



City of Manassas, Virginia
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New Exhibit at the Manassas Museum About Beer Baron Robert Portner



City of Manassas, VA . . . Opening this Friday, April 13 at 7 p.m., *Living the American Dream*, the new exhibit at the Manassas Museum, tells the story of German immigrant Robert Portner, the Washington, D.C. beer baron. He was an entrepreneur, a philanthropist and a Manassas resident.

It was while visiting the Mathis family in Manassas that Robert Portner, founder of Alexandria brewery Tivoli, decided to purchase property and build Annaburg, a legendary summer retreat named for his wife Anna, that still stands on Maple Street in the City of Manassas. He considered the 1892 house—with its 35 rooms, and electricity his escape from the city. Robert Portner was the inventor of the first mechanical air conditioning system.

The 2,000-acre Annaburg estate included a deer park, fountains, greenhouse, vineyard, swimming pool and the 1825 Liberia Plantation, which he operated as a dairy farm. For years, especially after Portner's death in 1906, the estate was considered a public park where residents held baptisms, skated, and strolled. In his will, Portner left \$5,000 to the Manasseh Lodge of Masons to build a Masonic Hall, which still stands on Center Street; \$5,000 to improve Manassas streets; and \$5,000 to a trust fund charged with caring for the poor, with a provision that one-third of the money should go to "the poor colored citizens."

Michael Gaines, author of *The Shortest Dynasty, 1837-1947, The Story of Robert Portner; a History of his Brewing Empire; and the Story of his Beloved Annaburg* is the guest curator for the exhibit.

“Sharing my knowledge of the Portner family and Annaburg is a passion for me and something that comes naturally, as I have been doing it for nearly 25 years now,” Gaines explains. “It is such a multi-faceted and fascinating story that pretty much anyone can relate to. Yes, they were wealthy. Yes, they owned multiple businesses and significant land holdings. But they were regular people too. They loved, lived, and mourned just like we do, and I want people to see that.”



Although the museum’s own artifacts—among them original Portner Brewery bottles—are on display, it is the Portner family’s heirlooms that help bring the story to life. Descendants have lent such items as crested Portner family china and glassware; paintings of a Portner child and of Anna’s Swiss homeland; an original Portner Brewery barrel; and a farm ledger listing expenses for Portner properties, including Liberia.

Catherine and Margaret Portner, two of Robert Portner’s great-great granddaughters and owners of the modern-day Alexandria Portner Brewhouse, have also contributed to the exhibit. The two ladies are sending samples of Hofbrau Pilsner, a beer they have recreated from the original Robert Portner Brewing Company, for the opening reception on April 13 at 7 p.m.

The free Manassas Museum exhibit runs through September 16.

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Captions for Images of Artifacts in the exhibit:

This 19th century beer keg is believed to be one of very few still in existence from the original Portner Brewing Company.

This soup tureen, used at Annaburg by the Portner family, features the American, Swiss and German flags to honor their heritage and their American citizenship.

This decorative wine cruet and glass were used at Annaburg by the Portners. The cruet features the initials R.P. on the side, while the glass features the family’s coat of arms.