

# Bourbon's 50th anniversary: A timeline of the ultimate American spirit



*Bourbon barrels in the private dining at Bank & Bourbon, in the Loews Philadelphia Hotel. MICHAEL KLEIN / Philly.com*

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POSTED: Friday, May 2, 2014, 12:23 PM

**Parade**

Imbibers, it's time to celebrate. On May 4, 1964—50 years ago this week—the United States Congress [resolved to declare](#) bourbon whiskey as a "distinctive product of the United States." A half century later, this honey-colored spirit is still drunk from coast to coast, helping invoke "the shared memory of the American past," as Dane Hucklebridge writes in his new book, *Bourbon: A History of the American Spirit*.

Bourbon—which is made primarily from corn and aged in charred oak barrels—has a long history that actually began long before European settlers sailed to America. We asked Hucklebridge to distill the story of bourbon into the following timeline. Enjoy—and cheers!

### **5,000 B.C.**

An early form of corn is domesticated by ancient Mesoamericans, becoming *the* staple grain of pre-Columbian American civilization. Corn dogs, however, are still roughly 6,900 years away.

### **1265 A.D.**

Catalan playboy Ramon Llull abandons his hard-partying ways to become a Franciscan monk—but he never completely gives up on drinking. Ramon discovers that with just a copper alembic, alcoholic beverages can be distilled into stronger spirits. Ireland and Scotland are intrigued...

### **1620**

Tired of trans-Atlantic beer runs, Jamestown colonist George Thorpe decides to make his own booze using native Indian corn. The precursor to modern bourbon is born, but gets off to a rough start—George is killed by disgruntled Powhatan Indians just two years later.

### **1776**

Fed up with intoxication without representation, Americans take matters into their own hands—and their own stills. With cheap British rum no longer available during the Revolution, making liquor from our own corn and rye starts to sound like a damn good idea.

## **1792**

After welcoming an initial wave of Scots-Irish settlers, Kentucky officially becomes a state. In the wilderness of the Bourbon County region, native corn grows better than any other grain. Tremendous amounts of whiskey-making ensue.

## **1821**

The name "Bourbon Whiskey" first appears in an advertisement—the title given to the barrel-aged corn liquor that's being shipped down the Mississippi River toward New Orleans. Mardi Gras will never be the same again.

The author, Dane Hucklebridge.

## **1897**

The Bottled-in-Bond Act, followed less than a decade later by the Pure Food and Drugs Act, finally defines what bourbon whiskey truly is: delicious. Along with some other things, of course. It has to be made primarily from corn, and it must be aged in new charred oak barrels.

## **1920**

Some knuckleheads in Washington get the bright idea to ban alcohol. Gangsters, speakeasies, and the Charleston result. The only legal way to purchase bourbon is with a doctor's prescription, predating medicinal marijuana by ninety years. The Great Depression, however, makes everyone reconsider.

## **1941**

America's involvement in the Second World War means that millions of Americans have to put their lives on hold to help secure victory—bourbon-makers included. The entire bourbon industry sets aside whiskey making to produce industrial alcohol for the war effort. And G.I. Joe gets his first DUI...

## **1964**

The U.S. Congress declares bourbon whiskey to be a distinctive product of the United States, stating once and for all that it's only real bourbon if it's made in the good ol' U.S. of A. Coca-Cola and apple pie both turn green with envy, and Americans across the land celebrate accordingly.

## **2014**

Fifty years after that famous piece of legislature, The American Spirit is still going strong. With Kentucky bourbon now a multi-*billion* dollar industry, and new bourbon distilleries opening across the land, our nation is truly experiencing a bourbon renaissance. So please, stock up on aspirin and ibuprofen accordingly.

*Bourbon: A History of the American Spirit* by Dane Hucklebridge is out now.