



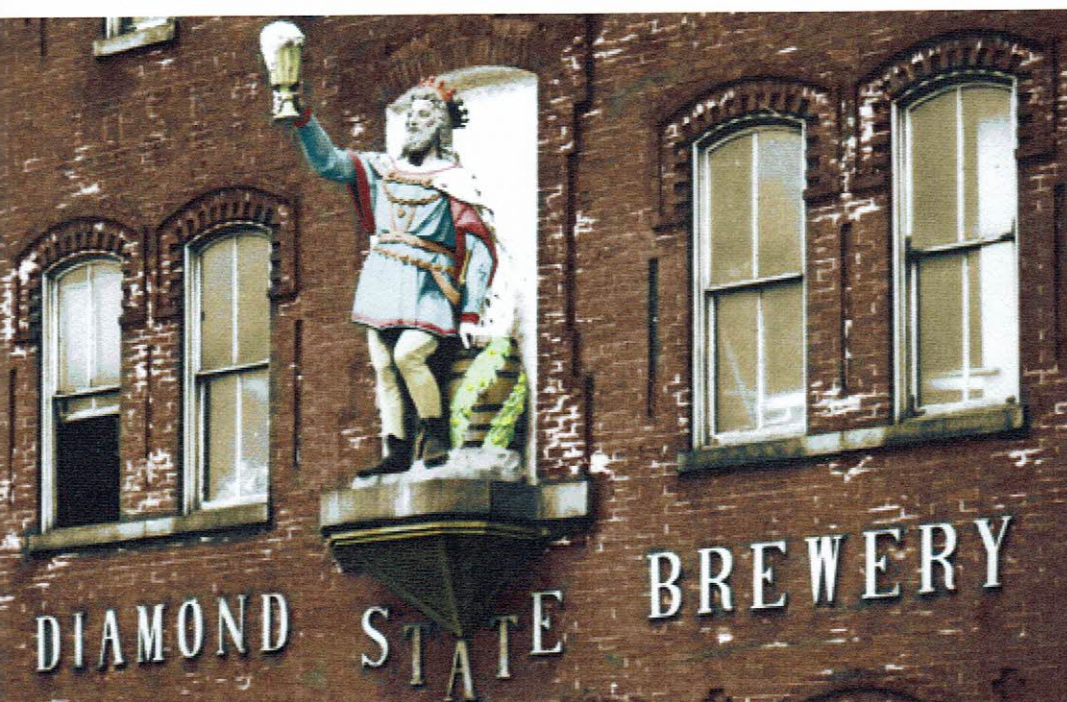
# RESTORE THE KING—SAVING THE ULTIMATE PIECE OF EASTERN BREWERIANA

*John Medkeff #2422*

An effort is currently underway to save, restore, and preserve the most significant vestige of Delaware's brewing history. The aptly named Friends of Delaware's Gambrinus Statue has begun a fundraising campaign to restore the 135-year-old King Gambrinus statue from the old Diamond State brewery. Once restored, the friends group will donate the statue to the Delaware Historical Society for long-term presentation and preservation. I have been researching, writing, and lecturing on Delaware's brewing history for more than 20 years. When I first came across archival images and written accounts of the enormous king statue back in the mid-1990s, I was immediately fascinated. Early on, I wondered what the king represented and, more importantly, what became of him? Several years ago, a usually reliable media source informed me that Gambrinus was accidentally dropped, broken, and sold for scrap back in the late 1970s. I eventually discovered that only part of that story was true.

The Gambrinus legend is quite complex and steeped in more than 1900 years of human history. Roman scribe Tacitus first wrote of the Germanic king, Gambrivii in 98 AD. The king's story survived until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when German writers began embellishing the myth and associating the monarch, then called Gambrivius, with beer and the art of brewing. In the 1840s, a Belgian historian suggested that the legend was based on John I, the Duke of Brabant, while another theory emerged that it was based on John the Fearless, the Duke of Burgundy. Gambrinus' identity as a Flemish royalty and inventor of beer was popularized and spread throughout Europe in the mid-1800s. Modern historians have even suggested that the legend was created during the period when the brewing was transforming from a largely female-dominated occupation to a larger commercial industry run mostly by men.

Countless stories, poems, and songs about Gambrinus and his relationship with beer were written in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Breweries on the continent were often decorated with statues and images of Gambrinus. Quite naturally, when German immigrants settled in the United States in the mid-to-late 1800s and opened breweries, they brought that tradition with them. Dozens of breweries constructed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century American breweries were adorned with similar statues of the king, including Joseph Stoeckle's Wilmington brewery.



When Stoeckle's new facility was constructed in 1882, he placed the 11 ½-foot, zinc statue in an alcove of his brew house, two and a half stories above West Fifth Street. King Gam remained in place for exactly eighty years, though the turn of the century, thirteen years of Prohibition, two world wars, and the entire tenure of a post-repeal brewing venture called the Diamond State Brewery, Inc. That venture went out of business in 1954 and the largely abandoned complex stood squarely in the path of the planned interstate through Wilmington. Finally, in 1962, just days before demolition of the brewery, Gambrinus was removed.

In his day, the colorful king statue cut quite a figure—one hand resting on a beer barrel and the other hoisting an overflowing goblet of beer towards the heavens. The statue's base includes a small plaque, identifying its maker as M. Gebelt and Brothers Company of Brooklyn, New York. J.W. Fiske and Company, a prominent Manhattan manufacturer of ornamental iron and zinc subcontracted with Gebelt and a couple of their Brooklyn competitors to produce Gambrinus statues for their clients. Fiske was not the only seller of Gambrinus statues for breweries, as several other American companies produced and sold their own versions of the king. After its removal from the brewery, Gambrinus spent a couple of months displayed in the storefront window of Wilmington's Cohen Brothers furniture store. Around this time, the owner considered donating the statue to a museum but sold it instead to a suburban Wilmington restaurateur. The iconic figure was displayed in front of the King's Inn restaurant from 1963 until its closure in 1970. It was then put into storage and for several years. The statue was inadvertently dropped and shattered into a dozen pieces during a 1978 move. Its remains ended up with a local historian and collector, who kept his ownership a guarded secret for nearly 30 years. The former owner's estate bequeathed the broken statue to me, as I discovered its existence and was interested in having it restored and donated for public display.



Four similar King Gambrinus statues, all cast from Fiske molds, are known to exist. The Onondaga Historical Association owns the statue from the former Haberle brewery in Syracuse, NY. The Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore features a beautifully restored Gambrinus in their museum foyer, which was originally located at the city's Weissner brewery. The Modelo Museum of Science and Industry in Toluca, Mexico displays a statue that originally graced the Narragansett brewery in Cranston, RI. Although not on public display, the final statue, originally owned by the Beverwyck Brewery in Albany, NY, is now in the courtyard of the Boston Beer Company in Breinigsville, PA. At least several other Fiske king statues were destroyed or have been lost to history, including those owned by Bergner & Engel of Philadelphia, PA; Gunther, Krueger, and Hensler, all three of Newark, NJ; Loewer of New York, NY; Bartholomay of Rochester, NY; and Fenius of New Haven, CT. As part of the restoration process, the Friends of Gambrinus intend to have 3-D laser scanning performed on an existing statue so that the pieces missing from the Delaware statue can be recast and included in the restored work.

While Delaware's Gambrinus statue is not unique, its value as a cultural icon and the indelible impression it left cannot be understated. Older Wilmington natives still fondly recall the visage of the king elevated high above the old brewery, decades after the statue disappeared from public view. In fact, there is no greater symbol for the revival of Delaware's brewing industry than the King Gambrinus restoration project. Brewing was among the most profitable industries in Delaware at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The industry was never able to gain footing after repeal and was completely nonexistent for four decades. Not coincidentally, Gambrinus was the virtual symbol of the last brewery in the First State to produce beer prior to the craft's resurrection in 1995. Thanks to the popularity and success of Delaware's breweries over the last 20 years, brewing is once again plays a key role in Delaware, both economically and culturally. The King Gambrinus statue will serve not only as the icon of Delaware's brewing history, but also as a versatile touchstone for wider historical examinations of industry, immigration, and Prohibition and repeal in the state. It is perfectly fitting that the restored statue will be displayed at the Delaware History Museum, exactly nine city blocks from the former site of the Diamond State brewery.



*Text continued page 20*

## Restore The King - *continued from p. 10*

Naturally, the substantial amount of work to be done on the statue will cost plenty. A metal skeleton will be created around which the sixty odd existing statue and additional recast pieces will be welded. The final product will be painted to match the original colors as closely as possible. Professional restoration companies have suggested that the complete cost for work could range up to \$100,000, but final costs could be even higher. The Friends of Gambrinus are also interested in funding the cost of a reinforced support structure beneath the statue, as well as interpretive museum signage. Thus far, the Friends have met nearly 10% of the \$100,000 fundraising goal. If you are interested in helping save a significant piece of eastern brewery lore (actually, the ultimate piece of breweriana!), please visit [RestoreTheKing.com](http://RestoreTheKing.com) to donate and learn more about the effort. The Friends of Delaware's Gambrinus Statue is a 501(c)(3), nonprofit organization, so your donation may be tax deductible. 