Aerial view of Lawyers' Row shortly before demolition, looking east. From left to right: Ball Building; Jesse Building; Jesse-Hosmer Building; Moncure Building; and Geo. H. Rucker Co. Building. (See Arlington's Lawyers Row, page 37.)
ARLINGTON'S LAWYERS' ROW:
THE PEOPLE AND THE PLACE
OF A LOST COURTHOUSE TRADITION

By

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In 1990, when bulldozers demolished the five familiar Colonial Revival office buildings, affectionately called Lawyers' Row, on the north side of Courthouse Road where the latest county jail has emerged, the last vestiges of Arlington's early administrative history and a traditional local-government landscape were plowed under. In Virginia's early history, the courthouse area of a county was a cultural and political hub where businessmen, lawyers, and merchants converged. The modest Lawyers' Row was unusual as one of the state's only twentieth-century groupings, and here mingled an intimate community of prominent life-long Arlington jurists.

The first county courthouse of independent Alexandria County — later the "cityless" Arlington County — was built in 1898 on Block 8 of the subdivision being developed by the Fort Myer Heights Land Company, the site once occupied by Fort Woodbury, where the 1961 courthouse sits today. The Victorian red-brick mass atop the hill, designed by A. Goenner, was dominated by an easily visible 75-foot clock tower. Some "wooden, unimpressive, small buildings" were erected across what was then Sherman Avenue by the early twentieth century, though the setting was still bucolic in ways. South of the courthouse area, along the path of Washington Boulevard (Route 50), wound Rocky Run and the Washington, Alexandria, & Falls Church electric railway; the Court House Station stood here at the foot of Sherman Avenue.

At the time, this government center was on the southwest edge of the Fort Myer Heights neighborhood, a sparse locale with neighbors limited to Clarendon, Aurora Heights, Colonial Heights, and the Fort Myer army base. Around the courthouse, a trio of commemorative markers helped consecrate the vicinity as the county hub: a World War I memorial tree and plaque installed in 1923, the Mother's Tree and plaque in 1924, and the striking eagle-and-cannonball of 1931 to remember lives lost in both World Wars. A 1925 street map shows four structures along Sherman Avenue where Lawyers' Row would emerge. At the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, the commercial makeup of the county of more than 17,000 persons was led by groceries/general stores, auto garages/service stations, lawyer/doctor professionals, and realtors. Until recently, Arlington had been one of the major Virginia producers of brick. Attorney Lawrence Douglas has
Detail, Map of Alexandria County, Virginia, 1907.
attested to the homey character of the area. There were no eateries, so the lawyers sometimes dropped in for lunch on the jailer and his wife who lived across the street above the jail; noontime baseball games on the courthouse lawn also broke up the day, he recalled.\(^5\)

It was not until the 1930s that the block of Sherman Avenue between 14th and 15th Streets filled out with the construction of modest offices 10 feet to 24 feet wide, set end to end; affiliated buildings included a dwelling, garage, and probably outhouses. The legal profession dominated tenancy, among them some of the fifty or so “prominent” attorneys in Arlington.\(^6\) Besides the individuals discussed in context with these structures, in the late 1920s Sherman Avenue was also the address of attorneys James Bleakly; Reid, Gordon & Naylor; and Claude O. and Harry R. Thomas.\(^7\) The Thomases rented for a time an office at the southwest corner of 14th Street and Sherman Avenue that was built by another prominent lawyer, Crandal Mackey.\(^8\) Across the street, the first of two relatively plain, fireproof wings was added to the south side of the courthouse in 1929-36 to house records. In 1934-35, when streets were renamed countywide, Sherman Avenue became North Courthouse Road.

Proximity to the courthouse and the unassuming one- and two-story visage of Lawyers’ Row facades helped sustain an intimacy among the many attorneys, judges, and clerks of court, while it offered a sense of accessibility to clients who might be intimated by the legal process. Thomas Phillips recalled just how crude the early structures were: lacking bathroom facilities except for the courthouse itself, outhouses were located behind the offices, and in the winter, each morning began by chopping wood to fuel a fire in the tin stove that heated each building.\(^9\) A legacy of interrelated professionals affiliated with these offices helped shape the early political history of Arlington — among them the Balls, Ruckers, Lyons, Jesses, and Moncures. “Many of Arlington’s finest and oldest families can be noted on the windows of the lower colonial-type office buildings on Courthouse Square,” wrote Cecil Crittendon in 1946, “That one spot where the atmosphere of old Arlington endures.”\(^10\)

That small-town ambience was provided in part by the quaintly sentimental Colonial Revival architecture that was popular nationwide — and well represented by the form and features of the more “designed” Lawyers’ Row structures: the Ball Building, ca. 1936-41; Jesse Building, ca. 1927; Moncure Building, 1936; and Geo. H. Rucker Co. Building, 1936. Of these, only the Jesse Building was Spanish influenced. The Colonial Revival is a far-reaching family of arguably “American” designs that evolved after the mid-nineteenth century, which includes the log cabin, pueblo, Georgian, and Federal models, or features thereof. The same sentiment inspired the preservation of Colonial Williamsburg (1929), and more locally the construction
Comparative site plans of Blocks 8 and 9, between 14th and 15th Streets, in 1936 and the late 1950s. At the earlier date, eight Lawyers' Row buildings sit across from the 1898 courthouse with wing; the later years reveal seven enlarged buildings opposite a much-enlarged courthouse complex. By author, based on Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps.
of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway (1928-32). A collective patriotic memory asserted that objects and images fondly associated with American forefathers such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson sustained the historical fantasy, the "thrill of vitality," assigned to early American life.11

Town halls built in the early twentieth century were typically Federal or Georgian revivals. A 1912 Architecture article asserted that these "should be the accepted type of design for public or semi-public buildings in our small American towns, especially the East, where Colonial traditions still survive with some strength."12 Such were the Lawyers' Row offices, subser-viently arranged around a courthouse, so common in Virginia. Genuinely colonial courthouse complexes are extant at Gloucester, Gloucester County; Charlotte Court House, Charlotte County; Palmyra, Fluvanna County; and Charlottesville, Albemarle County.

For the next two decades Lawyers' Row was in transition. There were fewer but more substantial masonry buildings than their predecessors, and they were expanding via additions to rear facades. An existing one-story office (No. 120) where Jessie & McCarthy operated was demolished to make way for the Ball Building (No. 1432-37), which filled the width of its lot. The Jesse Building doubled in size from a 24-foot square to a rectangle. Rear additions, built predominantly during and after World War II, reflected a new fondness for practical matters and materials rather than antique forms. This was especially apparent in window treatments where double-hung wood sash was coupled with steel-frame casements and glass block. The collective interiors boasted little ornament. The Moncure Building, formerly a one-room-deep block, was stretched as far as the rear lot line through piecemeal one- and two-story additions between 1945 and 1953. The Rucker Building was also extended well into the lot behind it, c. 1951. Nos. 1449 and 1441-45, a pair of one-story offices north of the Ball Building, were razed after 1954; a one-story building at No. 1431 was unchanged until demolition sometime after the mid-1950s.13

County growth after the war prompted the need for additional county space. A three-story wing was erected north of the courthouse in 1948. Both it and the south block, which are extant, are superficially Colonial Revival in details such as the rusticated first-story facade, brick quoins at the corners, contrasting horizontal banding, and scroll-topped pilasters framing the windows. The jail then occupied the third floor. Revival styling in general was on the wane, but the greatest departure from historic precedent came in 1959 with the erection of the southern courthouse tower, introducing with it a thoroughly stripped-down modernism. Within two years, the original 1898 courthouse in between was demolished and a modern one replaced it.

The anti-European sentiment shrouding both World Wars sustained an unabated favor for the Colonial Revival until at least the 1940s when modern
technologies began to eschew historicism. It was copied literally, as in near-replications of Mount Vernon, for instance, or in spirit, through an architectural vocabulary of gable roofs covered with slate, brick (usually red), white wood trim, and porches. Emblematic of adobe and Spanish revivals — like the Jesse Building — are plain round-arched windows, a simple and light facade, and rounded roof tiles.

The Jesse Building (No. 1423-27) was the oldest of the four most important offices, built in 1927 for Charles T. Jesse (1879-1960), a lawyer who by then had been elected three times to the Virginia General Assembly. He practiced as a principal in a series of firms and served as Arlington County Treasurer from 1932-39. Jesse was first elected a delegate to the General Assembly in 1920, and subsequently in 1924 and 1926. In 1927-28 Jesse & McCarthy was advertised at Arlington Court House, where the office was staffed by Walter McCarthy (1898-1985), a judge, lawyer, and "notary;" C. Norinne Kloss, a stenographer; and clerks Henry Klings and Frank K. Woolfolk. But Jesse's most significant contribution to the county may have been as an advocate for the county manager form of government in the 1930s.

Architect Frank Upman (1872-1948), then a partner in Upman & Adams, designed the Jesse Building. Upman also designed Washington's Congress Hotel and Woodward Building, where he had an office at No. 1003. The Woodward (1909) is considered "the most exuberant example of a handful of Spanish Colonial apartments built in D.C." Circumstances are unclear, but there was some sort of relationship between the county and the Upman and Percy C. Adams collaborative, which survived from 1917 until Upman's death in 1948. In 1916, for instance — when Upman lived in Arlington's Livingstone Heights — proposals for a new Cherrydale school and auditorium were to be delivered to Upman's D.C. office; by 1930, Adams is credited with designing "practically all the schools in Arlington, Virginia." He probably also worked on at least the south courthouse wing addition. Upman & Adams' simple design for the Jesse Building featured twin front entrances with round-arched openings. The main roof and the one projecting over the central bay were covered with tile supplied by a Chicago-based firm; identification was made by its imprint, "1924 LUDOWICI CELADON CO." The only specific ornament was a pair of cast-concrete medallions with a floral motif, and the cast band between the floors where the metal signage letters were anchored. The Jesse Building was the first Lawyers' Row structure to feature indoor bathrooms.

A related Spanish Colonial presence in Arlington is found in the small, stucco cottages built by Brumback Realty in Lyon Village, developed by Frank Lyon (1867-1953) in 1923. Lyon, a lawyer, also helped develop Clarendon, where the Lee Block and a former filling station exemplify
commercial variations on the style. An Interstate Commerce Commission examiner in 1907-12, he traveled extensively throughout the United States. The Spanish mission churches of the Southwest are believed to have inspired him to build Lyonhurst/Missionhurst, ca. 1907-11, his home until 1923. Lyon was one of the original property owners of undeveloped Lawyers’ Row land.

The three other noteworthy structures, each built about 1936, reflect an indigenous colonial Virginia spirit. This is especially true of the Moncure Building (Adams, Porter, and Radigan Building) and next to it the Geo. H. Rucker Co. Building. Similar in scale, proportion, and attention to detail, the overall composition of these two structures was endearing. The important horizontality was preserved by the one-and-one-half story height, symmetrical facades, and shallow roofs with dormers. The Rucker Building was further distinguished by parapet gable-end walls, brick quoining at the corners, and mousetooth brickwork along the cornice. The central doorways of both mimicked the Federal trait of sidelights and above-transom glazing.

Richard Cassius Lee Moncure (died 1918), a judge, attorney, realtor, and editor of the Falls Church Monitor, acquired the land on which the Moncure Building sits from Frank and Georgie Lyon in 1905. The original portion of the building may date from the following year when the Virginia Realty Title Company was chartered, based “at Alexandria County Court House
Moncure Building (Adams, Porter, and Radigan Building), 1415 N. Court House Road
SCHWARTZ

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Moncure was secretary of the corporation and general manager of the Alexandria County division; George Rucker was treasurer. No written evidence exists to explain the history of this structure, but a 1907 view of the office, also advertising "Machen & Moncure Attys at-Law," shows a small, one-story, clipped-gable-front building with deep eaves and a porch. This may have been 1415-1/2 Sherman Avenue, seen on the 1936 Sanborn map, for according to oral tradition, the "Moncure Place" was the oldest structure on the block and R. C. L. Moncure lived at this address. Like other immediate practitioners, Moncure's son (1903-66+) was engaged in the insurance business since 1927 and the real estate business since 1937.

In 1936, the Moncure Building became the headquarters for the Adams, Porter, Radigan, and May law firm, which rented the structure until the 1960s; Allen C. Adams (died 1972) and Harry W. Porter, locally prominent attorneys, were the principals. Adams represented Hopewell, Surry, and Prince Georges counties in the Virginia House of Delegates in 1929 and 1931. He also "appeared to be [Charles] Hosmer's campaign manager" in a race for Circuit Court judge that Hosmer won. Porter served on the Arlington County School Board and Board of Zoning Appeals in the 1940s. Both men were affiliated with the First Federal Savings and Loan Association.
The Moncure Building’s irregular profile and sequence of interior spaces were the result of piecemeal one- and two-story additions in 1945, 1947, 1950, and 1952. Constructed of concrete block covered with stucco, the building was one-and-one half stories tall, five bays across, and two bays deep. Decoration was largely confined to the central doorway, with its sidelights and wood pilasters. The roofs — primary and dormers on the west slope — were all clipped. The almost top-heavy composition of the dark roof and light walls was a sharp contrast to the stark rear addition with its flat roof, vertical casement windows, and glass block that epitomized modern functionalism.

The Moncure Building had the most decorative interior on the block. The doorways in the main rooms had reeded pilasters with bull’s-eye medallions. The most notable feature was in the central room of the original block where visitors would have been greeted. A shallow fireplace adapted for an electric “fire” had a wood mantel that was carved with bell flowers, floral swags, and dentils. A subtle segmental arch — an interpretation of those found in center halls of Georgian plantation houses — spanned the room from east to west. Baseboard, chair rail, and crown molding were found only on the first floor. Of a practical nature, a built-in booklift ran between the first and second floors.
In 1910 R. C. L. Moncure sold the corner lot adjacent to the site of his building to George Rucker. Rucker (1862-1919) was elected Clerk of Court in 1899 and held that post for twenty years until his death. He founded his insurance company in 1906, at the same time serving as an officer of the Virginia Realty Title Company, and was a developer of the Clarendon and Fort Myer Heights subdivisions. In 1927-28 his family real estate and notary business, the Geo. H. Rucker Co., occupied 100 Sherman Avenue — probably the office destroyed to make way for the new concrete-block building. Among the employees at the time were Floyd H. Goff, Ashton C. Jones, and N. Andrew Rees; Rucker's wife, Lizzie Councill Rucker; and William M. Stone.

The architect of the Geo. H. Rucker Co. Building, Kenton Hamaker (1909-82), commenced working in Arlington in the early 1930s with an office in the Rees Building, also built by George Rucker. Prior to World War II, Hamaker designed his own home (1938) and others on Ohio Street between Little Falls Road and Williamsburg Boulevard; in 1946 he became a principal in Sharpe & Hamaker, general contractors, and until the 1970s he continued to design churches, houses, office buildings, and furniture. By the time Hamaker completed 1415 N. Courthouse Road, his work was described as "both artistic and modern, and yet extremely practical." The original one-and-one-half-story structure was three bays wide and two bays deep. Most of the details were along the cornice line, which included a
mousetooth course of brickwork. The north and south end walls were parapeted to resemble large chimneys rising above the gable peak. Like the Jesse Building, metal letters set in concrete denoted this as the Geo. H. Rucker Co. building.

In contrast to its neighbors, nothing is known of who designed 1437 Courthouse Road, ca. 1935-41. The Ball Building was stylistically somewhat awkward compared to the others, which were better crafted and proportioned. Described as "one of the brightest and most popular of the young attorneys practicing law at the Alexandria County bar in 1915," Frank L. Ball, Sr. (1885-1966) was the first president of the Arlington Bar Association, and he served as Commonwealth's Attorney for Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax, and Prince William counties from 1916-24. After that, he and John C. McCarthy opened a private practice at 120 Sherman Avenue along with Lawrence Douglas. That building was one story high, twelve feet wide, and built of tile with a frame addition on the rear. Denman Rucker (1911-87), himself Commonwealth's Attorney in 1948-52, worked at the firm in 1937-38. From 1924-32 Ball served as a state senator; in 1927 he first proposed the incorporation of Arlington and the manager system, though it would not be legislated until three years later. In the 1930s he returned to Arlington to work and build 1437 N. Courthouse Road.

The original one-and-one-half-story Ball Building was five bays wide, one room deep, and two stories tall; a large rectangular rear addition was three bays wide and three units deep. Another structure once abutted the north wall of the office, but it had been removed earlier. Minor details such as a copper shed roof over an off-center doorway and the "gaslight" fixture contributed to the building's colonial character. Interior details were limited to simple chair rail, baseboards, crown molding, and window trim.

The least significant of the Lawyers' Row structures at the time of demolition was the Jesse-Hosmer (M. Patton Echols) Building, built and owned by Charles T. Jesse, probably ca. 1934-40. The concrete-block one-story office had a two-room addition on the rear. Lacking any architectural styling, the structure might exemplify the quality of the first generation of structures to line this block; only in alignment and scale does it fit in with its neighbors. Attorney and Circuit Court Judge Emory Hosmer, the occupant for many years, began practicing law in Arlington in 1923. The 1927-28 directory lists Hosmer as living at 108 Sherman Avenue, which would have been the renumbered offices at Nos. 1415 or 1419, or perhaps the dwelling at No. 1415-1/2. Hosmer's career included posts as Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney, Commissioner in Chancery, and Circuit Court judge. Lawyer M. Patton Echols also occupied the building at one time; his son (1925-64+) was also an attorney and engineer who practiced law in Arlington from 1958.
Epilogue

Most of these structures were occupied until a few months prior to demolition. The Lawyers’ Row site, in the southwest corner of its block, was Site B of four potential locations considered for the new county jail. Though the Jesse, Ball, and Rucker buildings were listed among the county’s “Inventory of Historic Resources and Districts,” they were never described as historic or otherwise significant in the 1989 planning document, “Courthouse Site Selection Analysis,” issued by the county manager. The county’s assertion that “to be part of local history, the seat of the local government needs to be recognized by residents and the general population,” apparently excluded bonafide historic sites, for preservation in situ and adaptive reuse of Lawyers’ Row was never part of any option in the jail-site study. The fate of the five buildings — threatened with demolition or disassembly and storage — was quickly decided on the basis of economics, when the county projected $100,000 apiece to save the facades.4

The Arlington County government is currently housed in its third courthouse and jail in less than a century, not surprising in light of the phenomenal growth during that time. In retrospect, however, preservation of some remnant of its political history and acknowledgment of the legacy of several generations of the prominent local lawyers and land developers who shaped the county, might have served as a beloved artifact of a local and statewide court tradition — but the last of it went down with Lawyers’ Row.

Notes and References

The documentation of Lawyers’ Row, 1403-37 North Courthouse Road, to standards established by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), a division of the National Park Service, was undertaken in fall 1989. The large-format photographs and written histories were sponsored by the Arlington Heritage Alliance Inc. with the financial support of the Bell Atlantic Charitable Foundation, to mitigate the impending demolition of the five structures. Historians Estella Bryans-Munson and Sara Amy Leach conducted the research; John C. Schwartz took the thirty-two 4 × 5” photographs. All the documentation is copyright-free and available at the HABS Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, as well as in the Virginia Room, Arlington County Library. The recorded sites are: Lawyers’ Row Block (HABS No. VA-1277); Rucker Building (HABS No. VA-1274), 1403 N. Courthouse Road; Moncure Building/Adams, Porter, and Radigan Building (HABS No. VA-1275), 1415 N. Courthouse Road; Jesse-Hosmer Building (HABS No. VA-1276), 1419 N. Courthouse Road; Jesse Building (HABS No. VA-1273), 1423-27 N. Courthouse Road; Ball Building (HABS No. VA-1272), 1437 N. Courthouse Road.

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""The Way They Were."" Thomas W. Phillips interviewed by Edward D. Campbell for the Arlington History Program (May 1985), 158.

Margaret Troxell in The [Arlington] Sun (February 1939); Gregor Noetzel, "Alexandria County, Virginia" (Washington, D.C., 1907). Between 1900-10, seventy new subdivisions were established in Arlington; Fort Myer Heights was one of the earliest.

"Court House" Geographical Files, Virginia Room, Arlington County Library.

Arlington County Virginia Directory and Year Book, 1924 (Rosslyn: Colonial Printery, 1924), pp. 12, 14. The population continued to climb dramatically, in 1940 to 57,000, and in 1950 to 135,000; for many years Arlington was the fastest-growing county in the nation.


Thomas Harry Randolph, "My Life" (typed mss in Arlington Families File, n.d.), pp. 8-9; Phillips, "The Way They Were," p. 211. These include Frank Lyon, Capt. Crandal Mackey, R. C. L. and Judge Robinson Moncure, Louis Machen, and Frank L. Ball. The lists of individuals are identical.


Phillips, "The Way They Were," pp. 163, 206; Randolph, "My Life", pp. 8-9. Claude Thomas specialized in real estate law, and Harry was a trial judge for the early trial justice court and served as Clerk of Court around 1900.


Cecil Crittendon, Arlington: A New Frontier (New York, 1946), p. 104; cited in Hooper, "The Nature of Things". See also C. B. Rose, Arlington County, Virginia (Arlington Historical Society, 1976), pp. 172, 174. In 1911, Frank Lyon, R. C. L. Moncure, and George Rucker were signers of a petition to study Arlington's form of government; the committee formed included Rucker for the Arlington District, and Moncure, Lyon, architect Frank Upman and Crandal Mackey (who preceded Frank Ball as Commonwealth's Attorney in 1904-15) for the Washington District. Two years later, Moncure and Charles Jesse were on the committee that drafted a charter for the would-be city of Arlington.


& Adams on several projects, including an addition to the courthouse, many schools, and Frank Lyon’s “apartments.”


18 Tilp letter to Templeman.


21 Historic Affairs and Landmark Review Board, Historic Resources in the Clarendon Commercial District (Arlington County, May 1985). The Lee Block, at Washington and Irving streets, was built in 1925. The former filling station, 3200 Wilson Boulevard, was erected in the 1930s by contractor A. J. Poert, who also built the Rucker Building in Clarendon. Both are one-story brick structures with tile-covered roofs.


26 “Rucker-Jones-Rees,” Biographical Files. Rucker owned the Jones Building, Rees Building (1929), and Rucker Building (1925) in Clarendon; he built the Westover Shopping Center at Washington Boulevard and McKinley Road.


28 “Kenton D. Hamaker” (obituary), Washington Post (ca. 18 May 1982); Jacqueline Antone, “House That Kent Built,” Northern Virginia Sun, 18 June 1959; AIA membership files; “Hamaker Drawings,” Virginia Room. The Virginia Room contains an incomplete collection of Hamaker’s drawings, which are indexed; no documentation exists for projects prior to the 1950s.


30 “Frank Ball’s Competency,” Alexandria County Monitor, 29 May 1915; Polk’s Washington Suburban Directory, p. 630; “Denman Rucker” (obituary), Northern Virginia Sun, 5 May 1987. E. Wade Ball, Frank L. Ball’s brother, was Treasurer in 1908-32, before which he was Deputy Treasurer for seven years.

31 Anderson, “Arlington Adopts the County Manager Form of Government,” p. 52.

32 Cited in Hooper, “The Nature of Things”; Polk’s Washington Suburban Directory, p. 633; Morton, Virginia Lives, p. 293. Some confusion arises because a 1927-28 directory lists his residence at 108 Sherman Avenue; this may have been the original structure on the site.

33 Morton, Virginia Lives, p. 293.