



Courtesy of Arlington Historical Society

**The 1841 James Roach mansion on Prospect Hill as seen before demolition in 1965.**

# Prospect Hill

## *A Lost Arlington Historical Treasure*

BY SHERMAN W. PRATT

In the 1960s, Arlington and Northern Virginia lost one of their most priceless and unique historical assets with the rezoning and destruction of the antebellum dwelling of early settler James Roach, standing majestically on Arlington Ridge and overlooking the Capital City area. The dwelling dated from Arlington's early history after the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the Republic, when the area was still a part of the Capital City.

In the late 1830s, Philip Roach, with his wife and two daughters and son James, arrived in Alexandria from his former home in Ireland. He immediately set about to find land upon which to establish a New World home for himself and his family. In due course, he focused on one of the most desirable and attractive pieces of real estate in Northern Virginia. The site was well elevated, located about a mile from the Potomac River, and today comprises approximately the northern portion of Arlington Ridge, parts of Crystal City, and Pentagon City and their nearby environs. The land was part of the 1669 original patent<sup>1</sup> of ship captain Robert Howson that was purchased by John Alexander, passed to his son Philip, and eventually conveyed in 1811 to William Henry Washington. It was taken over by the Bank of the United States in 1836, and then purchased by James Roach on June 29, 1837.<sup>2</sup>

The senior Roach died on June 9, 1838 at the age of 50, and James, still then residing in Alexandria, promptly looked around for a proper location on which to build his home on his new property. He selected a place on the north end of what was in later years to be identified as Arlington Ridge. The site provided a spectacular panoramic view of the Potomac River, the National Capital building, the President's mansion, the Mall, and many other places in the core of the Capital City. It was identified on land records as "Hoe Hill" as recorded by the late Arlington historian Eleanor Lee Templeman in her *Arlington Heritage*.<sup>3</sup> The unique Hoe Hill overlook site was a part of the Alexander estate on which that family had built their own home, known as Abingdon, in the early 1740s, located about a mile away on the banks of the Potomac River.<sup>4</sup> Roach began construction of his home on Hoe Hill in 1840 and completed it the following year, while the area was still a part of the Capital City prior to the 1846-7 retrocession of former Virginia lands. He named the manor "Prospect Hill."

Many years later, in describing Roach's home, Templeman wrote in 1959, some five years before it was demolished upon rezoning, as follows:

The house is beautifully proportioned and detailed, with a two-story center section and one-storied wings on each side. Brick-walled pathways lead to servants quarters which are also of brick. The original huge brass locks remain on the doors. One of the most interesting rooms is the kitchen with the oven built into the wall beside the massive fireplace.<sup>5</sup>

From Prospect Hill, an observer could perhaps have seen through the trees, a mile or so to the north, the majestic Arlington House, mostly completed by about 1814 by George Washington Park Custis. To the right and southeast, also to be seen could have been the Abingdon manor, the ruins of which are now preserved near the modern day main terminal at National Airport.<sup>6</sup> In the lowlands below Hoe Hill there ran a small stream that would in later years be known as Roach's (AKA Roch's) Run. In the same vicinity was Long Branch, which emptied into Four Mile Run about two miles to the south.<sup>7</sup>

Just below Roach's Prospect Hill manor in the lowlands the main turnpike from Georgetown forked. The right fork ran along Long Branch. About a mile south of Roach's new home, and within easy visiting distance, it ran past Green Valley Manor, the home and property of Anthony Fraser. That manor, built in 1820, was burned in 1924 and the property is now the location of the Forest Hills luxury townhouses. Fraser and other members of the family are buried nearby across Shirley highway in the family burial grounds next to Green #26 of the Army Navy Country Club.

The left fork of the Georgetown turnpike ran along the high ground on which Prospect Hill was located, now South Arlington Ridge Road. That road was part of the post road that connected the New England colonies, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore with the Carolinas and Georgia. It was the road over which George Washington often traveled between Mount Vernon and the north.<sup>8</sup>

When still alive, Philip and his son James energetically established themselves in profitable businesses. They constructed a gristmill on Four Mile Run and brick and masonry plants on or near Roach's Run (earlier known as "Mill Branch on Shallow Creek").<sup>9</sup> After Philip died, James pursued the businesses and was given masonry contracts for much of the stonework for the Alexandria Canal and the building of the Alexandria, Loudon and Hampshire Railroad, which became the Bluemont Division of the Southern Railway and then the electric line to Leesburg and Bluemont.<sup>10</sup> The brick factory on Roach's Run also provided materials for use in build-

ing his home on Prospect Hill. In his time, James Roach would be active in local civic affairs and serve in many important positions. At the time of retrocession of Virginia lands of the District of Columbia in 1846-7, Roach served as one of five commissioners appointed to oversee the referendum for the citizens of Alexandria County on the question of approving the return of the lands to Virginia. Roach voted in favor of retrocession.<sup>11, 12</sup>

Long after Roach's departure, Arlington County Planning Director Richard E. Arms would write in 1965 the following about Prospect Hill:

... the (Prospect Hill) tract has an excellent panoramic view overlooking the National Airport, the Pentagon and Arlington Cemetery with the District of Columbia in the background...the residence is an excellent example of colonial architecture, (and) has been kept in good repair by the owners except during and immediately after the War years of 1860-65. The House sits majestically atop this ridge (Arlington Ridge) among a setting of beautiful old trees overlooking the valley below...there are few other historical landmarks in Arlington with the architectural character of Prospect House which are situated in so prominent a location.<sup>13</sup>

During the Civil War and afterwards, the Prospect Hill house and the Roach family fell on hard times. Both were subjected to abuse and misuse in numerous ways. In a letter from Elizabeth Roach obtained by Templeman from a great-granddaughter of the builder of the house, it is related that Union soldiers came to Prospect Hill at 2 a.m. on May 24, 1861 and took possession of the house. The builder and his son James Carson Roach were taken prisoners. Philip, Roach's other son, had been at Georgetown College and had left for the Confederate Army, but was also taken prisoner and held first at the old Capital Prison and then at Fort Warren in Boston. None of the Roaches were released until after the war ended in 1865.<sup>14</sup>

Elizabeth Roach continued, "The soldiers burned the two story farm house and a large barn, killed ducks, turkeys and chickens, rooted up the vegetable garden, and turned government cattle in to graze in the front yard to destroy shrubs and everything. Many a night the family members were awakened by the soldiers tramping through the house under the pretext of finding fire arms . . . they gathered all grain into the grist mill and burned it."<sup>15</sup>

The letter writer relates that trees were cut down to built Forts Albany and Runyon<sup>16</sup> located on the property. The tree cutting was a source of great sorrow during the fort construction for Green Valley Manor owner Fraser nearby. In later years, family members reported that Fraser, aged and blind in the 1861-1865 period, was painfully distressed "when listening to the

sound of hundreds of axes (as) Union soldiers felled the forests on his lands so the fort guns could have clear fields of fire, that no cover might be afforded to the enemy, and that timber might be obtained for revetments for the earthworks or barracks.”<sup>17</sup> Templeman wrote further that while in prison, James Roach and his son “were not even allowed to go to church.... No wonder Roach, his wife and daughter died during the war.”<sup>18</sup>

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—Arlington historian, Eleanor Lee Templeman

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The Roaches moved into Alexandria after the war and the property was later sold under court order in 1869 to settle claims against the estate. Under the heading “Prospect Hill,” notices were published in local newspapers that there would be a public auction at noon on May 1, 1869, of the estate and residence of the late James Roach, broken into five lot numbers of 20 to 60 acres. The notice stated in part that the estate

contained four hundred acres of land opposite Arlington, situated in Alexandria County about two miles from Washington, D. C., on the Arlington turnpike at its junction with the Georgetown road, with a large Brick Mansion House, special excellent frame dwelling houses, large barns, stables, outhouses, etc. The Mansion House, built upon the same range of hills as the Arlington House, and distant three-fourths of a mile therefrom, and commanding a full view of the whole city of Washington and great extent of the Potomac river; . . . the land is of the best quality and highly improved, and is adapted to the production of this latitude.<sup>19</sup>

After the 1869 sale of the Roach property, the mansion changed hands and fell into further disuse and misuse and “evil days,” but in 1913 was rescued “by a brilliant family from the Middle West, the Philip Campbells.”<sup>20</sup> The Prospect Hill estate was purchased by Mrs. Philip Campbell, the wife of a Representative in Congress from the state of Kansas, and the home became known as Sunnyside to the family.<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Campbell died in the early 1960s, leaving four children as heirs to the property. All four were located in places far from Arlington and apparently had no interest in returning to the property to live, or even to retain it. It appeared to local residents that the property, in essence, constituted a “white elephant” for the heirs, and that they, therefore, entered into an agreement for the sale

and development of the property if it could be rezoned for higher density and more profitable uses such as a high rise apartment building.

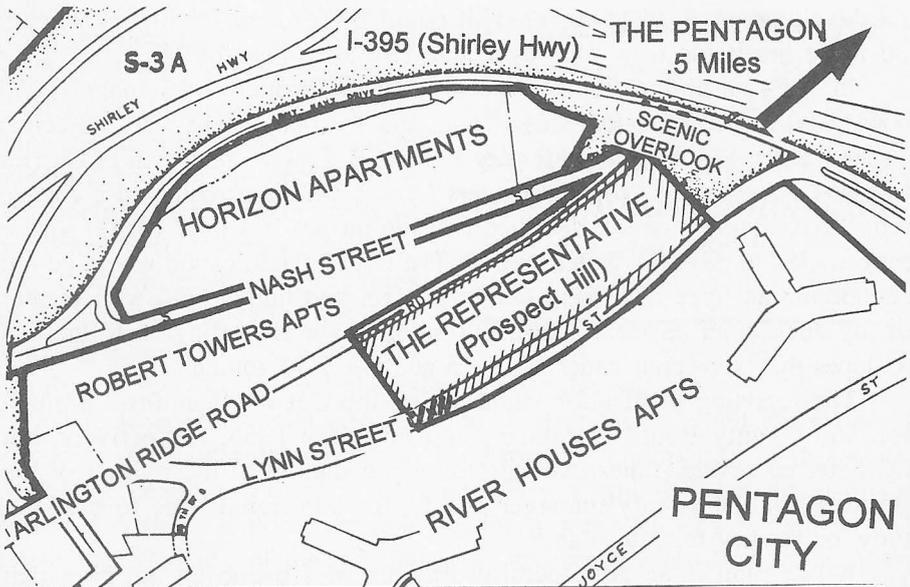
In 1964 an application for rezoning of the property designated 1230 (now 1101) South Arlington Ridge Road, and 164,000 square feet (3.8 acres) in size, was filed by Arlington Attorney William B. Lawson on behalf of Charles Rose and associates as "contract owners." The application requested a change from "R-10" (single family detached housing on not less than 10,000 square feet of land), to "RA-H," Hotel District. The RA-H classification would permit a condominium type apartment building larger and higher, and with greater density, than other adjacent apartment buildings on the Arlington Ridge and its slopes that were built under RA 6-15 and RA 7-16 zoning.

The rezoning application came before the County Planning Commission and County Board in January and February 1965, respectively, but was deferred several times over the following months at the request of the applicant, or the county manager's staff, for additional time to prepare, study, or modify the site plan.<sup>22</sup>

A site plan is an architectural drawing of a proposed building that would be constructed on a given piece of land. Such a plan is expected to reflect the general appearance of the building as well as its size, style, number of floors, total square feet and relationship to the square feet of the land on which it would be located, and other similar design or engineering characteristics or features.

During the months that the rezoning application remained on file and pending board action, numerous groups filed responses opposing the requested rezoning and urging that the site be maintained in its existing state with its mansion intact, by public purchase if necessary. These groups included the Arlington County Civic Federation, Patricia Barker on behalf of the Aurora Hills Women's Club, Shannon Trumbo on behalf of the Jefferson Civic League on 23rd Street South, The Arlington Ridge Civic Association, and Helen Bullock on behalf of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. No documents in support of the rezoning, other than those of the applicant, were filed with the County Office of Zoning. The Roscoe-Ajax Construction Company, Washington DC, wrote "...we do not recommend construction of an apartment house on the proposed site, since excessive aircraft noise can be expected...(but) should you nonetheless proceed, generous sound proofing should be used."

In numerous communications to the county board, the County Planning Commission and manager opposed the rezoning and urged that the property be purchased and retained for its historical significance. In a joint



Courtesy of Arlington County zoning office as enhanced by Sherman W. Pratt  
**Map depicts rezoning for apartments as of 1965.**

memorandum from the planning director and the county manager, the county board was advised, in part, as follows:

It is recommended that the County acquire this prominent overlook for open space purposes ...the site has historical significant since the earliest days of development in this area...

Arlington Ridge Road, known in the early 1800s as the Alexandria-Georgetown Road, connected Alexandria with Georgetown, climbing the ridge of "Hoes Hill" (later called "Prospect Hill" and subject of this zoning), and crossing the plain near Arlington Cemetery to reach the ferry at Rosslyn.

In 1841, James Roach, a leading citizen and contractor of that day credited with masonry work for the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal and early railroad construction, built his home on the crest of Prospect Hill. This residence, an excellent example of colonial architecture, has been kept in good repair by the owners except during and immediately after the War years of 1860-65. The House sits majestically atop the ridge...suggesting a role in the preservation of Arlington's and the Nation's Heritage...

It is the Office of Planning opinion that this property with its heritage, its size, condition and setting offers much to justify public ownership. There are few other historic landmarks in Arlington with the architectural character of Prospect House which are situated in so prominent a location. The

foreground of Shirley Highway right-of-way and the low silhouette of the Pentagon and Arlington Cemetery (below) assure a continued prominence of this site as a landmark.<sup>23</sup>

At its meeting on March 20, 1965, the board made no decision on the matter, deferred a further hearing until May 8, and requested additional information on the feasibility of public acquisition of the site. On April 27 the manager advised the board that acquisition could "be quite costly," and difficult to justify "although the staff feels that the combination of historical, architectural value and prominence of location is unique in Arlington County." The manager also reported that the applicant had been requested to study, and had studied, the feasibility of moving the main residence to the north end of the property and onto adjacent land owned by the Virginia Highway Department, but that such a movement was concluded not to be feasible because of steep topography and other reasons.<sup>24</sup>

In the following months, numerous work sessions were held with the applicant's representatives, the county staff, and interested citizen activists. During this period the staff explored the feasibility of public acquisition, and the applicant indicated a willingness to create, dedicate, and maintain a small open space on the north and east end of the property as an overlook for public uses.

The county board scheduled the matter for final hearing and decision for November 20, 1965. On November 18th, the manager furnished the board a "Statement Concerning Prospect Hill," indicating a reversal of its earlier position that the site should be acquired for public preservation and open space. The statement follows, in pertinent part:

In the past six months it has been our pursuit to see if opportunity for public acquisition could be implemented. The most promising course was to get this property registered as a National Historic Site by the U. S. Department of Interior. If this could be achieved, federal financing could be expedited. After a call to Secretary of the Interior Udall's office, (we learned) that the Advisory Board agreed it could not recommend Prospect Hill as a National Historic Landmark, that the historians, architects and archeologists agreed that any interest in the property must be local not national... Accordingly, we recommend that this property be rezoned, and that the County Board accept the contract owner's proposal to preserve for the public that portion of the tract which is by far the most important to the public—the overlook. The developers are offering...to obtain an easement over approximately 100 feet of the northerly portion of the property. We believe this goes a long way toward the goal of preserving for the general

public the most important factor of the tract—the vista of Arlington and the nation’s capital...we find it most difficult to justify the amount of money required to purchase the entire tract to obtain the additional southerly portion of the tract...

Accordingly, it is recommended that the zoning be granted and the site plan be approved preserving the northerly portion of the tract with an easement for public purposes.

The consideration of the Prospect Hill rezoning request by the county board at its November 20th meeting was extensive and, at times, heated. No public witnesses testified in favor of the rezoning other than the applicant or its representatives, including attorney William Lawson. Numerous individuals appeared in opposition, but perhaps the most articulate and outspoken were the members of the Arlington Ridge Civic Association, within whose boundaries the site was located.

Association member William Frederick told the board that it was not obligated to act on the application at all - that there was no law or rule requiring the board to approve the application in any form or to any extent; that the board could simply deny the request as a matter of discretionary judgment.

Member Francis Hewitt urged public acquisition to preserve the mansion and property and pointed out that the assessed value as shown by the county tax assessor was only a little over \$300,000, which was not prohibitive.

Association member Sherman Pratt, this author, showed the board home movie amateur film clips of the site to demonstrate the unique panoramic view of the National Capital as seen from the site’s promontory north end. Included in the clips were tourist shots Pratt had taken on trips to the Holy Land in the Mid-East and to the cultural city of Florence in Italy. Pratt showed the board views of Jerusalem as seen from the high ground on the Mount of Olives above the Garden of Gethsemane, and of the famed Ponte Vecchio over the Arno River, and the medieval churches and other buildings of Florence as seen from the public overlook in Garibaldi Park on the south side of the Arno River. Pratt told the board, in part:

None of these spectacular panoramic views of these historic and cultural places would be available to visitors and the public today if someone in history long ago had not had the foresight and courage to set aside the overlooks to the benefit of posterity. That preservation did not just happen. Someone made it happen.

You gentlemen in Arlington County on this zoning Board stand at the same cross roads this evening at this point in time. You have a similar opportunity to preserve the only remaining significant overlook in the

National Capital area, and the only remaining oldest structure in the county in its original condition, other than Arlington House in Arlington Cemetery. We beg you not to forfeit this opportunity. If you do, the possibility of preservation will be lost forever. Once an immense and costly structure is built, there will be no turning back. You will never ever be able to undo what has been done.

Following the testimony by public witnesses, the board discussed at length its course of action. Some members expressed doubt that funds could be allocated for public acquisition of the property at its marketable value. One member said he felt that if the board did not grant the rezoning, the board would be reversed in the courts; that adjacent properties on three sides were already zoned and occupied by high rise apartments, and that it could be found to be unreasonable and arbitrary for the board not to also classify the subject property as suitable for high rise uses. Whereupon, one public witness rose to point out that the existence of so many high rise apartments in the area constituted the strongest reason possible for not creating more if control of congested development was to be achieved.

Finally, near midnight, the board voted 3-2 to grant the rezoning "subject to the grant of a 100' easement to the north to be preserved as an overlook and developed and maintained by the owners."<sup>25</sup> Board members Thomas Richard, Harold Casto and Leo Urbanske voted for the re-



Sherman W. Pratt

**The representative condominium apartments at 1101 South Arlington Ridge Road as seen from the Pentagon City complex on South Hayes Street.**

zoning and Joseph Fisher and Roye Lowry voted against. Early the following morning, bulldozers and other razing equipment were at the site, knocking down the mansion and surrounding structures. By nightfall, destruction was completed and the site was devoid of any indications that it once contained a stately and historic structure. Local civic activists were convinced that the developers had moved with all deliberate speed to accomplish their goals before any legal or other challenges could be taken to reverse or otherwise interfere with the county board's approval of the rezoning application.

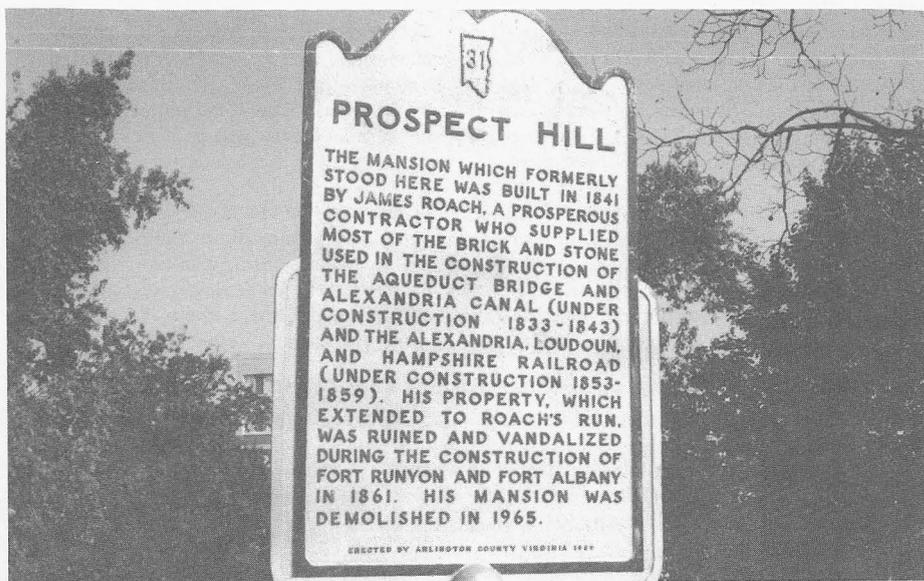
Reaction among disappointed Arlington Ridge Civic Association members, and perhaps many others, was bitter, acrimonious, resentful and openly critical. There was a general conviction that the board, consisting of four members who resided in the far northern areas of the county, had acted with great insensitivity to the interests and views of the South Arlington residents in whose area the subject property was located. There was the strong feeling that had the property been located in North Arlington, the board members who voted for approval would have taken a different course of action. The weakness of that attitude, however, was that one of the board members who voted for rezoning the property, Urbanske, himself lived in South Arlington, on 18th Street South, only a few blocks from the Prospect Hill site.

In the years following the board approval of the rezoning, after several additional changes in the site plan, construction began on the massive condominium Representative Apartments, that are now accepted as one of Arlington County's most luxurious and prestigious residential structures. The building stands high on the Arlington Ridge and can be seen easily from numerous view points in North Virginia and from across the Potomac River in Washington, DC.

Listed among the more famous and well known personalities that have resided in the Representative are the late Admiral Hyman Rickover, often called the father of the atomic submarine; Army General John Singlaub, much publicized during the Iran-Contra days of the 1970s; Korean entrepreneur Jung Park; and writers Garth Van Sickles and Karen Murray. Admiral Rickover's widow Eleanore is still shown on county land records as the owner of a unit in the condominium.

True to their promise, and in response to opponents who lamented the loss of a unique panoramic overlook of the Nation's Capital, the applicants did in fact create a 100-foot public access area on the eastern tip of the property.

The small park on the overlook of Prospect Hill has a concrete patio, benches and lighting. It is maintained by the condominium association of



Sherman W. Pratt

The historical marker on Prospect Hill.

the Representative and is a clear asset to Arlington County and the Arlington Ridge community. There is an historical marker on the site titled "Prospect Hill" and another a few feet away titled "Fort Runyon." The park and hill have proven to be especially popular each year for crowds watching the July 4th fireworks on the Mall in the Capital. Sadly, however, the unique, historical, and stately Prospect Hill mansion of James Roach of long ago is but a memory. It will forever, however, be an indelible, historically fascinating and lasting part of Arlington's past, even if no longer extant.

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Sherman W. Pratt is the author of *Arlington County Virginia: A Modern History*, and history books on the Korean War and World War II from his perspective as a participant. He is a past president of the Arlington Historical Society and a regular contributor to *The Arlington Historical Magazine* and in numerous other ways has been active in Arlington civic affairs.

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### References

<sup>1</sup> *Black's Law Dictionary* (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1968) defines patent as "a grant of some privilege, property or authority made by the government or a sovereign." In modern usage the term would be roughly equivalent to a deed.

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Northern Virginia Sun*, April 17, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes of a Virginia County* (New York: Avenel

Books, 1959), p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> The Alexander family were also the first residents of what later became Arlington County in 1920 who owned the land on which they lived. Other famous and well-known historical figures that would own land in the county such as George Mason and George Washington lived elsewhere. Abingdon was acquired during the Revolutionary War by John Parke Custis, the son of Martha Custis Washington; "Nellie" Custis and George Washington Parke Custis, who built Arlington House, were born while the family lived there.

<sup>5</sup> Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> The ruins narrowly escaped destruction in the 1990s incident to the remodeling of the National Airport where the ruins were located. In response to vigorous complaints from historical preservationists, the Airports Authority agreed to save and upgrade the ruins with new signage, walkways and landscaping. The ruins are now open to the public between parking garages A and B. For more on the preservation of the ruins, see Sherman Pratt, with Bernard Berne, "The Abingdon Manor Ruins: The Fight to Save," in *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 10, No. 4, October 1996, pp. 49-78.

<sup>7</sup> The current precise location of Roach's Run, if extant, is uncertain, but would be approximately where is Pentagon City. Long Branch has been underground along Army Navy Drive since the Shirley Highway (I-395) reconstruction of the 1970s.

<sup>8</sup> "With the Rambler," *The Washington Star*, Washington, D. C., undated but believed to be about 1915, on file in the Historical Buildings file of the Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library.

<sup>9</sup> Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> "With the Rambler."

<sup>11</sup> C. B. Rose, *Arlington County Virginia, A History* (Baltimore, MD: Port City Press, 1976), p.71.

<sup>12</sup> Roach's grandson of later years was the well-known Hollywood movie producer Hal Roach who died on November 2, 1992 at the age of 100 years. Hal Roach was nationally known for producing many Laurel and Hardy movies and for creating the *Our Gang* comedies and a partnership that set the stage for comedians that followed such as Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, and Dean Martin and Jerry Louis. See "Movie Great Hal Roach Dies," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 3, 1992, Obituaries.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum, March 10, 1965, to the Arlington County Board, signed by Planning Director Richard Arms and County Manager Bert Johnson; Subject: Application for Rezoning, Z-1794-65-2.

<sup>14</sup> Templeman, *Northern Virginia Sun*, April 17, 1957.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Neither fort is today extant, having been demolished soon after the Civil War. Fort Runyon was located near the Virginia end of the Long Bridge (now 14th Street bridge complex). Fort Albany was located almost exactly where is now Pentagon City. Both forts supported Fort Richardson, located where is now Green #9 at the Army Navy Country Club.

<sup>17</sup> "With the Rambler."

<sup>18</sup> Templeman, *Northern Virginia Sun*, April 17, 1957.

<sup>19</sup> Historic Buildings folder, on file in the Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library.

<sup>20</sup> Marietta Minnigerode Andrews, *George Washington Country* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1930), p. 144, out of print but on file in the Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library.

<sup>21</sup> Andrews, *George Washington Country*, p. 148.

<sup>22</sup> The Arlington County Board has required that site plans accompany rezoning applications for higher density and the plans are taken into account by the board in deciding whether to grant a requested rezoning.

<sup>23</sup> Memorandum, March 10, 1965, to the Arlington County Board, signed by Planning Director Richard Arms and County Manager Bert Johnson; Subject: Application for Rezoning, Z-1794-65-2.

<sup>24</sup> Memorandum, County Manager Bert Johnson to the Arlington County Board, April 27, 1965; Subject: Application for Rezoning, Z-1794-65-2.

<sup>25</sup> Arlington County Board minutes, Book # 21, p. 182.