



# Built to Last

## No. 6

### Vickers Building

225 East Redwood Street, Baltimore (1904-5, Myers & Eitelman, architects)

Excerpt from the full report written by Laurie Ossman, Ph.D., for HABS

*One of the largest to utilize brick as a primary structural and facing material following the devastating Great Fire of 1904, the Vickers Building is a rare surviving example of the commercial blocks constructed in the city's Central Business District in the first years of the twentieth century. The interior of Werner's Restaurant, an occupant of the building since 1951, is remarkably intact example of late Moderne lunch counter.*

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 19th-century commercial district. 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 7-8 February 1904. While most post-Fire buildings in the district were built of stone, the Vickers



**Vickers Building, north facade. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.**

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 build-

ings, is generally attributed to cultural factors such as the rise 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

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## Vickers Building (continued)

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 19 May 1904, indicating that Vickers lost no time in commissioning a replacement structure for the building that had been destroyed by fire. Built to house retail establishments at the ground level with rental office space above, the Vickers Building has retained its intended use into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*The complete report for this structure, including bibliographic citations and references, may be obtained from the Historic American Buildings Survey beginning in September 2002. Copies of this information sheet may be downloaded at no cost from the HABS web site:*

*[www.cr.nps.gov/habs/haer/habs/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/habs/haer/habs/)*



**Vickers Building, detail. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.**

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, 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.

Ranging chronologically from the Peale Museum (1814) to the Bank of America Building (1929; formerly the Baltimore Trust Company Building), and in function from Old St. Paul's 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 exhibit, launched at the Maryland Historical Society in May 2002 during National Historic Preservation Month, and the companion walking tour provide a glimpse into the architectural history of Baltimore's Central Business District. It is hoped that the exhibit and brochure will encourage further exploration and preservation of Baltimore's tremendously rich architectural heritage.