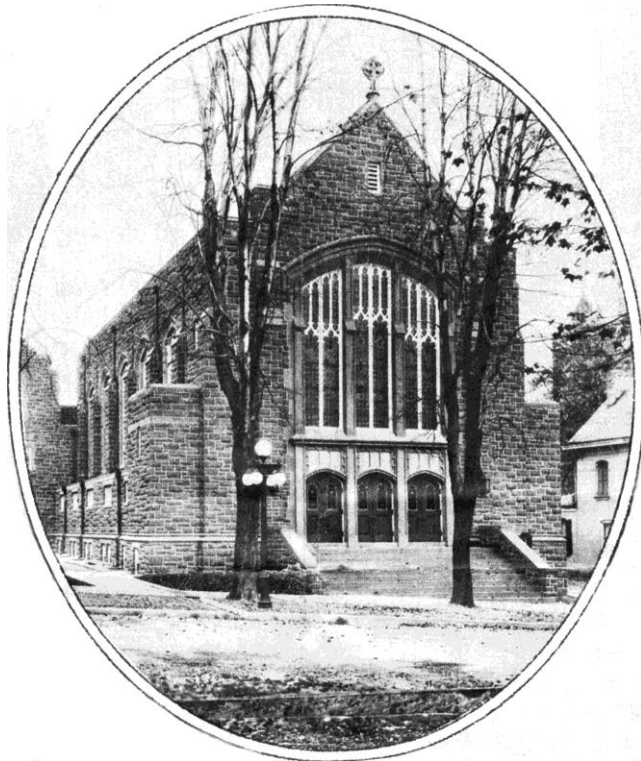


Verus Ritter's Bloomsburg: How One Architect Helped Shape a Community – Part 2

By Robert Dunkelberger

The first part of this article covered the life of architect Verus Ritter from his birth in 1883 up through the initial work of his firm, Ritter & Shay, in the early 1920s. During the middle part of the decade, he would reshape the center of Bloomsburg with three notable buildings. Work on the first of these projects to be completed began in 1923.



*St. Matthews Lutheran Church a year
after its dedication, 1926.*

St. Matthew's Lutheran Church had occupied its building in the 100 block of Market Street since 1857 and was looking for more space for its growing congregation, beginning with a fund started in 1907. Neighboring properties around the original building were purchased in 1914 and 1922, a building committee formed in 1920, and the plans for the church by Ritter & Shay approved in November 1923. Once enough money had been raised to proceed, work began in April 1924 with the demolition of the old church.

The building was designed in a modern cathedral style, with an exterior of randomly coursed brown stone and interior in the Arts and Crafts style. The cornerstone was laid on September 14 and just over a year later the new church was dedicated on November 8, 1925, completed at a cost of just over \$183,000. The building was later enlarged in 1957 with the addition of an education wing.

The next Bloomsburg project was the library building. Opening in June 1903, for more than 20 years the Bloomsburg Public Library resided at 223 Center Street. It was on the second floor of the building then occupied by the Clark dry goods store and later the Gelb & Mayer department store, located at the southeast corner of Main and Center. A narrow and cramped space, the library had no room to expand and by the 1920s there was growing demand for a building of its own. A fund was established for this purpose in 1923 and by December 1924 \$108,000 had been raised.



The Bloomsburg Public Library a year after opening, with the First National Bank next door, 1927.

A month before the drive ended, the library also had land to build on. In August 1924, the board of directors of the Bloomsburg YMCA was closing down and decided to donate a 37' by 198' plot on Market Street, just south of the First National Bank, to serve as the library's new home. The library directors accepted the gift and unanimously chose Ritter & Shay as architect, with the cornerstone laid on May 27, 1925.

In January 1926, the old library was emptied and the contents moved a block west. On Saturday, January 30, the new building opened for the first time, with nearly 1,300 patrons visiting. The facility was a two-story building, with the Market Street facade in a Georgian colonial design, furnished with the finest equipment in a warm and colorful interior, and all for less than \$60,000.

The original layout was much different from the current arrangement, even before the addition was completed in 1998. The first floor was divided into two areas: the front half inside the entrance initially holding exhibits of material from the Columbia County Historical Society, while the back half was community meeting space, the reference collection, and space for receiving and processing books. The second floor, one large room with an 18-foot high vaulted ceiling, was reached by a double wrought iron stairway. The front half held the juvenile library, with adults and the main collection in the back, and the circulation desk at the head of the stairs. It was a building the entire town celebrated.

The final Ritter & Shay project in Bloomsburg was a multi-year venture that actually began with a different Ritter connection in the 1880s. After having only smaller neighborhood public school buildings available for the majority of the 1800s, Bloomsburg built larger, more impressive structures on East Fifth Street in 1870 and on West Third four years later. The latter, in addition to the lower grades, held classes for high school students.

Increased enrollment finally demanded a separate building for a high school and the site of the old county jail at the southwest corner of First and Center Streets was purchased in 1888. The new building was completed in a short time and dedicated at the end of the following year. The Ritter connection is that the architect for the new high school was E.E. (Elmer Ellsworth) Ritter

(1861-1934) of Allentown. He must have been some relation to Verus, but probably distant. E.E. Ritter would have one more Bloomsburg connection, being chosen to build the new Masonic Temple, the Caldwell Consistory, in 1906 and 1907.

The high school served the residents of Bloomsburg well until it became overcrowded. Then, on the morning of October 23, 1923, a fire broke out which totally destroyed it. The students were dispersed to a number of town buildings, with the junior high pupils sent to the Normal School. Just over two weeks later the school board met and over the course of the next few months had two main issues to decide, where to build a new and larger school and who would design it, with the debate on both concerns often contentious.

One site considered at first was the plot across Center Street, just over an acre in size. It was the location of the abandoned Lutheran and Reformed Burial Ground, started by local German congregations that purchased the land in 1808. But when the board factored in the cost of relocating more than 300 graves and preparing the hillside site, it looked elsewhere. On January 3, 1924, by a vote of 4-3 (this would be a common margin in school board votes at the time), the former Waller Homestead at the southwest corner of Market and West Fifth Streets was chosen. The problem was that the Homestead wasn't even for sale! Owned by 14 heirs of David Waller, Sr., there was no interest at this time in selling it.

In addition to a site for the school, the choice of an architect was equally crucial. One interested person who attended the board meeting soon after the fire to offer his input on the situation was Verus. As reported on his role at the meeting by the November 10, 1923, *Morning Press*, "Mr. Ritter then spoke to the board on the new building proposition. He had specialized in plans for school plants for some years and spoke of the work that his firm had done in other cities. He had a different feeling toward Bloomsburg, he said, because of his former residence here and the fact he was a former student. He offered to make a survey of the district with the only obligation the co-operation of the board in furnishing comparisons on which to base estimates, and to prepare the preliminary sketches."

Two months after the meeting the board began to interview architects. The first at the January 9, 1924, meeting was also Verus. He showed the board detailed plans of two of his former projects: the high school in Huntington, West Virginia, and a junior high in Bethlehem. What Verus continued to demonstrate throughout his career was that he was not only a craftsman, but also a salesman, who needed to sell his product over those of his competitors. In this he was usually very successful but even so, on January 25 by again a vote of 4-3, the architect selected was not Ritter & Shay, but another Philadelphia firm, McLanahan & Bencker. This was despite the fact the firm had never designed a school before and during the interview could only show photographs of two of its railroad stations and a bank.

This decision did not sit well with certain citizens of Bloomsburg, among them Willie Law of the Magee Carpet Company, Dr. Bruner of the Bloomsburg Hospital, fountain pen designer Paul Wirt, and photographer and proud owner of a Verus Ritter house, Ralph Phillips. They went as part of a delegation of seven to what became a very combative board meeting on February 8, protesting the choice of architect and asking that it be reconsidered. Although by 1924 Verus was already responsible for a number of buildings in Bloomsburg, they were never brought up during

the discussions. Instead, it was Ritter and Shay's experience with schools and that Verus was someone they knew.

Dr. Bruner was quoted as saying, "Verus Ritter as a young man grew up here ... and he has built many schools in Eastern Pennsylvania. He is thoroughly capable because he has proved capable. He is also a man of good character. He is thoroughly respected ... He is the son of a veteran to whom we all take off our hats. He is a boy who has gone out from here and has made good." In the end the board voted 4-3, with one member shifting from the pro-McLanahan & Bencker side, to reconsider the award of the bid and, by an identical vote by the same members, awarded the contract for the design of the school to Ritter & Shay.

The contract was signed in March, but then progress slowed down, as a location still had to be decided. These discussions went on for nearly a year, until on January 9, 1925, the school board in a unanimous vote chose the cemetery plot over the Waller Homestead. The site at Fifth and Market did eventually become a school, but that was Memorial Elementary, which opened in 1953. The school board immediately began talks with the two successor churches that owned the cemetery: St. Mathew's Lutheran and the Bloomsburg Reformed congregation. They both agreed to sell the property to the school district and the human remains were removed from the burial ground in March, most of which were reburied in New Rosemont Cemetery.

Even though that part went quickly, with the delay in selecting a site, the plans for the new junior-senior high school by Ritter & Shay were not complete. This was partly due to disagreements between Verus and the school board over the design of a building to house 1,000 students, with an auditorium and gymnasium, at an estimated cost of \$341,000. The differences were eventually worked out and construction began in September 1925, with the cornerstone laid on November 7.

However, more problems arose, but not with the architect. It was the contractor selected to erect the building, the Charles McCaul Company of Philadelphia, that was causing problems. Proper materials had not been purchased, there was insufficient labor to comply with the contract, and what laborers there were had been observed drinking and exhibiting drunken behavior while on the job, in the midst of Prohibition. In addition to all this, there were rumors of unseemly relations between the laborers and young women of the town.

The contractor was removed from the project in July 1926 and bids taken for another firm to complete the school. The following month, the board voted to also remove Ritter & Shay from any further supervision of the work, due to a number of corrections that had not been made. Despite all the problems that plagued construction, the new general contractors, the Berwick Lumber and Supply Company, saw it through. The building was completed in early 1927, classes began in March, and the new junior-senior high school was dedicated on April 28 and 29.



The new Bloomsburg Junior-Senior High School, taken from the site of the former school, 1930.

Perhaps due to the issues caused by a less than reliable contractor, this would be Ritter & Shay's final design for Bloomsburg. The building continued to serve the community as a high school until the present facility opened in 1963, while functioning as a junior high/middle school up to 1988, when the new middle school was completed. The old school was sold the following year and converted into the Schoolhouse Apartments for students at Bloomsburg University.

Even though Ritter & Shay helped to reshape downtown Bloomsburg in the mid-1920s, it was their home city of Philadelphia where they really made their mark, with four major buildings constructed within just a few blocks from City Hall. These included the 24-story award-winning Packard Building in 1925 at 15th and Chestnut, housing the Pennsylvania Bank Company; from 1927 to 1929 construction of a 22-story office building at 15th and Walnut, with the First National Bank on the ground floor; at the same time the 33-story Drake Hotel at 1512 Spruce Street; and in 1930 the 24-story Art Deco-styled Market Street National Bank building at Market and Juniper.

While Verus' first Philadelphia office was in the North American Building, Ritter & Shay later utilized their own construction space, renting offices in the Packard Building and finally at 15th and Walnut. Their work was also promoted in educational displays, at an architectural exhibition in 1925 in the Philadelphia Art Museum, and five years later as part of a traveling exhibit by the American Institute of Architects.

Ritter & Shay continued to build schools throughout southern Pennsylvania in Chester, Bethlehem (Liberty High School was designed by Verus), Cornwall, Swarthmore, and Phoenixville; the Americus Hotel in Allentown; St. Luke's Hospital in Bethlehem; and banks in Pottsville, Bethlehem, and smaller ones outside downtown Philadelphia. There were also buildings for other purposes, including a YWCA in Hazleton, American Legion home in Germantown, and golf clubhouse at the Saucon Valley Country Club in Allentown.

But then the stock market crashed in October 1929 and little money remained for huge commercial real estate ventures. Thankfully for the firm, it had always diversified its projects and worked closely with school districts and other government agencies. There was money for smaller local projects and larger ones at the state and federal level. A state hospital complex was

built in Norristown in 1932 and 1933 and then came the crowning achievement for Ritter & Shay.



Verus and Edith Ritter on vacation, possibly at the Atlantic City Boardwalk, c.1930.

In 1932 the federal government was looking to replace the 104-year-old Custom House in Philadelphia and launched a nation-wide competition for a suitable design. Verus' firm won by proposing a mammoth structure that filled up an entire city block at the southwest corner of 2nd and Chestnut Streets. The base was three stories in height, with a center tower rising to 17 stories. Work on the \$3.5 million project began late that year and it was dedicated on November 10, 1934. With all of the additional office space in the tower, the building housed, in addition to the Custom Department and Appraiser's stores, 29 other federal bureaus and departments.

Even while work with the building was ongoing, Verus Ritter and Howell Shay were looking to end their partnership. On April 19, 1933, two months shy of his 50th birthday, Ritter chartered Verus T. Ritter and Associates, Inc., to once more go into independent practice, along with several members of the staff of Ritter & Shay as his associates. His work during this time was again with local and state government agencies. He continued to consult with school boards and designed schools in Chester County. For the state, Verus was architect for a \$1.2 million, seven-story, liquor control board building, near the state capitol complex, but his most impressive project in his later years was the Pennsylvania State Farm Show Arena building. Ground for the arena was broken in January 1938 and was first used for the farm show the following year.

What would have been Verus' greatest achievement, one that was never completed and which he spent the rest of his life striving to create, was a 6,000-foot tunnel beneath the Delaware River to connect Pennsylvania and New Jersey. It was first announced in December 1933 that Verus planned for a \$20 million tunnel about ten miles south of Philadelphia. This would funnel traffic between the two states instead of building another bridge and would also ease heavy truck traffic through Philadelphia. It was to be more modern and complete than the Holland Tunnel between New Jersey and New York, which had opened six years before, and employ thousands of men for two years during construction, a prime motivation during the Great Depression. Cooperation for construction and funding was needed from both states and the federal government but, even after years of trying, the creation of the Delaware River Tunnel Corporation, which he served as president, and the support of the War Department, it never came together.



The home of Robert Eyerly at 301 Oak Lane, c.1950. Photo from the Morning Press Negative Collection. Courtesy of the Press Enterprise.

Verus had two final projects in the Bloomsburg area during these last years, both done for personal reasons because they were for his nephews. The first came about when Robert Eyerly, who had been living on Market Street, purchased a lot along Oak Lane between Third and Fourth Streets in April 1939 from the Dillon family. Verus designed a home for him at 301 Oak Lane, which was completed by 1941. In April of that year, Paul Eyerly, Jr., who had been living in the old Ritter home at 404 East Second, bought a 74-acre farm in Scott Township.

He had the farmhouse remodeled, with Verus designing the renovations. The house became the Inn at Turkey Hill in 1984.

On a personal level, Verus knew both sadness and happiness his last years. His father William had passed away in March 1923 at age 79, while his mother Amelia lived at the family home on College Hill until her death in December 1931 at age 86. Verus' wife Edith, after a lingering illness, passed away on May 24, 1936. His son, Verus, Jr., graduated from Princeton, and his daughter Eleanor from Smith College in 1939. The following year, Eleanor married John Watson Foster Dulles, also a Princeton graduate and son of John Foster Dulles, then an attorney but later United States Secretary of State under President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Then in September 1942, his sister, Amy Ritter Eyerly, passed away at her Market Street home after an illness of nearly three years. He had just begun work on a \$7.5 million project to build a naval aviation material storehouse in Philadelphia, but like the tunnel, would never have a chance to finish it. Thirteen days after the loss of his sister, on October 6, at his home in Merion, Verus Taggart Ritter died at the age of 59 and was buried in the nearby West Laurel Hill Cemetery.

In its lengthy obituary, the *Morning Press* praised the architect for his life, the landmarks he created throughout his career, and especially those in Bloomsburg. He was lauded with such phrases as, "His work in Philadelphia will stand for years as monuments to his genius." and "Bloomsburg has benefited by his experience and genius." The latter is certainly true. Every one of his Columbia County projects, built between 1906 and 1942, still exists, are used even if not for their original purpose, and remain to be appreciated by the residents of today. Verus Ritter remade Bloomsburg in the early 20th Century as no other architect did and his legacy will live on for years to come.