

Verus Ritter's Bloomsburg:
How One Architect Helped Shape a Community – Part 1
By Robert Dunkelberger

The walking tour of Bloomsburg lists a number of buildings that in the coming decade will celebrate 100 years, built during an era which changed the look of the community. One architect more than any other is linked to that progress, responsible in whole or part for seven structures within three blocks of Market Square, all completed in a 20-year period. This article will cover the ten known buildings he designed in Columbia County, in addition to a mention of just some of the hundreds of others over the years. That architect, who came to Bloomsburg while still young and would go on to earn renown for nearly four decades, was Verus Taggart (also spelled Taggert) Ritter.

Ritter was born in Muncy on June 27, 1883, the youngest child of William and Amelia Spangler Ritter. William Ritter was born in Lycoming County in 1843 and, following service in the Civil War, returned home to work for many years as a builder/contractor. Because much of his work was increasingly in Bloomsburg, a rapidly expanding community in the 1890s, he decided to move the family there. They first needed a home, for which eldest son Meade took responsibility. He purchased two adjacent lots on East Fifth Street in May and October 1897, creating a 50' by 172' area at the corner with Spruce Street. A two-story, wood frame cottage at 587 East Fifth was then constructed over the winter.

The house was completed by March 1898, because that month it was reported Verus and two other boys had caught 62 snakes in the nearby Oak Grove, just to the east at Park Street. It remained the Ritter home until acquired in 1905 by Joseph Ratti to serve as the first Bloomsburg Hospital. The family then purchased 404 East Second, across from the Bloomsburg State Normal School, in March 1906, where William and Amelia lived the rest of their lives. The house was torn down in January 1971 prior to the construction of the tri-level parking garage at Bloomsburg State College.

While employed as a contractor, William worked on a number of the houses being built in Bloomsburg at the time. One of these was Ratti's home at 106 East Fifth, the southeast corner of the intersection with Iron Street, which was enlarged in 1905 with a four-room, two-story addition on the east side. Three years later, William was on the Normal School campus, busily engaged in building a new kitchen adjacent to the dining hall in the main building, later named Waller Hall.



Verus Ritter as a young man growing up in Bloomsburg

When he first came to Bloomsburg, Verus studied at the high school and was also a member of the Boys' Brigade, a group of young men associated with the YMCA. The brigade was a semi-military patriotic organization that began in Scotland in 1883 and spread to the United States. The Bloomsburg chapter, called a company, was organized in 1894 by Frank Turner, a bookkeeper for a number of local businesses. Turner was the commander, but when the Ritter family came to town, William quickly volunteered. Ever after he was called "Colonel" Ritter by the members of the brigade who knew him. Not only was Verus a member, he would also play "Taps" at military funerals.

Interest and ability in the field of construction ran in the family. Meade Ritter worked with his father, then lived in first New York City, where he was married, and Shamokin, before moving to Williamsport in 1894 at the age of 29. There he gained fame as an architect and made a major contribution to the city. Meade was responsible for, among other projects, remodeling a hospital and an opera house, as well as designing homes, schools (including one in Mount Carmel), an apartment house, and factories (dye works, iron works, and silk mills).

It must have been apparent early on that Verus would also continue in the family business. Although a student at Bloomsburg High School, he never graduated and instead looked ahead to a career as an architect like his brother. To help prepare for the profession he took special instruction in mathematics, for possibly as long as two years, from Amelia Armstrong (1848-1925). She ran a private school in her home at 136 West Main Street and was a member of the Normal School's first graduating class in 1870.

Verus worked for his father while still a student, on one occasion accidentally stepping on a nail in June 1902 while on a job in Berwick, before joining Meade in Williamsport. There he learned how to become an architect and later took special instruction in Philadelphia. Other than with his father, the first project for Verus in Bloomsburg came when Meade was hired by Frederick G. Yorks. He was manager of the Bloomsburg Silk Mill, owned by Ratti, and was looking for a new home in town. Wanting it to occupy a prominent position, Yorks purchased the old Presbyterian church at 249 Market Street, near the northeast corner with West Third. Abandoned when the new Presbyterian church was completed a block to the south, the old building had served as a candy factory and most recently been occupied by the First English Baptist Church. Unable to

make its mortgage payments, the church was forced to sell the site and Yorks bought the land in June 1903.

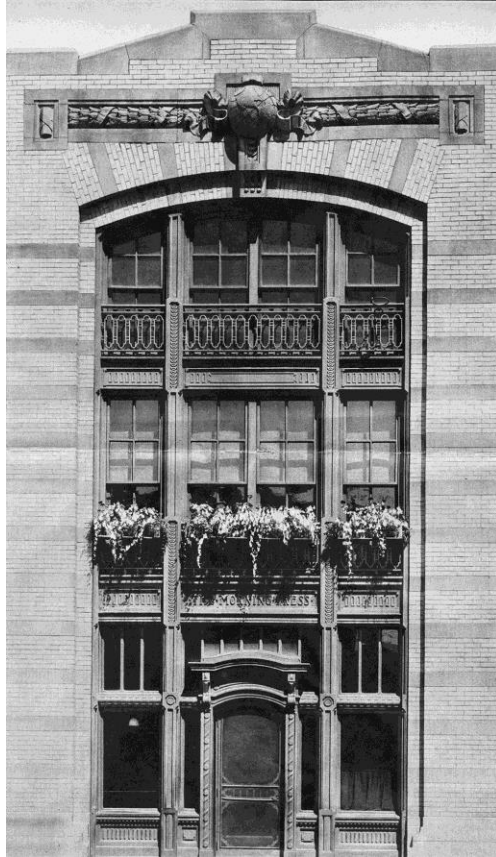
Meade was chosen to design a grand residence, as he had previously done in Williamsport. Work began in March 1905 when the church was demolished and the site cleared. Over the course of the year steel girders were erected for the frame, Vermont marble added to the base and trimmings, and gray brick laid for the exterior. In August, it was estimated the house would cost \$30,000 and be one of the finest in the area. It was then that the unexpected happened. Meade took ill in November 1905 and passed away from Bright's disease and other ailments on March 11, 1906, at the age of 40.

Meade's company would have ended then except for Verus. It was chartered in June 1906 as M.B. Ritter Company, Architects, and managed by the younger brother. He finalized the last parts of the design on the Yorks mansion which Meade had been unable to finish and took charge of overseeing construction. The house was practically completed and partly furnished by the end of the year, becoming a wonderful addition to Market Street. It joined the facing mansion, which the Tustin family had moved into that July.



The Yorks Mansion, c. 1915

This was just the beginning for Verus in Bloomsburg. His first commission was thanks to the newest newspaper in town, the *Morning Press*. Founded in 1902 by Paul Eyerly and Charles Vanderslice, the paper rented space in downtown Bloomsburg but soon looked for its own home. In May 1906, a dilapidated building was purchased at 111 West Main Street, just west of Robert Hartman's department store on the northwest corner of Market Square. Two years later it was torn down and a three-story building, with the press room in the basement, was designed by Verus to give the *Morning Press* a modern facility for its operations. Although obviously a talented architect, part of the reason he was chosen for the job may have been that in April 1908, Paul Eyerly married Verus' older sister Amy.



The Morning Press Building at the time of the paper's 25th anniversary, 1927.

Occupied in April 1909, an entire page of the newspaper celebrated its new home, with phrases including “unquestionably one of the most artistic and substantially-built buildings in Central Pennsylvania” and “ideal in location, ideal in architecture and practicable in every detail.” The architect received his praise as well, “The front of the building is one in which the architect, Verus T. Ritter, has stamped his work as being of the highest order and one which in itself would establish his reputation as a leading state architect.” The highlights of the front were the decorative ironwork and the stone arch at the top with the design of a globe that represented the earth’s western hemisphere. The building served as the newspaper’s headquarters until moving to a new facility in Scott Township in 1972.

Although still referred to as a town native, in mid-December 1908 Verus purchased his late brother’s company in Williamsport, officially setting himself up in business there. He still, however, kept a hand in Bloomsburg. Increasingly known for his creativity, in the fall of 1909 he was selected by local photographer Ralph Phillips to design his new home at the northwest corner of West Fifth and Jefferson Streets. Verus decided on a unique style for Bloomsburg, a different type from any other house in town. It was to be a craftsman-style home, a large, two-story structure, noted for brown stained shingles, rough foundation stone, a green shingled roof, and a large exterior stone chimney for the living room fireplace. The builder, thanks to Ritter’s Williamsport contacts, was E.E. Shaffer of Jersey Shore. Work went on rapidly over the course of the winter and the house was ready for the Phillips family—the parents and five children—to move into at the end of March 1910.



The Ralph Phillips home at 203 West Fifth Street, c. 1950

One interesting feature of the house was that it was fully equipped with two sources of lighting. An electric plant had been operating in Bloomsburg since 1891 and two small companies supplied power to the community, so Verus had knob and tube wiring run through the house, but its supply was not always reliable. Gas, on the other hand, had been used in Bloomsburg to light the streets since 1874 and was reliable, so copper pipes for gas lighting fixtures were also extended throughout the home to serve as a backup. This precaution was actually unnecessary, because during construction high tension power lines were being set up in Columbia County to link the major communities to a dependable source, the Harwood electric plant near Hazleton. Within ten days of the house being occupied, power from the plant began flowing to Bloomsburg. Ralph lived in his home until his death in 1950, with the author of this article and his wife the second-longest inhabitants at 18 years and counting.

Between 1908 and 1910 Verus was busy with other projects throughout central Pennsylvania, among them office buildings in Mt. Carmel and Jersey Shore and churches in Williamsport and Renovo. At the same time, he was eyeing a move westward for greater opportunities. The location he chose was Huntington, West Virginia, where Charles Lloyd Ritter (1865-1945), also from the Muncy area and his first cousin once removed (Verus' grandfather—Jonathan Ritter—was Charles' uncle), had lived since 1897. Charles was a lumberman, banker, and developer, who was responsible for two Huntington residential areas named after him, Ritter Hill and Ritter Park. Still wanting to keep a hand in the local market, before leaving Pennsylvania Verus went into a partnership with Frank Stetler, an architect out of Philadelphia. While Stetler took over the Williamsport end of the business, Verus moved to Huntington in January 1911 and opened an office in his cousin's office building.

He immediately made a name for himself by being awarded the contract for a \$200,000 church, then a Methodist Episcopal Church South denomination and now Johnson Memorial United Methodist Church of Huntington. Verus had moved at just the right time to make an enduring impact in his new community. During his few years there the city was looking to build a new city hall and a high school and he was named architect for both projects. The city hall was completed in 1915 and is still in use, with the high school opening the following year. It housed students for 80 years and is now a multi-use facility.

A few of the other projects he designed in Huntington were several additional schools, a country club, a movie theater, three and seven-story office buildings, a printing company, and a 12-story office building begun in 1912—anchored on the ground floor by the First National Bank—and where he moved his office. He also designed a number of houses, one for his cousin Charles. As a 1913 book, *West Virginia and its People* stated, “The career of Mr. Ritter as an architect has been fruitful in accomplishment; but he is still a young man (30), and a past so rich in results gives promise of even greater achievement in the future.” Truer words have rarely been spoken.

The time Verus spent in West Virginia was also successful from a personal standpoint. After he moved to Bloomsburg, either at the high school or through some other means, he met Edith Emma Keller. Edith graduated high school in 1900 and then from the Normal School the following year. She spent the next decade teaching, for several years at Rupert’s one-room schoolhouse and finishing up at the Fifth Street school in Bloomsburg. Even though Verus spent most of his time in Williamsport and then Huntington, they kept in touch and became engaged, marrying in Manhattan, New York, on January 30, 1912. The family grew while in Huntington, with son Verus, Jr., being born in October 1913 and daughter Eleanor three years later in November 1916, all while living in a home across from Ritter Park.

Even with his growing and influential business in West Virginia, Verus was looking at more lucrative markets for his talents, hundreds of miles to the east in southern Pennsylvania. His first known venture back to his native state was in Harrisburg, when in May 1917 he was selected as the architect of a girl’s high school. This project was never completed, the school board deciding to go in a different direction. Verus still felt he should have been paid for his work, even if the school was never built. He sued the district for \$38,000, with the case going to trial in 1925. The jury ruled in favor of the district, an appeal was denied the following year, and his case was finally taken to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. It ruled in January 1928, more than a decade after Verus had first been in contact with the school district, that the lower court’s judgment was affirmed and the case was finally at an end.

It was in 1918 that Verus and his family, even though he maintained an office in Huntington, moved to Philadelphia, where he would remain for the rest of his life. They first lived at 5980 Woodbine Avenue and in the early 1920s settled nearby in Merion, Montgomery County, in a home at 356 North Latches Lane. Verus named the house Elverstone, which is now known as Duperreault Hall and a part of the Maguire Campus of Saint Joseph’s University.

During this time Verus again made an impact on the architecture in his former home of Columbia County. In December 1916, a bank organized just two months before bought an old hotel and restaurant at 1 East Main Street in Bloomsburg, the northeast corner of Main and Center Streets. Verus designed a four-story office and bank building in a colonial style, made of Bloomsburg brick and Indiana limestone, which opened on October 2, 1918, as the Columbia County Trust Company. It was praised with the following statement in an advertisement in the *Morning Press*, “Our building is modern and completely equipped to give the utmost satisfaction and convenience to our customers and the public in general. To the men we offer the use of a business office with both phones, stationary, etc., and the ladies of this county are cordially invited to make use of our rest rooms when in town.”



The Columbia County Trust Company building with its original entrance, c. 1920

The building, however, served as a bank only through the beginning of February 1926, when a merger of two local financial institutions resulted in the creation of the Bloomsburg Bank-Columbia Trust Company, now First Columbia Bank and Trust Company. The firm decided to transact business in the newly occupied Bloomsburg National Bank building next to the courthouse and sell the other facility. In December 1927, Verus' building was purchased by Bloomsburg's American Legion post. The Legion owned it for just 11 years, before selling the building back to the Bloomsburg Bank-Columbia Trust Company for \$37,000, \$13,000 less than the original sale price.

While the Legion met in rooms on the first floor through 1940, the rest of the ground floor had quickly been remodeled to accommodate a store front. In 1928 it held the Economy Stores furniture company and throughout the 1940s, the Temple of Music, while the second and third floors held office space for up to a dozen tenants. In the 1930s the Federal Works Progress Administration was there. During the 1940s, the tenants were as varied as insurance and loan companies, a seller of hearing aids, offices for the Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters and the Pennsylvania Co-Operative Potato Growers, and the Columbia County Jewish Community Center. The longest tenants of the storefront sold women's undergarments. First the Ruth Corset Shop from about 1950 to 1967 and then Eudora's Corset Shop until 1997.

Meanwhile, over in Berwick another opportunity presented itself. While work was ongoing with the Bloomsburg bank, a fire broke on September 18, 1917, in the Friars Club. The club was located on the third floor of the Front Street building housing the First National Bank. After the fire the building was declared a loss and a new facility was needed. In all likelihood based on his work in Bloomsburg, Verus was commissioned to design this one as well, with the three-story building opening in 1919. The look is very different now, however, the exterior having been completely remodeled with a glass front in the early 1950s. It is still in operation today at 111 West Front Street as First Keystone Community Bank.



*The Berwick First National Bank with its original look,
c. 1936*

Initially on his own in Philadelphia, in 1920 Verus gained a partner, Howell Lewis Shay (1884-1975). Together, they formed the architectural firm of Ritter & Shay. Shay's background was similar to Verus' in that he did not have formal training before becoming a practicing architect, although he did eventually graduate with bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Pennsylvania.

The firm focused on smaller projects for the first few years, primarily schools throughout eastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey. In fact, during the 1920s Ritter & Shay built at least 11 school buildings in New Jersey, none more than 30 miles from downtown Philadelphia. There were also more prestigious assignments, one being the Hotel Bethlehem. The first plans for that building were drawn in 1920 and Verus attended the cornerstone laying ceremony on June 1, 1921. An early Philadelphia project of some note was built in 1924, an eight-story office building for the Independence Insurance Company at Fifth and Walnut, across from Independence Hall. Verus' greatest impact on Bloomsburg was still to come, however, as he continued to reshape the town in the 1920s.