

A Short Biographical Sketch of Andrew Reuss and the Early Cincinnati Piano Building Tradition

Thomas Strange, 2011

In his journals¹ describing his travels in America during the first decade of the 19th century, John Melish wrote of the pioneer township of Cincinnati; **“As the people are becoming wealthy, and polished in their manners, probably a manufactory of piano-fortes would do, on a small scale.”** This particular account of Melish’s travels, along with associated authors who described the young America and recommended suitable industry, would be published and widely read throughout America, Great Britain, and the Continent, and would have the effect of acting as a recruitment tool for peopling the young North American continent from Europe and the increasingly congested East Coast of the United States².

Early Cincinnati was a destination of a large contingent of Germans who came in the first wave of immigration late in the 18th century to settle along the Ohio River plain. From its founding in 1788 by pensioned revolutionary war soldiers who were promised land for service, it grew from 500 in 1790 to 10,000 by its incorporation as a city in 1819, with a population estimated to be 20% German by 1840³. These Germans established livelihoods through a vast array of businesses, and their letters home would result in a second large wave of immigration to the city beginning in the late 1820s.

George Charters, a Scotsman who learned piano-forte building in London, but having lived and made pianos in New York from 1796⁴, arrived in Cincinnati in 1819 and set up shop at 5th between Main and Sycamore. Charters was also a founding member of the loosely organized Apollonian Society, who gave musical performances and organized theater events at the local halls and beer gardens, and which remained in existence until 1828, marking the first musical era of the Cincinnati. Charters built piano-fortes based on the English style of construction, generally from five to five and a half octaves.

By 1825 the City Directory⁵ shows two other piano builders joining Charters, Francis Garrish (Vine between 2nd and 3rd) and Aaron Golden (alley between Main and St. Clair). John Imhoff, age 20, would arrive the next year (1826) to set up shop as a fancy goods and music retailer, and later factor in the biography of Reuss. Imhoff’s store, on Main Street between 3rd and 4th street placed him in the heart of downtown and in prominent view. An 1822 census of manufacturers within the United States describes a Cincinnati piano making firm employing “three men and a boy”, producing pianofortes to the value of \$250 to \$400⁶. The firm of Steel (Eliphalet) and Clark (Isaiah) began producing pianos in 1828 at Sycamore between 5th and 6th street.

Andreas Reuss was born April 8, 1799 in Bad Kissingen, Germany, to Andreas and Eva (ne Degant, also quoted as Dean) Reuss, who were married Feb. 21, 1797. Reuss clearly trained on the manufacture of pianos employing the Viennese action, sometimes referred to as prellmechanik, based on surviving instruments built under his name. He later describes himself as arriving from Vienna, and without any real piano building tradition in Bad Kissingen, we can infer that he left for Vienna at an early age to learn the craft from such houses as Andre Stein or J.A. Knam, whose instruments are similar in construction to Reuss.

Reuss arrived in Cincinnati between late 1828 and 1830, and immediately anglicized his first name to Andrew, under which he will be known for the rest of his life. The City Directory of 1831 lists his shop at No. 130 Main Street⁷. Francis Garrish and the firm of Steel and Clark is still listed, Golden has departed the city and Israel Schooley appears and is described as a piano-forte maker, though historical sources describe him as principally an organ builder⁸. Edward Blackburn is described as a cabinet maker in earlier directories, but by 1831 has changed to piano-forte maker from his shop at 5th and Western Row. It is possible that these smaller builders were now principally supplying the firms who manufactured finished pianos with case work, key boards, etc.

Nothing remains of his earliest years, but the next extant City Directory of 1834 features a prominent advertisement by Reuss:

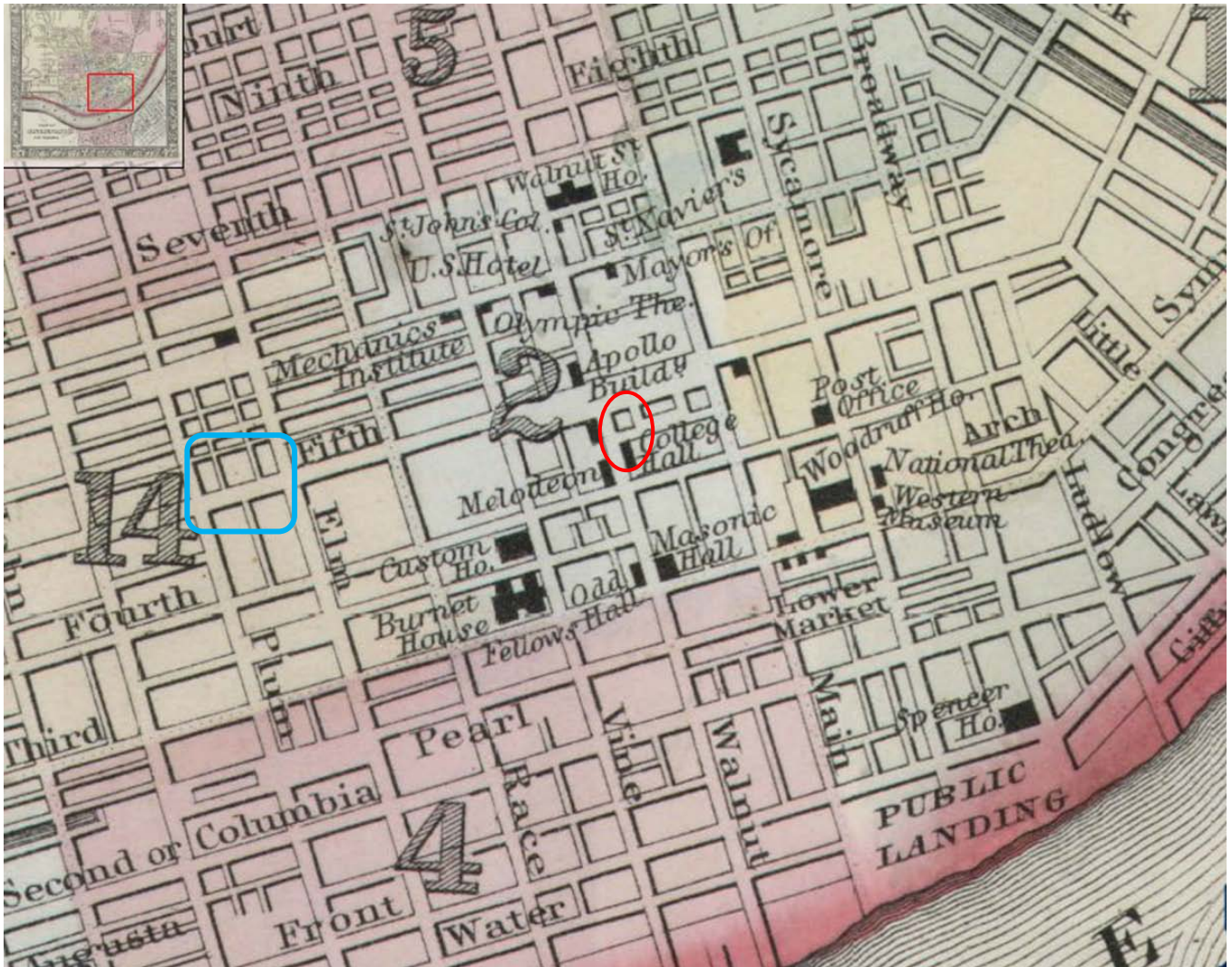
A. REUSS,
(FORMERLY FROM VIENNA, GERMANY,)
PIANO FORTE MANUFACTURER,
East side of Walnut, between 4th and 5th Streets,
CINCINNATI.
SUPERIOR PIANOS
MADE WITH A
GRAND VIENNA ACTION,
Splendid Finish and Rich Tone. Horizontal
and Upright Pianos, in different forms and shape,
always for sale. Pianos of every description and
action repaired and tuned on the shortest notice.
All orders will be strictly filled; and the articles
made by the best workmen, of materials imported
from Germany.

He has moved from No. 130 Main near the Ohio River to the east side of Walnut Street between 4th and 5th street, a prestigious location. He is clearly marketing to wealthy German families by emphasizing his connection to Vienna and imported German materials, though the wood types chosen speak more to types found in typical high end American furniture of the time.



Square piano circa 1832 by A. Reuss, Walnut St. Cincinnati, collection of the author

The piano is triple strung in the treble and tenor, and double strung in the lower bass, without any over spun bass strings, in keeping with the Austrian piano building tradition. The light weight hammers give an easy response, and the action touch is shallow compared to English and American built, English tradition pianos of the time. Two additional pedals produce a drum and bell ring, known as Jannisarry stops, and popular in the late 1820s to mid 1830s Viennese pianos.



Detail from S. A. Mitchell Jr.'s 1860 map of Cincinnati, Ohio, from the 1864 edition of *Mitchell's New General Atlas*. The red oval marks the location of Reuss' piano factory on Walnut in the 1830s. The blue rectangle marks his operation from ~1843 to 1850. Most of the addresses for piano forte makers fall within the boundary of this detail.

The 1836 directory shows Reuss boarding at Cyrus Coffins', a large recently established boarding house on the east side of Walnut between 3rd and 4th, which later became the Masonic Hall. At this point we can assume that Reuss' dealings were generating a fair amount of profit for him. On the death of his father, he commissioned a memorial for the Balthazar chapel in Bad Kissingen for his father, mother and sister. A marriage certificate⁹ shows that Andreas and Eva were married in this same chapel.



"Last, Oh dear Father, Mother, Sister / rest in peace in this silent grave / From your son, 'tis the thing he gave / dedicated to you by whom that now bitterly cries / but Virtue's true reward in eternity lies."

Set in the year 1836 / by Andreas Reuss, Piano Forte maker in Cincinnati, Ohio, North America " Among them [father, mother, sister]: Andreas Reuss, died on April 30, 1835 - / Eva Reuss. Dean, died on November 6, 1833 / Gertrude Inches, born Reuss, died on Nov. 22, 1831 / Lord, give them eternal rest!

Translation: Agnes Reuss



Note the similarity of the memorial geometry and the pedal lyre of the Reuss piano, indicating a design theme by Reuss.

By 1836 John Imhoffs' business has grown large enough that he took out a prominent advertisement in the 1836 City Directory¹⁰:



JOHN IMHOFF,
DEALER IN
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS,
FANCY ARTICLES AND JEWELRY.

(SIGN OF THE VIOLIN)
West side of Main street, second door below Fourth
CINCINNATI.

Imhoff is one block away from Reuss' shop, and the addition of musical instruments could signal that Reuss would be selling out of Imhoffs' premises. Other makers in the city now included Isaiah Clark, piano maker, N side 5 n Sycamore, John Clark , piano maker, 3rd between Pike and Butler, William Pommer, piano forte manufacturer, N' E corner Main and 8th and Edward Blackburn, Harrison between Broadway & Pike. Additionally we find William Nixon (piano forte saloon, S E. corner 4th and Walnut) and William Nash (S side 3rd between Main and Walnut) running large piano instruction schools for young ladies near the shops of Imhoff and Reuss, ensuring a steady customer base.

The synergy obviously led to partnership between Imhoff and Reuss, for by 1839 we see the following advertisement in the city directory¹¹:

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Shaffer's



IMHOFF & REUSS,
SIGN OF THE VIOLIN,
NO. 169, MAIN STREET,
CINCINNATI:

IMPORTERS OF ENGLISH, FRENCH & GERMAN

FANCY GOODS,
AND

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS,
OF ALL DESCRIPTIONS,

Jewelry, Perfumery, Cutlery, Toys, &c..

Pianos of all descriptions always for sale.

ALSO,

LOOKING GLASS PLATES,
OF ANY SIZE, BY THE BOX.

Other dealers whose primary business was mirrors also sold pianos, a marketing and sales strategy for home décor that can be seen today at boutique home stores.

WESTERN
LOOKING GLASS MANUFACTORY,
COOPER & WISWELL,
Main street, Sign of the Large Looking Glass.
Keep constantly on hand the largest assortment of
Looking Glasses in the Western country. Looking
Glass Plates by the box or single.
Portraits and Pictures framed in the neatest patterns
at reasonable prices, and at short notice.

PIANO FORTES.

Always for sale at this establishment, and warranted to be superior instruments, in tone and workmanship.

Advertisement from 1836 City Directory

Reuss continued manufacturing pianos at his Walnut street address under his own name, but is now partnered with Imhoff, presumably to enhance his selling power. This would mark the high point in business for both of these gentlemen. At this point, the US Census of 1840 lists Reuss as the head of a house hold of 6, which included his wife Bata (born Feb 16, 1801), one child later identified as Andrew (Born 1835), and John Imhoff and his wife Mary, and young son (John, born 1837) who were now boarding with the Reuss family. Two other gentlemen who were clerks for Imhoff & Reuss are listed in the 1839 directory as boarding with Reuss, but are gone by 1840 when the census was taken, one of whom, William Ballauf, also late from Germany, will figure prominently in the future.

In 1839 the number of persons identifying themselves in the piano trade is up sharply.

- T. B. Mason, Professor of music and dealer in piano-fortes, Keeps constantly for sale an assortment of pianos from all the most celebrated manufacturers in the United States, at manufacturer's prices / pianos securely packed for transportation
- JOHN BRITTING PIANO FORTE manufacturer and IMPORTER OF VIENNA PIANOS,
- NORTH Canal STREET, 2 doors East of Vine.
- All orders thankfully received, and executed with
- neatness and despatch. N. B.—TUNING and REPAIRING done at the shortest notice.
- Imhoff and Reuss, sign of the violin, No. 169 Main street, Cincinnati, Importers of English, French, and German Fancy goods and musical instruments of all descriptions, jewelry, cutlery, toys and etc., Pianos of all descriptions always for sale, also looking glass plates of any size by the box.
- Barnhart, Daniel (Pa) Piano-maker at Geo Kiel's,
- Blackburn, Edward (Eng) Piano Mkr, res, Ss Harrison street,
- Imhoff, John (Ger) [I & Reuss] bds at A Reuss'.
- Reuss, Andrew (Ger) /res. Walnut b 3d and 4lh.
- Rohmann, A. B. (Ger) Dry-goods Mer 175 Main, bds at Reuss'.

Nash and Nixon, Pommer, and both Clarks are no longer listed by this time, demonstrating the rapid turnover in business, though Nash and Nixon will return in subsequent years.

John Britting in particular seemed eager to make a splash, as we see in his advertisement:

JOHN BRITTING,
PIANO  **FORTE**
MANUFACTURER,
and
IMPORTER OF VIENNA PIANOS,
NORTH CANAL STREET,
2 doors East of Vine.
All orders thankfully received, and executed with
neatness and despatch.
N. B.—TUNING and REPAIRING done at the shortest notice.

Advertisement from 1839 City Directory

Britting would continue in business through 1853 but the business diminished in the 1840s and he disappears by 1855.

When the City Directory is again published in 1843, the partnership between Imhoff and Reuss has been dissolved. Imhoff has taken the family to live at Franklin Boarding House on Main between 3rd and 4th, so across the street from his store. This need not have been an unhappy parting, as three more children were born to Imhoff in the intervening years (Christian, Madeline, and Susan) and such a large family would need expanded quarters. Also, the musical scene in Cincinnati had shifted downward as the second era of musical life came to an end, and the city grew more strained under the growth of river commerce.

Reuss himself moved his operation to smaller quarters at 5th street between Elm and Plum, and took a house in Millcreek Township, an upscale neighborhood. William Ballauf on the other hand, had turned his hand to becoming a shop owner with much success. Ballauf would continue to figure prominently in musical life in Cincinnati and was a founder of a choral society there.

Ballauf, William, music and fancy store, Main, bet. 6th & 7th.

WILLIAM BALLAUF,
AT HIS
FANCY AND MUSIC STORE,
No. 284 Main street, Cincinnati,
Keeps constantly for sale a general assortment of
Jewellery, Perfumery, Cutlery, Musical Instruments, and
other Fancy Articles.
Looking Glasses fitted to all sized frames.
DRUM HEADS always on hand and fitted at the shortest notice.
HAVANA CIGARS, such as Cacadore's, Regalias, Canones,
Principes, &c. of the best quality.

*Advertisement
from City
Directory 1843*

Reuss continued at his 5th street address until 1850 when we lose sight of him in the directory, probably signaling his retirement. His wife Bata died in 1853 at age 52 and Reuss had a large obelisk erected for her and as a family plot in Spring Grove Cemetery in 1854.



He set his son Andrew up as a merchant, who is listed in the 1860 census as a Coal Merchant with a capital worth of \$2000, a significant sum. Andrew joined the 2nd Infantry Regiment Ohio in April of 1861, and was mustered out on July 1, 1861 on disability, shortly before the Battle of Bull Run. The son would live in Cincinnati for the rest of his life, and is buried with his family in a separate plot in Spring Grove.

Andrew Reuss the piano forte maker clearly made the most of the opportunities presented in a pioneer boom town of the first half of the 19th century in America, ultimately acquiring enough wealth to retire and set his son up in a handsome business. His surviving pianos are richly appointed, and the design sufficiently attractive to have allowed several to survive, despite their losing currency quickly against the ever more powerful instruments being made at the time. The action design of a Viennese arrangement in particular is ill equipped to produce stentorian results, and is more suitable to a lightly strung instrument. As these early pianos faded against the much heavier and robust pianos arriving from the East Coast, Reuss' design was marginalized and eventually replaced, as would occur in Baltimore MD where a similar concentration of the German piano tradition was active contemporaneous to Reuss.

Andrew Reuss died July 23rd, 1867 and is buried with his wife in Spring Grove Cemetery.

Acknowledgements

Special recognition is due to Mr. Frank Renfrow for bringing this piano to our attention and providing key links to the biographical information. Thanks also to the Reuss family in Bad Kissingen whose genealogical research has provided the parentage of Reuss.

¹ Melish, John "Travels in the United States of America in the Years 1806, 1807, and 1809, 1810, & 1811; Including an Account of Passages Betwixt America and Britain and Travels Through Various Parts of Great Britain, Ireland, and Upper Canada, Illustrated by Eight Maps" Volume II, Thomas and George Palmer, Philadelphia, 1812, pg 127

² Abbott, Edith "Historical aspects of the Immigration Problem: Select Documents" University of Chicago Press, 1926, pg. 718

³ Shaffer's Advertising Directory for 1839 – 40, pg. 483

⁴ Groce, Nancy "Musical Instrument Makers of New York" Pendragon, 1991. pg29

⁵ The 1825 Cincinnati City Directory, printed by Samuel J Brown

⁶ Digest of accounts of manufacturing establishments in the United States, and of their manufactures / made under direction of the Secretary of State, in pursuance of a resolution of Congress, of 30th March, 1822.

⁷ The City Directory for the Year 1831, Cincinnati, published by Robinson and Fairbank

⁸ Greve, Charles Theodore, "The Centennial History of Cincinnati and Representative Citizens" Biographical Publishing Company, Chicago, Vol. 1, 1904

⁹ The certificates of marriage (are) thus proclaimed / in the sight of the Church solemnly conjoined, 21 Feb., the good youth Andreas Reuss, Reuss Serenarius the citizen, good men all (in the nave of) Balthazar (Neumann) and (with) the Serenarius Family / Nor, Daughter of Michael Degant / and of this citizen (son of) Eva Reuschert, legitimate daughter. / The official host stood for this marriage and blessed the wedding. As witnesses, there were John Diemand, Andreas Reuss of Bamberg, representative, and Michael Hahn, Scribe and citizen of Kissingen. (Translation from Latin by Carl Strange)

¹⁰ The Cincinnati Directory Advertiser, Published by A. H. Woodruff, 1836

¹¹ Shaffer's Advertising Directory for 1839 – 40, pg. 40