

Firesign Theatre & Gresham's Law

A Brief Inquiry into the Sources of Historical Error in Foundation Dating of Early Pipe and Pipe Tobacco Companies



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For most of us who came of age in the 1970s, the name Firesign Theatre will ring a bell. Whether that peal is faint or clear may in some measure be a reflection of your taste in humor, where you went to school, your intellectual interests at the time, and recreational inclinations. Underservedly obscure to many of today's adolescents, this classic comedy group occupied a unique niche at a three-way intersection between subversive satire, extravagant erudition, and promiscuous drug use. Riddled with sophisticated wordplay, and betraying clear roots in the radio entertainment of the 1940s and 1950s, Firesign Theatre's albums remain classic almost two generations after they were released. And while some of the material is undoubtedly dated, it's difficult to be critical and dispassionate about the things that pleased us in our youth. One of their many landmark albums was entitled *Everything You Know is Wrong*. The content of this lp is largely irrelevant to the subject of this essay, but the title is most emphatically not.

All of us have occasionally felt data-impaired in a world where urban myth now circulates with the speed of light (or if not exactly that, then as fast as your internet connection allows). How often have we found that cherished beliefs are in fact cherished falsehoods? Or been confused by diametrically opposed accounts of an issue that we are trying to comprehend? The internet is indeed a powerful enabler, affording nearly simultaneous transmission of valuable information and utter garbage, all without providing a reliable filter to distinguish the one from the other. But we can only blame the internet for an exacerbation of this phenomenon, not for the phenomenon itself. Misinformation and its cheerful dissemination have been around as long as human society; it seems a part of who we are. And what is true in general has proven to be equally true of our understanding of the history underlying most of the innovators in the pipe

manufacturing and pipe tobacco industries.

All of which leads us in a roundabout way to the subject of this essay: conspicuous errors in the conventional wisdom regarding the earliest history of noted pipe makers and tobacco blenders, and why these errors occur. I'm going to begin by briefly reviewing five examples of famous pipe and tobacco pioneers, identifying and correcting oft-repeated misconceptions and fallacies regarding their origins. The first two deal with renowned pipe makers, while the last three examine celebrated tobaccoists. After these case studies I'll reflect on how these misunderstandings arise and why they are perpetuated.

Case Study #1: Kapp & Peterson

Here is an extract of the earliest history of this internationally famous Irish producer of pipes according to the company's website¹:

The Peterson Story

The Nurnberg brothers Friedrich and Heinrich Kapp, whose elegant Dublin tobacconist first opened for business in 1865 on Grafton Street, Dublin could scarcely have dreamt that they would participate in the birth of a legend [sic].

Friedrich & Heinrich, who christened their shop simply 'Kapp Brothers', soon made a name for themselves making and selling quality Meerschaum and Briar Root pipes. It was not long before Charles Peterson, walked into Kapp Brothers Grafton Street premises armed with a revolutionary pipe and ambitious plans for the future.

There and then, Peterson suggested that the brothers go into partnership with him to turn his pipe dream into the world's dream pipe. They agreed and the company was renamed Kapp & Peterson. Kapp and Peterson went on to become Dublin's most fashionable and respected manufacturer and purveyor of fine smoking products.

As an example of the frequent gap between truth and legend, you could hardly find a better place to begin

¹ Peterson of Dublin corporate website: <http://www.peterson.ie/pipes/about-us.html>

MEERSCHAUM MANUFACTURE IN DUBLIN.

Smokers throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom will learn with pleasure that genuine meerschaum pipes of the finest quality are now being manufactured in Dublin, by skilled artisans from the most famous factories in Europe. Mr. Frederick Kapp, of 62 Dean-street, Soho, London, perhaps one of the most eminent pipe-makers of the day, has opened a branch establishment at 53 Grafton-street, where meerschaum and briar root pipes are made in the presence of all who will visit the establishment. These pipes can be observed going through the process of manufacture, from the crude material up to the final polishing or elaborate carving. Amber cutting and pipe-cover making can also be seen at the establishment, and those who desire to possess a genuine pipe and case can rest assured of procuring them at most moderate cost from Mr. Kapp. The stock which he submits is very extensive, and contains pipes in splendid variety, and none are offered for sale that are not genuine in the class to which they belong, and it will be found that the prices asked are most novelly moderate. Mr. Kapp has also on view some exquisite personal ornaments in amber and other material, worthy of careful inspection.

Figure 1: Freeman's Journal July 7, 1874

than with the story of Kapp & Peterson. This commonly repeated version of the company's launch is wrong in almost every particular for which independent evidence exists, and therefore suspect for those details that are unsupported by anything at all. Careful research shows that:

a. the business did not originate in Dublin in 1865: notices from Dublin papers of the day make it clear that the first Kapp shop in the city was a branch of a London business, and not opened until the summer of 1874.

b. it was not originally called "Kapp Brothers"; the entrepreneur who founded the business was John Frederick Kapp, and from its establishment in Dublin in 1874 through Kapp's death in September of 1881 every advertisement and other reference to the business referred to it as "Frederick Kapp", "Fredk Kapp", or "F Kapp". It wasn't until some two years after Frederick Kapp's death, in the fall of 1883, that the business was renamed "Kapp Brothers".

53 Grafton street, Dublin.

We beg to contradict a report which, we are informed, has been circulated during the last week—viz., that we are about to sell our Business and Trade in Tobaccos and the Manufacture of Pipes. This report is utterly without foundation, and has been circulated by some evil-disposed person to injure us: but we are pleased to make it publicly known that our business was never in such a flourishing condition as at present.

KAPP BROTHERS (late F. Kapp).

November 17, 1883.

Figure 2: Irish Times November 7, 1883

c. Charles Peterson went to work for Frederick Kapp in 1876², but he did not come "armed with a revolutionary pipe". Many years passed before Peterson developed the pipe for which he became famous: English patent No. 12,393 wasn't granted to him until August 8, 1890

d. Peterson was not offered a partnership on the spot, not in the 1860s when the shop supposedly opened, or in the 1870s when it actually did. His employment with the company followed a natural progression from highly skilled "hand" (the terminology of the time for craftsmen engaged in this type of labor), to manager (some time after the death of Frederick Kapp in 1881), to managing director. The last named position, equivalent to a CEO in modern American terminology, didn't occur until he'd been with the business for almost twenty years. Peterson's new role was in fact tied to and contingent on a successful public offering of shares to raise capital for a new company, explicitly formed to acquire the patents and other assets of Kapp Brothers in April of 1895³

e. it was only then, almost two decades after Peterson arrived on the scene, that this successor company became generally known as "Kapp & Peterson."

In addition to these demonstrable errors there is every reason to doubt that there were two brothers involved in the establishment of the business in Ireland in the first

² Edward J. Riordan, *Modern Irish Trade and Industry*, E. P. Dutton & Company, 1920, page 186, and Charles Peterson obituary in the *Irish Times*, September 20, 1919

³ *Irish Times*, April 6, 1895

place; for a variety of reasons I strongly suspect the sole founder was John Frederick Kapp (this despite the existence of a younger brother, George Simon Gabriel Kapp, with whom he had previously formed a tobacco business partnership in London). Heinrich Kapp is almost certainly a fiction. But here we enter the realm of informed speculation, and broach a complicated subject for another day. For our purposes the point of this case study is simply that even a presumably reliable source, the current successor entity to the business started in Ireland some 138 years ago, offers an account riddled with error. Note that I am not trying to offer a comprehensive history of Kapp & Peterson. Nor am I suggesting that every fact in the account is wrong; only that what is presented as fact clearly incorporates much that is incorrect, with no way for the unwary reader to distinguish false from true.

Case Study #2: F. Charatan & Sons

Charatan has changed hands often enough since its founding that its early history is largely a blur, with no “official” version available. An unofficial version exists, however, and is widely recounted in substantially the same form on many websites. In brief it always begins with Frederick Charatan opening a shop on Mansell Street in London in 1863.

Here the facts are a bit murkier than they are with Kapp & Peterson, but the conclusion is equally clear. Whatever the true date Charatan’s shop was actually established, it must have been a number of years later than is generally supposed, very probably not prior to the early

Charatan Pipes have been made in the City of London since 1863, maintaining and enriching traditional standards of British Craftsmanship.

Figure 3: Copy from Lane-Era Charatan Catalog

**AFTER FIFTY YEARS~
A Perfect Pipe**

Charatan of London, after fifty years of pipe-making, presents the **UNDERBOAR**—the pipe that cleans itself.

Made in London of choice Algerian Bruyere, flush-mounted with a hand-cut, highest-quality Vulcanite stem. Contains a self-cleaner which, going completely under the bowl, eliminates any chance of a bad-tasting “slug,” and assures you of a cool, sweet smoke.

Samuel Gordon
Sole American Distributor

GORDON
Underboar

Figure 4: Charatan Ad from 1924

1870s. The easiest test of the plausibility of the 1863 date is a simple determination of Charatan's age at the time he is supposed to have opened his business. For this multiple data points exist, the most definitive of which is Charatan's application for naturalization as a British subject⁴. In his memorial to the Home Secretary Charatan states that he was born in 1849, making him a mere 14 years old at the time he is supposed to have opened his store. Many boys went to work at that age in Victorian Britain; it strains credulity, however, to believe that any of them opened a shop. As additional evidence a Charatan ad from the October 9, 1924 issue of the Greensboro Daily News is headlined "After Fifty Years ~ The Perfect Pipe".

Other contemporary advertisements, including one in *The Illustrated London News & Sketch* (Volume 164, 1924) say essentially the same thing, explicitly claiming "over fifty years of experience". The wording of these ads clearly implies a foundation date in the early 1870s, by which time Charatan would have been in his early twenties, a much more plausible age to start a business. As an additional indication of their reliability, it's worth noting that Charatan's son Reuben was alive and manag-
4 It's also worth observing that while the 1878 naturalization application does not state when Charatan arrived in England from Austria, none of the character references supplying affidavits had known him more than three years.

ing the business at the time these advertisements were placed, and Frederick himself had only been dead six years. Decades were to pass before the 1863 date was claimed. Finally, a careful review of London tax records and Post Office Directories fails to surface any mention of Charatan before the mid-1870s.

Case Study #3: Marcovitch & Co.

Here we have a slightly different case; the company is infinitely more obscure today than either Kapp & Peterson or Charatan, and much of what was hitherto believed a function of sources dating from many decades after the putative date the business was established. The most problematic of these, and very interesting for our purposes, are a series of ads run by the company (or more precisely, its parent, Godfrey Phillips) in the 1930s and 1940s. A typical example from the November 29, 1939 issue of *Punch* magazine states that "Nearly a hundred years ago Mr. Marcovitch started business in the smallest possible way". This turns out to have been truer than the copywriter could possibly have known.

Taken at face value the ad implies that Marcovitch launched his endeavor around 1840. A little digging, however, reveals that Moscho Marcovitch (his first name differs slightly across contemporary documents; this vari-



Figure 5: Marcovitch Advertisement 1939

ant is seen in the papers for his naturalization as a British subject) was born about 1846. Even the most gifted tobaccoist is unlikely to have established a prenatal enterprise. And if he did, it would have been in Russia, not London, since that's where both the England 1871 census and Home Office naturalization records make it clear that he was born.

The ad goes on to recount the intervention of the Prince of Wales in Marcovitch's life: swooping in like a deus ex machina to bestow his blessing, Prince Albert makes young Moscho's fortune by encouraging high society to patronize him.

It doesn't help the ad campaign's bid for brand antiquity if you know that Prince Albert (who decades later became King Edward VII) was only a few years older than Marcovitch, and was likewise not yet born in the 1830s. For the record, contemporaneous legal and marketing documents show that Marcovitch established his company in 1868, and remained involved for only three years before selling out to his partner and exiting the business.

Case Study # 4: John Cotton Ltd.

John Cotton represents a slightly different form of falsehood. Virtually every company tin and advertisement for much of the 20th century dates the origin of his business back to 1770. The difficulty here, as with Marcovitch, is biological. John Cotton wasn't alive in 1770. The evidence for John Cotton was trickier to develop than it was for the first three cases, largely because Cotton is a more common name in Scotland than Kapp or Peterson are in Ireland, and Charatan or Marcovitch are in England. Rarity of surname is a blessing in this kind of research. Picking one Thomas out of a myriad in Welsh records is like finding a needle in a haystack; on the other hand locating Welsh records for someone, say, named Guss would be easy. The good news is that Cotton is moderately rare, if not nearly as rare as Marcovitch. The bad news is that the Cottons turn out to have been prolific in the way so common in periods of high infant mortality. Any true history of the business must therefore

Among the rich, unchanging traditions of Scotland is one which, since 1770, has linked the name of John Cotton with fine and rare tobaccos—tobacco rare in its goodness and in its true Virginia flavour such as you may now leisurely enjoy in *Extra Fine* cigarettes, newly and proudly introduced by John Cotton of Edinburgh.

John Cotton EXTRA FINE
—just a matter of good taste

MADE IN SCOTLAND BY JOHN COTTON OF EDINBURGH

Figure 6: John Cotton Advertisement 1958

begin with a laborious genealogical exercise, sorting out the scores of Cottons appearing in the Edinburgh records of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries and putting them in their proper place. Luckily the records are there to be found.

The first Cotton in the Edinburgh tobacco trade turns out to have been named George. He established his tobacco shop in the city in 1773. John Cotton, the youngest of George's many children, wasn't born until 1801, and did not establish his own shop until 1826. Many other Cottons started tobacco businesses over the course of the 1800s, but it was the father's and son's that survived. Eventually, many years after the death of their founders, George's business was folded into John's. Not too long after that John Cotton Ltd's advertisements and product packaging began to claim 1770 as the date of establishment, despite the fact that this was some 56 years before John opened his shop and 31 years before he was born.

Case Study #5: Philip Morris

I include Philip Morris as my last example not because he accumulated any particular fame for pipes or pipe tobaccos, but as a classic example of misinformation coming directly from a multibillion dollar conglomerate that one might think would know better, or at any rate certainly have the resources readily available to find out the truth. Here is the official story from the company's website :

PM USA is more than 160 years old. The history of our company can be traced back to Philip Morris' 1847 opening of a single shop on London's Bond Street, selling tobacco and ready-made cigarettes. In 1902, Philip Morris & Co., Ltd. incorporated as a small tobacco company in New York City. In 1960, Philip Morris was the smallest among the six major tobacco companies in the United States. By 1983, PM USA had become the largest cigarette company in the country

Let's just focus on the first two sentences. The story here is familiar: nobody at the company ever thought it important to find out when their founder was born. It turns out that multiple England census records make it abundantly clear that Philip Morris was born in London in 1835. What was true for Charatan is equally true for Philip Morris; even an entrepreneurial prodigy is unlikely

1871 England Census

Name:	Philip Morris
Age:	36
Estimated Birth Year:	abt 1835
Relation:	Head
Spouse's Name:	Margaret Morris
Gender:	Male
Where born:	Whitechapel, Middlesex, England
Civil parish:	Paddington
Ecclesiastical parish:	St Augustine
County/Island:	London
Country:	England
Registration district:	Kensington

Figure 7: 1871 Census Showing Year of Philip Morris'

to have opened a shop on Bond Street at the age of 12.

Contemporary directories make that clear; London Post Office Directories throughout the 1850s and 1860s show that no Morris was established on Bond Street (or Bond Court, or New Bond Street, or Old Bond Street). In fact the relevant Morris active in the trade in London at that time was Philip's father Barnard (with whom Philip was still living at least as late as 1851). After immigrating to England from Germany, Barnard became a very successful cigar manufacturer, at one point employing 120 men. Philip was only one, and one of the youngest, of Barnard's many children, several of whom entered the tobacco trade. By the late 1850s Barnard, along with older sons Charles and William, was trading under the name "Bernard Morris & Sons", although not at any location on Bond Street. If the 1847 has any meaning at all, and I'm skeptical that it does, it refers to Barnard in some way. As with John Cotton Ltd., Philip Morris assumes the mantle of antiquity through the medium of patrimony.

Reflections on the Generation and Perpetuation of Error

What do these five examples tell us? That you can't trust anything you read, no matter who wrote it? I suspect that's too big and depressing a lesson to draw from such slender evidence. But there is at least one common thread here, and it suggests several things that are both simple and profound.

The first is the value that can be attributed to age. In the context of a hobby rife with collectible goods, imbued with connoisseurship, and filmed over with nostalgia, antiquity has the potential to confer a number of benefits yielding great psychic satisfaction. For that reason it matters to both producers and consumers, and it can matter a lot.

For the former, it substantiates claims to priority in their market segment. This aura of primacy has concrete advantages in marketing to customers, and also bestows a cachet that makes it easier for the company to attract, retain, and motivate the best talent in its field. This in turn reinforces innovation and leadership. Priority can therefore engender a cycle where tangible benefits both arise from and further enhance reputation. But this can work the other way round too; loss of prestige can lead to lower sales, a diminished employee pool, and an accelerated slump in reputation. The stakes for the company can be high, and greatly affect long term viability and economic performance.

For consumers the issue can be equally important, but tends to be more visceral than overtly economic in its impact. Age, and its implications for reputation, has the ability to lend mystique, wisdom, and ultimately validation to their choice. Every collector values the history underlying an object or class of object, and everyone who values history likes a pedigree; the more illustrious the better.

With that in mind, let's quickly review the errors in the five case studies given and look for a pattern. An obvious one immediately becomes clear: Peterson, Charatan, Marcovitch, John Cotton, and Philip Morris all eventually claimed to be older than they really were. They each exhibited a variant of the well-known phenomenon called "age fabrication". The ground for age fabrication, the act of altering age in the pursuit of perceived advantages, becomes fertile when individuals have a strong incentive to overstate or understate their age; a classic example is the supercentenarian who seeks the fame and attention associated with being recognized as the oldest man or woman alive. The interesting observation in this context is that what's true for individuals can be true for companies too. As we've seen, in a field where remoteness in time lends enchantment to the product being sold, there are powerful motivations to exaggerate the age of the enterprise. And where temptation is strong, there will be those who yield.

To be fair, not only is the temptation universal, the act of succumbing is too. When researching the earliest history of pioneers in the pipe and tobacco industry, rarely if ever have I failed to find differences, often material⁵, between what everyone knows to be true, and what is really true. I do not mean to imply that all published facts regarding a company's origins are really fictitious; to be candid if that were true research would be easier, not harder. The historian could safely ignore everything "known" about the early history of a business and start with a clean slate. The reality is more insidious; because of an indiscriminate (and probably generally unintentional) mixing of truth and falsehood, a significant amount of time must be spent trying to sort one from the other.

⁵ What constitutes a material difference is an interesting question. The pipe and pipe tobacco business was a ferment of innovation and activity in mid-19th century London. Scores of companies opened around the same time. In that environment even an apparently small exaggeration in the date of foundation had the potential to let a company stake out bragging rights as first in its field.

As noted pipe and tobacco essayist Fred Hanna has observed, there are many attributes of pipes that can make them appealing to their owner. Smoking quality, for example, is clearly an important one. But for many collectors other factors, more intangible or idiosyncratic, exist as well and play a critical role. In his remarkably introspective discussion of what straight grain means to him, and why he values it, Fred highlights "...a sense of recognition that is both deep and satisfying in some fundamental way"⁶. While Fred is clearly referring to the external appearance of a pipe, I believe that this "cognitive click", as he calls it, can be precipitated by any number of intangible aspects too, certainly including the charm surrounding an old and storied brand.

Because of this I believe it possible that the perpetuation of age fabrication for pipe and pipe tobacco firms is generally the result of a tacit conspiracy, engaged in by company and collectors alike. The company's actions may well be a consequence of indifference, deliberate manipulation of facts, honest mistakes unconsciously motivated by self-interest, or simple error; at this remove in time it's impossible to know, and frankly unimportant. The collector's role is simpler to understand. He or she is driven by an unconscious desire to preserve the mystique of a beloved object, and by a natural predisposition to accept the received wisdom of acknowledged authority.

This latter behavior, the subordination of one's judgment to a higher authority, is an interesting example of "error cascade". Originally a medical term, error cascade describes the accumulating consequences of relying upon an inaccurate initial diagnosis. More generally it can refer to the tendency to ignore observations that don't conform to the conventional wisdom if they contradict positions sanctioned by prior authority. The blinders involved in such a response can be astonishing. One classic instance is the Clovis Barrier in pre-history American archaeology. Because authority had stated that there

6 Fred Hanna, *The Perfect Smoke*, NASPC Press, 2012, page 161

was nothing to be found before the Clovis era, nobody looked; digs would uncover the strata of Clovis sites and simply stop going deeper. This mental block lasted for over sixty years.

The good news is that the pattern created by error cascade can be broken. When that occurs, it is typically precipitated by an exogenous factor: someone or something outside the field that forces a reorientation of thought. The bad news is that decades can easily go by before this takes place. In the five case studies described in this essay, a measure of error cascade is present whenever collectors accept a company's version of events because they accept its authority; whether this acceptance is the result of conscious decision or unconscious response is immaterial.

It's worth observing that a collector's amenability to the acceptance of authority is further enhanced by his preference bias, the deeply embedded prejudices that influence everything we do, and the judgments we make as to the value of other peoples' choices. To the extent that collector decision-making is driven by a desire to satisfy emotional needs, and sanctified by rationalization after the fact, the probability that external "facts" which support those decisions will be challenged is negligible.

A couple of closing thoughts. First let me note that I am not saying that every collector feels the same way about the value of age in enhancing reputation; collectors have different preferences, and their responses are framed accordingly (see Neill Archer Roan's blog post on this topic for an excellent discussion of some of the consequences of conflicting preference bias in pipe collecting⁷). One would reasonably expect to see more evidence of this behavior in collectors who gravitate towards brands that originated in the 19th century, dating from the infancy of the briar pipe. But even there the response could easily vary quite a bit from collector to collector.

7 Neill Archer Roan, "On Price, Value, Meaning, and the Scourge of the Flame Wars": <http://www.apassionforpipes.com/neills-blog/2012/4/26/on-price-value-meaning-and-the-scourge-of-flame-wars.html>



Figure 8: Sir Thomas Gresham

I'm not making a statement about how every collector thinks or feels; only about the forces, conscious and unconscious, which create a tendency to generate asymmetrical error (i.e. a prejudice towards age exaggeration) in foundation dating for the earliest brands of pipes and pipe tobaccos.

Finally, so what? Even if any of this is right, why should we care? I can only think of two reasons. The easier one to express is an exhibition of my own preference bias, the notion that true is better than not-true; that coming as close to knowing what really happened is an inherently good thing, yielding benefits both recognized and unforeseen. My second reason is, however, squishier than the first, and relates to the other part of this essay's title.

Sir Thomas Gresham was an English merchant and financial advisor to Henry VIII and his successors. He is perhaps the most well-known of the many before and since who observed the famous economic tenet that “bad money drives out good”. The concept is simple: when debased coinage is in circulation at the same time as undebased coinage, people will naturally spend the bad and hoard the good. Like all great concepts, applications abound outside the original field of intent.

In this context, I believe there is a Gresham-like tendency for “bad” information to drive out “good”. This is particularly true when the “bad” information is more welcome because it reinforces deeply held prejudices and beliefs. Once supported by seemingly impartial data that possesses the imprimatur of authority, preference bias is given free reign and becomes immutable. And like most strongly entrenched habits, such tendencies are more easily started than stopped.

