



Courtesy of Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library
The Alexandria County Courthouse shortly after its completion.

Albert Goenner

The Forgotten Architect of Arlington's First Courthouse

BY WILLARD J. WEBB

In 1880, a German architect, Albert Goenner,¹ immigrated to the United States. He settled initially in New York City, but soon moved to Washington where he quickly built up a flourishing practice. He designed apartment houses, office buildings, churches, and private residences. He also worked in Arlington and designed three major buildings—the Consumer Brewery in Rosslyn (1896), the original Alexandria (later Arlington) County Courthouse (1898), and the George Nicholas Saegmuller house, Reserve Hill (1905). Sadly, the brewery and the courthouse have long been demolished and only Reserve Hill survives today, and Albert Goenner is completely forgotten in Arlington.

Goenner was born in Württemberg in 1860. After studying at polytechnic institutes in Württemberg, Stuttgart and Zurich, he came to America in 1880 where he worked for one of the most prominent architectural firms in New York that specialized in apartment houses. In 1887, his employer, Hubert Prisson and Company, sent him to Washington as the supervising architect for construction on the old Shoreham Hotel (located at Fifteenth and H Streets, NW).²

Goenner liked Washington and decided to settle here and begin his own practice. He is credited with introducing the apartment house, with which he had grown so familiar in New York, to Washington. Apartments that he designed included: the Bertholdt (128 Maryland Avenue, SW); the Oswaco (11 R Street, NE); the Albert (1825 F Street, NW); the Driscoll (First and B Streets, NW); the Kingman (425 Massachusetts Avenue, NW); the Roland (201 Second Street, NE); the Hillside (1415 Chapin Street, NW); the Victoria (Fourteenth and Clifton Streets, NW); and the Sandringham (on Sixteenth Street, NW). He also designed office and commercial buildings. He had his office in the Bliss Building at 35 B Street, NW (now Constitution Avenue), a building he designed. Other of his buildings included additions to the Lansburgh Brothers store at Eighth and E Streets, NW; the seed distribution building of the Agriculture Department; the Solomon, Kraemer, and Herman Buildings on Seventh Street, NW; and a remodeling of Fritz Reuter's Hotel On Pennsylvania Avenue. (Other than the facade of the Lansburgh store, none of these buildings survive today.)

Goenner was active in the German-American community where he found a number of clients. In addition to the Lansburgh and Fritz Reuter commissions mentioned above, he planned the German-American Fire Insurance Building at 511 Seventh Street, NW, and the George Mueller candy factory on Pennsylvania Avenue. In 1889, Goenner designed the Concordia Church at Twentieth and G Streets, NW. The church housed a German Lutheran evangelical congregation that had been founded in 1833. Goenner was Catholic and not a member of the congregation.



Courtesy of Martin Luther King Library
Albert Goenner

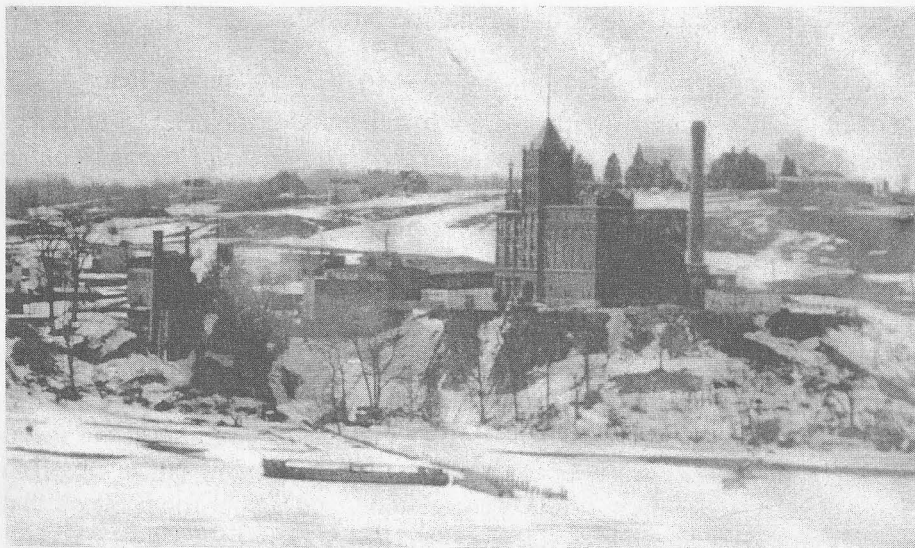
The new structure, dedicated in 1892, was the second Concordia Church on the site. It was in one of Goenner's favorite styles—red brick Gothic with a tower. The Concordia Church still stands today and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. As its members moved to the suburbs, it merged with Methodist and United Church of Christ congregations. It is now called "The United Church/Die Vereinigte Kirche," and there is still a German service at 9:30 on Sunday mornings.³

During the mid-1890s, Goenner received a commission to design a building for the Consumer Brewing Company in Rosslyn. No documentation has survived to indicate how he attained the commission. The brewery stood just above the old Aqueduct Bridge. It was a large, rectangular red brick building with turrets on the ends, a central clock tower, and a tall smokestack in the rear. When completed in 1896, it was certainly the most imposing building in then rural Alexandria County.⁴

The Consumer Brewery Company was later renamed the Arlington Brewery. It operated until Prohibition when it was converted to a Cherry Smash bottling plant. Later, the building served as a warehouse and was demolished in 1958 to make way for a Marriott motel.⁵

At the same time that the brewery was under construction, a movement began in Alexandria County to have a separate courthouse. Theretofore the county court and all county business was conducted in Alexandria City, a situation many county residents found inconvenient. In 1896, the Virginia Legislature passed a special act authorizing an Alexandria County courthouse, and the County Board of Supervisors selected Albert Goenner as the architect for the new building. Having watched the construction of the brewery in Rosslyn, the supervisors must have been impressed and chosen Goenner as their architect. Another factor in Goenner's selection may have been that the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, George Nicholas Saegmuller, was a German-American and may have known Goenner and his work through Washington German-American circles.

Construction of the courthouse began in 1898 and moved with "commendable haste." The new courthouse was a three-story, red brick structure with a central tower. In style, it was similar to the Rosslyn brewery. It was completed and dedicated on November 16, 1898, and finished within the allotted \$20,000 budget. A mosaic tile plaque in the first-floor hall read: "Erected by the Citizens of Alexandria Co., Va., A.D. 1898. Pursuant of an Act of the Legislature Passed February 1896. Board of Supervisors, Geo. N. Saegmuller, Chairman; Fred S. Corbett, W. Duncan. Arch., A. Goenner. . . ." The new Courthouse stood alone, surrounded by fields and woods. It included a court-



Courtesy of Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library
The Consumer Brewery in Rosslyn, c. 1900.



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Reserve Hill

room, a meeting room for the Supervisors, and offices for the Clerk of the Court, the Commissioner of Revenue, and the County Treasurer.⁶

As Alexandria County, now renamed Arlington, grew into a suburb during the 1920s and 1930s, the county offices needed more space, and additions were made to the courthouse in 1929, 1936, and 1948. These took the form of three-story wings to the north and south of the original building. Constructed of red brick in a contemporary style, they did not harmonize with the original courthouse. When even more space was required, the Goenner portion of the courthouse was demolished in 1960 and replaced with a seven-story tower.⁷ The only recorded opposition to the demolition was a complaint by former Judge Harry R. Thomas who said: "I thought it was a pretty good building. It was too good a building to tear down. It had been there a long time."⁸ Other than Judge Thomas' complaint, no other protest occurred nor was any effort attempted to preserve Arlington's original courthouse. All that remains today of that proud building is the metal cupola of the tower, two granite fragments from a window sill, a cast iron star, a brass box from the original cornerstone, and a courtroom bench that are in the collection of the Arlington Historical Society.

Albert Goenner's final commission in Arlington was a house for George Nicholas Saegmuller.⁹ Saegmuller, like Goenner, had immigrated to America

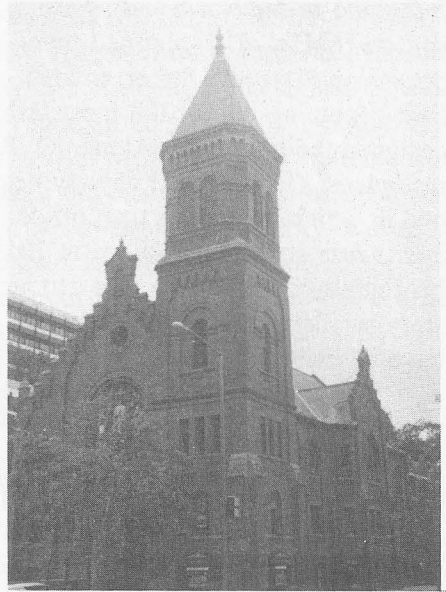
from Germany. He made a fortune as an inventor and manufacturer of precision scientific instruments. He had his business in Washington and he and his family had a home there. Mrs. Saegmuller, the former Maria Jane Vandenberg, had grown up on the family farm, Reserve Hill, in Alexandria County, and the Saegmullers had kept Reserve Hill as a weekend and summer home. The original Vandenberg house burned in 1892, and Saegmuller turned to Goenner when he decided to rebuild Reserve Hill.

Constructed in the years 1904-1905, the new Reserve Hill was a large two-and-a-half-story house of irregular-cut bluestone quarried on the farm. It had a front portico with classical columns, an arched doorway, and side porches, and included every modern convenience. Among the twenty-two rooms were four bathrooms, even one with a shower. It was the grandest house in all of Alexandria County.

Behind Reserve Hill stands a stone water tower that had been built in 1896. The stonework of the lower section of the tower closely resembled that of the new house built seven to eight years later. Family legend held that the tower was a replica of one in the Nuremberg city wall and was copied from a tankard that Mr. Saegmuller had brought from Germany. The water tower originally was separate from the new house and a driveway passed between the house and the tower but, in changes made in 1924, the house was extended to connect with the tower in order to provide additional servants' rooms.¹⁰

Did Albert Goenner design the Reserve Hill water tower? No evidence or plans survive to indicate that he either did or did not. Certainly, he could have. The tower was built at the same time as the Rosslyn brewery and it is in the Goenner style and matches the house.

In 1905, just as the new Reserve Hill neared completion, Saegmuller merged his business with the Bausch & Lomb Optical Company of Rochester, New York, and the Saegmullers moved to Rochester. For the next 20 years, they came to Reserve Hill only



Concordia Church

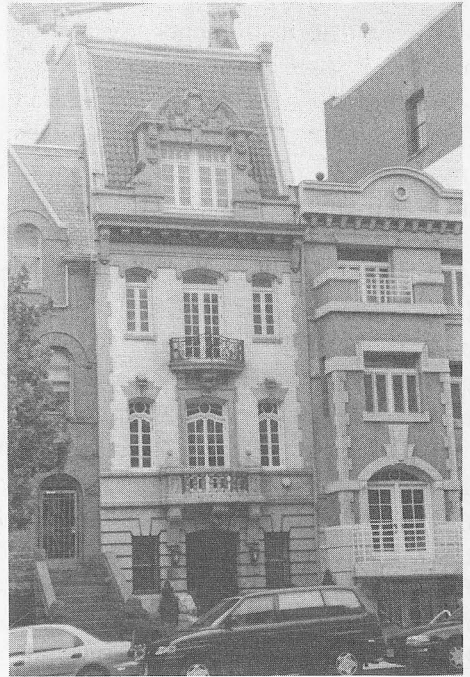
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during the summers. Saegmuller retired as Vice President of Bausch & Lomb in 1924 and the family returned to Reserve Hill permanently. George Saegmuller died there in 1934. Family members continued to live in the house until 1951 when they sold it to the Knights of Columbus, the current owners.

Although Goenner had no further commissions in Arlington, he maintained a busy practice in Washington. He designed a number of private residences in the city, including one for Dr. Maxey on Rhode Island Avenue, a “country” house for Robert Cook in Anacostia, and another country house for Professor Ridgway in Bookland in far North East Washington.¹¹ He also planned two houses on Sixteenth Street, an area

then becoming one of the most fashionable addresses in the city. Goenner designed the houses for Alonzo O. Bliss, who had made a fortune in patent medicines. Goenner had already designed an office building for Bliss, the one in which he had his own office. The Sixteenth Street houses were large *beaux arts* style town houses at 1013 and 1218. Bliss lived in 1218 where his initials could be seen in a cartouche in a broken pediment over a fourth-story window, part of the elaborate decoration that architectural historians have described as “neo-Baroque.” Bliss’ son Arthur lived briefly at 1013.

The Blisses soon sold both houses and they went through a succession of owners. The 1013 house served as the Brazilian Embassy and then the Chilean Embassy and was subsequently owned successively by two senators—Joseph Freylinghuysen of New Jersey and then James Couzens of Michigan. It was demolished in 1941 to make way for the Statler Hotel, now the Capital Hilton. The 1218 house has had a less distinguished series of owners and occupants, including business men, lower ranking diplomats, doctors, and law firms. The most recent occupant was a foundation established by Bill Cosby in memory of his son to provide college scholar-



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Goenner designed this house at 1218 Sixteenth Street, NW.

ships for minority students. Today, 1218 still survives though it now stands vacant.¹²

Goenner and his family, his wife Bertha and their daughters, Marguerite and Alicia, and son, Albert, resided in a house at 1307 Clifton Street, NW, near Meridian Hill.¹³ Goenner participated actively in Washington life. He belonged to the Technical Society and served as its librarian. He was fond of literature, art, and music and was an “enthusiastic” member of the Washington Saengerbund, a German singing society, which had an Arlington connection. The Saengerbund had been founded in 1851, and George Washington Parke Custis took an immediate liking to the group. At his invitation, the Saengerbund began gathering at Arlington Springs for singing and dancing on Sunday afternoons, and Custis often strolled among the singers playing his violin. The Washington Saengerbund continues in existence today.¹⁴

Albert Goenner’s career ended with his death from complications from influenza on January 18, 1918.¹⁵ His son, Albert O. Goenner, followed in his father’s footsteps as an architect in Washington. But the younger Goenner, who was only five at the time of his father’s death, never had the opportunity to know or work with his father.

Albert Goenner was a talented and versatile architect who worked in a variety of styles. He was particularly fond of red brick Gothic, so popular in the late nineteenth century, as seen in the Rosslyn brewery, the courthouse and the Concordia Church. But he also worked in the nascent colonial revival style as evidenced in Reserve Hill with its symmetrical façade, classical portico, and arched doorway with a fanlight. He designed as well in the *beaux arts* style that became the vogue at the turn of the century. His houses on Sixteenth Street demonstrate his proficiency in that regard. Goenner’s talent was manifest in the three imposing buildings he designed in Alexandria County at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, rapidly changing tastes and rampant development allowed the destruction of both the brewery and the courthouse before they could be appreciated. Today, both would be considered treasures and carefully preserved, and Goenner would be remembered in Arlington.

Willard J. Webb is a longtime Arlington resident. He served as a government historian for 34 years, culminating in his assignment as Chief of the Historical Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

References

- ¹ Eleanor L. Templeman in *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes at a Virginia County* (Arlington, VA: The Author, 1959), p. 78 refers to Albert E. Goenner. Nowhere else does his name appear with a middle initial and his family is unaware of any middle initial.
- ² All biographical data, unless otherwise noted is from: *A History of the City of Washington: Its Men and Institutions* (Washington: Washington Post Company, 1903), p. 308; *American Biographical Directory, District of Columbia, 1908-1909* (Washington: The Potomac Press, 1909), p. 182; *Sixteenth Street Architecture* (Washington: Fine Arts Commission, 1978), Vol. II, p. 247; and telephone interviews, author with Stephanie Goenner Conticchio (Ms. Conticchio is Goenner's granddaughter), May-June 2000.
- ³ *A History of the City of Washington*, p.308. National Register of Historic Places Plaque on Concordia/United Church. *Washington Herald*, 20 January 1918, p. 11.
- ⁴ Eleanor L. Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, pp. 78-79.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* Ltr., Carroll J. McGuire to Eleanor L. Templeman, 30 April 1958, Templeman Files, Archives, Arlington Central Library. For an account of the saving of mule shoes from the stack of the brewery, see Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, p. 78.
- ⁶ *A History of the City of Washington*, p. 308. Frank L. Ball, "Arlington Comes of Age, The Building and Dedication of the Court House," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. I, No. 2, 1958, pp. 5-14. Jeanne Rose, "A History of the Arlington County Courthouse," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. VI, No. 3, 1979, pp. 32-39. George N. Saegmuller, *The Story of My Life* (Arlington, VA: privately published, 1929), p. 20.
- ⁷ Rose, "A History of the Arlington County Courthouse," pp. 35-39. It is interesting to note that the cost of the original Courthouse was \$20,000 while the budget for the 1960 building was \$2.2 million.
- ⁸ Quoted in Rose, "A History of the Arlington County Courthouse," p. 35.
- ⁹ *A History of the City of Washington*, p. 308.
- ¹⁰ All information on the Saegmuller family and Reserve Hill is from: Saegmuller, *Story of My Life*, pp. 11-30 (interestingly, Saegmuller describes his business career and his experience on the Alexandria County Board of Supervisors, but does not mention the building of Reserve Hill.); oral interview, Hermione Saegmuller, 13 February 1989, Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library, pp. 9-10; Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, pp. 124-125; "Reserve Hill, The Saegmuller Mansion," information prepared for Historic Arlington Day, October 1978, Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library.
- ¹¹ *A History of the City of Washington*, p. 308.
- ¹² *Sixteenth Street Architecture*, pp. 239-242.
- ¹³ Pamela Scott (ed.), *Directory of District of Columbia Architects, 1822-1960*, 1999, Historical Society of Washington, D.C. Library.
- ¹⁴ Frank H. Pierce, III, *The Washington Saengerbund: A History of German Song and German Culture in the Nation's Capital* (Washington: The Washington Saengerbund, 1981), p. 4-7.
- ¹⁵ *Washington Herald*, 20 January 1918, p. 11.