The Many Faces of the West Chester Post Office

The first U.S. Post Office was established in West Chester in 1804 with Cromwell Pearce as postmaster until 1811. For several decades after, local postal services were provided in one of the various shops or hotels located downtown, usually determined by the Postmaster of the time. In 1849, Dr. James B. Wood opened the first Post Office as a distinct business, unrelated to any other, at 8 East Gay Street. All subsequent postmasters followed suit.

In 1865, Maj. William B. Darlington, a Civil War veteran, was appointed Postmaster from 1865 to 1877. He located the Post Office to what was called the Brandywine Bank Building on South High Street at Pearl Alley, where the F&M Building is now located. According to Pat Sullivan, author of SpotsylvaniaMemory.blogspot.com, Darlington, served in the 163rd Pennsylvania Regiment, 18th Pennsylvania Cavalry. He was shot while commanding from his horse during the Battle of the Wilderness on May 5, 1864, by Confederate sharpshooter John Cooper, who was perched in a cherry tree on Keller’s Hill.

Darlington was captured by the Confederates and taken to the home of William Shelton Buchanan where his leg was amputated above the knee. He was later freed by Sheridan's Union troopers while still recuperating. Eventually returning to West Chester, he was appointed Postmaster on June 3, 1865.

In 1885, William Shields moved the Post Office to the Cabinet Building on South Church Street at Wollerton Alley where it remained until it relocated to its current location in 1907. David M. McFarland owned the building which had been designed by Thomas U. Walter. Church Street was unpaved but there are pavers for a crosswalk. A news stand was located at the entrance.

Today, the West Chester Laundry occupies the space.

By 1905, activity had increased to where 130,000 pieces of mail were handled annually for about 15,000 patrons in West Chester Borough and rural routes. Due to this demand it was decided to construct a federally owned Post Office that would also serve as
The Many Faces of the West Chester Post Office, continued

the Federal Building. This was during a time when James Knox Taylor served as the supervising Architect of the Treasury (1897-1912). According to Preservation Pennsylvania, he believed that government buildings should be monumental and beautiful, designed by individual architects in classical styles, and built of the highest quality materials.

After much consideration, a location was selected at 101 East Gay Street for which Congress appropriated $60,000 for property acquisition and construction. Congress then selected Edgar H. Klemroth as the architect and appointed Harry G. Smith as the new Postmaster.

The current Post Office was actually built in two phases, 30 years apart. The first phase called for the Post Office to be designed as a two-and-a-half story structure with a raised main floor above a daylight basement, giving it a piano nobile quality. According to a Determination of Eligibility for inclusion in the National Register (E.O. 11593; May 7, 1979) it is stated that the “U.S. Post Office is an example of neo-classical styling expressed in a vernacular idiom. Classical elements including the blind arcade, window treatment and medallions express the neo-classical style popular for Federal architecture in the early 20th century. This building is particularly noteworthy for its stone material.”

Indeed, it is faced with Cockeysville Marble that was quarried at Baker’s Station near Avondale in Chester County. It’s a white stone that has crystalline qualities that glitter in the sunlight. Cockeysville Marble is most famous for its use in the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, where the first 152 feet of the monument is faced with it.

The front facade features a five-bay facade notable for repeated curved arches with pilaster trimming the main entrance and adjacent windows. Three eyebrow dormers with oval-shaped windows can be seen peeking over the cornice, lighting the attic. Window bays on both the east and west sides of the building have understated 12-over-12, double-hung windows. The original rear wall (the north elevation) can still be seen from inside the structure.

Construction began on August 14, 1905, and it was anticipated that it would take about a year to complete. However, cost overruns and bad weather delayed the project several times and it did not officially open until Sept. 9, 1907, more than two years after breaking ground. The final cost was $80,000, or about $2 million in 2013 dollars. The first patron to receive a letter at the new facility was a boy named William Brinton.

While it is not uncommon for people to complain about new projects, it’s ironic that the first complaint came from the architect himself, Edgar Klemroth, who stated that he would have preferred the building to be set-back further than it was and that a darker color stone would have been more elegant.

The next construction phase began 30 years later on Oct. 26, 1935, when an annex was added to the rear of the structure nearly doubling its size. A one-foot setback can be seen about midpoint of the building where the back wall of the original Post Office was located. The outside materials and architecture of the new construction is nearly identical to the original, although one can notice a smattering of rock near the top with a blue hue, often called “Brandywine Blue”. Victor Gondos of Reading was the contractor.

Today, the West Chester Post Office is called the Robert J. Thompson Post Office, named continues on page 9...
Celebrate Park and Recreation Month

This July the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is celebrating 30 years of Park and Recreation Month and the enduring importance of parks and recreation for the world. From the start, parks were created to serve the people – to give them a place to appreciate nature, exercise, socialize and have fun. This mission lives on and will continue to intensify into the future. This July celebrates the past, present, and future of parks and recreation.

In 2015, NRPA challenges you to rock Park and Recreation Month 80s-style. Maybe you’ll host a totally tubular aerobics dance party or maybe an 80s movie night series – whatever you choose, have fun with it. Visit the NRPA website www.nrpa.org/july to access materials and resources that can help you plan a local event.

Contact your local parks and recreation department for activities and events happening in your community in the month of July. Statewide, a calendar of events can be found through the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) at http://events.dcnr.pa.gov. You may also contact the Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society, Inc. at 814-234-4272 or visit the website www.prps.org. (B)

The Many Faces of the West Chester Post Office, continued from page 7

after a dynamic local county commissioner and state senator. It is a 14,000-square-foot building on a 22,000-square-foot lot that provides customer parking and a loading dock. It is within the West Chester Business Improvement District, the Downtown Retail Overlay District, and the Downtown Historic District placed in the National Register of Historic Places. (B)

This story was authored by Malcolm Johnstone, Executive Director of the West Chester Business Improvement District. A. Roy Smith, Dale Frens, and the Chester County Historical Society provided historical information. Visit www.downtownwestchester.com to learn more.

Inside PSAB

Navigating Legal Issues

Each year, the Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs (PSAB) hosts the PA Municipal Legal Update. This two-day workshop isn’t just targeted at solicitors – it’s ideal for mayors, secretaries, managers, council members, police and fire chiefs, and finance directors who want to learn more about the changing legal landscape. This year’s workshop is being held Aug. 26-27, 2015 at the Sheraton Harrisburg-Hershey.

Judge John E. Jones, III will speak about recent court decisions. In 2005, Judge Jones wrote the decision concerning intelligent design, and in 2014, Jones’ ruling made same-sex marriage legal throughout PA.

Retired Judge Phillip A. Ayers will also speak about issues from the bench. As a former assistant counsel to the PA Human Relations Commission, Judge Ayers presided over cases involving allegations of discrimination based on age, sex, race, disability, and other protected classes.

Other topics include police liability and excessive force, immigration issues, solutions for the Right to Know officer, use of body cameras by police, cyber security insurance, email and social media abuses, and much more.

This program has been approved by the Pennsylvania Continuing Legal Education (CLE) Board for 10 hours of substantive law, practice, and procedure CLE credit and 1 hour of ethics, professionalism, or substance abuse CLE credit. Borough officials can also earn 10 Certified Borough Official (CBO) credits.

Visit www.boroughs.org to obtain the program and hotel and registration information.

You can register online, or look for your invitation in the mail. For more information, contact Terri Dickow at tdickow@boroughs.org or 800-232-7722, Ext. 1042. (B)