

VICKERS BUILDING
219-231 East Redwood Street
Baltimore
Maryland

HABS No. MD-1120

HABS
MD-1120

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

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VICKERS BUILDING

HABS No. MD-1120

Location: Main entrance at 225 East Redwood Street (building encompasses 219-231 East Redwood), Baltimore, Maryland, 21202; UTM coordinates: 18.361005.4349841

Present Owner/Occupant: *Owner*: Brown-Redwood Ltd. Partnership (Contact: Craig Drambauer at 410.547-3010); *Occupants*: 219 Travel Services; 221 Clark Morley Salon; 225 Alex. Brown Realty; 227-9 Werner's Restaurant

Present Use: Multi-tenant commercial rental property

Significance: One of the few remaining large-scale commercial edifices to utilize brick as a primary material after Baltimore's Great Fire of 1904, the Vickers building typifies the simple massing and restrained use of classical ornamentation of the financial and commercial district after the fire. Since 1951, Werner's Restaurant has occupied part of the ground floor and retains much of its Moderne character from that period.

Historian: Laurie Ossman, Ph.D., Summer 2001

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1904-1905
2. Architect: Meyers & Eitelman
3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses: George R. Vickers, original owner and builder. Original use as commercial rental property remains unchanged since date of construction.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: D.W. & G.H. Thomas, builders
5. Original plans and construction: Originals unknown; for published sources, see list of works consulted.
6. Alterations and additions

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a. Exterior: Airlock entrance on #229 (Werner's Restaurant) ca. 1951; fabric entrance canopy blocking transom over main entrance (#225) ca. 1985. Building exterior was cleaned and interiors extensively altered by partition walls in support of mechanical systems upgrade in 1984.

b. Interior: No interiors remain intact from 1904-5 period. Werner's Restaurant interior (1951) has significance in its period; other tenant spaces subdivided and altered, most recently in 1984-5, completely obscuring original character and floor plan.

B. Historical Context

In 1729, the city of Baltimore Town was chartered on sixty acres falling roughly within the perimeter of the present-day Financial District.¹ The establishment of the Bank of Maryland on a lot on South Street between Redwood and Water Streets in 1791 set the crucial precedent for this area's development as the city's banking and commerce center. This area remained the center of the city's most important financial and commercial enterprises, including retail, newspapers, hotels, government, railroad and professional offices throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.

East Redwood Street, between Calvert and South Streets, was known until 1918 as German Street (for the preponderance of German-owned businesses in the area) and rests at the core of Baltimore's early nineteenth-century commercial district.² This core—which centers on the intersection of Calvert and Baltimore Streets—is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Baltimore Financial District, encompassing 16 city blocks and including 145 contributing structures, of which the Vickers is one.

The present structure replaced a previous Vickers building in the Second Empire style that was destroyed during the Great Fire of February 7-8, 1904.³ While most post-Fire buildings in the district were built of stone, the Vickers building is one of the largest to utilize brick as a primary structural and facing material. Typical of post-Fire commercial design in Baltimore, the Vickers building eschews the mansard roof and ornamental complexity of the Second Empire style in favor of a more restrained and visually cohesive massing, emphatic symmetry, a flat roof and limited application of classical ornament that was often concentrated at the cornice level. This abrupt change in the district's architectural character, as exemplified by the comparison of the pre- and post-Fire Vickers buildings, is generally attributed to cultural factors such as the rise

¹A variety of infill and reclamation projects in the first century of settlement altered the topography of the area such that no precise boundary correlation is possible. See Sherry H. Olsen, "Order and Disorder, 1789-1801," in Baltimore: The Building of An American City (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, rev. ed. 1997), 26-41 passim.

²Olsen, 300. Olsen notes that the street name was changed as part of overall anti-German sentiment in the community around World War I.

³George W. Howard, The Monumental City... (Baltimore: M. Curlander, c. 1889), 254 (ill.). This engraving of the previous Vickers building shows that the present one was built to conform to the essential a-b-a rhythm of bays and openings as the one that was destroyed by fire in 1904.

of Beaux-Arts classicism in American design following the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago of 1893. Pragmatism also played a role in defining the district's post-Fire character. First, the need to rebuild quickly mitigated against complex massing that was time-consuming to construct; second, the shift toward masonry as a fire deterrent material favored simpler masses for reasons of cost; and, third, the structure and attic space inherent in mansard roofs was believed to have contributed to the spread of the fire. There were also rhetorical reasons for the shift, such as an institutional desire to portray stability after the 1904 Fire—a desire that favored the associative value of classicizing architectural idioms as symbols of permanence.

The permit for the present structure was issued on May 19, 1904, indicating that Vickers lost no time in commissioning a replacement structure for the building that had been destroyed by fire.⁴ Built to house retail establishments at the ground level with rental office space above, the Vickers building has retained its intended use into the twenty-first century.

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: Early twentieth-century classical commercial vernacular with symmetrical massing and restrained application of mass-produced classical ornament, concentrated at openings and cornice.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, with some evidence of pigeon-related deterioration on horizontal surfaces of upper stories, such as windowsills and top of keystones, but with no noticeable losses of building fabric.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Lot size 55' x 80' (city survey block # 662, lot 10)
2. Foundations: Concrete (visible)
3. Walls: Red brick laid in common bond
4. Structural system, framing: Steel piers and joists
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, porticoes, bulkheads: Non-historic airlock entrance, wood frame and cladding with glazed openings, on #229 (Werner's Restaurant), ca. 1951; non-invasive fabric entrance canopy blocking transom over main entry doors (#225), ca. 1985.

⁴"Permits Issued," Baltimore (Morning) Sun 19 May 1904, p. 12 c. 2.

6. Openings

a. Doorways and doors: One double door in center (#225) is a ca. 1985 replacement, but is set within original opening; #219, #221 single doors; #227-9 (Werner's) one door (original door of #227 sealed but opening intact). Center entrance (#225) is marked by brownstone lintel in which "Vickers" is carved in relief block letters, flanked by triglyphs. This ornamental panel is supported by block-shaped corbels embellished with acanthus leaves, pendant fruit, other floral imagery, and exaggerated guttae.

b. Windows and shutters: All doors and windows have wooden frames, currently painted dark green. Areas of paint loss and flaking show earlier layers of various green paints, generally brighter than the current color. No shutters.

Ground level: Three center bays each have two openings under a single plate glass transom. A 1904 elevation drawing⁵ shows center double doors under a single center transom; one plate glass window and a single door opening paired under each transom to either side of the center entrance. The two flanking side sections of two bays each have one transom per bay, with identical pairing of one plate glass window and a single glazed door under each.

Levels two-four: Center section has one pair of double hung windows per bay, with level two windows appearing somewhat shorter than those of levels three & four. Identical side sections feature recessed bow extending from level two to four, each bow consisting of three double hung windows in an a-b-a rhythm. The center window on the second level of each bay is distinguished by a triangular pediment supported by cast metal ornamental scroll brackets. On the fourth level, the center window of each bow is capped by a lion's head keystone.

7. Roof

a. Shape, covering: Flat roof. Currently a vinyl membrane covering.

b. Cornice, eaves: Pressed brick stringcourse between ground and second level features egg and dart molding surmounted by a flat wave motif band. The cornice sequence echoes the egg and dart molding, capped by a flat, unembellished copper frieze punctuated by blocky, plain corbels. The frieze is surmounted by a convex cornice that is capped by a patinated bronze running shell and acanthus cresting.

⁵"Office Building, German Street...." Baltimore Sun 14 May 1904, p.7, c.2-5 (ill. with caption).

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Original plans not extant. Center stair hall foyer probably originally served as entrance for street level retail spaces flanking the entry door. On the upper floors, it appears that an original axial corridor provided access to individual rental spaces. Modern partition walls have obscured this arrangement.

2. Stairways: From the center entrance, a short (approximately ten feet) axial vaulted passage leads to a gray marble stairway, located to the direct right of axis. To the left of axis there stands an elevator, the cab and mechanicals of which clearly date to the 1985 renovations. Gray marble cladding runs from the floor to a height of six feet, and from the entrance door, along the passage, and up the stairs to the second level, after which it and the stairs are concealed by post-historic partitions. No data have been located to establish whether this marble sheathing is original or dates to when the building first received elevator service (also unknown).

3. Flooring: The foyer of #225 (center entrance) retains an original mosaic tile floor with a gray-white marble background, framed by a gray, black and terra cotta-colored mosaic border in a Greek fret pattern and the word "Vickers" in black lettering in the center. No other original floors remain.

4. Openings

a. Doorways and doors: Original wooden frames with replacement doors similar to originals.

b. Windows: Wooden frame; fixed pane plate glass on ground level; double hung on upper levels.

5. Mechanical equipment

a. HVAC: Current systems date to 1985.

b. Lighting: No original fixtures.

c. Plumbing: None original.

6. Additional features of note

The interior of Werner's Restaurant, while not original to the building, merits consideration as a significant example of a remarkably intact late Moderne lunch counter and soda fountain.

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Werner's occupies three bays of the structure, each bay marked on the interior by piers that create three "aisles" running north to south within the restaurant dining room. The kitchen area, on the south side of the building, was not accessible for this study. Each of the three "aisles" features three pendant light fixtures composed of brushed aluminum bands joined by concave frosted white glass, with a frosted glass "dome" at the base. The piers are perhaps the only indications of the original interior arrangement of the space into three long, narrow retail shops. The present interior decoration scheme dates to 1951.

Linoleum flooring in a mottled white-gray with accent tiles of burgundy and black was installed in the early 1990s, and approximates the appearance of the original, according to longtime restaurant employees. Likewise, an acoustical tile ceiling is of recent vintage.

The north wall (facing Redwood Street) is chiefly defined by the original window arrangement, clad in glossy varnished birch plywood dating from 1951. The walls retain most of the 1951 decorative treatment.

Walls are clad in a glossy varnished birch plywood dado paneling, above which the walls are currently painted pink. Thin strips of brushed aluminum cap the plywood dado treatment and are echoed by a streamlined "frieze" of three aluminum strips that encircles the dining room walls at approximately six feet from the floor. This "frieze" motif is carried onto the surfaces of the nine piers, which are clad in the birch paneling and mirrored above.

The east "aisle" features eight seating booths placed perpendicular to the east wall. The bench seating is fabricated of the same birch plywood as the wall finish, trimmed with tubular steel along the aisle-facing edge of the seat backs, and a quarter-circle of tubular steel for support under the seat. Metal poles with coat hooks projecting along the aisle from the edge of each booth are recent replacements of an original feature. The tables are tubular steel with black Formica tops and a fluted metal edge. The first, fourth, fifth and eighth booths each have an inset beveled octagonal mirror on the wall above. The second and third and sixth and seventh booths are "twinned" under a rectangular mirror etched in the lower right with a beach scene. Each double-bay rectangular mirror is flanked by neon-lit "shutters," which incorporate the aluminum-strip frieze motif as "louvers" in the shutter panels. The southeast corner is cut off to create a three-foot long, 45-degree-angle wall accentuated with an octagonal mirror.

The south wall is most distinguished by a dessert display case in the first aisle, which rises approximately 32" from the floor. Originally refrigerated, this case features a sliding glass doors edged in stainless steel and a stainless steel interior with notched shelves to hold stainless steel dessert cups (cups still in place). Doorways in the south wall lead to the basement and to the kitchen. The southwest corner, echoing the clipped angle of the northwest, contains a tiny restroom.

The west wall is dominated by the original stainless steel grill and soda fountain. The grill unit (no longer in use) includes a counter surface, a cooking surface, wall sheathing, a milk dispenser and a starburst-ridged vent hood, all in stainless steel. A lunch counter, with birch plywood cladding, metal trimmed counter and chrome stools, faces this unit and is still in use. In the center of the counter, a break allows employee access and also divides the grill area from the soda fountain, which runs parallel to the west wall, to the window facing Redwood Street. This area is defined by a higher counter (no stools) and a wider workspace, with aluminum freezer units (no longer in use) along the wall and matching shelving above.

The center aisle features six booths of the same design as those against the east wall, with room in both front and back for traffic flow. In all three aisles, freestanding square metal tables with metal trim and tubular chrome-finished chairs are placed against the piers for additional seating.

D. Site: Urban, flush-to-sidewalk placement, typical of Baltimore commercial district in this period.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views: Illustrations noted in footnotes and list of works consulted.

B. Interviews: Charlie Johnston, building manager (6/01); Tony Ikabani of Alex. Brown & Sons Realty (9/10/01, by phone); Craig Drambauer of Alex. Brown & Sons Realty (9/11/01, by phone).

C. List of Works Consulted

Newspapers

“Commercial Building, Baltimore, Maryland.” The Architect’s and Builder’s Journal XXIX (January 1906) 8.

“Office Building, German Street, to be erected by Mr. George R. Vickers.” Baltimore (Morning) Sun 14 May 1904: p.7, c. 2-5 (ill.).

“Permits Issued.” Baltimore (Morning) Sun 19 May 1904: p 12, c.2.

Unpublished Public Sources

Dilts, James D. Baltimore Commercial Architecture Project. City of Baltimore Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP)/Maryland Historical Trust, 1992.

Shoken, Fred B. "Baltimore Financial District." National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, City of Baltimore/CHAP, 1985.

"Vickers Building." Baltimore Metrocenter Survey: Financial District. City of Baltimore/CHAP, 1985.

Secondary Sources

Groeninger's Views of Baltimore's Great Fires, July 25, 1873 and February 7 and 8, 1904. Baltimore: Groeninger, 1904.

Henderson, Daniel McIntyre. Baltimore: The Book of the Fire. Baltimore: Henderson, 1904.

Howard, George W[ashington]. The Monumental City: Past History and Present Resources. Baltimore: M. Curlander, c.1889.

Olsen, Sherry H. Baltimore: The Building of An American City, rev. ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Scharf, Thomas J. Chronicles of Baltimore. Baltimore: Turnbull & Sons, 1874.

E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: Further investigation of general streetscape photographs in local history repositories might yield historic views.

PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

During the summer of 2001, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland Historical Trust, in coordination with the City of Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) and Preservation Maryland, recorded ten historic buildings and sites within Baltimore's Central Business District through large-format photography and original historical research. The heart of the downtown area and focus of intensive redevelopment efforts, Baltimore's Central Business District is a designated city historic district and home to a diverse array of historic commercial and civic buildings, churches, theaters and other landmarks. Many of them predate the district's Great Fire of 1904 and chronicle Baltimore's rise as a financial, commercial and civic center. This project, coordinated by Martin Perschler, Collections Manager, HABS/HAER, and Catherine Lavoie, Senior Historian, HABS, and resulting in more than 150 photographs by Baltimore photographer James W. Rosenthal for HABS and ten detailed architectural histories by Laurie Ossman, PhD., also a Baltimore resident, grew out of concern about the recent loss of the Merchants & Miners Transportation Company Building at 17 Light Street and other buildings of architectural distinction in Baltimore.

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Ranging chronologically from the Peale Museum (1814) to the Baltimore Trust Company Building (1929), and in function from Old St. Paul's Episcopal Church (1846) to the Gayety Theatre (1906), the ten landmarks selected for this study illustrate the architectural diversity of the district and the myriad forces that have informed the district's growth and evolution over time. The documentation resulting from this project formed the basis of a photographic exhibit that was launched at the Maryland Historical Society in May 2002 during National Historic Preservation Month.

The ten historic buildings and sites that were studied during the project are:

- Alex. Brown & Sons Company Building (HABS MD-1121)
- B&O Railroad Company Headquarters Building (HABS MD-1122)
- Baltimore Trust Company Building (HABS MD-1119)
- Gayety Theatre (HABS MD-1123)
- Mercantile Trust & Deposit Company (HABS MD-191)
- Monument Square & the Battle Monument (HABS MD-1126 and MD-185)
- Old St. Paul's Episcopal Church (HABS MD-1124)
- Peale Museum (HABS MD-398)
- Pennsylvania Railroad Company District Office Building (HABS MD-1125)
- Vickers Building (HABS MD-1120)