

# High View or Low Life? Arlington's High View Hotel

BY JESSICA KAPLAN

Nestled on a green promontory above Chain Bridge, Alexandria County's (now Arlington) luxurious High View Hotel was a local landmark. From its extensive porches, "one [could] look...straight down into the Potomac, one hundred and fifty feet below" and see "the unmarred beauty of nature in all directions." The hotel was composed of "parlors and dining rooms, four of which on the first floor [could] be thrown together, making a dining room fifty feet in length." Ten private rooms were available, "furnished with electric lights, electric bells and electric fans." "Cool verandas" made the hotel a perfect getaway from the heat and crowds of Washington.<sup>1</sup>

Despite glowing advertisements, this landmark, throughout its short history, was mired in trouble. From sleazy land deals to attempted murder and gambling, the High View, was a hub of illicit intrigue. Its sordid affairs were more a-kin to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* than a luxury hotel. Was the High View cursed by a string of bad luck or was something more sinister happening? Local historian, Eleanor Lee Templeman, believed that the hotel was a high-end gambling destination. If so, perhaps its many owners and operators attracted shady patrons and dealings that lead to its downfall? You decide.

## Unscrupulous Operators:

In March of 1891, general partners and fellow Minnesotans, Joseph O'Gorman and Theodore W. Tyrer, along with a slew of investors bought 15 acres by the south end of Chain Bridge from resident George Hill Jr.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, they created a corporation, the Potomac Electric Light Company (PELC), to develop the property and establish an electric light and power plant to supply Washington and Georgetown with light. They also sought to build a hotel overseeing the Potomac River.<sup>3</sup>

Unbeknownst to Theodore Tyrer, immediately after purchasing the tract, O'Gorman had taken title to the 15 acres in his own name. He then transferred 10 acres to PELC and 5 acres to F.C. Sprigg and Floyd Patterson, in trust, and later to Peter McCartney. He never informed Tyrer. O'Gorman gained PELC capital stock and land improvement bonds on the sales, which he used to secure a personal loan.<sup>4</sup>

By the summer of 1892, Tyrer had uncovered the deception and sued O'Gorman and the PELC to recover his losses. A court battle resulted, with Tyrer

winning the initial suit in the Alexandria Circuit Court, O’Gorman attempting a reversal in the Appeals Court, and the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals affirming the Circuit Court decision.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the real estate shenanigans, construction of the hotel and power plant began in the summer of 1891. The hotel, situated on a high bluff beside the remains of Civil War fortifications (Fort Marcy), was named the High View Hotel. On July 5, 1892, ownership applied for and was granted a hotel license from Alexandria County.<sup>6</sup>

As the lawsuits wound their way through the court system, O’Gorman leased the High View to Thomas A. Goodman, the owner of a livery stable in Washington. O’Gorman, president of the PELC, was also an investor of the Arno Hotel (16<sup>th</sup> and I Streets) in the District, managed by George Lawrence. Lawrence, perhaps due to O’Gorman’s influence, became manager of the High View Hotel. By December of 1892, the hotel was hosting events like a meeting of the League of American Wheelmen.<sup>7</sup>

### Better than Hitchcock:

Disaster struck “between 5 and 6 o’clock” on March 31st, 1894. Thomas Goodman, extremely drunk, knifed George Lawrence while sleeping.<sup>8</sup> According to the *Washington Post*, Lawrence was “slashed from head to foot.” The *Evening Star* headline read, “Hacked to Pieces: Bloody Daybreak Struggle at the High View Hotel.”<sup>9</sup> Here is an account of their struggle and its immediate aftermath from the *Washington Post*.

"Goodman, who was on the verge of *delirium tremens*, slipped into the sleeping room of Lawrence. The latter was in bed asleep. Without word of warning Goodman drew a sharp knife across the man’s throat.

Lawrence sprang out of bed and commenced a desperate struggle for his life. He was attired only in his night clothing, and was bleeding from the gash in his throat. Goodman fought like a maniac, screaming and flourishing the knife in every direction, Lawrence received another slash on the throat, was cut from neck to abdomen, in the

#### EXCURSIONS. & C. HIGH VIEW HOTEL,

##### On the Potomac at Little Falls,

Adjacent to Virginia end of Chain bridge,  
3 1/2 miles from city. BREAKFAST AND  
DINNER PARTIES. All delicacies of the  
season. Reached by Pa. ave., M and  
Canal road, following river to Chain bridge.

GEO. H. LAWRENCE.

jel4-3t\* Formerly of Arlington and Arno Hotels.

Evening Star, June 13, 1894

forehead, and on each cheek. He also received several cuts on the top of the head. Finally, dripping with blood, he managed to run out of the room to the kitchen where he fell exhausted."

"Goodman did not pursue him, but threw the knife, which was used to pare potatoes, on the floor, and went to his own room. His wife...sent a messenger to Georgetown for Dr. Ritchie... It took the doctor the entire forenoon to close and bandage

the wounds. Lawrence is a large man, weighing 250 pounds or more. For this reason, the cuts, while deep, did not reach the vitals."<sup>10</sup>

The *Post* claimed that the two men had an argument over money owed by Goodman to Lawrence. The *Star*'s report, hastily reported, informed readers that Lawrence had died. A later article instructed readers that Lawrence was able to "get about."<sup>11</sup>

The drama continued later that night. Goodman, in jail, attempted to kill himself by gashing his throat with the handle of a tin cup. He was sent to the "Emergency Hospital" and placed in its padded cell, "where he raved and moaned all night." Hospital spokesmen claimed Goodman had "but a faint idea of the assault made upon Lawrence" or his attempted suicide.<sup>12</sup>

Eventually, Goodman was sent to a penitentiary near Richmond. His sentence was for two years, but was remanded to one.<sup>13</sup>

Lawrence recovered from the assault and by the summer was advertising the High View in the local newspapers.

In the recurring *Washington Post* column, "About People You Know: What They are Doing and What They Say," Lawrence and the hotel were featured in September of 1894. Lawrence, it pointed out, was "well-known to pleasure seekers, and his name [was] a sufficient guaranty that everything connected with the house [was] first-class."<sup>14</sup>

Alexandria County had an unsavory reputation in the 1880s and 1890s as the home of many illegal gambling, prostitution and drinking establishments. The worst dens of iniquity were located around Rosslyn, Jackson City, and what is now Del Ray. One area that is somewhat overlooked in the literature



Washington Post, August 19, 1894, page 8.

High View Hotel illustration.

is the Chain Bridge vicinity. In 1895, local newspapers began touching on the problem. One claimed, "Every disreputable resort from Chain Bridge to Alexandria can be closed instantly, and by exercise of ordinary vigilance be kept closed until the weary gamblers and other law-breakers shall cease to struggle for local existence."<sup>15</sup>

Was the High View Hotel somehow caught up in this local underbelly? Eleanor Lee Templeman believed this was the case, but failed to provide proof for her claim. In her vignette on the "Chain Bridge Environs," Templeman wrote the, "High View Hotel became a noted resort during our County's infamous period of gambling. It probably catered to a more affluent Washington clientele than did its Rosslyn and Jackson City neighbors down the river."<sup>16</sup> A 2000 *Washington Post* article stated that the High View "operated as a deluxe gambling resort."<sup>17</sup> The author cited a Templeman article as her source. Gambling debts might help explain the bad blood between Thomas Goodman and George Lawrence, though no concrete evidence of this was found.

The High View Hotel remained out of the news until 1897 when T.W. Tyrer had his court case affirmed by the Virginia Supreme Court. To pay Tyrer for past inequities, the court forced the public auction of the hotel and accompanying land. The sale took place in April. Gardener Sims, the owner of an engine company and a purchaser of Peter McCartney's five acre tract, bought title to it, finally free of the O'Gorman-Tyrer legal entanglements.<sup>18</sup>

### HIGHVIEW HOTEL BURNS.

The Highview Hotel, at the Virginia end of the Chain Bridge, which was unoccupied for several years past, burned to the ground early Sunday morning. The cause of the fire is unknown and the fire discovered that attempts to put out the flames were of no avail. The building was three stories in height and unfurnished.

Evening Star, July 1, 1912

### Problematic Proprietors:

Within 12 days of the sale of the hotel, the High View was back in the news. Its newest proprietor, Mrs. O. I. Littell, had recently purchased furniture seized by Alexandria County's Sheriff Palmer. Some of it had been bought on an installment plan from the Lansburgh Furniture Company. The company called in her debt of roughly \$1,200 through an attachment and forced its sale at public auction. In 1899, Littell sued Sheriff Palmer, claiming that some of the seized goods were not part of the installment plan. The outcome of the lawsuit was never



reported (couldn't find it), but Mrs. Littell's financial problems were evident.<sup>19</sup>

The operation of the High View Hotel continued to flail. After Mrs. Littell's proprietorship, the High View became defunct and unoccupied for several years. In July of 1902, a Washington restaurant and racetrack manager, Bartholomew Mannix, leased it.<sup>20</sup> His tenure was short. A September 24, 1903 newspaper article referred to the hotel as "Mr. Harrison's High View Hotel." Mr. John D. Harrison was "the former genial host of the Wormley Hotel" in Washington and the Brookmont near Glen Echo, MD.<sup>21</sup>

It's unclear how long Harrison ran the High View. In 1903, a disgruntled past cook, Thomas Millner, stole a razor, revolver and dishes from the establishment. A larceny charge provided additional negative news coverage.<sup>22</sup> In 1905, a tiny mention in the papers, documented the hotel's continued existence.<sup>23</sup>

On July 1, 1912 the Evening Star reported that the High View been put out of it's misery - it had burned down.

### **High View or Low Life?**

Was the High View Hotel an "elite," "first class" resort as hailed in the newspapers or was it a "deluxe gambling resort" as Eleanor Templeman stated? In 1903, Crandal Mackey was elected Commonwealth Attorney for Alexandria County. He began a campaign to "clean up" the County from lawlessness. According to Templeman, Mackey and his men also cleaned up the High View. After 1905, the hotel no longer advertised in or made headlines in the papers. No one tried to re-lease and re-invent it now that the County's colorful days were past.

In 1915, the Rambler, an Evening Star columnist, visited the ruins of the hotel. He described them as "overgrown with trumpet vines and other creeping greens and present[ing] rather a picturesque heap" - a fitting ending for Arlington's luxurious den of iniquity.<sup>24</sup>

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### **About the Author**

Jessica Kaplan is a lapsed archivist and 28-year resident of Arlington. She lives in a farmhouse built by Will Marcey in 1904, located near Marcy Lane in north Arlington, above Pimmit Run and opposite the hill on which the hotel described in this article existed. Jessica is a member of the Arlington Historical Society Board of Directors.

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## *Endnotes*

- <sup>1</sup> *Washington Post*, "About People You Know," July 29, 1984, p. 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Arlington County Land Records, George Hill, Jr. to Joseph O'Gorman, March 1891, Liber M4, Folio 263.
- <sup>3</sup> *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, August 12, 1894.
- <sup>4</sup> Martin K. Burks, *Reports of Cases in the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia, Vol. XCVI, From June 9, 1898, to March 16, 1899.* (Richmond: JH O'Brann Superintendent of Public Printing), 1899, pp. 5-17.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> *Evening Star*, July 31, 1891 and *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, July 5, 1892.
- <sup>7</sup> *Evening Star*, December 3, 1892.
- <sup>8</sup> *Washington Post*, April 1, 1894, p. 1.
- <sup>9</sup> *Evening Star*, March 31, 1894, p. 1.
- <sup>10</sup> *Washington Post*, April 1, 1894, p. 1.
- <sup>11</sup> *Evening Star*, April 16, 1894.
- <sup>12</sup> *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, April 2, 1894.
- <sup>13</sup> *Alexandria Gazette*, May 6, 1895.
- <sup>14</sup> *Washington Post*, September 2, 1894.
- <sup>15</sup> *Evening Star*, Mary 24, 1895, p. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Eleanor Templeman, *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes of a Virginia County*, p. 112.
- <sup>17</sup> Susan Levine, *Washington Post*, "A Piece of History with a View," July 20, 2000.
- <sup>18</sup> *Morning Times*, April 4, 1895.
- <sup>19</sup> *Alexandria Gazette*, May 9, 1897 and October 30, 1899.
- <sup>20</sup> *Washington Post*, July 6, 1902.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, September 24, 1903.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Washington Times*, June 30, 1905.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Rambler*, *Evening Star*, June 27, 1915.