

J. F. WIESSNER & SONS BREWING COMPANY
OFFICE: 1700 & 1702 N. GAY STREET
BOTTLING DEPARTMENT: 1704 TO 1710 N. GAY STREET
Telephone call 1118
Phones—Wolfe 118 and 1359 (from 1910 ad)

By David Hagberg, member of ABA, NABA, BCCA, BABC, and ECBA

The American Brewery, originally the J. F. Wiessner Brewery, is a marvel of irregular design, stands high on a hill in East Baltimore, its peculiar silhouette visible for miles. It was the creation of a New York “brewer’s architect” who didn’t take himself too seriously. Wiessner was born in Bavaria in 1831, the son of a brewer. He came from Bavaria in 1853 after a practical experience as a brewer and served as brewmaster at the George Rost Brewery (which later became the Standard Brewery) in Baltimore. During this time Wiessner envisioned a brewery of his own but lacked sufficient money. Returning to Bavaria in 1862, he discussed this venture with family. The following year he returned to Baltimore, apparently with the needed money.

The original, small brewery was founded in 1863 by John Frederick Wiessner. The output of the brewery was only about 1,500 barrels of lager beer annually; by 1903 the annual output would be up to 80,000 barrels annually. He operated it for 34 years until his death, on New Year’s Day, in 1897. It was in the 1700 block of North Gay Street (originally called Belair Avenue) in an area known as the Greenwood Estate. John F. Wiessner leased slightly more than two acres, from Philip Rogers and his family, and built his small brewery in the midst of a modest dairy farm operated by a John Kinderlein. He was able to build his brewery with credit extended by Levi and Henry Straus, prominent Baltimore maltsters. He built a three-story brew house on the site in what was then a German neighborhood. The brewhouse fronted onto Belair Avenue (now Gay Street). It was a three-story structure with a two-story section to the north side, and only wooden pegs were used in its elaborate woodwork. A platform for loading and unloading occupied the ground floor of the two-story section. On the east side, behind the brewhouse, was the boiler room, with stack. This indicated that he used steam to cook

the mash, unlike most of the other breweries in the city that still used direct heat under the copper cookers. In the early years the brewery had nine employees. At the southern end was a beer-garden, saloon, and picnic ground. Later the brewery added a bowling alley, dancing pavilion, and flying horses.

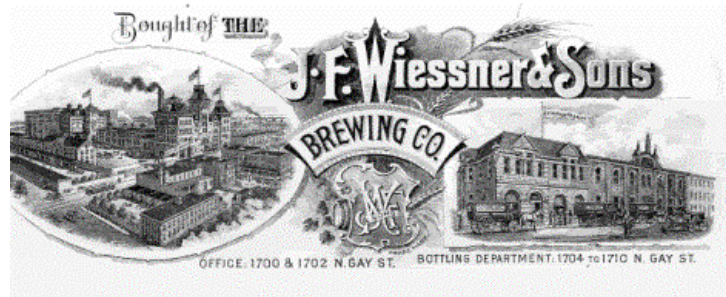
Malt was obtained locally, so there was no malt house. In addition, there was an ice house, keg racking room, a storage building, stables, and a cooperage shop. The brewery’s cellars, three stories deep, were located under the eastern part of the property. The plants original output was between 1,000 and 1,500 barrels per year. The brewery also featured a 16-foot tall statue of Gambrinus, the mythical patron of brewers. The cast pewter statue weighed 800 pounds.

At the time he started his brewery there were already twenty-one breweries operating in

Baltimore City and nearby sections of Baltimore County, which today is part of the city of Baltimore. The area Wiessner chose for his brewery was just down the road from a brewery built in 1853 by George Rost, where he had previously worked as a brewmaster, and would be joined, in 1864, by the brewery of George Bauernschmidt. The North Gay Street area would prove to be a popular location for brewers.

In 1863 the country was in the midst of the Civil War and both the Kinderlein Dairy and the Wiessner Brewery fell victim to plundering by Union soldiers who milked the cows and stole apples from the brewery and mooched beer from the brewery. Mrs. Wiessner did not trust the troops and often carried the brewery’s money in her apron to prevent them from walking away with it in their pockets.

In 1870 the citizens of the community objected to the original name of the area, Snake Hill. A meeting was called at Wiessner’s and the



local community decided on the name Highland Town for the central part of the community. When Baltimore City annexed the area in 1918 the spelling was changed to avoid confusion.

John F. was his own first brewmaster. His son, John Jr., left at age 15 to learn “brewing in all its branches” at the Ringler Brewery in New York. John Jr. returned to Baltimore two years later as a Master Brewer at age 17. He subsequently became brewmaster at his father’s brewery and, in 1882, his father took him into partnership. At this time the brewery had 24 workers and production was about 20,000 barrels per year.

In 1885, John George Neumeister came to Baltimore from Bavaria to become the Wiessner brewmaster. He remained with the brewery 36 years until Prohibition forced his retirement in 1921. Neumeister was known as a hard taskmaster by his fellow workers. He insisted on the best possible brew and followed exacting brewing methods. In its time, Wiessner beer sold for \$6.50 per barrel instead of the common \$4.50 for local beer. 1885 also saw the first refrigerating machine installed at the brewery.

By 1886/1887, the business had outgrown the building’s production, which was now about 40,000 barrels per year. An extensive enlargement and equipment modernization was started. In June of 1886 a \$10,000 mortgage was secured and construction of a new plant began. A new five-story brewery was erected with three wooden towers, an assortment of windows (some of them stained glass), and a delightfully dissimilar yet carefully ordered façade. It was designed by Charles Stoll, who also held patents on some of the brewery equipment. The central tower was functional, housing a 10,000-bushel grain elevator. At the same time one block to the south, George Bauernschmidt also began building a new brewery to replace his 23-year-old buildings. Both breweries were said to be the showplaces of their day, having the latest in brewery design and advanced equipment. The modern ice machines in these two plants were the first of their kind in Baltimore and created considerable interest and discussion. Just to the north of Wiessner, the

Standard Brewery (formerly George Rost’s) was also modernizing. Wiessner and George Bauernschmidt seemed to keep pace with each other in their activities. They started brewing within a year of each other, built new breweries at the same time, and production was about the same until the 1880’s, when Bauernschmidt move ahead.

After the new brewery started production, John F. and John Jr. took the other two Wiessner boys into the business. In 1891 the business was incorporated as the John F. Wiessner & Sons Brewing Co., Inc. The officers were: John F Wiessner Sr., president; John F. Wiessner Jr., vice-president; Henry F. Wiessner, vice-president; George F. Wiessner, secretary-treasurer. When John F. Sr. died January 1, 1897, John Jr. became president of the brewery.

A complex of buildings grew up on the site, including an 1892 brownstone wagon house and stable across the street. Next door, separated by a garden, was the former Wiessner house, erected in 1896. It was about fifty feet south of the brewhouse. The three-story brick residence with brownstone trim was large because, like other brewers, Wiessner adhered to the custom of providing lodging for his workers, mostly German immigrants. The following year the brewery was incorporated as the John F. Wiessner & Sons Brewing Company. By 1899 the brewery again found itself faced with the need for further expansion. This



was due in large part to the brewery creating its own bottling department in 1886 and the beer drinkers of Baltimore’s acceptance of bottled beer. William F. Kuzmaul was Wiessner’s bottler until shortly after 1900. The brewery began to bottle all of its own beer at this time. The first advertisement of the brewery’s bottling its own beer was in 1897 when it mentioned “Bottled at the brewery for hotel and family use.” The brewery did not deliver beer by truck until 1909, using draft horses and wagons before that. Plans for the expansion were announced on March 5, 1899 when The Sunday Herald announced “The John F Wiessner & Sons Brewing Co. yesterday consummated the purchase of land which will enable it to compete

with local rivals and to double the capacity of the plant.” The architect of the new buildings was O. Wolff of Philadelphia and Chicago. Plans called for the erection of a large warehouse and an extensive stable on the lot. The four-story warehouse was built of brick, stone, and iron in the Norman-Gothic style and had a capacity of 100,000 barrels. Union labor was employed exclusively and the improvement cost \$100,000.

In 1899, the Wiessner brewery faced the same problem as every other brewery in Baltimore; whether to sell out to the Maryland Brewing Company, which was organized March 1, 1899 for the purpose of buying up all local breweries. The Maryland Brewing Company viewed itself as an unbeatable, competition-proof organization. Its goal was to corner the beer business. After much deliberation it was decided to remain independent and take its chances against the Maryland Brewing Company trust, and to make every effort to warrant Baltimorean’s confidence and trade. The decision proved to be a sound one. The Brewer’s Journal, in 1900 and 1901, announced almost monthly the expansions, new buildings, and land purchases at the Wiessner brewery. The brewery had now increased its capacity to 150,000 barrels per year. Wiessner and the other independent breweries, particularly the new brewery of Frederick Bauernschmidt, continued to give the Maryland Brewing Company serious competition.

In 1903 the officers of the company were as follows: John F. Wiessner Jr., president; Henry F. Wiessner, vice-president; and George F. Wiessner, secretary and treasurer. John F. Wiessner Jr. died at his home on the brewery grounds on September 22, 1906. Brother George succeeded John Jr. as president, and George and Henry continued their family brewery, with brewmaster John Neumeister as exacting as ever. The brewery was flourishing and turning out their “Superlative Beers”, which everyone claimed to be the best beer in Baltimore at the time. Wiessner’s production reached its peak of 110,000 barrels per year in 1919, the year before prohibition closed their doors. The number of employees at that time was 61; 16 in brewery work, 17 drivers, 14 in the bottling house, 8 garage men, and 6 office workers. The sons would operate the plant until prohibition. Like so many other brewers, Wiessner’s tried to make

near beer at the beginning of Prohibition, but quickly abandoned the attempt. John F. died on July 8, 1925 and Henry F., the only surviving son of the founder, became president. The brewery was long since closed by then and Henry merely presided over the assets and physical property of the brewery. In January 1931, the Wiessner property was sold to the American Malt Company, thus ending the Wiessner family’s involvement with their great brewery. Some of the buildings, added later, have since been demolished. With the end of prohibition, the Fitzsimmon family turned it into the American Brewery, thereafter operating both businesses in tandem from the plant.

Wiessner’s was always a family brewery and seldom resorted to change for its own sake. Brewmasters remained steadily with the brewery and, to the end, quality rather than production was the true watchword. The brewery produced beer exclusively and never attempted to brew ale.

The American Brewery was the last to occupy the complex. It reopened upon Repeal as the American Brewery, Inc. and brewed until 1973. There were numerous changes and additions to the plant in the 1930’s when a modern brewery was created behind the old façade. It had acquired the names of the Fort Pitt, Heibrau, and Imperial Brewing Companies on its labels. When it closed, the brand names passed to the Cumberland Brewing Company. From the 1950’s until 1973, when it ceased operations. When it closed, the brand names passed to the Cumberland Brewing Company. Since then, the structures have stood vacant while various plans have been proposed for their reuse.

The latest plan calls for the former bottling plant immediately to the north of the brewery building to be renovated as a light-manufacturing center. The former wagon house, stables, and brewmaster’s residence across the street are to be connected and converted to senior housing units with a new building behind them. The city-owned American Brewery complex is under long-term lease to the Council for Economical and Business Opportunities, Inc. (CEBO), which hopes to find an eventual use for the brewery building itself.

A “new” John F. Wiessner & Sons (MD 113) brewery failed in an attempt to open on North Chester Street in 1934.



Brands (as Wiessner):

Export Lager (Warranted to keep in any climate)
Pilsner Style Beer (Perfect Pale Beer)
Pilsner Bottled Beer (as seen on the tray above)
Pale Superlative Beverage (red label)
Superlative Beer (blue label); Under the Food &
Drugs Act of June 30, 1906

Labels made by:

- A. Hoen (or Koen) & Co., Baltimore (the blue Superlative Beer label)
- B.

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Brands (as American):

- American Pilsener Beer
- American Nut Brown Ale

of David Hagberg, member of ABA, NABA, BCCA, BABC, and ECBA

- A 1910 ad (from around New Years Eve) states that a case of 24 bottles delivered in the city can be had for \$1.25.
- A 1914 ad from the Baltimore Sun newspaper shows a bottle with a body label, neck label, and crown top.

Sources:

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The Breweriana Collector (NABA), summer 1990, volume 70, page 16  
The collection