

Arlington Comes of Age The Building and Dedication of the Court House

By: Frank L. Ball
(Who Was There)

For 52 years after becoming a Virginia county, the County of Alexandria, now Arlington, had no building within its own limits to house any of its offices. The Court House was located at Columbus and Queen Streets and the jail at St. Asaph and Princess Streets, in the City of Alexandria. In 1896, when the agitation for building a court house within the County ripened up into legislation looking to that end, all offices and records of the County were located and kept within the City. The records, of course, were not voluminous and consisted mainly of those of the County Clerk, including the Court minutes and deeds and other instruments recorded in his office, and minutes of the Board of Supervisors, of which he was also Clerk. The Sheriff and Commonwealth's Attorney had no fixed offices and the official locus followed the person of the incumbent. This was also largely true of the Treasurer, who kept most of his official papers in his home, and the Commissioner of Revenue, who toured the County to make personal assessments, obtained his realty statistics from the deed books and kept his book of assessment, both real and personal, at his own residence. There was no income tax and no poll tax required to be paid in order to qualify to vote. The entire records of the Treasurer and the Commissioner of Revenue, therefore, consisted of a few small volumes. The Superintendent of Schools carried his office in his pocket.

Both County and Circuit Courts were held in Alexandria City, working a great inconvenience to jurors who were forced to drive long distances over bad roads to attend. County Court met every month. The Judge was not required to live within the County he served. The last presiding judge in the County Court (abolished by the Constitution of 1901) was J. M. Love of Fairfax, a much beloved veteran of the Confederacy, who had lost an arm on one of the battlefields of the Civil War. The County was in a circuit with Alexandria City, Fairfax and Prince William Counties. The Circuit Judge literally rode the circuit - holding court for two weeks at a time in each jurisdiction. Between terms, the local lawyers had to follow him to have urgent matters attended to. From this time on, the events enumerated are within the memory of the writer, and have been carefully checked as to dates and the identity of persons involved.

The demand for the removal of the County offices into the County itself reached its climax in 1896. At that time Charles T. O'Ferrall was Governor of Virginia. Alexandria County and Alexandria City were in the same districts, both as to the State Senate and House of Delegates, and were represented by Senator George A. Mushbach and Delegate William H. May, both of Alexandria City. Through the efforts of the local representatives, the Legislature passed an Act which was approved by the Governor on February 29, 1896, and is known as Chapter 556 of the Acts of 1895-96 Legislature. By the terms of this Act, an election was called to be held on the 28th day of May, 1896, at which time "the sense of the qualified voters of the County" should be taken upon the question of removing the Court House to one of four sites, three of which were to be selected by the County Board of Supervisors and the fourth to be the site already occupied in Alexandria City. The Act further provided that a Commission should be set up whose duty it was to proceed to have the County's interest in the old Court House and jail in Alexandria sold; to decide on plans and specifications for a new Court House and Clerk offices which should embrace walls of brick or stone, with the Clerk's office being fire proof; should let the building of such Court House, Clerk offices and the jail to the lowest responsible bidder for a sum not to exceed \$20,000.00; to complete the buildings within nine months from the letting of the contract; to receive the buildings in behalf of the County and record their action in the office of the County Clerk.

In order to finance the buildings referred to, the Board of Supervisors was directed to levy a tax not exceeding 10 cents on \$100.00 valuation, and to issue bonds of the County not to exceed \$12,000.00

The members of the Legislature were leaving nothing to guess and not only fixed the exact time for election and placed the limitations above upon the action of the Commissioners, but in the Act itself named the Commissioners who were to carry out the provisions of the Bill. They were Alonzo G. Hayes, A. W. Cathcart, George O. Wunder, Robert Walker, W. H. Hatch and Frank Hume, and the members of the County Board of Supervisors, who at that time were A. B. Grunwell, F. S. Corbett, and William Duncan.

The Act provided that the Commissioners should meet on the 10th day of June, 1896 (in case the people voted to remove the Court House) and proceed to organize and examine into the various building sites in the community which had been selected as the proper location in the foregoing election. The election was duly held on May 28th as provided in the Bill and the four

sites mentioned were Addison Heights, near Hume School in the old Jefferson Magisterial District; Hunters Chapel near the present junction Arlington Boulevard and Glebe Road in Arlington District; Ft. Myer Heights, the present location of the Court House in Arlington District; and, as provided in the Bill, the City of Alexandria. The vote as certified by the election commission was as follows:

Magisterial District	Addison Heights	Hunters Chapel	Fort Myer	Remain in Alexandria	Total
Jefferson	133	11	0	12	156
Arlington	2	130	115	3	250
Washington	0	50	105	0	155
Total	135	191	220	15	561

I have some personal recollection of this campaign which was hotly waged by the real estate holders in the various locations, each claiming that the others were merely trying to locate the Court House in their own communities for their private advantage. Although Hunters Chapel was probably closer to the center of the County and did actually receive a majority of the votes which were cast in Arlington District, in which it was located, nevertheless Washington District in the upper end of the County swung the balance in favor of Ft. Myer Heights, that being the nearest point to Washington District which had no site of its own submitted. It will be noted that of 561 people voting, only 15 voted to keep the Court House in Alexandria City.

It might be of interest also to note that at the time there was a big boom on in the sale of lots in Ft. Myer Heights. Building lots having a 50 foot frontage were selling as high as \$2,500.00 to \$3,000.00 a lot. The writer saw many of these lots sold 20 years later for \$150.00 to \$200.00 per lot. This was the only boom and bust which I recall in the County of Arlington.

The determination to move from Alexandria having been made, the Commission met on June 10, 1896, at what was then known as the Schutt House at the top of Collier's Hill, at the approximate location of the present Shell Oil Station on Wilson Boulevard, just east of Court House Road. A. B. Grunwell was elected Chairman, and Alonzo G. Hayes was elected Secretary. The Commissioners were sworn by Justice George W. Donaldson, who is mentioned here because he was one of the most colorful

characters ever in Arlington. It seems that Mr. Hume, who was from Jefferson District, had some doubts as to the legality of the election because of errors he claims were made in the information given on the ballot. He attempted to invalidate the same by resolution which was lost by a vote of 5 to 3.

The Commissioners then voted to advertise asking property owners within one-half mile of Ft. Myer Heights to donate not less than two acres as a site for the Court House. This advertisement headed "Free Court House Sites" appeared in the Washington Star of June 12th to June 18th, 1896. It announced that sealed offers for free sites would be received by the Chairman of the Commission at his office in Washington or by A. G. Hayes at Balston, Virginia. It may be noted that the spelling of Ballston was incorrect which indicates the careless habits of some of our forebears and which in fact was an error that a great many people made at the time.

The Commission reconvened on July 10th, 1896, Frank Hume being absent. Two offers had been received, one from the Ft. Myer Heights Land Company and the other from Reverend A. A. E. Taylor of Columbus, Ohio, who owned a large area approximately one-half mile from the present Court House. The Commissioners unanimously decided to accept the offer of the Ft. Myer Heights Land Company to contribute Block 8 of the Ft. Myer Heights subdivision, insisting, however, that the Commission should have five years in which to complete the Court House buildings instead of the two and one-half years mentioned in the offer. The deed is dated June 25th, 1896, and is recorded in Deed Book Y #4, of the County land records. Although the deed was executed on June 25th, it was not acknowledged until July 13th, after the offer had been definitely accepted, and the date of admission to record was October 10th. The covenants of this deed are rather amusing at the present time and are as follows: "That no blacksmith or other shop, manufactory of any kind, livery stable, pig pen or bone boiling or similar establishment shall be erected or permitted on said lots, that no nuisance or offensive, noisy or illegal trade, calling or transaction shall be done, suffered or permitted thereon". Whether the practice of the legal profession, especially in hotly contested cases, constitutes a noisy calling or transaction has never been decided.

Difficulties arose which are not entirely portrayed by the record, but evidently growing out of the legal questions raised by Mr. Hume concerning the first election, and the Legislature in order to make everything strictly legal passed an Act which

was approved on February 12, 1898, and is known as Chapter 321 of the Acts of Assembly 1897-98.

Officers changed quickly in those days even as they do now. At this Legislature, Louis C. Barley of Alexandria had succeeded Mr. May in the House of Delegates. J. Hoge Tyler had succeeded Governor O'Ferrall and George N. Saegmuller had succeeded A. B. Grunwell as Supervisor and had become Chairman of the Board. This 1898 Act directed the Board of Supervisors to proceed with the erection of the Court House, Clerk office and jail as speedily as possible and set up a bond issue of \$20,000.00, this being an excess of \$8,000.00 over the provisions of the Act of 1896, and provided that after the erection and acceptance of the buildings, "the said Ft. Myer Heights shall be the place for holding the courts of the County of Alexandria and for conducting all other business of said County." This last provision has been pretty well violated by the establishment of locations for large segments of the County's business to be attended to elsewhere. The principal of said bonds was to be payable within 30 years or upon the call of the Board of Supervisors at any time after five years and the expenses thereof should be met by general taxation. The properties in Alexandria had not been sold and the Act provided that the County's interests therein should be preserved until such time as the sale should be made.

After the Act of 1898 was passed, the Board of Supervisors moved with very commendable haste. The plans were prepared by A. Goenner, Architect, contract let to Joseph H. Hobson, and the building was completed and dedicated on November 16, 1898. The writer has a very clear recollection of the dedication and three things stand up particularly in mind.

First was the program of speaking. The proceedings were presided over by George N. Saegmuller, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, and the introductory speech was by J. E. Clements, ex-Commonwealth's Attorney of Alexandria County and at that time Superintendent of Schools. Music was furnished by Donch's Military and Concert Band of the District of Columbia. There were five principal addresses by the following prominent men: J. Hoge Tyler, Governor of Virginia; John W. Daniel, United States Senator; John B. Wight, Member of the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia; Andrew A. Lipscomb, a prominent attorney and owner of Altha Hall, and John F. Rixey, representing this district in Congress. This was probably the first time a Governor of Virginia had ever spoken on Arlington soil. John W. Daniel, at that time, was perhaps the greatest orator in America. He had lost a leg while a Major in the

Souvenir Program.

DEDICATION
OF
THE ALEXANDRIA COUNTY COURT HOUSE.
Fort Myer Heights, Va. November 16, 1898.



Program.

Commencing at 2 o'clock p. m. sharp.

CALLING TO ORDER.

By Geo. N. Saegmuller, Chairman Executive Committee.

INTRODUCTORY SPEECH.

James E. Clements, Ex-Commonwealth's Attorney Alexandria Co., Va.

MUSIC.

By Donch's Military and Concert Band.

ADDRESS.

Hon. J. Hoge Tyler, Governor of Virginia.

MUSIC.

ADDRESS.

Hon. John W. Daniel, U. S. Senator.

MUSIC.

ADDRESS.

Hon. John B. Wight, Commissioner District of Columbia.

MUSIC.

ADDRESS.

Hon. Andrew A. Lipscomb, of Alexandria Co.

MUSIC.

CLOSING ADDRESS.

Hon. John F. Rixey, Member of Congress.

MUSIC.

BANQUET.

Under direction of the Committees

Excerpts from Souvenir Program used at Dedication of Alexandria (Arlington) County Court House, November 16, 1898.

Confederate Army. He was a spell-binder of the first magnitude. Andrew Lipscomb was practicing law in Washington and lived in Arlington. He was a man of great eloquence. The most perfect English would roll off his tongue in charming phrases and seemingly without any effort. John F. Rixey was popular in Arlington. He had not been in Congress very long at that time and was known as a very hard worker and an interesting speaker. After the speeches, there was a banquet, part of which was served inside of the Court House, but the part which I remember the best was served at what I would call the southwest corner of Court House square, where a whole steer was roasted over charcoal fire and large pieces of beef were cut off and handed out with bread to all of us youngsters as well as the grown ups who had gathered enmasse at that point. This was the first and only steer the writer ever saw roasted over coals. My recollection is that they had him turning on a spit for about two days in order to get him cooked down to the point where the crowd could go into raptures over the well-roasted beef. I cannot say that I can still taste the meat as this would be somewhat of a reflection on it, but certainly I can still recall the fact that it was the top choice of any meat that I have ever eaten. By night-fall, there was nothing left but a few bones.

There was, of course, a guided tour through the whole Court House and we thought that it was the last word in elegance. The jail, with its small cell block, seemed at that time adequate for all needs and its strength and security were matters of proud comment by the Sheriff and his law officers. The Clerk's office was by no means fire proof, but it was such a step up from the former Clerk's office in Alexandria, that it seemed almost like a palace and was at least adequate for the purposes of the moment. Besides the Clerk's office, there were on the first floor, offices for the Commissioner of Revenue and the Treasurer and a meeting room for the Board of Supervisors. In one of the western lower rooms, there was a print shop in which the Monitor was printed and published for some years. There was also a lawyers' office. The Sheriff had offices provided for on the second floor and there was a room for the Attorney for the Commonwealth. However, the Commonwealth's Attorney did not occupy his office, and it was not until the writer became the Commonwealth's Attorney in 1916 that this office was actually moved into the Court House. The office of the Superintendent of Schools, although a room was provided for the same, was not opened in the Court House on full basis until Professor Fletcher Kemp came as Superintendent about 1915.

The other things most remembered by the writer on the day

of the dedication, were the race for a greasy pig and the climbing of the greasy pole. The pig race attracted a great many young boys. Insofar as I know, Robert Branch, who now lives in Hall's Hill and who is well known throughout the County, is the only person still living who ran the pig. Personally, I never knew of a less pleasant thing to do than even think of a greasy pig, much less catch one, and consequently took no part in the chase. The pig was turned loose immediately east of the Court House and ran out through the woods which extended over at least two blocks of land in that direction. The mob soon took care of him however.

The greasy pole was an attraction all of the day. At its top were a number of watches, an alarm clock and several other items of some value. The climbing started early in the day, at which time a host of young boys could only get a few feet off the ground before they slipped back. There was a young chap by the name of Copperthite, who had come over from Georgetown and who was a little too smart for all of us country boys. After making one or two attempts at the pole, he conceived the bright idea that with the aid of a little sand, he could make it. Somewhere, he found enough sand to fill his pockets and then he started up, climbing a foot or two at a time, at each stop taking enough sand from his pocket, rubbing it up and down the pole until he had gotten the grease off enough space to climb a foot or two more. By this process, he was able to reach the top, take the choicest watch and come back down. By the time he was down, all the rest of the boys had their pockets full of sand and it was a battle royal as to who should have the next chance. I am sure Copperthite got to the top of the pole at least three or maybe four times. I doubt if any other boy made it more than once.

The day was a beautiful day. Everybody in the County came early and stayed late. Everybody knew everybody else, and all the current gossip was hashed and rehashed and a glorious time was had by all.

Those that served on the Executive Committee, the Reception Committee and the Ladies Reception Committee for the celebration were as follows:

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

GEO. N. SAEGMULLER, Chairman

GEO. P. ROBINSON, Secretary

Wm. Duncan

D. K. Trimmer

Geo. G. Boteler

A. B. Hines

Fred S. Corbett

R. S. Lacy

Geo. E. Truitt

John B. Henderson

RECEPTION COMMITTEE

W. C. Wibert
A. M. Lothrop
A. W. Armstrong
R. A. Phillips
Robt. R. Veitch
Brooke Young
Robt. Walker
F. G. Schutt
Wm. Ball
Wm. N. Febrey
Geo. O. Wunder
R. W. Johnson
Thos. W. Buckey
A. S. Doniphan
Geo. W. Veitch
Geo. Rucker
Dr. Talbott
A. D. Torrison
L. A. Dodge

Frank Hume
M. B. Harlow
Jas. E. Clements
Jos. H. Hobson
H. H. Young
Wm. H. Palmer
Curtis B. Graham
H. W. McGeorge
W. W. Douglas
Wm. H. Payne
Julian Magruder
Chas. A. Douglass
Mervyn Buckey
John L. Saegmuller
Wm. H. Hatch
Dr. Hanse
Wm. Lockwood
Ernest J. Febrey

LADIES' RECEPTION COMMITTEE

Mrs. Frank Hume
Mrs. Geo. N. Saegmuller
Mrs. Dr. J. T. Johnson
Mrs. A. A. Lipscomb
Mrs. Dr. Talbott
Mrs. Geo. O. Wunder
Mrs. F. G. Schutt
Mrs. A. B. Grunwell
Mrs. Dr. H. C. Corbett
Miss Lacey Johnston
Miss Susie E. Grunwell
Mrs. E. S. Corbett
Miss Lockwood
Mrs. H. W. McGeorge
Miss M. Grace Douglass
Miss Ruth Clements
Miss Annie M. Hayes
Miss Margaret Bashford
Miss Millie Young
Miss Kate N. Munson
Mrs. Wm. H. Palmer

Mrs. Dr. P. M. Rixey
Mrs. Geo. E. Truitt
Mrs. Dr. Hanse
Mrs. M. D. Boteler
Miss L. D. Mulhall
Miss G. M. Wunder
Miss Graham
Miss Louise Grunwell
Mrs. S. A. Johnston
Mrs. Blanche Torrison
Miss Annie Gilbert
Mrs. H. A. Lockwood
Mrs. J. H. Hobson
Miss Elsie A. Febrey
Mrs. Geo. Rucker
Mrs. A. R. Hines
Miss Emily Hayes
Mrs. H. A. Whalon
Miss J. Hipkins
Mrs. W. A. Young
Mrs. Harvey Bailey

LADIES' RECEPTION COMMITTEE Continued

Mrs. Wm. Kidwell
Miss Olive Niles
Mrs. Harrison Hatch
Mrs. Wright

Mrs. Charles I. Simms
Miss Gussie Pierce
Mrs. R. W. Johnson
Mrs. R. A. Phillips

When Alexandria County laid down its sleepy head that night, it was for the first time in its history complete, with its Courts and offices all housed within its borders.

The December terms, of both the County Court and the Circuit Court, were held in the new building, less than one month after its dedication, and the Board of Supervisors held its regular December meeting therein. From that time on, it has been the center of the official heart beat of the County.