

A Lonely Grand Lady Awaits Her Future:

A History of 225 Bridge Street, Phoenixville, Pennsylvania

By Helen M. Harrop

The Grand Lady of 225 Bridge Street is captivating for a number of reasons. Among them are her architectural beauty and the number and variety of the hats she has worn. At various times since her construction in 1924, the impressive building has served as a bank, recreation center, snack bar, and newspaper publishing house. Years of emptiness sometimes crept in between these changes of identity and purpose.

The designation, “Grand Lady,” seems appropriate because the building’s face is a Bridge Street treasure. The façade is dignified, elegant, and eye-catching in its architecture and detail. A two-story building five bays wide, it beguiles Bridge Street with its large windows and towering, fluted columns surmounted by volutes. The columns support an imposing and ornate pediment featuring a heavy dentil cornice. Large, carved letters on a wide frieze above the columns form the words, “National Bank of Phoenixville.” The cornerstone, located near ground level at the lower left side of the building’s facade, records “1924,” the year it was built. The main body of the structure extends beyond the stone façade.

A Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey Form identifies 225 Bridge Street’s architecture as Greek revival: a style made popular in America after the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893. The façade of the nearby First Presbyterian Church at 145 Main Street is another example of this architectural style.

Efforts to establish a bank in Phoenixville began as early as 1852, but did not come into being until March 3, 1859, the day when banking operations began for the institution officially known as the “Bank of Phoenixville.” On December 30, 1864, it organized as the “National Bank of Phoenixville,” with an original capital of \$100,000 and ten directors. Samuel Buckwalter was the first bank president.

In the early days of its organization, the bank occupied a modest dwelling near Bridge and Bank Streets. In 1872 it moved into a grander building next door. However, its crowning achievement came in 1924, when both buildings were razed to make room for the classic, columned edifice described earlier and construction began. Its next door neighbor, the Colonial Theatre, established in 1903, welcomed it. During the construction of 225 Bridge Street, bank business went on as usual in temporary quarters in the rear of the new bank.

On November 11, 1925, the National Bank of Phoenixville formally opened its new residence, accompanied by much fanfare. Over 2,000 people came to admire it, some of whom were bankers and representatives of brokerage houses from large cities. They marveled at the interior, with its marble accents and beautiful detailing in wood. A commodious banking room with big vaults greeted visitors, and there were separate rooms for the bookkeepers and directors. A large skylight allowed the sun to illumine employees and patrons alike. On that opening day, a silk flag was presented to the institution by local merchants, and favors were given to all visitors. In the evening, an orchestra furnished music. Some newspaper reporters later referred to The National Bank of Phoenixville at 225 Bridge Street as one of the finest bank buildings in the eastern part of the United States.

Only eight years later, in 1933, the National Bank of Phoenixville merged with the Farmers & Mechanics Bank, now Wells Fargo, at Main and Church Streets. It then became known as "Farmers and Mechanics-National Bank of Phoenixville." It hoped to be one of the strongest national banks in Chester and Montgomery Counties. The Grand Lady, its original purpose lost when left behind by the merger, became a blind and empty spot on Bridge Street, Phoenixville's main thoroughfare. Occasionally, it was used for storage. Sometimes its arresting façade served as the rallying point for public meetings and civic affairs, but it had outlasted the reason for its existence, and must have wondered about its future.

In 1942 it was sold to a syndicate headed by A. P. deSanno, Jr. Mr. deSanno's plans for the building, while initially indefinite, called for an establishment that would be a credit to Phoenixville.

Records at the Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area indicate that two enterprises inhabited the building at 225 Bridge Street during this period. The Phoenixville Recreation Center, which included a seven-lane bowling alley, occupied the street floor from 1943 until 1950. On another floor, the patrons could play pool and meet their friends. In the downstairs area of the old bank building was the Checkerboard, a sandwich shop which welcomed personnel and patients from the nearby Valley Forge General Hospital, as well as area residents. Membership in The Checkerboard Club entitled one to the dancing available from 7 p.m. until midnight, as well as other guest privileges.

By 1950 the Phoenixville Publishing Company, home of the *Daily Republican*, our local newspaper, had vacated its office at 167 East Bridge Street. On November 15, 1950, it moved to more spacious, modern quarters at the completely renovated National Bank of

Phoenixville building at 225 Bridge Street. The Grand Lady then became home to a new Goss 16-page printing press.

When the public was invited to an Open House at the new newspaper plant on December 8, 1950, more than 4,000 people visited the quarters of the *Daily Republican*. On that day, President Hamilton H. Gilkyson, Jr. opened the ceremonies by unveiling a bronze plaque in memory of his late father, Colonel H. H. Gilkyson, first president of the Phoenixville Publishing Company. It reads: "In Memory of Col. H. H. Gilkyson, 1848-1927, Publisher and Mentor of The Daily Republican, 1902-1927." This plaque, one of the last personal mementos of the Grand Lady's history to be found in the building, remains on an inside wall to the left of the main entrance of 225 Bridge Street until this day.

The Phoenixville Publishing Company continued to reside at 225 Bridge Street throughout its evolution as the *Evening Phoenix* in 1975 and, later, the *Phoenix*, in 1991. In that year the press fell silent, as printing of the paper was shifted to the *Daily Local News* in West Chester. The publishing company closed its doors on November 22, 2010.

Now the lonely Grand Lady of Bridge Street, our unheralded treasure, is filled with purpose as she awaits her newest incarnation as an extension of her steadfast neighbor, the Colonial Theatre. One can only imagine her gratefulness to Association for the Colonial Theatre (ACT), her rescuer, and the anticipation she feels in the promise of a vibrant and purposeful new life as an arts center. Released from her loneliness, she looks forward to a glorious future. The Grand Lady waits no longer.