

# Curator's Choice

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## That's Not Booze—That's Medicine

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Rye Whiskey and Maryland used to go hand-in-hand. While other states produced rye whiskey in greater quantities, Maryland was renowned for having the best, with multiple distilleries throughout the state. Prohibition, however, dealt a crippling blow to the once highly regarded form of whiskey. The handful of producers that survived prohibition used loopholes to stay afloat.

Prohibition came into full effect on February 1, 1920 after the passing of the 18th Amendment, otherwise known as the Volstead Act. It lasted until 1933 with the passage of its repeal in the form of the 21st Amendment. The law prohibited “intoxicating beverages” but left open the possibility of continued production of high-proof spirits, like whiskey, for other purposes, including scientific research, fuel, dye, and “other lawful industries.” Other lawful industries included medicine (National Archives n.d.).

The medicinal exemption to the law was well-regulated and permits to manufacture spirits had to be renewed annually. Small producers like those in Maryland had the market cut out from under them. Larger companies, however, were able to navigate the requirements and continue to operate dis-



Figure 1. “Old Quakers visit, Old Quaker rye whiskey” advertisement c. 1900. Library of Congress, electronic resource, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2018694439/>



Figure 2. Old Quaker Rye Whiskey bottle recovered from the Edward Rawlings Site in Wallville (18CV554).

tilleries. Among the only six officially licensed distillers was a company called Schenley Industries, which bought out several known whiskey brands, including The Old Quaker Company (Figure 1) and their stocks of rye whiskey distilled before prohibition went into effect (Veach 2021).

Figure 2 depicts an Old Quaker brand rye whiskey bottle found at the Edward Rawlings site (18CV554), located in the community of Wallville, in southern Calvert County. The site dates from the early 1900s and into the 1950s – straddling the years before and after Prohibition. While the paper labels that were once affixed to it are gone, there is a flat ovoid spot on the lower left-hand side of the front of the bottle that once contained a branded sticker with the label “U.S.P.” for United States Pharmacopeia (Figure

3). U.S.P. published a reference book of standards for drugs and medicines entitled *The Pharmacopeia of the United States of America* (Middleton 2023).

U.S.P. had been the first medical publication to define manufacturing standards for medicinal whiskey in 1854 but would remove it as an approved medication in 1916 only to be added back in 1925. It was estimated that despite this initial loss of backing, doctors in the US would dispense roughly 145 million whiskey prescriptions (Figure 4) during Prohibition (Middleton 2023; The Ohio State University n.d.).

It is more likely that such a decoratively molded bottle of Old Quaker rye whiskey dates to after the end of Prohibition, rather than a prescribed medicinal bottle. The history of whiskey as a medicine, however, is the reason why production was able to immediately start back up again. Though rye whiskey is rare today, glass bottles such as these are somewhat ubiquitous across archaeological sites dating to the first half of the 20th century – a testament to Marylander’s love of the good stuff!



Figure 3. Closeup of U.S.P. label on Old Quaker Rye Whiskey Bottle. Electronic resource, <https://whiskeybent.net/product/old-quaker-rye-whiskey-pint-bottled-in-bond-fall-1917-spring-1933/>



Figure 4. Prohibition-era liquor prescription, from the Rex D. Davis Historical File, ATF Reference Library and Archive (The Ohio State University n.d.).

### References

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The Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory (MAC Lab) is a state-of-the-art archaeological research, conservation, and collections storage facility located at the Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum.



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