

Saving Delaware's King of Beer

by John Medkeff

I began researching the history of Wilmington, Delaware's Diamond State Brewery more than 20 years ago. During the course of my research, several sources informed me that the iconic statue of Gambrinus that once adorned the brewery was destroyed and sold for scrap. Newspaper accounts confirmed that the statue had indeed been dropped and dashed to pieces while being moved in 1978, but I was unable to verify the story about the remains being scrapped. I took it on faith that old Gambrinus was gone forever, since there had been no word on the statue in nearly 20 years.

The statue's story, which was almost too incredible to be true, fascinated me. Little did I know at the time that the statue's final chapter had yet to be written. Before it was over, I would find myself owning what I like to call "the ultimate piece of breweriana" and the gargantuan task of putting together an 11-foot tall, one ton, zinc statue. Before I get to that, I'll tell you a bit about the history and significance of the Diamond State Brewery's Gambrinus statue.

The King of Diamond State

After a fire destroyed the original Diamond State Brewery in 1881, owner Joseph Stoeckle replaced it the following year with a much larger and better outfitted brick structure. As was common practice for American breweries of the period, the front of Stoeckle's

new brewery was adorned with a huge statue of King Gambrinus.

Though often referred to as the king or patron saint of beer, the historic figures upon which the Gambrinus is based were neither kings nor saints. The legend is believed to have derived from a couple of European noblemen who ruled in the Middle Ages:

Jan Primus, the Duke of Brabant, and John the Fearless, the Duke of Burgundy. The legend of Gambrinus was embellished throughout the centuries and became so closely associated with the brewing trade that breweries throughout Europe featured Gambrinus statues. Naturally, many German immigrant brewers like Stoeckle brought that custom with them to America.

The Stoeckle Brewing Co. became re-incorporated as Diamond State Brewing Co. in 1936, following its bankruptcy during Prohibition. Its iconic King Gambrinus statue miraculously survived the brewery's shuttering during Prohibition to stand tall during the post-Repeal period. Even after the brewery ceased operations in 1954, Gambrinus stood atop the brewery, toasting passersby, just as he had done for a quarter of a



Standing more than 10 feet tall, Diamond State's Gambrinus, seen here in 1947, is believed to have been among the largest zinc trade statues made in America during the 19th century. The King remained in his alcove atop the Diamond State Brewery for more than 80 years, surviving the Prohibition era and two World Wars.

Photo courtesy Delaware Historical Society.



century. The familiar statue had become a local landmark and, indeed, an icon of Delaware's greatest era of brewing and industry.

The King Falls to Pieces

Remarkably, two days after the sale of the brewery complex to a storage company in 1956, Gambrinus' right arm broke off and crashed on the brick pavement two stories below, as



1956: Gambrinus loses an arm.

if in defiance. The statue was removed in 1962, days before the brewery was demolished to make way for the freeway through Wilmington. The next year, Gambrinus was sold and placed in front of a popular restaurant in suburban Wilm-



The King had his arm and mug restored when he was bought by a restaurateur, after the brewery was demolished in 1962 to make way for a highway. He held court at the front of the appropriately-named King's Inn in suburban Wilmington, toasting passersby at the entrance until it too, went out of business in 1972.



The statue was moved into storage and was sold to an antique dealer in 1978. Sadly it was accidentally dropped and shattered into dozens of pieces. Yet they survived and were acquired by the author in 2014.

ington, where he remained until it closed in the early 1970s.

In 1978, the statue was inadvertently dropped on its back while being relocated and cracked into dozens of pieces. Amazingly, that was not the end of the King's story.

Fast forward to 2014. I was conducting a tour of historic Wilmington brewing sites. As the crowd was gathering to begin the tour, a Delaware breweriana enthusiast informed me that the Gambrinus statue survived. He produced photos of King Gam that he had taken a few years prior. I was dumbfounded and almost couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Putting the King Back Together

Though the statue's owner made it clear that he didn't want his identity or the location of the statue revealed, I was able to discover both through a bit of detective work. At the time, I was in the process of writing a book

on the history of brewing in Delaware called *Brewing In Delaware* and hoped to include photos of the statue. My voice messages and a letter to the owner went unreturned.

After several months, I did some additional poking around and found out that the former owner of the statue had died the previous year. I made an inquiry through the attorney handling his estate, who offered me the opportunity to take

photos of the statue's pieces. After taking the photos, the attorney asked if I knew anyone who would want the statue. Without hesitation, I offered to take it, have it restored, and donate it to a local museum for public display.

A few months later, I was fortunate enough to have a pre-eminent expert in American zinc statuary, Carol Grissom of the Smithsonian Institute, visit the statue for a first-hand examination. She proclaimed it ultimately salvageable and put me in touch with a couple of restoration companies. The scope of work will entail constructing a reinforced metal skeletal framework around which the existing 60 plus pieces will be attached and then soldered together. Since roughly 25% of the original statue was destroyed beyond repair, new parts will be recast from 3D laser scans of a similar existing statue and soldered to the statue's framework. Finally, the finished product will be painted and readied for display.

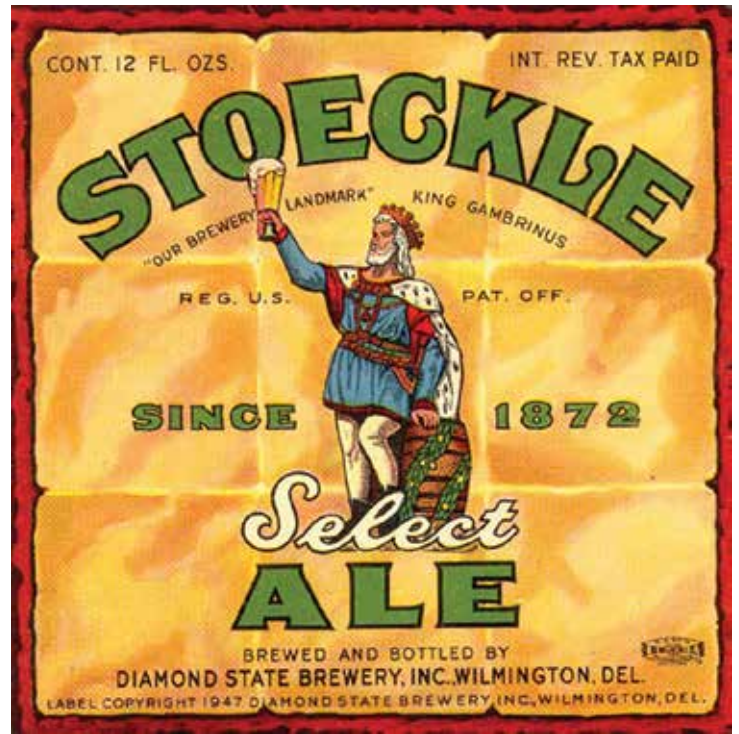
The King's New Home

Regarding display, the Delaware Historical Society (DHS) has committed to receiving the restored statue as a donation. Not coincidentally, the DHS has its own newly-renovated history museum nine blocks east of the Diamond State Brewery's original location. The Delaware

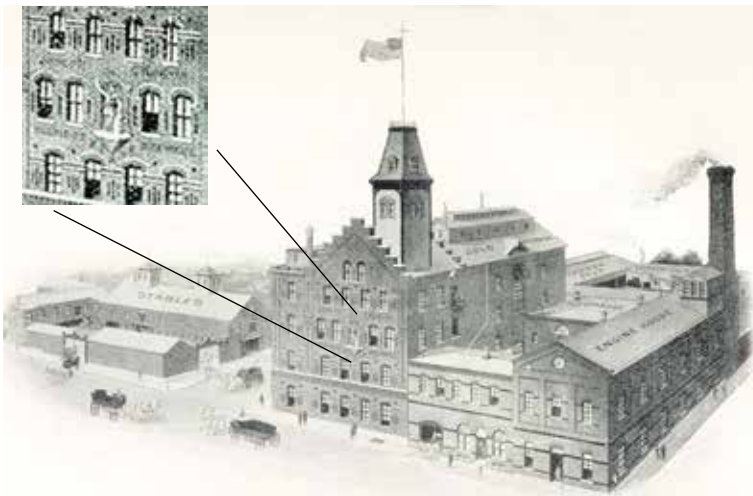
History Museum is perfectly positioned to serve as a permanent home for Gambrinus. The DHS has the available resources to present and preserve the statue so that the public can enjoy it long into the future.

The Diamond State's King Gambrinus statue is much more than the ultimate piece of breweriana. It is an apt symbol for the revival of Delaware's brewing industry and the city where it will eventually be displayed. The statue is one of five known to still exist that were cast from similar moulds in Brooklyn, NY. The others are on display in Syracuse, NY; Breinigsville, PA; Baltimore, MD; and Toluca, Mexico.

In late 2016, I helped found the non-profit Friends of Delaware's Gambrinus Statue, Inc. The organization continues to make progress towards meeting the "Restore the King" campaign's \$100,000 fundraising goal. If you would like to help preserve this important American brewery history artifact (Delaware's most significant) please visit www.RestoreTheKing.com to donate and learn more about the effort.



Above: 1942 Stoeckle Select Ale label.
Below: December 1951 *Morning News* advertisement.



JOSEPH STOECKLE'S DIAMOND STATE BREWERY

A close inspection of this 1898 litho shows the statue of King Gambrinus in the front.

About the Author: *New NABA member John Medkeff has been researching and writing about Delaware breweries since 1996. He has authored numerous articles on the topic and wrote the book "Brewing In Delaware" (Arcadia Publishing). As noted above, he is currently leading the "Restore the King" campaign. John runs DelawareBeerHistory.com, a website devoted to the history of brewing in the First State, and the Facebook group Delaware Beer History. He is also an avid collector of Delaware breweriana.*



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