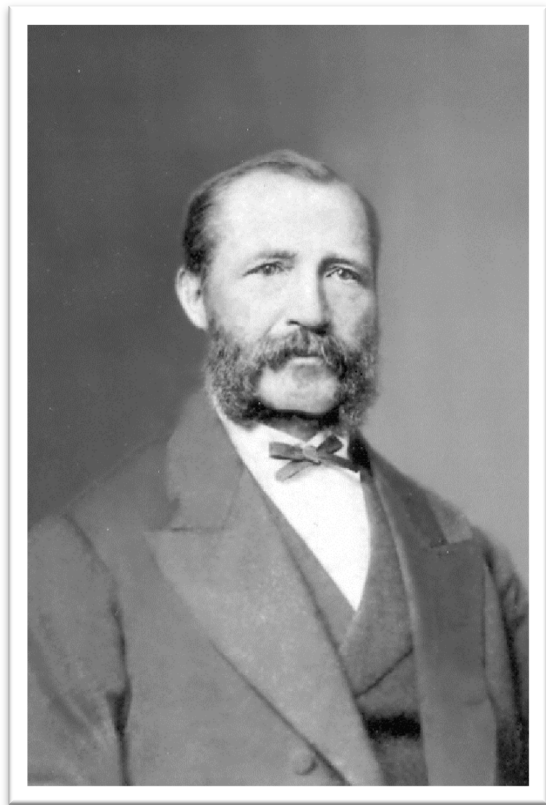# A short biography of William Vahland

Prepared for the City of Greater Bendigo

By Dr Robyn Ballinger, History in the Making, PO Box 30 Longlea VIC 3551

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CITY OF GREATER
BENDIGO

William Vahland is best known for his design of many of Bendigo's prominent public and private buildings.[1] But in many ways, Vahland's story also reflects that of other successful German migrants who made Bendigo their home.[2] Political turmoil and the prospect of riches on the goldfields saw Germans seek out a life on the Bendigo diggings. In 1857, 1,266 Germans (4 per cent of the population at that time) were recorded as being present on the Bendigo goldfields mainly in the areas of Diamond Hill, New Chum Gully, Victoria Hill and Ironbark, and the Whipstick.[3] In 1859, 500 German stonemasons were brought to the area to break a strike instigated by the movement for an eight-hour day on the Melbourne to Sandhurst railway line.[4] These German migrants made significant contributions to the district in engineering, geology, religion, mining, the arts, viticulture, architecture and building.[5]

At the age of 26 years, Carl Wilhelm Vahland arrived in Melbourne in September 1854 on board the sailing ship 'San Francisco'. Within a few days, he was on his way to the Bendigo diggings with companions from the ship, among them Jacob Cohn (later founder of Cohn's Brewery in Bridge Street, Bendigo), who became a lifelong friend. Vahland may have also travelled out with another family member, perhaps a brother. A child was born to an Adolphe Vahland and his wife, Anna (nee Sager), in 1855 at Sandhurst,[6] and in 1858, Adolphe was teaching German classes in the town; interested persons were asked to submit their details to the office of Vahland and Getzschmann.[7]

Vahland found no fortune in seeking gold in Bendigo. Instead he took up work as a carpenter, and opened a carpenter's shop in Bridge Street ca.1855 where he made gold cradles and other diggers' accessories. In October 1856, 'the inhabitants of Sandhurst and the surrounding district' were informed that William Vahland, architect, had opened an office in McCrae Street, opposite the Black Swan Hotel, where 'plans, specifications, and the superintendence of works' could be organised at moderate charges.[8] In March 1858, Vahland entered into partnership with another German architect, Robert

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[1] The details of this biography, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Ken Roberts, "W. C. Vahland Architect 1828-1915" (Architectural Research Thesis, School of Environmental Design, Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1984). Geoffrey Lawler, "The Vahland School" (Honours thesis, Department of Architecture, University of Melbourne, 1979). 'Death of Mr. W. C. Vahland.' Bendigo Advertiser, 22 July 1915, 10. Amy Huxtable, 'He Builded Better Than He Knew...In This City of Gold.' Bendigo Advertiser, 5 November 1977, n.p. The portrait photograph of William Vahland is from 'Vahland, William Charles (1828–1915)', Obituaries Australia, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2010-15, http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/vahland-william-charles-13901/text24777, accessed 29 January 2015.

[2] The unification of Germany did not occur until 1871 up until which time it consisted of a number of independent states.

[3] Cited in Geoff Lawler, "Bendigo's Heritage, More than Grand Buildings", in *Bendigo: Nothing But Gold 150 Years of Gold mining Conference Papers 27-28 October 2001*, 33.

[4] Frank Cusack, *Bendigo : A History* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1973), 152.

[5] Geoff Lawler, "Bendigo's Heritage, More than Grand Buildings", op. cit., 33.

[6] Digger Pioneer Index Victoria 1836-1888. Prior to 1854, the town was known as Bendigo, re-named Sandhurst in that year, then Bendigo again in 1891. The goldfield was consistently referred to as Bendigo.

[7] 'Advertising.' *Bendigo Advertiser,* 14 August 1858, 2.

[8] 'Advertising.' *Bendigo Advertiser*, 9 October 1856, 4.

Getzschmann, and moved the practice into offices at 2 Pall Mall. In 1872, Vahland employed German architect, Wilhelm Eduard (William) Nicolai, as a draftsman and clerk of works.[9] The partnership operated until Getzschmann's death in 1875. Perhaps because of a connection with German miners there, in 1862 Vahland travelled to Dunedin, New Zealand, for some months at the peak of the Otago gold rush to take up a position as a senior partner in an architectural business, Vahland and Monson. He returned to Bendigo in 1863. In January 1892, the partnership of W. C. Vahland and Son was established after Henry, Vahland's eldest son, having finished his training in architecture at Diepholz in Germany, joined the firm. In 1895 Vahland and Son moved to a two-storey building, designed by the firm, constructed at 254 Hargreaves Street.[10] William Vahland retired from the architectural practice at the end of 1900 and, in 1901, Henry formed a partnership with architect John Beebe (the brother of William Beebe, also an architect in Bendigo), at which time Vahland and Beebe added another storey to the offices in Hargreaves Street.[11] After Henry died in 1902 aged 42 years, William Vahland returned from retirement and re-joined the firm until 1912, when John Beebe became the sole operator.[12]

Vahland's firm was not the only architectural practice operating in the goldfields town of Bendigo,[13] but the firm's output was prolific, particularly during the period 1870-80 when it employed a staff of seven. Vahland tended towards the French Renaissance in his lushly decorated bank facades in Bendigo and used the mansard roof in his public buildings, such as the Bendigo Town Hall. In this, as in his Hellenistic Greek work, architectural historian Miles Lewis suggests, Vahland was influenced in some degree by current fashions in Germany.[14]

Vahland and his firm designed and directed the building of many of Bendigo's finest buildings, including the Town Hall, the Shamrock Hotel, the Bendigo Hospital, the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum, the School of Mines, the Mechanics Institute, the Princess Theatre, the Bendigo Masonic Temple, the Cascades in Rosalind Park, the Alexandra Fountain, the Sandhurst Club, the Commercial, National and Colonial Banks, the grandstand at Canterbury Park, Eaglehawk, as well as churches, commercial buildings, and private homes. The firm also opened an office in Echuca, and erected buildings in Hay, Deniliquin, Lorne, Lancefield, Rochester, Rushworth, Swan Hill, Yarrawonga and Benalla.[15] In addition, Vahland was also the architect for branches of the Union Bank constructed in northern Victoria.

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[9] Mike Butcher, "The Architects," in *Bendigo the German Chapter*, ed. Frank Cusack (Bendigo, Vic.: The German Heritage Society, 1998), 95.

[10] Mike Butcher and Gill Flanders, *Bendigo Historic Buildings* (Maryborough, Vic.: National Trust of Australia (Victoria), 1987), 35.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 6,35. *Bendigo Advertiser*, 1857-1915.

[13] For other architects see Butcher, "The Architects."

[14] Miles Lewis, 'The French Disconnection', in *Explorations: A Journal of French-Australian Connections*. No. 3, 2010, 31, http://www.msp.unimelb.edu.au/index.php/explorations/article/viewFile/35/33, accessed 2 March 2015.

[15] 'Vahland, William Charles (1828–1915)', *Obituaries Australia*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2010-15, http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/vahland-william-charles-13901/text24777, accessed 29 January 2015. 'W C Vahland', *Freemasons Bendigo*, Freemasons Bendigo Area, 2012, http://freemasonsbendigo.net.au/index.php/history/wc-vahland/, accessed 29 January 2015.

Carl Wilhelm Vahland was born to parents Johann Ernst Otto, a master builder, joiner and cabinet-maker, and Augusta Sophia Caroline (nee Scheele) Vahland on 2 October 1828 in the town of Nienburg an der Weser in the Electorate of Hannover, later part of Germany. The youngest of six sons and several daughters, he was baptised in the Lutheran Church in Nienburg.

Vahland finished his general schooling in Nienburg in 1844, then worked with his father for several years. In 1850, he entered the Polytechnic Baugewerkschule (School of Building) at Holzminden in the Duchy of Braunschweig-Luneberg, later part of Germany, a most prestigious tertiary college that provided training in building and architecture. After an initial examination, Vahland was accelerated to 'second class', thereby completing only two years of the usual required three-year course of study.

The founding director of the college, Friedrich Ludwig Haarmann, established it after a commission of examiners identified that many traditional building skills had been lost and trades could not keep up with technology. Haarmann tended to classicism in architecture. His curriculum placed importance on solid geometry, building construction, working drawings, estimates and design. Haarmann also emphasised the need for harmony between domestic and rustic buildings, and between commercial and public buildings.

In his final 'testimonial' or report card from the Baugewerkschule, Vahland received a 'good' or 'very good' for subjects that included spelling, mathematics, physics, descriptive geometry, sketching, designing, structures of buildings, order of columns, building law and regulations, surveying, and bookkeeping.

After completing his studies in March 1852, Vahland travelled for a period, then practised architecture in Hamburg and Bremen. In 1852 he was appointed engineer for the building of a section of railway line between Hannover and Kassel and set up an architectural practice in Diepholz, near Hannover. Because of his concern about political turmoil in Hannover characterised by a number of temporary alliances with both Prussia and Austria, and a wish to avoid military service, in 1854 Vahland sailed for the Australian goldfields and arrived in Bendigo in the same year.

Carl Wilhelm Vahland took out Australian citizenship on 20 July 1857, which may have prompted him to anglicise his name to William Vahland. In the same year Vahland designed and built his own residence at 58 Barkly Terrace, Bendigo. He soon took out shares in a number of local gold mines and, with other investors, leased 100 yards of the British and Foreign Reef at Tin Pot Gully in 1857.

On 21 July 1859, William Vahland married Jane Barrow at 'Charterhouse' in Runnymede (now Elmore) and changed his religion from Lutheran to Church of England. Jane was the eldest daughter of Henry and Elizabeth Barrow, who had emigrated from Norfolk in 1843 when Jane was two years old. Jane and William Vahland made their home in Barkly Terrace and had ten children in the ensuing years: Henry Ernest born in 1860; Eleanor Mary born in 1864; Charlotte Elizabeth born in 1866; William Christian born in 1869; Frederick Bismark born in 1871; Alice Audrey born in 1873; Laura Gertrude born in 1876; Doris Gertrude born in 1880; Ernst Otto born in 1883; and Margery born in 1885 (see Figure 1). Sadly, three of the Vahland children died: William in 1869 aged six months; Laura in 1878 aged 23 months; and Charlotte in 1883 aged 16 years.[16]

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[16] Digger Pioneer Index Victoria 1836-1888.

In 1880, Vahland became proprietor of his father in law, H. R. Barrow's, Charterhouse estate at Runnymede, where, in 1883 he established a substantial vineyard.[17] Vahland imported a special cross of seedling vines from Germany, and when the grapes were harvested, had them vacuum-packed and sent back to Germany for processing into wine. He exported his award winning wine through his depot in Swanston Street, Melbourne. In 1893 it was reported that Vahland was planning to ship 40 hogsheads of hermitage, two years old, to Messrs Burgoyne and Co., London, and that he also had an order from Glasgow for 60 hogsheads.[18] In 1900, Vahland put Charterhouse Estate and Vineyard up for sale. An advertisement described the property as comprising 810 acres on the Campaspe River, on which stood a commodious dwelling, stables, barns, coach house and a large brick two-storied wine cellar with a 50-acre vineyard irrigated by steam pumps.[19] However, it seems the property was not sold at this time as Vahland call for tenders for its sale later in 1904.[20]

William Vahland led a prominent public life. As a Justice of the Peace for over 40 years, he presided over the City Court. In 1859 he was manager of the Sandhurst No. 1 Fire Brigade, and in 1863, president of the German Association. He had a long association with the Bendigo Mutual Permanent Land and Building Society, as director from its foundation in 1858 until 1915, as chairman from 1870, and as managing director from 1891 through until his death in 1915.[21] He was a freemason before leaving Hannover and was a member and secretary of the Golden and Corinthian Lodge in Bendigo from 1863 to 1894, and in 1904 published a book on freemasonry in Bendigo. Vahland was a Bendigo City councillor for the Barkly Ward from 1869, and served as mayor. He resigned from council in 1872 to avoid a conflict of interest with regard to civic works his firm was undertaking. In 1884, he was treasurer of the School of Mines, where he was also an honorary examiner in mechanical drawings, architectural drawings, practical geometry and for the school of design.

In addition, Vahland was a director of the Bendigo Gas Company and the Bendigo Cognac Distillery Company, and served on the committees of the Bendigo Hospital and the School of Mines. He was also a member of the Victorian Institute of Architects.

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[17] 'The Charterhouse Vineyard, Runnymede.' *Bendigo Advertiser,* 3 January 1895, 3.

[18] 'Rural Topics.' *The Australasian,* 25 Nov 1893, 5.

[19] 'Advertising.' *The Australasian,* 11 August 1900, 52.

[20] 'Advertising.' *Bendigo Advertiser,* 24 February 1904, 8.

[21] Alan Mayne, *Building the Village: A History of the Bendigo Bank* (Kent Town, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 2008), 57.

Figure 1: A portrait of the Vahland family, ca.1900. Photo subjects believed to be - top row left to right: Otto Krome (married to Eleanor Vahland), Fritz (Fred) Bismark Vahland, Edith Vahland (nee Barker) married to Henry Vahland, Henry Vahland, and Doris Vahland; middle row left to right: Eleanor Krome (nee Vahland), W. C. Vahland, Jane Vahland (nee Barrow), and Alice Vahland; bottom row left to right: Margery Vahland, Pepper the dog, and (Ernst) Otto Vahland. Source: Mike Butcher, Goldfields Libraries Image Library.[22]

After retirement in 1901, Vahland visited Germany, returning to Bendigo in November of that year.

With the outbreak of World War One in 1914, it is likely that, along with other German residents of Bendigo, William Vahland experienced some anti-German sentiment.

William Vahland died at 87 years old on 21 July 1915. A number of Bendigo's leading citizens attended his funeral, including the mayor and city councillors, directors of the Bendigo Gas Company, the directors and management of the Bendigo Mutual Permanent Land and Building Society, members of the administrative council of the Bendigo School of Mines, and the local Masonic lodges. As a mark of

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[22] Some names of the people in this photo caption are different to those contained in the details supplied with the Goldfields Libraries photo. They have been changed according to information found during the research for this report.

respect, flags at the Town Hall and School of Mines were flown at the half-mast.[23] William Vahland was buried at the Bendigo Cemetery.

23   'Late Mr. W. C. Vahland.' *Bendigonian,* 29 July 1915, 4.