

Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY
NEWSLETTER

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"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Fall/Winter 2017

Rudolph Benz: Mobile's Gilded Age Architect

Each period of Mobile's history included a significant architect whose work changed the look of the city. In the ante-bellum period it was Thomas James (1803-1862). As Mobile came out of the woes of reconstruction, a new arrival brought his talents to the Port City: Rudolph Benz.

In 1847, Rudolph Benz was born in the southern German city of Stuttgart. He studied civil engineering and architecture at the University of Stuttgart and the University of Heidelberg. He was a proficient swordsman and on a visit to his alma mater many years later would be pleased to see his saber on display.

The Benz family must have been well-to-do because young Rudolph traveled extensively through Europe, Asia and South America before deciding to immigrate to the United States in 1871. His first stop was Chicago where he landed a job as chief draftsman for the architectural firm of Wolf & Co. This firm was well known throughout the Midwest for designing elaborate breweries and beer gardens.

Benz apparently had an adventurous streak. He took a job with the Union Pacific Railroad and surveyed potential avenues for construction of track as far west as California



The home of Dr. James Grey Thomas (on the right) was designed by Benz. The Register termed it "a modern Renaissance building" It is now a parking lot east of the former home of Raphael Semmes.

– all on horseback. On more than one occasion he ran into some cantankerous American Indians and survived the ordeal. Standing 6'2 with a full head of red hair and a military air Mr. Benz must have been an impressive sight astride a horse.

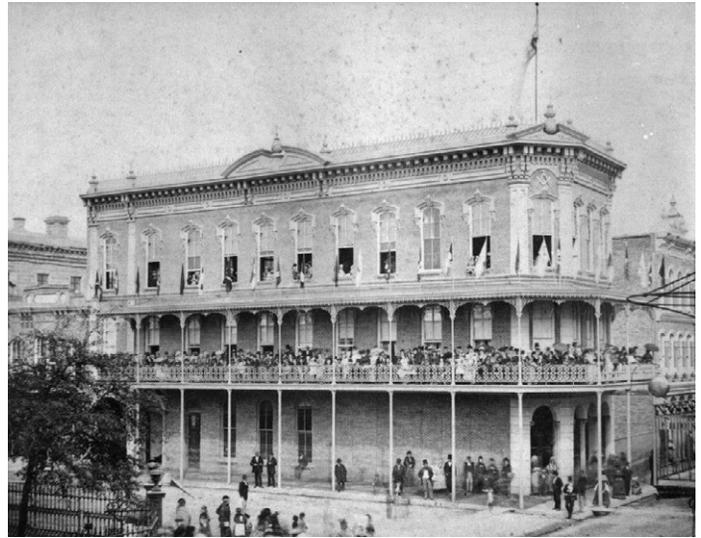
Benz next found his way to Fort Smith, Arkansas located in northern Arkansas, just across the line from Indian Territory. Fort Smith in the years following the Civil War has been described as “a bustling community full of brothels, saloons and outlaws.” Apparently the city was growing because Benz started a furniture business which was successful until his partner absconded with the company funds.

In 1870 he joined the U. S. Corps of Engineers which eventually sent him to Mobile. The city impressed him and he would certainly have been pleased to find a sizable population of German immigrants residing here. In November of 1873 he married Johanna Schwemberger after a 21 day courtship. The couple would raise five children.

From Beer Hall to Architect

Soon after his marriage he embarked on yet another career. He became partner in the Walhalla Lager Beer and Concert Hall on South Royal Street. An 1874 advertisement terms the Walhalla as “a pleasant place of resort.” His choice may have stemmed from his time in Chicago with one of the nation’s premier designers of breweries joined with his German heritage. In any event, the popular “resort” allowed him to meet many Mobilians. A year later Benz had gone back to being an architect after purchasing the architectural practice of a man named William Brown. He offered “Designs for all kinds of Public and Private Buildings.” His first commission appears to have been the second club house for the Athelstan Club which had been founded just two years earlier.

The three story building occupied the north east corner of Dauphin and St. Joseph streets and was wrapped with a cast iron gallery. A period photo reveals crowds posed on the galleries and in the third floor windows. Like many of Mobile’s downtown clubs the building’s first floor was reserved for retail rental to provide a stream of income to help offset the club’s expenses. The club moved to the north side of the square in 1902 and after serving as headquarters for the Manassas Club the building was stripped of its ironwork and converted to commercial space in the 1920’s. Following a fire the building lost its third story and was converted to a Walgreens in the 1930’s. That building survives.



The Athelstan Club, 1875. A portion of the building survives. This was the first of several club houses designed by Benz in Mobile.

In 1875 he also designed a two story mansion for wholesale grocer Manuel Forcheimer, another German immigrant. Benz chose a French Second Empire style topped by a mansard roofline and added a three story tower. The house stood on the south side of Government Street two doors east of Chatham Street until it was replaced by a motel in the early 1960’s.

The 1880’s and a New Courthouse

Mobile’s economy was steadily improving and by the 1880’s the number of completed works of Rudolph Benz was on a distinct rise. The Mobile Register even editorialized in 1886 that there was so much under construction that architects were having to refuse work.

Indeed, the mid-eighties were boom years for Benz. He was hired to design a courthouse in Brewton for Escambia County (1885) the Mobile Cotton Exchange (1886) the Baldwin County Courthouse in Daphne (1887) and in 1889 the exuberant Mobile County Courthouse.

The courthouses for Escambia and Baldwin counties were modest structures compared to his commissions in Mobile. The \$32,000 Cotton Exchange was completed in what the Mobile Register described as “the modern renaissance style topped with a roof of Queen Anne design.” Not only did the structure house the Cotton Exchange but within could be found the offices of the Mobile Chamber of Commerce and the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. At the roofline was a figure of a cotton bale beneath a crown alluding to the building’s main purpose in obtaining growers the best possible price for their cotton crops.



The Mobile Cotton Exchange stood on the north west corner of Commerce and St. Francis streets until leveled by a 1917 fire. The site today lies beneath a much widened Water Street.

Following his success with the Cotton Exchange, Benz was hired by Mobile County to design a new courthouse. On January 20 of 1888 a fire had virtually destroyed the courthouse which had been built in 1872. Benz and county authorities agreed on a contract that March and on July 8, 1889 the building was complete. The cost? \$60,763 or a little over \$1.5 million in today's dollars.

Although period postcards at the time termed its architectural style "German Renaissance" its roofline was obviously influenced by the French Second Empire and included corner three corner towers as well as a monumental central clock tower standing 186 feet. Even further French influence was on the Royal Street roofline where a pair of lions flanked a figure of Marianne, the symbol of the French Republic and the personification of liberty.



Mobile's German Renaissance Courthouse with French motifs.

The building faced Government Street as had its predecessor and featured a grand portico. At its pediment was a relief with allegorical figures of Law, Unity and Wisdom. Upon entering the building, the floors were of red, cream and gray marble, the walls were paneled in yellow pine and the grand stairway featured a large stained glass window.

One of the few grand residences to be constructed during the early 1880's was designed by Benz for turpentine and lumber magnate Franklin McCoy and completed in 1883. According to a newspaper account, the 17 room home occupied the south west corner of Government Street and Washington Avenue where the Mobile Public Library would be built in 1928. The distinctive mansion featured a 4 story tower and an assortment of porches, gables, and over-hangs. The cost of construction was a considerable amount: \$15,000.

The Nineties: Mansions of Merit

The economy steadily improved and by the 1890's Benz designed a number of notable buildings and residences epitomizing the Queen Ann taste. On Government Street he designed turreted castle-like edifices for attorney Gregory Little Smith, lumberman Arthur Shirley Benn and an appropriately termed "Italian villa" for physician Angelo Festorazzi.

These houses reflected the eclectic tastes of the period. The 1892 "Renaissance villa" of Dr. William Mastin at the north east corner of Government and Scott streets was described as "old English" in style and its interior included an octagonal library and a dining room paneled in English oak.

Gregory Little Smith's home was the most expensive of the houses designed by Benz in the 1890's with construction costs topping \$9,500. The Register termed its architectural style as being "a combination of English casteladed (sic) and Louis XIV."

The interior included a reception room that a reporter declared to be "one of the most beautiful rooms in the city." Finished in ash and antique oak the room had windows of "artistic painted glass" beneath hardwood cornices. The parlors had marble mantles and a "Mooreque arch of grille work" leading into a large bay window while sliding doors opened to Mr. Smith's spacious library.

The second floor held five bedrooms, two baths, a lavatory and a nursery and the house had electric lights and

servants call bells. The back of the lot had a two story stable opening onto Church Street.

Another elaborate home was designed for Dr. James Grey Thomas on the north west corner of Government and Bayou streets. A reporter termed it “a modern Renaissance building specially notable for its exterior wood carving.” The paper credited Benz for the design and reported that the cost of construction was \$7,500.

A description of its elaborate interior followed. Visitors entered a reception hall featuring a fireplace mantel and staircase of mahogany. There was a parlor and sitting room with inlaid hardwood floors as well as a dining room paneled in walnut and pine featuring a semi-circular bay window. On the floor above were five bedrooms and baths featuring “hot and cold water.” The house was equipped with both gas and electricity as well as “electric bells.”

The commercial structures designed by Benz during the 1890’s were numerous. In 1890 came the four story Pincus Building on the south east corner of Dauphin and Royal streets. Its original tenant was Zadek Jewelry Co. and the exterior featured a corner tower as well as decorative cast iron balconies. Much of the original ornament was lost to hurricanes over the years but the building still stands.

Clubhouses and a Police Station

In 1896 three important commissions were completed. The German Relief Hall and the new City Hall and Police Station stood next door to each other on St. Emanuel Street between Government and Conti streets. The German Relief Hall featured a corner turret while the home of the city’s police force was finished in pressed red brick and topped by a square tower. It lasted until the 1950’s.

The German Relief Association had been founded in 1870 to assist recent German immigrants in Mobile. Yellow fever epidemics ravaged Mobile every few years and dues paid by the members helped widows and orphans as well as bury the dead. A hall was being rented by the 1880’s and in October of 1896 a grand party which included a concert, banquet and ball, opened the new hall.

The Mobile Register described the structure as being two stores in height with a “corner tower of steel in a pretty design.” The banquet hall occupied the first floor while the second story held a 56’ X 70’ auditorium with five chandeliers lit by both electric globes and gas jets. The reporter termed the new building to be both “emblematic

of German large-heartedness” and “a monument to German unity and benevolence.”

The organization dwindled in membership by the time America entered World War I and disbanded due to anti-German sentiment. By the 1920’s it had been converted into a cafeteria before its final remodeling to house a furniture store. A fire took the abandoned building in 1992.

The third commission that year was the Spira and Pincus Building overlooking Bienville Square at the south east corner of Dauphin and Conception streets. The roofline was probably the most elaborate ever designed by Benz and like the German Relief Hall featured a circular corner turret and an assortment of dormers.

Like his creation more than 20 years earlier for members of the Athelstan Club, this building housed the Fidelia Club on its upper two floors while the ground floor was leased to C. J. Gayfer & Co. The second floor held a library, billiard room, dining room, kitchen and bathrooms while the third floor held an auditorium/ball room and “both ladies and gentlemen’s parlors” according to a newspaper account.

Members of the club enjoyed the well-furnished facility but a brief time. Just three years later a gas heater in the library was blamed for a spectacular blaze that left the proud building in ashes.



The Charles T. Hearin home. Now known as “Blacksher Hall.”

Classical Replaces Queen Anne

Rudolph Benz was called back to redesign a commercial building for the Pincus family on the cleared lot. The replacement reflects the changing architectural tastes as a new century dawned. The stone-clad neo-classical structure, which still occupies the corner, is far more subdued than any of Benz’s earlier designs.

A year after Benz designed the Pincus Building, he was hired by cotton broker Charles T. Hearin. As Hearin served on the board of the Mobile Cotton Exchange he would certainly have been familiar with Benz's work. However, the house he designed for Mr. Hearin in 1900 was like none Mobile had ever seen. In size it is reminiscent of the Smith home but architecturally there are no similarities.

According to an article in the Mobile Register, this mansion "in a classic Colonial style will be the most beautiful, attractive and comfortable residence in this city if not this section of the South." Unlike most of Benz's houses, this house was not built of wood. Finished in enameled brick and trimmed in Georgia marble and Bedford stone, the newspaper described its "old-style American grandeur."

Its entrance hall stretched 64' in length and its grand mahogany staircase included a fireplace. A large parlor, sitting room and den occupied the west side of the hall. The east side held the library, dining room and conservatory, and breakfast room. The second floor held 7 bedrooms, a nursery, a servant's room, and two baths. Lighting included gas and electric fittings. A two story stable occupied the rear of the property.

Charles T. Hearin enjoyed the house barely five years before his death in 1905. His widow sold the house in 1907 to J. J. Blacksher for a reported \$60,000 and moved to New York City. The house operates today as an events venue known as Blacksher Hall.

A Short Lived Partnership

In 1905 Rudolph Benz joined forces with his two sons – Louis and Leonhardt -- and established Rudolph Benz & Sons, Architects and Civil Engineers. Perhaps now that he was no longer a one man show he took some time off and visited his birthplace in Germany in 1906. That year he also finally received something he had wanted for years: his U.S. citizenship. He had apparently applied while a resident of Arkansas but his papers were lost in a fire and he had been too busy to reapply.

Sadly, Rudolph Benz died shortly after returning from Europe. He was not quite 60 years old and had practiced architecture in the Port City for 36 years. No other architect had given Mobile more examples of the Queen Anne style than Benz and it was obvious that had he lived longer his talents would have expanded to more examples of Colonial Revival.

His funeral took place from his home at 201 Rapier Avenue and was well attended by a large number of city

and county officials. Members of the National Guard marched beside his hearse as an escort of honor on its route to Magnolia Cemetery and fired a salute as his casket was lowered into the grave.

The firm of Benz and Sons survived for a few years and completed the Church Street annex to his courthouse and a similarly styled courthouse in Pensacola. The brothers separated with Louis moving to Birmingham where he ultimately established his own construction firm but died in 1921 and is buried beside his parents.

Leonhardt Benz founded his own engineering firm and died in 1949. Rudolph's widow died in Daphne in 1950 at the age of 92 and is buried beside her husband.

Sadly, many of the colorful buildings and houses designed by Benz have not survived. His memorable courthouse was destroyed in 1957 for a modern replacement. It was nearly unrecognizable when the wrecking crew arrived. Hurricanes had taken the original towers and statuary and the monumental clock tower had been replaced by a stunted replacement.

A few of the houses along Government Street were remodeled after 1910 with columns and coats of white paint eliminating the turrets, "Mooresque" arches and colorful paint schemes. After World War II with tastemakers openly despising anything from the Victorian era, several Benz mansions along Government Street were destroyed without notice and replaced by commercial structures.

The Benz creations which have survived are now prized by their owners and Mobilians alike.

—Tom McGehee



Grave of Rudolph Benz.



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Fall/Winter 2017

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This has been another productive year at Magnolia Cemetery. Improvements in landscaping and preservation continue. If you have not had a chance to visit the cemetery, November's weather is an ideal time to see it, and Tighe Marston will be offering walking tours on the following dates and with the following topics. Each begins at 10AM and ends by Noon.

November 4: Victorian Funerary Customs and Traditions

November 11: Historic People and Events

November 18: Victorian Funerary Art and Symbolism

Please call Tighe Marston at (251) 208-3707 to reserve a spot.

I hope that by now you have received your membership renewal. This publication and much of the work we do at the Friends is not possible without your generous support. If your membership renewal has gone astray, fear not. A form is included in this issue for your use.

*Tom McGehee
President*

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