



Virginia ABC To Celebrate 75th Year At Clifton Forge Store

June 22, 2009

Virginia's Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) program is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year and the state store in Clifton Forge is a prominent part of the department's history.

Clifton Forge's ABC store, which opened Monday, June 25, 1934, is the only store to remain in its original location for 75 years. The neighboring store in Covington which opened a day later, Tuesday, June 26, is in its second location.

As part of a year-long commemoration of the state ABC department's 75-year history, an open house will be held at the Clifton Forge store at 531 Main Street Wednesday from 11 a. m. to 1 p. m. During the ceremony, representatives of the state ABC board and Virginia government will be present and a plaque will be dedicated acknowledging the store's historic significance. The public is invited to the open house where "light" refreshments will be served.

The Clifton Forge, Covington and Hot Springs ABC stores were among the first to open in Virginia following the repeal of the 18th Amendment. The state ABC board was created in May of 1934 and by June 9 a store was open in Hot Springs, number 113. This was followed in the Highlands by the Clifton Forge store, number 123, on June 25, and the Covington store, number 124, June 26. Stores in Lexington and Staunton soon followed.

Virginia is one of 18 "control states" in the United States where the government actively participates in the distribution of alcoholic spirits. Beer and wine are sold by private retail businesses while bottled spirits are sold only in state operated stores. The state ABC stores do not sell beer and wine except for Virginia produced wines.

The ABC board was created following repeal of Prohibition, also known as "the Nobel Experiment" which lasted from 1920 to 1933 when it was illegal to sell distilled spirits in the United States, including beer and wine.

Actually Virginia had "gone dry" on Nov. 1, 1916, following a vote in 1914 to prohibit the sale of alcohol. Virginia was one of several states that made the sale of alcohol illegal. The entire country followed suit on January 16, 1920.

The 18th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution made the sale, manufacture and transportation of intoxicating liquors illegal. The amendment was proposed Dec. 18, 1917, ratified by the necessary 36 states on Jan. 16, 1919, and took effect a year later.

While the sale of alcohol was forbidden, the law didn't stop the flow

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of intoxicating spirits and in New York City alone there were from 30,000 to 100,000 speakeasy clubs where mixed drinks could be purchased. The alcohol was smuggled into the U. S. from other countries such as Canada and Great Britain where alcohol was legal. In Virginia, the law gave rise to moonshiners who operated illegal stills with the majority in Southwest Virginia.

Between 1918 and 1930, five Virginia Department of Prohibition agents were killed in the line of duty while enforcing the ban against manufacturing liquor.

Prohibition became more and more unpopular during the Great Depression which had begun in 1929 and on March 23, 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an amendment to the Volstead Act which allowed the manufacture and sale of certain kinds of alcoholic beverages which included beer and wine.

In August of 1933 the Virginia General Assembly met in a special session and authorized the sale of beer and wine and provided for an election to vote on repealing the 18th Amendment.

A proposal to repeal the 18th amendment was passed by Congress in February of 1933 and on Dec. 5, 1933 the 21st amendment to the U. S. Constitution was ratified by 36 states making the sale of liquor legal once again. Virginia voters voted Oct. 3, 1933, for repeal of the 18th amendment becoming the 29th state to support the proposal. Utah was the 36th state to adopt ratification of the 21st Amendment.

The first ABC license was issued by Virginia on April 3, 1934 to the Pullman Company to serve alcohol on six of its dining cars on commercial trains. The first four ABC stores opened May 15 in the capital, Richmond. By August, 50 stores were open, including Clifton Forge, Covington, Hot Springs, Staunton and Lexington and by year's end there were 66 stores operating throughout the commonwealth. Today the state operates 332 stores, 131 of which are open on Sundays in addition to the other six week days.

Prohibition ended Dec. 5, 1933 and on March 7, 1934, just three months later, the General Assembly voted to create the three-member Alcoholic Beverage Control Board. Col R. McCarthy Bullington, T. McCall Frazier and Maj. S. Heth Tyler were appointed to the board on March 22 with Tyler being named chairman.

Those first four stores opened in Richmond, 55 days after the ABC board began functioning.

Following Prohibition, Virginia adopted a policy of local option and any county or city could vote to prohibit an ABC store from operating within the boundaries of the governmental unit. Some counties did remain dry for many years following the opening of the first ABC store.

The ABC Board dates its beginning to March 7, 1934, when the General Assembly created the department. In addition to controlling the distribution of alcoholic spirits through sales in state stores, the ABC Board has 130 law enforcement special agents with full police powers which oversee over 16,000 establishments licensed to sell alcohol. The agents conduct investigations involving underage sales, alcohol related fatalities, narcotics trafficking, vice, tax fraud and other duties.

The ABC Board also provides an array of education and prevention programs and continues to close down illegal stills which continue to thrive in a few isolated areas of the state. While many stills were shut down and destroyed during Prohibition, the largest still ever discovered in Virginia was uncovered in 1993 in Pittsylvania County. Agents uncovered 36 pots which held 800 gallons each.

The ABC Board has a Web site which includes a wealth of information about the department's activities and has information on each of the 332 stores selling liquor. The site is available at www.abc.virginia.gov.

Among highlights in the history of the state ABC Department are:

In 1933 Prohibition was repealed; 1934, ABC Board created and first stores opened; 1941, the 100th store opens; 1950 ABC Investigator Floyd Fenwick Vincent is killed January 22 while trying to execute a warrant on a still in Bland county; 1966 the 200th store opens; 1968 liquor by the drink sales are approved for establishments but local option remains in effect with a vote required in each county or city to

permit the sale of mixed drinks.

In 1969 store 294 at Bailey's Crossroads in Fairfax County is remodeled for self-service patronage, a trend that spread throughout the state; 1970, store 294 chalks up another first when Betty Wilson becomes the first female store clerk hired by the ABC Board. She is followed by Judy Beers who become the second female clerk in the state.

In 1973 the 250th store opens; 1982 Robert J. Grey Jr. becomes the first African American commissioner appointed to the ABC Board. He served as chairman from 1984 to 1985. In 1985 Laurie Naismith becomes the first female commissioner of the ABC Board; 1986, ABC stores stop selling wine except for Virginia made brands; 2003 revenue to the commonwealth exceeds \$200 million; 2004, ABC stores open for the first time on Sunday in Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Northern Virginia; 2005 the 300th store opens; 2006 the first three-women ABC board is appointed by Governor Tim Kaine. Esther Vassar is reappointed and Pamela O'Berry and Susan Swecker are new appointees.

The department instituted a gift card program in 2008 where patrons can purchase a card in amounts ranging from \$10 to \$500.

In the past five years, the ABC Department has contributed more than \$1.25 billion to the commonwealth. Sales in 2008 were a record \$641.2 million. The department has been "Going Green" and annually recycles over 300 tons of cardboard, 11 tons of shrink-wrap, 40 tons of paper and added \$76,000 to its bottom line by recycling pallets.

ABC employs approximately 2,685 individuals statewide of which 36 percent are minorities, 45 percent are female, 60 percent are age 40 or older and the oldest is a part-time employee who is 85.

The five top selling brands in the state's stores are Jack Daniel's 7 Black Tennessee whiskey; Grey Goose vodka; Jim Beam bourbon; Crown Royal Canadian whiskey and Absolut vodka.

The ABC Board has won several awards, most recently, in 2008, Recognition Award for Innovative Prevention Projects from the Virginia Department of Health; Best Practices Award, National Conference of State Liquor Administration and E2 Certification Environmental Excellence Program, Virginia Department of Environmental Quality.

But awards, Sunday sales, liquor by the drink, and a network of 332 stores were far in the future on June 25, 1934, when the Clifton Forge ABC store opened on Main Street.

Residents of both Clifton Forge and Covington were eagerly awaiting the store's opening and for the two weeks prior to the store opening, the Clifton Forge and Covington daily newspapers followed the progress in detail.

An article in the June 19 edition of the Covington Virginian announced that Harry P. Burt had been named manager of the Clifton Forge liquor store. He was employed at the Clifton Forge Marble and Granite Works and had served several terms on the city council. James E. Smith was named assistant manager and clerks included W. B. Fellers, J. B. Goodwin Jr. and James G. Bayly. A native of Clifton Forge, Bayly had worked for the C&O Railway, Covington Virginian, Richmond Times-Dispatch and Washing Herald. In the early 1950s he was editor of the Covington paper.

The following excerpts from the 1934 Covington paper tell the story of the Clifton Forge and Covington store openings.

Friday, June 22: "The state-manufactured shelves have arrived in Clifton Forge from Richmond, brought there by the truck from the state penitentiary, where all the supplies in the nature of fixtures, etc., are made. It is not long after the arrival of the shelves that the liquor itself will arrive. The building which will house the dispensary in Clifton Forge, located on Main Street, a block from the city hall, and near the center of town, is being prepared for the reception of stock."

Saturday, June 23: "Clifton Forge today received its first delivery of liquor for the state dispensary store and the staff of the Clifton Forge store is busy this morning getting the stock arranged in order to take care of the rush expected Monday when sales start.

"Three large trucks, each almost as big as a C&O box car, pulled up to the back of the dispensary building at 10:15 o'clock this morning. They had left Richmond at midnight. Probably no such large lot of liquor has ever passed at one time over the Midland Trail. Dawn found them in the mountains and nearing their destination without accident or hindrance and it was well there was no effort at hijacking for the big trucks were heavily guarded by men who know how to shoot and to shoot quickly.

"At Clifton Forge they were even safer for Chief of Police Huffman and his men constituted a sort of reception committee. The always active chief himself aided in maneuvering the big trucks into position behind the dispensary building which is between Farrar's Drug Store and the city hall."

Monday, June 25: "Big Crowd On Hand When State Liquor Store Was Opened This Morning In Clifton Forge. Covington Store Expected To Open Tomorrow At 9 a. m. The state liquor store in Clifton Forge opened its doors to the public at 10 o'clock this morning. A crowd has been waiting for some time. A few had set their alarm clocks in order to be on hand early so as not to miss anything, especially their friends among the purchasers, who they thought might hand out a little. A popular man was the first one to make a purchase in the new dispensary at Clifton Forge. His preference was gin.

"Sales were brisk all the morning and well into the afternoon. Not a few customers were from Covington, impatient at the later opening of the Covington store. It seemed they just couldn't wait."

The store hours were 9 a. m. to 9 p. m. Monday through Friday and 9 a. m. to 11 p. m. Saturday. Each customer had to sign a piece of paper for each purchase. When an order was processed, a piece of paper giving the brand, amount of sale and quantity purchased is generated which is pasted on the bottle or bottles of liquor. A person can purchase only one gallon at a time but can reenter the store as often as he or she desires.

The first day of sales, Clifton Forge recorded 600 items sold for a total of \$536.40. Total sales for the week ending June 30 were \$2,862.10.

Monday, July 2: "A new order of whiskey arrived in Clifton Forge for the dispensary this Friday and half of the big van was unloaded at the back door of the store, the other half continuing on to Covington."

After the excitement of the Clifton Forge store's opening, the Covington store opened the next day in the Hotel Collins building on Maple Avenue.

Tuesday, June 26: "Three big moving vans, almost as big as box cars, rolled into Covington last night with Covington's State liquor supply. Each truck was reported to have carried 900 cases, making a total of 2,700 cases of liquor and wines. The cargo, which was transported from Richmond, is said to be valued at \$20,000."

The Covington store staff was composed of G. B. Lawless, manager; J. F. Milton, assistant manager, Jack Tingler, Gordon Hughes and Jack Baylor, clerks. Sales the first day amounted to \$650 to 754 individuals.

While the Covington store moved from Maple Avenue to its current location on Main Street on Sept. 23, 1959, the Clifton Forge has remained in the same location for 75 years. It is the only store in the Commonwealth of Virginia that can make that claim.