

Curator's Choice

A Bank You Can "Bank" On

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Director

This wonderful artifact (Figure 1), recovered from a privy filled during the third quarter of the 19th century, turns out to be a multi-level play on words. It is part of a cast-iron bank in the shape of a building and if you look closely, you can see the word "BANK" cast above the door. And to make matters even better, this "bank" bank was recovered from an archaeological site in Baltimore on a property that was about to become the Sharp Street location of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond.

Highly collectible today, cast iron banks began production in the 1860s (Ketchum 1981:116). Because this bank did not have moving parts like mechanical cast iron banks, it was known as a still bank. It was produced around 1872 by J. & E. Stevens of Cromwell, Connecticut. The Stevens brothers opened their hardware manufacturing business in 1843, producing tools, hooks and other household items (AntiqueToys.com 2017).

From around 1870 until the turn of the twentieth century, their product line turned primarily to cast iron banks, as well as simple toys like cap pistols. The J. & E. Stevens Company "is considered to have been the earliest and largest manufacturer of cast-iron toys in the country" (DeVoe 1971). The company produced over 300 models of both mechanical and still banks between 1869 and 1890 (McCain 1997).

When purchased, the bank would have been brightly painted to appeal to consumers. This complete example (Figures 2 and 3) was painted in red and green with gold accents, but different color combinations were also available.

The top and bottom of the bank were fastened to the building by a rod with screw fasteners at the top of the cupola and on the base.



Figure 1. Front of a cast iron bank recovered from the Federal Reserve Site (18BC27), Feature 30.



Figure 2. Complete example of the J. & E. Stevens cupola bank, height: 5.75", Private collection.



Figure 3. Back of the Bank. The screw at the top of the cupola is visible as a small dome. Private collection.

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