

# “DADDY” GARNER

## AND THE OLDEST SALOON IN ALABAMA

By Jack Sullivan

[Special to Bottles & Extras]

Raised on a farm in nearby Georgia, Robert E. Garner found his way to Anniston, Alabama, during the latter part of the 19th Century. Known as “Daddy” there, he created a saloon he called “The Peerless” (Fig. 1) and a whiskey he named “Old Wildcat.” The whiskey disappeared with Prohibition, but the saloon has been revived by his modern counterparts and now is accounted the oldest such establishment in Alabama.

“Daddy” Garner was born in Pike County, Georgia, in 1866, the youngest son of Eliza M. and John Garner, a Civil War veteran. His education appears to have been minimal. The 1880 federal census, taken when he was 14 years old, registered him not at school but as a “farmer.” Listed with the same occupation were three older brothers, possibly the reason for his leaving Georgia. As the fourth in line, his chance of inheriting any Garner land was very dim. That same year his mother, Eliza, died and his father later married again.

Garner’s whereabouts for the next few years have gone unrecorded. In the late 1890s, he surfaced in Anniston, Alabama, on the slope of the Blue Mountain, about 112 miles from his birthplace (Fig. 2). It was a good choice to locate. Named “The Model City” by Atlanta newspaperman Henry W. Grady because of its careful planning, Anniston was rapidly becoming the fifth largest city in Alabama. Although the roots of the town’s economy were in iron, steel and sewer pipe clay, the city fathers touted it as a health spa featuring several resort hotels easily accessed by rail. Local wealth allowed the erection of elegant public and commercial buildings, impressive churches, grand mansions and industrial facilities all set within a carefully conceived landscape.



Fig 1: The Peerless Saloon as it's known, and how the building looks today

But even a model city requires a saloon or two and Garner provided one of the more fancy watering holes in town (Fig. 3). Built in Classic Revival Gothic style, The Peerless featured a massive mirror-backed mahogany bar (Fig 4). The bar was purchased at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and moved by Garner to Anniston and The Peerless in 1906. He also bought old church pews, had them sawed in two and fashioned customer booths from them.

A model city also needs its own elite brothel and there again Garner did not disappoint. He set aside the entire second floor of The Peerless for that purpose. There were four rooms, each with its own ornamented fireplace and a fifth bedroom in a loft accessed by a ladder. Watching over this red-light establishment was a formidable madam named Lucinda Talley who sat at the head of the stairs to screen visitors. She was known for running a strict house and carrying a gun. It is something of a mystery how Garner earned the nickname "Daddy." No record exists of a marriage or any children. It occurs to me that the ladies upstairs might have bestowed that name on him as the boss male of The Peerless and it stuck.



Fig 4: The Peerless featured a massive mirror-backed mahogany bar



Fig 2: The Peerless Saloon as it's known, and how the building looks today



Fig 3: K.E.Garner Propr of The Peerless, Anniston Alabama

Meanwhile, Garner himself was busy building a wholesale liquor trade, supplying whiskey to other saloons and restaurants in Anniston from The Peerless and a second saloon/store he owned called the Iron City Liquor House. Garner advertised widely in Anniston papers, emphasizing "Wines, Whiskey, and Cigars" along with "Chattanooga Beer." (Fig. 5) Obtaining whiskey by the barrel from distilleries in Maryland, Virginia and elsewhere, he decanted it into a range of ceramic jugs for sale, all bearing his name and some with the motto, "Sells the Best." (Figs. 6-8). One Albany slip jug, shown here in detail (Fig. 9), bore the name of the Iron City Company.

Garner also featured his own proprietary brand, "Old Wildcat," at The Peerless bar and sold much of it in glass bottles (Fig. 10) that were made at factory 42 miles east of Anniston in Tallapoosa, Georgia, one of the few glassworks in that region of the South. While some sources claim Garner owned the company called The Piedmont Glassworks (Fig. 11), my research indicates that the saloon keeper at best could only have been a stockholder. Initially owned by a Boston investment firm about 1891, the Tallapoosa glass factory went bankrupt within a year or so and eventually was bought by the Dixie Glass Company.

Garner's drinking establishments were among the most popular of the dozen saloons that graced Anniston. "Daddy" was a genial host

THE FAMOUS  
**Chattanooga Beer**  
 Unexcelled for Purity, Richness and Flavor. The favorite with all who try it. Sold in Anniston district, wholesale and retail, by  
**...R. E. GARNER...**  
 PROPRIETOR OF  
**The Iron Queen and Peerless Saloons.**  
 Dealer in the  
 Choicest Wines, Whiskies and Cigars.  
**WHOLESALE AND RETAIL.**

Fig 5: Garner advertised widely in Anniston papers, emphasizing "Wines, Whiskey, and Cigars" along with "Chattanooga Beer."



Fig. 9: One Albany slip jug, shown here in detail, bore the name of the Iron City Company.



Fig 10: Garner also featured his own proprietary brand, "Old Wildcat," at The Peerless bar and sold much of it in glass bottles



Fig 6-8: Garner also decanted the whiskey into a range of ceramic jugs for sale, all bearing his name and some with the motto, "Sells the Best."

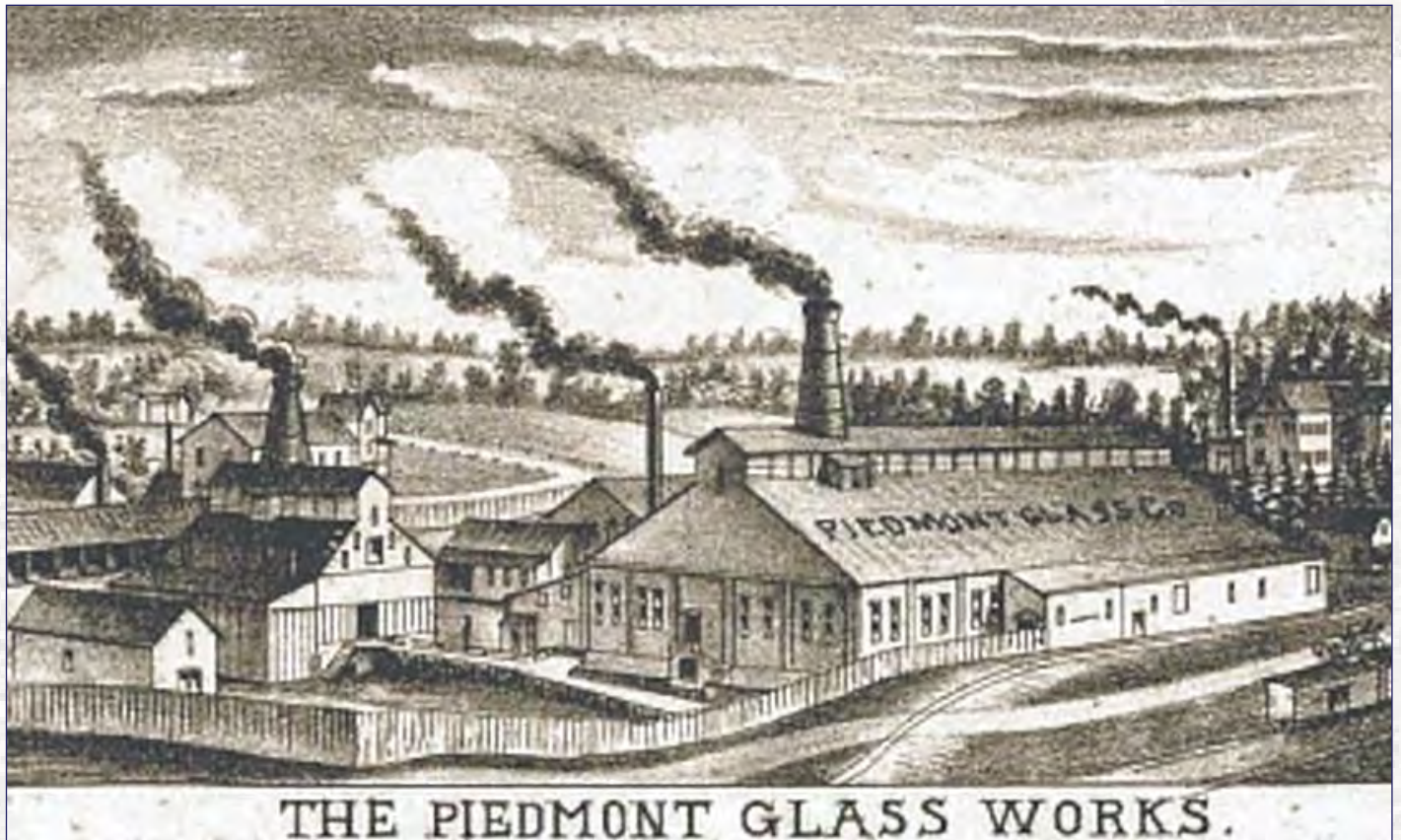


Fig 11: While some sources claim Garner owned the company called The Piedmont Glassworks, my research indicates that the saloon keeper at best could only have been a stockholder.



Fig. 12: Several giveaways included a mini-jug containing a swallow or of two of whiskey



Fig. 13: Giveaways to regular customers also a aluminum token, bearing his signature slogan: "E.A. Garner Sells the Best."

known for his generosity at the bar. Like other liquor dealers, he featured a number of giveaways to regular customers. Those included a mini-jug containing a swallow or of two of whiskey (Fig. 12) and an aluminum shot glass, bearing his signature slogan: "E.A. Garner Sells the Best." (Fig 13).

Although Anniston had flirted from time to time with banning alcohol through "local option" laws, for most of Garner's first fifteen years in business he faced no restrictions on liquor sales. In 1915, however, Ala-



Fig. 14: His unusual gravestone is in the shape of a couch and the inscription mentions him only as a son

bama voted for a complete ban on alcohol. Enforcement was spotty in Anniston and it was whispered in town that “Daddy” continued to bootleg liquor through his now-shut saloon. The activities upstairs apparently continued unabated despite the liquor ban.

The brothel closed in 1919 following the death of Lucinda Talley, shot by mistake by a policeman. The cop was chasing a suspect attempting to take refuge on the second floor among the ladies. Lucinda’s ghost is believed to haunt The Peerless; staff members have claimed to see her at her post at the top of the stairs. The ghost also is blamed when glasses are broken behind the bar. A group of paranormal investigators visited the saloon some years ago and are said to have captured “several visual anomalies” on video.

The same year as Lucinda’s killing, “Daddy” Garner died of natural causes at the age of 63 and was buried in the Mount Olive Baptist Church Cemetery in Pike County. His unusual gravestone is in the shape of a couch and the inscription mentions him only as a son (Fig. 14). While some in Anniston might have seen him as the epitome of perdition, nothing in his surroundings would indicate “Daddy” lived anything other than an exemplary Baptist life.

Garner also left behind a reputation as a philanthropist in Anniston. Never having married and with no children as heirs, he left his considerable fortune, made from selling liquor, for the creation of a new hospital to replace a crumbling one. Using his money, the city fathers built a new municipal medical center and named it Garner Hospital (Fig. 15). Although the building now serves as a nursing home, the saloon keeper’s generosity is credited even today as providing the basis for improved health care in Anniston.

During National Prohibition, the Peerless Saloon for a time became a jewelry store, sat empty for years and at one point faced demolition until 1985 when it was placed on the Register of Historic Places by the National Park Service. The building



Fig. 15: Using his money, the city fathers built a new municipal medical center and named it Garner Hospital

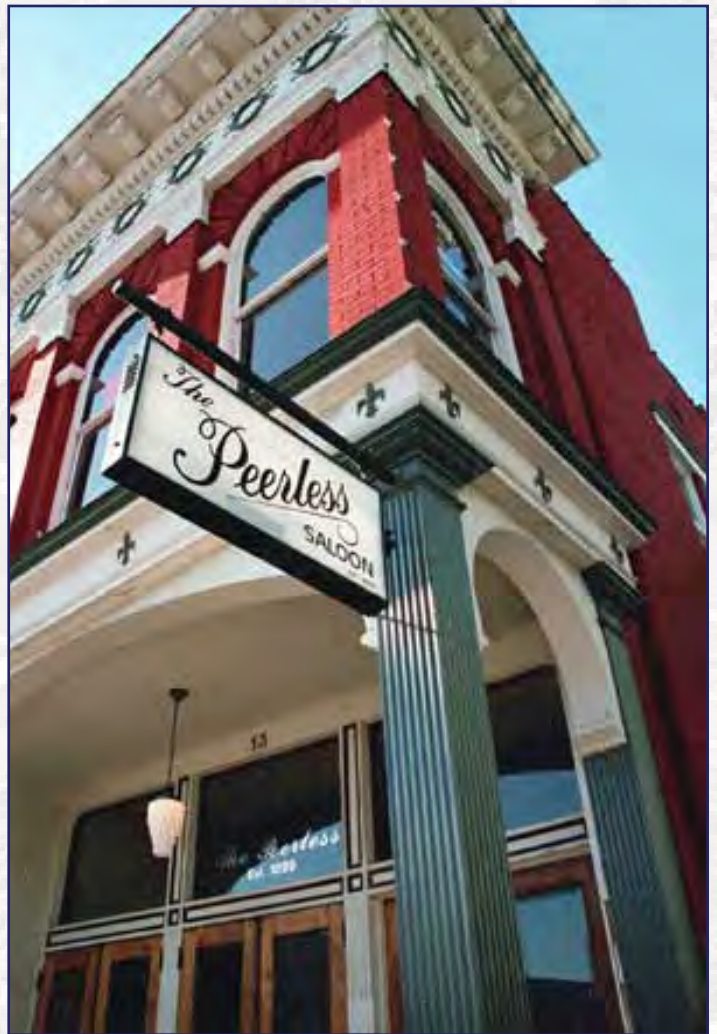


Fig. 16: The building subsequently was restored to its original luster by new owners and is honored as the oldest saloon in Alabama

subsequently was restored to its original luster by new owners and is honored as the oldest saloon in Alabama (Fig. 16). The upstairs has been renovated into one large room that features a 1890s decor and a pool table. The renovated bordello now can be rented for special events. The current owners have preserved the period look throughout the historic building. “Daddy” Garner, if he walked in The Peerless today, likely would feel comfortable taking his accustomed place behind the mahogany bar.

