

Big Apple Little BREWERY

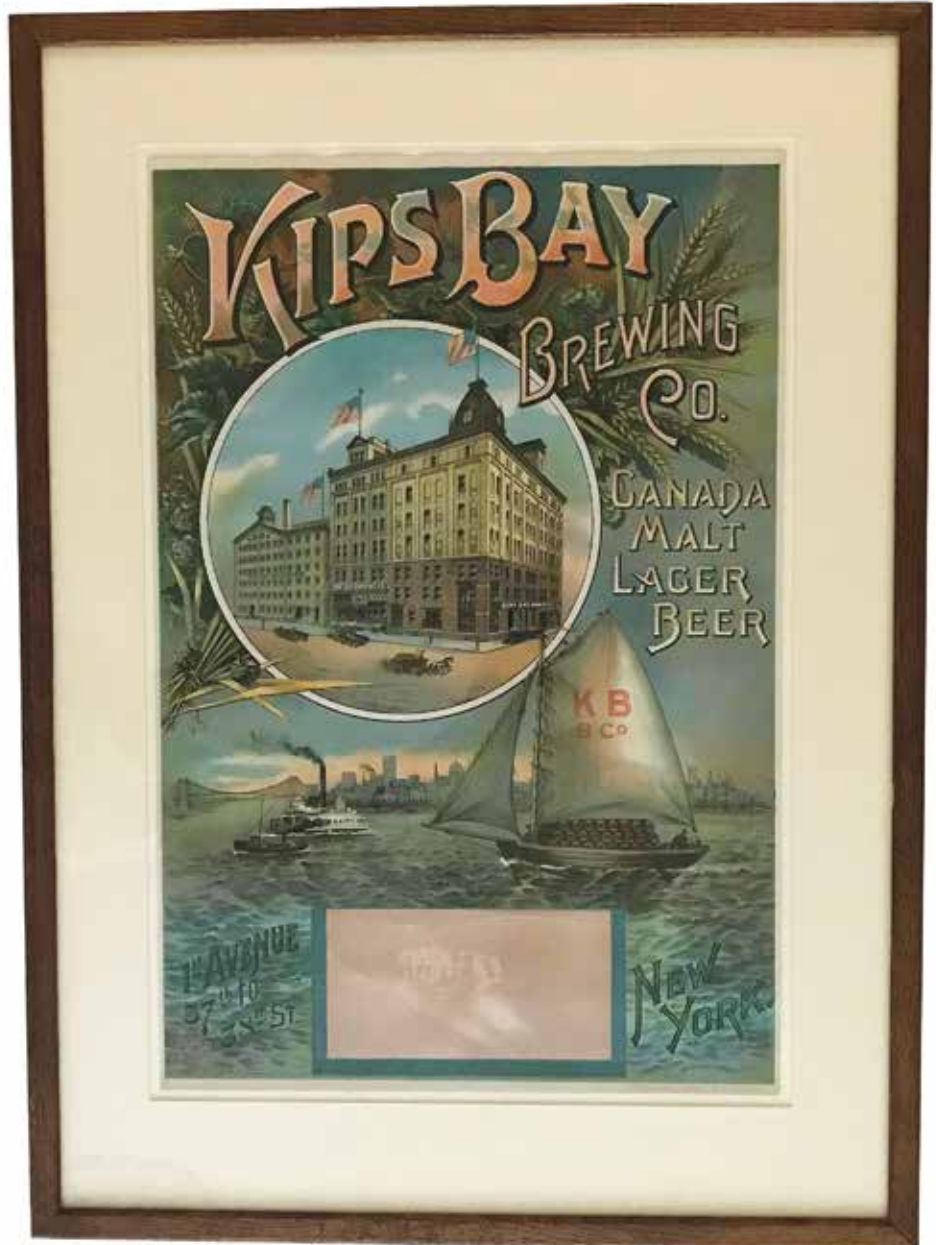
A 125-year-old
brewery building
still survives
in Manhattan

by Ken Quaas

Once upon a time, the little island of Manhattan had many breweries. In fact, as late as 1900, “The Big Apple” was the brewing capital of America, with more breweries than Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and Milwaukee combined.

This was largely because Manhattan also became the most densely populated area of the country, as German, Irish, and other European immigrants poured into New York harbor beginning in the 1830s and through the rest of that century. Many of these settled right where they had first stepped ashore in America—Manhattan.

Manhattan’s population deluge created a horde of discriminating beer drinkers. By the late 1800s, the city’s supply of breweries boomed to



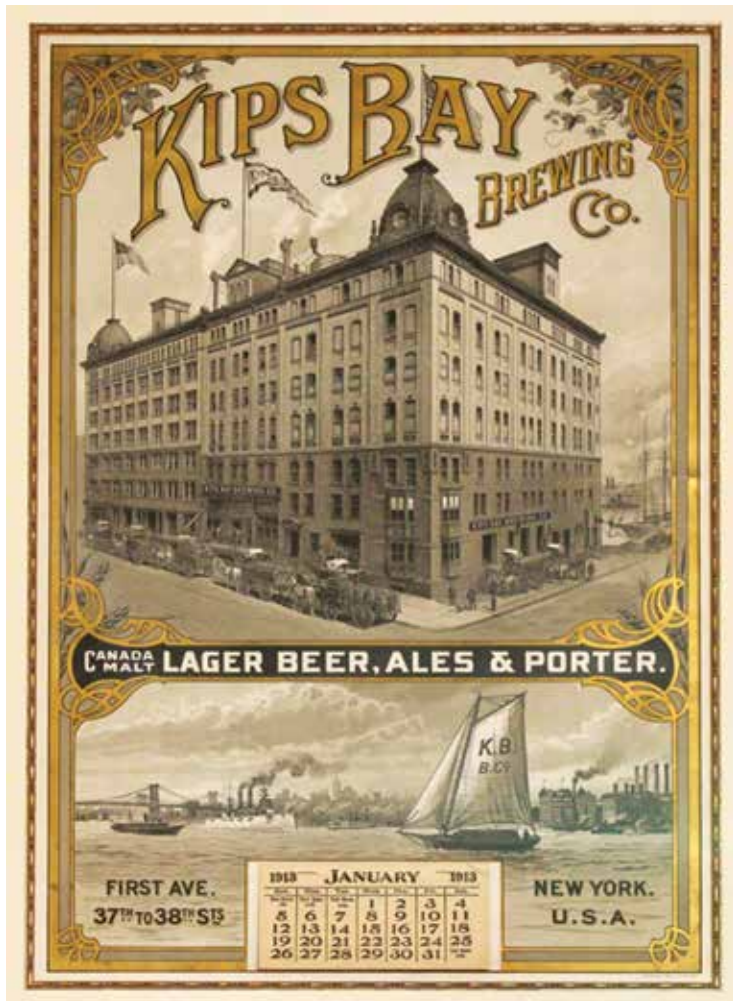
Early 1900s color lithograph of the brewery and the bay, only one known. Originally owned by Will Anderson and now in the collection of Keith Belcher.

nearly 150, many of which were crowded into Manhattan to serve the thirsty throngs living there.

A dense island

Manhattan island is only 13.4 miles long and ranges from 1-2 miles in width. The Hudson River separates it from New Jersey to the island’s west. The appropriately-named East River divides it on the East from fellow NYC boroughs, Queens and Brooklyn.

Manhattan’s east side especially, was loaded with breweries, where early brewmasters aged their lagers in wooden barrels in the cool mudbanks of the East River. Many of these breweries flourished, making multi-millionaires of their immigrant brewers.



Sepia toned lithograph of the brewery and its East River proximity, dated 1913, only one known. Originally owned by Will Anderson and now in the collection of Ron Small.

The breweries on the east side of Manhattan were especially crowded along a 3+ mile stretch from 28th Street northward to 94th Street. The East River provided an excellent transportation source for barges to deliver the barley and hops that had been grown upstate. By 1877, George Ehret's Hell Gate Brewery, a hulking complex of buildings, was America's #1 selling brewer by volume. Next-door-neighbor Jacob Ruppert Brewing Co. was ranked not far behind. In addition to Ehret and Ruppert, notable brewery names included Henry Elias, Peter Doelger, J. Christian G. Hupfel, Jacob Hoffman, Herman Koehler, and George Ringler, as well as Consumer's and Central.

Little and Late

One of the smaller breweries on the east side was a little different. It was a relative latecomer in 1894 and didn't have a German name. Instead, the Kips Bay Brewing Company was launched by an Irishman named Patrick Skelly, between two established Germanic brewery neighbors, Hupfel and



Because of its small size, Kips Bay did not produce large quantities or varieties of breweriana. What it did make could be stunning, like this pre-Prohibition factory scene tray, the only one known. Collection of Mark Kaufman.

Koehler (later re-named Fidelio, after its leading brand). Skelly had been a partner in a successful liquor wholesale company as well as a failing brewery called Centennial, which closed in 1899.

Skelly briefly named his little brewery after himself. Within a year or so he had changed the name to the area in which it resided—Kips Bay. Manhattan's Kips Bay neighborhood runs through streets of the east 20s and 30s. The area is named for Dutch settler Jacobus Kip who owned a farm in the 1600s near what is today 30th Street and the East River. Kips Bay was an inlet in the East River that gained fame in the American Revolution as the spot where the British landed to invade New York. That was in September 1776, in response to the America's Declaration of Independence two months earlier. The Redcoats overwhelmed a smaller American force and subsequently occupied New York City.

In the 1800s, the part of the East River originally named for Kip, which extended from present-day 32nd Street to 37th Street, was filled to create precious land for a growing population. It was on this landfill that the Kips Bay Brewery was constructed, at First Avenue between 37th and 38th Streets.

At his new brewery, Patrick Skelly made lager to satisfy his German customers, as well as



Above: The only two known Kips ball knobs not in George Arnold's collection, courtesy of George Baley, as found in his book, *Vintage Beer Tap Markers: Ball Knobs, 1930s-1950s*.



What's in the name? These ball knobs and coasters show the three brands made by Kips Bay Brewing: its namesake Kips Bay, the curiously-named Kipling, and Skelly's, named for the founding family owners. The knob on the far right shows that the Skelly's brand was later produced by the Greater New York Brewery. All from the collection of George Arnold.

porter and ale to suit the tastes of his fellow Irish immigrants. The small brewery prospered under Skelly and when he died in 1908 leaving a million-dollar fortune, his son Hugh took the helm. According to the *New York Times*, Kips Bay Brewing was “more or less a neighborhood facility with a small but loyal following among patrons of restaurants and saloons in an area defined by the range of its horse drawn delivery wagons.” Kips had a small tap room, open to workers and their friends. Compared to other east side behemoths like Ehret’s, Ruppert, and Doelger, Kips Bay was a more insular, neighborhood brewery that didn’t have an “export” market outside Manhattan.



Cardboard behind glass in oak frame, circa 1940s, only one known. Formerly owned by veteran New York City collector Dave Launt, it is now in the collection of Ken Quaas.



Kips Bay made just one style of tray after Prohibition, shown here. It reprised the brand’s logo, first created in 1899, of a sailboat in the East River, loaded with wooden beer barrels and flying a sail emblazoned with the company’s initials, K.B.B. Co. Collection of Ken Quaas.

CHEATING PROHIBITION

Kips Bay sold enough beer to thrive until Prohibition. Unlike most of the breweries in Manhattan, it survived until Repeal. That’s chiefly because Hugh Skelly spent the 1920s bootlegging. It turned out that the low alcohol “near beer” he was making actually was quite real—at a full 5% alcohol, it was far beyond the .5% limit allowed under federal law. Skelly and his subordinates concocted an elaborate scheme to smuggle that product through a steel doorway that was cleverly disguised to look like a brick wall. He and his crew were famously caught in 1928 and their brewing equipment was impounded by federal agents. Sadly, the feds found and destroyed thousands of dollars’ worth of full-strength product.

Meanwhile during the 1920s era of Prohibition, residential real estate was soaring in Manhattan. To make way for new apartment buildings, much of the east side’s brewery row was decimated, including the grand but then-vacant structures that once housed the Ringler, Consumer’s, Central, and Doelger & Hoffman breweries. Few survived until Repeal in 1933. Two notable names that did make it relocated out of pricey Manhattan. Doelger bolted to New Jersey (taking over the old Peter Hauck Brewery in Harrison) and Ehret sold its massive Manhattan complex to next-door-neighbor Ruppert, and re-emerged in Brooklyn at the former Leonard Eppig Brewery.

The rest of the surviving east side breweries did not

KIPS BAY BREWERY IS SEIZED IN RAID

Campbell’s Agents Shut Plant Valued at \$100,000 at 37th Street and 1st Avenue.

SECRET DOORS DISCOVERED

Raiders Say Brew Was Smuggled Out Passages Camouflaged With Brick and Steam Pipes.

The brewery of the Kips Bay Brewing and Maiting Company at Thirty-seventh Street and First Avenue was seized yesterday by the Federal Government as a result of a raid by prohibition agents last Thursday morning. The raid netted a truck load of alleged 5 per cent. beer—one of five which, it is charged, were about to start from the brewery. The truck driver was arrested. Following the seizure of the truck, Prohibition Director Campbell sent additional agents and inspectors to the brewery. They ordered the plant shut down. According to Major Campbell, they seized 10,000 gallons of real beer and equipment of the plant, valued at more than \$100,000.

The beer on the truck, Major Campbell said, had been smuggled out of the brewery through secret steel doors, so cleverly concealed that prohibition inspectors who made their regular rounds of the brewery never suspected their existence.

The steel doors were faced with brick, and when closed they were further camouflaged by a removable section of imitation steam and water pipes insulated with asbestos, he said. They connected with the garage of the brewery. The seized truck had been loaded with beer secretly smuggled out of the brewery without payment of tax in violation of the Internal Revenue law, it was charged.

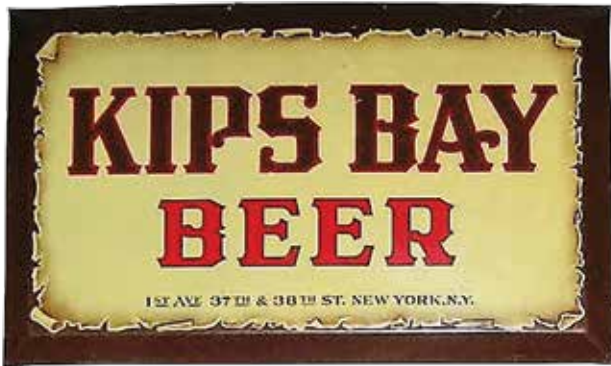
The driver of the truck was arrested on a charge of possessing and transporting beer in violation of the Volstead act. No other arrest has been made.

The Kips Bay Brewing and Maiting Company is capitalized at \$300,000. Its officers are listed as: Hugh P. Skelly, President and Treasurer; John Skelly, Vice President, and John A. Heffernan, Secretary.

The story of Kips Bay’s infamous bootlegging bust, as reported by the *New York Times* on July 3, 1928.



Above: Embossed aluminum sign, circa 1930s, only one known. Below, a rare tin over cardboard sign. Both from the collection of George Arnold.



Pre-Prohibition label, extremely rare, formerly in the collection of Bob Kay and now owned by Rob Walters.

last long. Those included the two other breweries in Kips Bay: Hupfel closed in 1938; Fidelio shut down two years later when it became a part of a consolidation of brands into the Greater New York Brewery. Greater NY also subsumed the remaining active breweries on Manhattan's west side, The Lion and Horton's. Each of these was subsequently closed, with brewing shifted to a plant in Queens, which itself closed and ended production of these brands in 1950. By the 1940s, Manhattan had just three functioning breweries. V. Loewer's Gambrinus Brewing on the west side closed in 1948. Ruppert, at the north end of the east side, lasted longest as a functioning brewery, until 1965. Sadly, all of these great brewery build-



Rare bottle crowns for Kips Bay's Extra and Skelly's brands. The two embossed Kip's Bay crowns are pre-Prohibition, and the Skelly's is post-Pro. Collection of Ron Small.

ings (a part of The Lion remains) were whacked by the wrecking ball in Manhattan's merciless march of relentless renewal.

All except one.

The Lone Survivor

Somehow, things went differently for Kips Bay Brewing. The small concern remained independent and in business longer than anyone but Loewer's and Ruppert. It sputtered and finally shuttered in 1947, however. Little is known as to exactly why, but it's easy to hypothesize the cumulative causes. Kips Bay had never had a canning line. While it did some bottling, it likely became over-reliant on its draft business and just had too much competitive pressure with which to contend. After World War II, the Midwest powerhouses had become "big nationals" (Schlitz, Anheuser-Busch, Pabst) and invaded New York City to get their bite of the thriving Big Apple bars. And local competition was still strong from four other leading NYC area breweries of the time: Ruppert; Brooklyn strongholds Schaefer, Rheingold, and Piel's; and of course, Ballantine from Newark, just across the Hudson River in New Jersey. With all of this power pressing upon it, there would have been little room at the bar for the tap handles of tiny Kips Bay.

Unlike the other fallen Manhattan brewery structures, the Kips Bay building somehow survived fully intact. Although it wasn't as massive or ornate as other east side breweries, it nonetheless had a strong and dignified look, standing a solid seven stories tall and crowned by two towers in the French Second Empire style that was so popular in the 1890s. Surprisingly, at a time in Manhattan when seemingly everything old was automatically considered obsolete—especially brewery buildings—Kips Bay was not reduced to rubble. Instead, it was sold and in a rare move during the decades before the city's historic preservation movement, re-purposed as offices.

Brewery architectural historian and NABA member, Dr. Susan Appel, says that below the brewery's

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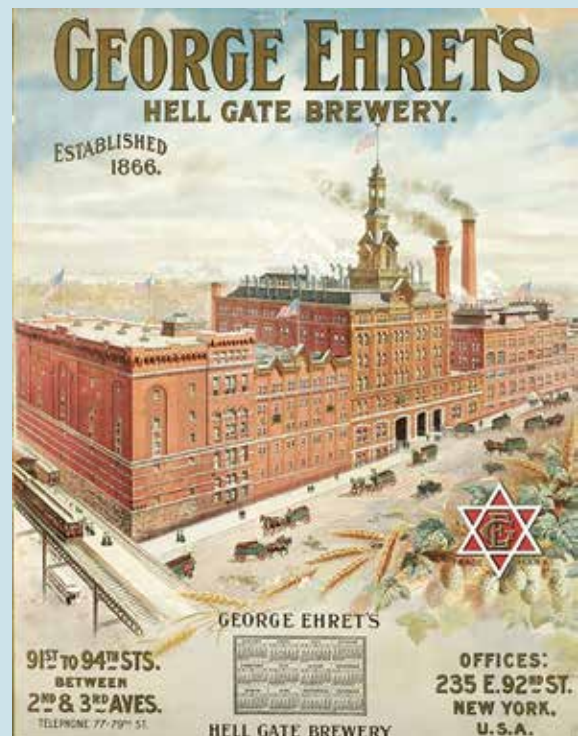
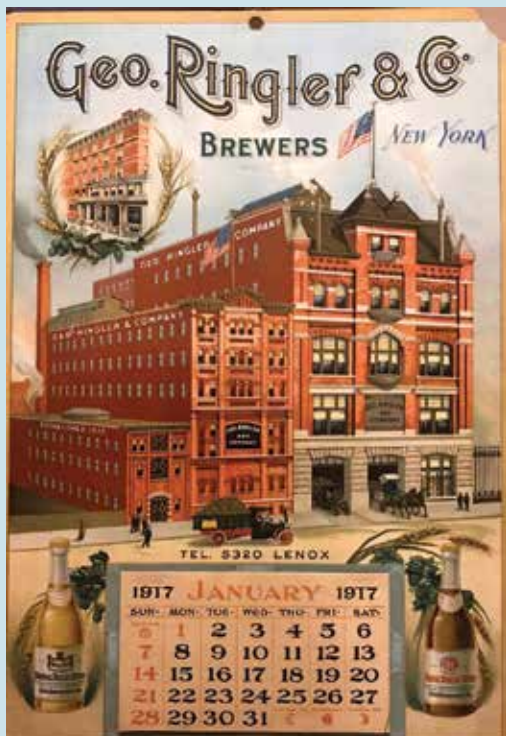
FALLEN FORTRESSES of FOAM



Every one of the many pre-Prohibition era brewery structures along the east side of Manhattan's brewing district ultimately met the fate of the wrecking ball—except Kips Bay. All that's left of these once imposing structures are images, like those depicted in the breweriana shown here. Today, this three-mile stretch along the East River houses posh high rise apartments, towering office and medical buildings, as well



as the imposing United Nations complex. From the collections of George Arnold, Mark Rodgers, & Ken Quaas.



elaborate rooftop domes, “the building is ‘calmer,’ less sculptural, and rather less classically inspired in detail than is often the case with a full-blown Second Empire building.” Perhaps the fact that the building was less ornate is the reason it survived. After all, the late 1940s was a time when this type of elaborate architecture was considered old fashioned looking, and often replaced with streamlined rectangles of steel and glass.

Built to last

Like other breweries constructed in the late 1800s, the Kips Bay structure is built like a fortress. It has walls three feet thick and floors strong enough to bear the weight of heavy brewing equipment. “We thought we might have some trouble when we put in some computer equipment,” one large tenant told the *New York Times* about the old brewery in 1977—thirty years after its original re-purposing. “We weren’t sure the floors of such an old building could take the weight. Then we found that it had a capacity of about 150 pounds per square foot—about twice the weight of most new buildings.”

Today, the nearly 125-year-old brewery building has survived yet another expansive renewal, this time by New York University, which spent millions in recent years on developing an extensive medical complex in the Kips Bay neighborhood. With its decorative domes intact, the former Kips Bay Brewing Co. still faces 1st Avenue between East 37th and 38th Streets, just as it first did in when horse drawn wagons filled with kegs first left its huge doors. Happily, it looks very much the same as it did in 1894, even though it now houses hospital offices instead of hops. Although it is dwarfed by much larger neighbors, it still stands proudly as a memorable monument—the lone survivor of a bygone era when the now posh and pricey east side of Manhattan was dominated by breweries.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Writing this article was for me, a labor of love. I lived in Manhattan for 12 years—a few of them in the Kips Bay neighborhood. I used to walk by the old brewery building frequently, fascinated by the fact that it still stood amidst a sea of constant change. As a New York City breweriana collector, I have for years been on the lookout for pieces from Kips Bay Brewing and am lucky enough to own a few. But advertising from this brewery is very rare. I suspect because the brewery was small and had a limited trading area, it didn’t produce too much in either diversity or quantity. That’s why to put together this article, I had to rely on many of my NABA friends, especially the dean of New York City collectors, George Arnold. Many thanks to George, Susan Appel, Keith Belcher, Mark Kaufman, Dan Morean, Ron Small, Rob Walters, and Daryl Ziegler for their contributions and guidance.*



Above: The brewery building as it looks today. The old structure has hosted various businesses since its re-purposing as an office complex in 1948. It now houses medical offices as a part of the massive New York University medical complex and is dwarfed by many newer and larger buildings, including the condominium in the background, built in the 1980s.

Below: Close-up of one of the old brewery’s two copper-clad, bowed mansard style domes. Both are French Second Empire architectural style, popular in the late 1800s. The domes remain beautifully preserved after nearly 125 years.

