

Danner's Hardware Store

Founded: 1837

Location: Corner of Ferry and Pike Streets, Vevay (1837–); 323 Ferry Street, southwest corner of Ferry and Pike Streets (1838–)

Ulysses P. Schenck, a native of Switzerland who had been raised in Switzerland County, Indiana, opened a general store in a wooden building on the corner of Ferry and Pike Streets in Vevay in 1837. When he first opened the doors to his store in Vevay at the age of twenty-seven, he was already an experienced businessman, owning and operating a business in Louisville, Kentucky, for eight years. In 1832 he had purchased the general store owned by his father in New Albany, the place where he had received his early commercial education. His partner in the enterprise was his wife, Justine Thiebaud Schenck, a seamstress with a knack for picking out fashionable materials that appealed to customers. During the panic of 1837 the couple moved from Louisville to Vevay, in part because they believed the rural surroundings would help to stabilize their business.

In the first building to house their store the Schencks lived on the second floor, with business conducted on the main level. In 1844 the family moved to a home on Market Street. A year after moving to Vevay the Schencks decided to construct a large and impressive edifice, which they hoped would attract customers. The brick Italianate structure they built in 1838 measured forty by one hundred feet, stood three stories high, and contained a full basement. Attached to the main building was a two-story brick warehouse. Local residents referred to the site as the “mammoth” Schenck Store.

Inside the building Schenck sold groceries, hardware, glass, clothing, shoes, china, and other goods. He accepted cash and often traded goods for farm products. He attempted to meet consumer demand whenever possible, stocking his shelves with the

latest in patent medicines, syrup for teething children, and medicinal herbs. Instead of relying on middlemen to buy East Coast products for him, he personally traveled to Boston, Philadelphia, and New York at least once a year.

Like many entrepreneurs during the nineteenth century, Schenck branched out of the general store business to embrace other closely related ventures. In 1841 he became an insurance agent for the Protection Fire and Marine Insurance Company of Hartford, which insured houses, factories, barns, and flatboats. Two years later he sold the insurance business to John Patton, who continued to operate the agency from the Schenck store. At around the same time Schenck invested in a flour mill that was used extensively in cooperation with his shipping business. In 1846 he expanded his dry goods and grocery sections of the business when he entered into a partnership with his brother Julius P. Schenck, a riverboat captain. This was Ulysses Schenck's first investment in the shipping business; each man chipped in \$3,000 to launch the concern. The brothers started shipping clothing goods, both fancy and utilitarian, molasses, and sugar from New Orleans in exchange for Indiana agricultural goods that Schenck either bartered for or bought from area farmers. Among the products he shipped, he became especially famous for hay. Known as the "Hay King," a designation made possible by the fact that he could press hay into 280- and 400-pound bales with the use of the little known "Mormon Hay Press," he transported more than nine million pounds of the material in a single season.

The general store in the 1840s kept traditional items on hand, such as flour and nails, but also began carrying silk, American prints, muslin, linen, combs, cotton balling, wallpaper, cutlery, castings, tea, coffee, and molasses. Advertisement in the area's newspapers became larger with time, as did the merchandise included in the store. In

July 1864 Andrew Jackson Schenck joined his father in the business and the name of the concern changed to U. P. Schenck & Son, a designation that did not change when Benjamin Franklin Schenck, Andrew's younger brother, became a member of the firm. In the mid-1870s the store began selling farm implements, including mowers, reapers, and rakes.

From the 1850s until his death in 1884 Ulysses was involved in several ventures that were housed in the "mammoth" store building. In the 1850s Julius and Ulysses Schneck's fleet of ten flatboats and five steamships carried numerous products, including beer, bacon, live animals, skins, corn, and metal tools to New Orleans. In the late 1850s the brothers started a private mail line that operated until the beginning of the Civil War. During the war the fleet was purchased by the Union navy. After the navy bought the Schencks' boats, Julius retired and the brothers' partnership came to an end. After the war Ulysses again became involved in the shipping business, a line continued by his son until 1893.

Well known as a wealthy and generous man, Ulysses Schneck was often asked by friends and employees for loans. In 1864 Schenck and several Vevay businessmen launched the First National Bank to serve the financial needs of the community, a burden undertaken in many respects by Schenck until that time. As one of the largest stockholders in the financial institution and perhaps the most prominent businessman in town, Schenck was elected president, a post he held until his death. The permanent home for the institution was located directly across from the general store. A second enterprise Schenck directed that also linked the store with the larger community was the Union Furniture Store, a company organized in 1872. The firm shipped a large amount of goods

to countries throughout the world on boats owned by Schenck. One steamship owned by Schenck carried thirty tons of Union Furniture products to New Orleans in the mid-1870s.

Andrew Schenck inherited his father's businesses. Born in 1842, he enjoyed many privileges his father had not, including a college education. As a teen he was employed as a salesman in his father's store. After he returned from college he was a steward and later a captain in his father's steamship company. In 1875, after a decade on the water, he began to manage the family's general store and its seven employees. Like his father, Andrew directed the national bank, the furniture store, and a woolen mill company.

In 1897 Americus Vespuccius Danner, a clerk at U. P. Schenck & Son, bought the general store from Andrew's widow. Danner had graduated from Vevay High School in 1888 and began working in a drugstore in town. When the store's owner moved to Peru, Indiana, Danner followed him, helping the man open his business. After two years, however, Danner returned home and started working at the general store. He bought the enterprise in the same year that he married his wife, Effa Morrison. Effa Danner was a local historical authority and a founder of the Switzerland County Historical Society. While Americus Danner managed the venture, hardware and farm implements made up the firm's primary product line, but sometime before America's entry into World War I he began furnishing the town's children with baseballs and other sporting goods. Throughout the 1910s the store had only three employees, including Danner's sister. The town's residents must have thought highly of Danner, he served as the first Republican

mayor of the city. His term of office, unfortunately, coincided with the 1913 flood, which caused severe damage.

In 1929 Emmet Danner joined his father in the business. He had literally grown up in the store, as the family lived in the two stories above the main level, but had never worked, at least officially, for his family's firm until after graduating from the New Albany Business College. In 1931 he married Helen Pauline Cripe of Madison. The couple had two children, Carolyn Jean and Emmett Michael. Michael Danner began working for the firm in 1963. Carolyn Danner later pursued her grandmother's interest in history and wrote a small book on the life of Ulysses P. Schenck.

The introduction of new products since the 1920s have kept the company competitive and continued Ulysses Schenck's vision of trying to please the customer by offering as many goods as possible. Emmet Danner and his father began selling major appliances to the area's residents in the 1930s. In 1959 Emmet started carrying gifts. Michael brought furniture back to the store's product line in the 1980s. To remain price competitive, Danner's Hardware Store joined the True Value team, which helped the company buy lumber and other goods at low prices through volume buying. In the 1990s Emmett Michael Danner continued "to add new items" every year, and in 1999 he remained the president of the company.