

Carroll Yesteryears
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From Livery Stables to the Rise of the Automobile
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Long before automobile brand names like Kia, Hyundai, and Subaru were on our lips, there were ones no longer mentioned – Nash, Durant, Marmon, and Hupmobile. These were sold and serviced at the Harbaugh brothers' City Garage on Westminster's East Main Street beginning in the 1920s.

Harbaugh was a name long associated with transportation in Carroll County. Harry Harbaugh, according to his 1939 obituary in *The [Carroll County] Times*, "conceived the idea of acquiring several horses and equipment for the purpose of transporting people to Taneytown, New Windsor, and Westminster. It was in this manner his career as a liveryman was started." He lived in Uniontown at the time.

Westminster, being the county seat, seemed a better place for Harry to operate a growing business. He set up a large livery stable called the Palace Garage on East Main Street next to the Westminster Fire Department. After that burned in a spectacular fire in 1906, he replaced the many horses and equipment lost and opened a new Palace Garage at 60-62-64 East Main. Eventually he began selling cars and even branched out to offer taxi and bus transportation to Reisterstown and other nearby points.

The handwriting was on the wall. Gasoline was replacing oats as the "fuel" for transporting people and goods across America. According to Cathy Baty, curator at the Historical Society of Carroll County, "In 1908 Henry Ford introduced the Model T. Originally, any automobile was a luxury purchase. In its first year of production, the Model T sold for \$825. By 1927, the last year of production, the price had dropped to \$290 and over 15 million had been sold." W.H. Davis opened one of the first automobile dealerships in Carroll County in 1910, and in 1920, car shows began in Westminster's armory. Livery stables such as Harry Harbaugh's had become obsolete.

By 1927 Harry's sons, Ezra W. and H. Vernon, owned a large Art Deco structure recently built by David Weaver on Westminster's East Main Street. They called it the City Garage and operated an automobile sales room plus a 24-hour service station. A Sanborn insurance map from the same year indicates the showroom occupied the side near Westminster Avenue (actually an alley). On the other side stood the service garage. A large area at the back of the building held up to 50 cars and stretched to South Street, another alley running between East Main Street and Green Street.

Architectural historian Christopher Weeks, author of *The Building of Westminster in Maryland*, suggested that the "flamboyant" style of the Weaver building "clearly indicates a feeling of optimism about the then-dawning Automobile Age." The City Garage's downtown location proved advantageous. If Carroll Countians gathered for dinner in the Westminster Hotel, they might be tempted by shiny new cars parked in the Harbaughs' showroom directly across the street.

A 1928 City Garage ad in *The Times* featured a stylish four-passenger, custom-equipped Hupmobile Century Eight Coupe for a whopping \$2,015. Among the used cars also for sale were Fords, a Buick, a Hudson, and an Overland. The Harbaughs competed for local business with many other companies besides W.H. Davis. In 1932, 16 automobile dealers appeared in the Westminster phone book.

When Ezra Harbaugh died in 1974, ownership of the City Garage passed to his personal representative. Two years later, Christopher Weeks commented on the decaying condition of the building, suggesting “We have lost our enchantment with the ‘benzine buggy’; it is, to say the least, no longer an object of wonder and love. Present day garages are...less romantic in design.”

Sometime after 1976, the entire rear of the building was demolished, leaving the original two large rooms fronting 118 East Main Street with an opening between. In November 2022, the former City Garage was reincarnated as a distillery and tasting room called Covalent Spirits. On September 7, the owners, in conjunction with the Historical Society of Carroll County, will host an evening entitled “History: Shaken and Stirred.”

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer with the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Caption: The Art Deco-style façade of the Harbaugh brothers' City Garage, located at 118 East Main Street, appears in this undated photo. Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County