

Starr Co. was piano pioneer

By CHERYL GIBBS
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Only 22 years after Beethoven died and while Brahms was still in his teens, a young German piano maker arrived in Indianapolis.

Almost 80 years later, he would be dubbed "the father of the piano industry in the middle west" in a 1928 newspaper article about Starr Piano Co., which he co-founded in Richmond with pioneer businessman James M. Starr.

By the time George L. Trayser arrived in America in 1849, he al-

As we were

ready had served his apprenticeship in the piano factories of his native Germany.

He made pianos in Indianapolis until 1869, when he moved to Ripley, Ohio and founded his own company, called the Trayser Piano Forte Co.

"This was the first organized effort for the manufacturing of grand, square and upright pianos in the middle west," according to information compiled by former Richmond resident William G. "Bill" Patterson, whose collection of items manufactured by the Starr Piano Co. formed the nucleus of the Starr Gennett Preservation Committee archives.

Although possessing an inborn faculty for originality and ability for his work, Mr. Trayser lacked the intuition for successfully carrying on the financial side of the business, being an expert builder rather than a merchant," according to Patterson's information.

On a promise of financial aid, he moved his plant to Hamilton, Ohio, in 1871. It was there he met a merchant named James Jackson, who said he owned an ideal site in Richmond for manufacturing pianos.

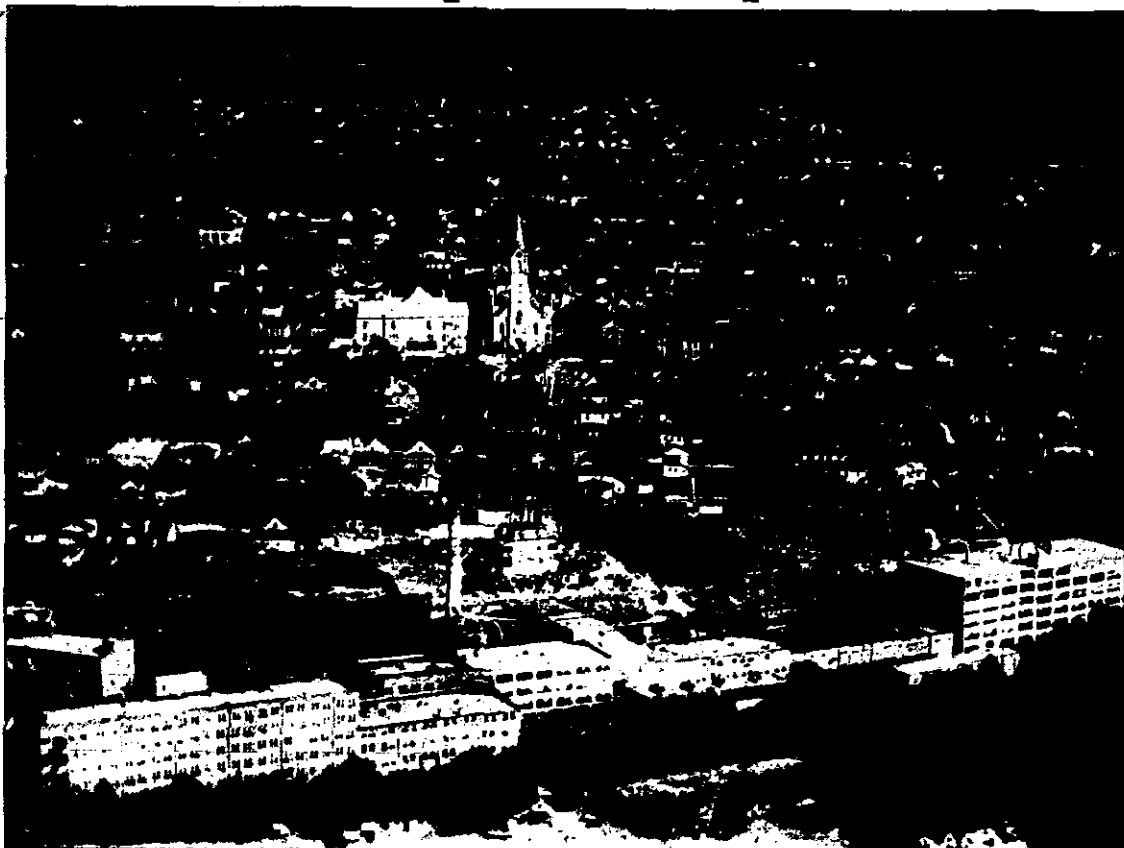
The rest, as they say, is history. In 1872, Trayser, Starr and Jackson set up their first piano factory at North Eighth Street and Elm Place.

"This was the beginning of a business that has grown to world wide recognition," the 1928 article said.

At first, the company manufactured about a two or three pianos a week, but that was not enough to keep the company financially healthy. So company officials hired G.M. Chase, a former associate of Trayser's who knew little about building pianos but was an excellent merchant.

"After Mr. Chase took charge, Mr. Trayser withdrew on account of his former business associations with Mr. Chase," according to Patterson's information. "The company was reorganized in 1878."

The operation was moved alongside the Whitewater River in the Whitewater Gorge, to make use of water power there, and a four-



Palladium-Item archive photo

This undated photograph was taken well before most of the buildings of the Starr Piano Co. fell victim to fire and decay. Smoke coming from the stack just left of the middle of the

photograph indicates that the plant was operating when this aerial photograph was taken. The plant shut down permanently in the 1950s.

story plant was built.

In 1884, discontent among several members of the company prompted another reorganization. The firm was renamed James M. Starr & Co., with Starr in partnership with his brother, Benjamin Starr, who served as factory superintendent. The new company began to make only upright pianos, for which there was an increasing demand.

Then, in 1893, a couple of businessmen from Nashville, Tenn. — John Lumsden and Henry Gennett — visited the local factory.

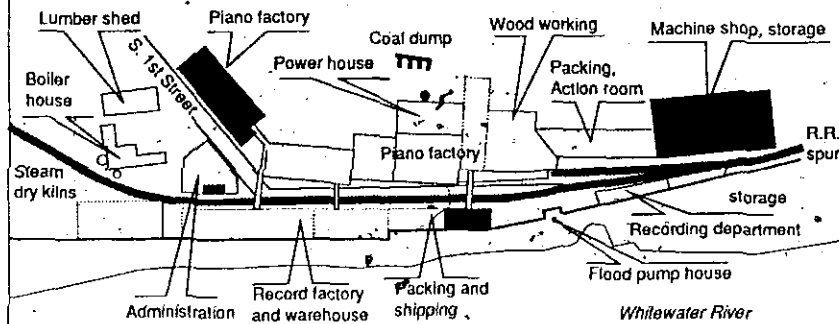
"They had been engaged in selling the Starr products and were so impressed with the possibilities and condition of the trade that they offered to purchase a half interest in the plant," the 1928 article said.

After the sale, the company's name officially was changed to Starr Piano Co.

Next week: In its heyday, the Starr Piano Co. branched out into making phonographs and records.

The Starr-Gennett Ruins

The Starr Piano Company was situated between the Main and G Street Bridges on the shore of the Whitewater River. At the peak of production, over 1,000 workers made Starr Pianos or worked in the Gennett Records factory. Buildings shown in black are still standing.



Source: Richmond Parks Department

Palladium-Item/Scott Davis