

# THE LAST HOTEL IN BLOOMSBURG

By **André Dominguez**

For a little more than two centuries, there has been a hotel in one form or another operating in the Town of Bloomsburg. The first one started operation in 1802 with many other hotels following as the Town grew. The hotel industry reached a peak during the railroad era of the 1930s. The steady decline of hotels during the latter part of the 1900s ended with the sale of the Magee Hotel, more recently called Magee's Main Street Inn, in 2003. Fittingly, the Town's last hotel was on the same site as one of its first.

The first recorded evidence of a hotel in Bloomsburg, then called Eyers' Village, dates to 1802, when John Chamberlain kept a hotel and tavern in his two-story frame building at the northwest corner of Main and Center Streets, then called Chamberlain's alley.<sup>1</sup> Guests could sleep on the floor of the public room if they spent at least sixpence at the bar.<sup>2</sup> As the village grew other hotels began to appear, mostly on Main Street, the Town's main thoroughfare.

In addition to Chamberlain's Tavern, three other hotels began operation in the early part of the 1800s. In 1810 the original Exchange Hotel, later the Magee Hotel, began as a log and frame structure. A hotel has been located on the site of the Exchange Hotel from 1810 to the present. In 1818 the Central Hotel, another log structure, began operation.<sup>3</sup> It became a prominent hotel and continued operating until 1931, when it was destroyed by one of the most difficult fires to fight in Bloomsburg's history.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the Forks Hotel, erected around 1825, greeted guests at the fork in the road where Main and East Streets met Lightstreet Road. The Forks Hotel operated until it was removed in 1875.<sup>5</sup> Although not the reason for its removal, this made it possible to extend Main Street up College Hill to Bloomsburg Normal School's Institute Hall, now known as Carver Hall. (See the table at the end of this article for a more accurate location for these and other hotels.)

The hostelry business continued to grow in Bloomsburg into the 1900s. This growth can be explained by three important developments in Bloomsburg's history: politics, industry, and railroads.

The first development centered on politics. Shortly after the creation of Columbia County in 1813 with Danville as the county seat, there emerged a political struggle to remove the courthouse from Danville to Bloomsburg. Finally, in a county-wide referendum authorized by the state on October 10, 1845, the voters overwhelmingly gave their approval for Bloomsburg to become the new county seat of government.<sup>6</sup> This brought many people to the Town for business at the courthouse. Second, industrialization came to Bloomsburg first in the form of iron furnaces and foundries, the Town's main industries from 1845 to 1880s. At the iron industry's peak, Bloomsburg boasted two furnaces and at least five foundries.<sup>7</sup> As the iron industry began to decline by the early 1880s, other businesses started to appear in this decade. Bloomsburg by 1902 would be

the home to at least twenty industries that provided a strong economic base and numerous employment opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

1. Bloomsburg Brick Company
2. Bloomsburg Silk Mill
3. Bloomsburg Car Manufacturing Co.
4. Harman & Hassert's Foundry (large foundry and machine shop)
5. E. C. Caswell & Co. (woolen mill)
6. American School Furnishing Co.
7. Hawley-Slate Furniture Co.
8. Creasy & Wells (lumber)
9. White Milling Company
10. J. L. Dillon (florist)
11. F. J. Richard Manufacturing Co. (wire drawing machines – mostly government contract work)
12. Bloomsburg Artificial Ice Co.
13. Wirt Fountain Pen Co.
14. Safety Button Suspender Co.
15. William Ferguson Brick Maker
16. T. L. Gunton's Marble Works (cemetery monuments)
17. W. F. Slagle (farm implements)
18. Paragon Plaster and Supply Co.
19. J. B. Eves (farm implements)
20. Magee Carpet Co.

The Bloomsburg State Normal School, now Bloomsburg University, also grew during this period and contributed to the increased need for hotels.

The third development was the railroad. Railroad expansion brought passenger rail service to the Bloomsburg area, creating a need for hotels to accommodate travelers. Before rail service, nearly impassable mountains separated the area from the two major cities developing along the mid-Atlantic coast, New York and Philadelphia. Early roads were slow and steep, and the North Branch canal built in the early 1800s was typically closed to traffic for a third of the year because of freezing temperatures. Rail service remedied all these problems. The first train to come to Bloomsburg was the Lackawanna & Bloomsburg Railroad in 1858, linking the Town to other cities.<sup>9</sup> It was soon followed by other lines. By 1910 a total of four railroad lines connected Bloomsburg to the region and the rest of the nation: Delaware, Lackawanna & Western, Philadelphia & Reading, Pennsylvania, and Bloomsburg & Sullivan.<sup>10</sup>

The rail service provided the transportation needed to move people and goods to and from Bloomsburg. Although many of the hotels had stables for guests who arrived by horse, many also provided omnibus service to meet all the trains that stopped in the Town.<sup>11</sup>

These three developments combined to stimulate business in Bloomsburg. More business brought with it the need for bigger, better, and more hotels to serve the increased number of travelers.

As time passed, additional hotels appeared on Main Street. In the first half of the 1900s, St. Elmo's Hotel, Hotel Gilmore, and the Martha Washington Hotel & Café, along with the modernized Central and Exchange Hotels, were well recognized names. These substantial brick structures could accommodate many people with the latest conveniences. They also had excellent dining rooms, tastefully decorated parlors, along with comfortable, clean rooms. In 1910, for \$2.50 a day, one could have first class accommodations and a room with a bath.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the major hotels listed above, a number of other establishments existed, not all on Main Street. Some were equally as large but shorter lived than the above hotels. Others were somewhat smaller, but just as important in accommodating the large volume of travelers to Bloomsburg. These hotels included the City Hotel, Irvin Hotel, The East End Hotel, The West End Hotel, Yodock's Hotel, Hilday Hotel, and Hummel Hotel, just to mention a few. It was not uncommon for the names to change as new proprietors took charge of hotels. (See the table at the end of this article for a list of the owners and proprietors of each hotel.)

The Exchange Hotel was the grandest hotel ever built in Bloomsburg. Before starting operation, the Exchange Hotel was a log and frame tavern erected on a lot sold to Abraham Whiteman. Whiteman's widow sold this establishment to Catawissa merchants Casper Chrisman and Philip Mehring in 1806.<sup>14</sup> In 1810 the Exchange Hotel began operation on this site. By 1857 Chrisman had transformed it into a notable three-story brick hotel from which Captain John Derr ran the tri-weekly mail coach to the White Hall Hotel in Whitehall, PA.<sup>15</sup> Fire destroyed the hotel in 1870.<sup>16</sup> It was rebuilt as an impressive four-story brick building with a notable Second Empire façade which boasted a second floor balcony with an iron gate railing facing Main Street.

By 1889 the Exchange Hotel was by all odds the grandest hotel in this part of the state. It had seventy rooms, with rates of two dollars a day - American plan, of course. Even in 1889 it boasted electric lights, steam heat, and a free bus to and from the hotel. The Exchange Hotel was a very important part of the community life as well. In the huge parlor, to the right of the main entrance, were staged the widely known annual Christmas dances sponsored by the Winona Fire Company, the Town's big social event of the year. Oppenheim's Orchestra was always brought down from Wilkes-Barre for the occasion. Oppenheim's was considered the last word in orchestras. It cost ten dollars a couple for the dance and the dinner.<sup>18</sup>

In 1910 the Exchange Hotel had all the modern improvements. It had elegantly appointed offices and sitting rooms, along with spacious sample rooms for the use of commercial men. It was known as the "Commercial Men's Home." There were 100 nicely furnished sleeping rooms. The model bar connected to the hotel was stocked with the choicest brands of imported and domestic wines, liquors, and ales, beers and favorite brands of cigars. The dining room was well furnished, and the bill of fare included all the delicacies of the season, perfectly prepared and served.<sup>19</sup>

The Exchange Hotel was sold to George K. Fink following the bankruptcy of the previous owner, Gehard Snyder in 1912. Later that year James Magee II purchased the hotel and eventually renamed it the Magee Hotel.<sup>20</sup> Magee renovated the hotel, reopening it as one of the region's earliest temperance hotels.<sup>21</sup> Upon the death of Mr. Magee, a corporation known as the Leader Store Company formed in 1919 bought the hotel and adjoining space from the estate. The hotel façade was destroyed by a fire in 1933.<sup>22</sup> It was re-built by Magee, and while still a significant hotel in Bloomsburg, the façade was not as impressive.

The adjoining space of the Hotel Magee became a department store called the Leader Store Company. Years later when the Leader Store closed, Harry Magee leased the space to Sears, Roebuck and Company. The sixty-six rooms available to the traveling public were neatly furnished, with a constant program of redecorating keeping the rooms looking their best. The Hotel slogan – "For the rest of your life – Stop at the Magee Hotel," was recognized by travelers who frequently traveled considerably out of their way to stay at the Hotel. The Greyhound bus station and the Western Union office were in the first-floor lobby adjoined by the Char-mund Coffee Shoppe restaurant operated by Mrs. Charlotte Hoch. The Chamber of Commerce office, and the Retail Credit Bureau shared office space on the third floor. The radio station WHLM, named after Harry L. Magee, occupied the front section of the second floor with 1,000 watts of power. It was affiliated with the Liberty Broadcasting System and operated by Bloom Radio. The spacious front studio was the scene of many broadcasts by civic, choral and dramatic groups, with the station having a wide listening audience and correctly titled as "The Voice of the Susquehanna Valley."<sup>23</sup>

Through the mid-1900s, the Magee Hotel continued as the social center of Bloomsburg, slowly losing its importance, until the later part of the century when it's most noted feature in the 1980s was the Publick House Restaurant. This restaurant was known as having the most complete gourmet dining in Northeastern Pennsylvania with full menu table and wine service.<sup>24</sup> The Magee Hotel continued in operation into the 2000s as a hotel and restaurant.

The peak of the hotel industry has not been definitively identified, but it is believed to be closely connected to the decline of railroad passenger service to Bloomsburg. By the end of the 1940s virtually no railroad passenger service to the Town existed.<sup>25</sup> Two fires signaled the beginning of the decline of the hotel industry in Bloomsburg: first, the fire that destroyed the Central Hotel on January 19, 1931;<sup>26</sup> second, the fire at the Magee Hotel on May 17, 1933.<sup>27</sup>

After the Central Hotel fire, a new structure occupied by two shops and a department store replaced the hotel. Apparently the number of travelers to Bloomsburg had decreased, making it unnecessary to replace the lost rooms. Although the Magee Hotel was re-built, it was not the grand structure it once was.

The hotel industry continued to decline due to the invention of the automobile and the subsequent development of modern highways that caused railroad passenger service to end. In 1956 the Federal government authorized the construction of the Interstate Highway System. This, coupled with the increased use of the automobile as the primary means of personal conveyance and transportation of merchandise, started to make the need for hotels located in the Town obsolete. As new interstate highways were built, the main thoroughfares began to change. Most people could bypass the Town using the new interstate highway when traveling. The new highway system also caused railroads to disappear from Bloomsburg. With the loss of the railroads, the need for places to house travelers who stopped locally for a day or two significantly diminished. Passenger service for Bloomsburg came to an end in 1951 for lack of business. Since travelers no longer needed to rely on buses and railroads, motels or motor courts with ample parking, built along major highways made it more convenient for travelers in automobiles. The first motel appeared in a Bloomsburg phone book in 1952 and the number listed continued to grow with the progression of time.<sup>28</sup> This steady decline continued until the late 1900s, when only one hotel remained in Bloomsburg, the Magee Hotel.

The Magee family announced plans to sell the Magee's Main Street Inn to a student housing developer on June 12, 2003. Harry's Grille would not be sold but would remain open. The developer announced he would convert the hotel into "luxury student housing" for around 80 students.<sup>29</sup> On September 3, 2003, it closed its doors to travelers bringing the hotel era in Bloomsburg to an end.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps it's fitting that the Magee's Main Inn was the last hotel. The site had been the location of one of the first hotels in the Town, the Exchange Hotel, and at the peak of the hotel era, it was the most imposing hotel in this part of Pennsylvania. It had seen the Town's entire hotel industry develop and decline to the end.

## **Hotels and Known Owners/Proprietors**

NOTE: The list of owners and proprietors below is not complete. If you know of any missing owners or proprietors, please send the name and any other information, e.g., dates, source, etc., to the author c/o the Society. The sources of the information were deeds, city directories, newspaper articles, maps, histories and advertisements. "O" is for owner, and "P" is for proprietor.

**Central Hotel (AKA American Hotel, Ent Hotel) 22, 24 & 26 East Main Street**

- ☉O – Rubin Davis & wife Catharine
- ☉O – Daniel Gross & wife Susannah
- ☉O – Charles H. Doebler & wife Mary
- ☉O – Joshua Fetterman & wife Rebecca
- ☉O – John Leacock
- ☉O – May Kuhn Butler & R. Glenn Butler
- ☉O – Hannah May Stohner
- ☉O – Charles B. Ent
- ☉O – James M. Kline
- ☉O – Elmer E. Ball & Zebulon S. Robbins
- ☉P – John Leacock
- ☉P – Mr. George Aunard
- ☉P – Mrs. B. Stohner & Charles F. Stohner
- ☉P – J. M. Kline
- ☉P – Mrs. J. M. Kline
- ☉P – George Wagonseller
- ☉P – Peter G. Rupert

**Chamberlain’s Tavern, 11 West Main Street**

- ☉P – John Chamberlain

**City Hotel (1)<sup>32</sup> (AKA Brown’s Hotel) 11 West Main Street**

- ☉P – John Chamberlain
- ☉P – George H. Brown
- ☉P – J. L. Girton
- ☉P – B. Stohner

**City Hotel (2) 123 – 125 West Main Street**

- ☉O – G. W. Sterner
- ☉O – William A. Hartzell
- ☉P – William A. Hartzel

**Colonial Hotel, 501 East Street**

- ☉O – Metheral and Guinard

**East End Hotel,<sup>33</sup> 556 East Sixth Street**

- ☉O – William Giger
- ☉O – J. L. Fisher
- ☉P – Henry F. Dieffenbach

**Exchange Hotel (AKA Crisman Hotel & later became Hotel Magee) 20 – 28 West Main Street**

- O – Casper Chrisman
- O – Mr. Brady
- O – Valentine Doebler
- O – Elisha Biggs
- O – John Richards
- O – John S. Sterner
- O – W. B. Koons
- O – I. W. McKelvy
- O – Robert J. Huntzinger
- O – Gehard Snyder
- O – George K. Fink
- O – James Magee
- P – Peter Billmeyer
- P – George H. Brown
- P – W. R. Tubbs
- P – James McClosky
- P – Irwin N. Snyder
- P – G. Snyder & Sons
- P – Henry J. Clark

**Forks Hotel, Located at the intersection of Main Street, East Street, and Lightstreet Road**

- O – Daniel Snyder
- P – G. W. Mauger
- P – T. Bent Taylor

**Gilmore Hotel (AKA The Gilmore House) 35, 37 & 37 East Main Street**

- P – G. W. Enterline

**Heddens Hotel (AKA Heddens House, Stauffer Hotel) 116 Iron Street**

- O – Mrs. B. Stohner
- O – E. Stauffer
- P – P. B. Heddens

**Hidlay Hotel** Located in the heart of Bloomsburg

- O – Bruce Hidlay
- O – A. C. Hidlay
- O – O. E. Myers
- P – W. F. Stohner

**Hummel Hotel (AKA East End Hotel, Jack Rhoades Hotel, K & H Hotel, & Ship's Inn) 542 – 544 East Street**

- P – John J. Fish
- P – Wilma Thomason
- P – John Potter

**Irvin Hotel (AKA Reice Hotel, Flaherty Hotel) 402 – 404 W. Main Street**

- P – Irvin A. Snyder
- P – Mike Flaherty

**Magee Hotel (Previously the Exchange Hotel) 20 – 24 West Main Street**

- O – James Magee II
- O – Harry L. Magee
- O – Ella G. Magee
- O – Willie Law
- O – John W. Kines
- P – Johnson
- P – J. H. Lollar, Jr.
- P – Richard A. Benefield
- P – Norman Mael
- P – Drew Magee
- P – Justin Hummel

**Martha Washington (AKA Columbian Hotel) 2-4 West Main Street**

No information

**Railroad House corner of East and Lackawanna (now 6<sup>th</sup>) Streets**

- P – William Giger

**Robison Hotel Moyer's Block (northwest corner of Main and Center Streets**

- P – William Robison

**St. Elmo Hotel 38 – 40 East Main Street**

- O – J. L. Girton
- O – Henry. F. Dietrich
- O – H. S. Kelchner
- P – George Wagonseller
- P – J. B. Earhart



## **Stohner Hotel, 138 – 140 East Main Street**

🏠O – Mrs. Pereman

🏠P – W. F. Stohner

## **West End Hotel (Bauman's Hotel, Yodock's Hotel) 416 West 4<sup>th</sup> Street**

No information

### **Endnotes**

1 J. H. Battle, ed., *History of Columbia and Montour Counties, Pennsylvania*, (Chicago: A. Warner & Co., 1887), II-154.

2 Brain Johnson, "The Changing Face of Main Street" in *Discovering Bloomsburg, a bicentennial history*, William M. Baillie, ed., (Haddon Craftsman, Bloomsburg, a division of R. R. Donnelley & Sons, Inc., 2002), 51.

3 *Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1915), 106.

4 "Site of Central Hotel Had Same Use Since 1818," *The Morning Press*, Bloomsburg, PA, 6 March 1931, p. 1, col. 6.

5 John G. Freeze, *A History of Columbia County, Pennsylvania*, (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania: Elwell & Bittenbender, Publishers, 1883), 94.

6 Freeze, *A History of Columbia County, Pennsylvania*, 37.

7 Ann Brandt, "The Iron Industry" in *Discovering Bloomsburg*, 153.

8 "A Retrospect and a Prospect," *The Bloomsburg Daily*, Bloomsburg, PA, 1 February 1902. "Reviewing Historically the Industrial and Financial Interests," *Daily Sentinel*, Bloomsburg, PA, June 1910. *Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia County and Montour Counties, Pennsylvania*, 113-118.

9 Jeanne Balshi Roberts, ed., online, *A History of Catawissa Pennsylvania 200th Anniversary 1974*, <http://home.ptd.net/~waltgosh/history.htm>, viewed 13 September, 2003.

10 Lawrence B. Fuller, "The Long Decline: Railroads in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bloomsburg" in *Discovering Bloomsburg*, 78, 79, 80.

11 *Williams & Lynch's, Bloomsburg Directory, 1898-99*, Exchange Hotel advertisement, 54.

12 *Program of the Columbia Theatre, Bloomsburg PA, 1910-1911*, Second page advertisement.

13 "The Old Central Hotel in Convention Attire," *The Morning Press*, 14 June 1952, 124.

14 William M. Baillie, "Bloomsburg's founders" in *Discovering Bloomsburg*, 32.

15 Thomas A. Hurley & John Y. Lloyd, *Map of Bloomsburg, Columbia County, PA*, (1857), 21 x 16.5 in. Half-size, original at Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, Columbia County Historical and Genealogical Society Library. *Annals*, 39.

16 "Trying Hard," *The Columbian and Democrat*, Bloomsburg, PA, 11 March 1870, p. 3, col. 1.

17 *Atals, Columbia and Montour Counties, Pennsylvania*, (New York: F. W. Beers & Co., 1876), 58.

18 "Passing Throng," *The Morning Press*, Bloomsburg, PA, 19 August 1940, 4.

19 "Exchange Hotel," *The International Magazine of Industry*, June, 1910, 17.

20 Columbia County Deeds, Book 86: 216, 217, 275, Columbia County Register of Deeds, Bloomsburg, PA.

21 Douglas Karsner, "Magee Carpet Company" in *Discovering Bloomsburg*, 183.

22 Brian Johnson, "The Changing Face of Main Street" in *Discovering Bloomsburg*, 56. "Leader Store and Hotel Magee Burn," *The Morning Press*, 18 May 1933, 1, 6. "What New Hotel Magee and Leader Store Will Look Like," *The Morning Press*, 26 August 1933, 1.

23 "Hotel Magee Offers Typical Bloomsburg Hospitality to Its Guests," *Commonwealth, The Magazine for Pennsylvania*, May-June 1952, 12-16.

24 "Press Enterprise Souvenir Edition," *The Press Enterprise*, Bloomsburg, PA, 25 September 1982, page 15.

25 Lawrence B. Fuller, "The Long Decline: Railroads in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bloomsburg" in *Discovering Bloomsburg*, 82.

26 "Central Hotel Bldg. Guttled by Repeated Outbreaks of Fire," *The Morning Press*, Bloomsburg, PA, 20 January 1931, 1, 2.

27 *The Morning Press*, 17 May 1933, 1, 6.

28 *Bloomsburg-Danville and nearby points Telephone Directory*, Bell Telephone Company of Pennsylvania, April, 1852, Yellow Pages, 85.

29 "Magees to sell Inn for Housing," *Press Enterprise*, Bloomsburg, PA, 12 June 2003, 1.

30 "Goodbye, Magee," *Press Enterprise*, Bloomsburg, PA, 5 September 2003, 1.

31 Photo: Magee Hotel, 20-28 W. Main St., Bloomsburg, PA, André Dominguez Records: file <ww\0gene\Bloomsburg Hotels\Magee\Photos\Magee Front & Harrys (7-5-03).jpg>.

32 Two hotels had the name "City Hotel."

33 Two hotels had the name "East End Hotel." Hummel's Hotel was originally called the East End Hotel.