

THE FIRST REVITALIZATION

The face of downtown Lansdale changed in 1920

By DICK SHEARER

The economy has taken a big bite out of growth and development in the past few years, but that wasn't the case back in 1920 when Lansdale was quickly rebuilding part of its downtown district.

Many of the buildings put up in the earliest days of the community were showing their age as Lansdale approached its 50th anniversary celebration. Out with the old and in with new structures that better served the times.

This was especially evident along Susquehanna Avenue between Main Street and Derstine Avenue. Three major construction projects were under way that changed the face of that part of town.

Lansdale was getting a new firehouse between Courtland St. and Derstine – and a fine edifice it was: five bays for fire trucks and equipment, meeting rooms and all the amenities the Fairmount volunteers didn't have at their old home on Montgomery Avenue. The bigger quarters befitted a growing town of 4,700 residents, a one-third increase over 1910.

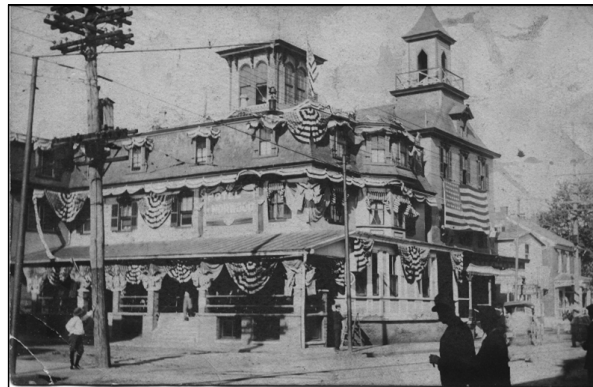
The Montgomery Avenue station only served the company for 11 years but the new firehouse was home to Fairmount until 1980 when the present fire station was built on Vine Street. *The Reporter*, whose plant is adjacent to the firehouse, purchased it to expand its circulation department.

At the same time, across Courtland toward Main was another sign of the changing times. The Stover livery stables, were torn down. Old Dobbin, it seems, was quickly being replaced by the automobile so it was ironic that the stables gave way to Heebner-Felver Motor Co., which was putting up a large new building to house its Oldsmobile-Packard dealership.

In keeping with the car's ever-increasing

popularity, new buildings were now being designed specifically for use as showrooms and garages. Previously, horseless carriages were often sold at buggy and harness shops. Heebner-Felver was one of the largest facilities at the time, stretching 100 by 78 feet with a 40 by 88-foot wing.

As it turned out, the building wasn't a car dealership for very long. It was converted into



In 1920, the old Hotel Norwood, top, was transformed into Citizens National Bank.

an A&P market in the 1930s, and is now the home of the North Penn Boys and Girls Club.

The firehouse and auto showroom were major new additions to Lansdale's downtown in 1920, but the most interesting – or the most unusual – change was taking place on the corner of Main and Susquehanna, next to Heebner-Felver.

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1920: A summer of change in Lansdale

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The old Hotel Norwood, once a premiere overnight stop in town, had outlived its usefulness. The land, we would think, was more valuable than the old building standing on it.

It was purchased as the site of a new financial institution, Citizens National Bank, which would some compete with the Lansdale National Bank, the oldest business in town.

For some reason Citizens Bank officials decided to renovate the Norwood, not tear it down. Yet they wanted their new home to look like a rock-solid bank, not a 19th century hotel, so they enlisted Milton B. Bean, the well-respected Lansdale architect who designed the Hotel Tremont and hundreds of other buildings in the region.

Bean, who was nearing the end of his career, worked his magic on the weary structure, gutting the insides and lowering the first floor to street level. He filled the space with a new lobby, tellers' area, vault, fancy offices for bank officials and a board room suitable for a group of well-heeled directors.

The most striking alteration was to the exterior walls that fronted on Main and Susquehanna. He fashioned a stone facade that gave the appearance of a well-to-do financial institution.

As luck would have it, Citizens Bank prospered during the 1920s only to run into rough sledding after the 1929 stock market crash. Soon thereafter, it was acquired by Lansdale National, which didn't need another bank down the street.

In future years, the disguised hotel struggled for a new identity. It was occupied by a variety of stores, shops and offices until the 1990s when it was condemned for safety reasons. Time took its toll on Bean's stone façade. Whether it was his design, shoddy construction work or a lack of maintenance, the facade began separating from the old hotel walls, imperiling pedestrians on the sidewalk below. Today, it is the site of a parking lot.

We should not leave this episode of *Back in Time* without putting a price tag on all of this. The *Lansdale Republican* reported the total cost for all three buildings would be more than \$100,000.



FIRST an auto dealership, the building at Susquehanna Ave. and Courtland St., was later an A&P. The firehouse, above, was built in 1920.