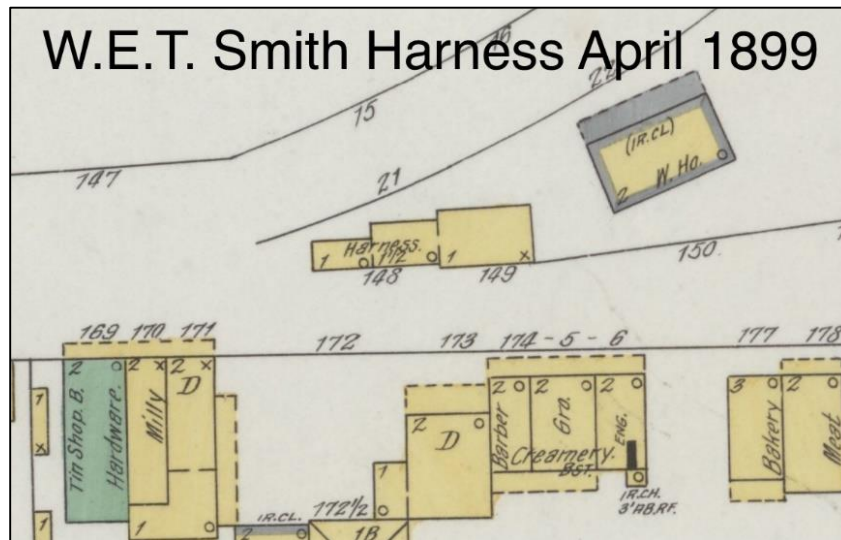


HISTORY OF THE SMITH BUILDING

Main Street, Mt. Airy, Maryland

William E.T. Smith (the great-grandfather of Travis Norwood) was a harness maker who came to Mt. Airy in the summer of 1886. Originally from Urbana, his first daughter was born on January 28, 1886, and Smith moved to Mt. Airy when she was just six months old, into the same residence where Howard Murdock, on Main Street once resided.¹ Eventually, Smith and his wife, Laura, had five children: Charles Albert Smith, Royal J. Smith, Edgar H. Smith, Minnie Smith and Maude Smith.² Like many other businessmen of the day, Smith served Mt. Airy's agricultural needs by establishing a two-story, wooden framed harness shop on the corner of Main Street and Camp Avenue in 1887. "Camp Avenue" you ask? Well, prior to 1911 that was the name of the street we now call Park Avenue.³ It most likely derived its original name from Barrett's Work Camp, located nearby and associated with the railroad,⁴ or possibly from the nearby camp area where 19th century revivalists held their country sermons. Unfortunately, Smith's harness shop burned down in the great fire of February 25, 1903. The fire started in Adam Ruland's bakery on South Main Street and the flames soon spread and ignited Smith's harness shop across the street⁵.



*Map design of Smith's Harness Shop as shown on the Sanborn
Fire Map of Mt. Airy, April 1899.*

¹ Interview of Smith's daughter by E. Normandy, *History of Mount Airy*, (Ref Pg. 11)

² Charles Albert Smith Obituary, *Community Reporter*, February 27, 1931

³ *Sanborn Fire Maps for 1899 and 1904 (Street detail)*, Courtesy Library of Congress Archives

⁴ *Democratic Advocate*, July 28, 1877

⁵ *Democratic Advocate*, February 28, 1903 (et. al. 1903 Fire Articles) *The American Sentinel*, October 1903



Shown center distance, just above the horse team, this is a rare photo of Smith's two-story, wooden framed Harness Shop, taken prior to the fire of 1903..

But Smith successfully rebuilt, and this time in brick. The building was completed by April 25, 1903.⁶ The *American Sentinel* newspaper in Westminster, Maryland later reported in April of 1903 “Mr. E.T. Smith has completed his handsome new three-story brick building which he will use as a harness shop, store, or display room, with two office rooms on the third story and a glass front store room on the ground floor. It is a great improvement over the old two-story frame structure.”⁷



Both photographs, taken circa 1905, show the original, rectangular floor plan of the Smith Building as it was built in 1903.

⁶ 2005 *History of the Flat Iron*, by Helen Simpson

⁷ *The American Sentinel*, April 1903

Although it was commonly known as the Smith Building in the early days, we have since come to know this iconic building in Mt. Airy as the Flat Iron Building. Many towns have “flatiron” buildings, including Washington DC and New York City. The name originates from the unique, triangular, architectural design commonly situated on an angular street corner and resembling an old fashioned flat iron. Smith continued to operate a harness shop in the newly erected brick building, and over the years leased the floors to a barber shop, a drug store, a music shop, and an insurance office.⁸

In May 1903, Morgan G. Clary whose own building was destroyed in the 1903 fire moved his insurance business into W.E.T. Smith’s new building. Morgan G. Clary had no insurance on his own building and could not rebuild after the fire.⁹ Perhaps the most prominent tenant of the Smith Building was the insurance man, A. Frank Miller. In 1902, Frank was an office boy working in the insurance business for Morgan G. Clary.¹⁰ Clary had started the firm in Mt. Airy in 1891.¹¹ A year after moving in to Smith’s building, Clary died on May 6, 1904 at the age of 39.¹² Clary left the business to his widow, who shortly afterwards entered into a partnership with Frank operating out of the Smith Building. They remained partners for the next two years and thereafter Frank was successful on his own.¹³ The Smith Building prominently displayed Miller’s sign for many years, and Frank advertised in *The Mount Airy Messenger*, with catchy phrases such as “*Insurance that Insures! A. Frank Miller, Smith Building, Mt. Airy, MD.....*”¹⁴

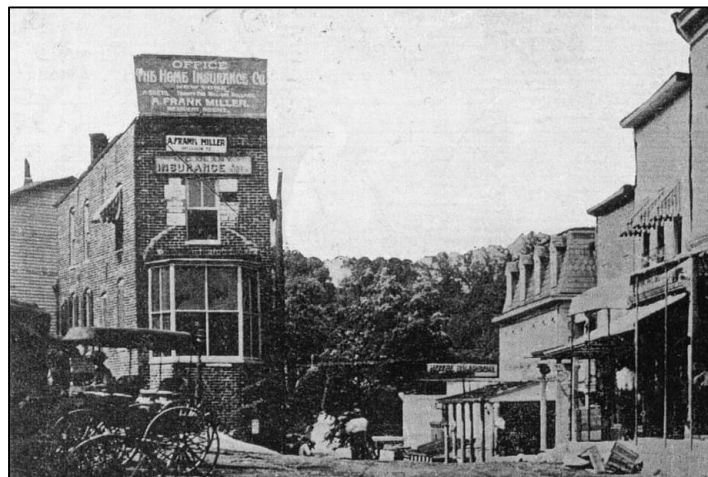
Insurance that Insures !

A. Frank Miller
Smith Building, Mt. Airy, Md.

Insurance of all kinds, representing the strongest companies in existence. Losses paid promptly and without discount.

☛ **Be careful in getting your insurance written by a man who knows how.**

Would you send for a blacksmith to care for an ill one in your home? Then don't place your Insurance with fruit tree agents, and grocery clerks, but place it with an agent that devotes his time and attention to the Insurance business. A word to the wise is sufficient. Prompt and courteous treatment to all, is our motto.



Frank Miller’s Insurance advertisement in the Mt. Airy Messenger, 1916, and a photo of the Smith building, about the same time, prominently displaying Miller’s signs.

⁸ Sanborn Fire Maps (detail), Courtesy Library of Congress Archives

⁹ 2005 History of the Flat Iron Building, Helen Simpson

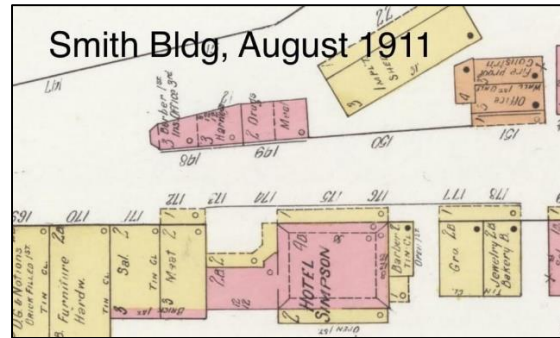
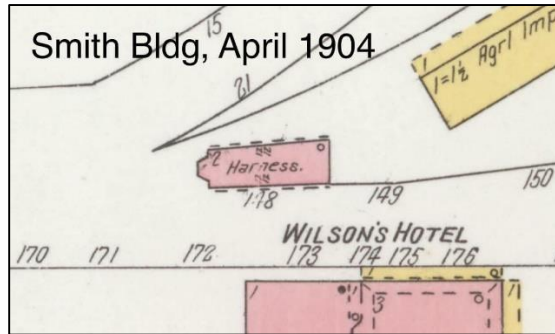
¹⁰ Mt. Airy “The Way We Were” Magazine Reproduction 1910, Miller Business Profile

¹¹ Democratic Advocate, December 21, 1906

¹² 2005 History of the Flat Iron Building, Helen Simpson

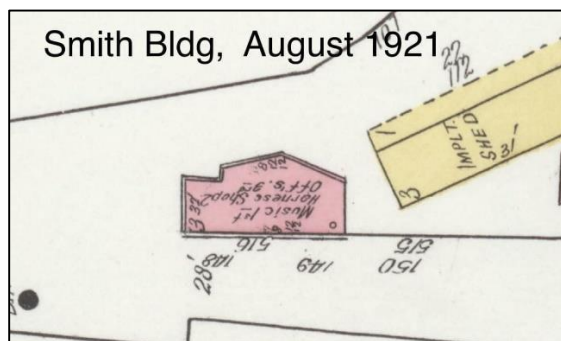
¹³ Mt. Airy “The Way We Were” Magazine Reproduction 1910, Miller Business Profile

¹⁴ Mt. Airy Messenger, March 3, 1916



Sanborn Fire Maps show the changing configuration of the Smith Building as it was originally built, shown in the 1904 map. Additional square footage was extended southward by 1911.

Prior to his death on October 28, 1914, W.E.T. Smith modified the building.¹⁵ Additional land square footage was obtained from the late Byron Dorsey and his wife as well as the town of Mt. Airy.¹⁶ (The building was again later modified prior to 1921. Changing details of the building can be seen in each of the Sanborn Insurance Company fire maps of Mt. Airy for the years 1899, 1904, 1911, and 1921.¹⁷ Additions and alterations to the building are apparent and observable in a few early photographs as well.) A month after Smith's death, the deed to the Flat Iron Building passed to his sons Charles A. Smith and Royal J. Smith.¹⁸ Charles A. Smith had learned the harness and saddlery trade from his father, and continued in that trade until his death on February 21, 1931.¹⁹



The final configuration of the Smith Building, as in the Sanborn Fire Map of 1921. This design still stands today. Note the "Victrola" Music Shop in the lower floor photograph. (Photo circa 1926)

¹⁵ 2005 History of the Flat Iron Building, Helen Simpson

¹⁶ Community Reporter, Article October 5, 1951

¹⁷ Sanborn Fire Maps, Courtesy Library of Congress Archives

¹⁸ 2005 History of the Flat Iron Building, Helen Simpson

¹⁹ Charles Albert Smith Obituary, Community Reporter, February 27, 1931.

Charles and his wife, India Smith, eventually came to own the building in their names on August 10, 1917. India kept the building for several years after Charles died, and later sold it on December 24, 1946 to Ralph D. Pryor, and it thereafter became commonly known in Mt. Airy as the Pryor Building.²⁰ Up until 1951, The Pryor Building housed several tenants to include Mr. JB Pryor who conducted a barbershop on the ground floor and a shoe cobbler by the name of Howard Hood. Contractor Truman Lowman maintained his headquarters on the second floor, while the top portion was used by the local American Legion Post as their first location after WWII.²¹



The Flat Iron Building, as it stands today



The Flat Iron Building, as of August 1911 (This photo can be dated because we see Fritz Leuba's Portico Building in the far distance on Main Street. His building was built prior to 1911, and the Saturday August 26th date on the banner only occurred in 1911)

On September 11, 1951 the town of Mt. Airy purchased the Pryor Building for \$12,050.²² The original intention was to tear the building down in anticipation of widening Main Street. However, that never occurred, and on February 16, 1959, a special meeting was called by Mayor Horpel, at which thirty townspeople attended, and a vote was taken which allowed the building to remain in possession of the town. On March 2, 1959, the Town Council voted unanimously to let the Pryor Building remain standing.²³ The building has remained in possession of the town ever since, serving a variety of functions over the years to include town hall, the local Maryland State Police office, a branch of the County Library, a military museum, and the former home to the Historical Society of Mt. Airy museum.²⁴ In 2005, Helen Simpson, a member of the

²⁰2005 *History of the Flat Iron Building*, Helen Simpson

²¹ *Community Reporter*, Article October 5, 1951

²² 2005 *History of the Flat Iron Building*, Helen Simpson

²³ 2005 *History of the Flat Iron Building*, Helen Simpson

²⁴ *Fredrick News Post*, Article September 29, 2003

Historical Society of Mt. Airy prepared a summary history of the Flat Iron Building and its various occupants over the years.

Over the years, various efforts and proposals have been made to either move the building, refurbish the building, or tear down the building altogether. In 2021-2022, the Town Council expressed concern that the building sits too closely to Main Street, and poses a safety risk to passing cars and pedestrians attempting to walk alongside the narrow sidewalk between the building and roadway. That, in addition to the general deterioration of the building, posed structural and financial challenges which the Town Council felt did not warrant saving the building.

Subsequently, a group of town volunteers to include Lawrence Valett, James Molesworth, Charles Beck, John Simpson, and Terry Baker - in conjunction with the Historical Society of Mt. Airy and the Mt. Airy Arts Alliance - made several efforts, proposals, petitions and appeals to save the building, and sought assistance and funding opportunities from the non-profit organization Preservation Maryland and other agencies. Unfortunately, on May 2, 2022, Mt. Airy Town Councilmember Steve Domotor introduced a motion to have the building torn down and removed within six months. Councilmember Pamela Reed seconded the motion. Mayor Larry Hushour spoke out against the motion, offering to take the building off the hands of the town council to allow the contingent of volunteers from the community work towards its preservation. The plea failed, and the final vote was held with Council President Jason Poirier joining the vote in favor of tearing down the building. Councilmembers Lynn Galletti and Karl Munder voted against the motion.²⁵

-By Lawrence Valett, member, Historical Society of Mt. Airy, June 2022

²⁵ Mt. Airy Town Council Meeting, May 2, 2022