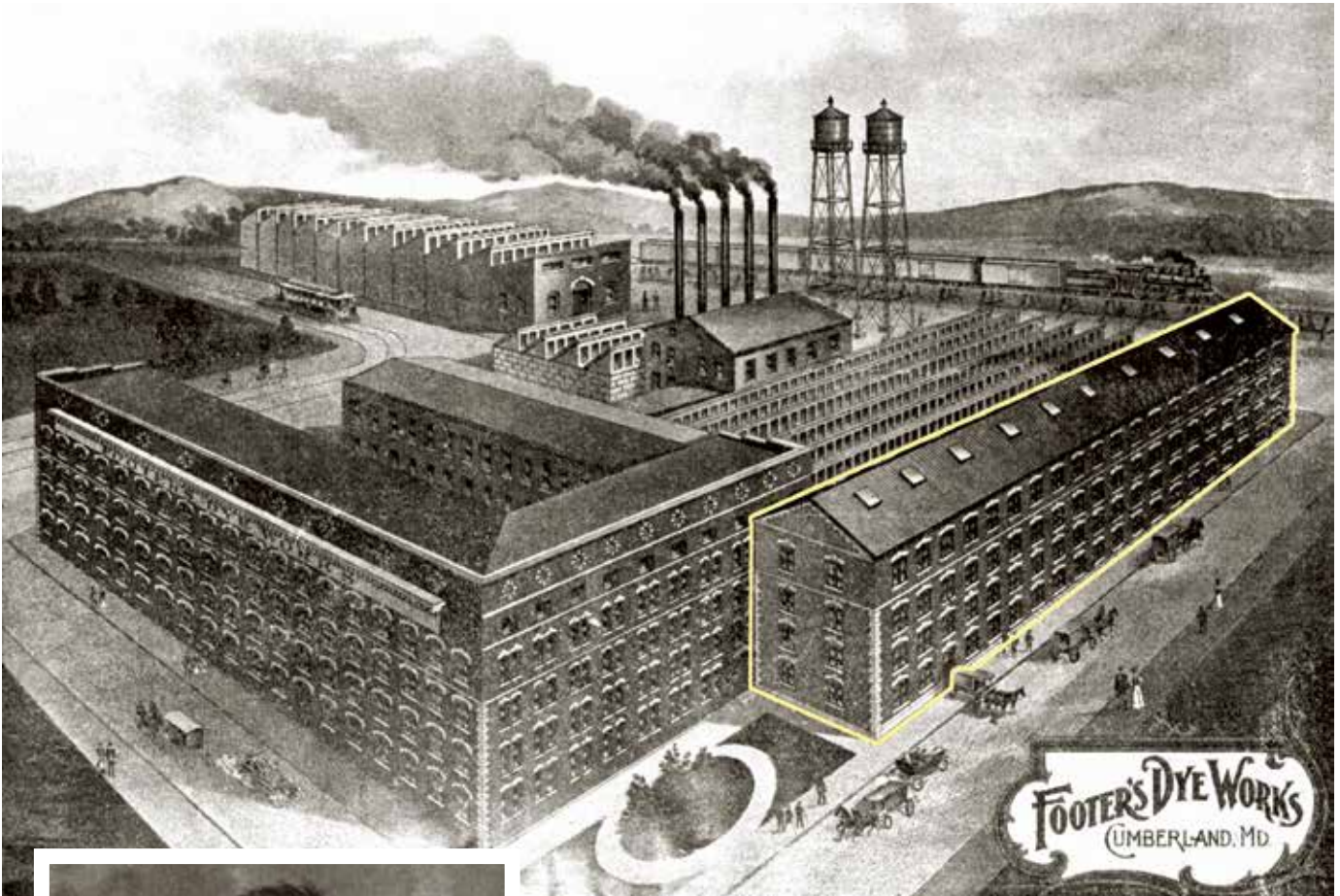


Footer's Dye Works Remembered

CUMBERLAND, MARYLAND —

AMERICA'S GREATEST AND BEST CLEANING AND DYEING ESTABLISHMENT

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**



Architectural drawing of Footer's Dye Works, Cumberland, Maryland, circa 1904. The building at right (yellow outline) is the only remaining structure of this vast complex. Today, the historic, remodeled building features upper floor luxury apartments and ground level retail space.



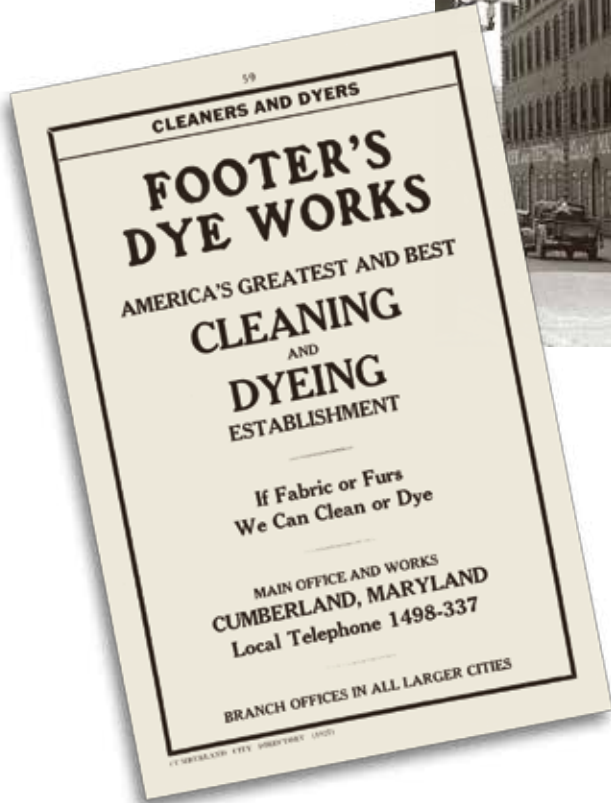
Thomas Footer
*Founder of Footer's Dye Works
and President of the Company*

One of Cumberland's landmark buildings holds a history that embraces the 19th century Horatio Alger stories of rag-to-riches youngsters who succeeded through good works and honesty. The Footer's Dye Works building located on Howard Street remains a visible reminder of Thomas Footer, the orphaned boy who made his way across the Atlantic Ocean to create one of the most prominent dyeing and cleaning works in the United States. His massive factory brought notoriety to the city and employment to hundreds of residents who became intertwined with the remarkable story that unfolded in Cumberland during the late 1800s.

Mr. Footer recorded that both parents died at early ages, thereby causing him to work in the textile mills of England and Scotland. The hard scrabble circumstances changed following marriage and immigration to

Footer's Dye Works, South Mechanic and Howard Street area. This photo was apparently taken after Footer's closed; several businesses were utilizing the ground floor.

Below: Footer's Dye Works ad from Polk's Directory, 1927.



the United States where more opportunities for success became available.

Familiarity with the British textile industry was likely the reason he sought employment in several northeastern mills upon arrival in the United States. For reasons unknown today, Mr. Footer departed the textile industry and moved to Cumberland around 1872 where he established a small shop on Greene Street that advertised "carpet weaving and carpet rags" services. Apparently, this service included weaving rags into rugs and carpets.

The Greene Street location was short lived and, according to newspaper reports, Thomas moved operations to the corner of North Liberty and Mill Streets where the weaving

of carpet was abandoned for the purposes of establishing a dyeing and cleaning business. Three years later Mr. Footer moved to 24 Liberty Street. It was at this location business prospered to the point that additional facilities were required. In 1891, Mr. Footer boasted that he owned the "most successful" business of its kind in Maryland. Specifically mentioned in advertising was the cleaning of curtains, lace, blankets, and gloves.

In the same year the Cumberland City Council voted to permit the building of a three story brick addition to the rear of Footer's establishment. Additional progress at the site may be followed by examining Sanborne Fire Company maps that show multiple buildings being added over the years between North Liberty and the mill race, an area behind the current building at 19 Frederick Street.

In October 1904, Mr. Footer purchased property south of Howard Street for the purpose of constructing a larger facility. The location offered significant transportation advantages, including street car service for employees, rail service and C&O Canal transport for goods. Mr. Footer initiated plans by placing orders for 30,000 bricks from Cumberland Brick and Tile Company in South Cumberland and roofing materials from National Tile Roofing Company in Lima, Ohio.



Top: Some of the saw tooth structures at the Footer complex.

Middle: The Red Head Gas Station located in one of the Footer buildings, late 1940s or early 1950s. The Crosstown bridge (I-68) destroyed the building on the right.

Bottom: The deteriorated Footer complex showing some of the saw tooth buildings in the foreground. The back left building is now the only remaining structure. *PHOTOS COURTESY DAN WHETZEL*

The massive Footer's Dye Works buildings ran along Howard and Wineow Streets and featured four story brick walls and gable roofs. Steel girders and trusses supported the buildings that could withstand the pressures of heavy equipment. One may examine the remaining Footer building on Howard Street to appreciate the industrial qualities.

Not all of the buildings in the complex were four stories, as a series of smaller saw tooth structures added to the distinctive setting

along Wineow Street. The buildings' ridge design shielded workers and machinery from direct sunlight, but still provided for illumination of interior spaces.

Major departments in the factory included dry cleaning, dry dyeing, scouring, renovating gloves, shoe repair, wet dyeing, inspection, shipping and receiving, while other processes brought the total number of divisions to thirty. Specific services included the cleaning of rugs, carpets, curtains, shawls and handkerchiefs. Mr. Footer noted some of his processes were unique to the Cumberland factory and exceeded the capabilities of European competitors.

Mr. Footer's success continued into the 1920s as the business shipped packages around the globe. Local residents traveling throughout the United States and abroad reported seeing large Footer's Dye Works signs along their routes. Even Mr. Footer's death in 1923 did not immediately diminish prosperity as his son continued in a leadership role at the factory.

The times and technology began changing rapidly during the 1920s and Footer's was not exempt from the consequences. Fabric dye for home use presented a direct challenge to traditional factory enterprises that specialized in the processes. RIT, a home dye kit, became widely marketed at inexpensive prices following World War I.

Unfavorable circumstances were held at bay until the Great Depression combined with the disastrous 1936 flood and changing dry cleaning and dyeing processes brought about Footer's Dye Works demise. Over the years, parts of buildings were utilized by smaller businesses that failed to prosper at the site. Section by section the massive Footer's complex was demolished, except for the lone building on Howard Street.

A state report described the surviving Howard Street structure as being twenty bays in length and two bays wide, an area that nearly occupies the block. The walls are red brick laid in a five course common bond with decorative features on the ends. The entire building is set upon a stone foundation that rises above ground to a distance of about three feet. The roof remains covered with terra cotta tiles. One distinguishing feature that is apparently not

original is a concrete block elevator tower protruding from the south wall. A Sanborn map noted the building hosted cloth finishing and pressing processes, although the space may have been utilized in different ways over the years.

The post-World War II years were not kind to Mr. Footer's building and its continued existence seemed to be in doubt before purchase by Canal Place Preservation and Development Authority in 1997. The authority, formed by the Maryland General Assembly in 1993, was charged with developing, managing, and administering the historic C&O Canal Heritage Area in Cumberland.

In 2017, the Footer building changed into a prime example of an adaptive reuse project that transformed an older building for new uses, while maintaining its historical features.

Leading the project was Michael Joy of Joy Development who announced plans for luxury apartments on the three upper floors and retail opportunities on the ground level. Dig Deep Brewing Company, Transamerica and T-Mobile currently operate retail businesses at the site. Care was taken during development to retain the character defining features of the building—distinctive brickwork, exterior windows, roofing, tongue-and-groove flooring, and painted signage maintained their original appearances.

Located at the convergence of the C&O Canal, Great Allegheny Passage, Canal Place and downtown Cumberland, the historic structure is now surrounded by a vibrant atmosphere that welcomes both visitors and residents—Mr. Footer would be proud!



The few surviving saw tooth structures had deteriorated into a state of disrepair as shown in this 2008 photograph. The buildings caused discussions about their fate—should they be restored or demolished. It was determined the saw tooth buildings should be demolished and replaced. The replacement buildings, completed in 2017, were later occupied by retail businesses.

Inset: A recently found roof tile used in the Footer complex confirms it came from National Tile Roofing Company in Lima, Ohio, 1904.

PHOTOS BY DAN WHETZEL



Today, the remaining Footer's Dye Works building has been transformed for new uses, while maintaining its historical features. The three upper floors are luxury apartments while the ground level houses Dig Deep Brewing Company, Transamerica and T-Mobile.

PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN

The Footer's Dye Works building is located at the intersection of South Mechanic and Howard Streets in downtown Cumberland.

The Footer building was listed on the National Register for Historic Places in 2013.