

## SAVING HISTORIC LANSDALE

# 10 buildings to preserve

By **DICK SHEARER**

One look at downtown Lansdale is all it takes to realize that much of the borough's old charm was torn down over the years in the name of progress.

Lamenting the loss of landmarks like the Hotel Tremont and the Lansdale Theatre is like crying over spilled milk: Nothing will bring them back. But we can take stock of what's left and commit to doing everything possible to save

these structures.

With that in mind, here's my list of 10 public or commercial buildings that need to be preserved so that future generations will have physical proof of Lansdale's storied past. In the future, we'll talk about residential properties that are old, unique or both.

These are listed in no particular order and if you think we've missed a few, drop us an e-mail and let us know:

### SEPTA RAILROAD STATION

It should be a no-brainer. This structure, built in 1903, is the cornerstone of Lansdale's history, past and present. The third station at the same location, it replaced a wooden building that was erected just after the Civil War.

The station has always been a center of activity in the borough and now ranks as the fifth busiest stop on the SEPTA line. That makes it tempting to become complacent about its future. The building looks fine now but think back 20 years when it was a rotted, dirty hulk before it was finally restored after years of political wrangling and pressure.



### THE OLD FREIGHT STATION

On the other hand the old freight station on South Broad Street has waited decades for a reprieve. It was also built in 1903 but its usefulness was compromised when trucks took over the shipping business after World War II.

Despite its rough appearance this stone-walled structure was built to take a lot of punishment. By most accounts the heart of the building is still solid. The question is what to do with it. How can it be retrofitted for 21<sup>st</sup> century use? Suggestions have included a meeting hall, farmers' market, restaurant or museum but to date nothing has materialized.

## **MUSIC HALL BLOCK**

When people talk about Lansdale movie houses most automatically think of the long-lamented Lansdale Theatre which was razed in 1979. Yes, it was a beauty but from a historical standpoint the Music Hall on North Broad Street has a much richer past.

Built in 1888, the Music Hall was the town's first real entertainment center. It hosted everything from school graduations to traveling vaudeville shows and the first Lansdale Symphony Orchestra. Converted to movies in the 1920s, this 600-seat venue always played second fiddle to the Lansdale Theatre in size and elegance but it served the community well until it closed without fanfare in 1967.



The building still stands between Second and Third Street and its exterior looks surprisingly similar to its original appearance. Now the home of the Koffee Korner and a series of other storefronts, I'm amazed that it hasn't been suggested as an alternative to the ill-fated Performing Arts Center. It has the pedigree.



## **THE MOYER BUILDING**

If any commercial structure harkens back to the Victorian Era it is the Moyer Building at West Main and Walnut Sts. Today it's the home of Chantilly Floral Boutique.

Built in two phases during the late 1890s, the Moyer Building has probably been home to more businesses and professional offices (perhaps as many as 125) than any other structure in town. Pharmacies, markets, tailors, clothing and camera shops are just a few of the varied specialty stores that have occupied space on the first floor. Insurance agents, doctors and lawyers were among the professionals who rented offices upstairs.

Despite its age, the Moyer Building wears its years well and is a must to preserve if Lansdale hopes to retain any memories of its past glory.



## **GELLER'S GRAND EMPORIUM**

In its prime back at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Geller's Grand Emporium was Lansdale's version of a department store. Owner Jacob Geller claimed that he would sell anyone anything - and if he didn't have it, he'd get it for you pronto. People came from miles around to load up on everything from food-stuffs to furniture or even a casket, if they had need for one.

The building, across Main Street from Wells Fargo Bank, was originally comprised of the two sections now occupied by Wilson's Hardware and a phone store. The larger section that houses the Lansdale School of Cosmetology was added later by Geller.

## **THE DRESHER ARCADE**

Situated in the middle of the 300 block of West Main Street, the Dresher Arcade has lived a double life. It was originally built as a garage, Dresher Motors, which sold Buicks. It featured display windows on each side of an entryway that allowed customers to drive their cars from Main Street to the service facility in the back. It also had gas pumps right out on the curb.

During the late 1920s Dresher stopped selling Buicks and the building was converted into retail shops with apartments above them. To maximize the available square footage, the enclosed walkway that remains today replaced the entryway to the service department. It was a unique design for its time.







### **BUTLER BUICK**

Way out in the 800 block of West Main Street is the building that most people remember as either Brenninger Motors, Hajoca Corp. or Hammer's Moving and Storage. More recently it was occupied by a short-lived furniture store. Now vacant, its long-term future would appear to be murky.

Built in 1928 of Spanish architecture – similar to that of the Lansdale Theatre which was erected at the same time – this building originally served as home of Butler Buick, which replaced Dresher as the local

dealer.

Butler's showroom was not your average car store of its day; it was a buying experience for prospective customers who were greeted by a wide variety of models displayed indoors surrounded by ornate wall fixtures, fancy desks for the salesmen and a fountain to help calm folks' nerves while they contemplated the cost of owning a Buick.

With the Depression around the corner, Butler Buick didn't last long but the exterior of the building looks much like it did in 1928.



### **MASONIC TEMPLE**

There's not much more that can be said about the Shiloh Lodge Masonic Temple, more recently known as the Lansdale Performing Arts Center and now 311 W. Main St.

Built in 1913, the façade is familiar to Lansdale residents because it has changed little over the years. The original interior, seldom seen by non-Masons, will remain a mystery for the ages since most of it was wiped out by the arts center renovations. The temple's historic value is limited to the façade, including the two storefronts that once housed Bartholomew's and Jeanne's clothing shops.

### THE OLD REPORTER BUILDING

Situated in the first block of West Main Street, it is now home to Nostalgic Collectibles and for many years was Stephenson's Gift Shop.

The front of the building was added later but the original upper floors look much like they did in the 1880s when it was the home of the *Lansdale Reporter*. The publisher, Dr. R.H. Andrews, who owned the building and had a medical practice on the second floor, lost interest in the newspaper and sold the rights to W.H. Woodmansee, who moved it to North Broad Street.

Well into the 1970s, the "Reporter" could be seen in upper façade.



### SLIFER'S STORE

The last historic building still standing at Main and Broad Streets was a general store dating back to at least the 1870s. One of the first commercial buildings on the east side of the railroad, the building was expanded to the west and over the years housed a variety of grocery, clothing and hardware stores and a luncheonette. McQuillin's photo studio, a gun shop and a restaurant now occupy the site.

## **IN CONCLUSION...**

There you have it – my top 10. There are several other buildings that should be included in the mix:

- The Moats and Taylor Building, next to the Music Hall Block dates to the 1880s and housed many businesses over the years.
- VonFossen's General Store, on the northwest corner of East Main and Chestnut Sts., was literally a rural outpost on the edge of town when it first opened.
- Lansdale National Bank. The building itself is impressive – and the façade dates to the 1930s – but of even more importance is the fact that the bank and its successors have remained on the same tract since 1864.

We did not mention Lansdale Borough Hall – the old post office – but the three original brick walls must be retained. The rest is a 1980s redo and of no historic value.

Want to add to my list? Send your suggestions to [info@lansdalehistory.org](mailto:info@lansdalehistory.org). And if you have ideas for a similar rundown of residential properties (built as private homes even if they have been converted to commercial use since), please pass them along.