

George Nicholas Saegmuller

By JOHN FIELDING BURNS



George Nicholas Saegmuller, 1847-1934, scientist, inventor, farmer and civic-minded citizen of Arlington, came from Germany to the Washington area as a young man, in 1870. Upon his marriage to the daughter of an Alexandria County farmer, he moved to the County and began taking an interest in its development and affairs of government.

He was born February 12, 1847, in Neustadt on the Aisch, the son of John Leonard Saegmuller, a school teacher, and Babette Bertholdt Saegmuller. The Bertholdts had always lived in Franconia, in the valley of the Aisch, but the Saegmuller family came there from

Upper Austria, where they had been foresters for the Count of Schwarzenburg. No doubt it is this fact which gave origin to their name, which means "sawmiller." Toward the end of the Thirty-Year War (1618-1648), the Austrian Emperor Ferdinand moved north to fight Gustav Adolphus, head of the Protestants, and the Saegmullers, being staunch Protestants, were driven out, finding refuge in Franconia.

Soon after George was born, his father was transferred from Neustadt to Uttenreuth, and this George regarded as his real boyhood town. From here, each morning for three years, he made the one-hour walk to the technical school in Erlangen, priding himself in never once having been absent or tardy, bad weather notwithstanding. His father had taught him at a very early age to read and write, and being naturally brilliant, it was not long after he entered school at the required age of seven, that he was far advanced for his age. It was at Erlangen that he studied English.

From the school at Erlangen he went to Nürnberg to the "Polytechnicum," while also receiving training as a machinist from a man with whose family he lived. These two years, young George believed, were the hardest years of his life. The meals were meager and, before leaving for class, he had to do chores. Upon his return, he worked in the machine shop. In addition to the chores, his father also paid 200 gulden (roughly \$85) for the training George received. However, because of his skill and ingenuity in

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author's wife, Louisa Saegmuller Burns, is a granddaughter of George N. Saegmuller.

mechanical work, Professor Bauschinger, a noted mechanical engineer of his time, took George as his special assistant, and aided him in completing the three-year course at the "Polytechnicum" in two years. He had scarcely any money to spend, and no acquaintances in Nürnberg. However, George's Aunt Sabina, who was married to a confectioner in the city, occasionally invited him to dinner; but for this he was expected to baby-sit, a duty he abhorred, considering it more pleasant to work for Prof. Bauschinger!

About the time of his graduation from the "Polytechnicum," George met two English engineers, who brought about quite an important change in his life. A cotton mill had been erected in Erlangen, using British machinery, and these two men were sent to install it. They spoke no German, but upon learning that George spoke some English, he was engaged as their helper at one gulden (about 42 cents) per day. At this job he worked for about a year and, as the men were on contract, they worked a 13-hour day. George saved all his money, walking each day from Uttenreuth to work in Erlangen. He was offered a job by the Englishmen at the plant, Platt Bros., in Aldham, so he journeyed to England by way of Frankfort, Ostend and London. He did not like the Platt factory at all, so he took a job with Muir & Co., makers of high-grade tools, where he assisted in building a machine to count railroad tickets.

One day he saw an advertisement for experienced "mechanicians," by Thomas Cooke & Sons of York, makers of clocks, telescopes and astronomical instruments. He called there, was hired, after showing them some of his designs and calculations, and took an immediate part in the development of some large instruments they were then building for observatories and for surveys in India. Mr. Cooke, Sr., had four sons in charge of various branches of his plant, but he himself chose to test all the larger instruments, making observations at night. Most of the helpers at night demanded overtime pay at double-rate; but George felt that he learned so much from this experienced man, that he made no charge, and consequently was favored with a great deal of valuable experience and instruction—plus a raise at his regular job!

One of the Cooke sons, Fred, became interested in building a steam carriage; all who helped build it were to share as owners. So George joined them, and all through one winter they worked on it. It was a cumbersome affair that rarely got home under its own power, usually being shipped home by rail. It was necessary to have a man, waving a red flag, precede it on the road. Once it got as far as Lincoln, but in returning, an axle broke and a lady received a fractured arm. That ended the steam carriage!

Thos. Cooke & Sons prepared a large exhibit for the Paris Exposition of 1867, and George felt that he was greatly complimented when he was put in charge of it. No doubt this appointment was partly because of his

mechanical ability and partly because he spoke French. He spent what he called ten delightful months in Paris. He also enjoyed thoroughly the four years in England.

However, all good things must end, and the Prussians had defeated the South Germans in 1866 and instituted their military system in 1868, so George took a freighter in Hull and sailed for Rotterdam and thence home, to serve the prescribed three years in the German army. However, the three years would be cut to one year for 36 men, called "Einjaehrige," if each could pass a rigid four-day examination, and demonstrate that he was able to clothe and board himself. These men were to receive special instruction. One hundred took the examination in Feb. 1869, and George finished second. He served his year, and by doing so earned the right to emigrate.

On March 15, 1870, he received his passport, and again set out for England via Ostend and Dover to the London office of Thos. Cooke & Sons. Here he learned that his great friend, the senior Mr. Cooke, had died. George proceeded to York and started to work; but things were not the same—many changes had taken place.

Remembering that Buff and Berger had left the German colony at York and prospered in the United States, he decided to follow suit; so, sailing from Liverpool on the S.S. "City of Cork," he arrived in June 1870 in New York. He went to a Mr. Werner on Center St., a former Cooke employee who operated a shop making mostly patent models, and got a job at \$3.00 per day. After making a new kerosene burner and the drawings for an invalid chair, he decided this job was not for him. While out at lunch one day, there were "extras" on the street, telling of war between Germany and France. George went immediately for his passport and to the German Consul, asking passage home to enter the German army. The Consul looked at his passport and told him that, since he had emigrated, the Consulate could not give him passage home; he would have to pay his own way. Having no money, he returned to the old French Hotel (later torn down to make room for the Brooklyn Bridge).

Here, as he pondered his plight, occurred an incident which again altered his life. He struck up a conversation with an old gentleman, to whom he related his story. The man was William Wurdemann from Washington, who was then en route to Karlsruhe, Germany, to bring back his family. Mr. Wurdemann said he did all the instrument work for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey and for the colleges, and was particularly interested in Mr. George Saegmuller's work on dividing engines. He gave George Saegmuller a letter to his foreman, a Mr. Kuebel, with instructions to employ him. Mr. Saegmuller came to Washington, stopping at the Bismarck Hotel on Pennsylvania Ave., and the next morning went to the Wurdemann factory, a small building on a hill opposite the Capitol, behind a row of three-story houses, which Mr. Wurdemann also owned to rent. Beside Mr. Kuebel, only one other man was at work in the shop.

When Mr. Wurdemann returned, he brought with him another instrument-maker, Camill Fauth. As time went on, Mr. Saegmuller became tired of eating in restaurants; he sent for his sister Barbara to come over to keep house for him, and he rented a house on Delaware Ave. Mr. Fauth soon began courting Barbara.

Some time later, Mr. Wurdemann decided to remove his operations to Germany. When his departure-time grew near, Prof. Hilgard of the Coast Survey, who had kept a close watch on the progress of instruments for which he had contracted, had become interested in Mr. Saegmuller's work and offered him the job of Chief of the Survey's instrument shop, which he accepted. Mr. Wurdemann's departure also meant the loss of Mr. Fauth's job, and he had meanwhile married Mr. Saegmuller's sister, Barbara. So, Mr. Fauth and Mr. Saegmuller sought to buy out Mr. Wurdemann, but his price they considered exorbitant.

About this time Mr. Saegmuller was taking his meals at the restaurant of Charles Mades, at 3rd and Pennsylvania Ave. Here he had met a photographer, Albert Siebert, and also an artist, Rudolph Reichmann, who made crayon enlargements for Siebert. Reichmann was married to Evaline Vandenberg, the eldest daughter of Gilbert and Sarah Vandenberg of Alexandria County. Reichmann brought George Saegmuller out to the farm as a guest, where he met the youngest daughter, Maria Jane, whom he began to court and whom he married on April 29, 1874.

He often rode out from Washington in a carriage with Henry Lockwood of the Treasury Department, who was married to the second daughter of the Vandenberg, and to whom he related the situation with respect to Wurdemann. Mr. Lockwood offered to join the partnership, so a company was formed under the name of Fauth & Co., and they started in a building put up by Mr. Lockwood at First and B Sts., S.W. Mr. Saegmuller was to design instruments; Mr. Fauth to run the shop; and Mr. Lockwood to handle the books and correspondence.

One of their first jobs was to complete a display of instruments for the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. The new company had a hard struggle. To properly promote the instrument sales, there was need for much travel by one knowledgeable in these matters, but no one could be spared from the Washington area. Mr. Lockwood worked days at the Treasury; Mr. Fauth had to supervise the shop; and Mr. Saegmuller, in addition to running the Coast and Geodetic shops, was studying astronomical computations at night under one of the Coast Survey's mathematicians, Dr. Kampf, and was designing instruments for his new company. Also, there was no item which could be mass-produced. Mr. Lockwood decided to withdraw from the partnership, and a new factory site was found at Second and Maryland Ave., S.W. Like the first building, it was half-residence and half-factory, which proved unsatisfactory. Ultimately a new shop was built behind the original building, and was from time-to-time enlarged.

After the crash following President Cleveland's inauguration, a number of people were dropped from the Coast Survey, including George Saegmuller. However, to his credit was the vastly improved condition of their instruments, as a result of his tenure there.

Now free to devote his full time to the Fauth & Co. factory, and having established a reputation, orders began coming in! To save commuting time, Mr. Saegmuller moved from the farm to the house in front of the factory on Maryland Ave. He was a man of tremendous energy, and all his projects he pursued with vigor. Even when he commuted to the farm, driving his own fine horse, people along the route up Canal Road and across Chain Bridge referred to him as "the Flying Dutchman."

After seventeen years in this country, Mr. and Mrs. Fauth decided to return to Germany, Mr. Saegmuller contracting to buy Mr. Fauth's interest in the company. Also about this time, Mr. Saegmuller undertook to build large instruments, among the more notable being his first equatorial telescope with star dials, for Georgetown University, the Cincinnati Meridian Circle, and equatorials for Denver and Manila.

Sometime in the 1880's Mr. Saegmuller was called to the Office of the Chief of Naval Ordnance, where he found Capt. Sampson, who, as a lieutenant at the Naval Observatory, had received instruction at night from Mr. Saegmuller in astronomical computations. Mr. Saegmuller was told that experiments by the Navy in the Far East, using an ordinary telescope to sight guns, had been quite successful, and that no doubt the telescope could be greatly improved, if designed for the job and properly mounted. Mr. Saegmuller designed, built and delivered 100 such sights, which were distributed throughout the fleet for trials. An invention of Mr. Saegmuller's, which made telescopic sights successful, was the boresight. Throughout his career, he secured 39 patents for his inventions in optical instruments.

During these years, Mr. Saegmuller had purchased his father-in-law's original 150-acre farm in the northern end of the county, as well as adjoining land, to enlarge it. This property became known as Reserve Hill Farm, because reserve Federal troops were stationed there during the Civil War. Mr. Saegmuller tried in every way, but with little success, to make the farm self-sustaining; raising chickens, hogs, and several times operating it as a dairy farm. For 46 years he employed Mr. Henry Chapman as his overseer. Another of his longtime farm employees was a colored man, Aleck Byrd, who was on the farm 55 years, until his death in 1925. He never knew his age, but remembered that he was "a young man when the War Between the States" started!

There were four children in the Saegmuller family: John Leonard (Lee), Frederick B., George M., all of whom became well known in Arlington, and one daughter, Babette, who died at fourteen. This was a tremendous loss to Mr. Saegmuller, as he was affectionate and extremely fond of his



The home of George N. Saegmuller which burned in 1894. It is at the site of the home which was rebuilt and is now the Knights of Columbus Hall.

children and grandchildren. His devotion did not override his discipline, however; and this even bore a touch of humor at times. On one occasion, his son Lee related, he and some young friends were making a swimming hole in Little Pimmit Run, near the present intersection of George Mason and Old Dominion Drives. When dinnertime came, the boys left their tools, to resume the next day, and went home. Upon learning that the tools had not been returned, Mr. Saegmuller said nothing till the boys were asleep. Then he rolled them out of bed and gave them orders to take a lantern, fetch the tools and return them to the tool shed. This was done, marking the last time the tools were left out!

Elected Supervisor for Washington District in the 1890's, and ultimately Chairman of the Board, Mr. Saegmuller proved to be a man of action, seeking better roads, more schools, etc. He found that the County finances were depleted, and that often the County paid premium prices for work, because the contractors knew that they would either have to wait for their pay, or go out and discount the warrants at less than face value, often 80 cents on the dollar. So, he had Mr. W. Wibirt, then County Treasurer, determine how much money was required to make all accounts current. The amount required was about \$10,000. Mr. Saegmuller went to the

National Bank of Alexandria and gave his personal note, and this restored the County's credit.

Feeling that children in the Chain Bridge area should not have to walk so far, to the Carne School at what is now 25th St. and Glebe Rd., he personally advanced funds for immediate construction of the old Saegmuller School, later torn down to erect the James Madison School on the same site.

Another anecdote showed Mr. Saegmuller to be a man of action! The County Board decided to reduce the difficult, steep grade on Lee Highway in what is now Lyon Village, near Highland Street. There was immediate opposition from the nearby residents. So Mr. Saegmuller went quietly among the local attorneys, paying each a ten-dollar retainer fee to defend the Board's action. Then he mobilized a number of teamsters with drag scoops. On the appointed day the teamsters appeared and began to move dirt. The irate neighbors rushed out to find a lawyer to secure an injunction. Telephones were few, horses and carriages were the transportation, and the Courthouse was in Alexandria! By the time a lawyer could be found for the opposition and any action taken, the job was well on toward completion.

The location of the Courthouse in Alexandria was a constant source of inconvenience, and it was while Mr. Saegmuller was Chairman of the Board, that he urged the building of a new Courthouse in the County. An election was held to select a site and, with only \$20,000 available, a new Courthouse and Jail were completed and dedicated in 1898. These stood on the site of the present Courthouse buildings. Of this project, "The Falls Church Monitor" of November 19, 1898, commented: "Probably no man is entitled to more credit for the successful outcome of the great project undertaken in behalf of the citizens of Alexandria County, in the erection of a new Courthouse, than Mr. Geo. N. Saegmuller, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors. Mr. Saegmuller is a thorough businessman, and was elected as one of the supervisors of the County on account of his business qualifications.—"

Around the turn of the century, a group of prominent men in Alexandria County decided to build an electric railway to Great Falls. Among these were George E. Truett, Thomas B. Jewell, Judge Alfred B. Grunwell (all three sons-in-law of Gilbert Vanderwerken, founder of street railways in Washington), Mr. Saegmuller (by marriage a nephew of Mr. Vanderwerken), and George Boteler. Mr. Saegmuller was treasurer of the company and was very helpful in acquisition of rights-of-way. However, before any rail was laid, these men sold their interest to Virginia State Senator John M. McLean and U.S. Senator Stephen Elkins of West Virginia. The railroad (The Great Falls and Old Dominion) was completed by the latter two men.

Mr. Saegmuller's active part in the affairs of Alexandria County came to an end in the spring of 1905, when he merged his optical instrument

business with Bausch & Lomb, and he moved his family to Rochester, New York. An attempt was made to sell the farm for an exclusive school, but the deal fell through, and the family retained the farm. In 1917, the eldest son, John (Lee) Saegmuller was put in charge of a new Bausch & Lomb office in Washington, and returned to the farm. In 1926 Mr. George N. Saegmuller retired and came back to what is now Arlington County to live, followed a few years later by his younger sons, Fred and George.

In 1932 he lost his wife of 58 years. He made a brief visit to his old home in Germany in 1933, but was bitterly disappointed at the state of affairs there and returned to Arlington. On Feb. 12, 1934, Geo. N. Saegmuller died at his home, Reserve Hill Farm. It was his 87th birthday.