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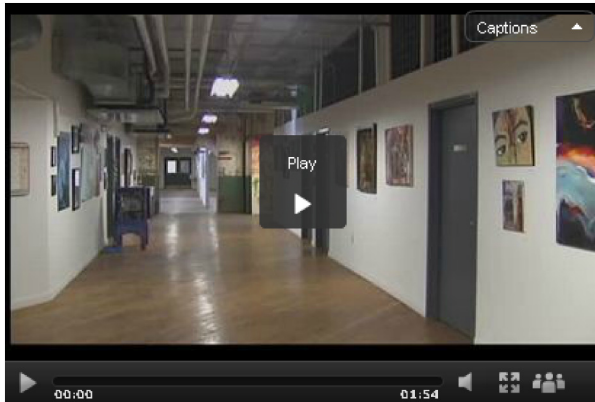
## History's Headlines: From "Seegars" to artists' mecca

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History's Headlines: From "Seegars" to artists' mecca

ALLENTOWN, Pa. - Ever since it began in New York in the last quarter of the last century, the use of old industrial spaces as loft apartment and studios has become the rage. And locally the most recent addition to this trend occurred on November 19, 2013, with the opening of the Cigar Factory Artists Studio, at 707 N. 4th Street.

In crafting its modern spaces without sacrificing the integrity

of the building, developer George Huang has made a significant contribution in re-purposing the space. Artist Brandon Wunder, of Allentown's Alternative Gallery, which is a space for emerging artists that has recently moved to the Cigar Factory, has developed an interest in the building's past. He is hoping to create an exhibit around it.

Built between 1898 and 1900 as an actual cigar factory by the New York based Bondy and Lederer Cigar Company, it has found a new life.

Cigars and cigar making did not arrive in the Lehigh Valley in 1900 with Bondy and Lederer. Perhaps as far back as the 18th century, but certainly in the 19th century, the region was making tobacco products.



Throughout that period Pennsylvania was among the largest producers of tobacco products in the country. The industry had grown to meet the huge demand for cigars of all shapes, sizes and names as well as chewing tobacco and other products. Allentown had at least 60 cigar rolling establishments by 1885, but most consisted of only 6 to 10 rollers. Other communities also had similar, smaller cigar making operations.

These jobs were usually taken by unmarried women, a practice that was common throughout the industry at the time. It was assumed they had more

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nimble fingers than men, and would work for lower wages.

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The cigar industry was one of the first unionized industries starting in the 1860s. Samuel Gompers, the founder of the American Federation of Labor, began his work life in a cigar factory. Allentown's cigar workers got their first union in 1869.



Perhaps the biggest cigar makers in the Lehigh Valley before the coming of the New Yorkers were the Ruhe Brothers. The Ruhe family arrived in Allentown about 1790 and took on a number of business ventures.

It was Joseph Ruhe, born in 1837, who became a cigar maker. In the mid-1850s he formed with his brothers Charles and

Frederick the Ruhe Brothers company. In the 1860 city directory, Allentown's first, they are listed together as "seegar makers" with a factory located between 7th and 8th Streets. In 1885 they were employing 190 workers and by 1912, 300.

Joseph Ruhe invested his tobacco money in city real estate and sent his son Wallace Edgar Ruhe off to the University of Pennsylvania to study architecture. After graduation in 1899, young Ruhe spent a year traveling and studying in Italy and returned to Allentown, where he would have a career as one of the city's leading architects.

But the Ruhe Brothers were not in the same class as Bondy and Lederer. The Bondys had first came to America in the 19th century from Bohemia, then part of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire and what is now the Czech Republic. They were a Sephardic Jewish family, Jews who were descendants from those who were forced to flee Spain in 1492 by the government's persecution under the Spanish Inquisition. A Bondy is listed as a tobacco merchant in New Orleans as early as 1857. By 1885 they were major New York tobacco product manufactures. Their business was located in the city between 70th street and 1st Avenue and employed 600 rollers. They were also spreading their operations into other parts of the east coast. In the 1870s, during a strike by cigar workers in New York City, the Bondys opened a cigar factory in Suffolk, County, New York, using local Bohemian immigrant labor.

It is not known exactly what attracted them, but the 1899 city directory notes that Charles C. Bondy and his sons Emile C. and Richard C. were staying in rooms at the Hotel Allen, then the best hotel in the city. Perhaps it was the city's reputation for cigar making that drew them.

By 1900 Charles C. and Emile C. Bondy are listed as "residing in New York." Richard C. lived locally at the then-fashionable address of 1350 Hamilton Street. The name of the firm was Bondy and Lederer but no reference can be found for who Lederer was or what role he played.



The business flourished, although there was a strike in 1910 against the local cigar industry, the same year Bethlehem Steel was experiencing one. How it affected the Bondy's interests is unknown.

In 1900 John Jacob Astor IV, multi-millionaire and later Titanic victim noted, "a man who has a million dollars in America today is as well off as if he were rich." And by Astor's standards the Bondys were very well off. On February 10, 1915 Emile Bondy died, leaving behind a fortune estimated by the New York Times at \$1,250,000. A large part of it went to his sister, who was living in Vienna. A bequest of \$100,000 went to Columbia University's medical school for cancer research.

Perhaps it was the death of Emile Bondy that caused his brother to either sell or merge the Bondy family operation with the General Cigar Company in 1916. Apparently as part of the deal Richard C. Bondy was named a senior vice-president of General Cigar. He returned to New York with the Allentown factory being run by a superintendent.

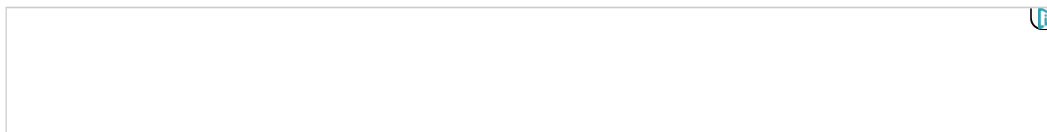
For the next 50 years, surviving the Great Depression and World War II, it turned out tobacco products. For a few years later it was knitting mill before becoming vacant.

Today, instead of being torn down like many other cigar factories, it has been re-purposed as a functioning part of the Lehigh Valley's and Allentown's past, re-tooled for the future.

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