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04 Unusual Historical Find - the Boals' Ford Dealership

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Unusual Historical Find - the Boals' Ford Dealership

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West Chester has its share of historical oddities and another one was revealed in 2009 by masonry contractors renovating an E. Gay Street building. Although it sits in plain view of the street, it took the sharp eyes of a young man named Andy Rodriguez to spot it, plus the recollections of a long-time Borough resident and an unidentified radio listener to get things moving. Finally, with the cooperation of the staff at the County Recorder of Deeds office and the Chester County Historical Society, the full story was revealed.

The discovery is a ceramic plaque that is set into the wall of the building at the northwest corner of E. Gay Street and Patton Alley, across the alley from Domino's Pizza. The plaque is about six feet square and contains a relief sculpture. A close look reveals that it portrays two figures dressed in classical Greek clothing, surrounded by objects that include a hammer, some chains, a wheel, and what appears to be a tire. The most remarkable feature is an object that the figure on the left offers to the figure on the right. It looks like a Model T Ford.



Photo courtesy of Andy Rodriguez



**The building at the corner of E. Gay Street and Patton Alley.
The plaque is above the door in the center of the picture.**

Mr. Rodriguez, who writes a blog called Arod138 in beautiful West Chester, Pa" asked West Chester University history professor Jim Jones if knew anything about the plaque. A quick search of the files showed that the building was a car showroom in 1931, and was constructed sometime after 1921. From 1956 to the early 1980s, it was the showroom for Turner Motors, a

Mercedes-Benz dealer. More recently, it was Hannum's motorcycle shop, and after that, the Verlo mattress and futon store. At present, contractors are remodeling it into a shopping center that will be called "Gateway Plaza."

It took a few telephone calls to learn more about the auto dealership. The first, to a retired postal worker with a lifelong interest in automobiles yielded pay dirt. He remembered the J. L. Boals company at that location in the early 1930s, and identified Boals as an agent for the Ford Motor Company. He also thought that they ran into trouble during the Depression and that the remnants reorganized into Wiley Motors, which operated at 110 N. Walnut Street (across from the Post Office) for many years.

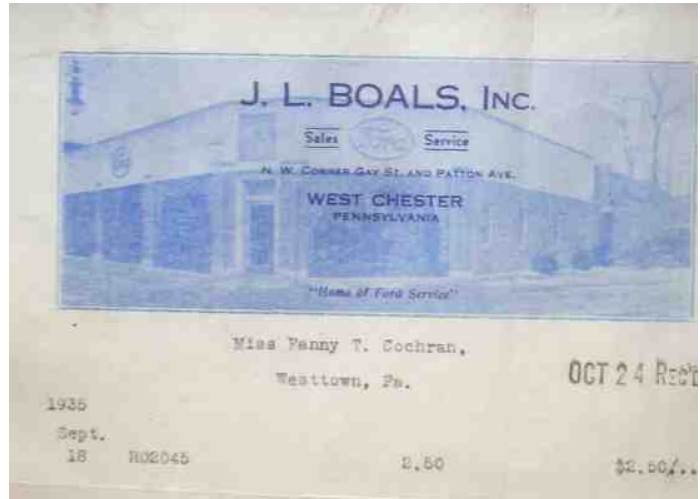
A second phone call went to the Robert Henson, the former host of WCOJ's "The Big Show." Although he is on the young side of forty, Henson grew up in West Chester and also has a strong interest in vehicles and history. He said he'd once read that Henry Ford made it a point to visit every one of his dealerships in the United States, and wondered if he'd ever been in West Chester. A few moments later, another caller identified himself as an "old-timer," confirmed that the building once housed the Boals Ford dealership, and added that back when he was young, another old-timer had told him about Henry Ford's visit to West Chester.

Documents in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds provided the names of the people who owned the property since 1894. That year, the West Chester Railroad sold it to a real estate firm which eventually sold it to the Pennsylvania Railroad. This was not surprising, since West Chester's first station was located a short distance away at the corner of Matlack and Chestnut Streets, and the Pennsylvania Railroad acquired control of the WCRR in 1879.

Near the end of World War I, the PRR subdivided the property and sold the eastern part to a real estate development company. They do not appear to have done anything with it, and in August 1928, they sold it to Horace Temple, owner of a printing business which operated in the middle of the block on E. Gay Street until only a few years ago. Two weeks later, Temple sold the eastern half of the property -- the section at Patton Alley and Gay Street -- to J. L. Boals, Inc.

An undated notice from the West Chester Lions Club newsletter contained a brief biography of James L. Boals Jr. He was born in 1893 in Philadelphia where he was raised and educated. After serving ten years as the chief clerk of a Ford dealership at Broad and Lehigh Streets in Philadelphia, he moved to West Chester and took over the local Ford agency located at 110 N. Walnut Street. Sometime later, according to the notice, Boals built a "fine showroom" at the corner of Gay Street and Patton Alley.

CARS	TRUCKS	TRACTORS
Lincoln <i>Ford</i> Fordson J. L. BOALS, INC. <small>AUTHORIZED</small> SALES AND SERVICE <small>110 N. WALNUT STREET WEST CHESTER, PA.</small>		
SOLD TO <i>C. H. Jacobs</i>		May 5 1926
1	Ford Coupe saloon #12883114	597 50
1	pare tire tube & cover	18 00
1	ford front bumper	7 50
1	rhinny heater Clock	7 00
1	40 Speedometer	10 00
1	LeLand Lock	7 00
1	Set Safety pedals	1 00
1	set Ford Shubbers	3 00
1	Labor charge installing accessories	3 00
		660 00
<small>Front bumper back ordered will notify when to call for installation</small> <i>Paid by Cash</i>		



Left: 1926 invoice from J. L. Boals, Inc. Right: 1935 letterhead showing the car dealership. Note the plaque located just above the J. in the company name. Both images courtesy of the Chester County Historical Society.

The first Borough Directory in the collection of the Historical Society to list Boals in West Chester was published in 1927, although an invoice dated May 5, 1926 showed he was already in business at 110 N. Walnut Street before then. Borough directories continued to show him on N. Walnut Street until the 1930-1931 directory, which gave his business address as 225 E. Gay Street. Boals' company letterhead shows the front of the building with the plaque clearly visible over the doorway. Other documents in the Historical Society files show Boals was still on E. Gay Street as late as September 1936, but by 1938 the Borough directory placed him back at 110 N. Walnut Street. A few years later, the E. Gay Street property was put up for sheriff's sale.

There are still plenty of unanswered questions about Boals and his building. Why did he sell it to someone named Charles Kahn only a week after he bought it in 1928, for the same price that he paid for it? Was Kahn a representative of the Ford Motor Company? If so, then why did Kahn sell the property to Melrose Realty in 1938, and what happened that led to the sheriff taking possession by 1943? Perhaps most intriguing -- did Henry Ford ever visit the West Chester dealership, either on E. Gay Street or N. Matlack Street? And most of all, who designed the plaque and decided to put it on a wall facing E. Gay Street?