

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (1)

Name of Building or Site

Common Name: Suhr Building

Historic Name: German-American Bank

Location

Street Address: 102–104 King St.

Aldermanic District: District 4 (Mike Verveer)

Classification

Type of Property: Commercial Building

Zoning District: C4

Present Use: Bar/restaurant and small office

Current Owner of Property (available at City Assessor's Office)

Name(s): John W. Sutton

Street Address: 104 King St.
Madison, WI 53703-3314

Legal Description (available at City Assessor's Office or online at cityofmadison.org)

Parcel Number: 0709-133-2729-7

Legal Description: Original plat, block 103, part of lot 1, beginning on west corner of block, then east on King St. 63.2 ft to center of wall between 104 & 106 King St., then along center of wall north & northwest to Main St, then southwest on Main St. 86 ft m/l to pob.

Condition of Property

Physical Condition: Good

Altered or Unaltered: Little alteration

Moved or Original Site: Original

Wall Construction: Madison sandstone

City of Madison
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (2)

Historical Data

Original Owner: John J. Suhr

Original Use: Bank

Architect: John Nader (Captain John Nader)

Builder: Contractor: Butler
Plaster: Henry Bischoff, 617 S. Brearly Street 1915-1929.
Carpentry: Zirkel
Glass and painting: Park and Company
Tin work: Schiebel and Krehl
Heating: King and Walker

Architectural Style: Italianate

Date of Construction: 1885-1887

Indigenous Materials Used: Madison Sandstone

List of Bibliographical References Used

City and State Archives:

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- Rankin, K. and T. Heggland. Madison Intensive Survey Historic Themes. For the City of Madison and the Historic Preservation Division of the State of Wisconsin Historical Society. Unpublished manuscript, 1994.

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http://www.cagenweb.com/quarries/articles_and_books/stone_quarries_bedford.html, 2004.

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Mollenhoff, David V. *Madison: A History of the Formative Years*. 2nd ed. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2003.

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Form Prepared By:

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Date Form Was Prepared: December 3, 2004

Landmarks Commission

LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (3)

Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance

The three-story building at 102–104 King Street occupies the corner of King and Main Streets and faces the Capitol Square. The Suhr building occupies one of Madison's 'flat iron blocks', so named because Madison's unusual street plan resulted in unique triangular buildings on corner lots that resembled flat irons. The building remains largely unchanged since 1887, and is perhaps the most intact building on the block. The others began to lose their upper stories after World War II, and the building on the eastern end of the block has been gone since 1934.

The Suhr building forms part of the Simeon Mills Historic District block of Italianate Commercial buildings on King and Main streets. Madison's Historic Preservation Plan notes the building as an important contribution to Italianate architecture in Madison, as its main features represent the style's most prevalent expressions. The building is of brick load-bearing construction with a veneer of stone, forming walls 16 inches thick. Walls twelve inches thick separate the building sections (102 and 104 King Street), and each story of the building contains 1200 square feet. The three-story building has a flat roof with wide overhanging eaves supported by paired brackets. The frieze formerly was decorated with evenly-spaced dentils, but these no longer are present. The windows are arranged in groups of three, symmetrically placed on both sides of King and Main streets. First and second floor windows have stone lintels topped with cove moldings held up at each side with simple stone corbels. The first floor windows also have stone lintels, but lie beneath a stone beltcourse that separates the top floors from the storefront and doors on the ground level.

The storefront openings remain largely intact, with wooden paneled kick plates under the 104 storefront windows; smaller kick plates (due to the slope of the street) on the 102 King Street storefront window are no longer extant. Other alterations during the past three decades are visible from Main Street; including, one first floor window lengthened and converted to a door (but not altered in width), and glass block in another window to allow venting from the restaurant's basement kitchen. Basement windows also have been covered just in the past three years. None of the modifications detract noticeably from the building's appearance.

The layout of the windows and their decorative elements are unchanged. Columns of lighter stone border the first floor windows and support the undecorated frieze and the canopy above them. Similar columns also border the original entrances on King and Main streets, which retain transom windows above the doors. The pattern extends to the main entrance as well, where stone columns in the same color as the building form its corners and follow the same pattern.

The main entrance lies under a semi-circular arch at the point of the flat iron, guarded by decorative columns and stonework on both sides. Commercial buildings usually reflected a more modest range of Italianate style traits than did residences, yet architect John Nader (see below) gave the Suhr building extra decorative touches to offset the elegantly simple design. Composite capitals rest atop marble columns supporting the bracketed canopy above it. The second and third story windows above the first floor main entrance have bracketed stone canopies as well,

matching the upper stories on King and Main streets. The architect also designed a roof ornament in the form of a semicircular pediment above the main entrance, modifying a popular Italianate residential trait to fit a commercial building and showcasing the owner's name carved in stone below it. The pediment was later accompanied by a large billboard (see photos) and was removed sometime after 1949.

Several key elements of the interior remain intact and in good condition. The most interesting remnant of the former bank may be the bank vault still present in the basement. The vault's doors remain in their original location and still are used (as a closet), though the combination for the lock is now a mystery. In addition, recent renovations uncovered the original first floor tin stamped ceiling and the current tenants have restored it. In addition, the doorway and stairs to the second and third floors remain in their original location.

The Italianate style remained fashionable in Madison from the 1840s until the early 1900s, nearly two decades longer than the rest of the country. It seems clear that architect John Nader chose an older style to make the new building blend in with the older structures on the block, matching the cornice line, the windows, and the eaves and brackets, as well as the indigenous Madison sandstone. In fact, most of the Capitol Square was once lined with sandstone buildings, the majority of which no longer exist.

Captain John Nader was the City Engineer upon first arriving in Madison from the East Coast and designed the city's first sewer system. His secondary career as an architect gradually became his principal work, and one newspaper in 1899 proclaimed him "Madison's pioneer architect." Buildings such as the Suhr family residence, 121 Langdon St. (Madison Landmark and NRHP listed) St., Patrick's Church, 404 E. Main St. (Madison Landmark and NRHP listed), and the Madison Candy Company, 744 Williamson St. (Madison Landmark and NRHP listed) attest to his ability to design both residential and industrial buildings in a variety of styles, including French Second Empire Style and Victorian. Only six of his other buildings remain. They represent some of the best extant 19th century stock in Madison.

LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (4)

Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria

The historical significance of the Suhr building comes from both its architectural integrity and its association with its original owner, John J. Suhr. Suhr founded Madison's oldest bank, and the history associated with both this business and the Suhr family represent important social and economic trends in Madison's history. In addition to being a visual landmark, the Suhr building is identified in the Downtown Historic Preservation Plan and the Downtown 2000 Master Plan as a notable historic site.

The Suhr Building was completed in 1887 for John J. Suhr and the German Bank (founded in 1871). The bank he founded helped the city remain stable during economic downturns such as the Great Depression. Suhr and his family represent the great number of German immigrants who influenced Madison politically and socially during its early years. The family attained the American dream by reaching the upper echelons of Madison society, entertaining President Grover Cleveland in 1885 and playing a role in the founding of the Oscar Mayer Company.

John J. Suhr was born in Bremen, Germany in 1836 and immigrated to Madison in 1857 via Milwaukee. He began work as a bookkeeper in the State Bank, and later recognized a need for banking services for Madison's large German community. In 1871, he opened the German Bank at 103 King Street. In 1885, Suhr changed the name to the German-American Bank and commissioned a new building on property purchased from Simeon Mills, one of Madison's earliest realtors. A 2-story red brick building originally occupied the site and housed a drug store and fancy grocery as well as a harness shop. A fire may have destroyed this building, allowing Suhr to purchase the property for \$5,000, the highest price then paid for property around the square.

The Suhr building has exceptional value in illustrating Madison's heritage and embodies broad patterns in its social history. While Suhr arrived a German immigrant and established a bank to serve the needs of fellow immigrants, his and other immigrants integration into the community is represented by the name changes of the bank; first to a blend of German and American business (the German American Bank) and acceptance by East Coast Madison elite, and after his death in the time of his children, to fully American (the American Exchange Bank).

The bank was a true family business. Suhr's brother, F.W. Suhr, and two of his five children worked for the bank in the Suhr building. John J. Suhr was President of the Madison Turnverein Society (also known as the Turners, a German athletic club), member of the Madison School Board, President of the Madison Free Library, and with his wife Louise (Heicke), was active in raising funds for Civil War veterans, widows, and orphans. During Suhr's tenure, the school board changed from use of chalk and slate in school to lead pencil and paper.

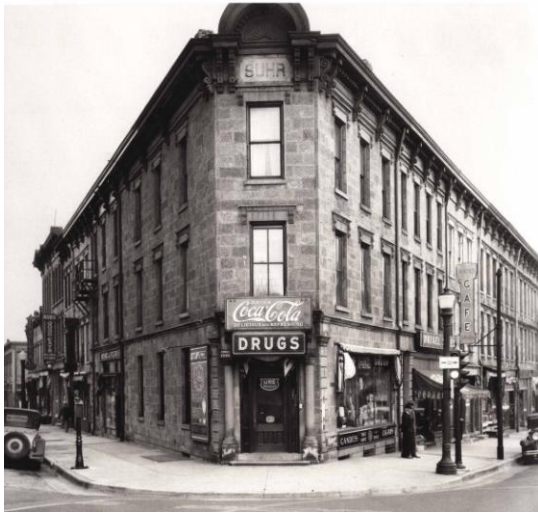
After John Suhr's death in 1901, his descendants continued to play an active role in Madison, managing the business he founded. Sons John J. Suhr, Jr. and Edmund Suhr rode horses with Governors Rusk, Robert LaFollette, and Phillip LaFollette, as well as John Olin, founder of the Madison Park System, showing the rapid transition of an immigrant family into an integral part

of the community. Fred Suhr's brother-in-law was Oscar Mayer; during one visit, Suhr prompted Mayer to look into a packaging plant that was up for sale. "Oscar Mayer" went on to become an international company that for many decades played a prominent role in Madison's business community.

The bank occupied the building until 1922, when it moved to its present location at 1 N. Pinckney Street on the square as the American Exchange Bank. The name change reflects the historic and social trends after World War I, when strong anti-German sentiment forced great changes in Madison's largest ethnic community. The bank moved into the building on the Capitol Square at 1 N. Pinckney Street where it remained for decades a family-run business.

The Suhr building also housed some of Madison's other longest-lived businesses. After the bank moved, the first floor store front was occupied by the Detloff drugstore, the Bergman Drug Company, a mechanical store, and most recently restaurants. The current tenants are Finn Berge and Matt Weygandt's Flatiron Tavern. The building also housed the city's longest-lived shoe retailer. The shoe store was founded by Adam Blind, who was later joined by Huegel and Hyland to run the Huegel-Hyland shoe store for 62 years in the same location. The portion of the building at 104 King St. remained in the Huegel family until 1986. Doctors' and dentists' offices occupied the upper offices in the building, and represent the longest standing dental office in the city (more than 41 years before 1939), including many of Madison's old-time dentists, such as E. F. Hart, and John and Oscar Meng. Other tenants included a dress shop and a tailor.

The Suhr Building over time:



The Suhr Building 1930s (Angus McVicar)

Saturday Afternoon, February 12, 1949 MADISON

Madison's Historic Buildings

Former German-American Bank Bldg. Keeps Old Dignity

Property Has Been Owned By Suhr Family Since 1877

By ALEXIUS BAAS

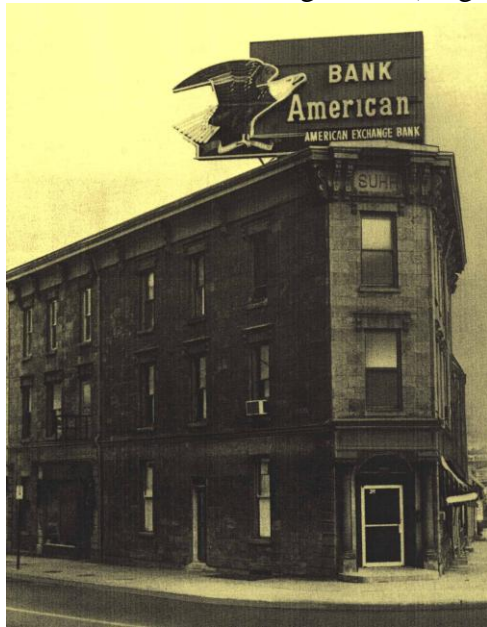
AT THE CORNER where King st. joins Pinckney and E. Main sts., stands one of the "flatiron" buildings made necessary by Madison's peculiar street plan. It was the home for many years of the German-American bank and, in the minds of older Madisonians, is still associated with that name. It is also connected with the name of one of Madison's oldest and most prominent German names—that of the Suhr family. This building is the subject of today's story.

The land on which it stands was of course owned at the time by James Duane Doty, who bought it from the United States in 1806. It passed through a succession of ownership and, in the still early days, fell into the hands of Simon Mills—one of the city's early realtors. In his day it was occupied by a two-story brick building which housed offices of various kinds and possibly the office of its owner. In 1887 the property was purchased by John J. Suhr. The history of its ownership since then is simple: it is still in the hands of the Suhr family.

JOHN J. SUHR "was born in ..."

Here is the "flatiron building" at King, Pinckney and Main sts., which is the subject of today's article on "Madison's historic buildings," by Alexius Baas.

The Suhr Building 1949 (Capital Times)



The Suhr Building 1971 (American Exchange Bank photo)



The Suhr Building 2001 (Zane Williams)