

## WHAT'S IN A STREET NAME?

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Only in a town where the German influence has been present over many years, as in the case of Baltimore, might one expect to find a *Hasselberger* or a *Hammerbacker Court*, a *Bauernschmidt Road*, a *Von der Horst Lane*, a *Bloede Avenue*, and streets with names like *Schuch*, *Schroeder*, *Mueller*, *Luerssen* or *Waesche*.

Any study of street names must necessarily be in the nature of a "not too serious history," to borrow the charming title of Letitia Stockett's delightful volume on Baltimore. One finds little or no documentary evidence for the reason behind the naming of a street; there is no recitation of such reason in ordinance, plat, or deed. One must rely on his knowledge of etymology and orthography as applied to family names in order to submit that nearly one hundred thoroughfare designations in Baltimore are of German origin. Sometimes the memory of an old-timer among the denizens of a particular neighborhood aids in establishing the fact that such and such a street was named for the donor of the road-bed, or for his wife, his mistress, his favorite author, composer, or character in fiction; or that a certain lane was named for an old brewery which used to flourish there in happier days; or that this or that road was given the name of a family which once owned much land thereabout.

English names naturally predominate in American towns, especially in the East, both in patronymics, and in historical and place names. The German influence is, however, frequently second, notably in cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore, with French, Italian, Polish, and Indian trailing far behind. This is not surprising for Baltimore, inasmuch as the German

element appeared here even before 1750; the thrifty "Dutchmen," as they were erroneously called, were soon quite successful in business and industry.

Breweries in Baltimore, as in many other towns, were for decades conducted by Germans and their descendants. Accordingly, we have such street names, derived from the brewer families, as *Bauernschmidt Road*, already referred to, with an amusing variant in *Bauernwood Avenue*. Another is *Brehm's Lane* from the Brehm family of brewers, and *Gunther Avenue* from the Gunther family of beer makers. *Beck's Lane* is derived from a brewer who flourished in West Baltimore years ago.

Businesses and industries, other than breweries, conducted by persons with Germanic names gave us such street names as *Benkert Avenue* (the Benkerts conducted a tavern and a picnic grove) and *Bunnecke Street* (the Bunneckes were building contractors) and *Bloede Avenue*, mentioned above (the Bloedes were manufacturing chemists specializing in dyes) and *Graue Road* (Graue was a financier) and *Hafer Street*, named for a popular coal dealer and business man. Among the many smaller alleys and courts we find names like *Hax Alley*, after a family in the furniture business; *Hempel Court* and *Hempel Alley*, after a brush maker by that name; *Lipps Lane*, named for a manufacturer of soaps and then of candy; *Landwehr Lane*, for a dealer in hay, grain, and feed.

Most celebrated of all is *Wilkens Avenue* in southwest Baltimore, which runs from Gilmor Street out to Rolling Road. We shall refer to this thoroughfare later, both because of the interesting personality whose name it bears and because of the fact that re-

cently the name was the subject of spirited newspaper, political, and public discussion when an ill-advised attempt was made to change it.

Second to English place names are the German place names which would hardly have been chosen had not a German element been flourishing here. Examples are *Bremen Street*, *Berlin Avenue*, *Hamburg Street*, *Frankford Avenue*, *Brunswick Street*, *German Hilt Road*, *Germania Avenue*, *Westerwald Avenue*, and *Hanover Street*.

*Stricker Street* was named for an interesting historical figure, John Stricker, of German descent, saw service with Washington's troops in the Revolution; and in the War of 1812 he commanded the Baltimore troops who routed the British at the battle of North Point. And *Armistead Lane*, near Fort McHenry, is named for that historic fort's commandant, whose name, according to both Faust and Schuricht, is an anglicization of the original German "Armstaedt." One is surprised to see that only an insignificant little road in the suburbs is dedicated to the General *DeKalb* who figures so prominently in Maryland history.

The street names of *Waesche*, *Warner*, *Schroeder*, *Uhler*, and *Hoffman* are said to derive from German-Americans prominent in the city's financial and political life in the 1812 period. Another street named after one of this group of influential Germans was *Raborg Street*. This street, now changed to Fairmount Avenue extended, ran westward from Greene Street, parallel with and half a block north of Baltimore Street. In its later years it fell upon evil ways, becoming the only full fledged red-light street, for part of its way, in West Baltimore. We school boys regarded Raborg Street as taboo; once two hardy spirits and the writer walked through the worst part of it on a dare, to the fascinated horror of some pig-tailed school girls who promptly reported the incident to our parents.

*Broening Highway* is probably the

latest thoroughfare to be given a German sounding name; it was named in honor of William F. Broening, twice mayor of Baltimore, himself a citizen of German ancestry.

In mentioning street designations which glorify the sweeter sex—like *Henrietta*, *Doris*, *Edna Streets*—we regret that we possess no record of the possible romantic backgrounds for such designations. Occasionally, however, by the chance encounter of an old native we learn why, for example, a *Catherine Street* was so named. Again William Wilkens enters the picture; he named Catherine Street for one of his three wives, a graceful gesture, indeed. He likewise glorified the name of another of his wives in the street name of *Mary Ann*. Alas, Mary Ann, unlike her more fortunate contemporary Sarah Ann, has been doomed to oblivion save in the memory of those oldsters who now give their address as Ashton Street but remember when their residence was still on Mary Ann. Of course, there is nothing exclusively German about Catherine Street's name, and Mary Ann is quite English in sound, but they were the happy inspiration of a German immigrant who made a cool million in West Baltimore.

Wilkens named two other streets after sons of his. *Wilhelm* is the name of one, and its German spelling is obvious. The other is *Christian Street*; curiously, almost none but Jews lived here for ever so long. Besides Wilkens Avenue there was a *Wilkens Street*, now changed to Willard Street to avoid confusion with the avenue of the same name.

The following is a partial list, besides those already mentioned, of street and road names unmistakably German in spelling and sound. Most of these are for families who were prominent in the locality of the various streets: *Benninghaus*, *Benziger*, *Berg*, *Berger*, *Breitwert*, *Classen*, *Decker*, *Dietz*, *Diller*, *Doering*, *Dreher*, *Eierman*, *Eislen*, *Everhart*,

*Foerster, Frankfurst,<sup>1</sup> Gephart, Gehb, Gutman, Hartz, Heckel, Hellwig, Heneman, Herkimer, Hertlein, Holtzman, Hubner, Joh, Johannsen, Kahler, Kaufman, Keller, Kirsch, Kleins, Knecht, Konig, Koontz, Kuhlman, Kuper, Lehman, Lehnert, Lohrs, Maempel, Manns, Muth, Nuth, Pentz, Pfister, Radecke, Reinhart, Rehbaum, Ritter, Rueckert, Schaver, Schenley, Schley, Seidel, Seifert, Siegwart, Snyder, Staab, Stengel, Ulrich, Vogt, Vonieff, Waldman, Waldorf, Walpert, Walrad, Waltemeyer, Walther, Wagner, Weber, Wehr, Weidner, Weitzel, Wildberger, Zeppelin.*

The above list plus the other names mentioned elsewhere in this paper would thus indicate that there are nearly one hundred street names in Baltimore, the spelling of which is proof of the German influence which has been present in the town for nearly 200 years.

Before World War I there existed the name of German Street in the heart of the financial district. Due to war feeling there was strong popular clamor to change this name. Numerous banking, brokerage, business and industrial houses added their voices, arguing that this name on their letter heads might injure their business. Although the then mayor, the late James H. Preston, and others pointed out that the street had not been named for or by the Germans who had immigrated here, but that it had been so named in honor of an old and respected English colonial family who had donated the land to the city many years before, the City Council and the mayor found that it was inevitably necessary to agree to the change. The street was named Redwood in honor of the first Baltimorean to fall in the war.

Some thoughts about William Wilkens and the avenue which bears his name: Wilkens, a most colorful personality, an odd admixture of the saintly and the Satanic, came to Baltimore from a spot near Hamburg,

over a century ago. Like John Jacob Astor, who had landed in Baltimore from Waldorf, Germany, in the period just following the Revolution, Wilkens was a poor young man. The hair factory which he established in West Baltimore grew rapidly. At the period of its greatest prosperity it gave employment to over 800 people, a considerable number of employees in the last century for a single plant. The land area of the Wilkens factory which lay between Frederick and Wilkens Avenue with Bentalou Street on the east and Millington Lane on the west, covered territory equal to at least ten square city blocks. Of the more than 20 building units at the Wilkens plant, the huge warehouse was over a block and a half in length, and the main building of the plant was equally as immense. The large land area was used for the drying and curing of horse, hog, and cattle hair by sunlight and aeration. Henry Mencken in his book "Happy Days" characteristically limits his remarks about the famous Wilkens factory merely to the smells along Hollins Street when the wind blew from the west.

Wilkens amassed a considerable fortune, being accounted a millionaire shortly after the Crimean and Civil wars; one of his best strokes being the purchase for a very low price of the tails and manes of horses killed in these conflicts. His was an indefatigable mind and spirit; and it is a great pity that no biographical sketch of the man exists. In connection with Wilkens Avenue and Wilhelm, Wilkens, Catherine, Christian, and Mary Ann Streets, it should be said that Wilkens not only deeded the roadbeds to the city, as was customary, but he also made extensive improvements such as grading, paving, and the building of bridges over runs and creeks. He built many houses on these and other streets for his employees favoring them with especially low rents.

<sup>1</sup>An odd contraction of the name Frank Furst, a beloved citizen of German descent, prominent in politics, and a financier.

Wilkens Avenue was a grand experiment with him. This Svengali-like man with a huge black beard, piercing eyes, an Abraham Lincoln kind of stove-pipe hat which he wore daily and on all occasions (and even in bed) if one were to believe the vast legends of the neighborhood children who partly loved and partly feared him, wanted the satisfaction of having an important avenue named after him while he was still on this earth. He spent a great deal of money on his avenue: he built the heavy stone bridges over the two creeks which the avenue crossed, and he laid out a fine mall in the centre of the wide boulevard. Here he caused lawns, trees, and flower beds to be planted; he also had set up a number of fountains and statuettes. Finally he built a row of three storied homes in which some of his office employees resided.

The pretentiousness of the avenue attended upon its early days did not continue. The Wilkens row is the only one of three storied houses, save for a small group here and there; the mall in the center has disappeared in the interest of four lanes of traffic. But the name remains, thanks to the determined stand of Wilkens Avenue residents and many other Baltimoreans against a recent attempt to change it.

The story is worth repeating: last year a proposal was made to change the name of Wilkens Avenue to Crozier Boulevard, in order to honor a city employee by that name, who had been a very fine engineer. The mayor of Baltimore, unaware of the sentiment of the denizens not only of Wilkens Avenue itself, but of southwest Baltimore in general, innocently signed the ordinance passed by the City Council, most of whose members had never heard of the name of William Wilkens. Then the storm broke.

Practically one hundred percent of the residents of the avenue expressed passionate opposition to the attempted change. Many people placed signs in their windows to the

effect that come Hell or high water, their address would remain Wilkens Avenue as long as they drew breath on this planet. The newspapers, sensing a good fight, took up the cry, rushing to the support of the Wilkens Avenue "Minute-men" and women. People who had in their childhood or youthful days lived on the old avenue or in West Baltimore, but who had long since removed, joined the protestants, wrote letters to the newspapers, and signed petitions.

Mayor Howard W. Jackson, who had signed the ordinance as a matter of routine, and the city councilmen who had just as innocently voted for the change, let it be known that in view of the opposition they were willing to reconsider their action. This was promptly done, and the name of Wilkens Avenue remains. The sponsors of the ordinance certainly had not realized how much loyalty a neighborhood may have for a name that had become a tradition.

Just how loyal to a name residents would have to be to fight for a Joh, Waesche, Pfister, or Kirsch street, or for one of the "sch" group like Schuch, Schwartz, or Schaver Street is not certain. An attempt to tamper with Brehm's Lane would probably bring a protest from those who recall the fine brew produced by the brewery of that name; and the residents of *Beethoven's* single block might possibly insist on continuing to honor the great composer for what he gave the world, by sticking to the name of their street.

At all events, before one advocates changing the name of our Bauernschmidt, Hammerbacker, and Hasselberger streets, he had better reflect what happened when an attempt was made to change into "Crozier" the tradition-laden name of "Wilkens." The history preserved in fortuitous fashion on our street signs is evidently at times engraved in granite and at others merely writ in water, but at all events it offers us pleasant speculations for an idle hour.