

The Star Spangled Banger

“It’s a mallet, Hon”

By, John A. Gasparine © 2009

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It was October of 2008 when the concept of Baltimore Beer Week took flight, a grand celebration “of all things beer in the Land of Pleasant Living.” Given Baltimore’s rich beer history, it was only fitting that the celebration began with a cask-tapping ceremony aboard the historic warship: The USS Constellation.

Let me clarify for those who don’t consider themselves “beer geeks.” The celebration didn’t begin by twisting a metal hand pump/hose assembly onto a pressurized keg. Rather, this was done the *old-fashioned* way, by using a mallet to drive a simple tap into the end of a cask.



Photo Credit: Alexander D. Mitchell IV--Mid-Atlantic Brewing News

Over 55 careful hours went into designing and crafting a special beer mallet for this event, with full intentions of this mallet becoming an icon for all Baltimore Beer Weeks to follow.

The organizing committee of Baltimore Beer Week wanted a massive “trophy mallet”; something ornamental yet functional, with a deeper significance than simple beer mallet... they wanted a mallet backed with lore. And, this is what I set out to deliver.

Inspiration for the design

The mallet is implicitly beer-centric, given its intended use. However, additional respect was paid to the art of brewing by designing the head of the mallet to resemble a wooden cask, and adorning the pommel with the likeness of a hop cone. But from what material should this majestic mallet be fashioned?

There is a plethora of historic sites in and around Baltimore, and the mallet would surely be glorious if crafted from a piece of historic wood. With that in mind, the initial materials search began with considerations for wood from Fort McHenry and the USS Constellation. Fort McHenry earned its fame for its defense against the British in the War of 1812, and the USS Constellation was the last sail-only warship built by the US Navy.

Yet, there is another historic source of wood whose fame goes back just as far. Unlike Fort McHenry and the USS Constellation, this historic icon has succumbed to the ravages of Mother Nature, and can now only be appreciated for its magnificence through photographs and anecdotes: [The Wye Oak](#).

The Wye Oak was an awesome tree that took root more than two centuries before the colonization of America. Located on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, it was long recognized for its marvelous size: the largest white oak tree in the United States. This tree was considered so special, that in 1941, the Maryland State government declared the Wye Oak Maryland's state tree, and subsequently built a state park around the Wye Oak in its honor. Through the course of its life, great measures were taken to protect the champion tree- it was bolstered with steel straps, supported with steel cables, and even lightning rods were installed.

Despite best efforts, the tree collapsed in a severe thunderstorm on June 6, 2002. At 460 years old, the trunk was over 31 feet in circumference, and the canopy covered nearly 1/3 of an acre of land. The wood from the felled Wye Oak was collected by the state of Maryland and given to a number of woodworkers upon promise to produce commemorative works of art.

Two of these woodworkers were Jim McMartin and Jim Beggins, highly skilled artisans renowned for their elegant handcrafted furniture. Their company, McMartin & Beggins, became the custodian for much of the Wye Oak, and they were commissioned by the State of Maryland to make the Governor's desk out of the champion wood.

Note: Images of the Governor's desk can be seen at www.mcmartinbeggins.com

Crafting the mallet

Once asked to craft the beer mallet, I contacted McMartin & Beggins to inquire about any remaining Wye Oak. They seemed enamored with the concept, and helped obtain permission from the State to use Wye Oak in the Baltimore Beer Week mallet. However, due to the limited availability of this historic wood, the State mandated that the Wye Oak be used for "decorative elements" of the mallet only...

The rest of the mallet was to be crafted from rock maple, generously donated by Free State Timbers (www.freestatetimbers.com). Rock maple is another durable species of wood indigenous to the area, which has historically been used for production of maple syrup. Aesthetically the light colors of the maple contrasted nicely with the dark brown of the Wye Oak and together, these two woods held promise for a resilient and aesthetically pleasing combination.

Warm wood chips started flying in August of 2009 as the Wye Oak and maple were hand-planed and glued-up into a solid block, destined to be the head of the mallet. This block of wood was assembled in such a way that it could be turned on a lathe, and the

Wye Oak appeared to represent the steel hoops around a wooden cask. Additional Wye Oak was laser engraved with an interpretation of the Baltimore Beer Week logo and inlaid on each side of the mallet head, acknowledging the year Baltimore Beer Week was established.



The maple handle was turned smooth on the lathe for an easy grip, yielding a blank canvas for future ornamental work. The pommel of the mallet was then adorned with a hand-carved Wye Oak finial in the likeness of a hop cone. Finally, set into the neck of the mallet, was a 1979 copper penny- my signature as the artist and a tribute to my wife.



A mallet without a name

Creating this mallet became a labor of love for me, and as most artists seem to do, I felt it was appropriate to come-up with a name for our iconic beer mallet. However, not any name would do, for the same care that went into the design and materials needed to be put into a name. I wanted the name to pay homage to both beer culture and to Baltimore. With the help of Rob Kasper, columnist for the Baltimore Sun, suggestions came flooding in from readers. The very first respondent on Kasper's Blog struck a chord with me when s/he suggested "The Star Spangled Hammer".

Clearly, this name honors the Star Spangled Banner- something quintessentially "Baltimore." For those of you who don't know, our National Anthem was actually written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key, as a poem, after witnessing the heroic defense of Fort McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore. And yes, he references an actual Fifteen Star American Flag (images of which can be seen with a simple Google search). The poem was fittingly sung to the tune of a British drinking song before becoming our official National Anthem in 1931.

Alas, as another reader suggested, a *mallet* has been crafted, not a *hammer*. So sticking with the theme, and at the suggestion of Baltimore Beer Week committee members Dominic Cantalupo and Les White, I decided upon the name *The Star Spangled Banger*. While there are no stars and stripes on the mallet itself, respect must be paid to its namesake. Accordingly, I recommend that *The Star Spangled Banger* be wrapped in stars and stripes when not in use.



Beyond the inaugural Baltimore Beer Week

The Star Spangled Banger was crafted for the opening tap ceremony at the first inaugural Baltimore Beer Week, but its intended use does not stop there. It would only be fitting that this iconic mallet be continually used at cask tapping events year-round throughout the Baltimore area.

Symbolically, *The Star Spangled Banger* was envisioned somewhat akin to the Olympic Torch, in that it would be passed-down from BBW chairperson to chairperson. This year's chairperson (and founder) of Baltimore Beer Week, Joe Gold, will have the honor of being the first chairperson to hold our iconic mallet high.

While there is already a ton of lore behind *The Star Spangled Banger*, there is yet more room for the legend to develop. The smooth maple handle was intentionally left blank for further artistic development. At the discretion of the Baltimore Beer Week committee, the handle can be further adorned with other artistic carvings, engravings of each chairperson's name, or perhaps some other historic notes yet to be conceived.

...Just a little more beer history in the making. Cheers!