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03 The Borough's Hotel History

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The Borough's Hotel History

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Lately we've seen a lot of interest in the possibility of building a hotel in the Borough, and not just because of the two- year-long conditional use hearing for the Zukin project. There are signs that the market for construction mortgages may be loosening up, and thus the hotel already approved for the Warner Theater site might get underway soon. December is also the time of year when parents come to the Borough for the WCU graduation, and other folks gather to celebrate the holidays. Other than the Microtel out on the bypass at Matlack Street, or assorted bed and breakfasts sprinkled around the edges of the Borough, would-be visitors are constrained to pass their nights in Exton or even (shudder) Lionville or King of Prussia, or else journey up Route 202 to the Borough from as far away as Delaware.

That was not always the case. In fact, the original seed from which our community sprouted was a drover's inn located on the top of the hill at the intersection of roads leading west from Philadelphia and north from Wilmington. The Turk's Head Tavern was licensed to Phineas Eachus by the state in 1762 and served wagon drivers and other travellers who plied the dirt roads of the region. Since it was located about a day's drive north of Wilmington or west of Philadelphia, it became common for people to spend the night there.



The Turk's Head Hotel in its final days

For a generation, that was the only option for travelers without friends among the local farmers, but once the Revolutionary War came to an end, several people began to imitate Eachus. A local farmer named Isaiah Matlack purchased more than 130 acres of land in what became the northeast quadrant of West Chester, and built the Greentree Tavern on the northeast corner of the crossroads in 1786 (modern: Green Tree Building and Rite Aid). That same year William Worthington opened the Cross Keys at the southeast corner of Church & Gay Streets (modern: former Mosteller department store) and Emmor Trego built the Horse and Groom Hotel in 1786 south of the corner of Church & Market Street (modern: not sure). A year later John Hannum opened the Washington House just north of the courthouse (modern: Courthouse Annex).

West Chester provided a market for hotels because in 1785, the state authorized the transfer of the courthouse from Chester to a more central point in the County, in response to petitions from residents of the western part of the County who complained that it took them too long to file

papers, register deeds and the like. Although West Chester was more centrally located, it still required people from the edges of the county to stay overnight, since a day's wagon journey on the roads of the time was limited to about 20 miles. West Chester's central location also made it popular as a market town, and that attracted farmers whose heavily laden wagons moved even more slowly. In order to get set up at the market by morning, farmers travelled to West Chester one day in advance. Local proprietors were only too glad to offer them lodging and provide stables to house their horses, while a community of craftsmen developed to take care of the wagons, tack and other gear associated with horse-powered travel.

New hotels appeared with some regularity during the next fifty years. Samson Babb opened the Black Bear Inn at the southwestern corner of High & Market Streets (modern: F&M Building) in 1789, while Jonathan Matlack opened the "Spread Eagle" --later called simply The Eagle Hotel -- at the northwest corner of Gay & Walnut Streets (modern: former Rite Aid across Walnut Street from the Post Office) in 1803. Meanwhile the other hotels continued their business, although the Cross Keys when through several changes of name and ownership during this period (General Wayne in 1797, the President Jefferson in 1804, Pearson's Tavern in 1815, the Cross Keys in 1818, and finally the White Hall in 1839).

The next stage in the hotel business was shaped by the invention of the railroad. West Chester's first railroad reached the corner of Matlack & Chestnut Streets in 1832, but in anticipation of the people it would bring to the Borough, two new hotels were built. The first was the West Chester Hotel which opened in 1828 at the corner of Hannum Avenue & W. Gay Street (modern: Borough parking lot #6 a.k.a. the "Spaz lot"). The other was built by William S. Everhart, a shopkeeper who made a fortune speculating in land that increased in value thanks to the railroad. He built the Chester County Hotel in 1831 on the southeast corner of Church & Market Streets (modern: Sovereign Bank) and sold it in 1836 to the Hollman brothers of Chester Springs, who renamed it the Mansion House Hotel.

Everhart's hotel was something of an anomaly because it was the first one built without a place to serve liquor. Everhart promoted it as a "temperance

West Chester's Hotels			
Name	Address	Year Opened	Open Until
Turk's Head Tavern	1 E. Market St.	1762	early 1960s
Greentree Tavern	101 N. High St.	1786	1931
Horse and Groom Hotel	S. Church St. near Market	1786	not known
Cross Keys	40 W. Gay St.	1786	1797
<i>renamed</i> General Wayne	40 W. Gay St.	1797	1804
<i>renamed</i> President Jefferson	40 W. Gay St.	1804	1815
<i>renamed</i> Pearson's Tavern	40 W. Gay St.	1815	1818
<i>renamed</i> Cross Keys	40 W. Gay St.	1818	1839
<i>renamed</i> White Hall	40 W. Gay St.	1839	1874
Washington House	10 N.	1787	1856

house" designed to cater to a population that included many Quakers, Amish and other religious sects that rejected the consumption of alcohol. Whether it was unsuccessful or Everhart simply became preoccupied with his other interests -- expanding his store, building a second railroad in the Borough, and serving a term on Borough Council -- is not clear, but his successors immediately applied for a license to sell spirits.

During the remainder of the 19th century, several new hotels opened, but even more closed. The most interesting was the Magnolia House which opened at 300 E. Miner Street in 1866. The owner, Moses G. Hepburn Jr., was the mulatto son of a former slave who came to West Chester before the Civil War and went on to become the first non-white member of Borough Council in 1882. He operated a number of businesses in the Borough and was successful at most. One was his hotel, which was for many years the only place in the Borough where people of color could stay. As a consequence, he played host to several prominent African Americans, including Frederick Douglass, who visited the State Normal School (modern: West Chester University) several times in the late 19th century.

Another new hotel started out as a private school known as "Crowell's Academy" until E. O. Taylor converted it into the Sherman House (205 W. Market St., modern: County Justice Center) in 1878. In the early 1890s he changed the name to the Old Farmers Hotel, and by the beginning of World War I, it was called the Brandywine Inn. After the war, a local developer converted it into the Wawassan Apartments, and so it remained until 1956 when the Borough acquired it and knocked it down to make room for a parking lot. Nowadays, the site is under the eastern end of the County Justice Center.

A third attempt to open a hotel took place at 29 E. Gay Street, the site of Spence's Restaurant. In 1906, James Spence added an addition to his restaurant and included hotel rooms upstairs, but

	High St.		
Black Bear Inn	102 W. Market St.	1798	late 1860s
Spread Eagle Hotel	39 E. Gay St.	1803	around 1900
West Chester Hotel	301 W. Gay St.	1828	before 1914
Chester County Hotel	40 W. Market St.	1831	1836
<i>renamed</i> Mansion House Hotel	40 W. Market St.	1836	1970
Magnolia House Hotel	300 E. Miner St.	1866	1922
Sherman House Hotel	205 W. Market St.	1878	early 1890s
<i>renamed</i> Brandywine Inn	205 W. Market St.	1905	1918
<i>renamed</i> Farmer's Hotel	205 W. Market St.	early 1890s	1905
Imperial Hotel	29 E. Gay St.	1910	1915

despite a long legal battle, was unable to obtain a "hotel liquor license" which allowed the sale of "vinous, spirituous, malt and brewed liquors by retail" -- in other words, beer, wine and hard liquor. As a sort of consolation prize, the Court granted Spence an "eating house license" which permitted the sale of beer and wine, but not liquor. A few years later, Spence was convicted of selling alcohol to minors and sent to jail briefly, forcing him out of business. Several men attempted to revive his restaurant, and one even reopened it as the Imperial Hotel, but they were never able to get a hotel liquor license. The last one abandoned the effort in 1915 and converted the hotel into apartments.

The biggest hotel that never opened in the Borough was proposed by Nathan Hayes, a London Grove farmer who came to West Chester during the Civil War and bought the Mansion House Hotel. Later, he bought the Eagle Hotel, and at the end of 1892, the newspapers reported that he planned to build a five-story "\$100,000 hotel" at the northeast corner of Gay and Walnut Streets. Although a basement was excavated, the work came to a halt after Hayes committed suicide in April 1893. Workmen tore out the unfinished basement, and the lot remained vacant until 1906 when the current post office was built there.

During the late 19th century, the local newspaper regularly published the "scale of prices" for West Chester hotels that included the price of full board (lodging plus three meals), partial board, a single meal and stabling a horse for the night. In 1854, full board cost a dollar, plus sixty-two cents to keep a horse overnight, while a single meal cost only thirty-seven and a half cents. By 1873, those prices had risen to \$2.50 for full board, \$1.25 for horse stabling, and seventy-five cents for a meal.

Despite the increase in prices, some hotels became unprofitable. In 1856, real estate investor David McConkey converted the Washington House into his own private home, and the White Hall Hotel was torn down in 1874 and replaced with stores. William Leslie converted the Eagle Hotel into apartments and retail space around 1900, while the Old Farmer's Hotel and the West Chester Hotel suffered the same fate during the next decade. By the beginning of World War I, there were only three hotels still in business: the Green Tree, the Mansion House and the Turk's Head.

The end came by 1970. First, the Green Tree closed in 1931, a victim of its age and the Depression. Then the Turk's Head was sold off in the mid-1960s. Finally, despite an attempt to save it by using it to house college students, the Mansion House was demolished in 1970.

For the next thirty years, visitors to West Chester had to stay somewhere else. Then in the early 1990s, with gasoline prices rising and the conversion of West Chester into an entertainment destination, the first "bed and breakfast" establishments opened. In 2001 restaurant owner Jack McFadden proposed to open a small hotel at 13-15 S. High street, and in 2003 Brian McFadden (no relation to Jack) proposed a larger hotel at 152-154 W. Gay Street. Neither of those proposals went forward, but a 2007 proposal by Brian McFadden for the Warner Theater site at 120 N. High Street was approved by Borough Council and awaits construction financing. Most recently, the 2008 proposal by Stan Zukin for a hotel on the site of the old Eagle Hotel has received the first of several stages of approval from the Borough.

Postscript: The "Warner Hotel" opened at 120 N. High Street in the summer of 2012. The proposal for a hotel on the former Rite-Aid site at 33-39 E. Gay Street was turned down by Borough Council in December 2013, and is in litigation as of November 2014. Meanwhile, a new proposal -- to convert the F&M Building at 2 W. Market Street into a "boutique hotel," is in the works as of November 2014.