

POTTHAST BROS. FURNITURE
&
THE FIRST WORLD WAR

On April 1, 2018, the German Society of Maryland published issue 109 of its *Vereinsnachrichten*. The major focus of that particular newsletter was the celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the Society's incorporation and the issuance of its charter on February 3, 1818. However, there was also a page devoted to events one hundred years prior, in 1918, as anti-German sentiment in the United States grew in the wake of the country's entry into the war against Germany and other members of the Central Powers. The page is a collage of news reports, signs, and other images which document both the breadth and the intensity of efforts to eradicate things German from Baltimore and Maryland, a city and a state with a significant German heritage. Among the more noteworthy items are:

- An article on the demise of *Der Deutsche Correspondent*, the German-language daily newspaper which had published continually since 1841 and which is to this day one of the best sources for the life of the German immigrant community in Baltimore and even beyond.
- A resolution offered by Richard J. Biggs, a member of the board of school commissioners for Baltimore City, to eliminate the study of German in Baltimore's preparatory schools.
- Placards posted by the Health Department with the word "LIBERTY" on them on the front doors of those infected with rubella rather than "GERMAN" as previously. The policy mirrored national practice, which substituted "Liberty" for any term which might have a German connection, e.g., liberty cabbage (for sauerkraut), liberty dogs (for dachshund), hot dogs (for frankfurters), etc.
- A move to remove the word "German" from the names of businesses and buildings like **German-American Mutual Permanent Building Association**, and, most enduring,
- An ordinance to rename "German Street" to "Redwood Street," in honor of George B. Redwood, the first officer from Baltimore to lose his life on the battlefield in France.

Of course, Baltimore and the State of Maryland were in many respects not much different from the rest of the country.

By March 1918, the joint venture between the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and the North German Lloyd Shipping Company was already fifty years old. On March 23, 1868, the North German Lloyd ship, the “Baltimore,” landed at the immigration pier in Locust Point on the Baltimore waterfront. The next day there was a festive celebration and major parade in Baltimore. The cooperative venture ultimately served 1.2 million immigrants, about half of whom came from German-speaking areas of Europe.¹ The B & O/NGL partnership ushered in a decades-long flourishing of the German presence in Maryland. Many, of course, left the ship at Locust Point and immediately boarded a B & O train for the Midwest. Most Germans arriving in Baltimore hurried on to the Ohio River and from there to the prairie states, which were rapidly being opened up for settlement. In a coincidence of historical timing, Baltimore became the most popular port of entry for German-speaking immigrants during the time of greatest influx. This was largely due to the ever-growing trade between Baltimore and Bremen. While relatively few German ships had come to America in the earlier days, the Hanseatic seaports, Bremen and Hamburg, made great strides in the nineteenth century in regaining their one-time importance, and German shipping took its place among the traditional seafaring nations. This sudden growth of German shipping lines was largely due to the profitable business of bringing German emigrants to the American shores. For the return journey, the vessels could be loaded instead with hogsheads of tobacco or other American staple products. A close relationship ensued, especially between Bremen and Baltimore. As Dieter Cunz, the foremost scholar on German immigration into Maryland, says: “Certainly the happiest period in the long history of German immigration into Maryland lay in the five decades between the Civil War and the first World War.”²

By 1900, more than half of Marylanders (53.4%) had one or both parents who were born in German-speaking districts of middle Europe. The national average, in comparison, was 30.2%. Maryland had the fourth largest concentration of German-Americans (exceeded only by Kentucky, Indiana and Missouri).³ The 1910 census put the number of persons born in Germany who were residents in Maryland at 36,652. Those of German parentage, including those born in Germany and those whose parents were born in Germany numbered 135,325. German-speak-

ing residents made up 45.7% of the total foreign population in Maryland and about 11% of the total population of Maryland. By 1914, on the eve of World War I, 94,000 Germans lived in the City of Baltimore, making up twenty percent of the population.

The situation in Baltimore and Maryland during and immediately after the First World War presents a bit of a conundrum. Baltimore is arguably a very pro-German city, yet it exhibits every anti-German trait one would expect. On the other hand, despite Mr. Biggs' attempt to ban the teaching of German in schools, through the 1920s a third of the city's public schools included German as part of the regular curriculum, and one in four Baltimoreans could speak German fluently. Baltimore businesses suffered generally after the devastating fire of 1904, yet Potthast Bros. Furniture, a fledgling, family-run company with unmistakable German roots, expanded around the same time and flourished through the war and well into the 1920s. It is difficult to judge the degree to which Potthast Bros. was unique among German-American business of the time. Certainly beer brewers, who were almost exclusively first- or second-generation immigrants from German-speaking countries, suffered under Prohibition, but there is no true parallel. Other Baltimore businesses with strong German roots may well have prospered. Nonetheless the case of Potthast Bros. Furniture seems unusual enough to warrant a closer look.

A few words in way of background: In July 1891, Vincent Potthast arrived in Baltimore from Bremerhaven. He was trained as a cabinet-maker and was able to find work almost immediately at Knabe Piano. At Vincent's urging, three of his brothers joined him. William arrived in June 1892, John in November 1894, and Theodore came finally in August 1900. For a time the brothers made furniture in the basement of their homes, but eventually they went into business making new furniture and repairing antiques. The firm, which became known as Potthast Bros., Inc., was officially founded in 1892. It flourished for eighty-two years, becoming a Baltimore institution known well beyond the borders of Maryland. Numerous Potthast pieces are now treasured antiques; many are still in use. In fact, Potthast made the mahogany desk in the private office of the governor in the Maryland State House.

Potthast Bros. Furniture, the enterprise, has received scholarly treatment several times. Catherine Arthur completed a thorough study of the

furniture as a part of her degree work in the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture of the University of Delaware.⁴ An article in the 2010 *Yearbook for German-American Studies* devotes a section to Vincent Potthast, one of the four brothers involved in the earliest days of the company,⁵ and there is a relevant essay in the project on Immigrant Entrepreneurship initiated and maintained by the German Historical Institute.⁶ Although articles within those volumes feature “business biographies,” as a matter of policy the focus is always on an individual, on entrepreneurs rather than their companies. In the case of Potthast Bros. Furniture, that person is William Potthast, the eldest of the four Potthast brothers who emigrated to Baltimore and formed Potthast Bros. Furniture. The current discussion will, however, focus on the business, especially during the first two of the four periods identified in the article on William, e.g., the turn of the century up to the eve of the First World War and the postwar period through the Great Depression. Even as the anti-German hysteria grew, as street names were changed, as individuals “Americanized” their names, as German-American cultural organizations—The Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland, The German Society of Maryland, the *Sänger-* and *Turnvereine*—suspended business, Potthast Bros. enjoyed its greatest success, and that success continued into the Depression.

A 1904 article in *Der Deutsche Correspondent* identifies Potthast Bros. as a “modest” firm.⁷ The date is important. The Great Baltimore Fire of 1904 destroyed the heart of the city’s downtown, but the Potthast Bros. factory was north of the affected area, and the retail store lay even further north. The firm’s business records which have survived pick up in 1906.⁸ By that time, Potthast Bros. was completing some 500 jobs a year for almost as many customers.

The number of orders per year does not increase markedly from 1906 through 1928, but the size and nature of the jobs change rather dramatically. Repairs, which had sustained the brothers in the early years, fall away and are replaced by sales from the company’s catalogue of dining room sets, bedsteads, breakfronts, secretaries and writing desks. The average invoice amount rose over the same period from \$75 to several hundred dollars.

Even as early as 1906, Potthast Bros. had a noteworthy clientele. Their Baltimore customers resided in neighborhoods known still today for their affluence, neighborhoods which housed the prominent and the powerful. They delivered as well to states as diverse as West Virginia and Ohio and cities as far flung as Syracuse and Denver, as well as Portland, Maine, and Portland, Oregon. Two of the most intriguing clients are Elsie de Wolfe and Messrs. Smith & Watson. Smith & Watson advertises itself even today as “London Furniture Makers in New York,” and Potthast Bros. made some of the pieces they sold. Elsie de Wolfe was, among other things, an interior decorator. Her first commission as a decorator was from the Colony Club, a private social club modeled on gentlemen’s clubs in England and elsewhere, but for women only. De Wolfe was hired to furnish the Club’s new space in New York City when it moved from its original location. On her order Potthast Bros. delivered \$2478 worth of furniture to West 52nd Street in April 1906 to furnish the new building into which the Colony Club was moving. Today, that space, with its de Wolfe décor intact, has landmark status.

On the surface, the 1890s would not seem a particularly propitious time to leave Germany for the United States. Economic conditions in the United States were certainly better than those in Europe, but even people with economic clout suffered trying times during that decade. Indeed, in its day, the Depression of 1893 was the steepest financial decline ever experienced in the United States to that point. Hundreds of banks closed, railroads were forced into bankruptcy, thousands of businesses failed, crop prices fell, and farms ceased operation. Although the statistics differ slightly from source to source, all agree that unemployment rose steadily during the 1890s, peaking at mid-decade at around fifteen percent and returning to earlier levels only in 1899.

Vincent and William Potthast arrived early enough to experience the worst of the economic downturn. Still, they were able to start and grow a business that achieved tremendous success. To be sure, the training and skill that they had acquired in Germany was a major factor in their success. At the same time, however, it must be said that the brothers benefited from circumstances that were virtually unique to Baltimore in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Three factors in particular converged to benefit their company: the expansion plans of the North German Lloyd

steamship company, the growth and expansion of the Knabe Piano Company, and the geographic location of Baltimore, a port city that was at once the northernmost Southern city on the Eastern seaboard and the southernmost Northern city in the mid-Atlantic region.

Although the B & O was not the first rail company in the United States, it was the first to offer regular passenger and freight service between major American cities, making Baltimore an attractive port city through which to reach significant markets all over the United States. By 1857, through the building of its own rail lines and a series of strategic mergers and acquisitions, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad offered service as far as St. Louis, effectively connecting the Eastern seaboard with the Mississippi River.

By 1880, Baltimore was the seventh largest city in the United States in terms of population with slightly more than one-third of a million inhabitants. Almost twenty-five percent of Baltimoreans were immigrants from German-speaking areas or the children of those immigrants. If it wasn't already, Baltimore was rapidly becoming an attractive destination for immigrants from German-speaking areas of Europe.

As Baltimore became a more popular destination for emigrants from the German Empire, it also became a more attractive site for business. On February 20, 1857, the same year that the B & O extended its service as far as St. Louis, the North German Lloyd Steamship Company was founded. Ten years later, on January 21, 1867, North German Lloyd contracted with the Baltimore & Ohio to combine services and permit passengers embarking in Bremen to purchase a single ticket for passage via steamship and then rail from the Baltic through to Chicago or other Midwestern destinations, thus further enhancing Baltimore's attractiveness for German emigrants. In 1888, North German Lloyd commissioned the first of eight medium-sized steamers dubbed the "city class" [*Städteklasse*].⁹ As each was launched, it was put into service on a number of routes, but almost invariably the run from Bremerhaven to Baltimore, often with intermediate stops in Southampton and New York, was among the itineraries.

In the meantime, the economy was improving across the United States, and Baltimore, primarily because of its geographic location, benefited in a number of ways. For the future well-being of the Potthast

brothers, the most important development was the Knabe Piano Company's decision to renovate and expand its facilities in Baltimore. Knabe had been founded in 1839 by first-generation German immigrant William Knabe. Thirty years later the company, then run by his sons William Jr. and Ernest, decided to construct bigger quarters. In 1869, Knabe built a new factory on the corner of West and Eutaw Streets, where the Baltimore Ravens football stadium is currently situated. The building was immense, filling approximately the same space occupied by the stadium complex today. Knabe had its own railway spur to deliver lumber and employed over 200 men in its new five-story, L-shaped building, which was crowned on the Eutaw Street side by a huge and distinctive cupola that eventually came to function as an unofficial company emblem. Business was thriving, and the company was in desperate need of qualified skilled labor. Knabe carried out every step of the piano-building process within the new facility. By 1890, the company employed over 300 men and produced as many as seventy pianos a week. The situation was made-to-order for skilled cabinetmakers from Europe, and it is hardly surprising that William, Vincent, and John Potthast found work so quickly.

If Baltimore's standing as one of the leading port cities in the United States during the nineteenth century was important for German immigrants like the Potthast brothers, then its location midway along the Atlantic seaboard between the industrial Northeast and the agricultural South was just as critical for the development of Potthast Bros. Furniture. During the American Civil War, Maryland remained in the Union, but sentiment for the Southern cause was rife throughout the state. The war itself ultimately destroyed an established way of life and left devastation in its wake. Many a Southern gentleman or gentlewoman found him- or herself impoverished and destitute. The trappings and accoutrements of a former way of life—including eighteenth-century mahogany furniture handcrafted in Britain and transported to the New World by early colonists in Virginia and the Carolinas—fell into disuse and disrepair. For two enterprising young Baltimore cabinet makers, the opportunity to establish themselves in the business of repairing and restoring antique furniture lay just to the south in Virginia. Baltimore was a gateway to the South, but it was fortunate in that it had suffered less under the vicissi-

tudes of war. Wealthy, older residents were largely able to maintain their previous lifestyles. There were immigrants and freed blacks to help rebuild, and the city was connected by rail not only to the developing West but also to the markets of the North, particularly New York City.

Company letterbooks, which go back further than the payroll and sales records, constitute a rich source of information. The letterbook for 1914, for instance, includes a letter to Baltimore socialite and art collector Etta Cone concerning additional pieces for a bedroom suite already purchased for her sister-in-law, Mrs. Ceasar Cone.¹⁰ The typewritten letter provides the specifics of the order and includes a careful drawing of one of the pieces. In their time, Etta Cone and her sister Claribel were part of Baltimore's intellectual and cultural elite. Today, the sisters are remembered fondly in Baltimore, because they ultimately willed their extensive collection of modern European art to the Baltimore Museum of Art, effectively assuring the museum's role as a premier venue for the art of the classical Modern period. The Cone Collection includes major works by Henri Matisse and many of his contemporaries such as Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cézanne. Etta Cone became a long-time customer of Potthast Bros.

Although perhaps not a typical customer, Etta Cone was the type of client, e.g. wealthy and cultured, that the firm cultivated as its reputation for fine furniture grew. The brothers believed that these sorts of clients would be more interested in learning about their pieces, and that this education would lead them to value the pieces even more. As Catherine Rogers Arthur has argued, the Potthasts sought to “mentor” their customers and “positioned themselves as arbiters of taste to their well-established, predominantly upper-class clientele.”¹¹

Arthur's point is particularly pertinent when one considers the trajectory of the Potthast Bros. as a business. In the late 1920s, arguably at the height of the business' success, the company launched a marketing campaign designed to appeal to clients like Etta Cone. They partnered with museums to reproduce British and American pieces from the eighteenth century. Thus it happened that the “Mt. Vernon” sideboard became the most popular piece in the company's repertoire. The success of such a program rested, of course, on the shop's ability to produce pieces of similar craftsmanship. To an even greater extent, it depended upon an

artist's ability to conceive the item on paper even before the design went into production.

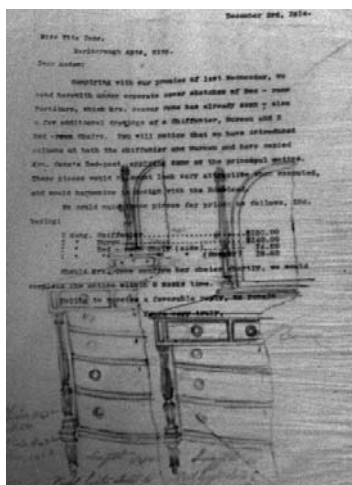
It is clear that there were several individuals who could sketch a piece as a part of a proposal for a commission. The process of mentoring a younger generation is evident from the letterbooks. However, the process began with William. The partnership with museums was his brainchild, but the initiative started many years before. In the very early days, when the brothers were traveling the Virginia countryside soliciting business, repaired pieces were returned with a label bearing the company's contact information. Moreover, William made wax impressions of the delicate scrolls and other decorative details of the pieces which were repaired so that Potthast Bros. could make reproductions. From the onset, William's artistic skill, his cleverness, and even his audacity looked both backward and forward. Even as the label on a returned piece left a calling card for the next repair, the impressions left behind in the shop supplied the basis for the reproductions of the future. As Catherine Arthur has pointed out, the slogan which later labels bore, "The Antiques of Tomorrow," ultimately proved prophetic. Potthast pieces are available online and in auction houses, antique stores, and even museums. When for sale, they carry substantial price tags. Finally, in the ultimate accolade, those selling Potthast furniture today invariably point to the label of certification which was attached to each piece before it left the factory as proof of authenticity.

It can be argued that the story of Potthast Bros. Furniture as well as its success in the face of poor economic conditions and strong anti-German sentiment is a matter of threes. Initially, there was the happy coincidence of Baltimore's growth as a port of entry at a time when German immigration was at its peak. Then there was the fact that Knabe Piano was located in Baltimore and in almost constant need of skilled woodworkers. Thirdly, there was the physical location of Baltimore as the northernmost southern city, with easy access to both the homes of the reconstruction South and the markets of the North, particularly New York City. As it turned out, the four brothers ultimately became three. Vincent died young, and neither he nor his family members ultimately had much involvement in the firm. His three brothers, William, John, and Theodore, remained to set the course for the company. The three brothers each had

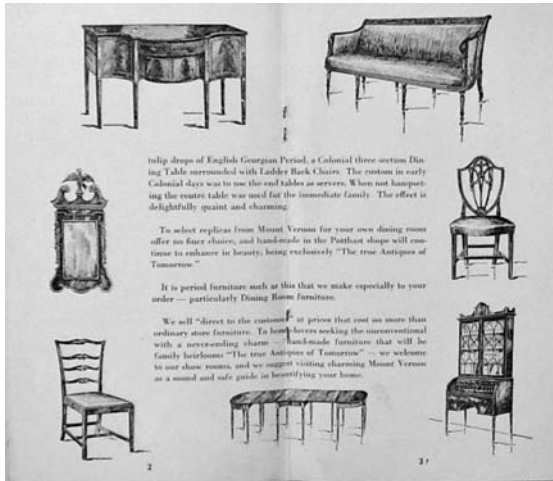
differing skills. It is not entirely clear how those skills were distributed. The assignment of titles within the company, e.g., president, treasurer, etc., seem to be dictated by birth order, and the occupations which each brother lists in various census counts are equally unenlightening. It seems clear, however, that William was the driving force behind the business. All the brothers were accomplished furniture makers, but William had trained in Berlin as an artist and was certainly the source of a number of very creative and likely innovative ideas for marketing the products the company produced. Whether John or Theodore was the guiding force behind certain other company actions, policy seems to have been driven by both a sense of honesty and practicality. Company records, including specifically the letterbooks, which in this case contain carbon copies of all outgoing correspondence and some internal memos, and the payroll records, convey a sense that company operations were informed by a definite pragmatism and a strict sense of correctness and fairness. If a customer complained and the complaint seemed substantive, Potthast Bros. responded graciously. A frivolous complaint received a firm, polite, and negative response.

The rule of three seems to prevail as well in the principles which the company espoused. Potthast Bros. Furniture operated by principles which one could easily trace to the German heritage of its founders and principal officers: honesty, reliability, and craftsmanship. Potthast Bros. gave its customers well-crafted furniture at a fair price with prompt and polite service. However, it is important to note but those values were expressed through actions and in English. The Potthast brothers never traded on their German roots. To the contrary, despite the fact that the firm was closely held and family-run, there is no evidence that the company ever spoke with other than a single, corporate voice. All letters are signed "Potthast Bros." The family was involved, and the younger generation was trained to take on additional responsibility, but even the letterbooks which give evidence of a mentoring process between a younger son or nephew and his father or uncle never deal in personalities. The internal memos are unsigned, and the addressees are not named specifically enough to identify a given individual (there were simply too many Williams and Theodores).

Certainly there was some element of serendipity in the long-term success of the firm. Yet, it took perseverance, ingenuity, skill, and a flair for marketing to make Potthast Bros. Furniture a household name in Baltimore and beyond. Potthast Bros. Furniture did, of course, become famous, or at least extremely well-known and valued in certain circles. Although wealthy German-Americans, such as the Cones, provided the Potthasts with substantial business, the brothers' clientele extended well beyond the city's German-American community. Their aim was to sell to all of high society, regardless of ethnicity. This may be one of the reasons why they never explicitly traded on their German heritage. Their customer list doubles as a directory of presidents, governors, and artists; among their clients were the social elite of Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia, not to mention the abundantly wealthy across the United States and overseas. Yet, it was always the furniture that was the star. The professionalism and flair for advertising which the Potthast brothers exhibited plus the location and history of Baltimore likely hold the key to the prosperity of Potthast Bros. Furniture amidst the anti-German hysteria of one-hundred years ago.



LETTER TO ETTA CONE



U. S. REG. TRADE MARK

We Certify that this piece is individually custom made by hand in the POTTHAST SHOPS after the original in

This authentication is your assurance of authentic design and superior craftsmanship, backed by our reputation of almost half a century as the makers of "The True Antiques of Tomorrow".

POTTHAST BROS., INC.
 Established 1892
 BALTIMORE MARYLAND

The Significance of

Potthast's "Written" Guarantee

You are safe in the knowledge that your unique reproductions are actually hand-made, with hand-direction, the carving is done by hand — no machines used and then "skinned" over — the coloring is genuine satin wood set in — not painted on; the metalloges is selected for beautiful figure thoroughly seasoned, the finish is hand polished.

This makes our "Written Guarantee" a further assurance of lasting satisfaction in home your furniture from the Potthast shops is unquestionably made according to the highest standard of quality, materials and workmanship.

Est. 1892.

POTTHAST BROS., Inc.

Makers

"The true Antiques of Tomorrow"

(U. S. REG. TRADE MARK)

Main Showrooms - 924-26 N. Charles St.

Cabinet Shops - 1400 block Wicomico St.

Baltimore, Maryland

Representatives

New York City Wash., D. C.

(continued)

NOTES

1. See Nicholas Fessenden's article elsewhere in this issue.
2. *The Maryland Germans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1948), 394.
3. figures cited reflect the respective census.
4. Catherine Rogers Arthur, "'The True Antiques of Tomorrow': Furniture by the Potthast Brothers of Baltimore, 1892-1975," in *American Furniture 2000*, ed. Luke Beckerdite (Milwaukee, WI: Chipstone Foundation, 2000), 31-58. [available at <http://www.chipstone.org/article.php/401/American-Furniture-2000/%E2%80%9CThe-True-Antiques-of-Tomorrow%E2%80%9D:-Furniture-by-the-Potthast-Brothers-of-Baltimore,-1892%E2%80%931975>]
5. R.P. Donaldson, "Genealogy versus History: Generating Synergy," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 45 (2010), 177-192.
6. Randall Donaldson, "William A. Potthast," *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 3, edited by Giles R. Hoyt. German Historical Institute. <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=254>
7. "Eine neue Möbelfabrik," *Der Deutsche Correspondent*, April 29, 1904. At the time of Vincent Potthast's death in 1911, that same paper would identify him as only a "junior member" of the Potthast Bros. firm. See *Der Deutsche Correspondent*, August 13, 1911, p. 7.
8. My thanks to Theodore Potthast, Jr., grandson of John Potthast, one of the original four brothers. Ted has been extremely generous with his time and his collection of material related to the business. He made the business records for the period under review available to me for the research which provides the basis for this essay.
9. Arnold Kludas, *Die Seeschiffe des Norddeutschen Lloyd 1857 bis 1970* (Augsburg: Weltbild [Bechtermünz imprint], 1998), 6.
10. Maryland Historical Society Manuscript Collections, item MS 2183: Letterbooks, 1908-32. Potthast Brothers, Inc. 1892-1975. Box 1: Book One, page 96, December, 1914, Miss Etta Cone, Marlborough Apts.
11. Arthur, "'The True Antiques of Tomorrow.'"

**THE ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN (OPPOSITE)
IMAGES COURTESY THEODORE POTTHAST, JR.**

