

A PRIME SITE

By William Baillie

The Society has now fairly completed the move into its new location on Market Square (50 West Main Street) in Bloomsburg. This spot for more than 150 years had been the home of First National Bank and its successors. The corner lot is a prime site in the town's economic and social history.

When Bloomsburg was laid out by the Eyer brothers, John Adam and Ludwig, in 1802, the town centered on Market Square. There were five north/south streets from East Street (now Iron Street) to West, and three east/west streets, First to Third. At the center, the crossing of Second and Market Streets, was Market Square; the corner lots at that location were prime real estate from the outset.

The southeast corner (lot #37) was soon purchased by two merchants, John Coleman and George Stroup, while the adjoining lot to the south (#38) became the property of Ethel Baron and William McKelvy. Before long, Mr. McKelvy had sole ownership of both these lots, and in 1863 he built a grand new three-story brick residence at the corner. The windows on the third floor had distinctive semi-circular tops highlighted by masonry arcs; this feature set a style which was followed by the later buildings on the other three corners of the square.

In 1864 McKelvy and other men obtained a charter for a national bank and began selling shares to raise the needed capital. They set up a banking parlor on the first floor of McKelvy's building and opened for business in March, 1864.



A 1902 photo of the original First National Bank bedecked for a lodge fete. Note that much of the ground floor is occupied by the Townsend store. At the left is the narrow United States Express shipping office and the three-story Columbian building, their lots now part of the parking lot. To the right under the tree branches can be seen an ornate one-story structure which was soon razed to make way for the bank's second addition. (CCHGS 04-

0189)

The bank prospered and was able to weather the national financial Panics of 1873 and 1893, when many other banks failed. Indeed, in 1893 the bank added a three-story addition to the rear, doubling the size of the premises. The addition featured six windows on each floor facing the Square, including the arched windows at the top.

Then in 1905 the bank added a second addition at the rear which extended to Market Street along the south side of the Square. This extension was an office building specifically designed for the town's Post Office on the ground floor and Phillips photography studio above.



A 1904 photo showing the bank's first addition at the right; the banner is for the Roosevelt-Fairbanks team in the presidential election (they lost). Facing the bank across Main Street is the slanted-roof store building about to be replaced by a yellow-brick 3-story structure that still stands. (CCHGS 04-0216)

The bank's new L-shape was matched in 1906 by the rebuilt Pursel store directly across Main Street. On the two western corners of the Square the "L" effect was created by adjacent buildings (the Moyer residence on the south and the Consistory to the north). Thus, Market Square was neatly enclosed on all four corners with three-story brick buildings featuring arched third-story windows, and all four corners were "closed off." This arrangement lasted until 1935 when the symmetry was broken with the razing of the Moyer house for the new Post Office (still in use).



The First National Bank, Market Square, 1908

In 1973 the bank was merged into the First Eastern Bank (later PNC Bank). The new owners felt the need for a modern home on the Square. The three-section 3-story bank building was razed and

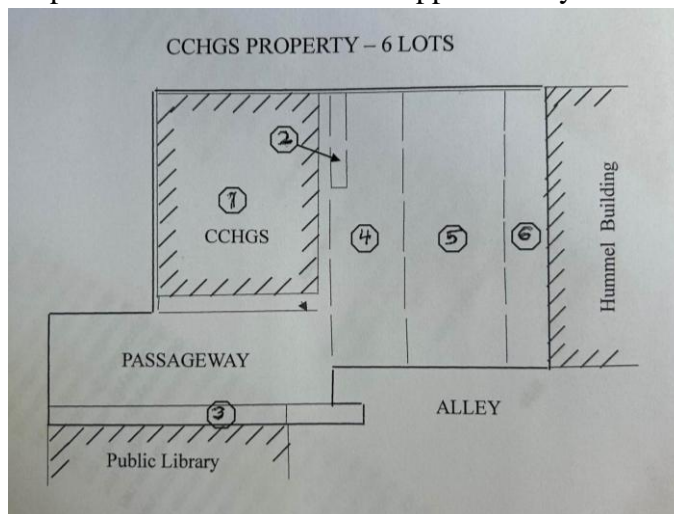
replaced. The new structure left behind the traditional height and style of the Square's buildings. However, the architect did "echo" that tradition with distinctive very large windows that arch at the top over central columns.



The crowd at the dedication of the Civil War monument November 19, 1908, showing the newly-completed second addition to the bank (with spectators standing on the roof). The first-floor windows show "POST OFFICE." The painted sign on the bricks reads "Phillips PHOTOGRAPHY." (CCHGS 04-0796)

The new bank building opened in 1974. It featured a twenty-foot-high ceiling in the main lobby and a partial mezzanine. The vault in the back corner with a massive foot-thick steel door was matched by concrete-lined vaults above and below on the mezzanine and in the basement. (All three vaults remain in place and are used now for storage of the Society's collections.) The small white-marble cornerstone has the date 1863 on one side and 1974 on the other, to honor the two structures at that site.

In 2021 the bank corporation closed this downtown Bloomsburg office. The building remained empty until, through a very large state grant, the Society was able to purchase it. The new CCHGS home opened to the public in April 2024 after extensive renovations, mainly to bring the building into line with today's handicap-access rules. (By another current rule, the basement and mezzanine floors are off-limit to the public until a modern fire-suppression system is installed).



A plat of the CCHGS property, which has a very complicated deed history now represented by the six numbered "lots" of the diagram. The darker line encloses the overall Society property, totaling 12,643 square feet or about one-fourth acre.

(from the survey by Daniel Vassalio, December 2022)

One other item associated with the bank corner is worth mention: THE TREE. A large American linden tree stood at the bank's corner of Market Square for more than a century. It was a meeting place and a notice board for generations of Townies. If a Bloomsburg resident said "I'll meet you at the Tree at noon" everyone knew which tree she meant. The tree provided a shady spot for a peanut wagon which parked near it in summers around 1905. For many years frosh students at Bloomsburg State College as part of their initiation trekked down Main Street and kicked THE TREE for good luck.



A peanut wagon parked "at the tree" beside the bank.

(CCHGS 04-0381)

In the 1960s the aging tree was struck by disease and, after the bank spent thousands trying to save it, the directors decided that it had to be cut down. The bank staff preserved a slice of the large trunk to memorialize a Bloomsburg institution. That slice now is exhibited in the Society's museum collection.

THE TREE



CCHGS HOME IN 2024 WITH FLAGS AND FLOWER POTS

