Cord Asendorf

January 27, 1858 to January 6, 1944

by

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History 300
Dr. Roger Warlick
Cord Asendorf, a prominent Savannahian and German immigrant, will long be remembered for his Victorian house at 1921 Bull Street. Cord, who became successful in the grocery business also was very ingenious in his real estate dealings.

Renewed interest in the preservation of old buildings will insure the remembrance of Cord through his unique architectural taste. Many people, however, will never forget Cord Asendorf the grocer or Cord Asendorf the family man.
Cord Asendorf

The story of Cord Asendorf is a very interesting one. Cord Asendorf was born on January 27, 1858 in the small town of Osterholtz. Here, young Cord lived and worked with his father building cigar boxes until the age of fourteen. At fourteen, young Cord decided to come to the promised land of America and seek out his fortune. Leaving his family behind in 1872, Cord reached Savannah on September 20 of that same year.¹

Upon his arrival, young Cord worked and stayed with his uncle, J.M. Asendorf who owned and operated a grocery store on the corner of Jones and Habersham Streets. An interesting story appears in the Savannah Morning News dated May 11, 1878:

A Bold Outrage

Late yesterday afternoon whilst Mr. John M. Asendorf was quietly reclining in a chair in his store, situated on the corner of Habersham and Jones Street lane, two Negro men entered, and without a remark, one immediately caught hold of him, pinioning his arms behind him, whilst the other made a dash for the till. Mr. Asendorf resisted the villain who had hold of him so vigorously that his confederate was compelled to come to his assistance.

A knife was drawn by one of the rascals and an attempt made to stab Mr. Asendorf, who, however, proved a match for
them, and before they could inflict any injury, freed himself, when they immediately fled.

Mr. Asendorf's clothes were cut somewhat, but he was unhurt beyond the shock of so sudden an attack. He failed to recognize the Negroes, but has given the best description he could to the police, and it is to be hoped they may yet be apprehended.

Cord took the oath of American allegiance on April 15, 1879 and is listed in the Savannah Morning News as doing so. Cord is listed in the Savannah City Directory in 1880 as a clerk for his uncle. Cord was twenty years old by this time, and had a room at 49 Jones Street.

The Savannah City Directory has Cord listed as a clerk for his uncle in 1881; however, in May of that year, Cord opened his own store. Located on Tattnall Street, Cord was becoming quite successful for the age of just twenty-one. After a couple of years Cord sold this store to his brother, Fred Asendorf, and moved to East Broad and Liberty. There Cord started another grocery store and is listed in the Savannah City Directory of 1884. Cord purchased this property on June 23, 1883 for the sum of $1,975.00.

Operating a successful trade, Cord purchased his second piece of property on April 27, 1885. This property was quite large, located between Huntington, Hall and Gwinnett Streets. Cord purchased this property at an auction for the payment of back taxes. His was the highest bid at $1,175.00. By this time, Cord had become very well-known in business as well as social circles. A newspaper article of 1886 invites him and his acquaintances to a
funeral. 6

In addition to selling groceries, Cord decided to open up a bar and sell liquor. Both his brother and his uncle were doing this at the time. Cord is listed in the January, 1887 newspaper advertisement receiving his license to sell liquor. 7

Cord's life was not all work and no play. Being active in social circles, Cord was also a member of the German Volunteers. He is listed in 1888, as a corporal for the Volunteers when they celebrated their 42nd anniversary. 8 Among other people in the German Volunteers at the time was a prominent Savannah baker, Captain John Derst who was one of Cord's many friends.

In April of 1888, Cord made another purchase of land. This time, he was the highest bidder at another land auction for 18 Bartow Ward. His bid, being the highest, was for $997.00. 9

June of 1889 made way for another land purchase; this one in Bartow Ward at Jones Street for the sum of $1,500.00.

The following years were to be important ones for Mr. Asendorf, as he was to be married in February. His wife to be, Bernadine Hagen, was also a German immigrant. She had arrived in Savannah on October 18, 1884, after a voyage which left her engineer brother dead in the Canary Islands. 10 Bernadine had worked as a governess for the Kuck family here in Savannah, cooking and sewing for three children until her marriage.

Cord and Bernadine were married on her birthday and several newspaper accounts of the event are available. One which is quite interesting is as follows:
Runaway at a Wedding

The Bride's and Groom's Carriage nearly upset in a collision.

The Asendorf bridal party had a narrow escape last night from what might have been a serious accident. After the wedding at the Lutheran church, the party drove to Turner Hall where the reception was held. The band was on the sidewalk in front of the hall awaiting the arrival of the bride and groom, and as their carriage drove up and the driver stepped down from his box, the band began playing.

The driver, holding the reins in one hand, had opened the carriage door and the bride's maid had alighted, leaving the bride and groom and the groom's best man in the carriage. The horses, frightened by the music, broke away and started into a run before either of the three were able to get out. The team was a spirited one and dashed across Jefferson Street, dragging the driver, who clung tightly to the reins. The carriage collided with a telegraph pole at the corner of Broughton and Jefferson Streets, partially checking the horses, but not stopping them. The driver was thrown between the wheels, but he held on and drew the team up on the sidewalk.

In front of the Singer sewing machine agency the carriage struck a sign post, knocking it down and nearly overturning the occupants of the carriage. There the runaway was stopped, and the bride and groom were helped out and assisted by the groomsman and got to the hall. Neither of them were injured. The driver, James Hines, was considerably bruised about the
legs and arms, but not so that he was unable to take care of his team.

The street and sidewalk in front of Turner Hall was crowded with people, and for awhile there was a good deal of excitement until it was known that none of those who were in the runaway were seriously hurt.

Another article from a local newspaper upon which only the clipping is available states:

One of the leading social events of the season was the marriage of Mr. Cord Asendorf and Miss Bernadine Hagen at the Lutheran Church Wednesday evening last. The ceremony was performed by Reverend W.S. Bowman before a vast concourse of the friends of the young couple.

The reception was held at Turner's Hall, which had been neatly festooned and decorated. The hall was thronged with the relatives and friends of the bride and groom who showered their congratulations upon the happy pair.

The supper was furnished by the ladies of the German Aid Society and was one of the most elegant ever served in the city.

Dancing was indulged in until a very late, or as I might say, a very early hour.

Mr. Asendorf is one of our most energetic and pushing young merchants. By his industry and frugality, he has acquired a handsome competency. The bride is accomplished and popular and is highly esteemed in German social circles where
she has a host of friends who admire and love her for her gentleness and disposition of character. I extend my congratulations.

Another announcement in the February 20, 1890 Savannah Morning News is as follows:

Mr. Cord Asendorf and Miss Bernadine Hagen were married last night at eight-o'clock at the Lutheran Church by Reverend Dr. W.S. Bowman. The groom's best man was Mr. Fred Asendorf and the bridesmaid was Miss Gesene Asendorf. The other attendants were Mr. Fred Schmaars, Mr. Herman Lange, Miss Annie Mehrtens and Miss Matilda Goethe.

After an eventful marriage, Cord pursued his avocation of buying more property. On July 18, 1890, Cord purchased Lots 2 and 3 in Wesley Ward for $2,505.00. In March of 1891, Cord made some improvements on his investment of lots. The newspaper lists a permit for two two-story houses between Habersham and Price.

Later again on December 2, 1891, Cord purchased some property at Gordon and Price Streets in Wesley Ward for $1,600.00. During that year Bernadine bore their first child, a girl, who unfortunately died shortly after birth. It was not until July of the following year that Mr. Cord Asendorf was blessed with another child, a boy, Cord, Jr.

With their new baby, Cord and Bernadine took their only trip back to Germany in 1893. The ship had no accommodations for babies, and Cord and Bernadine improvised their trunk to form a cradle.

After their return from Germany, Cord was blessed with two
more children, Annie in 1894, and Christian in 1896. On September 21, 1898, Cord purchased some land on Bull Street in Estill Ward. His deed states his payment at $3,600.00 for the property; however, a later tax statement claims $2,000.00. This purchase of property out in the "wilderness" at the time, was to be an historic event. It was here that Mr. Asendorf was to build a premiere house that Savannahians had not seen the likes of before or since. Cord Asendorf engaged Hawley Construction Company to build his home. Whether or not Hawley had a pattern book for Cord to look at is uncertain. It seems likely that he created his design using precision tools as many carpenters did in that period.

During the construction of the house, Bernadine gave birth to another child who died soon thereafter. This traumatic event almost led Cord to halt construction permanently. At this time, Cord's house could be recognized as being quite fancy. It is recorded in the tax records as the house costing $3,000.00. Quite a change from today's housing costs!

Cord and Bernadine's next five children would be born at the Bull Street address, from Wilma in November 1899, to Meta, born in December of 1907.

The house is described in the Amoco Torch as being "one of the best examples of steamboat gothic Victorian architecture" found anywhere.

After the construction of Cord's dream house, he retired from his grocery store and took up the full time job of caring for his real estate investments. Retiring at the age of forty, Cord made only one more purchase of land, this being in Davis Ward. On July 2, 1900, Cord purchased Lots 19 and 20 on Price Street for
$2,800.00. In all, Cord had purchased over eight different properties comprising a fairly large amount of real estate. This is quite an accomplishment when, in addition he had to run a grocery store and bar successfully and raise a family. Cord had come quite far from his early clerk duties, searching for his fortune in this, the promised land of America. Not many of us today will be able to retire at forty so successfully.

After his retirement, Cord Asendorf devoted much of his time to his property and family. Mr. Asendorf is also remembered by his family as a lover of the outdoors, and an avid sportsman. In the early days at Bull Street, Cord can be remembered as keeping a horse and cow at his Bull Street residence. "When cars became fashionable, Cord had one of the first automobiles in Savannah, a Cole 30-40," said his daughter, Meta. Three of Cord's daughters were married at home. The Bull Street residence has had many happy and somber events take place within its walls, regarding the Asendorf family. Fortunately, this remarkable residence will always be kept due to its historical importance.

Cord spent many days after his retirement sitting in his favorite chair on the porch or piazza at Bull Street, enjoying the seasonal breezes and talking to fellow Savannahians.

On December 26, 1930, Cord's wife Bernadine died, leaving Cord and his family behind. Cord enjoyed his many activities as well as his family up until his death in 1944. Both Cord and his wife are buried in Bonaventure Cemetery in Section N, Lots 37 and 38.

Mr. Cord Asendorf left many, many friends behind. Through his unusual taste in building architecture, he will never be
Many books and magazines have published photos of Cord's street residence. This interesting house has also caught the eye of noteworthy Savannah visitors. In 1933, President Roosevelt stopped his motorcade so his mother could get a better look at the house. Burt Reynolds, Gregory Peck and others knocked upon its doors. It was also featured in "location" testing in a major motion picture.

Cord Asendorf will always be remembered for many things. He was an active member of the Lutheran Church, a member of the Friendly Society of Savannah, director of the Atlantic Mutual Fire Insurance Company, and a member of the German Volunteers. His friends and family will never forget him. Kind, generous, and loving, he is a man we can all strive to become. The Bull Street residence still stands as a memorial of this great immigrant, Cord Asendorf.
DIES HERE—Cord Asendorf, popular Sandusky man who died at his home but three days after a short illness.

CORD ASENDORF
PASSES AT HOME
NEAR 80TH BIRTHDAY
Well Known Quaker Leader
After Service.
"Gingerbread House"

This Victorian house at 1921 Hall St. is one of Savannah’s best known of this era. Called "the Gingerbread House" because of its ornate decorative carvings, the house was built by Cord Asendorf, a German-born grocer, in 1899.

Recently purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Steve Geoghegan from Miss Sophie Asendorf, daughter of the builder, the house is being repainted.

The house attracted the attention of President Franklin D. Roosevelt as he was being driven down Hall Street in 1933. The President had his car stopped so that his mother could see the home from all angles. The house is expected to be shown in The National Geographic Magazine when its article on Savannah appears this year. It was featured in "location" shooting for the recent movie, "Hello, Long and the Traveling All-Stars."
THIS early photograph was taken when Bull Street was unpaved and gas street lamps were still in use. The Asendorpf family is assembled on the ornate porch for the photograph.
Notes

1. Diary of Cord Asendorf.
   Savannah Morning News, 15 April 1879.
2. Savannah City Directory, 1880.
18. Armistice Day.
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Savannah Morning News, 7 January 1904
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Savannah Telephone Directory, J.R. Asendorf.