



**FROM BROKEN FRIEZES
TO BROKEN DREAMS:
THE FLEETING PROSPERITY
OF A. A. FISCHER,
ST. LOUIS BUILDER**

by Nancy Moore Hamilton

INTRODUCTION

A. A. Fischer could yodel. He fished for turtles and made good turtle soup. During the 1904 World's Fair, he had a gondola on Post-Dispatch Lake. His grandchildren remembered him as a kind, gentle man who was always tinkering and inventing things.¹

St. Louis architecture enthusiasts remember A. A. Fischer for his “broken frieze,” whose wreaths and/or swags descend into the spaces between the upper-story windows rather than extending straight across the façade below the cornice. They also remember him for building large numbers of houses. In a 1905 interview, Fischer said he had built 517 houses in St. Louis.² In 1906, he raised the figure to 600.³ A day-by-day search of building permits in the *St. Louis Daily Record*, however, raises questions about these numbers.⁴ Because he sometimes built for other speculators in real estate, we may never determine the precise total, but Fischer's lifetime output appears to have been fewer than 400 structures – still an impressive achievement.

Fischer specialized in residences, though he also built a few stores-below-flats and a Knights of Pythias hall in St. Louis and an opera house in Washington, Missouri. Because his career spanned 35 years from 1894 to 1929, his styles range from Romanesque to bungalow. Many houses embody more than one style. There is a mix of single-family houses, flats, and apartment buildings, representing all price levels. All houses found so far have been in St. Louis or University City.⁵

Fischer's brick houses were solid and substantial, but the economic basis of his enterprise was a house of cards. Most dwellings were built on speculation. The land, materials, and labor were financed with borrowed money: deeds of trust to be repaid with interest, usually in three years. The house itself was the collateral. It was essential to find a buyer before payment was

due. Sometimes, Fischer built for investors such as Chris and Jennie Garvey, who commissioned at least eight Fischer houses between 1901 and 1910 and lived in most of them briefly before selling them. The number of houses custom-built for buyers planning to be long-term residents was relatively small.

Carolyn Hewes Toft, referring to Fischer's habit of building many houses along the same block, writes, “His trademark, the ‘broken’ or interrupted frieze at the roofline, is stamped on entire streetscapes.”⁶ Many broken friezes can be seen along the 6100 blocks of Washington and Westminster, the 1300 block of Union, the 5500 block of Page, the 5200 blocks of Cabanne and Kensington, and the 5100 block of Cates.

Who was this man whose distinctive streetscapes have largely survived the rigors of a century?

EARLY LIFE, 1866-1893

His full name was Alexander August Fischer. He was born on May 14, 1866, in Washington, Missouri, a predominantly German town about fifty miles up the Missouri River from St. Louis. His father and his maternal grandparents were German immigrants. When Alex was 12, he and his parents and siblings moved to a 200-acre farm near Subrosa, Arkansas, where their Arkansas neighbors included other settlers from Washington. Throughout his life, Alex and his family maintained close social and business ties with Washington friends and relatives.

In 1889 after 11 years on the farm, Alex moved to St. Louis and became a bookkeeper for the Tower Grove and Southwestern Building Association. On weekends he courted Frances Peterson in Washington, Missouri, where they were married in her mother's living room on February 20, 1890. Their first home in St. Louis was at 2702 Missouri Avenue. Three months later, Walter J. Lewis, Alex's employer, married Emma Simon, Alex's cousin.⁷

BUILDING PROSPERITY, 1894-1910

As bookkeeper for a building association, Alex quickly realized that “the ownership of a home was a natural craving of mankind.”⁸ It is not clear how he acquired the skills for becoming a builder instead of a bookkeeper. He may have done some building during his farm years, and a catalog of correspondence courses in

the building trades was found among papers later salvaged by his great-grandson. By 1894 he was sharing an office at 1821 South Jefferson with another young builder, Harry W. Mephram. This partnership lasted until 1899. Fischer's brother-in-law, John W. Hahn, was another collaborator in the early years.

2244 South Jefferson (1894) is the earliest documented Fischer house. Pairs of round brick columns flank the recessed entrance. The entrance and all three windows on the façade have round brick arches. Continuous brickwork goes up over the openings and down between them, foreshadowing the broken frieze, which would not appear for another seven years.



2244 Jefferson, A.A. Fischer's First House

The left bay of 5253 Vernon (1896) contains a round tower, which has lost its conical roof. The originally recessed entrance, topped by a wide, round brick arch and flanked by pairs of round brick columns, is reminiscent of that at 2244 S. Jefferson.

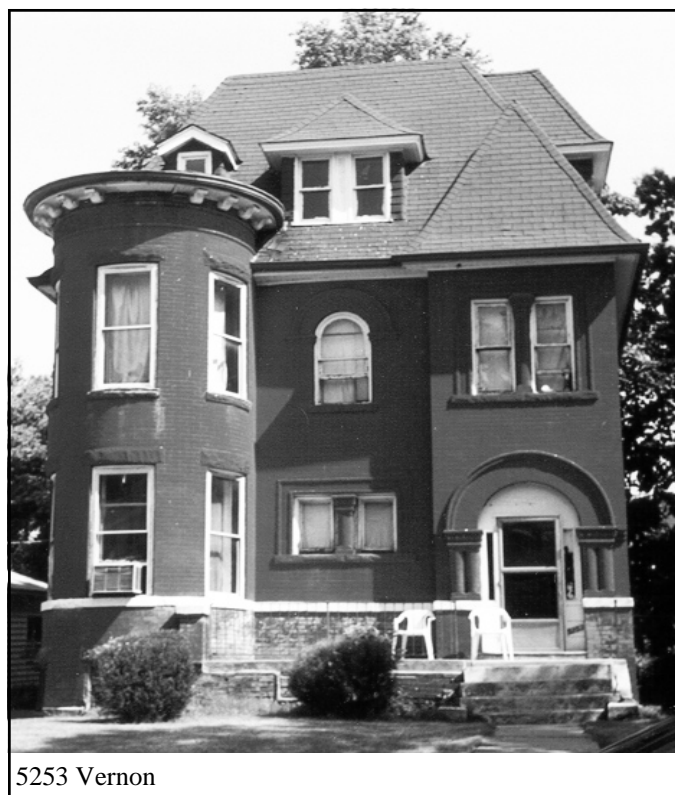


5231 Vernon

The steeply-pitched, hipped roof of 5231 Vernon (1897) has two elaborate dormers. Under the roofline is a continuous frieze of swags. The brick façade is flat, four bays wide, with continuous brickwork arching over

the recessed second-bay entrance and each of the three first-story windows. Again, short, round brick columns flank the entrance.

On July 23, 1899, Alex Fischer's father died in Arkansas. His mother moved back to Washington, Missouri soon afterwards. Alex inherited the farm, but his younger brother, Hugo, continued to do the farming. On September 12, 1899, the A. A. Fischer Architectural & Building Company was incorporated, with Alex and his wife Frances owning 98% of the shares. It was in 1899 that Alex moved his office to "Real Estate Row" on Chestnut Street. On February 6, 1900, he and four other investors incorporated the St. Louis Saw Mill & Lumber Company. Because of the timing of these events, it is tempting to suspect that Alex inherited some money in addition to the farm. Curiously, no 1900 building permits bear the name of Fischer or his building company, but abstract searches and inspection of house styles make it plausible that he built houses for Joseph T. Donovan's McKinley Realty Company that year.



5253 Vernon

It was in 1901 that the continuous frieze morphed into the broken frieze. In interim examples, the frieze had separate ornaments (wreaths or short swags) instead of continuous swags but was not actually interrupted by the windows. As the year progressed, the ornaments

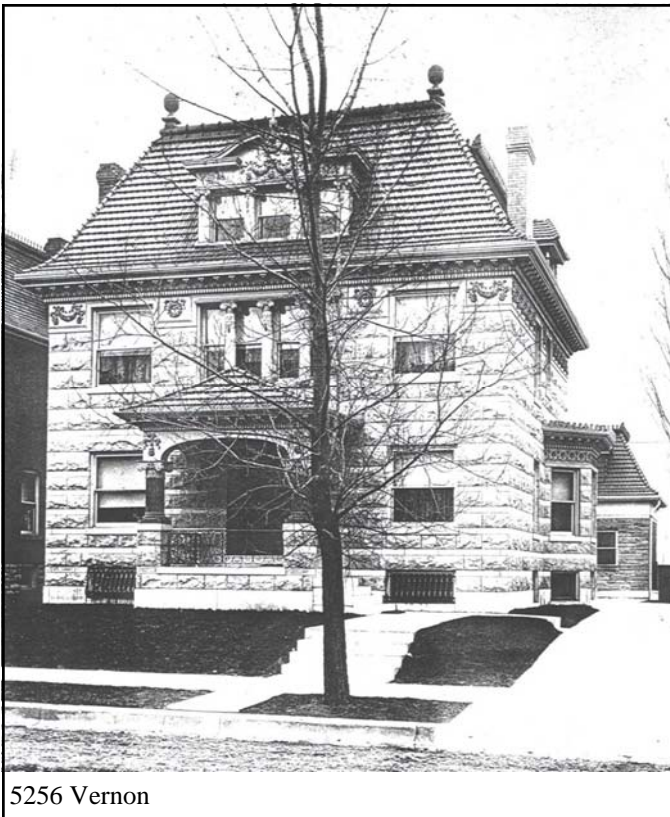
descended farther into the spaces between the windows, but still not as far down as on the last house built in 1901, Fischer's own residence at 5256 Vernon.

5256 Vernon (1901), which faces north, is shown as it looked when it was new. The unusually wide lot-60 feet-allows a driveway to run along the west side of the house from street to stable. The east wall, which is very close to the house next door, is unornamented brick, but the other three walls abound with decorative flourishes. Even the front porch, with steps on its west side, is oriented toward the driveway. The façade and west wall are limestone, alternating wide rough-faced courses with narrow smooth courses. The broken frieze on the façade has both wreaths and swags, but when it wraps around to the west wall, it becomes a frieze of continuous swags except when it encounters a window. This elegant, ornate house was not only Fischer's family home but also a means of displaying his financial success and showcasing his craft.

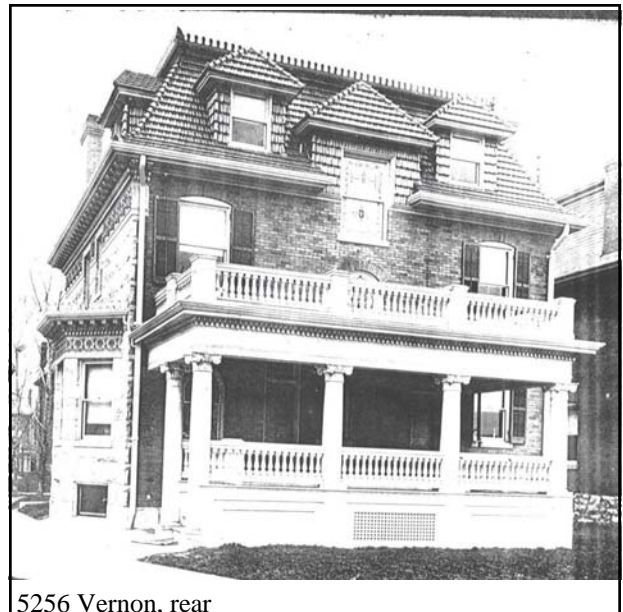
The broken frieze graced the majority of Fischer's houses from 1902 through 1908. The percentage dropped precipitously in 1909 and 1910, after which no Fischer house had a broken frieze. The chart below summarizes this trend, based on photographs taken for an inventory of Fischer's achievement.

Year	Available photos	Houses with broken friezes	Percentage of houses with broken friezes
1902	23	17	73.91
1903	22	20	90.91
1904	27	17	62.96
1905	27	25	92.59
1906	28	22	78.57
1907	24	15	62.50
1908	35	21	60.00
1909	23	5	21.74
1910	22	8	36.36

Fischer did not limit himself to owning one company at a time. In 1902, he and Harry Mephram incorporated the Cleveland Realty & Building Company, which built groups of houses on Cleveland, Lafayette, and McPherson avenues in 1902, 1904, and 1907 respectively. In 1903, he and Levi F. Gardner incorporated the Grand Valley Building Company, which, despite its name, sold houses built by the A. A. Fischer Architectural & Building Company. The *St. Louis Daily Record* for May 22, 1906 lists "Miscellaneous Deeds" for three new corporations: the A. A. Fischer Realty Co. and Builders Manufacturing & Supply Co., which are mentioned in the 1912 edition of *The Book of St. Louisans*, and Vernon Realty & Construction Co., which is not – but which is tied to Fischer by several items of information, including the house styles. Because the actual notices of incorporation are missing from the *Daily*



5256 Vernon



5256 Vernon, rear

Record, so are the names of the stockholders and how many shares they owned.⁹

The distinction between architects and builders was often fuzzy in St. Louis during Fischer's career. Missouri did not register architects until 1941.¹⁰ In city directories, Fischer's occupation was variously described as real estate, president (of one or more companies), contractor, architect, builder, and, toward the end of his life, carpenter. His granddaughter recalled watching him make architectural drawings. The A. A. Fischer Architectural & Building Company employed "a force of draughtsmen and superintendents."¹¹ The architect Edward H. A. Volkmann worked for Fischer from 1903 to 1906 before incorporating his own company, the Victor Architectural & Bldg. Co.¹² Edmund C. Little, an architect trained at MIT, had been architectural superintendent of the Missouri State Building at the 1904 World's Fair. He worked in Fischer's office from 1906 to 1911, then independently, then for Klipstein & Rathmann.¹³ Little and his wife lived in a Fischer-built apartment building from 1910 into the 1930s. Levi F. Gardner, sometimes described as a superintendent for Fischer, designed the Fischer-built house at 6224 Washington. Chris Garvey, though he was president of the American Diagraph Company at the time, designed the house Fischer built for Chris and Jennie Garvey at 6317 Washington.¹⁴

3655 Flora (1903) was built for Charles A. Stevenson, president of the C. A. Stevenson Pig Iron & Coke Company. In some ways it looks like an oversized version of 5256 Vernon, but with eyebrow dormers, a balcony, two full-height granite columns, and a large side porch.



5614 Maple, front

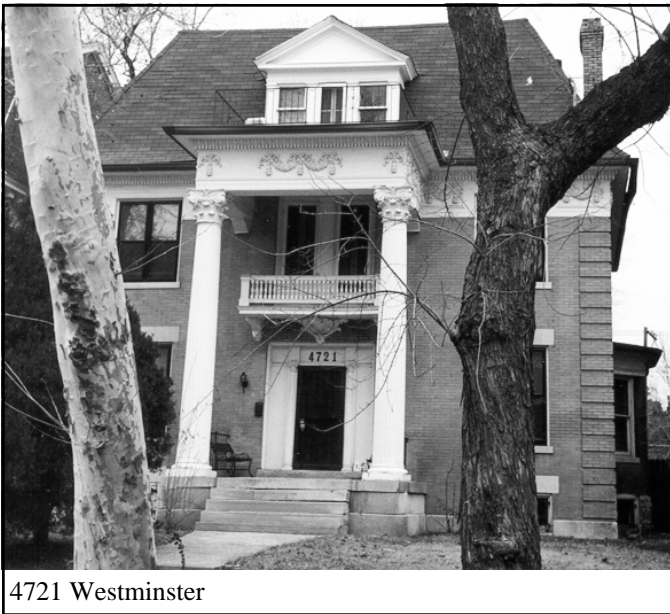
5614-16 Maple and its next-door neighbor, 5618-20 Maple (both 1905) are flats, each with two porches. From the front, each house appears to have a full third story with a flared, hipped roof and a centered dormer. Now that the house to the east of it has been demolished, the side view of 5614-16 Maple reveals that the impressive roof is only a few feet deep and the house has only two stories. Because houses in St. Louis were built so close together – "near enough to borrow a cup of sugar from your neighbor through the windows," as one observer put it – builders lavished most of their attention on the view from the street. Fischer houses must be inspected one by one, because some of these roofs do signal a genuine third story.



5614 Maple, side



3655 Flora



4721 Westminster

4721 Westminster (1906) was built for Charles F. Levy, president of the Hub Furniture Company. Its steeply pitched, hipped, flared roof encloses an actual third story, though the building permit describes the house as having two and a half stories. Eleven Fischer houses with two-story columns have been found, all built between 1906 and 1908. Some have flat roofs with parapets.



6164 Washington

6164 Washington (1908) has a flat roof with a straight parapet. A centered pediment rises above the cornice. The broken frieze has swags at each end, but substitutes pairs of brackets on either side of the center bay's double window, which is divided by a colonnette. The full-width porch has an arched frieze, four half-height Ionic columns, and a wooden balustrade.

A similar flat roof, straight parapet, and centered pediment are seen on the Calvin Opera House (1909) at 311 Elm Street in Washington, Missouri. Lawrence H. Caugh assisted Edmund C. Little in designing the building, which was constructed by the A. A. Fischer Architectural & Building Company. The opera house, reportedly 53 by 124 feet, was named for J. L. Calvin, who had purchased the land for the building. The lower of its two floors was used as a skating rink and dance hall and the upper floor as a theatre for stage plays and "moving pictures." A 1909 photo shows that the arched, broken pediments in the left and right bays were originally above double doors, while the center bay contained a large triple window.¹⁵ By 2000, as shown here, the entrance had been moved to the center bay and was shaded by a marquee. A recent Internet search found an advertisement for a rock concert at the Calvin Theatre.



Calvin Theatre, Washington , MO

Although Fischer built in many parts of the city, his largest concentrations were in two neighborhoods. In Mount Cabanne/Raymond Place – bounded by Union, Page, Kingshighway, and Delmar – he built approximately 96 houses from 1896 to 1908. In Skinker-DeBaliviere – bounded by Skinker, Delmar, DeBaliviere, and Forest Park Parkway – he built 68 houses and

16 apartment buildings from 1907 to 1911.

In 1910, his most ambitious year in terms of speculative expenditure, Fischer built 12 houses and 13 apartment buildings in Skinker-DeBaliviere. A multiple-page advertising flyer proclaims, "The above show a part of our gigantic building operation in which we spent \$1,000,000." The flyer says of the corner apartment building at 6102-04 Washington and 519-21 Rosedale that it "contains 12 apartments, 6 five-room and 6 four-room apartments, beautifully located, steam heated, fire-proof halls with tile floors, iron stairways with marble treads...wainscoting, oak floors, hardwood finish, built-in buffets and china cases, tile baths. All rooms bright and well arranged."



6102-04 Washington

THE HOUSE OF CARDS COLLAPSES, 1910-1936

In retrospect, Fischer was too optimistic about Skinker-DeBaliviere. Profit margins were narrow. For example, he netted only \$760 when he sold 6188 McPherson for \$8,500. Commonly, he took out two deeds of trust on each property: first, to acquire the land, and second, to buy the building materials and pay his workers. A typical deed of trust for the latter was \$5,000 at six percent for three years. Some houses were sold within a few months, but as time went on, it was not unusual for a house or apartment building to remain unsold when it was time to repay the loan. For a while, Fischer bought time by taking out second deeds of trust on the same properties in order to pay the first ones. Construction came to a screeching halt. Ultimately, many houses and apartment buildings were put up for auction by the holders of the deeds of trust, and sold for much less than their real value. Other houses were sold directly

for \$100 or less; according to his granddaughter; the buyers being Fischer's workmen, whom he would have been unable to pay in any other way.

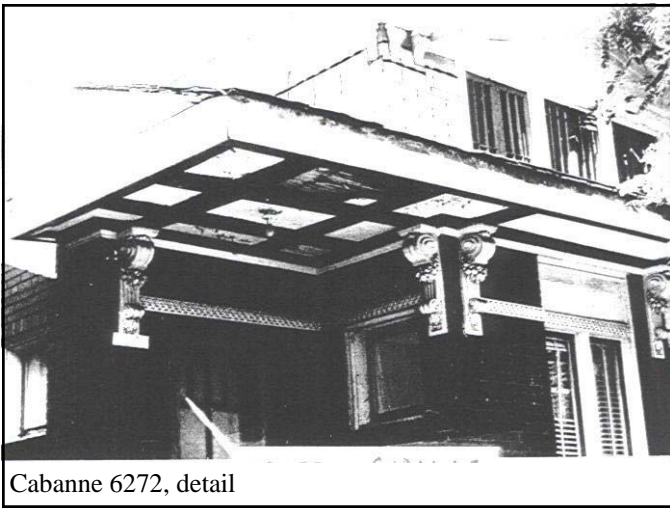
By the end of 1916, Fischer had lost most of his properties, including his home at 5256 Vernon, where, according to the 1910 census, he and Frances and their son, Roland, had had two live-in servants. (Roland, who had worked for his father since 1909, was married in 1912.) Alex and Frances lived in Kirkwood for a few years before moving to a brick building near a Suburban streetcar stop in Pine Lawn. The building also housed a grocery store, a barbershop, and at least one other apartment, which was occupied by Frances's brother.¹⁶

In 1921 and 1922, Alex and Roland attempted a comeback. They built thirteen brick bungalows in the 6200 and 6300 blocks of Cabanne and the 6300 block of North Drive, and nine two-story four-family brick tenements at 6256-58 and 6306 Cabanne and in the 6400 block of North Drive. (All the buildings on North Drive have since been demolished.) This was apparently the last time Roland worked with his father; afterwards, he worked for other real estate companies and later became a brick vendor.¹⁷

Detail of the bungalow at 6272 Cabanne (1922) shows elaborate scrolled brackets under the eaves. Though Fischer had progressed with the times and was building in a radically different style, he had not lost his penchant for decorative touches. The ornamental brackets were under the roofline and between the windows—just as the broken frieze had been on his earlier houses.

In 1925 Alex was the builder of the Spanish Revival house designed by William W. Sabin for Adolph Boldt at 7327 Westmoreland. Other projects from the 1920s include two apartment buildings, a small house, and a porch.

But prosperity never returned to Alex and Frances Fischer. Their last home was a narrow, one-story house at 8479 Kempland in University City. Alex died of bronchial pneumonia at the age of 70 on September 16, 1936 in St. Louis. He was buried in Washington, Missouri.¹⁸ Frances outlived Alex by 21 years. She never again had a home of her own, but circulated among the homes of her sister, her son, and her three grandchildren.



Cabanne 6272, detail

PHOTO CREDITS

Norman & Dorothy Fischer and the late Lorraine Fischer Cruise: 5256 Vernon (façade), 5256 Vernon (rear), advertising flyer.
 Nancy Moore Hamilton: 5253 Vernon, 5231 Vernon, 3655 Flora, 5614-16 Maple (façade), 4721 Westminster, 6164 Washington, Calvin Theatre, 6102-10 Washington.
 Robert Powers: 5614-16 Maple (side view).
 Sue Rehkopf: Urban renewal photo of 6272 Cabanne.
 Joan Emerson Young: 2244 S. Jefferson.

NOTES

- 1 Norman and Dorothy Fischer, the late Lorraine Fischer Cruise, and Rick Fischer have generously shared family memories and pictures.
- 2 "Fischer's Houses would make a Line from Forest Park to the Mississippi," *The Builder*, July 1905, n. p.
- 3 John W. Leonard, ed., *The Book of St. Louisans* (St. Louis: St. Louis Republic, 1906; 2nd ed., 1912) is an indispensable resource, but the profile of Fischer contains errors. Alexander Fischer and Frances Peterson were married in 1890, not 1889. Their son Roland's middle initial was A, not C. Alex's business partner in the 1890s was Mephram, not "Mephan." These errors appear in the 1906 and 1912 editions, but the latter edition omits the phrase, "has built about six hundred houses in St. Louis."
- 4 All building permits in the *St. Louis Daily Record* from 1890 to mid-1917 for both the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County have been searched, along with County permits from 1917 to 1930. The City issued Fischer only one permit between August 22, 1911 and May 7, 1917. The County issued him no permits from December 2, 1909 to December 5, 1921. A day-by-day search of building permits in the City of St. Louis from 1917 to 1930 is in progress.
- 5 The pictures in this article were chosen with a view to showing the richness and variety of Fischer's work and how his style evolved. Houses illustrated in other published works are not repeated here. For photographs and discussion of the 1905 Fischer house at 3222 Hawthorne, see Carolyn Hewes Toft and Jane Molloy Porter, *Compton Heights: A History and Architectural Guide* (St. Louis: Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc., 1984.). For his houses on Westmoreland and Portland Places, see Julius Hunter et al, *Westmoreland and Portland Places* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1988.) For his houses in Parkview, see Mary Henderson Gass, Jean Fahey Eberle, and Judith Phelps Little,

Parkview: A Saint Louis Urban Oasis, 1905-2005 (St. Louis: Virginia Publishing Co., 2005.)

6 Carolyn Hewes Toft with Lynn Josse, *St. Louis: Landmarks & Historic Districts*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc., 2002), p. 131.

7 Much information about Fischer's early life and his relatives and in-laws has been gleaned from the Kiel File, a large collection of local newspaper clippings, at the Washington (Mo.) Historical Society. Other sources include census records, county marriage records, tombstones, and Arkansas maps and land records.

8 *The Builder*, July 1905.

9 *St. Louis Daily Record*, various years. The A. A. Fischer Realty Co. was responsible for most of the Fischer houses in Skinker-DeBaliviere from 1907 to 1910.

10 In *The Way We Came: A Century of the AIA in St. Louis*, ed. George McCue (St. Louis: The Patrice Press), p. 47, Esley Hamilton writes that the St. Louis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects began in 1924 to encourage the State of Missouri to establish a registration board for architects. No law was passed until 1941.

11 *The Builder*, July 1905.

12 *The Builder*, January 26, 1903: "Mr. Ed. H. A. Volkmann, architect, now associated with the A. A. Fischer Architectural and Building Co., 915 Chestnut street, announces that plans are about ready for ten dwellings to be erected on Fairmount [now Cates], between Clarendon and Academy. Brick, stone foundations, slate roof, plate and art glass, heating, electric light and bells, plumbing, granitoid walks, etc.; total cost \$45,000." The incorporation of Ed Volkmann's Victor Architectural & Building Company is reported in the *St. Louis Daily Record*, August 22, 1906.

13 Little's connections to MIT and Klipstein & Rathmann are found in the membership files of the St. Louis Chapter of the AIA. The attribution of the Missouri State Building is from Ralph Gregory, *A History of Washington, Missouri* (Washington, Missouri: Washington Preservation, Inc., Washington, Mo., 1991), p. 56.

14 *Gould's St. Louis Directory*, various years. *St. Louis Daily Record*, building permits.

15 Gregory, pp. 56 & 58.

16 *Gould's St. Louis city and county directories*, 1916-1922.

17 *Gould's St. Louis city and county directories*, 1924-1943.

18 Death certificate, City of St. Louis. Obituary in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 17, 1936. Obituary in the files of Nieburg-Vitt Funeral Home, Washington, Mo.

\$1,000,000.

Has Been Spent by the

A. A. FISCHER
ARCHITECTURAL & BUILDING CO.

IN BEAUTIFUL

Washington Heights

For Choice Residence and
Investment Property. See Us

Office: Nos. 728-730 Chestnut Street



A. A. FISCHER, President

APARTMENTS

FOR SALE BY THE

A. A. FISCHER
ARCHITECTURAL & BUILDING CO.

IN BEAUTIFUL

Washington Heights

Choice Investment Property

TELEPHONES: KINLOCH, Central 4847. BELL, Main 5106



SOUTH SIDE OF WESTMINSTER PLACE, EAST OF SKINKER BOULEVARD, IN WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

News Letter

© 2005 The Society of Architectural
Historians. St. Louis and Missouri
Valley Chapters.

NewsLetter is published quarterly by the St. Louis and Missouri Chapters
of Architectural Historians.

Please mail editorial correspondence and submissions for publication to:
Esley Hamilton, Editor, 7346 Balson Avenue, University City, Missouri
63130 or contact him by telephone: (314) 615-4696, or by email ehamil-
ton@stlouisco.com. Deadlines for submission of material for publication in
NewsLetter are as follows:

Spring issue	15 February
Summer issue	15 May
Fall issue	15 August
Winter Issue	15 November

St. Louis Chapter, SAH 2004-2005 Board of Directors

Karen Bode Baxter	President
Kristina Gray Perez	Vice President
Mimi Stiritz	Secretary
Richard Mueller	Treasurer
Esley Hamilton	NewsLetter Editor

Memberships:

Individual, \$10	Student, \$5
Supporting, \$25	Joint, \$15

St. Louis and Missouri Valley Chapters
Society of Architectural Historians
Post Office Box 23110
St. Louis, Missouri 63108