



By the nineteenth century, "Albany Ale" had earned the city's breweries international recognition and a reputation that would extend into the next century—and our own.

**I**n New Netherland, brewing was an integral part of society and was a major trade in Dutch New York. Beer was both taxed and regulated under Dutch law. Though the Dutch lost control of New York to the English in 1664, Dutch brewing traditions were continued by many of the original brewer's families well into the eighteenth century.

Brewing in the Hudson Valley dates

back to the seventeenth century and to the first Dutch settlers arriving in the area around Albany (then called Beverwyck). By the 1660s, at least eight breweries were operating in Beverwyck. Because wheat grew better than barley in the area, it became the primary brewing grain. Hops grew locally, and wild indigenous varieties were bred with imported Dutch plants. Many brewers coming from the Netherlands were

wealthy, reflecting the expense of the equipment needed to brew beer. Because of this wealth, many brewers were appointed to powerful positions and became Beverwyck's founding fathers. The Gansevoorts, Van Schaicks, and Visshers—well-known names in the Capital Region today—all operated breweries in the city at that time.

### Brewing Locally

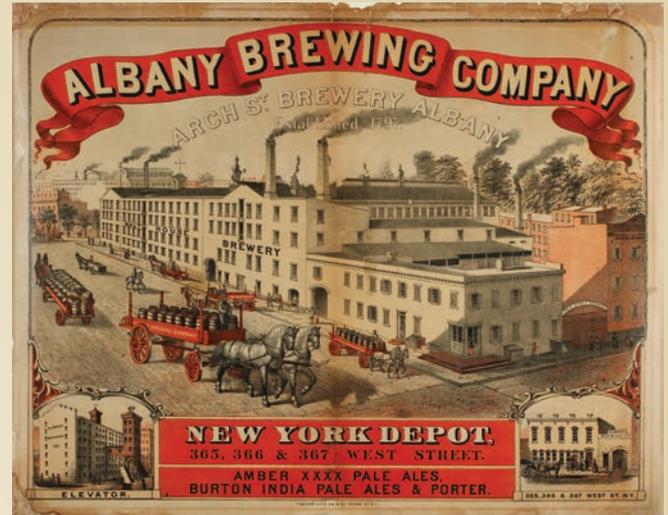
As settlements began expanding west from the Hudson River in the early 1700s, however, a new form of "local" brewing emerged. While most of the larger breweries were located in New York City or Albany, under British law tavern owners could brew their own beer. As a result, small beer-making inns and taverns began appearing in the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys, and the need for locally grown raw materials for these taverns helped to establish grain-growing farms in these areas. Trade routes opened within the state, partly because of negotiations between the British and the Iroquois organized by the British agent Sir William Johnson, who allowed wheat grown on farms in central New York to supply breweries in Albany and New York City. Despite later difficulties that affected the wheat crop, including the destruction of farms by the British during the Revolution and an infestation of the Hessian fly brought over on mercenary ships during the war, New York's brewing industry con-

tinued to grow steadily.

Down the Hudson, by the first decade of the nineteenth century Matthew Vassar, founder of Vassar College, was operating a very successful brewery in Poughkeepsie (now Dutchess County), while the Evans family had been running their brew house in Hudson (now Columbia County) since the 1780s. But Albany's 150 years of Dutch family breweries had helped it become a well-known brewing center, so James Boyd opened a brewery in Albany in 1796—considered to be the first modern brewery in the city—and between 1800 and 1825 twelve more new breweries opened. The first advertisements for "Albany Ale" began to appear in newspapers in both New York City and Albany during this time, produced by agents for the city's breweries (such as Robert Dunlop's and Uri Burt's) and other merchants. Most of these early advertisements didn't specify what Albany Ale actually was, although some did indicate that it was strong. It seems that in the early nineteenth century, "Albany Ale" was simply a euphemism for excellent beer brewed in the City of Albany.

### Masters of Albany Ale

Both the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and an Albany brewer named John Taylor would soon change that perception. Taylor was born in England around 1790. His family immigrated to the United States when he was a



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child, landing first in Brooklyn and settling in Albany a few years later. By the time Taylor was seventeen, the industrious youth had started his own candle-making business with backing from his father. Fire was a constant threat to the candle-making industry, and Taylor's factory was not immune; fires broke out in his factory at least four times. But he was not deterred; a contract with the U.S. Army in 1813 provided enough capital for him to switch his business from candle-making to brewing. By 1819, Taylor had married Mary Richmond, and within a few years had accumulated enough money to open his first brewery at 70 South Pearl Street in Albany with his brother-in-law as partner.

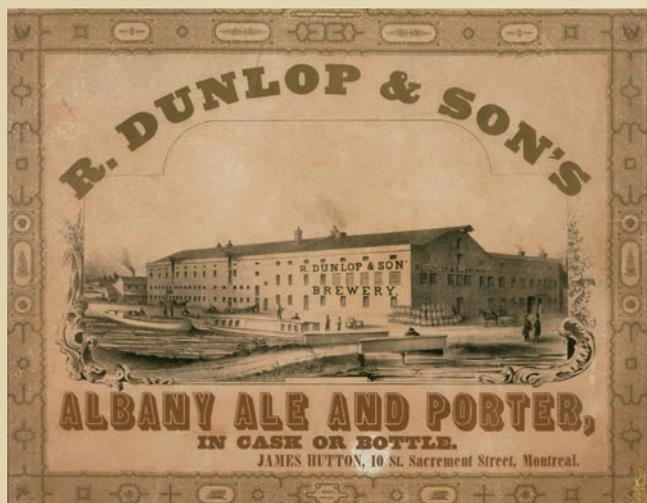
1825 brought the opening of the Erie Canal, which connected Lake Erie with the Hudson River. A savvy businessman, Taylor saw an opportunity to exploit New York's new water highway: he could import grain and hops from the western part of the state, make his beer in Albany, and then ship it south

*The Albany Brewing Company, on Arch Street near Taylor's brewery, was one of many breweries in the city in the early nineteenth century.*

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A promotion for R. Dunlop and Sons' Albany Ale, ca. 1840.

By the start of the Civil War, Taylor & Sons had become one of the most technologically advanced breweries in the country: it used pressurized kettles capable of boiling up to 1,000 barrels of unfermented beer, known as wort.

to the port of New York via the Hudson. This meant that his Albany Ale could be brewed, casked, and shipped anywhere in the world. In 1833, Taylor bought out his brother-in-law's half of the brewery and relocated it to a larger facility on Green Street.

In the mid-1830s, however, a former wine merchant turned prohibitionist, Edward C. Delavan, publicly accused Taylor of using stagnant and contaminated water to produce his beer. Taylor then sued Delavan for libel in 1840 in a case that made headlines across the country. It was the first widely publicized pro-temperance legal battle, but it also propelled John Taylor and his brewery, Taylor & Sons, into the spotlight. Taylor ultimately won the case, and the publicity he garnered from it, along with his business acumen, helped get him elected mayor of Albany. He held the position—while also running his brewery—for one year.

By the 1850s, Taylor had built a new brewery at



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The Beverwyck Brewing Company was one of the few breweries to remain open through Prohibition, although it did not brew beer during that time.

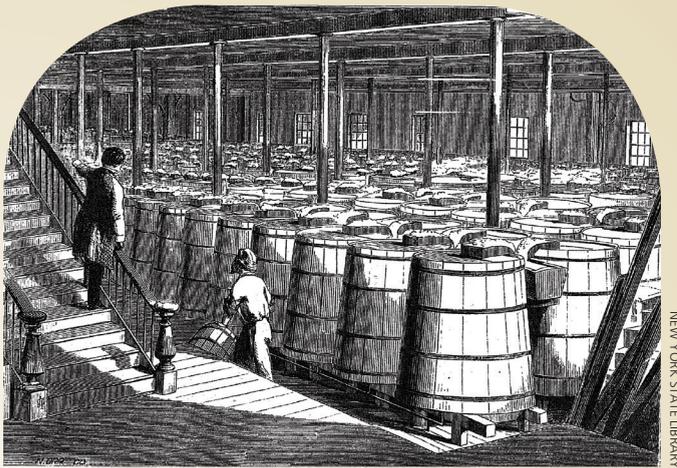
Broadway and Arch Street in Albany. It was the largest brewery in the country, capable of producing 200,000 barrels of beer a year. Taylor began producing a flagship double-strength "XX" ale, which he dubbed "Imperial Albany XX Ale." As demand for this double-strength ale grew, so did the number of breweries in the city—twenty-four by the mid-1860s—many of them producing some variation of Albany Ale. By the start of the Civil War, Taylor & Sons had also become one of the most technologically advanced breweries in the country: it used pressurized kettles capable of boiling up to 1,000 barrels of unfermented beer, known as wort. Best of all, Albany Ale was no longer a euphemism. It had become a specific style, not unlike the light, mild ales made in England around the same time.

But Taylor's wasn't the only brewery making Albany Ale. George Amsdell opened a modest brewery on Lancaster, Jay, and Dove

Streets in Albany in 1854, and was joined in the business by his brother Theodore a few years later. Brewing was in the blood of the Amsdell brothers. Their father had been a brewer at John Taylor's brewery before opening a small firm during the 1840s on the Great Western Turnpike (now the Albany suburb of Guilderland), where the brothers had learned the craft of brewing. By the mid-1860s, Amsdell was one of the dominant breweries on the East Coast, producing between 75,000 and 100,000 barrels of ale a year. It offered many varieties of beer, from IPA and Burton Ale to its strongest, Diamond Stock Ale. But the Amsdell brewery owed most of its success to its version of Albany XX Ale.

#### Decline of the Famous Brew

The development of railroads during and after the Civil War resulted in a decline in Albany Ale. While Albany in general and the Amsdell brewery in particular continued its ale-



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The pontoon room of Taylor's brewery, where beer was refined by a pontoon apparatus of Taylor's own design.

making tradition, the popularity of ale was in a steady decline across the nation. By the 1880s, the clamor for Albany XX Ale had dulled, and Albany lost a sizeable portion of its distribution as other towns began building their own breweries and making their own beer. With the rapid influx of millions of German immigrants in the 1890s, demand for Bohemian-style, cold-fermented lager beer boomed. By the turn of the twentieth century, the number of breweries in Albany was down to eleven, only eight of them producing ale. Taylor & Sons brewery had passed out of Taylor family hands by the 1880s and closed its doors in 1905, and in 1916 the Amsdell Brewery, having been bought and sold a number of times since the death of George Amsdell in 1906, also closed.

By 1919, with ratification of the 18th Amendment, which prohibited the sale, production, and transportation of alcohol, the total

number of Albany breweries dropped to seven. Within a year, and with the enactment of national prohibition in 1920, only three breweries remained open—Beverwyck, Dobler, and Hedrick—albeit not producing beer. Albany Ale had disappeared earlier; Amsdell was the last brewery in Albany to make a beer called Albany Ale, and there is no record of it after 1905.

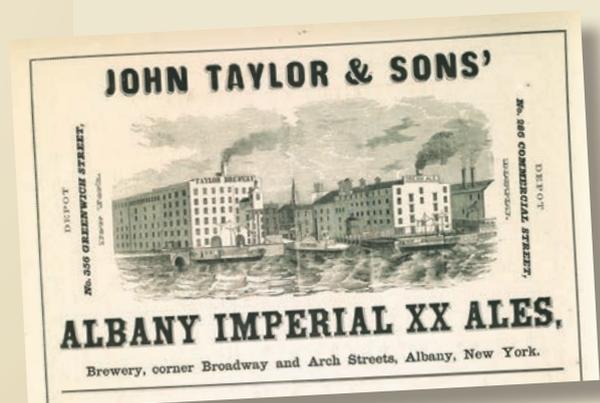
Although Albany Ale no longer exists, the research being done by the international Albany Ale Project ("Slaking Thirst for 400 Years") has renewed interest in the forgotten history of Albany's brewing past. The project and C.H. Evans Brewing Company have also partnered to literally re-create some of the old beers. For example, this past autumn the group released a beer based on an adapted 1901 recipe for Albany XX Ale. The recipe was found in the brewing logs of Amsdell Brewing and Malting Company—and it was the first Albany Ale brewed in 112 years. ■

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Without the records, we might know the history of Albany Ale, but we wouldn't know the beer. One of the goals of the Albany Ale Project ([www.albanyaleproject.com](http://www.albanyaleproject.com)) is to reconstruct its evolution. What was it, and what did it become? There was no one single recipe. Beer changes over time, and public taste, economic conditions, and competition all affect what beer is—regardless of where it's made—at any given time in history.

Matthew Vassar, while not an Albany-proper brewer, appears to have made something very similar to Albany Ale. We know this because a series of his brewing records from the 1830s is held in the collections of Vassar College. These logs show that what Vassar brewed was similar to what many Albany brewers testified to making in an 1835 New York State Senate hearing on the brewing practices of Hudson Valley brewers. Vassar's records also fill in blanks: his brewing processes, from water temperature to fermentation time, are literally laid out for the reader.

The Amsdell brewing logs from the early part of the twentieth century, which are held by the Albany Institute of History & Art, show what Albany Ale became. In the Amsdell logs we can see not only the similarities to Vassar's beer but also the differences, like the influence of German brewing techniques on beer formerly brewed in the English tradition.



Taylor & Sons promoted their Albany XX Imperial Ales far and wide.

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