



KENTUCKY BOURBON HALL OF FAME® | 2026 CLASS BIOS

Bios, as provided by each inductee, are below in alphabetical order.

Shane Baker, 55, Danville, Ky and **E. Patrick Heist, Ph.D.**, 53, Danville, Ky. Shane Baker is the Co-Founder, President, and CEO of Ferm Solutions and Wilderness Trail Distillery. Born in November 1970 in Danville, Kentucky, he comes from a long family lineage in the distilling industry, dating back to the 1940s. His grandparents, Dorris and Hubert Ballard, met while working at the Kentucky River Distillery as teenagers, and Dorris later retired from the renowned Stitzel-Weller distillery after more than 50 years in the Bourbon industry. Shane's father also worked in distilling at Canada Dry Distillery, which later became Old Fitzgerald Distillery.



Shane graduated with a Mechanical Engineering degree from the University of Kentucky and spent the early part of his career working for a variety of engineering and manufacturing companies. His journey into the bourbon industry began in 2006, when he co-founded Ferm Solutions – a consultancy that provides fermentation expertise, training, research, engineering and lab services to businesses and brands around the world – with his longtime friend and business partner, Dr. Pat Heist. Since the company's inception, the duo's combined expertise in engineering, microbiological research, plant pathology and fermentation has allowed them to help hundreds of the world's most elite bourbon and spirits producers, and dozens more non-distillery businesses that use yeast production, optimize and improve their processes.

Having worked intimately with many of the top distilleries in Kentucky, Shane and Dr. Heist leveraged their expertise and learnings to create their own distillery, Wilderness Trail, in 2012. The fast-growing distillery quickly gained recognition for its unique approach of using modern science to optimize old-world distilling traditions. Wilderness Trail distinguishes itself by using proprietary yeast strains, unique mashbills and an infusion mashing process that preserves the integrity of grains, resulting in a smooth, flavorful distillate. Additionally, unlike most distilleries that use a sour mash process, Wilderness Trail uses sweet mash fermentation as its sole mashing technique.

With decades of experience in engineering, fermentation and distillation, Shane Baker has solidified himself as an innovative leader in the spirits industry. His expertise in process optimization, problem-solving and business management has driven the success of both Ferm Solutions and Wilderness Trail. His contributions continue to shape the future of bourbon production while preserving Kentucky's rich distilling heritage.



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E. Patrick Heist, Ph.D. is the Co-Founder, Co-Owner, and Chief Scientific Officer of both Ferm Solutions and Wilderness Trail Distillery. He studied microbiology in college, then moved into plant pathology in field crops, earning B.S., M.S., and Ph. D. degrees at the University of Kentucky. He then spent 6 years at the Kentucky College of Osteopathic Medicine as a Medical Microbiology Professor.

In 2006, he founded Ferm Solutions along with business partner and friend Shane Baker, with whom he was in a rock-and-roll band in the late 1990s. Ferm Solutions offers numerous services and products to brewers and distillers, including research, engineering, product development, and technical services, including process optimization for both the fuel and beverage alcohol industries. They work with over 200 distilleries around the world, offering lab services focused on fermentation and microbiological testing for yeast health, bacterial analysis, pH, and yeast

and bacterial molecular identification. In addition, Ferm Solutions provides training for the entire process of distillation and offers consulting services as well.

In 2013, Dr. Heist, once again partnering with Shane Baker, founded Wilderness Trail Distillery, which has now become one of the fastest-growing bourbon distilleries in the world. Wilderness Trail produces several bourbons, including both high rye and wheated bourbons, as well as rye whiskey using their own proprietary yeast strains. They also utilize a proprietary infusion mashing process, which is where they are able to determine the ideal temperatures high enough to gelatinize starches, but not so high as to degrade the quality of the grain. The pair believes that this results in a softer and more flavorful distillate. Wilderness Trail also uses a sweet mash process, unlike the usual sour mash that most distilleries use. It claims to be the first distillery to solely use sweet mashing in Kentucky, believing that not acidifying the mash provides a more flavor-forward product with a softer finish.

Dr. Heist and Shane initially aged and bottled everything made by Wilderness Trail in Danville, Kentucky, using a 250-gallon Vendome Pot Hybrid Still. As the operation grew, it became necessary to add a 40-foot-tall, 18-inch diameter Vendome Column Still with a 250 gallon doubler. With the continued growth, they then added an additional 40-foot-tall, 36-inch diameter Vendome Column Still and a 500-gallon doubler, allowing them to have flexible systems ranging from smaller-scale production to large-scale production with up to 216 barrels per day running 24 hours a day. They can currently fill a 20,000-barrel warehouse in about 100 days.

Wilderness Trail uses Independent Stave Company barrels with a #4 char, barreled at 110 proof for bourbon and 100 proof for rye whiskey. The bourbons are aged to a minimum of 4 years, but they have since released 6- and 8-year age-stated bourbons.

Dr. Heist is now an Adjunct Professor at James B. Beam Institute in the College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky and has given a TEDTalk on the process of making bourbon, starting with the aging process, types of grain



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required to produce a bourbon, and what happens inside the barrel warehouses before it is bottled. In addition, Dr. Heist has published or contributed to numerous research articles.

In November of 2022, Campari Group based in Milan Italy, owners of the Wild Turkey distillery, agreed to purchase a 70% share of the Wilderness Trail Distillery for \$420 million, given a distillery valuation of \$600 million, with an option to purchase the remaining 30% in 2031 for \$180 million. At the time, this was the second largest purchase by the Campari Group, second only to their earlier purchase of Grand Marnier. #



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The late W.L. Lyons Brown, Sr. and George Garvin Brown II, Louisville, Ky. W.L. Lyons Brown Sr. (1906-1973) and his brother George Garvin Brown II (1912-1969) served as leaders of Brown - Forman Distillers Corporation across many positions during their careers. Known as "The Boys" they were the sons of Brown-Forman President and Chairman Owsley Brown I and grandsons of founder George Garvin Brown. Both joined Brown-Forman in 1933 prior to the repeal of prohibition helping their father to rebuild the company and position it for growth. During their tenure Brown-Forman grew to become the largest Kentucky-based distilling company and its Early Times brand the top-selling Kentucky Straight Bourbon in the world.



W. L. Lyons Brown, Sr. was a visionary businessman who successfully transformed Brown-Forman – a historic family company – into a global leader of American whiskey, leaving a legacy across his professional and civic ventures. He brought a dynamic salesmanship style to the bourbon industry that helped forge deep, long-standing relationships with distributors and customers worldwide.

Lyons worked as a stockbroker before officially joining Brown-Forman in September 1933. Initially joining the family business as Secretary and Director, his innate charm and sharp marketplace perception quickly propelled him into executive management. He was elected corporate Vice President in 1941.

After assuming the Presidency in 1945 and becoming Chairman of the Board in 1951, Lyons revolutionized Brown-Forman's post-war strategy by focusing resources on Old Forester and Early Times. His leadership led to a 1,500 percent increase in net worth over 22 years. He significantly expanded the portfolio, notably through the acquisition of the Jack Daniel Distillery. Lyons even returned from retirement to serve as Chairman from 1969 to 1971, stabilizing the company after his brother Garvin's death and leading it through its 1970 Centennial.

Beyond his professional success, Lyons served on numerous corporate and humanitarian boards and received an honorary doctorate in recognition of his civic leadership. A devoted sportsman, he also managed Ashbourne Farms, led the American Shorthorn Breeders Association, and made sporting history in 1970 when his horse, Fathom, was ridden by Diane Crump, the first female jockey in the Kentucky Derby. Notably, Lyons was among a group of eleven influential Louisville business leaders who sponsored Louisville boxer Cassius Clay – later known as Muhammad Ali – following his gold medal win in the 1960 Olympics in Rome, Italy.



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George Garvin Brown II – affectionately known as "Garvin" – built a legendary 36-year career at Brown-Forman by learning the business from the ground up. The grandson and namesake of the company's founder, Garvin was called home from the University of Virginia at age 21 to help the business emerge from Prohibition, following his father Owsley Brown's health crisis and the passing of his mother, Laura Lee Lyons Brown. He joined the company in 1933, initially working within a physical labor crew. His hands-on grit became company lore during the historic 1937 Louisville flood when, as a newly appointed Vice President, he donned hip boots to personally wade through rising waters and rescue the corporation's vital records.

As President from 1951 to 1966 and Chairman of the Board from 1966 until his passing in 1969, Garvin steered Brown-Forman through an unprecedented era of global modernization and growth. Under his leadership, corporate sales and income more than doubled. This massive expansion was driven by his forward-thinking pursuit of international trade, his strategic oversight of the former Blue Grass Cooperage Company, and landmark portfolio additions – most notably the acquisition of the Jack Daniel Distillery.

Beyond his active involvement in the distilled spirits industry, Garvin provided professional guidance as a director for The First National Bank and The Kentucky Trust Company, among others, while also earning recognition as national "Mr. Shorthorn of the Year" in 1964 for his purebred cattle operations at Sutherland Farms. Remembered for his "light touch" leadership, rich baritone voice, and profound corporate conscience, Garvin did not merely inherit a bourbon legacy; he masterfully engineered its global future. #



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Eric Gregory, 59, Midway, Ky. Eric Gregory, a veteran communications and public affairs strategist, is President of the Kentucky Distillers' Association that unites and leads the Commonwealth's signature Bourbon and distilled spirits industry, including the world-famous Kentucky Bourbon Trail® tour.



Gregory assumed leadership of the KDA in 2008 and has reshaped not only the organization he heads, but also the trajectory of Kentucky Bourbon itself, elevating it from a recovering “sin” industry into a “signature” global economic, cultural, and tourism powerhouse.

Through vision, relentless work ethic, and strategic leadership, Gregory rebuilt the KDA from the ground up, expanding membership from just seven distilleries to more than 75 today, and created a highly effective trade association now regarded as a national model across industries.

His legacy has been defined by collaboration and unity, as Gregory brought together distilleries of all sizes under a shared vision, fostering a culture where collective success outweighs individual competition, and consistently emphasizing responsibility and public service.

Leveraging his 35-year career in governmental affairs, political consulting and journalism, Gregory has overseen a sweeping series of legislative and regulatory reforms that have unlocked innovation, expanded market access, modernized state tourism, and revolutionized the industry.

The pinnacle of his long list of successes came in 2023 with the passage of landmark legislation to phase out the discriminatory tax on aging barrels – a skyrocketing burden the industry had been fighting for more than 75 years.

This career-defining achievement alone will save millions of Kentucky barrels from potentially leaving the state to avoid the tax – while protecting funding for local schools and vital emergency services – and stands as one of the most monumental policy victories in the history of Bourbon.

Equally important – and revolutionary – has been Gregory's leadership in developing Bourbon tourism into a global, bucket-list phenomenon. When he took the helm, the Kentucky Bourbon Trail® tour was a modest, underdeveloped concept with only seven distilleries.

Through strategic branding, marketing, collaboration, intellectual property protection and a ton of media and tasting events, he reimaged and refashioned the Bourbon Trail™ into a world-class destination on par with Napa Valley.

Today, the KBT® features 74 locations throughout the state, attracts millions of visitors from across the globe, supports thousands of jobs, revitalizes rural communities, and fuels a vibrant hospitality ecosystem of restaurants, hotels, and small businesses.



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He also created the Kentucky Bourbon Affair® fantasy camp, co-founded the Order of the Writ®, built the Kentucky Bourbon Tales® oral history project, launched the Lifting Spirits foundation, and revamped the Kentucky Bourbon Hall of Fame® into an elite, prestigious honor and experience.

Even with all these accomplishments, Gregory’s personal commitment is indisputable.

His leadership is marked by around-the-clock accessibility, unwavering integrity, fierce dedication and a “white glove” approach to member services that has earned the trust and admiration of distillers at every level.

Before joining the KDA, Gregory served as Governmental Affairs Manager at East Kentucky Power Cooperative. He previously served as Vice President of Public Affairs for Preston-Osborne, a Lexington public relations, political consulting, marketing and research firm.

A graduate of the University of Kentucky, Gregory began his career as an award-winning journalist for the *Lexington Herald-Leader*. He also served as a reporter and editor at the *Honolulu Advertiser* and has been nominated twice for the Pulitzer Prize.

Gregory is a native of Henderson, Ky. He and his wife, Ellen, live in historic Midway, Ky., the state’s first town founded by a railroad, and have three children: Ginny, Duncan and Sarah. And if you ask about his favorite Bourbon, his response will always be, “Kentucky Bourbon.” #



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Fred Minnick, 47, Louisville, Ky. Since returning home from Iraq in 2005, Fred Minnick has become one of the most recognized and influential voices in American whiskey. While much of the media focused on Scotch, Minnick hit the pavement to champion bourbon, publishing his first article on the Kentucky Bourbon Trail in 2006. He has since told Kentucky bourbon stories to national outlets including Bourbon+ Magazine (which he co-founded), Forbes, The New York Times, Parade Magazine, Scientific American, Tasting Panel, Whisky Advocate, Whisky Magazine, and Wine Enthusiast, among others.



A 2001 graduate of Oklahoma State University with a degree in Agricultural Communications, Minnick began his career as a forestry technical writer, collaborating with foresters, soil scientists, and timber companies on environmentally conscious practices. Colleagues affectionately nicknamed him “Forestry Fred,” and this early foundation informed his distinctive, agricultural-first perspective on bourbon, grounding his work in the realities of grain, land and production.

In 2002, Minnick, a former staff sergeant, received orders for deployment with his Army National Guard unit. He served in the Middle East from late 2003 to early 2005 as an Army photojournalist. Upon returning home, he struggled with readjustment and severe PTSD, finding it difficult to hold a job. Through the Louisville VA, he received life-saving therapy, including exposure and cognitive behavioral techniques. One pivotal tool — “Taste Mindfulness” — helped reconnect his sensory perception and became the cornerstone of his approach to tasting and evaluating bourbon.

This personal journey, combined with a growing passion for bourbon’s flavors and stories, inspired his USA Today and Publishers Weekly bestselling memoir, *Bottom Shelf: How a Forgotten Brand of Bourbon Saved One Man’s Life* (2026). For Minnick, bourbon represents far more than a distilled spirit, it is a lens through which to explore history, resilience, craftsmanship, and human connection.

Minnick is the author of nine books that have significantly advanced public knowledge of bourbon and American whiskey. His work *Bourbon: The Rise, Fall & Rebirth of an American Whiskey* won the 2017 Spirited Award for Best Spirits Book and helped define bourbon’s modern narrative, tracing its evolution through Prohibition, World War II, and its recognition in 1964 as America’s Native Spirit. *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch & Irish Whiskey* broke new ground in documenting the critical, often overlooked contributions of women to whiskey history and received a Gold Medal in Women’s Studies from ForeWord Reviews. His book *Bourbon Curious* further broadened the category’s reach, bringing bourbon education to a new generation of enthusiasts.

Beyond writing, Minnick has played a central role in bringing bourbon into mainstream cultural conversation. He co-hosts the widely followed *Bourbon Pursuit* podcast, produces digital content through his YouTube channel, and has appeared on national programs including *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, *Fox & Friends*, *NPR*, *Bravo’s Top Chef*, and *Discover’s Moonshiners*.



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Recognizing the shift toward digital and mobile consumption, Minnick expanded into podcasting and live events. He has led tastings at the Kentucky Derby Museum, including the long-running Legends Series, hosted corporate and public events nationwide, and co-founded the Bourbon & Beyond music and bourbon festival with Danny Wimmer Presents. This evolution transformed him from an author into a charismatic personality who has tasted bourbon alongside celebrities like Ludacris and Peyton Manning and even instructed presidential cabinet members on professional tasting techniques. His events have reached massive audiences at the Super Bowl and other major pop-culture gatherings.

Minnick founded the American Spirits Council of Tasters, an international spirits competition, and Club Marzipan, a whiskey club for ultra bourbon geeks.

Minnick has also demonstrated a sustained commitment to philanthropy, helping raise more than \$11 million for charitable causes, including the Ronald McDonald House, the USO, food banks, and children's organizations. In his partnership with the Kentucky Distillers Association and Bourbon Crusaders, he helped raise nearly \$5 million through bourbon auctions to support Kentucky communities impacted by the devastating floods and tornadoes of 2021 and 2022.

He serves on the Board of Trustees for the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels.

Minnick lives in Louisville, Kentucky, with his wife, Dr. Jaclyn Engelsheer Minnick, and their two energetic children, Oscar and Julian. In his free time, he enjoys wearing ascots and practicing Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, though never simultaneously. #



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John W. Schickel, 72, Union, Ky. John Schickel concluded a distinguished 50 year career in public service in December 2025, retiring as state Senator for Kentucky’s 11th District in Boone County. Over his tenure in the General Assembly, Schickel served as long time chairman of the Senate Licensing and Occupations Committee, where he played a pivotal role in modernizing Kentucky’s alcohol laws and ushering in a new era for the state’s signature bourbon industry. As chair, he served as the gatekeeper for all alcohol, business, and gaming regulations, using his position to lead a thoughtful overhaul of outdated statutes stifling economic growth. His leadership contributed to the success of the Kentucky Bourbon Trail, the growth of craft distilling, and the revitalization of urban and rural communities.



One of Schickel’s most far-reaching accomplishments came in 2016, when he carried Senate Bill (SB) 11, a sweeping modernization of Kentucky’s alcohol laws. SB 11 expanded production limits for small farm wineries and microbreweries, created new license types to support public consumption and tourism, and authorized precinct-level local option elections for distillery sales—bringing much-needed flexibility and modernization to Kentucky’s regulatory framework. It also gave distillers broader authority to offer samples, sell souvenir packages, and collaborate with other alcohol producers, making Kentucky a more competitive destination for craft spirits and beverage tourism.

Schickel’s continued efforts to support the industry built on the foundation of SB 11. He sponsored SB 99 in 2020, allowing distilleries to sell products created in partnership with microbreweries—encouraging collaboration between two of Kentucky’s fastest-growing industries. He also championed SB 67, which legalized “to-go” alcohol sales alongside takeaway food orders, helping restaurants and distilleries adapt and survive during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Schickel was a stalwart supporter of House Bill 500, which clarified and protected the increasingly popular practice of private barrel selections—a major tourism draw and unique selling point for Kentucky bourbon. This legislation helped highlight bourbon experiences at distilleries across the state, including Boone County Distilling in Schickel’s own district.

During his time in office, Schickel viewed economic development through a pro-business lens, believing strongly in the ability of entrepreneurs and private industry to drive revitalization. Under his leadership, alcohol laws were reformed to reflect modern realities while respecting the cultural significance of bourbon. His work did not just benefit distillers—it laid groundwork for the growth of small farm wineries and craft breweries, transforming former tobacco farms and old buildings into vibrant tourist destinations.

Beyond his legislative accomplishments, Schickel’s public service included an appointment by President George W. Bush, a U.S. Marshal for the Eastern District of Kentucky, a law enforcement officer, a corrections administrator, and an adjunct professor of justice studies at Northern Kentucky University. He holds a master’s degree in public administration from NKU and resides in Union, Kentucky. In retirement, he enjoys pickleball, hunting, gardening, and fishing. #