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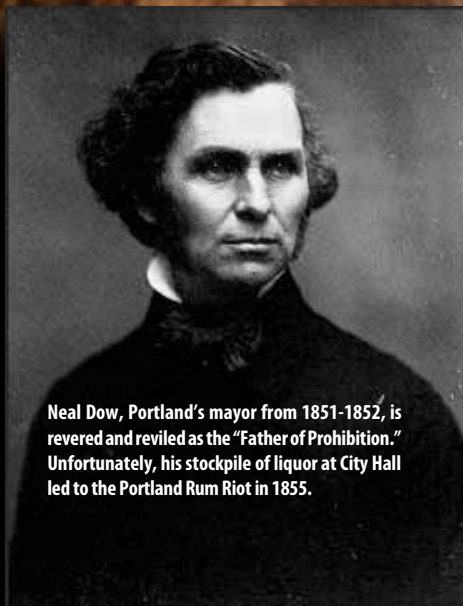
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MADE IN MAINE

# The Rum Diaries

The next old thing: New & Old Rum Makers

BY COLIN S. SARGENT



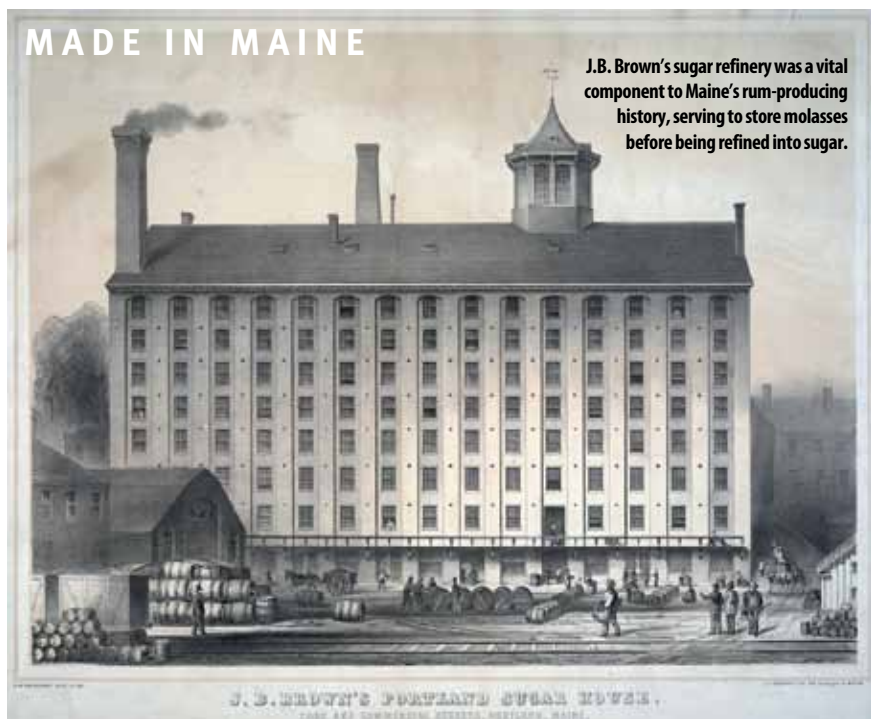
Neal Dow, Portland's mayor from 1851-1852, is revered and reviled as the "Father of Prohibition." Unfortunately, his stockpile of liquor at City Hall led to the Portland Rum Riot in 1855.

Craft distilling in Maine has become the newest revival of one of Maine's oldest industries. Bob Bartlett, Keith Bodine, and Ned Wight agree that, for them, they particularly enjoy the mystique and the unique challenges of forging the true spirit of the New World–Caribbean molasses perfected as Made in Maine rum.

Keith and Constance Bodine of Sweetgrass Farm Winery & Distillery in Union were the first to have a Maine craft rum to hit shelves. Their Three Crow Rum is a wonderfully French-toasty, warm spirit that began as an experiment. "We started with gin and apple brandy, but all of our neighbors liked to drink rum. My neighbors kept asking why I don't make a rum. So I decided to do a barrel," Keith says. "That's how it started. Last year it was so popular we sold out of what we thought was going to be a couple years' supply. We're not going to release a rum again until next spring, when we open up



## MADE IN MAINE



J.B. Brown's sugar refinery was a vital component to Maine's rum-producing history, serving to store molasses before being refined into sugar.



DO WHAT I SAY, NOT WHAT I DO—Adjacent to the 'sentimental' announcement of Kitty Kentuck's death from intoxication—and violence—is an ad for "The Delicious Tonic," gin.



**GETTING YOUR RATION**—Beginning in October, Portland's New England Distilling will sell Eight Bells Rum at RSVP in Portland, Bootlegger's in Topsham, and other liquor stores in the state of Maine. Three Crow Rum has sold out for the season, although it "would be worthwhile to take a peek at your local liquor store's shelf, to see if there are still unsold bottles," says Keith Bodine. Rusticator will be available in the spring. "Hannaford and Shaws only reset their liquor once a year," says Wight, "but Eight Bells is on the list for next year!"

**DOWN TOOLS AND UP SPIRITS**—Ned Wight's Eight Bells Rum refers both to the beautifully stormy painting *Eight Bells* and the practice of timekeeping aboard ships before the advent of cheap clocks. An hourglass would be turned every half hour and the ship's bell rung on the turning, adding one ring for each turn of the glass. At 'Eight Bells' the cycle would reset, making it a four-hour cycle—putting the most rum-appropriate 'Eight Bells' at the stroke of midnight. Rum was actually customarily served to sailors aboard ships at 11am and 5pm—six bells.

**KNOW YOUR ENEMY**—Neal Dow's cousin, John Neal, was an author, lawyer, and civil rights advocate. He and Dow had a falling out over Irish entrepreneur Catherine Landrigan, aka 'Kitty Kentuck,' who purchased property in 1851 from Neal, who would defend her against prosecution under Dow's administration. While Neal described her as "a poor, but generous, kind-hearted Irish woman," Dow countered she was the proprietress of "a notorious groggery." Dow attributed his cousin Neal's fondness for Kentuck to her being "handsome, once," writing that "her [more recent] friends were truly friends in need."

again for the year. Now I see how much you can do and how wide a category rum is. It's a fun drink for me to make."

What is it that rum has, though, that brings a little extra smile to the face? Rum, particularly in its 'brown spirit' variety, retains a connection to an imagined, salty-aired past that its drinkers likely have no actual connection to, and that couldn't matter less. Whether through old paintings that show the Sons of Liberty around a table with hot rum drinks in their hands, through stories of the local Rum Riots, or even *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, rum brings an extra fun and flair packaged along with it that no other drink seems to quite possess.

Consistently throughout rum's history, the drink has been connected with subversive ele-





**Eight Bells Rum is a wonderfully warm dark rum with power and presence. It has dark rum's toasted sugar flavor with vanilla and cinnamon, and provides a smooth finish of caramel with a touch of a rich fruitiness.**



ments of society, both romanticized and denigrated. That's what pirates, dockworkers, rum-runners, slave traders, and even the Sons of Liberty have in common with each other—all crave rowdiness in a bottle, regardless of finger-shakings from the Cotton Mathers of the world. “Where we find rum, we find action,” wrote Charles Taussig, president of the American Molasses Company in 1928. “Sometimes cruel, sometimes heroic, sometimes humorous, but always vigorous and interesting.”

**N**ed Wight, whose Eight Bells Rum hit shelves in September, agrees that it's not all about the sea. Much of the rum produced in Maine was likely produced in stills in the back of public houses, produced

not for bottling and off-site consumption but to be drunk on the premises by the patrons. “To me, that's the real essence of Maine's connection to rum, less than sailing or piracy. I don't have much connection to the sea,” Wight says. “Instead, I like to think of taverns here in New England, the meeting rooms and the arguments between part-time philosophers where our country was first born. They were drinking rum drinks.” Of course, it also took a splash of rum to rev up the Boston Tea Party. “The tea tax was really just the straw that broke the camel's back—the real grumbling had been over the tax on rum!”

That tax began as the Molasses Act in 1733, although it was so poorly enforced that

the Sugar Act of 1764 cut the tax in half but tried to add more teeth to collection efforts. That came down hard on the New England distilling industry that had sprung up after ships from Britain and her colonies were granted the right to deliver slaves from West Africa to the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. Traders accepting payment for these people in molasses (the cheapest storable and transportable sugar-cane product) could get the best deals. Rum made here from this molasses could be traded for furs in North America or for guns and luxuries in Europe—all of which, along with rum, was used to purchase more slaves in West Africa, and so start the loop again.

“Rum would be stored in oak barrels,” says Wight. “Oak is a naturally waterproof wood, and further, when rum is stored in it, there are terrific flavor compounds released from the wood—vanillin, in particular, which is particularly nice for rums.” Wight thinks that necessity may have been the mother of the first good rums. “Rum was an important part of the triangle trade, where boats would travel between here, West Africa, and the Caribbean. Not all of the rum would always be traded or offloaded—some would be designated for the crew—and especially when conveying to avoid privateers, round trips of the triangle could have kept that cheap rum sloshing around in oak barrels, exposed to temperature changes. I can't be sure if that's where it first got started, but from a distiller's perspective, that would absolutely have worked to produce rum that had been really improved.”

**T**he rough and rowdy history of Maine rum turned violent in the 1850s, as under the growing temperance movement spearheaded by mayor Neal Dow, “the Napoleon of Temperance,” alcohol production and sale of liquor was prohibited. However, it was discovered four years after the passage of the law that Dow himself was keeping large stocks of brandy set aside for “medicinal” purposes—necessary to maintain the temperaments of solid, respectable citizens, of course. But for the working population of the city, alcohol was often their only escape, and many of the rioters decried Dow's attack on what they viewed as their culture.

“It sounds like it was probably undrinkable,” says Bartlett Winery's Bob Bartlett, with a laugh, whose Rusticator Rum will be released for the first time af-



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Winslow Homer, Eight Bells—Mid Day, Observation from Harbor, 1881. Oil on canvas, 24 1/2" x 32 1/2". The Portland Museum of Art, 1881, and the Maine State Museum, 1911. The Portland Museum of Art, 1881, and the Maine State Museum, 1911. The Portland Museum of Art, 1881, and the Maine State Museum, 1911.



**PROFILES IN STORAGE**—Joseph P. Kennedy kept our spirits flowing through New England.

ter three years of aging this coming spring from his Gouldsboro facility. "By the 1920s, the Prohibition era, it sounds like it was a much nicer product. Then, rum started going the other way." Indeed, rum-runners would float ashore casks, probably to the Breakwater Court (now The Colony) in Kennebunkport or to the palaces of Bar Harbor, or meet lobster boats anchored offshore just outside the limit. "Maine, Gloucester—anywhere with a large population of fishermen.

## TEATOTALLERS

The Temperance movement in the United States was successful in ending the U.S. Navy's rum ration in 1862. 'Black Tot Day,' the last rum ration served aboard Royal Navy ships—was in 1970. The Royal New Zealand Navy continued the practice until 1990—by then, the concerns were no longer about the moral well-being of sailors, but about their ability to operate sophisticated machinery such as, well, guided missiles.



**GOOD SWILL HUNTING**—George Smith Hunt (b. 1829), great-great-grandfather to actress Helen Hunt, owned the Eagle Sugar Refinery on Fore Street in Portland as well as a fleet of ships that traded Maine lumber and Caribbean sugar and molasses. A high-profile trader, Hunt testified before the U.S. Senate in 1886 that molasses imports should be placed on a reduced schedule, arguing that it was a raw material and not a finished product. Raw material for what? His former residence at 165 State Street will forever live in Portland's psyche in its connection to the West Indies rum trade.



They'd bring the rum ashore from the big schooners out of the Caribbean. Bill McCoy, he was the most famous of them." McCoy's so-called Rum Row stretched all the way from Florida to Maine, and sent ashore Canadian whiskey and Caribbean rum. "He was famous for not watering down his booze—he's the guy who popularized 'The Real McCoy.'"

Tastes changed during Prohibition, however, and sweeter mixed drinks became much more common. After Prohibition, the large breweries and distilleries with alphabet-soup names and production in the tens of millions of units took over the national market, including Maine, where family distilleries could only strug-



Bill McCoy used up to six ships up and down Rum Row, including aboard his *Tomoka*.



**Bill McCoy's so-called Rum Row** stretched all the way from **Florida to Maine**, and sent ashore **Canadian whiskey and Caribbean rum**. "He was **famous** for **not** watering down his booze—he's the guy who popularized 'The Real McCoy.'"



**GANGS OF PORTLAND**—The family split between cousins and their different perceptions of Kentuck illustrate how class and ethnicity were aligned in Portland. Many of Portland's working men and women were Irish, and from their perspective the Temperance movement, particularly the heavy-handed tactics of Dow, combined both class disdain and anti-Catholicism in a nativist, moralist bisque. Dow was certainly not aided by the overlap between the Know-Nothings and the Temperance movement. These tensions—mirror those portrayed in Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*—were carried on as well in the streets of Portland during the 1855 Rum Riot.



gle on. "We have to make a craft spirit, something lovely to drink," says Wight. "We couldn't compete on economies of scale. They can sell rum for less than I buy molasses. But Maine is a more sophisticated place—it started hardscrabble, and now

as Maine has changed, its rum should change, too."

And that's how these new rums carry on the tradition of the old spirit of Maine. By making such a beautiful, artisanal, local product, Bartlett, Bodine, and Wight have a

shot to nip at the heels of the big producers by warming bellies and minds. And isn't that, in a way, the new rum-running? ■

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