The Moller Family History Tour and Guidebook

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This tour and guidebook are dedicated to the people of Hagerstown, the Moller family, the employees of Eastern Organ Pipes, Inc., and Brendan Fitzsimmons. Without their faith and goodwill, this project would not have been possible. Credit also to Gabrielle Harlan, Patricia Slovinak, Anna Maas, and the UVA BOOM studio for contributing text and images.

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Introduction to Hagerstown and Moller Pipe Organs

The life of Mathias Peter Moller, the founder of the largest pipe organ company in the world, has been described as a Horatio Alger story, or as the ultimate fulfillment of the American dream. Moller located his business in Hagerstown, Maryland in the late 19th century, and over the course of his lifetime he contributed significantly to the growth, development, and overall character of the city.

The influence of Moller’s life and his organ business affected many different parts of the urban fabric of Hagerstown; in addition to his two factories, Moller constructed houses for himself and his workers, invested heavily in the rehabilitation of his local church, took control of a local automobile manufacturing company, and adaptively reused one of his old factories as an upper-middle class apartment complex.

Moller’s businesses and his commitment to the civic life of the city left an expansive architectural legacy in Hagerstown. This process of building a business and building a life in one place shows how one man, through industrial means, had a lasting effect over time on the commercial, residential, and civic fabric of the city of Hagerstown.
The craft of organ building and its history as a trade long predated M.P. Moller’s factory in Hagerstown. A form of the craft of organ building can be dated to the ancient Greeks and Romans, but the tradition that Mathias P. Moller embraced dates from 9th century Germany. Organ building became an established industry in medieval Germany and France, although the instrument was not adopted for church use until the 14th century. The modern organ form, which includes the pneumatic bellows, multiple keyboards, wind chests, and mechanized key and stop action, was completed in Germany in the 15th century. Organ styles varied depending on the particular region, however, and different cultural groups created distinctive tonal and visual characteristics in their organs.

Mathias Moller’s career drew upon the Germanic tradition of organ building. He was born in September 1854 on the island of Bornholm in Denmark. His family farmed the land, but the German-Danish War of 1862 devastated the local economy, and young Moller needed to find a new vocation. At the age of 14, Moller left Bornholm for the town of Ronne and apprenticed himself to a cabinetmaker.

In 1872, Moller immigrated to the United States with his sister and brother-in-law; and he went with them to Manhattan, but soon left New York and joined his half-brother George Moller in Warren, Pennsylvania.
George was an employee of Greenlund Brothers, a furniture manufacturing company that offered Mathias Moller the opportunity to use his years of skill as a woodworker. Several months later, Moller left Greenlund and went to work for a woodworker in Erie, Pennsylvania; this was where Moller received his first training in the pipe organ business.

Moller once remarked that “I was not a musician—I was just a woodworker. It seemed to me the finest thing in the world that could be done with wood was to make it into an organ. A carriage was a utility, but to find and fix, in something you had made out of wood, all the tones and harmonies of music, had something mysterious and reverent about it.” Moller was a woodworker by trade, but his ambition was to use that craft to its highest purpose: organ making.

The financial and moral backing from the citizens of Hagerstown allowed Moller to use his vision and capabilities to create the most successful pipe organ business in the world. After struggling for a few years with little outside financing or capital, Moller received a lucrative offer from the city of Hagerstown, which was located just south of the Maryland-Pennsylvania line in Washington County, Maryland. Moller moved to Hagerstown in 1881 at the behest of the town’s businessmen, including the Governor William Hamilton and Senator Lewis McComas.
Site 1: M.P. Moller Organ Factory  
403 N. Prospect Street

Moller’s first factory building in Hagerstown was two stories tall and was located near the corner of North Potomac and Fairground Avenue. The building had a 75’ x 200’ footprint when it was originally constructed. Moller added to the factory in 1883, 1885, 1886, 1889, and 1892 in order to accommodate increased production.

In 1895 this factory burned to ground. After the fire, Moller received many offers of land from various cities to relocate his business away from Hagerstown; however, his fellow citizens in Hagerstown became aware and alarmed at his offers to move, and they offered him a new site in Hagerstown on North Prospect and West North. Ground for the new factory building was broken on September 13, 1895 and the factory was in operation by January 1, 1896.

Although the building would undergo many substantial additions in the years to follow, the factory at North Prospect and West North accommodated operations of the M.P. Moller Pipe Organ factory for the next ninety-seven years.

Before Moller built his new factory, Prospect Hill stood on the western outskirts of town. There were few houses nearby, and ungraded dirt paths served as the only streets. An old Roman Catholic cemetery was located on the southern portion of the hill, but the rest of the property was vacant.
The building projected both images of M.P. Möller the Industrialist, and M.P. Möller the Civic City Builder. In 1925, Möller opened and dedicated a new erecting room which filled in space between two pre-existing walls and completed the eastern façade along North Prospect. The earlier factory walls had been clad in simple brickwork, but the wall of the new erecting room took a different aesthetic approach. Its large window and pointed gable roof are reminiscent of the vaulted roofs and large stained glass windows prevalent in religious architecture. This façade that faces onto North Avenue projects the image of M.P. Möller as a Civic City Builder, towering over the city as a representation of the morality of the man and his company. Möller chose to project this image of his work onto the public façade of his building, allowing visitors today the opportunity to see the religious heritage of the organ building craft in the architecture of the factory itself.

The western side of the factory complex lacked the carefully composed street wall of the Prospect Street elevation. Raw materials arrived here by rail beginning in the 1890s, and the rail lines continued to be used until the factory closed in the 1980s. While the western and eastern sides of the building have the same utilitarian brickwork, the western façade proudly displays the Moller name in paint from the top floor of the factory. This side of the building dealt with work, labor, and production; it was not often seen by the townspeople, but was
used by Moller employees and seen by railroad workers from the nearby tracks. On December 8th, 1925, Moller celebrated 50 years in the organ making business with a Golden Anniversary celebration and dinner at his factory. The highlight of the evening was the gala opening of the factory’s new erecting room. This new space spanned the area over the North Avenue right-of-way that crossed Prospect Hill. North Avenue ended at Prospect Street, but the right-of-way had been extended over Prospect Hill and to the west in case any more road building would occur. When Moller received the deed to Prospect Hill and built his factory, any plans to extend the road were abandoned.

The new façade also had utilitarian purposes on the interior as well. Since it was larger than the older erecting room, Moller used this new space to exhibit a large organ for visitors. In this way, the space became an extension of Moller’s public side in the interior as well as the exterior of the building. During its heyday, the company used to hire out teenagers from the town to give tours during the summer months. The new erecting room, with its 3-story demonstration organ, was the highlight of the tour. In addition to serving as a showcase space, the interior allowed the organ assemblers to have access to light for most of the day through the large eastern window and skylight. Today, the Eastern Organ Pipe Company is still using this space for assembly and shipment.
Site 2: Moller Home - 431 N. Potomac St.

Moller built this new home for his family in 1903-1904, just a few years after his new factory was built on North Prospect Street in 1895. The property was subdivided from the lot belonging to Julia McComas, a widow who lived on 433 North Potomac.

No buildings existed on the lot Moller purchased; however, a covenant in the deed specified that any building put on the property had to conform to the building lines already established by the neighboring homes. The unusually large setbacks can still be seen on the lots today, adding an air of exclusivity and grandeur to the large homes overlooking North Potomac.

Though his new house was located on North Potomac Street, both the house and the new factory could be easily accessed by North Avenue. Only a few blocks separated Moller’s factory and home. Even as he aged, Moller could still easily get from his house to the factory.

Moller lived in this house until 1936, when a devastating fire substantially damaged the building. Although Moller had survived trials before with the destruction of his first factory, he was at this time an old man and the loss of his home contributed to his declining health. Those who watched him at the fire said they could literally see him fail; and from then on he never came back. The house was rebuilt, however, and today serves institutional purposes.

Courtesy of Particia Slovinac.
The Moller’s second residence first appears on this 1904 Sanborn map outlined in red (right). The 1897 Sanborn Map (bottom) shows the same street with existing lots and setbacks that existed before Moller built.
The earliest City Directory of 1893-1894 shows that this house at 610 North Potomac was the first Moller residence in the city. M.P. Moller did not build this house himself, but he purchased it because it was located across the street from the site of his original factory building on 610 North Potomac. Since Moller ran the factory himself, oversaw every aspect of production, and taught many of his new workers the organ making craft, it was essential that he be as physically close to the site as possible. When Moller completed his new house at 431 North Potomac, he donated this building to Washington County and it became the first Washington County Hospital. Today, the building no longer exists. Although this picture obscures most features of the house, Peter Daniels, M.P. Moller’s grandson, described the building as “an enormous Victorian house, [with] lots of turrets on it, and a big wide front porch.”
Site 4: The Dagmar Hotel - 50 Summit Ave.

The Dagmar Hotel is another example of how the memory of Moller persists in Hagerstown despite the fact that the family no longer has any vested interest in the building. The Dagmar was constructed by M.P. Moller in 1911, and was named after his daughter, who had been named after the medieval Queen Dagmar of Denmark. The Dagmar Hotel, located in the corner of Antietam and Summit Avenues, took advantage of the booming commercial and industrial enterprises of the city; it catered to business people and Moller billed it as the leading tourist hotel in the city.

This hotel was technologically modern for the time and used concrete as a new structural material to help keep the building fireproof. Moller’s many experiences with fires at his factory may have convinced him that concrete would be a more efficient and safe building material to use in the center of the downtown.

According to M.P. Moller’s grandson, Peter Moller Daniels, one of the main motivations behind building the hotel was the fact that his visiting African American clients could not find lodging in the city. Many wealthy African American congregations from across the country were purchasing Moller organs, and when they visited the Hagerstown factory, they needed decent lodging facilities. So M.P. Moller built the Dagmar Hotel to meet the needs of his clients, and to generate more income from a profitable commercial venture.

An original brochure advertising the hotel described its amenities: “The Dagmar is absolutely fireproof, it being of concrete construction, cool in summer and warm in winter … It is six stories high, contains 80 rooms, 56 of which have private baths, and hot and cold running water in all rooms … The roof garden commands a very magnificent view of the city. The hotel is conducted on the European plan, and a fine dining room is operated in connection … This hotel is centrally located, opposite the Post Office, and B & O R.R. Station, and one square from the C.V. [Cumberland Valley] and N.W.R.R. [Norfolk and Western] Stations, and within one block of the business district of the city.”
Site 5: St. John’s Lutheran Church  
141 S. Potomac St.

Lutheranism came to Hagerstown in the mid-18th century with the formation of the St. John’s congregation in 1770. The congregation replaced their original log church with the present brick Georgian meeting house in 1795. When M. P. Moller first arrived in Hagerstown in 1881, he joined the congregation of this church. During Moller’s lifetime, he was personally responsible for installing a new organ, new pews, and his woodworkers redid the interior finishings and designs on the woodwork in St. John’s. The entire Moller family worshipped in this space, and in time it even became known as “The Moller Church.” This church, while not one of Moller’s industrial or commercial buildings, acted as an extension of his influence in the civic realm of the city. His philanthropy in rebuilding and shaping the physical interior space of this church created an indelible impression in the minds of Hagerstown residents that remains to this day.

Image courtesy of the papers of Peter Moller Daniels.
Site 6: The Moller Apartments

This site and the 901 Pope Avenue Factory Building are part of the history of luxury automobile production in Hagerstown. Automobile manufacturing began in Hagerstown in 1903 when Col. Albert Pope, who had been a bicycle maker, bought the Crawford Manufacturing Plant and used it to produce new automobiles. After the sale of his business to Colonel Pope, Mr. Crawford used the money to start his own automobile manufacturing plant. With backing from M.P. Moller and other investors, Crawford turned this building (which had been his stable) at the corner of Surrey and Summit Avenues into a new factory building. In 1922, Moller became the majority stockholder in the company, took over the entire business, and began producing automobiles of his own.

A few years later, Moller took control of Colonel Pope’s automobile business as well and purchased the Pope Avenue Factory. Moller moved all his operations into the Pope Avenue factory in 1923, he still owned the Summit Avenue site. After moving production to the Pope Avenue site, Moller reused the old automobile factory by turning it into an apartment complex. Moller rehabilitated the building, removed the machinery and equipment, and opened the new apartments for residents in 1925.

The building has a U-shape and is built entirely of brick. When Moller rehabbed it,
however, he covered the brick down to the foundations with cream-colored stucco.

He added centered mission-shaped parapets on the roof of the main façade (the Surrey Avenue side), and along the Summit Avenue façade. The roof has terra cotta tile edging around all the sides. The building also has ironwork balconies and decorative ceramic tile work around several of the entrances. This building represents an excellent example of the Spanish Eclectic Style, and it retains all of these decorative features today. The building also currently contains two efficiency apartments, four two-bedroom/two living room apartments, and eighteen two-bedroom apartments. This building has been listed as a contributing property in the Hagerstown City Park Historic District, an area that is also designated as a National Register Historic District.

Moller’s fondness for the Spanish Colonial style can be seen in his Florida estate house. Moller constructed this retreat in the beachfront community of Delray in 1931, and he vacationed here until 1937. Courtesy of the papers of Peter Moller Daniels.
Site 7: Moller Motor Car Company
901 Pope Avenue

This building was the site of M.P. Moller’s luxury automobile company, which produced luxury sedans, sports cars, touring cars, and fleets of taxicabs from 1923-1938. In 1922, Moller became the majority stockholder in the Crawford Automobile Company; he renamed the company the Moller Motor Car Company and began production of his first luxury car: The Dagmar. Moller also moved the location of his new business in 1923 from the Surrey Avenue plant (see Site 6: The Moller Apartments) to this building at 901 Pope Avenue.

Moller brought out new Dagmar models every year from 1922 – 1927. He produced a variety of models from a petite sedan to a nine-passenger touring car to a flashy sports car that boasted a top speed of 87 mph.

While the Dagmar sedans were luxurious, the bulk of Moller’s orders were from taxicab companies. The company’s first order came from the Luxor Cab Manufacturing Company of New York in late 1923. The order was for 300 taxicabs at a cost of $700,000. Until production ceased in the 1930s, Moller Motor Cars made taxis that were used in Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Despite its success, the Company closed in 1938 shortly after M.P. Moller’s death.
The factory at 901 Pope Avenue is currently being renovated into an apartment building. It is an enormous site, however, and part of the building is also being used by the Hagerstown Organ Company, Inc. Interestingly, while Moller never produced any of his organ parts in this building, previous employees from the Moller Pipe Organ Company started this small organ shop and are now using this space. The Hagerstown Organ Company, which has been operating out of the site since 1992, makes new pipe organ parts and provides rebuilding and upgrading services on older organ models. This interesting coincidence shows how the Moller legacy continues at the site of his old automobile plant, but instead of housing car manufacturing, it now holds the remnants of his pipe organ business. This building is an excellent example of an adaptive reuse development that has taken advantage of Hagerstown’s unique industrial buildings.
The Moller Mausoleum in Rose Hill Cemetery. Courtesy of Karen Robbins.

A bucolic view of Rose Hill Cemetery (above). Moller’s funeral obituary appeared in every major local newspaper (right). Courtesy of Anna Maas and the Western Maryland Reading Room.

Site 8: Moller Mausoleum - Rose Hill Cemetery

In August, 1936, three months after his home on North Potomac Street was devestated by fire, Moller and his son went to Denmark for a holiday. He celebrated his eighty-second birthday on the boat and then again at the Waldorf-Astoria when they docked at New York City. That fall his son was called home from Columbus because his father had fallen ill with pneumonia. Disregarding doctor’s orders, Moller continued to visit his church and his factory every few days. In December, however, he suffered a heart attack and was in bed until Christmas. He vacationed with his family in Florida in early January, but coming back by train he became worse, and was met in Washington by his doctor. He had another heart attack when he reached Hagerstown and died within the week on April 13, 1937.

Moller lived to be eighty-two years old; in his lifetime he built an industry that brought wealth and prestige to the City of Hagerstown. The memory of Moller’s legacy still exists in Hagerstown due in no small part to the continued existence and use of so many buildings that were associated with his life and enterprises. This lasting impression on the cityscape can be best appreciated by creating an awareness and appreciation for the history of Moller and his business.
Each of the buildings that Moller was associated with in his lifetime are currently being put to good, productive uses except for the most important building of all: his organ factory on Prospect Hill. While a small part of the factory is currently used by the Eastern Organ Pipes Company, the majority of it is vacant. An adaptive reuse scheme for this building should take note of the other reuses that currently work well in Moller’s other buildings. His home on Potomac Avenue, the Moller Apartments, the Dagmar Hotel, and the Pope Avenue automobile plant have changed ownership and uses a number of times over the decades, but they are still all productive, useful, and significant structures. Each have been used for different types of business, but through the preservation of their architecture and sympathetic reuse strategies, these buildings still retain a connection to Moller and to the eras in which they were built.

Yet none of these outside enterprises could have existed without the wealth that was generated at the main factory. The employees at that site built pipe organs, but their labor and products also helped to indirectly build the City of Hagerstown. Understanding the use and history of this building is key to understanding how it contributed to the broader applications of Moller’s industrial and civic interests in the city. Thus the future adaptive reuse and preservation of this site is crucial to helping future generations understand, interpret, and forge a connection to the broader physical landscape of Hagerstown.
Moller Organ Festival Proposal

The citizens of Hagerstown can help return vitality to the Prospect Avenue factory and to the broader cityscape by using the Moller landscape as a framework for a musical and cultural festival. This proposed annual festival would use the factory as its centerpiece, but would also incorporate other Moller buildings and the Hagerstown churches that contain Moller organs into a weeklong celebration of pipe organ music and the craft of organ building.

Other cities around the world use festivals to showcase the popularity of musical culture, and Hagerstown could easily capitalize on this tradition. Tanglewood, located in rural Massachusetts, hosts a series of concerts, performances, and lectures every summer that focus on classical music. Bayreuth, a medieval town in Germany, hosts a famous concert series every year that is focused exclusively on the work of Richard Wagner. Both of those events are examples of highly successful concert series, but the Vermont Mozart Festival uses a model that could have a wider variety of applicable lessons for Hagerstown.

In 1974, Melvin Kaplan, an oboist, concert manager and teacher at Juilliard for twenty-five years, had recently moved with his family from New York to buy a farm in Charlotte, Vermont. Mel, inspired by the possibilities inherent in Vermont’s countryside, barns and churches, conceived the idea of a festival in the European tradition with a variety of locations and a variety of events, all interrelated.
This model has always been what defines the Vermont Mozart Festival as a festival rather than a concert series.

The Moller Organ Festival could use this same model by using the architecture of the Moller landscape to host educational tours, musical events, and craft demonstrations. The Prospect Avenue factory can be used for organ concerts, demonstrations of pipe organ production, and as the starting point for this walking tour. In addition, the erecting room and other vacant work rooms can provide exhibition space for theater organs, the “Traveling Moller” organs, antique Dagmar automobiles, and one of the Fairchild airplanes made in the factory during WWII. In addition, local churches could provide tours and demonstrations of their own Moller organs, allowing visitors to see church interiors and instruments that would be otherwise inaccessible.

The creation of the Moller Organ Festival would be a way for the people of Hagerstown to share their rich musical and architectural resources with local residents and visitors. The Festival could provide links to other local cultural and educational institutions such as the Maryland Symphony Orchestra, the Maryland Theater, local churches, art museums and galleries. The Festival would also bring new attention to all of the buildings and landscapes associated with M.P. Moller and could generate funds for the preservation and development of some of these sites. Hagerstown’s unique musical heritage and traditions should be shared with the world. This guidebook and Festival could be the starting point for the renewal and preservation of this unique legacy for future generations.