

## BACK IN TIME

# Post office dates to 1934

By **DICK SHEARER**

In recent weeks there has been much discussion about the future of Lansdale's Borough Hall. While most residents concede the 79-year-old building needs major repairs the overriding question is whether to fix it or tear it down and start over.

Is the former post office a landmark worthy of preservation or just another old downtown building to be demolished along with the 75 others – including the Hotel Tremont and the Lansdale Theatre – that were razed over the last half century?

A recent study concluded that both borough hall and the adjacent police station desperately need attention. The police station, originally built in 1957 as a library, has little historic significance and, in fact, served its original purpose for only 15 years. However, borough hall has some deep historic roots.

They go back to the early days of the Great Depression, a time when the stock market crashed, banks failed and the masses of unemployed resorted to selling apples on street corners to subsist.

The year was 1929: The last gasp of the Roarin' Twenties. The Lansdale Kiwanis Club launched a campaign to get a new post office for the town. Over the years the USPS had operated out of a number of rented facilities on Main and Walnuts streets. They were all cramped, dingy and ill-equipped to service a growing community. Some of Lansdale's leading citizens got behind the effort including the Rev. Joseph Shade, rector of St. Stanislaus Church, and Walter Sanborn, publisher of *The Reporter*.

Under normal circumstances the timing of their

campaign seemed ill-advised, coming as it did on the eve of the stock market crash. Not so, thanks to the efforts of a local congressman who pushed Lansdale's request as part of the first wave of a \$100 million public works project designed to create jobs for the unemployed. Those hired were not just laborers but skilled architects and craftsmen who through no fault of their



**Early photo shows World War I artillery piece at post office.**

own got caught in the Depression web.

Word came on Dec. 30, 1930 that the Feds jumped on board and Lansdale was chosen for a large post office that might also house other government offices. The timeline was three to four years. The deal went through for \$125,000 (big money for a small town in 1930) and, as it turned out, the project was completed in 37 months. Actual construction took about a year.

It was built at Broad and Vine Streets, once the site of the Broadway Hotel and later Strawberry Park, a community gathering place.

The finished product aroused tremendous pride on the part of Lansdale's residents. For years they battled the image of a rough-around-the-edges railroad town; now they had a federal building that rivaled those in

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# Lansdale Borough gets a new home

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communities twice Lansdale's size. Its imposing façade – largely unchanged today – was rivaled only by the First National Bank.

The needs of the postal service and the public changed considerably between 1934 and the 1980s. The region's population boomed, especially in the surrounding townships that were served by motorized routes.

Also, borough residents became wed to their cars and parking was a major problem. The post office lobby and service windows fronted on Broad Street where council chambers now are. The area in the back – which is now the front of borough hall – was reserved for loading docks and employee parking.

The postal service decided an all-new facility was needed so it purchased the former Loyal Order of Eagles property at Vine and St. Elmo Sts. and moved there in 1986.

At the same time the borough was in the middle of one of its numerous redevelopment phases and had just received a recommendation from the American Cities Corp., a subsidiary of the Rouse Co. ACC's report suggested that the post office would be a good candidate for conversion to a community center because of its location, architecture and history.

The borough was already looking for a new borough hall. The town's offices had been located at 421 W. Main St., a converted apartment house, with small rooms, difficult access and sometimes unbearable climate control conditions.

Although many other parts of the Rouse plan were

caught in an economic squeeze, the borough purchased the post office in 1986, converted it to a Borough Hall in 1987 and dedicated the building the following year.

The old post office was literally gutted except for the three outside walls facing Broad and Vine Streets and Railroad Avenue. They were retained, much as they looked in the 1930s. And as we mentioned before, the main entrance was moved to the back of the building where public parking was added. The architects were Diserod and Wolff Inc. of Hatfield.

At the time there was a sense of relief by residents that the building was retrofitted. Most agreed that it outlived its usefulness as a post office but very few felt that it should be torn down. Its imposing presence meant something special to several generations of Lansdale residents that townspeople didn't want to lose.

Today's borough citizens – and the people who represent them – will have to decide how much they value preservation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the long run is Borough Hall worthy of another makeover to save it for future generations to enjoy, or will it go the route of the Hotel Tremont, the Lansdale Theatre and all those other buildings that disappeared from the downtown district?

Unlike the Tremont and the theater, Borough Hall is a public building. Lansdale's residents own it and its future should be determined by them. If they have an opinion, now is the time to speak out. And it is equally important for members of council to take their constituents' comments to heart.

## New post office spurred civic pride

The citizens of Lansdale were bursting with pride on Feb. 22, 1934, the day their new post office was dedicated.

A crowd of several hundred residents and dignitaries packed into the mail sorting room for the ceremony which featured Deputy U.S. Postmaster General Clinton B. Eilenberger.

Holding the event outside would have been hardship for all concerned. The North Penn area was locked in one of the coldest winters in history. A few days earlier a temperature of -12 was recorded in Lansdale, -27 near Sellersville.

The February 23 *Reporter* went to great lengths describing the new facility as one that would meet

the community's needs for decades to come.

The writer continues:

"In a location that makes it one of the most conspicuous buildings in Lansdale, facing one and flanking two busy thoroughfares, the post office presents a striking appearance.

"Designed in a Colonial style and topped with a graceful cupola, it is placed upon the rising ground of a small terrace which creates the impression of added height to its two stories.

"The lobby of the new building would almost contain the entire old post office." Among the impressive features were its wide doors which opened in both

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# Few knew of secret 'peep system'

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directions; there would be no more stepping aside to allow others to come and go as they had to do at the old quarters.

The writer applauded the high windows which let in plenty of light – a marked improvement over the dark, crowded interior of the former post office. The service windows were spaced along both sides of the sweeping lobby to disperse crowds and aid efficiency. The postmaster's office included his own private bathroom.

The second floor featured a "swing room", where carriers and other employees were required to stay when they weren't working in the sorting room. It was a federal regulation that those who were off-duty could not congregate where the mail was being sorted.

Then there was a special feature that raised a few eyebrows. Here's how *The Reporter* described it:

"One of the most interesting items in the construction of the building which many, or perhaps most of the visitors failed to notice, is the postal inspector's peep system.

"This is in the form of a hidden corridor built into the walls and between beams. Its one entrance is in the inspector's private office and the other in the swing room upstairs. The only external evi-

dence of something unusual is a black line set in the wall which follows the course of the corridor.

"Close observers saw in this black line tiny slots or



**The Broadway Hotel occupied the post office site in 1900.**

windows. Through these windows the inspector can watch any employee anywhere in the building without anyone being aware of the fact that he is being watched. It is impossible to see the watching eyes in the slots and cork floors deaden the sound so that the observer's approach cannot be heard.

"This system is installed in all new federal buildings and is a means of guarding the mails. Should anything arouse suspicion against any employee, his every move can be watched without his knowledge every moment he is in the post office."



**During the days of the Great Depression, it didn't take years to complete a construction project. The foundation was laid for the Lansdale Post Office in April, 1933 and the building was dedicated and put in service Feb. 22, 1934.**



# First hall was shared with firemen

The current discussion about Borough Hall is an appropriate time to travel back to Lansdale's founding in 1872 when multi-million dollar municipal projects would have been folly.

Thanks to the excellent research of the late Robert Quinn, a one-time president of the society, we have a snapshot of what the first borough councils had to deal with. A critical issue that needed to be addressed was cattle roaming in the streets. One of the first ordinances required that owners of livestock keep their animals under control.

The streets themselves were a mess – muddy, rutted and far too narrow. For council, this was a thorny problem because widening the roads and adding sidewalks took frontage from private property. No one wanted to lose a strip of their land and since Lansdale was a small town where everyone knew everyone else arguments even among council members became personal and petty.

It didn't take long for the wheels of government to grind to a halt. By 1887, the town was growing by leaps and bounds but borough council was mired in endless disputes some of which wound up in court.

The few positive steps council took were not initiated by the members but by H.M. Woodmansee, publisher of *The Reporter* who was stunned when he came to town in the mid-1880s.

Fifteen years into its existence council could not even agree on a home for its government. Instead they gathered in the living room of the council secretary who got the job because he had the best handwriting.

Something had to be done to light a fire under council – and that's exactly what it took – not one fire but a number of them that threatened to burn down good portions of the town.

While council fiddled with issues like a public water system that other small towns communities solved in short order, the pace of construction in Lansdale was rising to a fever pitch. Lots were being subdivided and many new buildings – most of them made of wood – were built in close proximity to one another. The only fire protection going into 1889 was in the form of bucket brigades.

Woodmansee was appalled by the situation. In a Jan. 3, 1889 editorial the publisher warned that "if a fire should break out in Lansdale, the inhabitants have but one resource for protection – to fall to their knees and pray."

And he was correct. The fires came as soon as January 26, when an old skating rink which stood where the Lansdale Public Library parking lot is now broke out in flames and threatened the entire downtown dis-



**Lansdale's first Borough Hall (second floor).**

trict. In this case, the valiant efforts of a bucket brigade using water from the few hydrants in town stopped the fire's spread.

That was enough as far as the Line Lexington Fire Insurance Co. was concerned. The company suspected an arsonist was at large and offered a reward for his capture. More importantly, it said it would not insure another property in Lansdale until the borough had adequate fire protection.

That got council's attention but, as usual, nothing came easily or quickly in Lansdale. While government fiddled and fussed setting up an "official" fire company, other impatient citizens started their own brigade and called it Fairmount. For several years, Lansdale had two fire companies who occasionally battled each other to fight fires.

To house the borough's version of a fire company, council directed architect Milton Bean to draw up plans for a building that would house the firefighters' equipment on the first floor and borough council chambers upstairs. An annex was added for the police lockup. The location was Courtland St. and Montgomery Ave., a corner that was wiped out when the Century Plaza building was erected in 1972.

It quickly became apparent that Lansdale's own fire company was no match for Fairmount, whose training practices and equipment were superior. In the early 1890s, the borough got out of the fire protection business and turned its assets over to Fairmount. The first floor of borough hall was used for storage until the public library moved there in the 1920s.