

On the Waterfront

BY BETTY JOYCE NASH

It's 8 a.m. at Fells Point in Baltimore, and people are washing windows or unloading beer at taverns in the salty breeze. If it weren't for rehabbed waterfront warehouses and homes selling for upward of \$300,000, it could be 1817. Back then, though, the waterfront reeked of waste and runoff. Also missing from the 2006 tableau are sailing ships with cargoes of immigrants from war-weary Europe or famished Ireland, some with money in hand to buy farmland, others redemptioners whose time would be sold for the price of passage.

Those bakers, butchers, iron workers, cabinetmakers, laborers, retailers, shipbuilders, and financiers built Baltimore, its turnpikes, bridges, the B&O Railroad, and many, many houses. The city grew from 13,503 people in 1790 to 212,418 in 1860 to become the nation's third largest, behind New York City and Philadelphia. A quarter of Baltimore's residents that year were foreign born, among them 15,536 Irish and 32,613 German, according to history professor Dean Esslinger of Towson University. He has written of Baltimore's little-known immigration history.

They were drawn by the same forces that have always drawn immigrants — the opportunity to work and improve their lots in life. Baltimore's influx never reached the likes of Ellis Island in New York Harbor, or its predecessor Castle Garden. But by some estimates, as many as 2 million immigrants arrived through Fells Point and later Locust Point between the late 18th century and World War I, forever branding the city's character.

The earliest immigrants after the English were primarily Irish and German. Starving Irish, reports one author, "arrived at Thompson's Sign of the Harp on Ann Street near Thames in 1847." Later came Italians

and Russians, Ukrainians and Poles, Greeks and Czechs, among others. Immigration effects reverberated, producing, for example, insurance based on ethnic efforts to protect the newcomers, or the German concept of graduate school, unknown in the United States before the 19th century.

Baltimore still absorbs immigrants. The old ethnic neighborhoods, with a church on every block, festivals, and restaurants, exist alongside Spanish Town, the most active Hispanic enclave in the state, says Ellen von Karajan, executive director of the Preservation Society in Fells Point. Among other projects, she is working to save from the wrecking ball a Polish sanctuary on the second floor of the 1880s-era St. Stanislaus church. "Baltimore has always been hospitable to immigrants and still is," she says. "Immigrants are always city builders. That is still going on."

West by Water

The Chesapeake Bay snakes inland from the Atlantic to Baltimore, the farthest west that immigrants could venture via ship, farther west than Philadelphia, farther west than Charleston. The point of Fells Point

Two million immigrants entered the United States via Baltimore in the 19th century



Immigrants wait for a train at the B&O Baltimore facilities at the Locust Point, Pier 9 or "Immigrant Pier."

hooks out into the Bay; the land was settled by the Fells family, Quakers from England.

Early on, the planter economy needed only river landings to load supplies and product. But as the first Germans drifted south from Pennsylvania to western Maryland, they brought wheat farming, establishing mills near the rivers and streams that emptied into the Chesapeake. Historian Dieter Cunz wrote: "The grain farms of the west demanded an intermediary, a port of deposit, an urban center." And demand for grain in the sugar colonies of the West Indies was growing.

By about 1800, there were a dozen grain mills on a 14-mile stream on the nearby Jones Falls, a stream that stretches from northwest Baltimore County to the harbor. Converted later to textiles, there were some 350 mills by the mid-19th century. Some made canvas for the U.S. Navy sailing ships, including the famous *Constellation*. Baltimore gained from the War of 1812, and the city was feeling its economic oats. Fells Point had become famous for the Baltimore Clipper ships, many of which were privatized for great profit during the war. (Some 126 privateers used Baltimore Harbor during that war, seizing more than 500 British ships. Many investors made fortunes on cargoes of wheat or flour at wartime prices.)

Besides the growing maritime industries of shipbuilding and sailcloth-making, there were clothing manufacturers. The spate of wars also had stoked the chemical industry, including powder mills. Government pamphlets in boom times advertised Maryland in Western Europe to attract workers.

The National Road beckoned immigrants to Baltimore. The road was completed from the coast to the Ohio River at Wheeling in 1818, and immigrants flocked to Baltimore knowing the path inland was cleared.

"From only a few hundred immigrants per year, the total of newcomers climbed to nearly two thousand by the end of the decade. In 1828, Baltimore

further improved its position by establishing the nation's first commercial steam railroad," writes Esslinger. Many headed for the Midwest or even farther west. Before rails became reality, canals to move goods inland were under construction, providing work. By 1867, the B&O Railroad joined with the North German Lloyd Line and offered one ticket from Bremerhaven, Germany, to Baltimore and beyond.

"Baltimore was the favorite port for Europeans and especially for Germans during these decades, partly because of the tobacco trade, partly because of the close relations that existed between Baltimore and Bremen," writes Cunz in his 1948 book *The Maryland Germans*. Germans had a taste for American tobacco. Ships loaded with tobacco sailed down the Chesapeake and returned "down the mouth of the Weser packed full of German emigrants."

As early as 1783 a German Society had been founded to care for the mistreated and indigent. Immigration dwindled during the Napoleonic wars, but by 1817, the society was revived as immigration gathered steam and redemptioners suffered abuse once more.

Here's an often-told story: A ship anchored in the Bay in a February freeze in 1817 offered passengers' labor to would-be buyers with these words: "These people have been fifteen weeks on board and are short of provision. Upon making the Capes, their bedding having become filthy, was thrown overboard. They are now actually perishing from the cold and want of provision." In a move that speaks to how influential the German Society had become, it pressured the state Legislature to pass laws drawn up by the society to supervise the redemption system. Later, the society collected \$1.50 from each immigrant to support the poor; the Hibernian Society (Irish) did likewise.

Ethnic societies also established employment bureaus, among other services. For example, the German Society's Intelligence Bureau formed in 1845 and found jobs for 3,500 immi-

grants by 1846. "Such effort and success could only have bolstered Baltimore's reputation as a favorable port of entry when immigrants wrote home to their friends and relatives," Esslinger writes.

Many newcomers — some estimate half — did stay to ply trades or work in construction jobs in growing Baltimore, especially in the transportation industry. Major turnpike, rail, and canal projects, under way to keep goods (and money) circulating, required strong backs. For immigrants in bustling Baltimore, there was construction galore on houses, streets, bridges, and wharves. Esslinger notes that some 2,000 houses a year were going up in Baltimore by mid-century.

With the multi-ethnic labor force, though, tension sometimes erupted over competition for jobs. For example, Irish workers attacked German-built sections of the C&O Canal in 1839, according to reports. Federal troops shot rioters, razed worker shanties, and took prisoners. Wages dropped to 87.5 cents a day from \$1.25, according to *Baltimore: The Building of an American City* by Sherry Olson. Free black workers really felt the brunt of depressed wages as white immigrants took unskilled jobs as caulkers, or coal and brick yard workers. In some yards, the black caulkers' \$1.75 per day jobs went to whites who worked for 50 cents less.

By the Civil War, immigration and Baltimore's economy had slowed. "Its only growth sectors were closely tied to its role as a strategic transportation center," according to Olson. The Union plopped troops on Baltimore's Federal Hill to ensure control of the vital harbor.

Some businesses prospered, however, Olson wrote. "William Wilkens was another enterprising German immigrant of the '40s. In the '50s, he had sent agents to the battlefields of the Crimea, and now he followed the Army of the Potomac to Richmond and Petersburg, to clip the tails from dead horses. At his curled hair factory

on the Frederick Road, horsehair and hog bristles were spread out like hay over the hillsides to dry.”

The German community was active politically, and many opposed slavery. German newspapers editorialized against the practice, making them targets of attacks by nativists and Southern sympathizers in this border town.

From Bremerhaven to Baltimore and Beyond

After the Civil War, Baltimore's economy rebounded. The steam age accelerated manufacturing and immigration, too, as it speeded transatlantic service and reliability. With better connections, Baltimore became even more attractive to German immigrants. In September 1865, Olson reports that 18 first-class steamers made regular trips to Havana and Liverpool, the latter city being one of the hubs of the Industrial Revolution. In 1867, the B&O Railroad and the North German Lloyd Line teamed up to offer immigrants one ticket that would take them from Bremerhaven into the prairie states via steamer and B&O passenger train. More than 10,000 immigrants entered through the port in 1867 compared with fewer than 4,000 in the previous year, according to Esslinger.

But a casualty of the steamships was Fells Point, as they docked at Locust Point. Fells Point's shipyards folded and were replaced by the lumber, canning, and packing industries, all of which needed workers.

Most immigrants coming through Baltimore via the Lloyd's Line in the immediate post-war years hailed from somewhere in what was then the Austro-Hungarian empire, including modern-day Germany. For

example, 12,000 arrived in 1868.

And so by the 1870s, Baltimore exuded a German flavor and feeling. Earlier generations of German immigrants had become entrenched, with four German American banks, factories, breweries, German newspapers, churches, clubs, halls, and opera houses, as well as German housing developments. And Germans ran their own schools, many connected with churches. “But the success of the German educational institutions ironically produced their decline: by popular demand, the city in 1872 added to its public schools a network of ‘German-English’ schools,” Cunz wrote.

The German American Society in Baltimore is active today, with many descendants carrying vivid memories of forebearers' tales. Ted Potthast grew up in the furniture-making business founded by his grandfather and three great uncles, Potthast Brothers.

The first brother, Vincent, arrived in Baltimore on the Lloyd's Line in 1892, and Potthast relates the family legend: Vincent got in a bar fight in his hometown and, thinking he had dealt a fatal blow, fled upriver to Bremerhaven. Even as he was preparing to depart his native land, friends arrived to report the victim simply knocked out. Vincent emigrated anyway. “He was a cabinetmaker, and there was plenty of work,” Potthast says. Germany was in a depression and work there was scarce. Three brothers joined Vincent and all worked at the Knabe factory, a building of seven stories that covered a city block, where the Orioles play baseball today, Potthast says.

“In those days, the only entertainment was music and every family had a piano, so pianos were selling like hot-

cakes,” he says. The brothers worked in their off hours building their own furniture business, replicating fine Colonial furniture. Potthast Brothers closed in 1975. Potthast Brothers furniture pieces remain in museums and private collections nationwide.

Immigration through Baltimore was largely managed through private enterprise. For example, between 1868 and 1914 the steamship companies contracted with a woman named Mrs. Koether to run a boarding house on Locust Point. For each immigrant she fed and housed, she received 75 cents a day, according to Esslinger. The boarding house did not inspect passengers, as stations in New York did, because officials boarded ships at the mouth of the bay and examined passengers and papers before arrival in Baltimore.

But by 1913, with immigrants averaging some 40,000 a year, the federal government constructed three buildings to process immigrants. World War I shut down immigration, and Germans were viewed with special suspicion, virtually ending Baltimore's role in reception. The structures became military hospitals.

All but forgotten, Baltimore immigration deserves recognition, according to people who are raising money for a memorial. But the necessary \$4.2 million is hard to come by.

Brigitte Fessenden is working on the project and is also president of the German Society of Maryland. “This memorial will not only honor and commemorate those who came before us, but also today's immigrants whose dreams and aspirations are probably not so much different from those of their predecessors,” she notes. **RF**

READINGS

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