

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 12, 2015

Wilmington Banks through the 20th Century: With this story, I tread on uncertain ground, as some details may be slightly incorrect, but here is what I remember: In the 1950s, there were four statewide full-service banks, with three of them having their main offices in Wilmington. Savings banks and savings & loan associations were not considered "full service." Branch banking had not really caught on, although there were exceptions such as the Wilmington Trust branch at Greenville and Delaware Trust's takeover of the bank in Middletown. I think Wilmington Trust also owned the former Odessa bank. Small independent banks were located in many Delaware towns of 1,000 people or more, and most of them provided great service to their respective communities.

Historically, the Farmers Bank, headquartered in Dover but with a major presence in Wilmington, was the "State's Bank" founded around 1800 and was the depository for State of Delaware funds. This bank and the officials who headed it had a major influence on the politics of the state. Gordon Smith and Vernon Derrickson, both of Dover, were major shareholders in the Farmers Bank. When our travel agency booked a tour for Mrs. Smith and a friend, Oliver H. Perry Baldwin, president of the bank, hand delivered a check to pay for the trip. I think the Wilmington office was on the corner of 5th and Market Streets.

Wilmington Trust Company was the "du Ponts' bank." Pierre S. du Pont (builder of Longwood Gardens and president of the DuPont Company from 1915 to 1919) and most but not all of the du Pont family did their banking at Wilmington Trust. In assets, it was by far the largest of the Delaware banks. Pierre S. du Pont, III, nephew of the Longwood founder and father of Congressman and Governor "Pete" du Pont, had a desk in the lobby of the bank on the ground floor of the DuPont Building at 10th and Market Streets and enjoyed helping those who needed the bank's services.

When Alfred I. du Pont fell out with his cousins Coleman and Pierre over the direction of the DuPont Company, he founded the Delaware Trust Company and built a new office building on the corner of 9th and Market Streets. Upon Alfred's death in 1935, William du Pont Jr., owner of Bellevue (now a state park) and vast lands around Fair Hill, Maryland, inherited a controlling interest in Delaware Trust Company. "Willie" du Pont surrounded himself with a great staff of people to run the bank, such as Tyler McConnell (his son-in-law), Charlie Robinson, and "Dutch" Vosters. Hercules Powder Company occupied much of the Delaware Trust Building as its corporate headquarters for many years.

Across Market Street from Delaware Trust was the Equitable Trust Company, Coleman du Pont's bank. For many years, Coleman's son-in-law, Clayton Douglass Buck, was president of this bank, even when he held a secondary job as a two-term Governor of Delaware. Followed by presidents John B. Jessup, Ed Nielan, and Jeremiah P. Shea, Equitable Trust merged with Security Trust Company at 6th and Market, a favorite of country people around Wilmington, and was known as "Equitable-Security Trust Company" before the name was changed to Bank of Delaware, the 19th-century name of either Security Trust or Equitable Trust.

Wilmington Savings Fund Society and Artisan's Savings Bank were not considered full-service banks, possibly because they did not make commercial loans (the first commercial loan made by WSFS was to us in 1960 for the construction of our Holiday Inn). Also in Wilmington were the First Federal Savings & Loan, the Ninth Ward Savings & Loan, and the Morris Plan Bank (whatever that was). Wilmington Trust absorbed Union National Bank at 3rd and Market before World War II, and Industrial Trust Company across 10th Street from the DuPont Building.

When I visited California in 1957, I was surprised to find Bank of America branches all over the state. This practice was unknown in these parts, but it was soon to come. By the 1970s, branch banking was in full swing, with the four major banks, plus Wilmington Savings Fund (WSFS) having about 20 branches each in all parts of the state. When Delaware Trust opened a branch in Hockessin in 1966, it was a forerunner of things to come.

Prior to that time most merchants in Hockessin and Yorklyn used the National Bank and Trust Company of Kennett Square, of which my father was president for nine years in the 1930s.

Mergers began in the 1970s. The Farmers Bank, which had a new building at 10th and Market Streets, was absorbed by Girard Trust Company of Philadelphia, which itself was soon taken over by the Mellon Bank of Pittsburgh. Delaware Trust Company was bought out by Meridian Bank, which then became CoreStates, Wachovia, First Union, and finally Wells Fargo. Bank of Delaware was absorbed by Pittsburgh National (PNC). The mighty Wilmington Trust Company got into trouble and was taken over by M & T Bank of Buffalo. Ironically, WSFS, which finally became “full service” and no longer a mutual savings bank, is the only one of the statewide Delaware banks still going strong. Many out-of-state institutions that usually do not offer retail banking have established Delaware as their corporate headquarters, and other little-known banks are offering retail services. Unfortunately, I don't keep up with modern developments.