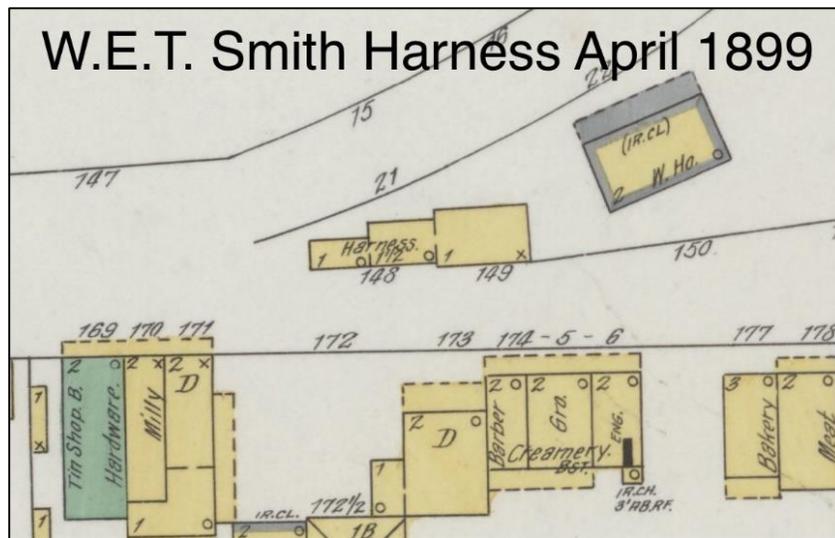


# HISTORY OF THE SMITH BUILDING

## Main Street, Mt. Airy, Maryland

William E.T. Smith was a harness maker who came to Mt. Airy in the summer of 1886. Originally from Urbana, his 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> It most likely derived its original name from Barrett's Work Camp, located nearby and associated with the railroad,<sup>3</sup> or possibly from the nearby camp area where 19<sup>th</sup> 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 street<sup>4</sup>.



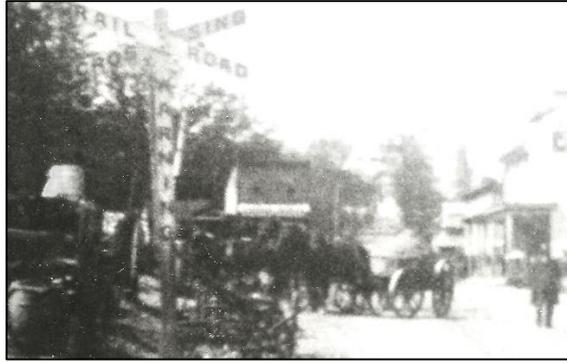
Map design of Smith's Harness Shop as shown on the Sanborn Fire Map of Mt. Airy, April 1899.

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

<sup>2</sup> Sanborn Fire Maps for 1899 and 1904 (Street detail), Courtesy Library of Congress Archives

<sup>3</sup> *Democratic Advocate*, July 28, 1877

<sup>4</sup> *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 *American Sentinel* newspaper in Westminster, Maryland reported in October 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.”<sup>5</sup>



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

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<sup>5</sup> *The American Sentinel*, October 1903

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.<sup>6</sup>

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 C. Clary.<sup>7</sup> Clary had started the firm in Mt. Airy in 1891.<sup>8</sup> In 1904, Clary died leaving 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.....*"<sup>10</sup>

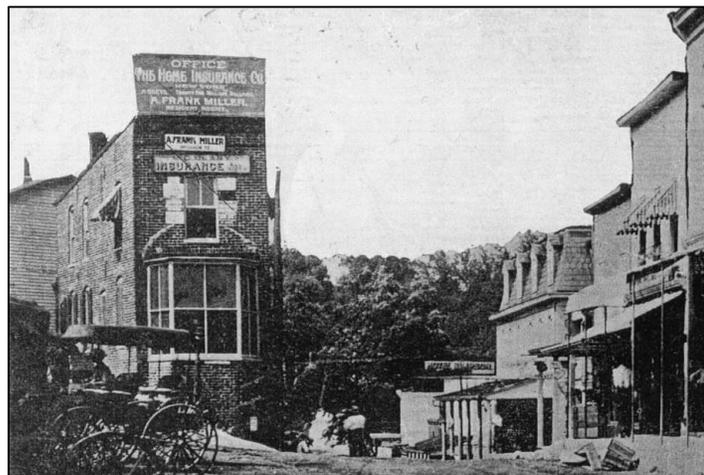
*Insurance that Insures!*

*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.*

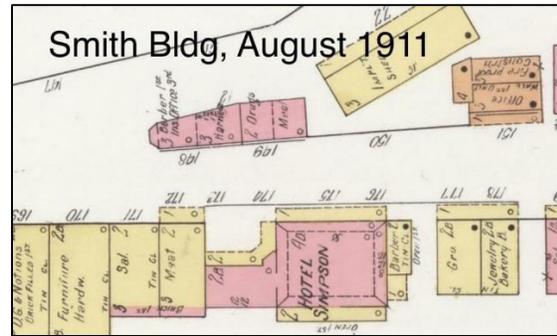
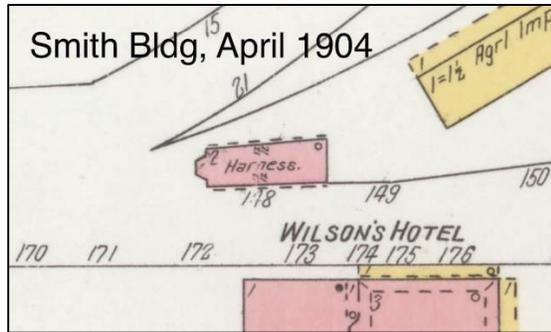
<sup>6</sup> Sanborn Fire Maps (detail), Courtesy Library of Congress Archives

<sup>7</sup> Mt. Airy "The Way We Were" Magazine Reproduction 1910, Miller Business Profile

<sup>8</sup> Democratic Advocate, December 21, 1906

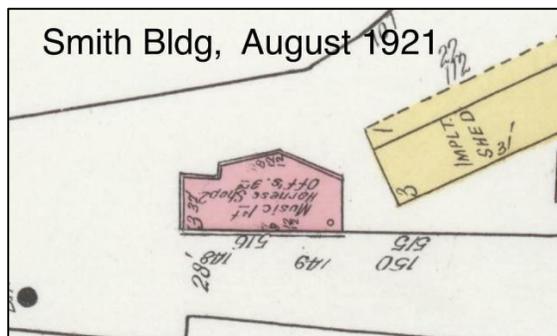
<sup>9</sup> Mt. Airy "The Way We Were" Magazine Reproduction 1910, Miller Business Profile

<sup>10</sup> 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, Smith modified the building several times.<sup>11</sup> Additional land square footage was obtained from the late Byron Dorsey and his wife as well as the town of Mt. Airy.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> Additions and alterations to the building are apparent and observable in a few early photographs as well. Around 1917, the building fell into the possession of a relative, Charles A. Smith, and his wife India Smith. (Charles A. Smith owned the Ridgeville Hotel up the road in Ridgeville, and was a prominent businessman referenced in the Frederick News newspapers of 1888).<sup>14</sup>



*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)*

<sup>11</sup> Flat Iron History, by Simpson. Mt. Airy Historical Society  
<sup>12</sup> Community Reporter, Article October 5, 1951  
<sup>13</sup> Sanborn Fire Maps, Courtesy Library of Congress Archives  
<sup>14</sup> The News, Frederick MD, March 26, 1888

India Smith kept the building for several years after Charles died, and later sold it in 1946 to Ralph D. Pryor, and it thereafter became commonly known in Mt. Airy as the Pryor Building. 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.<sup>15</sup>



*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 26<sup>th</sup> date on the banner only occurred in 1911)*

In October 1951, the town of Mt. Airy purchased the Pryor Building for \$12,050, and it 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.<sup>16</sup>

*-By Lawrence Valett, member, Historical Society of Mt. Airy, October 2021*

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<sup>15</sup> *Community Reporter, Article October 5, 1951*

<sup>16</sup> *Fredrick News Post, Article September 29, 2003*