

Old Virginia Cheroots

P. Whitlock & Co.

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In the Spring of 1853, an adventurous 15 year old boy set off Westward from his native Poland. His destination, the docks of Bremerhaven. There he caught a boat to New York, where he found relatives among that city's teeming Polish population. In summer of the following year he set off once again, this time to Richmond, Virginia, where he moved in with an older brother, and began working as a tailor's assistant. By 1859, the 21 year old lad had become an American citizen and joined the Richmond Grays, a militia unit made up largely of Poles and other European immigrants. When the war came Philip was assigned to the quartermaster corps where he made uniforms for two years. In 1864 he left the military to get married and purchase a Richmond tobacconist's business, which he and his new wife ran during the remainder of the war.

At the close of the war in 1865, Whitlock hired six cigar rollers and opened the P. Whitlock Company. The 1867 version of Universal Tobacco Dealers Directory that annually evaluated the nation's cigar and tobacco manufacturers gave the fledgling company a CD rating, the best a tiny operation could hope for: "business limited but has good credit for moderate amounts." Historical records don't indicate, but it's likely Philip employed fellow Eastern European immigrants with mother-country cigar-making experience. Whomever he hired, his business prospered. A Directory of the Tobacco Trade of the United States, Great Britain and Germany published in 1874 lists Philip's Company as Whitlock and Abram, located at 1445 East Main Street. When this association began, and how long it lasted, is not known, but this is the only referent to it I have found (not surprising since data is sparse).

Government records for 1886 show the P. Whitlock Company was bonded and licensed for 70 rollers, who would have been capable of more than 100,000 cheroots a week. Those same records show Whitlock was engaged in the manufacture of smoking tobacco as well as cheroots and cigars, but no quantities are suggested. Another 30 support people appear to also have been on staff say other sources. The 1880s became an especially momentous period for Philip Whitlock. In mid-decade he built a giant new "P. Whitlock's Cheroot and Cigar Factory" and began offering a 3/5¢ cheroot that became a national favorite for more than a half century.

The new factory, located at 2004 & 2006 Franklin street in Richmond, cost \$20,000 to build and had the latest in cigar making machinery, enabling the company to more than double its previous output. The building was described by a contemporary writer as “first class” with steam-driven machines, \$1,000 each elevators, modern toilets for both men and women as well as “handsome” rooms for packing cheroots, which had become the company’s primary focus.

Illustration: Andrew Morrison, “Richmond, VA. And the New South.” Not in the NCM

When Philip Whitlock created Old Virginia Cheroots he cleverly trademarked an image recognizable to nearly everyone in America, a close facsimile of Frederick Church’s distinctive representation of the fictional story teller Uncle Remus, whose songs and stories had been chronicled by Joel Chandler Harris in 1881. [11038]

Collector’s note: end labels are seldom seen on OVC boxes.

Whitlock wasn’t the only cigar company to capitalize on an already-popular image. Levy Brothers of New York City made this brand for a customer who wanted the price difference emphasized. The “Quality not Quantity” was a direct jibe at Whitlock’s 3/5¢ pricing. [14581]

In 1891, P. Whitlock's Old Virginia Cheroots became the first of two cheroot brands to be purchased by James Buchanon Duke's newly formed American Tobacco Co. ("the tobacco trust"). Whitlock was a logical choice for Duke: large, successful, in the heart of tobacco country and not all that far from Duke's NC stomping grounds. The other was the Banner Cheroot Company, control over which was attained in 1899. American Tobacco Co. was not yet in the cigar business, domestic or foreign. They made only cheroots, but that would soon change (described in another Exhibit).

After selling his company for a very heady \$300,000, Philip Whitlock stayed on as head of the P. Whitlock branch of the American Tobacco Company. Conflicting reports exist as to whether he retired in 1895 or whether he remained the branch head when the American Cigar Company was formed in 1901 after American Tobacco acquired Puerto Rican, Cuban and domestic cigar companies. He apparently did not continue as head of P. Whitlock when the federal court settlement made the brand part of P. Lorillard in 1911. Lorillard continued to make Old Virginia Cheroots with little change to the the name, trade mark and package design until the brand was discontinued in the early days of World War Two.

Old Virginia Cheroots boxes

The vast majority of 3/5¢ cigars, cheroots and stogies (and there were a great many of them, made primarily in Western PA and Eastern Ohio) were packed in boxes of 250, almost always with drop-fronts. One box holding 250 cost about one-third the price of 5 boxes holding 50 and margins on inexpensive cigars were tight enough without unnecessary expense for boxes. Old Virginia Cheroots were no exception. I know of no OVC box smaller than 250 found by collectors dating before the Lorillard acquisition of the brand. The 1898 American Tobacco Co. OVC 250 (above) has it's drop front nailed shut to make it useful for storage, a common practice.

Like many brands whose smokes were sold in multiples for a nickel or dime, the majority of cigars in an OVC box were packed in distinctive paper pouches holding three, four or five

cheroots (depending on the price at the time). A few smokes were always left unbundled in boxes of 250 for customers with less than 5¢ or 10¢ to spend. Note the earlier American Tobacco Co. pouch refers to Richmond; the later American Cigar Co. pouch does not, as they were made in one of dozens of other factories controlled by American Cigar Co. [3687] [21360c]

Not all OVC were made in Whitlock's Richmond factory. The box at the top of this article was made by American Cigar Co. in New Jersey and the one immediately above by American Tobacco Co. in Dayton, Ohio. Lorillard's only significant change to the brand was its decision to switch to boxes of 100, both wood and cardboard, in keeping with cigar industry marketing practice after 1910 when the larger boxes were seldom seen. All Lorillard OVC were made in Whitlock's former factory and are marked "Fact. 17, 2nd Dist. VA" on the bottom until 1920, after which they read simply "Fact. 17, VA." The former P. Whitlock factory became home to Muriel, Headline, Masterpiece, War Eagle, Postmaster, Cubist, Roxy King, Possum, New Currency, Between the Acts, Captain General, Rocky Ford, St. Leger, Jack Rose, LeRoy, Flexo, Blue Rings, Van Bibber, Two Orphans and other P. Lorillard brands over the years.

New size may have referred to the 1916-1917 box which held 100 smokes, rather than the 250 of earlier times. Note the price increase, hand pasted over the old 3 for 5¢. The notice on the front explains why it was necessary. The sloppy application of the inner label is unusual, especially for a prominent company. A very rare Lorillard OVC in fine collectible condition.

[above & left] P. Lorillard OVC from the 1930s. This is what sellable condition looks like. Note

the condition of the liner and edging. A similar top brand is seen on OVC boxes from the 1920s.

[lower left] P. Lorillard wooden OVC from 1942. Note smaller top brand and price change. Very good. [below] Inside lid of 1942 cardboard box.

Notes to eBay Sellers about OVC boxes

[1] Old Virginia Cheroots are among the most common cigar boxes there are.

[2] All OVC boxes carry the name P. Whitlock and the same color and general design of the original, BUT the inside label will indicate whether the cheroots were made by the American Tobacco Co. (1891-1901), American Cigar Co. (1901-1911) or P. Lorillard (1911-1942). For help deciding a more exact date for Lorillard boxes go to the Museum's extensive exhibit on dating boxes.

[3] A Lorillard-made OVC is unlikely to sell at any price UNLESS it is full of original cigars. Hundreds of them have been offered on eBay without getting a bid. You can try, but anything less than near-new condition doesn't have a chance. Lorillard boxes are inevitably made in Factory 17 in Virginia.

[4] Not all Lorillard OVC boxes are the same. Lorillard made the brand for 30 years, six times longer than Philip Whitlock. Lorillard OVC are made of different materials, in different configurations, and sold for different prices. If you do have one in very fine condition provide complete information or large clear pictures. Variants are not going to affect the value much, but it may sell.

[5] OVC boxes made under American Tobacco Co. or American Cigar Co. are more scarce than Lorillard boxes, but still not rare, and still must be in very good condition to sell. That means lid and drop front attached, inside paper liner intact, all labels clean and complete, and 90% of the edging present. Scribbles, crayon, grease and water stains are the kiss of death.

[6] The likelihood of finding a genuine OVC box used by Philip's company between 1886 and 1891 is very small. The latter are quite rare, but not necessarily valuable. Value is determined by demand, not rarity.

[7] Boxes of 250 are a difficult sell to collectors because they take up a lot of display room. Large OVC boxes don't have much going for them since the design changed little for 55 years so one of the plentiful boxes of 100 satisfies most collectors. Find an early box of 500 and you may have a winner.

[8] The people who collect "Black Americana" want racist portrayals, comically drawn. They don't want a common portrait of Uncle Remus, a hugely popular fictional character whose likeness is readily available for pennies. That drawing will not sell your box.

[9] Don't describe a filthy or damaged box as "good for it's age." There is no such thing. Age is one characteristic of a box; condition is another. Please don't clutter eBay with any OVC box that isn't in excellent condition. If your box isn't in the same condition as those pictured above, it won't sell.

[10] There is a market for other OVC advertising, premiums and tokens so don't hesitate to list them. Here's three obtained on eBay.

Whitlock exhibited at the 1888 Virginia Agricultural, Mechanical and Tobacco Exposition and gave these tokens as souvenirs. The tokens are the same, but two different metals were used.

Left token not in the NCM.

Tin sign, 8 ½" square. The portrait differs in many respects from that used on boxes, labels, pouches, letterhead and other items.

NCHM Home

Philip Whitlock,

and the P. Whitlock Cheroot and Cigar Company
American Cigar Company ?