



Robert H. Matts

Robert Hermann Matts was born October 12, 1908, in McKean, Erie County, Pennsylvania. His father, the son of German immigrants, worked for a trolley company that operated between Erie and Buffalo.

Although he had no formal training in architecture, Robert worked as a draftsman and designer for architect George Mitchell (father-in-law of Fort Myers architect George Bail) in Cleveland, Ohio, and it was there that he gained his practical architectural experience. His expertise as a mechanical engineer stood him in good stead throughout his career, and was critical in projects for Dupont and Goodyear in Ohio, Delaware, and Georgia on facilities for extracting synthetic rubber, and in the design of the first Sanibel Causeway in 1961. His designs were used in chemical plants in Germany, England, Japan, and China. Robert's last engineering plant project, at age 77, was in Kensington, Georgia.

Robert came to Fort Myers in 1953 from Jamestown, New York, and he worked as a mechanical engineer for the architecture firms Bail-Horton and Frizzell. He obtained his license to practice architecture in Florida in 1956, and immediately set about designing and building a house for his family at 2903 Valencia Way. His wife Henrietta and his daughters moved from Jamestown to join him in Fort Myers at that time. He established his own architectural and engineering firm as Robert H. Matts & Associates.

Robert and Henrietta acquired property along West First Street in Fort Myers, and in 1962 they sold part of this to the Royal Palm Yacht Club and part to Harbour Towers, Inc., a condominium development company in which Robert was a principal, together with local businessmen George E. Judd, Thomas M. Biggar, and John M. Stoy. In 1962, Robert was the president of this company and Henrietta its Secretary-Treasurer. The company's plan was to build six apartment towers, but only one, First Harbour Towers, was actually built. Robert and Henrietta sold their Valencia Way house and purchased apartment 606 in First Harbour Towers in 1967. (They also acquired apartment 804 in 1977). Robert served on the Board of Directors of First Harbour Towers as President in 1977, and as Director in 1978, 1981, 1984, and 1985. Robert and Henrietta lived in First Harbour Towers until their deaths, Robert on June 3, 1988, and Henrietta on August 21, 2001. Robert never really retired – late in life he still maintained an office, at Suite A, 2015 West First Street, Fort Myers.

Robert was an intensely private person, but very much liked and respected by those he worked with. He was not without flair – he drove a red two-seater '56 T-Bird and smoked cigars. His reluctance to be in the limelight is poignantly illustrated in the newspaper pictures that document the opening of the first Sanibel Causeway – many local and State politicians made sure they appeared front and center, but Robert, if he was even there, was nowhere to be seen.

Robert Taylor who, when a beginning architect, worked with Matts on several projects in the early 1960s, describes him as a strict but fair man with his associates, diplomatic with his clients (but usually able to convince them to do things his way), and someone who listened to and acted on advice from builders and tradesman, as long as their competence had won his respect. Matts also introduced Taylor to the pleasures of T-Bird ownership by finding an available car and convincing him to buy it.

Jim Scollen, a stair-builder and carpenter who worked with Robert on additions to St. Isabel's Catholic Church in the 1980s, remembers him as intelligent, creative, honest, and private, with a dry sense of humor, and yet always agreeable and open to suggestions:

From my point of view he was a pleasure to work with. He gave clear instructions and knew exactly what he wanted. His grasp of the woodworking details was exceptional. [He] could envision reveals, shadows, color and grain match as well as any person I ever met. He had a monster chest of detail drawings accumulated over a lifetime of work. ... He once told me that he cut his teeth on the big frame houses of Pennsylvania. After looking at those drawings, I don't doubt it. They were like a bible of how things should look.

The Rev. Robert Browning, for whom Robert designed and built St. Hilary's Episcopal Church, remembers him as follows:

I met him in October 1965 when we discussed the original concept for St Hilary's to be a Spanish Mission building at our present location. We didn't have the money and building was beautiful but out of our price range. Instead he and I designed the present building by taking the dome he had designed for over the Altar and making it an expanded 60 foot circle. We then took the idea of a parish hall and church school wing and made them open arms reaching out to the community. Some detractors later said it all looked like a silo and barn. Robert said, "Good!" We decided that Jesus was born in a barn that it was a great idea. In fact, he said let's invite the News-Press mailbag person to the dedication and he would pay for the limo to bring him there. Someone sent us several thousand dollars because of Robert's retort. He welcomed any and all ideas that contributed to a better final plan. He was a complete joy to work with!

Robert became such a part of the design and construction that ultimately he only accepted about 25% of his original charge. He even designed and paid for the reredos, the entire wooden wall behind the Altar as his gift! He didn't charge us for the earlier design either.

He was a devout Roman Catholic and his wife was Lutheran. I visited them both in their home and many times in his office there by the Yacht Club. We had some meals with him and his wife at the Yacht Club. He was a kind and gentle man who walked with stiff leg, but I do not remember the problem.

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Robert married Henrietta V. Umrath, from Erie, Pennsylvania, in the early 1930s. She was born on May 2, 1909, and was also a descendant of German immigrants. They had three daughters: Marilyn Ann, born in 1933; Janet Mae, born in 1938, in Pennsylvania; and Betsy Lou, born in 1941, in New York. Marilyn married Richard Eugene Bissell in the mid-1950s and they have a son Douglas Robert, born November 18, 1958. Richard died on August 17, 1997, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Janet married Richard Lee Prickett on March 5, 1961, in Fort Myers. Betsy married James "Jimmy" Wyatt Meredith on July 20, 1962, in Fort Myers, and as of 2002 was living in Jackson, Mississippi.



Henrietta (Umrath) Matts

Robert's parents were Charles Andrew Matts, born April 1866 in Pennsylvania, and Emma A. Matts, born 1875, also in Pennsylvania. They married in 1896, probably in McKean, Pennsylvania, and had five children: Gertrude Marguerite, born January 18, 1898; Carl V., born 1902; Andrew G., born 1905; Robert H., born October 12, 1908; and Theodore J., born September 17, 1911. Charles worked first as a painter, and then took a position with the Erie Traction Company. They lived on Shaddock Road in McKean. He died in 1918, and Emma died in 1936. Robert's sister Gertrude, married to Thomas Harry McCarthy, died in Escondido, California, on January 4, 1974. His brothers Carl, an electrician, who died in 1989,

Andrew, a barber, who died in 1974, and Theodore (married to Helen T. Hoehn of Erie) who died in 1980, are all buried in St. Francis Xavier Cemetery in McKean, Pennsylvania, together with their parents.

Robert's grandparents on his father's side were Anton "Anthony" and Anna Mary "Hafling" Metz (or Matz). Both were born in Bavaria – Anton in March 1825 and Mary in January 1846. Anton immigrated to Pennsylvania in 1865, and they were married about the same year. He worked as a laborer. They had six children, including Charles Andrew, born 1866, George Joseph, born 1868, and Frank, born 1871, all in McKean, Pennsylvania.

Henrietta's parents were Emil C. Umrath, born February 1876, and his second wife Amelia Umrath, born May 15, 1881. Emil worked as a shipping clerk; they were married about 1906. By 1918 they lived at 825 West 26th Street in Erie, Pennsylvania, and Emil was a patrolman. Henrietta, born May 2, 1909, was their only child. They divorced in the early 1920s, and Emil remarried. In 1930, Amelia and Henrietta were living at 501 French Street, Erie; Amelia was working as a saleslady in a department store while Henrietta worked as a stenographer in an engine works. Emil died on November 22, 1953, in Erie, and Amelia died in January 1967 in Fort Myers.

Henrietta's grandparents on her father's side were Emil Umrath, born April 1845, and Bertha Eitel, born March 1848, both from Wirtemberg, Germany. Both immigrated to Pennsylvania as children. They were married about 1871 and lived on Peach Street, and later at 217 10th Street, in Erie. Emil was a druggist. They had four children, including Edith S. "Ida", born July 1874; Emil, born February 1876; and Edna Alma, born April 1880.

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Robert H. Matts & Associates was responsible for many projects in the Fort Myers area, including:

Matts Residence, 2903 Valencia Way, Fort Myers, 1956

Sanibel Causeway, 1962

R.H. Matts & Associates Office, 2370 West First Street, Fort Myers, 1962

Christian Science Church, 2390 McGregor Blvd., Fort Myers, 1963

Bishop Verot Catholic High School, 5598 Sunrise Drive, Fort Myers, 1963

First Harbour Towers Condominium, 2350 West First Street, Fort Myers, 1964

St. Andrew Mission, 2628 Del Prado, Cape Coral, 1964

St. Hilary's Episcopal Church, 5011 McGregor Blvd., Fort Myers, 1965

St. Michael Lutheran Church, 3595 Broadway, Fort Myers, 1968

Hessler Residence, 1215 Alhambra Drive, Fort Myers, 1969

Additions to St. Isabel's Catholic Church, 3559 Sanibel-Captiva Road, Sanibel, 1975, 1978, 1981

The following are descriptions of some of Robert's most notable designs:



Matts Residence, 1956

This house, at 2903 Valencia Way (on lots 10 and 11, block 6, of Valencia Terrace subdivision) has 3,905 sq. ft., 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, a fireplace, and a finished garage. In 1980 the next owners added a pool, concrete patio, and screened enclosure.



Sanibel Causeway, 1962

Robert H. Matts & Associates won the contract to design and engineer the causeway on October 19, 1960, for a fee of \$107,500. The causeway opened on May 26, 1963. Construction by the Army Corps of Engineers lasted 15 months and cost \$2.73 million.

There were 3 bridges: a 26' high drawbridge, a low-level bridge, and a long span, joining Sanibel, with a clearance of 16'.

The picture above, taken in 2004, shows one of Matts' original bridges in front of its replacement. Corrosion from salt spray was one of the major factors in the deterioration of the original bridges. All of the original bridges were demolished and their remains were sunk into the water to create a number of artificial reefs.



R.H. Matts & Associates Office, 1962

This office building at 2370 West First Street, Fort Myers, has, currently, 924 sq. ft. According to Tom Biggar, Jr., originally there were two identical but mirror-imaged buildings with a covered carport connecting them. The other building was south of the current building, at the southeast corner of the yacht club's parking lot.

Matts sold this office property for \$40,900 to the adjacent Royal Palm Yacht Club on April 16, 1971.



Fort Myers Christian Science Church, 1963

This church, faced with small tiles of beautiful rose-colored Italian marble, is located at the corner of McGregor Blvd. and West First Street.

Robert's design – an irregular octagonal core with wings at different angles – has strong echoes of the Fifth Church of Christian Science in Cleveland, Ohio, designed by Frank W. Bail, an in-law of George Mitchell, with whom Robert worked as a young man. But the two churches are far from being identical, and the Fort Myers one definitely has Robert's modernistic stamp.

Robert V. Taylor, who was Matts' assistant at the time of construction, remembers what a difficult time they had getting rid of a large clump of bamboo on the site. They kept digging it out, but sprouts would reappear. Eventually they had to excavate quite a deep hole to ensure eradication of all the bamboo, and then they were faced with filling the hole and packing the earth to make a solid bed for construction.



Bishop Verot Catholic High School, 1963

The school was established in 1962 as Fort Myers Central Catholic High School and was renamed Bishop Verot (for the first Bishop of Florida) when they moved to their newly constructed location in 1964. Coincidentally, the school chapel was used for church services before St. Cecilia's Catholic Church, designed by Edgar Wilson, was built next door in the mid-60s.



First Harbour Towers Condominium, 1964

This is an 8-story steel-frame high-rise apartment building located northwest of the intersection of West First Street and Virginia Avenue.

According to Tom Biggar, Jr., the original plan was to have six Harbour Towers buildings, three on each side of the street that later became simply the entrance drive to First Harbour Towers.



St. Andrew Mission, 1964

This church building, at 2628 Del Prado, Cape Coral, was dedicated in 1965.



St. Michael Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1963 or 1964

This church, at, 3595 Broadway, Fort Myers, was built in 1968. It has 6,789 sq. ft.



St. Hilary's Episcopal Church, 1965

This church, at the corner of McGregor Blvd. and Colonial Blvd. in Fort Myers, features a cylindrical main sanctuary.



Hessler Residence, 1969

Robert designed this house for Carl W. and Lois M. Hessler, at 1215 Alhambra Drive, Fort Myers, on the Caloosahatchee. The house, built in 1970, has 1 story, 4,998 sq. ft., 2 bedrooms, 2 ½ bathrooms, a finished carport, a finished garage, a fireplace, and a pool.

Robert and Henrietta financed the Hesslers with a mortgage of \$20,000, which was paid in full by August, 1975.



Pine Island Residence, 1971

Robert Matts designed and built a house at 2770 Teal Court, St. James City, Florida, on land he purchased from James & Mary Wells, of Albuquerque, New Mexico. A concrete seawall was constructed in 1972.

The house has 2,290 sq. ft., 2 bathrooms, a finished 2-car garage, and a finished screened porch on the channel side. The finished upper story is 12 ft. x 17 ft. A fireplace was added in 1980. A wooden dock and boat lift were constructed in 2000, and shutter awnings were added in 2008.

Robert and Henrietta sold the property to Frances Ilene Gates, of Independence, Iowa, on June 27, 1977. The Mattses financed the purchase with a mortgage of \$25,000.



St. Isabel's Catholic Church additions, 1975, 1978, and 1981

The church, at 3559 Sanibel-Captiva Road, Sanibel, had been built in 1963. Robert designed and built the new rectory, which was dedicated on December 7, 1975.

Again in 1978 he drew up proposals for a new addition to the church, and construction was completed December 1978.

In 1981 there was a consideration of a further addition. Robert proposed three different sets of plans. The chosen version included expansion of the church opposite the hall with permanent seating, three

classrooms and a kitchen, involving the removal of the original outside wall and the addition of a “donut” around the original church. Construction began in 1982, and the certificate of occupancy was issued on May 14, 1984.

Jim Scollen, a stair-builder and carpenter who had moved to Fort Myers in the early 1980’s, accepted the job of finishing the old and new parts of the church to make them look and function as if they had been designed together. He added red oak sheathing around the steel roof supports and constructed an oak lighting tray to wash the ceiling of the original part of the church with indirect light.

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Written by Thomas J. and Donna A. McQuade

Research by Donna A. McQuade, phone 347-274-9903, email donna@mcquades.net