

Delaware Beer History: Brewing Before Dogfish Head

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When [Dogfish Head](#) was preparing to launch in 1995, some elements of Prohibition were technically [still on Delaware's books](#); brewpubs weren't legal, and the notion of a brewery at the beach was worlds away from beer's previous role in Delaware's history, which had largely been an urban one, with commercial brewing operations largely centered in Wilmington.

Homebrewing has deep roots in Delaware; the first European settlers from Sweden brewed on a domestic level as early as the 1630s (including '[small beer from Indian corn](#)' largely brewed by women—persimmons were also mentioned as a brewing ingredient, so perhaps Delaware brewing has always been a bit 'off-centered'), and later Dutch arrivals continued that tradition.

Delaware's first semi-commercial breweries were built sometime before 1662, during the Dutch colonial period, as Alexander De Hinijossa was in charge of their fort at New Amstel, and the soldiers needed beer—it was also popular with English settlers who had begun to move into the area.

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The Dutch influence did not continue long beyond that, however, as the English took charge and changed the town's name to New Castle in 1664. Domestic production was again the norm until the 1730s, when [William Shipley](#) came from England and opened a commercial brewery in Wilmington. Shipley's many businesses were key to developing Wilmington as a center for trade, and the city began to outpace neighboring New Castle. As Wilmington grew in the 18th and early 19th centuries, demand for beer was frequently met by saloons and taverns

that made their own on site—the brewpub was a key part of Delaware life for generations of First State residents, even before it was a state.

But as the 19th century wore on, brewing in Delaware became more commercial, and, as in many other states, it became considerably more German. The Nebeker Brewery was built on 5th street in Wilmington by three German brothers during the Civil War; the site, a former quarry, was ideal as it only required a bit more excavation to create cold vaults for lagering their beer.

But the brewpub notion (even if it was not so called) continued—the Grand Union Hotel, founded by Henry Blouth, also had its own in-house brewery that was '[very popular with the German population](#) ', while [John Hartmann and John Fehrenbach](#) began brewing lager for the saloon on a small scale in 1865, and later built an immense production brewery known for its '[lager beer, porter and brown stout](#).'

The move toward production breweries continued with another brewery on Wilmington's 5th Street at DuPont Avenue—the [Bavarian Brewing Company](#) —it was noted as one of the most 'substantial and profitable' businesses in the city in 1908, although it was originally founded in 1880 by Karl Specht and Peter Spahn, recently arrived from Germany.

But Delaware's most successful pre-Prohibition brewery was managed by Joseph Stoeckle, who immigrated to Wilmington, DE in 1854; like Hartmann and Fehrenbach, he began brewing in his saloon in 1858. Illness and the Civil War led to operations being temporarily suspended, but he resumed his business and later, in 1872, he helped organize the A. Bicta Brewing Company. Along with his Bicta family business partners—his wife was a Bicta—he purchased the abovementioned Nebeker Brewery, and after some reorganization, the business became known as the [Diamond State Brewery](#).

Although the 1859 brewery plant was destroyed by fire in 1881, it was quickly rebuilt with the most modern equipment available, and the brewery, including a tower and a statue of Gambrinus, was very much a city landmark. Joseph Stoeckle died in 1893, and was succeeded by his wife, Johanna, who ably ran the brewery until her own death eight years later. Son Harry Stoeckle was appointed president in 1891; at the time, Diamond State was producing 30,000 barrels of beer annually. [Harry Stoeckle](#) proved an adept manager in the succeeding decades, and continued to increase the brewery's capacity—just before Prohibition, output was up to 100,000 barrels a year.

Diamond State limped through Prohibition by making near-beer, but Harry Stoeckle's death in 1925 did not help the brewery's declining fortunes; although it technically survived Prohibition and [re-opened](#) under new management, things were not quite the same; the reorganized Diamond State focused only on the local market, and eventually was unable to compete with large national brands. By 1954, the only brewery in the state folded and its iconic buildings were ploughed under [to make room for I-95](#).

But after 40 years of inactivity, brewing began again in Delaware, first with [Dogfish Head](#) following in the footsteps of its early forebears—starting off as a brewpub, and later growing into a production brewery.

[Stewart's Brewing Company](#) in little Bear, Delaware, also started brewing in 1995, and since then the state has added others like [Twin Lakes](#) and [Evolution](#) (although they are moving just across the state line to Maryland). [16 Mile Brewery](#), in Georgetown, continues the trend of today's Delaware breweries remaining centered in smaller communities; an outpost of [Iron Hill Brewing](#) boasts Wilmington's only city-made beer—for now—but if Delaware brewing history is anything to go by, it should eventually find another brewing neighbor in a city once known for it.