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Out of the Attic

The 'Red Architect' and his role in shaping our City Hall

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Image: Vola Lawson Lobby undergoing renovation in the 1970s. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Just five weeks after the destruction of Alexandria's 1817 by fire in 1871, city council accepted a proposal by the noted Washington, D.C. architect Adolf Cluss, to build a larger, fire-proof structure at the same location adjacent to the public market place.

Although Cluss had emigrated from his native Germany little more than two decades before, he had emerged as one of the most influential architects and engineers in the nation's capital during the Civil War period, and by the 1890s had designed dozens of schools, churches and public buildings in the city. His designs were known not only for their innovation, beauty and flexibility, but also the comfort and protection of building occupants. Among his greatest works still standing in the District of Columbia are the [Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building](#), Calvary Baptist Church, and [Eastern Market](#).



Cluss was born in Heilbronn in 1825, but emigrated to the United States at the young age of 23 in response to the political turmoil in his home country and his participation in the revolutionary movement that swept across Europe in the mid-1840s. As a teenager, he became a close friend of social scientist Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, who together developed new theories of a classless society known as communism. Marx promoted the active overthrow of the capitalist system by the proletariat, and replacement with a new system of government based on shared needs.

Despite his upbringing in an upper middle-class family, Cluss shared Marx's views and was a dedicated member of the Communist League. When attempts at a German revolution failed in 1848, he was forced to flee the country and joined thousands of other revolutionaries from across the continent, known as the "Forty-Eighters."

Even after his arrival in Washington, D.C., Cluss maintained his strong relationship with Marx and Engels and routinely wrote articles espousing their principles. It was no secret in Washington that Cluss held controversial social and political views, but that had little impact on his rise to becoming one of the most important architects in the region. His extensive use of brick and political leanings led him to be called the "Red Architect" by astute Washingtonians.

One of the major reasons for the selection of Cluss for the Alexandria City Hall project was that he had experience designing both public government buildings and market places. At several times during the course of construction, City fathers visited Washington's Central Market, now the site of the National Archives, also designed by Cluss, to understand how the new Alexandria building would properly incorporate market stalls for vendors.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Cluss was also well-recognized for his emphasis on building safety and fire protection. His designs incorporated the use of the most advanced fire-proof products and materials then available, minimizing wood where possible. In Alexandria, his commitment to the use of brick, concrete, iron and slate addressed City concerns that the destruction of the building by fire not be repeated.

This view of what is now the Vola Lawson Lobby at City Hall, taken during a 1970's renovation, documents the framing and strong masonry walls of the structure. The decorative cast-iron support columns are still visible in the lobby today.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.