

Curator's Choice

A Token for a Pint

By: Alice Merkel, Collections Assistant

During a recent rehousing project of the Camden Yards Site, we came across a copper alloy coin marked with the initials “C M B CO.” arched over a center stamped “4” (Figures A, B). The site, now home to the Baltimore Orioles, was excavated in 1989 and 1990 and revealed a large privy deposit for all sorts of artifacts from residents living along Conway Street in Baltimore.



Figure A (left): Token before conservation treatment with the stamped decoration covered with corrosion. Figure B (right): Token after treatment with the stamped initials, number four, and edge decoration visible.

Out of curiosity we researched the initials and came across the Christian Moerlein Brewing Company in Cincinnati, Ohio. Founded by Bavarian immigrant brewer and blacksmith apprentice Christian Moerlein in 1853, this brewery still stands today in the same historically German neighborhood, known as Over-the-Rhine (Figures C, D). Moerlein Brewery was the only Cincinnati brewery to enter the international beer market, and at one time was the 13th largest brewery in the nation (Digging Cincinnati History). Their popular “Old Jug Lager Krug-Bier” sold in ceramic stoneware bottles featuring the brewery logo in black, a collectible item still popular with bottle enthusiasts today (Ohio Link). The brewery shut down in 1920 due to prohibition but was later reopened in 1981.



Figures C&D: Moerlein built his brewery in the predominantly German neighborhood, Over-the-Rhine, just north of Downtown Cincinnati. At one time more than a dozen breweries called the neighborhood home (Digging Cincinnati History, The City View Cincinnati)

While the building has gone through a few remodels, many of their brewing traditions continue to this day, including the tradition of selling of beer tokens. Now a novelty, back in the day beer tokens marked with the brewery name were used to purchase a Moerlein beer in any Over-the-Rhine bar that had it in stock. They were a great way to ensure customers would drink a certain brew, no matter which saloon or lager house they ended up in. Beer tokens range in size, material, and design, but they usually have the name of the establishment, a logo design, or the value of the token, either in pint value or quantity of pint(s).

While it is hard to find what Moerlein beer tokens looked like historically, we were a little unsure about whether the token found at the previous excavations of Camden Yards in Baltimore was really connected with a brewery in faraway Cincinnati, Ohio. Looking further through the circa 1880s-1940 collection, there are a couple of complete glass bottles with the Moerlein stamp (Figures E & F, Kuranda et al., 1992). Having these Moerlein marked bottles in the same collection as the beer token suggests some residents of Conway Street enjoyed brews at home and when traveling, just like we do today.



Figure E: One of the bottles from the Moerlein brewery found in the Privy 19A01 site.

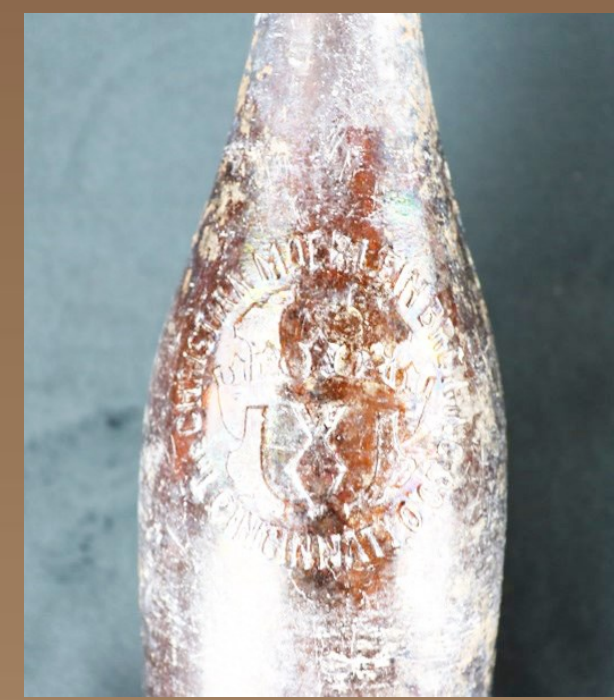


Figure F: Close-up of the Moerlein logo on the bottle: the trademark large “M,” with central form made from a pair of blacksmithing tongs and the top of the letter form wearing a crown.



Figure G: The modern-day logo still holds many features of the old one, the central M made from a pair of blacksmithing tongs, an homage to the founder, Christian Moerlein (Moerlein Lager House).

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