



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

## LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By Eric Lidji, Director, Rauh Jewish History  
Program & Archives

### Jews in the Liquor Business

For the earliest Jewish settlers in Pittsburgh, liquor was not the easiest business opportunity, nor the most common one, nor the only source of great fortunes. But it best exemplified the economic life of the community at the time. Traits like self-employment, creativity, rapid advancement, social insularity, and communal generosity were found across the small Jewish population of the city before 1880 and were heightened among those few families engaged

in the business of making and selling alcoholic beverages.

The 50 or so Jewish families in Pittsburgh in the mid-1850s began to expand beyond dry goods into other mercantile fields, selling tobacco, jewelry, and notions. High start-up costs made liquor a tough business for new entrants. But by 1860, at least five Jewish men were employed in the retail end of the field running bars, inns, and stores.

In partnership with his half-brothers Emanuel and Samuel Wertheimer, Asher Guckenheimer started a wholesale liquor

operation in downtown Pittsburgh as early as 1851, sometime after arriving in this country from the German state of Württemberg. Within six years, Guckenheimer Brothers had purchased the Thomas Bell Distillery in Freeport, Pa., upstream from Pittsburgh on the Allegheny River. By upgrading equipment and hiring expert Irish distillers, they turned “Good Old Guckenheimer Rye” into one of the most popular whiskey brands in the country and made a small fortune in the process. By 1880, Guckenheimer and Samuel Wertheimer were among five members of the Concordia



Philip Hamburger immigrated to Pittsburgh from Bavaria in 1867. The success of his distilling business made him an important figure in the local Jewish community.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Philip Hamburger Photograph, 2001.0190.



Mr. Dewitt Haber,  
Berger Building,  
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Dear Sir:

Your favor of April 29th to hand, with check  
for \$550.00 in the Isaacson matter, for which I thank you.

Please mail me your bill for services and  
oblige,

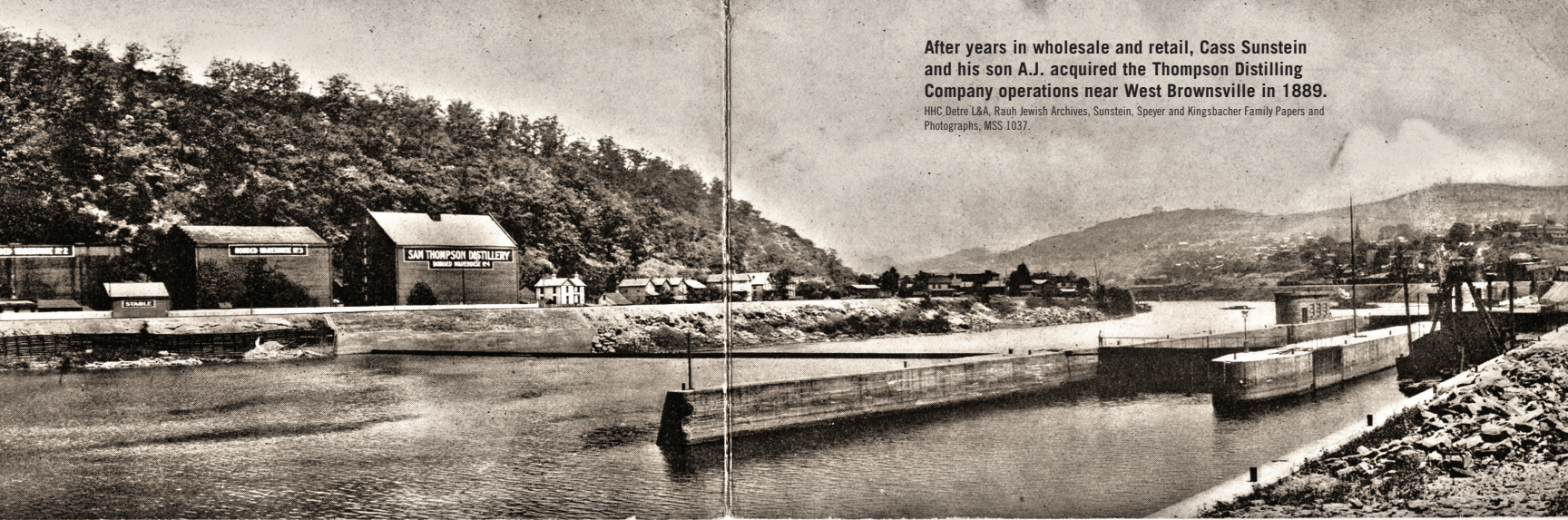
Yours very truly,

*Ph. Hamburger*

Philip Hamburger  
acquired the George  
W. Jones distillery  
in Brownsville and  
produced the well-  
known “Monongahela  
Rye Whiskey” and “Old  
Bridgeport” brands.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Aaron  
Family Papers, MSS 248.





After years in wholesale and retail, Cass Sunstein and his son A.J. acquired the Thompson Distilling Company operations near West Brownsville in 1889.  
HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Sunstein, Speyer and Kingsbacher Family Papers and Photographs, MSS 1037.

Club (an elite Jewish social club in Pittsburgh) who employed at least two servants.

A third member on that short list was Philip Hamburger, who started a retail liquor store soon after arriving in Pittsburgh from Bavaria in 1867. He eventually acquired the George W. Jones distillery in Brownsville, south of Pittsburgh on the Monongahela River. Innovative and aggressive marketing helped Hamburger grow his “Monongahela Rye Whiskey” and “Old Bridgeport” brands. He built one of the largest plants of its kind in the world and boasted a sizeable wholesale operation based out of a four-story building in Pittsburgh. He was a prominent figure in the industry, representing the U.S. Chamber of Commerce at three International Commercial Congresses.

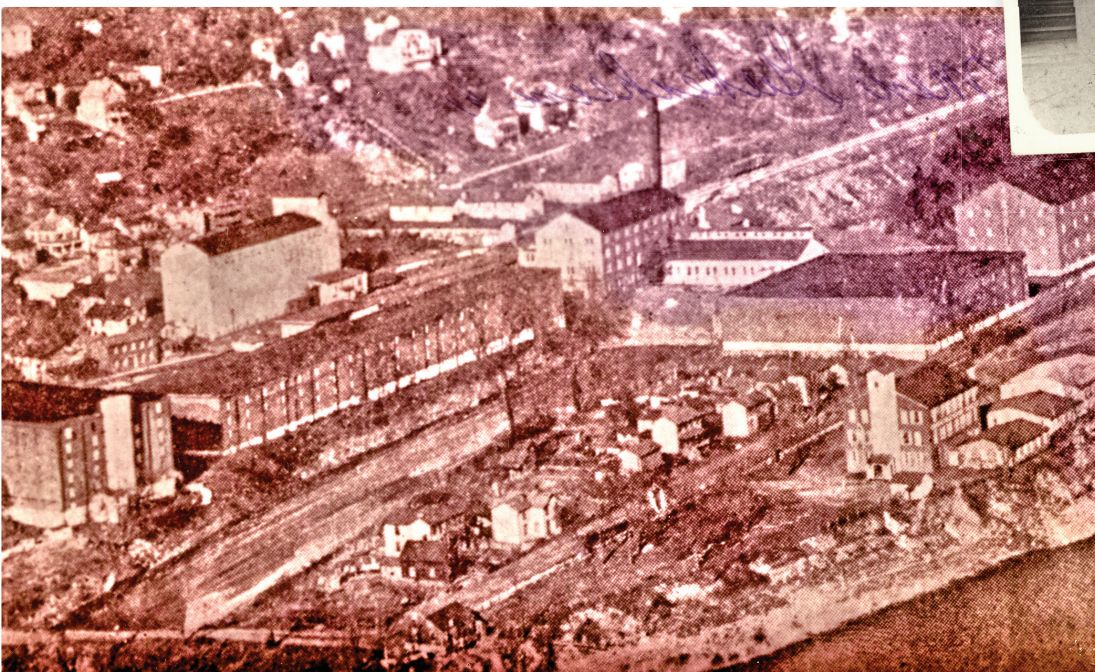
Unlike the German-born Guckenheimer and Hamburger, Cass Sunstein came from Lithuania. According to family lore, he smuggled himself out of the country in a sack of hay to evade conscription in the Russian army. He arrived in Pittsburgh in 1866 and brought his wife and four children over in 1870. With his son A.J. Sunstein, he started the C. Sunstein & Sons jobbing business, and in 1889 they purchased the Thompson Distilling Company operations near West Brownsville. A.J. Sunstein served two terms as the president of the National Association of Distillers and Wholesale Dealers and three terms in the state legislature and was a leading

voice against Prohibition.

As the Jewish population of Pittsburgh grew—reaching 1,000 by 1870 and 2,000 by 1877—the segment engaged in liquor declined, but the stature of those businessmen increased. Liquor was the second most common profession among Concordia Club members after dry goods, accounting for 13.2 percent



Cass Sunstein immigrated to Pittsburgh from Lithuania in 1866 and became a jobber and retailer of liquor from various storefronts around downtown Pittsburgh, including this storefront at 133 Water Street.  
HHC Detre L&A, General Photographic Collection, Box 17.




Guckenheimer Brothers acquired the Thomas Bell Distillery in Freeport by 1857 and greatly expanded the size and increased the quality of its distilling operations.  
HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Lehman Family Papers, MSS 1018.



**Cass Sunstein started as a jobber and retailer of liquor from a storefront in downtown Pittsburgh."**

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Sunstein, Speyer and Kingsbacher Family Papers and Photographs, MSS 1037.

in 1870 and increasing to 15 percent by 1880, according to an analysis by researcher Michelle Pailthorp. Economic bonds often cultivated social ones. For example, A.J. Sunstein's son Alexander married Aimee Rauh. Her great uncle was the malt dealer Louis I. Aaron. Her first cousin once removed was Marcus Feuchtwanger, who worked for a time in the Aaron family malting business. Feuchtwanger married Nellie Sunstein, who was Alexander Sunstein's aunt.

The communal benefits generated by these economic and social bonds lasted long after Prohibition brought an end to the industry in 1920. Emanuel Wertheimer was president of Rodef Shalom Congregation for 15 years. Hamburger and A.J. Sunstein were inaugural officers of the Federation of the Jewish Philanthropies of Pittsburgh. The wealth generated from their industrial efforts continues to address charitable needs today. 



**By investing in improved still design and Irish expertise, Guckenheimer Brothers turned its "Good Old Guckenheimer Rye" into one of the most popular whiskies in America.**

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Lehman Family Papers, MSS 1018.