Alfred Bossom

"Neither one thing nor the other!"
~ Winston Churchill, 1932, upon hearing Alfred Bossom's name in Parliament, hoping it was not "bosom" nor "bottom"

Years ago, a historian described the fun of research as the "fox hunt" to differentiate it from the hard work of analyzing, documenting, and recording one's findings. Sometimes, while on this hunt, serendipity plays a part: you push aside a low-hanging branch and an entirely new vista is revealed. This happened while researching the architect of a handsome Classical bank in Titusville, Crawford County.

From the exterior, the bank has the requisite Ionic columns, limestone façade, and large, round-arched windows found on many other banks across the nation. Something drew us inside where we found the ceiling covered with colorful murals depicting the discovery of oil by Colonel Edwin L. Drake and barrels of it being shipped via flatbed boat and horse-drawn wagons. Smaller lunettes illustrate various modes of transportation that use petroleum such as planes, trains, and dirigibles.

The bank manager shared a brochure describing the murals by Alfred Valiant and the firm of Mack, Jenney, and Tyler, crediting architect "Alfred Blossom" with the building design. Since this was a new name among the list of architects working in Western Pennsylvania, I went to the bound copy of the Avery Index then housed in Carnegie Library's Art and Music section. Using the printed version made a difference: while I would have discovered that there was no "Alfred Blossom" in an online search, I would never have discovered a prolific architect named Alfred Bossom (1881-1965) without seeing his name on the adjoining pages of the hard copy. Suddenly, the small bank in Titusville led to an aristocratic Englishman with a poignant life story whose practice was in New York City from 1906 to 1926, and coincidentally bracketed by events in Pittsburgh.

Bossom was born in London in 1881, educated at the Royal Academy of Arts, became a member of Parliament in 1931, a Baronet in 1953, and in 1960, a Life Peer of the Realm, or Lord Bossom to us. He came to the United States in 1904 at the behest of Henry Phipps, who asked him to design Carnegie Steel Mill workers' housing in Allegheny (since demolished).1 His son, Baronet Clive Bossom, notes, "The Heralds of the College of Arms were somewhat surprised when he designed for his Arms the representation of a steel building column, with three floor girders and appropriate wind bracing projections—this they had never seen."

Bank exterior, Titusville.

1. Bossom family crest. Collection of Lu Donnelly
Near the end of his career, Bossom served as the London contact for the committee planning the English Nationality Room in the Cathedral of Learning. He discovered that architectural elements designed by A.W.N. Pugin (salvaged from the Houses of Parliament after World War II's bombings) could be made available to the university. He had them sent to Pittsburgh in 1950. For his role in providing "more of the original materials from the old House of Commons than exists anywhere else in the world," Bosom was given an honorary degree by the University of Pittsburgh in 1952.

How did this quintessential Englishman come to design a bank in Titusville? The answer, of course, is through oil. Bossom moved to New York after his brief stint in Pittsburgh and opened an architectural practice there on West 34th Street in 1906. He met and married Emily Bayne whose father, Samuel Gamble Bayne, had been with the Oil Well Supply Company in Oil City (near Titusville) and who then became president of the Seaboard National Bank in New York. This family connection led to Bossom’s designing a series of suave, Classical banks from Kansas to Connecticut. He remained in the United States for 23 years. James Curtis McKinney was on the board of the Seaboard National Bank and a native of Titusville. When he was 15 years old, Colonel Drake struck oil nearby; later, in 1918, McKinney commissioned the Titusville Trust Company bank building to handle oil certificates and to commemorate the event that immeasurably changed his hometown.

By all accounts, Emily and Alfred were well-matched. They had three children, Bruce, Clive, and Doric—appropriately named for an architect’s son! They shared a love of art and music, and entertained frequently in their apartment at 270 Park Avenue. In 1924, husband and wife collaborated on the book An Architectural Pilgrimage in Old Mexico using her photographs and his sketches. Alfred Charles Bosom brought organizational skill and a keen eye to his skyscraper designs, and he ran a successful architectural office.

The Bosoms returned to England in 1926 so the boys could attend English schools, and Alfred never again practiced architecture. He turned his energies to urban planning and ran for Parliament, elected to the House of Commons in 1931. Tragically, in 1932, Emily and their oldest son, Bruce, were killed in a plane crash, and in 1959, Doric also predeceased his father.

As Churchill remarked, Bosom’s name is neither “bosom” nor “bottom,” and, to add to the litany, it most certainly is not Blossom.

According to Ellis Island Foundation records, Alfred C. Bosom, age 24 of London, first arrived in New York on December 5, 1904, and reentered on March 28, 1905. He came to the U.S. to work with George Crawley on the plans for Phipps’ Westbury House on Long Island. Since Crawley was not a registered architect, they both worked under the auspices of the Grosvenor Atterbury firm. Atterbury’s firm is credited with the tenement design.


According to her son, Clive, Emily Bayne Bosom was treasurer of the New York Philharmonic for several years and entertained internationally-known musicians at their home. Sharp, p. 11.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at Carnegie Museum of Art.

A mural inside the Titusville bank commemorating Edwin Drake.

Sir Alfred Bosom (left) and University of Pittsburgh Chancellor Rufus Fitzgerald confer on the stained glass medallions now located in the rear bay window of the English Nationality Room. The stained glass rondelles were gifts from Sir Alfred.

University of Pittsburgh Nationality Rooms