

## "The Bank of Westminster"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Some recent changes in local banking institutions has suggested to some that change is a relatively recent phenomenon in the banking industry. History, however, reveals that there have been a number of bank name changes, mergers, etc., since the first local bank opened in Westminster in 1816. A 1913 newspaper article provides an interesting history of the Bank of Westminster which later became Union National Bank:

"The Union National Bank – Banks are good things upon which to base an estimate of the financial condition of the community in which they exist. A town without a bank amounts to very little in this year of our Lord 1913. There was a time, however, in the history of many of the small towns, or rather large villages and wagon hamlets, of Maryland, when it would have been next to impossible to maintain a bank, even one with what might be now considered of small capital. As we have stated in other articles the volume of money was small and a great part of trading was done by the simple exchanging of commodities. The state banks issued money, or promises to pay, which passed within certain prescribed territory as money, and the solvency or insolvency of the bank regulated the value of a \$1 note within that territory.

Whatever may have been the financial conditions of other towns, villages and hamlets of Maryland, Westminster, from its very beginning, seems to have been provided with banking facilities. When the British under General Ross threatened Baltimore in 1814 one can imagine the state of terror into which the financial people of that city were thrown. Had General Ross succeeded in entering Baltimore his first act would have been to seize all the gold and silver money and use it for purchasing supplies for his soldiers. Many of the bankers of the city fled with whatever silver, gold and paper money they possessed and sought shelter in some of the nearby towns and villages. The British fleet was anchored in Chesapeake Bay and there was no escape by water. The flat county to the south of the city offered no protection and so the bankers sought the hill country lying to the north.

Among the banks that moved most of its assets to a place of comparative safety was the Commercial and Farmers' Bank. It sent Mr. John Walsh to Westminster in charge of the funds, stocks and bonds and during his stay as agent of the bank he opened a small office of 'Discount and Deposit.' To the young man of to-day it seems like a long, long time ago. It is; but when one stops to consider that time moves mighty rapidly and that 100 years in history is, after all, but a short period, the year 1814 was not so long ago.

After the British scare was over and Baltimore was found to be intact, the Commercial and Farmers' Bank moved its assets back to Baltimore. The people of Westminster, however, having had some idea of the convenience and facilities of banking were loath to have the office of 'Discount and Deposit' closed. This induced Mr. Walsh to remain, and in 1816 the legislature incorporated the Bank of Westminster, from which time all banking history of Westminster begins.

The men who organized the bank in 1816 must have been of enterprising stock because not long after the Bank of Westminster had gotten under way they organized a branch bank in the town of Frederick and called it the Farmers and Mechanics' Bank. To one familiar with the history of those days the act seems to have been rather 'cheeky'. The idea of the people of Westminster, a small hamlet in Frederick

county, organizing a bank in the proud old town of Frederick, the county seat, with all of its Revolutionary War history behind it. The people of Frederick town owned a majority of the stock and after a period of about six years they suddenly awoke to the situation and proposed to the Bank of Westminster that the Farmers and Mechanics' Bank of Frederick be known and treated as the parent bank and the former the branch. To this the Westminster stockholders demurred and an amiable separation was effected. The Farmers and Mechanics' Bank of Frederick was rechartered and has been in existence ever since with excellent relations still existing between the two organizations.

When the National Bank Act was passed by Congress the Bank of Westminster ceased to issue paper money. We might state in passing that the paper money of the Bank of Westminster had a much wider circulation than many of the state banks of Maryland and that every dollar issued by it has been redeemed at face value. The bank was known for many years as the 'Fisher Bank' because one of its early cashiers was Mr. John Fisher; one of Westminster's men of substance. Mr. Isaac Shriver, grandfather of Mr. Edwin W. Shriver, of this city, was one of the early presidents of the bank. Its banking room was in the office now occupied by the Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Carroll county and its old vault is still used by the insurance company. The doors of the office were covered with sheet iron and the locks were of immense size with keys made by hand and large enough to fell a human being. The workmanship on the old keys is excellent and would be a credit to the best mechanic of to-day. The old keys and lock may be seen at the banking room of the Union National Bank, of this city, where they are kept as relics of by gone days.

The Bank of Westminster having been practically put out of business by the passing of the National Bank Act the stockholders determined to change the character of the same by reorganizing under the Act. Accordingly in 1865 The Union National Bank was organized with a capital of \$100,000. The question of a name for the bank, we are informed, was discussed at some length and finally the word Union was suggested. In 1865 Westminster was still divided on the questions arising out of the Civil War and the feeling was very bitter between certain classes of citizens and the word union was a happy thought. Men of different shades of opinion were put into the organization of the bank and its success was assured from the beginning.

The board of directors has always embraced some of the most prominent and influential citizens of the county, such as Isaac Shriver, Andrew Pouder, John Fisher, Jehu Royer, John K. Longwell, Jacob Powder, John Roberts, William P. Maulsby, Abraham Shafer, William Reese, David H. Shriver, David and Daniel J. Geiman, David Roop, Charles B. Roberts, J. Henry Hoppe, Benjamin F. Crouse, Lawrence Zepp and Frank T. Shaw.

The first semi-annual dividend was declared in November 1816 and its one hundred and ninety-third one was declared December 31, 1912.

Through all the money stringencies and panics, so destructive to many financial institutions, which have occurred in the country during the past ninety-seven years, the bank has maintained its unbroken line of success, and has, in all that period, regularly, at the end of each six months paid a dividend to its stockholders. Since its organization as a national bank in 1865, to its dividend of December 31, 1912, it has paid to its stockholders \$534,251.34 and has added during the same period, the sum of \$55,000 to its surplus fund.

The banking house of the Union National Bank, which is fitted up with special regard to the requirements of its business, is situated at No. 111 East Main street, one of the most advantageous locations in the

city. The present officers and directors of the bank are: Dr. J. H. Billingslea, president; Dr. Joshua W. Hering, cashier; J. Pearre Wantz, assistant cashier; C. Ray Fogle, clerk and J. H. Billingslea, Chas. V. Wantz, Harry F. Cover, Charles E. Stewart, Jeremiah Geiman, George K. Schaeffer, J. Wesley Hoffacker, Emory C. Zepp, B. Frank Shriver and Dr. Charles R. Foutz, directors.

According to its last published statement the Union National Bank has a capital stock of \$100,000, a surplus fund of \$60,000 and undivided profits of \$7,016.35. Its individual deposits subject to check are \$211,975.02 and time certificates of deposit \$33,421.56. It has national bank notes outstanding of \$100,000.

Dr. Joshua W. Hering, the cashier, is also a member of the Public Service Commission of Maryland and attends its sessions regularly."

Although located in Westminster, the Westminster Bank had directors and stockholders from throughout Carroll County.

Photo caption: John Fisher was Cashier of the Westminster Bank and once owned the Historical Society's Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House at 210 E. Main St. in Westminster. Courtesy of Union National Bank.