland whiskey was the best preventive of pneumonia in the R months.” Another Mencken friend “always ate rye bread instead of wheat because rye was the bone and sinew of Maryland whiskey — the most healthful appetizer yet discovered by man.”

All this was firmly believed by Mencken’s father Augustus, a cigar manufacturer. When the senior Mencken sent out for whiskey, he wanted Monticello Rye. His famous son recounted: “His...bill file shows that on December 27, 1893, he paid Courtney, Fairall & Company, then the favorite fancy grocery fancy grocers of Baltimore, \$4 dollars for a gallon of Monticello whiskey.... Before every meal, including breakfast, he ducked into the cupboard in the dining room and poured out a substantial hooker of rye, and when he emerged he was always sucking in a great whiff of air to cool off his tonsils. He regarded this appetizer as necessary to his well-being. He said it was the best medicine he had ever found for toning up the stomach.”

Monticello Rye not only had a loyal customer base in Maryland but also reached consumers nationwide, with distributors such as Peter Welty in Wheeling, West Virginia (Figure 13) and Loeb-Lion-Felix in New Orleans (Figure 14). A 1910 directory shows the brand fourth in production among dozens of Maryland distilleries, figured in “capacity of bushels of mash daily.” It ranked just behind Mount Vernon Rye.

Prohibition Comes

Baltimore distilling stopped with the coming of Prohibition, which Mencken abhorred. Part of his opposition stemmed from the violation of individual liberties, part for his love of drinking. Never seen drunk, he still regarded liquor as one of the joys of life. “It is my belief that no man ever grows so old that he has got beyond learning something about the art of alcoholic stimulation,” he once said.

Mencken became one of America’s staunchest critics of Dry America and called constantly for Repeal. “The chief argument

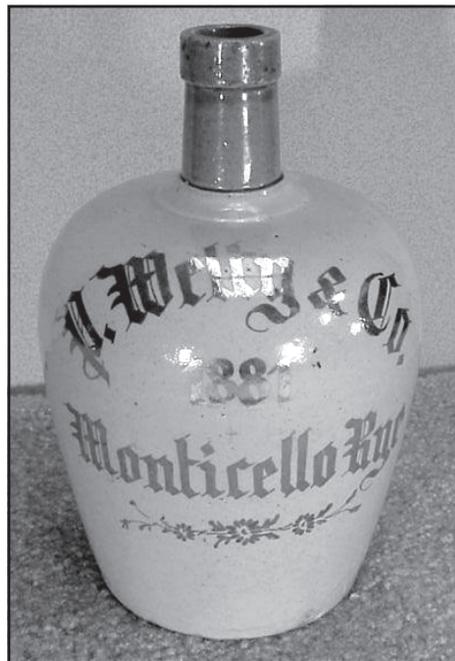


Figure 13: Welty Monticello Rye jug



Figure 14: New Orleans ad for Monticello Rye

against Prohibition is that it doesn’t prohibit,” he commented. “This is also the chief argument in favor of it.”

The journalist and author responded personally to the “Great Experiment” by selling his car and using the proceeds to purchase a large stock of “the best wines and liquors I could find.” We can guess Monticello Rye was among them, although Mencken also had a taste for Cutty Sark scotch. He stored his liquor in a basement vault in his home at 1524 Hollins St.

(Figure 15). The vault door bore a custom-painted sign emblazoned with skull and crossbones. It said: “This vault is protected by a device releasing chorine gas under 200 pound pressure. Enter at your own risk.”



Fig. 15: Mencken’s Baltimore home

Although the Cahn Brothers Monticello Distilling disappeared from Baltimore business directories in 1919 with the coming of Prohibition, the brand, phoenix-like, continued. Shown here is a bottle of Monticello Rye that was distilled in 1917, before Prohibition, and bottled in 1926, after Prohibition (Figure 16). Although the Baltimore firm is credited as the merchandiser, the distiller is listed as Thompson Distilling Co. of Pittsburgh, Pa., whose flagship brand was Sam Thompson Rye (Figure 17). From the tax stamp on the bottle (Figure 18) and language on the rear label it can be inferred that Monticello was one of the few brands nationally that were allowed to be sold but only by a doctor’s prescription for medicinal use. The label warns, “Medicinal purpose only. Sale or use for other purposes will cause heavy penalties to be inflicted.”

Continued on page 56.



Figure 16: Monticello “Prohibition” pint. **Figure 17:** Thompson Distilling paperweight. **Figure 18:** Tax stamp on Prohibition pint.

Connecticut: Press of the Case, Lockwood and Brainerd Co. 1896, pg. 113.

³ *Connecticut Current* (Hartford, CT) 18 April 1820.

⁴ *Willimantic Journal* (Windham, CT) Nov 20, 1863.

⁵ See Peggy Dow, *Vicissitudes Exemplified, or The journey of Life*, New York : Printed by J.C. Totten. 1814

⁶ *Freeman and Messenger* (Lodi, New York) May 14, 1840.

⁷ Among his publications are: *Polemical Works* (1814); *The Stranger in Charleston, or the Trial and Confession of Lorenzo Dow* (1822); *A Short Account of a Long Travel; with Beauties of Wesley* (1823); and the *History of a Cosmopolite; or the Four Volumes of the Rev. Lorenzo Dow's Journal, concentrated in One, containing his Experience and Travels from Childhood to 1814* (1814, and many later editions); this volume also contains "All the Polemical Works of Lorenzo." The edition of 1854 was entitled *The Dealings of God, Man, and the Devil as exemplified in the Life, Experience and Travels of Lorenzo Dow*.

⁸ *The New York Times* (New York), May 9, 1886.

⁹ Lorenzo Dow, Peggy Dow and John Dowling, *The Dealings of God, Man, and the Devil: as Eemplified in the Life, Experience and Travels of Lorenzo Dow, in a Period of Over Half a Century*. Vol. 1, Middletown, Ohio: Published by Glasener and Marshall. 1849, pg. 310.

¹⁰ Dr. John Plummer, *Reminisces of the History of Richmond, Indiana* (included with the first Richmond City Directory in 1857).

¹¹ John H. Binford, *History of Hancock County, Indiana*, King & Binford, Publishers. Greenfield, Indiana: William Mitchell, Steam Book and Job Printer. 1882, pg. 140.

¹² *The National Intelligencer* (Georgetown, D.C.) February 6, 1834.

¹³ Untitled, Reformed Latter Day Saints Junior Curriculum, c. 1970, p. 365, located at: <http://www.solomonspalding.com/docs/ldow1804.htm>.

¹⁴ *New Bedford Mercury* (New Bedford, Massachusetts) May 18, 1827.

¹⁵ *Middlesex Gazette* (Middletown, Connecticut) June 13, 1827.

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"The Bad Boys of Baltimore" & Monticello Rye by Jack Sullivan Continued from page 51.

Moreover, Maryland was the only state in the Union not to pass a local enforcement law during Prohibition, giving it the nickname — "The Wettest State in the Union." Thus, Monticello Rye may have been a beneficiary of this more tolerant view of alcohol.

Prohibition Goes

No one celebrated the end of Prohibition with more gusto than Mencken. A photograph on the front page of the *Baltimore Sun* showed him downing the first beer to be poured at Baltimore's Rennert's Hotel bar in 13 years (**Figure 19**). "Pretty good. Not bad at all," the paper quoted him saying.

Mencken, however, came to see Repeal as a mixed blessing. He complained about paying higher prices for liquor. Now, he raged, Monticello Rye cost \$3 to \$3.50 a quart — not the \$4 a gallon his father had paid. Even as his health began to fail at the end of his life, Mencken continued to enjoy a drink. "I drink exactly as much as I want, and one drink more," he bragged.

Once again, the Monticello Rye brand survived, at least into the 1940s, the vintage of the mini-bottle shown here (**Figure 20**). Mencken died in 1956. In 1967, after the death of his brother left their Hollins Street house empty, Baltimore citizens interested in turning the Mencken home into a museum found numerous full bottles of whiskey and wine in the cellar, as well as a few empties. There is no written record to reveal if Monticello Rye was among them, but we may be excused for believing so.

Notes: In addition to Mencken's own writings, a source of material for this article was the 1990 article by Jim Bready in the *Maryland Historical Magazine* entitled, "Maryland Rye: A Whiskey the Nation Long Fancied— But Now Has Let Vanish." The illustrations for Figures 4 and 20 are courtesy of Robin Preston and his website, www.pre-pro.com. A good new biography by Marion Elizabeth Rogers, "Mencken: The American Iconoclast," provided information on the author and his views on Prohibition. Portions of this article have previously appeared in *The Pontil*, the newsletter of the Potomac Bottle Collectors.



Figure 19: Mencken celebrating the end of Prohibition



Figure 20: Monticello mini-bottle



Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956)