08 The History of the "Mosteller Corner" in West Chester, Pennsylvania

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Although West Chester has undergone considerable change in the last two generations, it has not come without controversy. The resurrection of the town's center, which was in an advanced state of decay by the early 1980s, has had a number of consequences, not the least of which is an increase in the value of West Chester's commercial property. In 2008, a major parcel became available when the County of Chester moved out of its offices in the buildings that surround the old courthouse. Their sale generated the conversion of courtrooms into office suites, and proposals to replace some of the older structures with new buildings. Those proposals led to public hearings which elicited testimony from numerous experts -- both credentialed and self-proclaimed -- that demonstrated the enthusiasm that West Chester's citizens have for local history. To satisfy that enthusiasm, and to provide some well-reached information, is the purpose of this article.

The buildings which are slated for demolition were all once part of West Chester's largest store. *Mosteller's Department Store*, which was created by combining twelve separate storefronts plus several other parcels locating in the block's interior, wrapped around the southeast corner of Church and Gay Streets on what preservationists call West Chester's "first block." Although not strictly accurate -- four blocks were laid out at the same time around the intersection of the Wilmington and Philadelphia roads (modern High and Gay Streets) -- the name is apt. Besides the original courthouse, the block was
also surrounded by Church, Gay, High and South (later Market) Streets, the site of two of West Chester's first four inns (the other two were located a few feet away across High Street). People came to West Chester for other reasons, but if they ate or slept over, they were drawn to the "first block."

**Note:** The properties on this block were subdivided and recombined many times, with the result that the numbering of the street addresses varies considerably according to the source. For the purpose of this article, the Mosteller's store occupied 19-27 N. Church Street and 24-28 and 38-42 W. Gay Street. Two other parcels, 34 and 36 W. Gay Street, separated the two portions of the Mosteller facade along W. Gay Street.

One of the hotels was built on the "Mosteller Corner." In 1786, the year that the court house opened, William Worthington constructed a three story hotel called the "Cross Keys" on land belonging to Emmor Trego.[1] Over the years, its name changed frequently, but the original building (plus several additions) stood on the site for nearly a century until 1873.[2] The list of owners was even longer, and included William Worthington in 1792, Robert McClanahan in 1794, Isaac Webb in 1796, Ephraim Buffington in 1801, John Watson in 1812, Benjamin Jeffries in 1814, Benjamin Pearson in 1815, Davis Beaumont in 1818, Philip P. Sharpless in 1838 and finally Robert Irwin in 1839. Most were "outsiders" – McClanahan was a merchant from Easttown, Buffington was an innkeeper from East Marlborough, Watson kept a store in what was then called Coventry Township, Jeffries and Pearson both operated mills in East Bradford, while Beaumont had a store in Newtown, Delaware County.[3]
In 1899, an 89-year old West Chester resident named Philip P. Sharpless described his memories of the corner when he was a small boy (i.e. about 1816). “... the Cross Keys is the next stone house with the small kitchen at the southeast corner of the house, leaving room between it and Church street for a small yard, in which was a porch for the accommodation of the bar room, with a few trees for shade. The stables and sheds were on Gay street; the lot extended from the corner on Church to the west line of the house now in possession of J. Herbert Mullin. [Author's note: 28 W. Gay St.] The landlady of the house was Mary Pearson. It divided the honor with the Green Tree and the Washington, of being the principal tavern in the town.”[4]

Although it lasted a long time, the White Hall was eventually doomed by a combination of changes. The growth of the Borough sparked the construction of newer, more modern hotels which created competition, while the completion of a second railroad to Philadelphia and post-civil war economic growth opened up possibilities for new stores. In 1873, the owner of a popular dry goods store at 101 W. Market Street, Eber Woodward, formed a partnership with local builder Lewis W. Shields and bought the White Hall Hotel.[5] They organized its demolition, built three brick stores that became 38-42 W. Gay Street, and sold off the rest to a variety of investors.[6]
The corner property was acquired by James Finegan, a grocer who had operated for years at 9 N. Church Street. By 1879, his neighbors to the east were F. S. Hickman's print shop with an upstairs billiard hall, Ann Smith's "white goods" shop for sheets and towels, Christman's shoe store with the upstairs meeting room of the "Philosophical Society", and a hardware store operated by Fairlamb & Lear. Looking south along Gay Street, there was H. W. Robinson's wallpaper shop, Hennessey's cigars, Catharine Robinson's millinery shop for women, Eldridge's bookstore, a private residence and Spackman's dry goods store at the corner of Courthouse Alley. Most rented their space from either Shields or Woodward, but as both men died, their heirs put their properties up for sale. In 1890, the first members of the Mosteller family joined the ranks of West Chester property owners.

Neither were named Mosteller. They were J. Howard Lumis and his brother-in-law, Lewis C. Moses, neighbors from West Vincent who had started out running small country stores and graduated to a partnership selling horse carriages in Phoenixville. In the spring of 1890, they bought 19 N. Church Street from Eber Woodward's estate, and in 1903, they bought the neighboring shop and demolished both so they could rebuild a larger store at 17-29 N. Church Street. While both men became known for other endeavors - Moses was the postmaster and chief of the Fame Fire Company, while Lumis became the president of the Penn Mutual Insurance Company -- their
store remained in operation even after Moses died in 1907[10] -- but by the end of World War I, Lumis and the Moses family began to look for a buyer. They found one in James Brownback Mosteller, the Birchrunville postmaster and general store owner, who also happened to be the brother of Lumis' brother-in-law.[11]

For years afterward, West Chester's Daily Local News retold a story that began with "Mosteller's first came to West Chester in February of 1920 having purchased the long established dry goods business of Moses and Lumis at 19 and 21 North Church Street ..." In fact, the transfer took place over more than five years, starting with the sale of the store's contents and fixtures to Mosteller in January 1920 and only ending with the sale of the building in April 1925. By then, Moses' widow Annie was in her seventies and his son George was preoccupied with expanding his automobile business on N. Walnut Street, while Lumis was in the process of a career change that led to the presidency of the Penn Mutual Fire Insurance Company by 1928. In January 1925, Lumis took his daughter Ruth on a two-month cruise to the Caribbean and South America, and three days after they returned, the store was sold to Mosteller.[12]

Over the next two decades, Mosteller and his wife Rosalind, plus their sons J. Dewees, Clinton and J. Paul acquired more stores and in the process, changed the corner's appearance and the way the people of West Chester went shopping. First, they bought Grauten's clothing store next door in 1927, and then the next two storefronts (25-27 N. Church Street) in 1928. After the existing leases expired, Mosteller joined them together and added a third floor and sprinkler system to create what the newspaper called a "handsome new department store." Four floors offered cloth and sewing materials, women's...
clothing, men's clothing and a toy department. The store also featured an electric elevator and a restroom for its customers. The newspaper concluded that customers "will find a delightful surprise awaiting them in the completeness with which every detail of a high-class mercantile establishment has been carried out by the firm. This together with the enviable reputation always maintained, makes it an ideal place in which to shop. It is in truth a department store for all the people." [13]

Looking south from Gay St. Mosteller's is on the left just before the alley.

The front of Mosteller's store after the first expansion in 1929

A view of the Gay Street parcels

The next opportunity for expansion occurred in 1941. The Mostellers bought two men's clothing stores located side-by-side at 24 and 28 W. Gay and convinced the owners of 34 and 36 W. Gay Street to sell them land at the rear of their properties. Besides remodeling the two stores to accommodate a new men's clothing department, women's lingerie and housewares, the Mostellers constructed a corridor that connected the new stores to the old.[14] In 1944 they acquired the corner and the property to the south (42 W. Gay and 29 N. Church), and eight months later they added Simon Grant's Boston clothing store at 38-40 W. Gay Street. Finally, in 1953 they purchased Wood's store at 36 W. Gay Street.[15]
That set the stage for the third major redevelopment of the Mosteller corner. The Mostellers removed some walls and reinforced others, connected basements, wrapped the exterior in light yellow brick and added awnings with the store's new logo. Inside they installed a pneumatic air tube system to link the sales registers with a central cashier, and distributed metal disks to their customer which allowed them to shop without cash and pay monthly account statements. They offered pension plans to their employees, introduced West Chester to "Bermuda shorts," held contests, hosted flower shows and provided the town with place to meet a Santa Claus each year. As a newspaper reporter gushed, "There seems to be no end to the word "Improvement" when one thinks of the Mosteller store in ten years hence."[16]
Despite all these efforts, the Mosteller family had a rough time of it in the 1960s. Mosteller's, like town center stores all over the country, began to face growing competition from new shopping malls, despite further upgrades including the reconstruction of the storefront at the corner in 1963 and two more storefronts at 24-28 W. Gay Street in 1969. Additional problems resulted from the Mosteller brothers' civic involvement when Borough Council set in motion a plan to redevelop the Friends Meeting House on West Chestnut Street for parking. As Council president since 1960 (and a member since 1946), J. Dewees Mosteller was criticized by opponents who charged that he wanted to destroy a historic property to benefit his business. Although Mosteller died unexpectedly in April 1968, the meeting house was demolished and turned into a parking lot. In the next election, his younger brother J. Paul was elected to Council (and served as council president from 1972 to 1977), but the controversy also incited the movement that led to the election of the Borough's first Democratic Mayor (J. Herbert Chambers) in 1970.[17]

Although the Borough eventually built its first parking garage at the corner of Chestnut and Walnut Streets in 1973, the pressure on Mosteller's proved too great. As the business district continued to decline, the public sector expanded, and in the spring of 1978, the Chester County commissioners voted to but the Mosteller store and converted it into offices. Predictably, there was an outcry sparked by concern about the impact on the neighboring businesses. The criticism became more intense after the Borough's Planning
Commission recommended approval of the change of use, even though it would remove the property from the Borough's tax rolls, since three of its members were also directors of the bank that held the Mosteller Store's mortgage.[18] Despite the uproar, and the sale went forward and the County took over the corner for the next quarter century. The move provided only temporary relief, however. In 1993, the County opened a new "Government Services Center" in West Goshen Township, and in 1997 began floating plans for demolishing the old store and constructing a new building on the site. Fearing the destruction of the business district, which was beginning to revive, a variety of local activists campaigned to save the Mosteller building, or at least to limit the height of its replacement and insure that its ground floor was reserved for retail use. As the process dragged on and public officials came and went, the proposal was modified until finally the County agreed to build a new "Justice Center" on W. Market Street, lease office space in several other buildings, preserve the historic 1847 courthouse at Market & High Streets, and put the remainder of its space in the First Block up for sale. In 2011, that sale was completed, and the new owner D-Town Associates began to present its plans to redevelop the old store.[19]

By the time this was written (November 2014), D-Town Associates had filed plans for three different buildings ranging in height from 75 to 90 feet and containing various combinations of commercial space on the ground floor and office space upstairs. The tallest plan, which included condominiums on the upper floors, received conditional use approval from Borough Council in November 2012, but while that was going on, Council revised the zoning for that district to make it harder to build anything taller than three stories (45 feet). Thus, when D-Town Associates offered to reduce their project to four stories (60 feet) and provide a public plaza on the corner, Borough Council called that a new plan and said it had to meet the new zoning regulations. Instead, the developers decided to move forward with their 75-foot plan, which was subject to the old zoning requirements, and Borough Council agreed to begin hearings on that plan in December 2014. [20]
Reference Notes


2. Among the names were the 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. See Futhey & Cope, 214.


5. The last owner of the hotel, Robert Irwin, died suddenly in Maryland in 1873. His heirs sold some of his property to adjacent property owners, but the hotel went to Shields & Woodward. See Chester County Deed Book M8 (March 30, 1874), 117. Basic information on the lives of Irwin, Woodward and Shields can be found in "Death of Capt. Robert Irwin" in *Daily Local News* (January 14, 1873), an article on Woodward's store from *Daily Local News* (March 12, 1891) located in the CCHS clippings file "West Chester Business Houses: E. Woodward, Dry Goods", and

6. The sale of the stores on Gay Street is documented in Chester County Deed Book N8 (April 5-6, 1874) pages 7-9. The other sales, complicated by the demise of Shields and Woodward's partnership, are sprinkled through a long list of deed books. For a sense of the sources, see Chester County Deed Book O8 (various dates in 1874), pages 83-87 & 160, Deed Book H9 (March 15, 1880), and sales made by Eber Woodward's executors in 1891.


10. “Lewis C. Moses” in *Daily Local News* (March 14, 1907); “J. Howard Lumis” in *Daily Local News* (August 29, 1899). Regarding the purchase of the two storefronts, see Chester County Deed Books R10 (April 1, 1890), 322 and S12 (April 1, 1903), 8.


12. For an example of the "official story" of the Mosteller origins, see “Here It All Began in 1920” in *Daily Local News* (June 20, 1970). For the more detailed version, see the untitled clipping from the *Daily Local News* (January 31, 1920), in the Chester County Historical Society (henceforth "CCHS") clippings file for “West Chester Business Houses: Mosteller”; “Announcement” in *Daily Local News* (March 1, 1920); passport applications #497521 and 497522 from National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; Series: Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925; the passenger list for the United American Line ship *Resolute* in New York, New York arrivals (March 29, 1925); and Chester County Deed Book T16 (April 1, 1925), 547.

13. Chester County Deed Books L17 (June 1, 1927), 134 and A18 (December 24, 1928), 213; article in *Daily Local News* (June 5, 1929), available in the CCHS clippings file “West Chester Business Houses: Mosteller.”

15. Chester County Deed Books U20 (March 16, 1944), 186; Y21 (May 23, 1945), 135; and M26 (May 26, 1953), 40.

16. The CCHS clippings file on "West Chester Business Houses: Mosteller" contain a rich selection of articles on Mosteller's in the decade after World War II. Many of West Chester's older residents also shared information about Mosteller's during this period. I am particularly grateful to Anne Gincley, Jack & Charlotte Harvey, Jack Waldron, and Sarge Clark for sharing their recollections. The quotation is from a *Daily Local News* clipping dated January 28, 1955.

17. Details on the facade improvements can be found in the *Daily Local News* (March 23, 1963); photo caption in *Daily Local News* (November 6, 1969), both in the CCHS clippings file "West Chester Business Houses: Mostellers." Details on the Friends Meeting Controversy and its results can be found in the official minutes of the Borough Council of West Chester, especially September 30, 1966 through February 8, 1967 and August 8, 1967 through April 10, 1968. The April 10 minutes described the passing of J. Dewees Mosteller: "Following reading of the Minutes, Mr. Mosteller excused himself due to not feeling well and requested Mr. Baldwin to take over conduct of the meeting. ... [later, a] question and answer period was interrupted by Mr. Baldwin who reported he had just received notice that Mr. Mosteller had died, and the meeting was adjourned."
