

Professional Beginnings

“Architecture begins where engineering ends.”
—Walter Gropius

Following graduation, Herb and his good friends Frank Ballard and Charlie Boney accepted offers to complete their required five-year apprenticeships with Charlie’s family-owned L. N. Boney Architects, an established and reputable architectural firm in Wilmington, North Carolina.

“L. N. Boney, Sr., was visible, but it was Leslie Boney, Jr. who made the firm,” Herb says. “We worked with them for five years, and saw that firm grow from the three brothers to a big firm. It was a picture book way to do design; it was a great experience.”

In June 1955, with their apprenticeships drawing to a close, Herb and Frank decided to start a company of their own: Ballard and McKim Architects.

“It was a busy, busy time for people like us all over the country,” Herb says. “We worked out our final year for the Boneys during the day and then we worked on our own projects at night. We started by renting a nice little two-room office in the Masonic building downtown on Front Street; it was the only [office] building in town that was open at night.

“A friend’s wife, Mary Lou Jackson, was looking for work, so we hired her as a part-time secretary to come in to answer the phones during the day. She was a professional stenographer and was older than we were, so that gave us some maturity in our office,” he laughs.

Herb and Frank left the downtown office when a small building became available on 17th Street, at that time a two-lane country road but now a busy thoroughfare.

“Previously a one-room shoe shop with a counter partition, we thought that would be a good place for an architect’s office, especially because there was a parking area as well. So we bought the building and over the years added on to it.”



Courtyard entrance to Ballard and McKim's office at 17th Street.

Joint Venture

Shortly after Herb and Frank launched Ballard and McKim Architects, they put in a bid for a Student Union project at Wilmington College, now known as the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW).

The 12-member board had a difficult time deciding which architectural firm they should hire: L.N. Boney Architects (Herb's former employer) or Ballard and McKim Architects. "The Boneys had been here forever, and we were just whippersnappers," Herb says. Regardless, the board's vote came down to a 6–6 tie.

"They had closed sessions back in those good old days, so they excused us after we answered their additional questions and they said they would make an announcement in the morning," Herb recalls.

When Herb got up the next morning, the front page of the newspaper announced, "College Decides Between Nobody."

"They decided to give the project to the two firms together!" Herb laughs. "They didn't even ask us! But Frank and I decided, well, what the heck. We'd been working for the Boneys for five years, let's just go ahead and work some more with them.

"Everything was in transition at that time—architects were beginning to use modern designs, so I pitched my coin in that pot. But using brick was a requirement on campus. As a matter of fact, one brick

company was the sole supplier because the college required their brick to be of a particular color and quality. So you didn't have to worry about locating bricks; you just had to hope they'd give you a good price," he laughs.

"So that was our introduction to the college. Our firm has come back and designed several more buildings over the years, including the James Building (a small administration building) and Kenan Auditorium, which was another joint venture with the Boneys."

First Residential Project

When Bertram Williams, a prominent Wilmington doctor, advertised for an architect to design his new home, Ballard and McKim responded and the firm was selected. "It became a real tremendous friendship and relationship," Herb says.

"He wanted a new, different kind of house. He did not want Georgian-style like everybody else; he wanted a contemporary house on his new lot on Forest Hills Drive.

"He and his wife Ellen fell in love with crab orchard stone, a vein of sandstone in the western slopes of the Appalachians. It's beautiful material, it really is. When you look at it, you think it will feel soft.

"We used that for the exterior and some spaces on the inside of their big two-story house. One half of the bottom floor was underground, if you can imagine," he laughs, referring to how most of coastal North



Rear elevation of the Bertram Williams home, Herb's first residential contract.



Rear elevation from lower level to upper garden level. Very pleasant view looking to the west.

Carolina is at or just above sea level. The lot, located on a 10–12-foot hill, gave Herb a chance to create a terraced lower level that contained a kitchen, a breakfast room, and a dining room. “It was a really nice livable space and allowed access to the house from lots of places,” he says.

It was at that point, with the house framed and the roof on, that Herb was confronted with a major dilemma. “At about 9:00 o’clock at night one weekend, I got a call from Bert, with a strange tone to his voice. He said, ‘Herb, we’ve got a real problem.’

“‘What’s the matter?’ I asked.

“‘Our house is just broken in two.’

“‘What?’

“‘The house has broken in two, right in the middle.’”

“‘Well, would it do any good to come over?’ I asked.

“‘Well, you might want to come look at it,’ he said.

“I went over and, oh!” Herb exclaims. “There was an inch-wide crack at the ceiling on the second floor that tapered down to about a quarter-inch crack in the floor of the basement. Here we were—Frank and I didn’t have any money; we had *zero* money.

“The first thing Monday morning, I called the head of the Civil Engineering Department at NC State. I told him what happened—not only had the workers blown all the sand out of the well, they had also removed four and a half feet of dirt out from under the house, which caused it to collapse right in the middle. He dropped what he was doing and drove down.

“He came up with the idea that since they’d pumped the dirt out from under the house, they could pump some dirt back in. So they found a small well lower than the foundation and actually pumped sand back in underneath the house. We watched it for a while and finally left. Fortunately, it held.

“That was our introduction to the business side of architecture. That’s the way you start a career,” Herb laughs.

Ballard and McKim Architects Expands

As Herb and Frank’s business grew, they also added staff and moved their office to Market Street in Wilmington’s historic district. “We hired Bob Sawyer as a partner in 1960 and changed the name of the company to BMS Architects – Ballard, McKim and Sawyer,” Herb says. “We also added two, three, sometimes four architectural interns. So we made a big leap and it worked well.

“Frank and I were much closer together in personality, attitude and interest in architecture—we enjoyed living and we played hard,” he laughs. “Bob, being a little bit older, had a different perspective.

“But after about a year and a half, Frank and I settled down and got more serious about life. Catherine and I were married in 1950; Frank and Dot were married two weeks before us.

“Frank, Bob and I worked hard all the time. For Frank and me, it started when we went to school. Kamphoefner got us by the ears and taught us that you spend a lot of time with your business. That is what your life is all about—your projects, plural.

“We just loved architecture; we loved what it did, what it said and what we left behind. I don’t know any person who could have had a better way to start his life professionally than being an architect.”



Rear of the BMS Market Street office. Built in 1856 across from Bellamy Mansion, Herb and his colleagues revised the rear elevation to increase floor space.

Taking a Chance

When the newly conceived North Carolina Museum of Art advertised for the services of architects and engineers to design its complex in the early 1950s,⁴ Herb not only applied, but also enlisted the assistance of famous New York City architect, Paul Rudolph.⁵

“At that time, his buildings were on the front of all the architectural magazines in the world,” Herb says. “He was just one of the greatest architects, I thought, in the way he did things.”

Undeterred by his colleagues, who doubted that someone of Rudolph’s caliber would work with a newcomer, Herb called the man’s office.

4 The NC Museum of Art opened April 1956 in a converted and expanded state office building in downtown Raleigh.

5 Paul Rudolph (1918-1997) was an American modernist architect known for utilizing boldly contrasting masses and innovative surfaces in his designs. Credited as being one of the most influential American architects of the mid-20th century, Rudolph also served as chair of the architecture department at Yale University from 1958-1965.

“I said, ‘I would like to come and have an appointment with Mr. Rudolph. There is a very important project advertised down here for the state of North Carolina, and I would like to see if he’d join with me,’” Herb laughs.

“His secretary was very nice. She thumbed through her desk calendar and said, ‘How about next Thursday morning at 9:00 o’clock?’ Then she added, ‘Maybe you could bring some slides of your work,’” he laughs.

“So I called Piedmont airlines, got my ticket, and took off to New York to see him. I didn’t know what I’d need but I took a few notes along and my little box of slides.

“His office was located in an old building; just what you would think a New York office would be. It wasn’t a huge office—he didn’t have over ten people in it, but it was a nice, nice place.

“He greeted me and I thought, ‘This can’t be real,’” Herb laughs. “So we talked about the project, and what I’d done, and what he’d done. He said, ‘Herb, why don’t you take these slides of mine and mix them together with yours, and we’ll go present our slides to them.’

“I thought, *Man! I’m getting the job right here.* So I got in the airplane and came back to prepare the slide show. Frank and Bob couldn’t believe it, until I showed them the proof,” he laughs.

Mr. Rudolph and Herb arranged to meet in Raleigh the day before the appointed interview. “We had dinner and then we roughly went through the interview, with him stating which slides he would present and which ones I would do, alternating Paul Rudolph *and* BMS Architects. It was just a real fun thing.

“I went in to the interview scared literally to death. But we each did our part of the presentation and then had to wait for them to make their decision. Word has it that we were second.”

Move to Public Works

Because private and commercial projects were hard to come by in the early 1960s, BMS Architects decided to expand their educational projects by submitting letters of inquiry to county school boards to design elementary and secondary schools.

The southeastern portion of North Carolina was experiencing rapid population growth at that time and the need for new schools was critical. This turned into a lucrative business for BMS Architects, which ultimately designed over 75 school projects throughout eastern North Carolina.

“Frank and I went to Raleigh to attend the Department of Education’s Division of School Planning seminars on how to design a school, what kinds of materials to use, etc. We took that to heart, worked hard on it, and changed the whole concept of the way the buildings were built. They turned out to be quality schools, in both cost and function.”

Aiding their efforts was the fact that building materials were relatively inexpensive. “Air conditioning was not yet standard in any building so you could build the whole school at \$3.50 a square foot,” Herb says. “Today, you’re talking about \$35.00 for just the doorknob.”

As Herb continued to design schools, Frank branched off in a slightly different direction. “Frank began designing some churches for the Methodist Conference,” Herb recalls. “You use the same design philosophies to create both churches and schools—how you put it together, how you make the floors function vertically and horizontally, and all that—but they won’t look alike. Although they may be mechanically the same, you don’t trim them or treat them the same.”

“Bob Sawyer became interested in public housing, hotels and motels in Wilmington and the surrounding beach communities. He designed Shell Island Hotel, the Sheraton Hotel, and the Holiday Inn Hotel on Wrightsville Beach. I designed the renovation and addition of the Prince Charles Hotel in Fayetteville.”

Although the three partners specialized in different structures, “we would all pass ideas past each other and help each other,” Herb says. “The lead architect conceived and created the work but the others in the practice provided feedback; it was really a group exercise.”