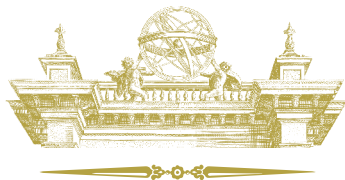


UP FRONT



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Angelique Bamberg

Robert L. Barnhart: Architect of the Monongahela Valley

In 1890 or thereabouts, a young man stepped off the train at the brand-new Charleroi Station looking for opportunity. Robert L. Barnhart, 27 years old, had come from Missouri by way of New York. Possessed of restless energy, a creative mind, and skilled at engineering and design, Barnhart became Charleroi's first professional architect.

The word “professional” denotes a change in the way architects were viewed, educated, and prepared for their careers in the late 19th century. Professionalization entailed defining a specialized set of skills and devising a standardized program of education and licensing to qualify practitioners. In an era of rapid urbanization and advances in building technologies, the rise of the professional architect provided assurance of competence and expertise. Prior to this, architects, like other craftsmen (and they were mostly men), learned design and construction skills on the job. The elite studied in Europe, the rest via apprenticeships with practicing builders.

What training, exactly, Robert Barnhart

received in New York is not known, but its length—12 years—suggests an apprenticeship rather than university. Barnhart also brought other skills to Charleroi and pursued other kinds of work before, during, and after his architecture career. Shortly after his arrival, Barnhart worked to design Charleroi's electrical grid, and as early as 1891, he became the manager of an opera and vaudeville hall. His preoccupations with electrical technology and theater combined in the name of his own theater, the Electric Theater, which he built in 1905. Later, the Electric was incorporated into a larger movie house that Barnhart built next door, the Palace. The 1920 census lists his profession not as architect but as “manager—own theater.” Barnhart was also a tinkerer and inventor who held patents for

electrical appliances such as an animal trap and a smelting apparatus.

Barnhart's simultaneous career as an architect may say as much about his timing and entrepreneurialism as his vocational calling. He arrived in Charleroi, then a hamlet on the outskirts of Monongahela City, on the cusp of architecture's professionalization, when



The Palace Theater was reputedly the fourth moving picture theater in the United States. It closed in 1961, but still stands, in altered form, on McKean Avenue in downtown Charleroi.



The Coyle Theater in Charleroi. Managing this theater was one of Barnhart's first jobs in Pennsylvania and led to a lifelong career as a theater owner and manager.

All photos by Angelique Bamberg.

**U.S. Post Office, Donora,
R.L. Barnhart c. 1915.**

the fields of building design and construction were busy and still open to any man who demonstrated skill. Along with Jeannette, Donora, Monessen, and other industrial towns developed during the 1890s, Charleroi was poised for a boom as the coal, oil, glass, iron, and steel industries thrived along the Monongahela River. For a creative young man with the mind of an engineer, this meant work, and plenty of it, designing and managing the construction of the many buildings that would house these towns' workers, managers, and their economic and social institutions.

Barnhart's first known commission was the original First National Bank of Charleroi in the center of the town's commercial district. Following this, Barnhart designed several other banks, schools, hotels, residences, and the occasional church, fraternal lodge, and post office throughout the Monongahela Valley. He worked in the Classical Revival Style, characterized by formal, symmetrical compositions with elaborate detailing based on the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, and in the Colonial Revival Style, which tied ancient classical prototypes to the early building history of the American colonies. Both of these styles were popular around the turn of the 20th century and held associations with antiquity, tradition, and durability.

Some of Barnhart's buildings still stand, while others are known only through photographs, and still others, not at all. In addition to his major known commissions, Barnhart also designed dozens of small houses and other modest buildings in and around Charleroi which are unattributed today. Barnhart died in 1924 and is buried in Monongahela Cemetery. 🌟

Angelique Bamberg is an independent historic preservation consultant, instructor in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh, and author of *Chatham Village: Pittsburgh's Garden City*.

