

Babb Coast to Coast

By Eric McGuire

Plagued by consistent misspellings of his name, Jefferis Babb probably just gave in and let it happen. His given name is often written as "Jeffries". Named after his mother, he was the third child of Sampson Babb and Charity Grubb Jefferis, born March 31, 1824 in Chester, Chester County, Pennsylvania. His father had been elected sheriff of Chester County in 1819, and after serving his term Sampson Babb purchased a farm in Bradford. In 1830, Sampson became proprietor of the Washington Hotel in West Chester, but moved to Philadelphia in 1841, along with his wife and ten children, where he died on 2 June 1846. In a tragic accident, he fell from the fourth story window of his son's drug warehouse in downtown Philadelphia, losing his balance while watching some pigeons.(1)

The early life choices of Jefferis Babb appears to have followed that of his older brother, Peter, born April 18, 1822. Both brothers had an interest in the manufacturing of drugs and medicines. By at least 1845, Peter had established a partnership in Philadelphia, styled as Morrison & Babb (2), as wholesale druggists, but within a few months was operating his own drug business in Philadelphia until the end of the year. (3) On January 1, 1846, Babb formed a partnership with William S. Ernst at 235 Market Street (4). This is the location where Peter's father, Solomon, met his fate by a deadly fall.

It is not clear when the Ernst and Babb drug business dissolved but it appears that it was soon after Solomon's death. Peter gravitated toward the manufacture of soda water by early 1849 in Philadelphia and was still listed in that business in the 1851 city directory (5). However, in October 1849 he married Julia Harlan in Baltimore, Maryland, and made his home there. Peter promptly began the

manufacture of soda water in Baltimore where he was very successful. The earliest record of his business there is in the form of an advertisement in *The Baltimore Sun* on 20 June 1850:

"CAUTION – The subscriber, desiring to do a fair and honorable business, has procured a large stock of Bottles with his name and residence impressed thereon. Such bottles are by him never sold; he therefore cautions all persons from using



Perhaps the first of several bottle and mold variants used by Peter Babb. It is embossed P. Babb / Balto (ebay photograph)

or trafficking in said bottles, as he claims and will demand them wherever found

PETER BABB
Bottling Establishment, 79 North st."

Peter soon became one of the largest soda water bottlers in Baltimore as evidenced by his presence at the Maryland Institute Fair which showcased the manufactories of local origin. *The Baltimore Sun* of October 25, 1851, noted:

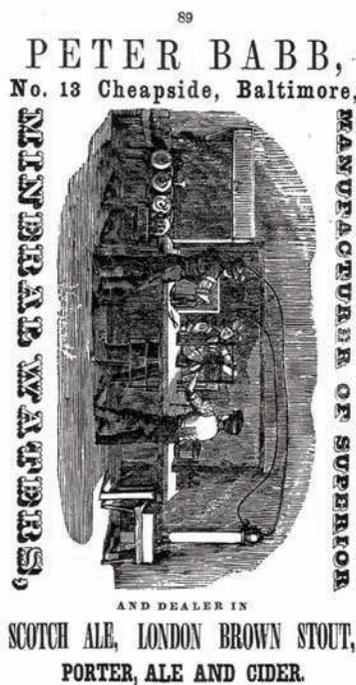
"Here are the samples of 'something good to take'. Mr. Peter Babb has a pyramid of bottles labeled carbonated cider, ale, Baltimore porter, Sarsaparilla, Ambrosia, &c." He didn't escape noticeable competition, however, as the article also notes, *"Messrs. John Boyd & Son have a similar pyramid of bottles, labeled Sparkling Catawba and Scuppernong, champagne cider, ale, brown stout, mineral water, syrups, &c."*

Success motivated Babb to open a branch establishment in Washington, D.C., as *The Sun* reported on September 27, 1851:

"BABB'S CELEBRATED MINERAL WATERS, PORTER, ALE, AND CARBONATED CIDER. – The subscriber, having established a branch of his establishment in WASHINGTON, is prepared to supply the citizens of the District with the same quality of articles which have gained him such enviable reputation in the city of Baltimore. The management of this branch will be under the supervision of M.J. BABB, who, with the assistance of responsible drivers, will give prompt attention to orders from dealers or private families. Office at Empire House, Pennsylvania avenue."

Peter continued his business until his untimely death on August 16, 1857 – at age 35 years. *The Baltimore Sun* of August 17, 1857 states;

"This gentleman, well known as the Colonel of the First Rifle Regiment of Maryland militia, died at his residence on Paca street, near Pratt, yesterday morning, after an illness of two weeks."



Advertisement for Peter Babb found in the *Baltimore Wholesale Business Director and Business Circular* for the year 1853

What illness brought its terminal wrath upon Peter Babb at such a young age, and with an illness of such short duration, remains a mystery. Perhaps he was a casualty of the 1857-59 influenza pandemic that hit the United States particularly hard.

Undoubtedly influenced by his older brother, Jefferis Babb followed a similar career path. Druggists and soda water manufacturers often shared a common bond and many druggists sold soda water as well. After moving to New York City in the late 1840s, Jefferis plied his trade as a druggist. The lure of gold and riches in a new land pulled him from New York to California at least by 1850, when he was first documented as making the trip to San Francisco (6). Rasmussen* also documents entry to the port of San Francisco by Babb in 1851 and 1852, implying that he sailed home at

Jefferis Babb had apparently entered the soda water business in San Francisco very early in the life of that city. In a letter written by Ellen Apple, of West Chester, Pa., on August 31, 1851, she states. . . "*Jeffries* (sic)

Babb has returned from California. He says he has made up his mind that he can make more money between here and there than he can in that country. He was in the mineral water business in San Francisco." (8)

His mind was not as made up as he would have some believe. The San Francisco city directories continue to list Babb & Co. as soda water manufacturers in 1852, 1853 and 1854, and no directory was printed in 1855, which may be the terminal date for Babb's activities there. He is absent

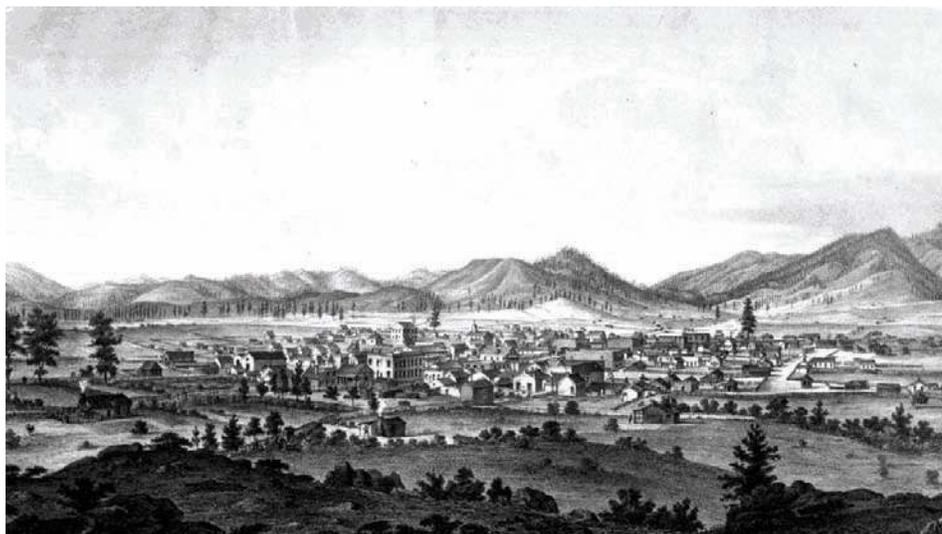


The only bottle used by Jefferis Babb. It is embossed BABB & Co. / SAN FRANCISCO / CAL, and is found only in shades of green from dark to a green-aqua.

from any documentation for the next several years; however, there is some evidence that he vacated San Francisco about 1856 and moved to the Northern California town of Yreka, Siskiyou County, just 22 miles south of the Oregon border. Although virtually tied with Crescent City, the City of Yreka is the northernmost county seat in California, being the administrative center of the County of Siskiyou – 6,347 square miles. Upon its incorporation in 1857, Yreka held about 2,000 souls, mostly miners. Today, its population is about 7,200.

Begun as the result of a gold strike in 1851, Yreka's population quickly swelled to several thousand. In 1852, a young Joaquin Miller (at this time he was still using his birth name, Cincinnatus Miller) had moved from Indiana to the Camas Valley, Lane Co., Oregon, with his parents). (9) In a fit of daring at the age of 14, young Cincinnatus ran away from home with some companions and found himself in Yreka. He later described the town as a bustling place with "...a tide of people up and down and across other streets, as strong as if in New York".(10) Of course, he had not yet been to New York, but this adventure inaugurated his desire to express with the written word, and he soon gained international fame as **The Poet of the Sierras**.

The October 18, 1860, edition of *The Yreka Weekly Journal* stated. . . "**RETURNED – Dr. J. Babb who has been absent for some months, trying to regain his health, has returned to this city looking better than we have seen him for the last two years. With the exception of a slight stiffness of the joints, he says he feels as well as he ever did.**" Sporting the credential of a doctor, it appears that Jefferis Babb had decided to fall back on the more traditional druggist component of his expertise after leaving San Francisco. Six months later, on 4 May 1861, *The Weekly Journal* noted. . . "**BALL COURT – The large and superb ball court, erected in this city by Messrs. Kelley & Babb, is now finished. It, together with the saloon attached, will be opened to-day. The**



A Kuchel & Dresel lithograph drawing of Yreka executed in 1857, at the time the new court house was being constructed and contemporary with the residence of Jefferis Babb.

proprietors have undergone much expense in the erection of this place of exercise and amusement, and they deserve to be well patronized’.

Regardless of Babb’s rehabilitated health, he succumbed from this life, in Yreka, on April 30, 1866 – at age 41 years. His funeral was a solemn event in Yreka, and was conducted by the fire department, with the help of the Yreka Brass Band. The *Yreka Weekly Journal* detailed the event. **“Last Tuesday afternoon the funeral ceremonies of Dr Jefferson (sic) Babb (11) took place under the supervision of the Yreka Fire Department The cortege seemed quite imposing, the band performing solemn funeral marches, and the firemen looking remarkably well, with their flags, banners, trumpets and arms wearing badges of mourning. . . . He was also an early resident of Yreka, and has resided among us for about 12 years, during which period he has acted more than half the time as Constable, and proved himself a worthy citizen.” (12)** Jefferis Babb never married.

As with his brother Peter, Jefferis Babb left a long-lasting legacy with the soda water bottles he had made at an unknown glass factory in the East for his San Francisco operations. All the bottles found today appear to have been blown from the same mold and all are consistently within a range of

medium to dark green in color, as if made from the same purchase order and at the same time. It is difficult to estimate the rate of attrition through breakage and non-return – especially in the topsy-turvy world of San Francisco in the midst of the gold rush. Obviously, if his bottle inventory was reduced too much due to non-returns, he would have had to supplement it in some manner. Babb could have either used bottle inventory from other bottlers, by pirating or legitimately purchasing stock from a company that quit operations. The decision to purchase more new bottles would have been one of major significance in determining whether to continue in business and was probably a big factor in the closing of a number of bottling operations – possibly even Babb’s.

Regardless of the speculation, it would be safe to assume that Babb’s bottles were produced prior to about 1853, and more likely made at the inception of his soda water venture. They could have been produced about 1850. Regardless, his bottles are unquestionably material artifacts of gold-rush California.

More difficult would be determining the date of the nine mold variations and different color batches, probably representing separate orders, produced by Peter Babb in his Baltimore bottling business. **(13)** It is easily possible that he may have ordered

bottles up to just weeks before his death in 1857; however, it is unlikely that any of his bottles were made prior to 1850. It is interesting to note that for the few years that he operated in Philadelphia, 1849 to 1851, no bottles have been found that can be attributed to him. Could he have been working for another soda water manufacturer at that time – learning the trade? Or, perhaps, his bottles that are not embossed with a geographical location may have been initially used in Philadelphia as well as in Washington, D.C., at a later date.

End Notes:

The North American (Philadelphia, Pa.), June 23, 1846, pg. 2

1. *Eastern, Western and Southern Business Directory*. J.F. Kimball & Co., Publishers; Cincinnati and New York. 1846. pg. 330

2. *The North American* (Philadelphia, PA) August 19, 1845, pg. 4

3. *ibid*, January 28, 1846, pg.

4. *Philadelphia Directory*, 1849 and 1851.

5. *-Rasmussen, Louis J., *San Francisco Ship Passenger Lists*. Coloma, Calif., Vol. 2, 1966, pg. 77

6. *Ibid*, Vol. 1, pg. 8 and Vol. 3, pg. 75.

7. *California As I Saw It: First-Person narratives of California’s Early Years 1849 – 1900*. One man’s gold; the letters and journal of a forty-niner, Enos Christman. Compiled and edited by Florence Morrow Christman, pg. 240

8. *Illustrated History of Lane County, Oregon*. Portland, Oregon: A. G. Walling, publisher, 1884. pg. 480

9. www.yrekachamber.com/history.html

10. Even in death his name was misspelled.

11. *The Yreka Journal*, May 4, 1866 see <http://www.bottleden.com> for documented mold and color variations.

Eric McGuire
1732 Inverness Dr
Petaluma, CA 94954
(707) 778-2255
Emcguire@comcast.net