

A HISTORY OF THE ARLINGTON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

By

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Courthouses, wrote John Sherwood in the *Washington Star*, are usually built on "the best spot in town".¹ The Arlington County Courthouse stands on high ground less than a mile east of the Potomac.² But only since 1898 has a building been located on that favored spot. In 1870 Alexandria County (as Arlington then was) *did* acquire a courthouse, but this was in Alexandria City, at Columbus and Queen Sts.³

With its courthouse, as with many other things, Arlington has been a Johnny-come-lately among Virginia counties. When counties began to be created in Virginia in the mid-17th century, the area that was to become Arlington was at first included in Northumberland County, 1648, then in the successively smaller counties of Westmoreland, Stafford, Prince William and Fairfax. Arlington first achieved an identity of its own in 1789, when Virginia offered it to the United States to form part of the District of Columbia.⁴ When the federal government failed to use the Virginia part of its territory, and the people of the area pleaded for a return to Virginia, it was retroceded in 1847 as "the county of Alexandria."⁵ And the name was changed to "Arlington" as late as 1920. So while King William County has a courthouse that dates back to 1725,⁶ Arlington County's chief public building makes its appearance quite late in Virginia history.

During the 17th and 18th centuries Arlington was rural, with a sparse population. As the 19th century progressed, however, and the population grew, it became increasingly awkward for county citizens to have to trudge all the way to Alexandria City with their legal and governmental business. County officials, such as the Sheriff and Commonwealth's Attorney, carried their offices with them, and the Treasurer kept most of his papers in his home.⁷ Finally, in 1896, the General Assembly of Virginia passed legislation giving Alexandria County citizens the opportunity to vote whether the courthouse should stay in Alexandria or be moved to one of three locations within the county.⁸ The act also provided for a commission to implement the building of a new courthouse and jail for a sum not to exceed \$20,000. The voters duly acted, on May 28, 1896, and picked a location in Fort Myer Heights, on the site of Civil War Fort Woodbury.⁹ Five hundred sixty-one persons cast ballots. The commission advertised for donations of land and accepted an offer from the Fort Myer Heights Land Company.¹⁰ A February

1898 Act of the Assembly then directed the Alexandria County Board of Supervisors to proceed with construction. Thereafter events moved swiftly. With A. Goenner as architect and Joseph H. Hobson as contractor, the three-story brick building with a tower was ready for dedication in November, 1898.¹¹ This was indeed a festive occasion. Two days prior to the ceremony a huge steer was cooked on an open spot in front of the courthouse. Then on November 16 those attending enjoyed a hearty beef barbecue before touring a building then called “the last word in elegance.” Other festivities included games — climbing a greased pole for prizes, and chasing a greased pig. Among the speakers were J. Hoge Tyler, the new state governor, believed to be the first governor to speak officially in Northern Virginia. A thorough and enjoyable account of the popular movement for a courthouse in the county, its financing and the dedication ceremonies is found in the article already cited — “Arlington comes of age; the building and dedication of the Court House, by Frank L. Ball (who was there).” According to the late Senator Ball, “a glorious time was had by all.”

A contemporary photograph gives some idea of how Arlington has changed in eighty-one years. It shows the new courthouse, in an area now completely built up, surrounded by woods and fields.



The 1898 Courthouse as it looked the year it was built.

And what of the 1870 Alexandria City Courthouse? It was sold at public auction in December, 1898, torn down and hauled away!¹²

Arlington's new courthouse had on the first floor offices for the Clerk of the Court, the Commissioner of Revenue and the Treasurer, and a meeting room for the Board of Supervisors. On the second floor were the Sheriff's offices.¹³ The jail was in a separate building, facing 15th Street, while the Courthouse faced Courthouse Road. It was a two-story structure; the jailer lived upstairs in the front, and behind his quarters was a double-tiered cellblock. On the first floor the jailer's office was in the front, with a single-tiered cellblock at the rear.¹⁴

But these buildings, which seemed perfectly adequate at the time, did not stay that way long. Archival files in the Arlington Historical Museum and the Arlington County Public Library detail some of the changes that the County's expansion brought to its Courthouse. One early improvement is recorded in a December 1913 "Notice to Contractors" from the Board of Supervisors calling for "proposals . . . for the proper electric wiring of the Court House Building."¹⁵ The 20th century had reached Arlington.

Then as World War I increased Arlington's population, from 6,430 in 1900 to 16,040 in 1920,¹⁶ a need for additions began to be felt. The first story of a south wing for the Clerk's Office was added in 1929, at a cost of \$42,366.99.¹⁷ Prices were rising! A letter of April 13, 1935 from County Manager Roy C. Braden to the County Board details a long-term plan for the Courthouse that is essentially the building we know today. This same letter notes that three departments of the county government had their offices at that time in the attic, a dangerous and inaccessible place, never intended for office use.¹⁸ In 1936 remodeling of the 1898 Courthouse coincided with a second-floor addition to the south wing.¹⁹ The cost was \$68,451.30.²⁰ With the outbreak of World War II the County population again made a spurt forward, to 57,040 in 1940.²¹ Temporary buildings for the draft board and the press room were added in 1946, gifts from the federal government.²² More tempos in 1948 provided space for the Surveys Division, Personnel Director, Police Department, Fire Department, and Department of Finance, and allowed more room for the departments remaining in the main building.²³ All these measures detracted from the appearance of the structure and showed only too clearly how poorly the 1898 building now met the needs of an urbanizing county.

The history of the jail parallels that of the Courthouse itself. An addition to it was built in 1904 at a cost of \$8,300.²⁴ But by the end of the 1920s citizens realized that it was again inadequate and petitioned in vain for a new jail in 1930.²⁵ In the 1940s various groups again worked for a new jail, urged on by Sheriff J. Elwood Clements, who reported that in 1949-1950 the 1898 jail, built to accommodate sixteen had a daily population of thirty-nine.²⁶

Finally in 1948 the County Board accepted a bid of \$425,000 from Lee T. Turner to build a three-story north wing for the Courthouse.²⁷ It was completed in 1950.²⁸ The old jail was then torn down and its functions moved to the third floor of the new wing, with a capacity of forty prisoners.²⁹

But that dream of a modern central section to take the place of the old red-brick structure persisted. In June 1956, when the population of Arlington had grown to 133,449, the voters approved \$2,200,000 to improve the Courthouse.³⁰ To make room for the new building, the sixty-two-year-old 1898 edifice was demolished in 1960 — though not everyone was happy about it. A former judge, Harry R. Thomas, was quoted as saying, “I thought it was a pretty good building. It was too good a building to tear down. It had been there a long time.”³¹ A photograph shows the scene just before the old building came down.



Arlington County's 1898 Courthouse, with wings added in 1950.

While the wrecking was going on, Senator Ball remembered that at the 1898 dedication ceremonies a box had been placed in the cornerstone.³² The cornerstone was opened, and a small unmarked copper box removed. When it was opened in the presence of the County Board, the box was found to contain a number of 1898 “artifacts.” A letter from Cornelia B.

Rose, then the County Manager's Research Assistant, to Senator Ball, contained in the Historical Society Archives, lists the soggy contents as finally identified. They include various documents concerning the moving of the Courthouse from Alexandria, a blueprint of the Courthouse, a copy of an *Alexandria Gazette*, the *Washington Post* for Wednesday, June 22, 1898, and the *New York Herald* of the same date.

It may be interesting to note that almost ten years previously another, more historically important, discovery had been made. In early 1952 a large collection of old documents was found at the Courthouse. They were examined by Meredith Colket of the National Archives, who stated that they "had been deposited in crates in the attic . . . on the third floor. For the most part, they were loose, unbound papers literally covered with thick black dust . . ." ³³ Mr. Colket inventoried this collection, finding that it consisted primarily of certain records of the Circuit Court and of the Register of Wills and Orphans' Court which were created between 1801 and 1840, the period that Alexandria was part of the District of Columbia. There were also records of the town of Alexandria before it became a city, and of the County Court of Alexandria, 1847-1902. Loose papers also included petitions for the licensing of taverns, deeds of emancipation of slaves, marriage licenses, wills, and registers of birth and death. The records ranged in date mainly from 1786 to 1925.

In addition, this find included material that Mr. Colket felt was potentially valuable for exhibit purposes. Among others, he found documents signed by W.H. Fitzhugh Lee, John Marshall, and Presidents Martin Van Buren, George Washington, John Tyler, and James Monroe.

The Arlington County Board, at its January 13, 1954 meeting decided that the Virginia State Library, with its excellent facilities for housing archives, was the proper repository for these historic documents. All but two boxes of personal papers, therefore, were sent to Richmond and have been available for public use there since mid-1955. The collection is known as the "Arlington Transfer." ³⁴

The architects for the new building were John M. Walton and Associates with Albert D. Lueders. According to Ernest B. Rauth, a spokesman for John M. Walton and Associates, construction began in May 1959. The old Courthouse was replaced by a seven-story tower building; this, together with the three-story entrance cost \$1,567,000. The tower section connected with the two earlier additions. These wings were also remodeled, a third story was added to the south wing, and the second story was remodeled, as was the second story of the north wing. Cost for this portion of the work was \$575,000.

White, gleaming and modern, this new central structure contrasted strongly with the ornate Victorian landmark it supplanted. An impressive two-story foyer, white corridors, and spacious new offices seemed at last to

offer ample room in which the County could transact its business. The County Board had a chamber of its own, a handsome room with a new mural photograph of Arlington House dominating its rear wall. The Board met here for the first time on July 2, 1960.³⁵ There were offices for the County Manager, the print shop, the Treasurer, the Personnel Department, and others of the many activities needed to keep a busy county functioning. The various courtrooms (Traffic Court, Criminal Court, Circuit Court, etc.) were scattered among the rooms of the new tower.

The new Courthouse was dedicated on January 14, 1961, with Leo Urbanske, Chairman of the County Board, as main speaker. Again a box was enclosed in the cornerstone (which is to the right of the main entrance). An effort was made to select for its materials portraying present-day life in Arlington. Articles enclosed included a current map and telephone directory, a miniature gavel made from wood of the old Courthouse, photographs of the area adjacent to the Courthouse, plus many other items.³⁶

But even with all the space now available, the Courthouse still could not house under one roof all the functions of a booming county of 165,401.³⁷ The Health Department (now part of the Department of Human Resources) had its own complex; the Recreation Division and the county libraries had buildings at various locations, and the county offices have overflowed the Courthouse into adjacent office buildings. The jail and the Police Headquarters again became too small. In 1958 the Police Department moved into two buildings on N. Uhle St., which proved a security risk because persons arrested in Arlington had to be taken to two different buildings to be booked.³⁸ Again the voters were presented with a bond issue for \$4,500,000, to finance a new jail and police headquarters. The new six-floor facility was dedicated November 1, 1974. County police offices are located on the lower levels, and the Detention Center, with room for 146 inmates, on the upper level. Both the pamphlet *The Arlington jail, a brief account, 1898-1974* and the program for the dedication ceremony explain in some detail the aim and functions of the new building. The old jail, incidentally, on the third floor of the north wing, was made into a home for the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.³⁹

So the 1960 Courthouse moved toward its nineteenth year, no longer the center for all the county's governmental activities, but still vital and important. Unfortunately, the surrounding area does not show it off to advantage. Typical of the whole heterogeneous community, "Fort Myer Heights" now surrounds the Courthouse with clusters of banks, small businesses, lawyers' offices — and parking lot after parking lot. There is one small grass plot to the side of the building, graced with a stone memorial to those who fell in the two World Wars, with all their names engraved on it. The stone was originally near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery. Mounted on the memorial is a bronze bell,

and nearby are three cannons, all gifts to Arlington from the heirs of Frank Hume, an early leader in county affairs. All these items played vivid roles in American history, as detailed in “Arlington Heritage, no. 39”, one of the newspaper articles from which Mrs. Templeman’s book was compiled.⁴⁰ On the whole, though, Arlington has missed forever its opportunity to have a graceful civic center, with landscaped grounds and trees — an oasis of calm in a hectic county. Perhaps it would never have been possible after 1920; open space in Arlington has been and remains very scarce.



Arlington County Courthouse, 1961.

Again to quote John Sherwood of the *Star*, “great moments of happiness and tragedy take place inside” courthouses. The Arlington County complex has had its share of both. In 1967 it was the focus of general attention when John C. Patler was tried there for the murder of George Lincoln Rockwell, head of the American Nazi Party. Rockwell, whose Arlington-based organization had earned nationwide notoriety, was murdered in the county on August 25, 1967, and the trial created considerable excitement, especially when the American Nazis disrupted the preliminary court hearing on August 29. Patler was convicted of first-degree murder in Arlington County

Circuit Court and sentenced to twenty years in prison. (The Arlington County Public Library's *Virginiana* vertical file under "American Nazi Party; John Patler" gives details of the murder, trial and aftermath).

On the lighter side, Arlington County has become a favorite spot for celebrity marriages, since no proof of former marriage or divorce is necessary, just blood tests and the oath. Special Judge Francis Thomas there married Lana Turner to her sixth husband, and in 1976 performed for Peter Lawford and his third wife a marriage ceremony that involved "considerable clowning."⁴¹ The prime celebrities to marry here, however, were Henry Kissinger and Nancy Maginnes, for whom Thomas tied the knot at a very private ceremony in April, 1974.⁴²

It has been an eventful eighty-one years since that first Courthouse was dedicated in 1898. Who knows what the next eighty-one years will bring?

FOOTNOTES

¹John Sherwood, *The Washington Star*, May 15, 1978.

²U.S. Geological Survey, *Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia*, 1963. (Map)

³Frank L. Ball, "Arlington comes of age; the building and dedication of the Court House, by Frank L. Ball (who was there)." *Arlington Historical Magazine*, (1958), p. 5.

⁴Arlington County, Va. Office of the County Manager, *A history of the boundaries of Arlington County, Virginia*. [2d ed.] Arlington, 1967, p. 1.

⁵Arlington County, Va., *op. cit.*, p. 13-14.

⁶Evelyn Taylor Adams, *The courthouse in Virginia counties, 1634-1776*. Warrenton, The author, p. 52.

⁷F.L. Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁸Cornelia B. Rose, Jr. *Arlington County, Virginia—A History*. Arlington Historical Society, 1976, p. 142.

⁹Arlington County Bicentennial Commission, *Historic Arlington*. Rev. ed. The author, 1976, p. 17.

¹⁰C. B. Rose, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹¹F. L. Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹²Robert Anderson, "The administration of justice in the counties of Fairfax and Alexandria (Arlington) and the City of Alexandria, part II." *Arlington Historical Magazine*, (1962), p. 13.

¹³F. L. Ball, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁴Conversation with Sheriff J. Elwood Clements, 1969.

¹⁵Arlington Historical Society. Archives, under "Courthouse."

¹⁶*Statistical abstract of Virginia*, v. 2. Charlottesville, Thomas Jefferson Center for Political Economy, University of Virginia. 1970, p. 7.

¹⁷*Arlington Personnel News*, July 1960, p. 2.

¹⁸Arlington Historical Society. Archives, under "Courthouse."

¹⁹*Arlington Personnel News*, July 1960, p. 2.

²⁰Arlington Historical Society. Archives, under "Courthouse."

²¹*Statistical abstract*, v. 2, p. 7.

²²*Northern Virginia Sun*, June 28, 1956.

²³Arlington Historical Society. Archives, under "Courthouse." Letter of May 8, 1948.

²⁴*The Arlington jail, a brief account, 1898-1974*. [Arlington] 1974, p. [1].

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. [1].

²⁶*Northern Virginia Sun*, May 21, 1974, p. 5.

²⁷Arlington Historical Society. Archives, under "Courthouse". Letter of Oct. 25, 1948.

²⁸*Arlington Personnel News*, July, 1960, p. 4.

²⁹*Northern Virginia Sun*, May 21, 1974, p. 5.

³⁰*Northern Virginia Sun*, June 28, 1956.

³¹*Northern Virginia Sun*, July 6, 1960, p. B-1.

³²*Northern Virginia Sun*, July 7, 1960.

³³Meredith Colket, *Inventory of some old records*. 1952, p. 1.

³⁴Information from Cornelia B. Rose, Jr.

³⁵*Northern Virginia Sun*, July 2, 1960.

³⁶Arlington Historical Society. Archives, under "Courthouse." Speech by Eleanor Lee Templeman at the dedication ceremony.

³⁷*Statistical abstract*, v. 2, p. 7.

³⁸*Northern Virginia Sun*, August 6, 1969.

³⁹*Northern Virginia Sun*, January 7, 1975.

⁴⁰*Northern Virginia Sun*, November 29, 1957.

⁴¹*Washington Star*, June 26, 1976.

⁴²*Arlington Globe*, April 4, 1974.