

The Murphys of Chillicothe — Success and Sorrow

By Jack Sullivan

The Murphy brothers of Chillicothe, Ohio, often were beset by the kind of ill-fortune that might have doomed others. They stuck together to build a successful liquor house and reputations as local businessmen who had the confidence and esteem of their community.

After the grocery run by their Irish immigrant father was burned out, the eldest son, Frank Murphy, sprang to the fore. In his mid-teens, Frank went to work as a clerk with the firm of James Boulger & Company, a grocery and liquor store. He remained there for twelve years, learning the business and developing a reputation as a bright and rising young local. Within a year's time, 1874-1875, however, his father, mother and a 32-year old brother, one after another, died.



Figure 1

By that time, Murphy had purchased the liquor business owned by Hugh Curry, calling it "Frank Murphy & Company." In 1882 he took as a partner his younger brother, Thomas, who had joined him at fifteen working as a clerk. Shown here is a corkscrew bearing the company name (Fig. 1).



Figure 2

With subsequent success, the Murphys eventually needed more space and bought a considerably larger building at 85 N. Paint Street, the main commercial avenue of Chillicothe (Fig. 2). In detail here can be seen the Murphy sign (Fig. 3). This establishment they named Murphy Distilling Company, advertising itself as "Jobbers and Brokers in Fine Whiskeys, Wines, Cordials, Champagne, Gins, Bass Ale and London Porter." (Fig 4). The brothers also were acting as "rectifiers," that is, blending and mixing whiskeys to achieve particular taste, smoothness and color. Their flagship brand was "Old Lafayette Club." (Fig. 5, 6).

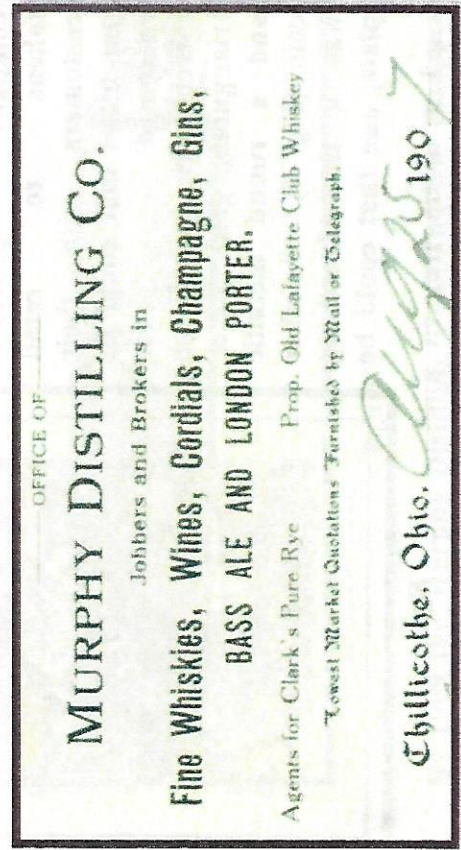


Figure 3

Meanwhile Frank was having a personal life. In 1889 he married Ella Kirby Piatt, who was only about 20 when they wed; Frank was 25 years older. Their marriage would prove tragically short. During their first year together she became ill with what was termed "winter sickness," actually tuberculosis. Hoping to recuperate, she went home to her parents in West Liberty, Ohio, but died there in October 1890 and was buried in the Piatt family plot. The Murphys had been married less than 13 months. Frank was shattered at the death of his young wife. He never married again.

Instead, he threw himself into conducting his liquor house. This

included his emphasis on advertising through giveaway items. The company provided tokens to retail customers with their purchases that could be redeemed for merchandise, including a triangular gold token and a round metallic coin (Fig. 7). Another was a tin advertising plate, one that could be used as a tip tray in a saloon or fastened to a

wall as decoration (Fig. 8). The front of the tray shows a maiden carrying an urn full of flowers. The reverse says: "Compliments of the Liquor House You Hear About, Murphy Distilling Company."

Frank Murphy continued to manage the company he had founded almost up to the day of his death on September 1, 1901. At this point his brother Thomas took over the management of the liquor house. Thomas also

married, suffering a fate similar to his brother. His wife was Annie Hydel. Annie gave him one child before dying about two years after their wedding. With tragic fate, the child died a year after Annie.



Figure 4

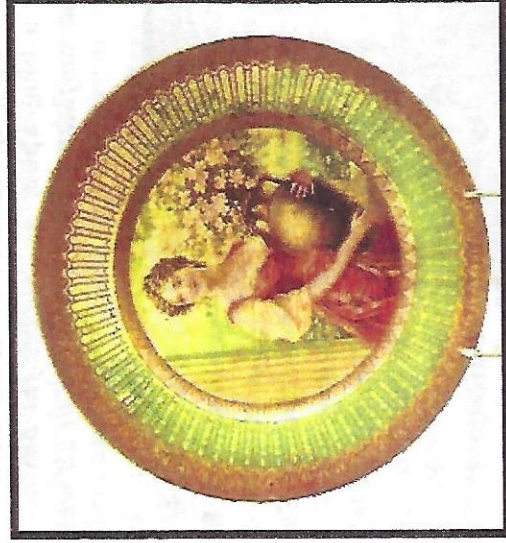


Figure 6



Figure 5

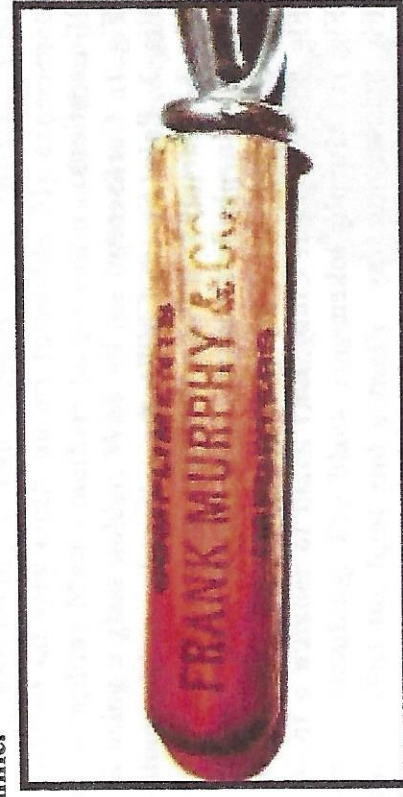
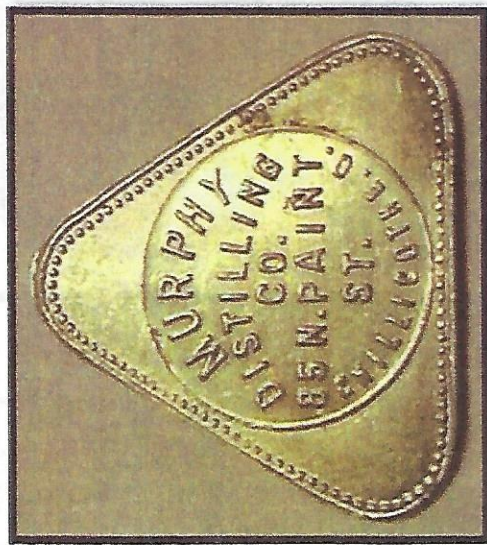


Figure 7

By 1909 the Murphy Distilling Company had disappeared from Chillicothe business directories. After that point I have

been unable to find further information about the fate of Thomas Murphy.

We remember the Murphys of Chillicothe as whiskey men who overcame the hardships of fire only to face devastating deaths, seemingly emerging undaunted from their sorrows and acclaimed by a biographer as "*successful business men, possessing universal confidence and the esteem of all who knew them.*"



Note: Much of the information for this post came from the volume, "*A Standard History of Ross County, Ohio*" Vol 2., ed. Lyle S. Evans, Lewis Publishing, Chicago, 1917.

Figure 8

Illustrations:

- Fig. 1: Corkscrew
- Fig. 2. Paint Street, Chillicothe
- Fig. 3. Murphy building enlarged
- Fig. 4: Murphy letterhead
- Fig. 5: "Lafayette Club" bottle
- Fig. 6: "Lafayette Club" ad
- Fig. 7: Murphy token
- Fig. 8: Serving tray