

“GOOD FOR DRINK OR SEGAR”

A Curious Artifact

The excavation of Feature 312 at Fishtown’s Gunner’s Run South Site during the summer of 2012 produced an unusual artifact, the significance of which became evident as research progressed. An upper stratum of the feature yielded a red vulcanite (hard rubber) token that read on its face, “ARTHUR CHAMBERS’ / 922 RIDGE AV. / AND / 917 & 919 WOOD ST. / PHILAD’A. / ‘CHAMPION’S REST.” Who was Arthur Chambers and what was “Champion’s Rest”? First perceived to be a merchant’s advertising token, this artifact took on an added dimension when we flipped it over. The reverse of the token read, “SPARRING / GOOD / FOR / A / DRINK / OR / SEGAR / ACADEMY”. A sparring academy that sold alcohol and cigars?

We had to know more.

The red vulcanite “Champion’s Rest” token.
Photograph by Chester Cunanan 2016.

**A Story of One Family,
Two Saloons, and a Prizefighter**

Thomas J. Kutys and Samuel A. Pickard

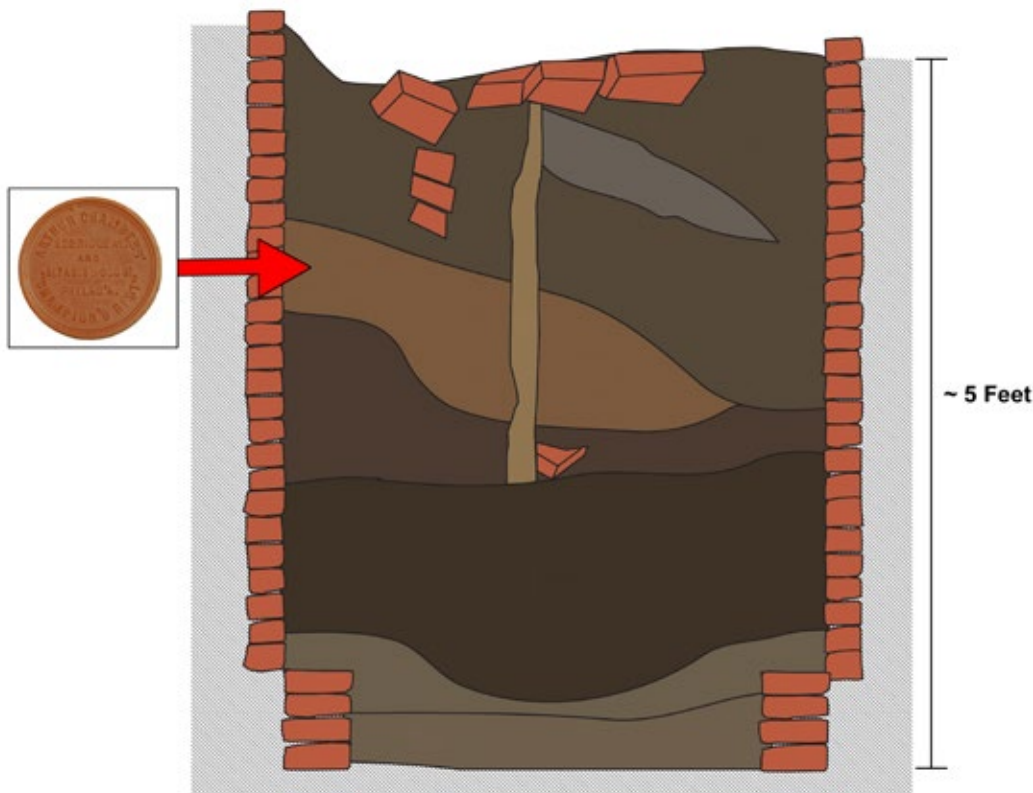
Initial research indicated that most hard rubber merchant tokens such as this were struck between circa 1860 and 1885, though some continued to be made through the 1890s.¹ By the 1880s, the increased demand (and increased price) for hard rubber—largely caused by the beginning of the bicycle craze—necessitated the rise of other materials, such as celluloid and aluminum, for the production of tokens. Vulcanized rubber, or “vulcanite,” consisted of a sulphur-infused rubber compound. Colors could be added just prior to vulcanization, as the various impurities were removed from the crude rubber. Vermilion, garancine (ground root of the madder plant), cochineal (a type of insect), and oxide of antimony (a chemical element) were all used to achieve a light red color. Interestingly, red vulcanite’s resemblance to human gum tissue led to its use in early dentures, though the use of vermillion, as a sulphuret of mercury, had obvious drawbacks.

Pressed from large sheets of hard rubber, tokens were primarily used in two ways: as fare tokens for transportation companies or as advertising cards.

Some merchants also issued these hard rubber tokens with a “good for” value. In the case of our token, the Champion’s Rest sparring academy would have given tokens like this as change to ensure that patrons returned to their business.

Arthur Chambers and His Champion’s Rest

Our preliminary research provided us clues regarding the composition, likely date range, and probable use of the token, but it was during the next phase of research that the story of the token took a turn for the flamboyant and highlighted a facet of nineteenth-century Philadelphia’s social network. It turns out that the Champion’s Rest was a well-known boxing saloon (and “sparring academy”) and the home of retired bare-knuckle boxer Arthur Chambers, located more than 40 blocks southwest of where the token was found. Open by March 1875, by late 1879, the Champion’s Rest had expanded to occupy the entire corner of Ridge Avenue and Wood Street in Philadelphia’s 13th Ward. By the early 1880s, the Champion’s Rest consisted of a large barroom on the first floor, a more modest but “handsomely furnished,



(Left) A digitized profile of the brick-lined privy where the token was found showing its approximate location within the privy’s soil strata. *Drawing by Nina Shinn, 2016.*

(Right) The red vulcanite “Champion’s Rest” token. *Photograph by Thomas J. Kutys, 2015.*



Obverse



Reverse



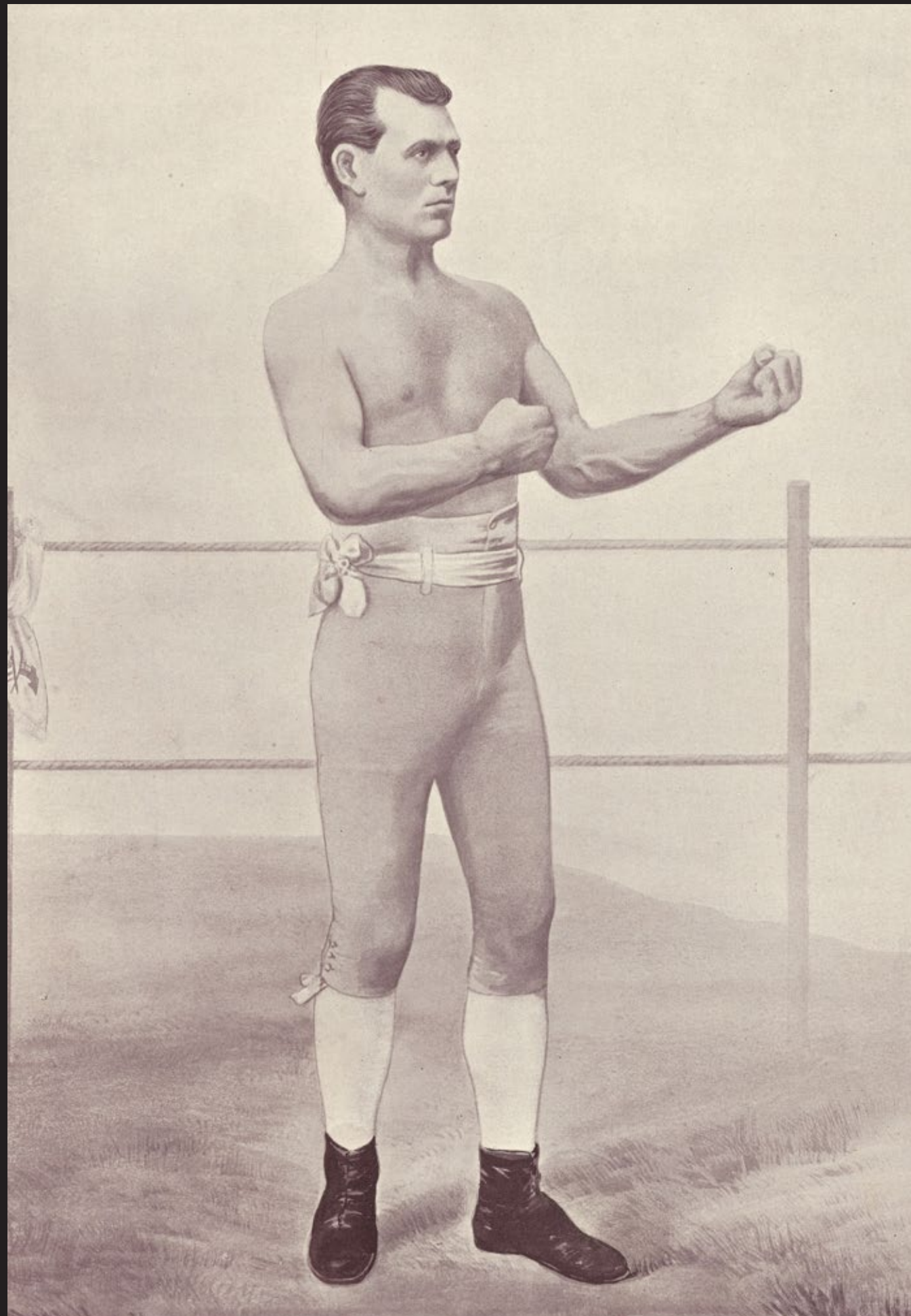
well ventilated, and well lighted” poolroom on the second, and an exhibition room on the third.² The exhibition room contained a 16-foot roped and staked ring where sparring matches, which drew audiences of nearly 200 people, were held at least every Saturday night.

The capacity of the first floor barroom seems to have been only 65–80 men, plus however many could elbow their way in. A piano and fiddler sat in one corner, while a ticker (an early telegraphic machine) “rattled merrily away” in another.³ Even when the saloon itself was not the scene of entertainment, crowds would fill the bar from early morning until midnight anxiously awaiting the results of distant title-fights as they arrived over the ticker.

Fistic entertainment was not the only draw of the Champion’s Rest, however, as one notable event clearly demonstrates. Just before Christmas 1881, the exhibition room was the scene of a rat-killing match that was, apparently, “the only legitimate match of the kind ever held in America.”⁴ Arranged between two contestants, the goal of the match was to be the

fastest person to transfer 100 rats from a specially constructed pit into a central barrel using bare hands alone. The winner that evening accomplished the feat in a mere 34 seconds, taking home \$50 and the entire gate money for his troubles. Newspapers in places as distant as Indiana, Tennessee, Illinois, and Nebraska reported on this event.⁵

Arthur Chambers, whose celebrity status was one of the saloon’s main draws, was born in 1847 in the town of Salford, England, just across the River Irwell from Manchester. After a brief stint in the Royal Navy, Chambers turned to prizefighting, winning his first professional contest at the age of 16. By the time Chambers arrived in New York in 1871, he was considered the best lightweight in England. Though he stood only 5 feet 3¾ inches tall and possessed a fighting weight of about 117 pounds, he was described as “a lad with excellent shoulders and loins, exceedingly strong and game, with tremendous punishing powers, but capable of taking any amount of punishment himself”; in short, “he was a compact bundle of muscular Christianity.”⁶



Chambers quickly made his mark on the prize ring in America, defeating lightweight champion Billy Edwards in 1872 and successfully defending his newly won title against George Seddons in 1873. Chambers left New York for Philadelphia sometime late in 1874 or early in 1875, establishing his saloon on Ridge Avenue shortly thereafter. Chambers was forced to retire from the ring in 1877 after his left index finger was nearly severed and later amputated following an attack outside his saloon. He returned to regain his title in March 1879 when he defeated Johnny Clark in an epic 136-round, 2-hour and 20-minute contest, after which Chambers retired from the ring permanently.

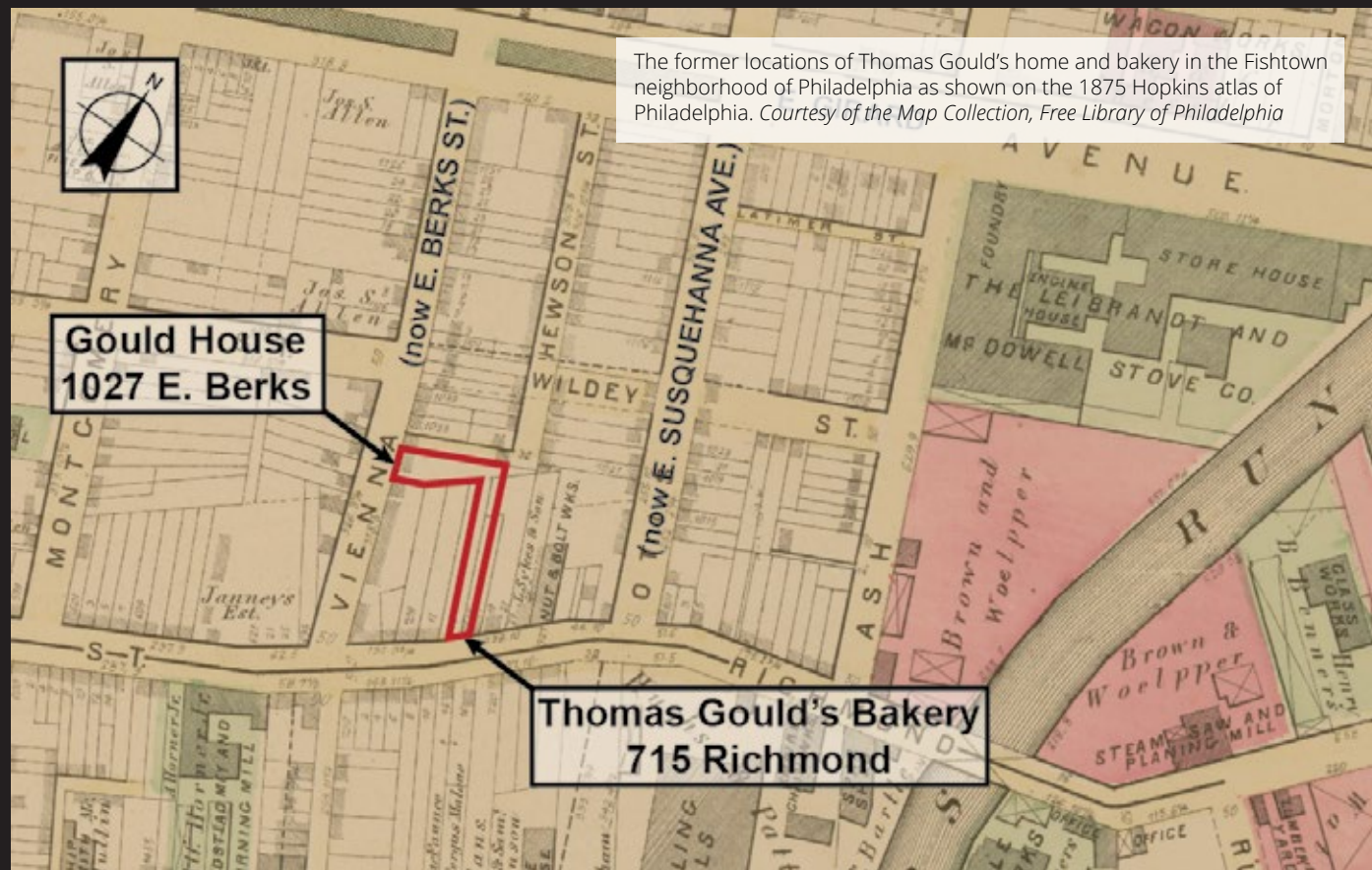
The Champion's Rest prospered from its opening through most of the 1880s, but was forced to close for a time when Chambers was refused a new liquor license in 1888. Though the property no longer served as a saloon during this period, it is likely that sparring lessons were still being given here, as a "Philadelphia Athletic Club" was listed at 922 Ridge Avenue in 1891 and 1892.⁷ Chambers finally obtained a new license for his saloon in 1893, but was again refused a renewal in 1896. After this refusal, he sold the property and the Champion's Rest passed into history.

The Champion's Rest token from Fishtown likely dates between circa 1879 and 1896, as evidenced by the Wood Street addresses listed on it.⁸ Other occupants of 917 and 919 Wood Street are listed in the city directories through 1879, the year Chambers purchased the properties, so it is unlikely that the token predates the 1879 acquisition. The tokens may very well have been struck immediately following this Wood Street expansion.

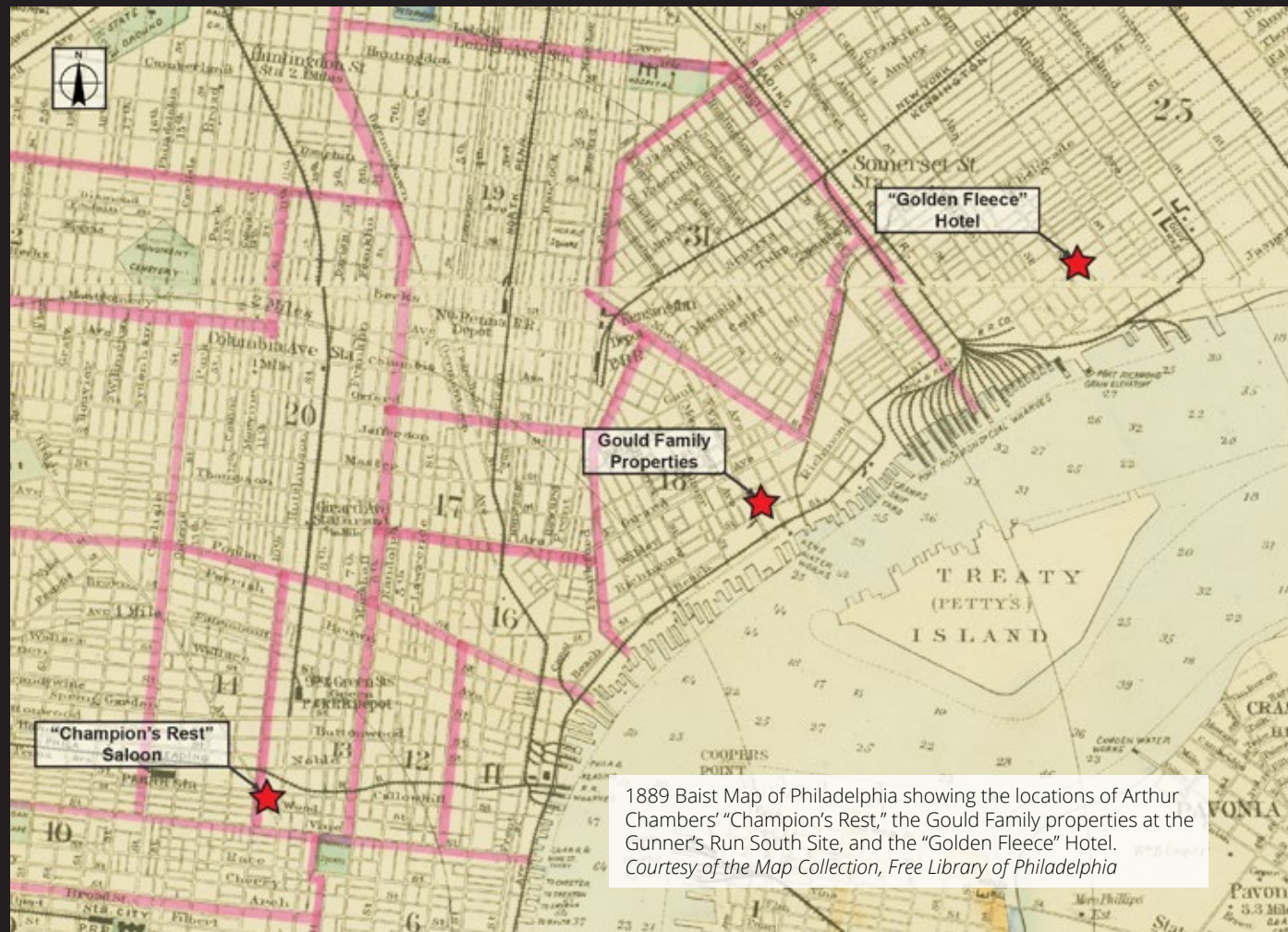
But Whose Token Was It, Anyway?

The token was recovered behind what was historically 1027 E. Berks Street (previously Vienna Street), a home in Fishtown that sat more than 40 blocks from the location of the Champion's Rest. Who would have traveled such a distance to frequent this "colorful" place, and was there some connection between the resident of the Fishtown property and Chambers's saloon?

An 1894 halftone print of Arthur Chambers by the Pugilistic Publishing Company. *Private Collection of Thomas J. Kutys.*



The former locations of Thomas Gould's home and bakery in the Fishtown neighborhood of Philadelphia as shown on the 1875 Hopkins atlas of Philadelphia. *Courtesy of the Map Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia*



1889 Baist Map of Philadelphia showing the locations of Arthur Chambers' "Champion's Rest," the Gould Family properties at the Gunner's Run South Site, and the "Golden Fleece" Hotel. *Courtesy of the Map Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia*

In an attempt to sort this out, we started with the basic question: Who owned 1027 E. Berks Street when Chambers was running his saloon? The answer left us with even more questions. From 1854 until 1896, Thomas Gould owned the property. Gould, a baker by trade, was born about 1820 in England and immigrated to the United States around 1838, probably with his older brother William.⁹ Though we don't know exactly where Thomas was from in England, evidence suggests that his family may have lived in a village just 30 miles away from Arthur Chambers's hometown of Salford.¹⁰ By the late 1840s, the Gould brothers had settled in the Kensington District in Philadelphia County, where both married and opened bakeries. After a few years, William moved north to the Richmond District (now known as Port Richmond), where he ran a hotel and tavern named the Golden Fleece at the corner of Richmond and Clearfield Streets.¹¹

While his brother ran the Golden Fleece, Thomas's bakery—which adjoined his Berks Street property—thrived, and soon he was purchasing real estate in the area, including the property where the Golden Fleece was located. By 1857, Thomas had built a three-story brick home at 1027 E. Berks Street. He resided there with his family for several years before moving to quarters above his bakery, renting out 1027 E. Berks to Ann Sidebotham, a widow who kept a boardinghouse at the address.¹²

By the early 1860s, William had returned to baking, leaving others to manage the hotel. He continued to work as a baker until his death in 1866 at age 48.¹³ About a year and a half after his brother died, Thomas abruptly left his bakery and moved north to the Richmond property, where he worked as a boatman.¹⁴ Within another year or so, it appears that he began personally managing the Golden Fleece Hotel.¹⁵ After an apparently uneventful few years, Gould had left the hotel business by late 1873 and was once again residing over his Fishtown bakery, at least initially with an assistant baker and boarders. With the help of his sons, John and James, Thomas Gould continued to operate his bakery into the early 1880s.¹⁶

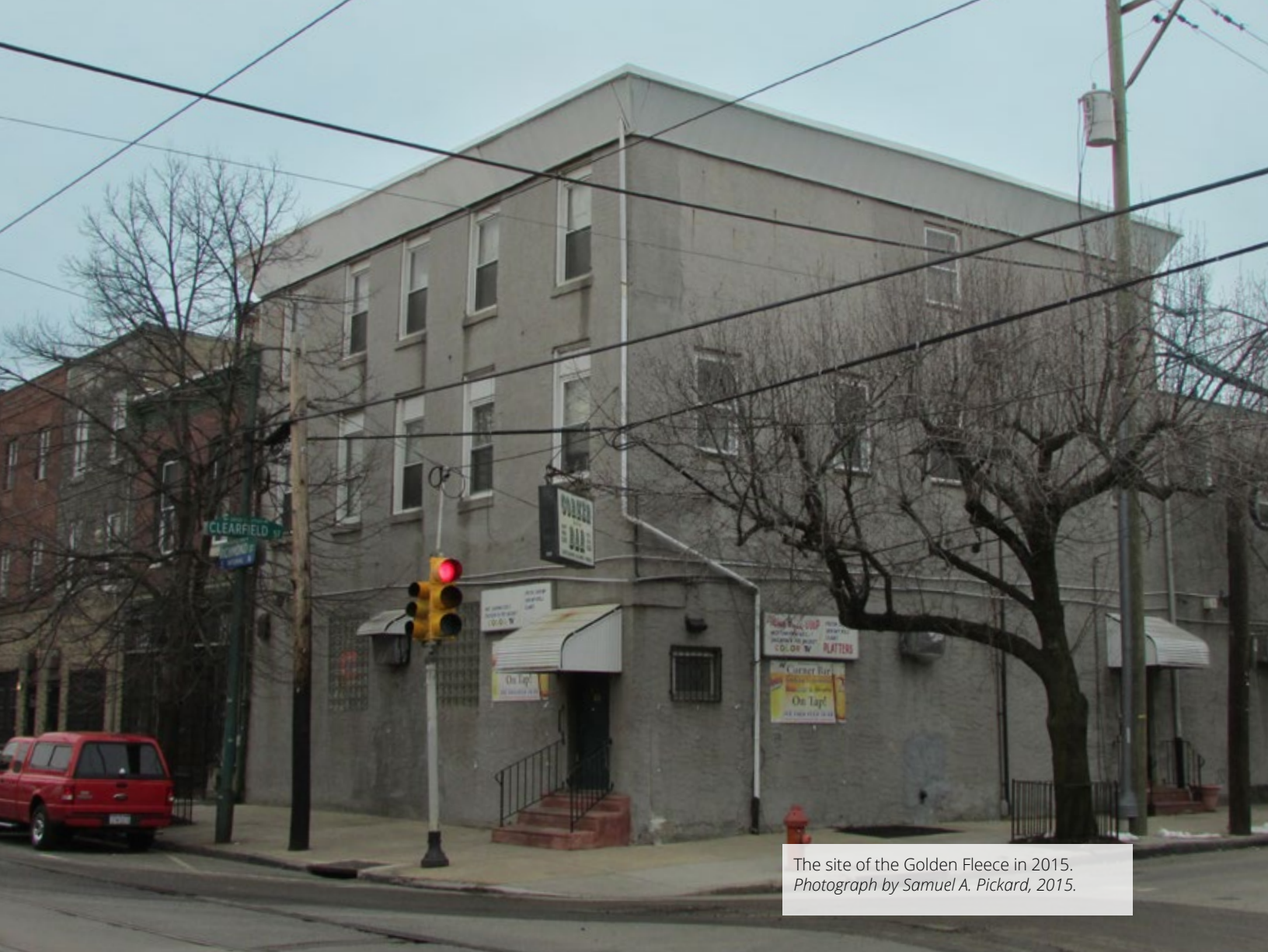
The Gould family left baking and returned to 1027 E. Berks in 1882. After Ann Sidebotham moved her family and boardinghouse several blocks away in 1868, the property had hosted a number of tenants—starting with Hannah Massey, an English widow, and her daughters.¹⁷ In the second half of the 1870s, a succession of families occupied the dwelling for

relatively short terms, including the Paine, Van Horn, Phillips, Baxter, and Fox families. Mostly composed of native-born Americans, these families were involved in numerous trades and industries, such as iron foundries, dressmaking, fishing, painting, peddling, and shipbuilding.¹⁸

In 1895, Thomas's wife died and, just over a year later, he transferred the deeds to his remaining real estate to his sons. His son John died in 1901 after falling on the street.¹⁹ A year after John's death, Thomas applied to administer the estate, and according to newspaper articles claimed to be 104 years old.²⁰ Thomas Morris apparently vouched for this curious assertion, claiming that Gould had been his late father's foreman when the elder Morris went to work at age eight. The newspapers may have been in on the deception or at least aware of the dubious nature of the claim, as they stated that Gould looked like he was in his 60s or 70s. A month later, however, Thomas Gould died of pneumonia.²¹ Oddly, his death certificate states that he was 63, an age that also seems very unlikely, considering that he was running a bakery by 1849, when he would have been just 10 years old.

James Gould, now the only living member of his immediate family, sold 1027 E. Berks Street in September 1904.²² He moved into the home of his cousin Elizabeth Keefe (whose husband operated the Golden Fleece Hotel for 10 years, starting in 1878) in Port Richmond, but died of cirrhosis of the liver in July 1905.²³

While the Champion's Rest token cannot be conclusively linked to any member of the Gould family (or even the family itself), a case can be made that it belonged to one of them. Like Arthur Chambers, Thomas Gould was from northern England, operated a colorful bar, and may have been a bit of a character—as suggested in his claim that he was 104 years old. In addition, both of his adult sons remained bachelors, and at least one, James, seems to have damaged his liver from excessive drinking. It isn't hard to imagine these individuals patronizing an establishment such as Chambers's saloon. Regardless, the saloon token recovered from the Gunner's Run South Site in Fishtown is significant, not only to Philadelphia's rich boxing history, but also as an artifact of leisure and a window into the social networking of the nineteenth-century city. The token ties together three neighborhoods through the business and social connections of one extended family, and provides evidence that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, neighborhood residents were willing to travel



The site of the Golden Fleece in 2015.
 Photograph by Samuel A. Pickard, 2015.

a good distance to seek out entertainment, whether to be among individuals similar to themselves or for a specialized form of entertainment such as sparring.

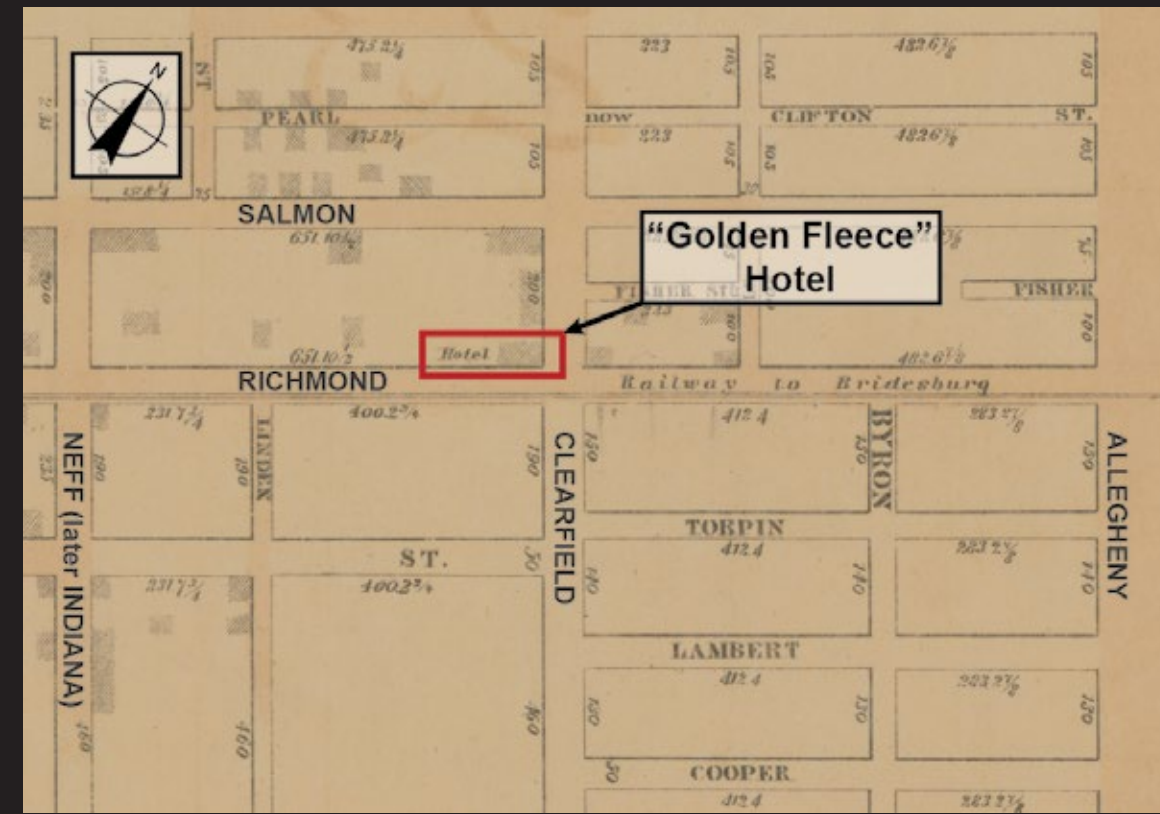
Full Circle: A Modern Epilogue

The buildings that housed the Champion's Rest and much of their block were demolished in the 1930s.²⁴ The Gould family's properties in Kensington/Fishtown were demolished, as well, for the construction of N. Delaware Avenue and I-95. So it was a nice surprise for the authors to discover that a building matching the footprint of the Golden Fleece, from an 1875 property atlas, exists today. Intrigued that it was still home to a local bar, we made our way there one night in December 2015, keeping our expectations low. A single light and a neon Open sign served as beacons guiding us to our

destination on that dreary night, illuminating banners that advertised homemade soup, color television, and Pennsylvania's favorite lager beer on tap. As we pulled open the heavy door and walked to the bar in the dimly lit establishment, the barkeeper gave us a once-over before asking, "Hey boys, you lost?"

No... we had found exactly what we were looking for.

Thomas J. Kutys has over 15 years' experience in archaeological investigations and artifact analysis within the Mid-Atlantic, Northeast, and Southeast regions of the United States. **Samuel A. Pickard** has recently co-authored and presented papers Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology and the Society for Historical Archaeology. His research interests focus on the 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States and include the roles of industrialization, ethnicity, and religion in urban life.



The location of the Golden Fleece Hotel in the Port Richmond neighborhood of Philadelphia, as shown on the 1862 Smedley atlas of Philadelphia. Courtesy of the Map Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia.

THE GOLDEN FLEECE HOTEL
a checkered history

Within only a few years of opening the Golden Fleece, William Gould and his hotel found themselves in the press when members of the notorious Schuylkill Rangers gang executed a one-night burglary spree in Richmond. They ransacked several nearby stores, but when they got to the Golden Fleece, they awoke the Goulds' dog and ran off.¹ Unfortunately, William Gould was not always on the right side of the law, as evidenced in an incident several months before when an argument with a man on a trolley came to blows in the street.²

After Gould gave up direct management of the Fleece, William Nugent ran the establishment for about six years, during which time a dog allegedly came to the hotel's defense again. In June 1876, several men—including former city councilman Daniel Gilbert—were returning from a political rally when, perhaps already having enjoyed

libations, they decided they were thirsty and made for the hotel. As it was four in the morning, they found the tavern closed and its proprietor asleep. Rattling the gate to wake him, they drew the attention of Nugent's dog, which snarled at the group. As a drowsy Nugent opened the door to allow them in, he watched Gilbert produce a pistol and shoot at the dog. However, not only did he miss the canine, his shot struck a lamplighter. Though initially feared to be serious, the bullet failed to break the man's skin and Gilbert was simply fined \$5.³

Anthony Keefe, who had married William Gould's daughter Elizabeth, took over the Golden Fleece in 1878. Keefe's tenure seems to have been relatively uneventful, though at some point he lost his liquor license and was subsequently indicted for selling without one. During this time, the hotel seems to have transformed into a rentable hall, the management of which James N. Makin took over in 1889. Within four years, Thomas Gould sold Makin the portion of the property containing the Fleece, while retaining the portion with houses along Clearfield Street. Two years later, Makin obtained a liquor license for the Golden Fleece, starting a new chapter for the establishment.⁴

- Samuel A. Pickard