

## *Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles*

"The Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Carroll County"

Carroll County Times article for 24 April 1994

By Jay A. Graybeal

This past Thursday evening, nearly 200 people gathered at Martin's Westminster to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Carroll County. A short program presented by board member William B. Dulany dedicated the evening to the late Granville E. Bixler. Mr. Bixler joined the board in 1960, served as president from 1980 to 1988, and was chairman of the board until his death in 1993.

Incorporated on November 29, 1869, the Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Carroll County is the oldest insurance company in the county and one of the oldest local businesses. The first directors were John Roberts, Alfred Zollickoffer, Dr. Henry E. Beltz, Edward Lynch, Dr. Joshua W. Hering, Richard Manning, Dr. Samuel Swope, Granville S. Haines, David Prugh and Augustus Shriver.

The founders sought to provide property owners with insurance from losses due to fire, the leading cause of property damage in the nineteenth century. As with other mutual insurance companies, policy owners purchased a "premium note" and became members of the company. Each year policyholders paid a small percentage, usually 4 percent, to renew their policy.

The company has operated out of its two-story brick building located at 249-251 East Main Street in Westminster. The site became a bank during the War of 1812. Baltimore bankers who feared a British invasion in 1814 moved their monies to Westminster for safekeeping. Shortly after the war a group of local men formed the Bank of Westminster, known today as Union National Bank.

The Mutual Fire Insurance Company issued its first insurance policy on March 21, 1870. The policy was sold to Francis Penn, an African-American homeowner who lived on Union Street in Westminster. Mr. Penn owned a 16' X 20,' two-story, frame, weatherboarded house with a shingled roof valued at \$500. His premium note amounted to \$29.28, however, he eventually received a reduction of \$7.00 during the life of the policy.

When the company observed its 25th anniversary in 1895, the financial statement revealed a prosperous and growing firm. The company had issued 3,843 policies covering \$3,905,444 worth of property in the county. During 1895, the company paid out nearly \$8,000 for fire damage to properties owned by 23 policyholders. The largest claim was made by Elijah and Rebecca Wagoner who lost their home valued at \$1550. Nine policy holders received payments of less than ten dollars each for fire damage; there was no deductible clause in any policies.

A history of the company written for the "Trade Edition" of The Democratic Advocate on December 7, 1906, provided the following background of its business operations: "Its policy has been to insure property against loss by fire and lightning, at the lowest possible cost, confining the cost to the minimum figures by the practice of the strictest economy on the part of the management. Settlements in the event of losses have been paid promptly, and always with a desire to deal fairly by avoiding technical subterfuges."

Over its entire history, the Mutual Fire Insurance Company has had eight presidents: Augustus Shriver (1869-1872), Dr. Joshua W. Hering (1872-1913), Dr. Jacob J. Weaver, Jr. (1913-1937), George A. Arnold

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(1937-1945), Dr. Lewis K. Woodward (1945-1968), D. Eugene Walsh (1968-1979), Granville E. Bixler (1980-1988) and Gerald A. Peeling, Sr. (1988 to date). The current Board consists of J. Paul Hering, Chairman of the Board, R. Kenneth Barnes, Jr., John E. Chenoweth, William B. Dulany, Harold M. Molesworth, Jr., Thomas D. Morris, Gerald A. Peeling, Sr., George O. Sparks, Jr., and Merhle B. Warfield, Jr.

Throughout its 125 years of existence, the company has preserved a strong tradition of Carroll County business history through its local ownership and activities. The 1906 history summed up this tradition with the following statement: "Considering the fact that it is a home company, whose officers and directors are well known and representative citizens of the community, the Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Carroll County deserves the preference given it by the leading influential and fair-minded people of this section."

Photo caption: The Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Carroll County Building, 249-251 East Main Street, Westminster, c.1950. Courtesy of the Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Carroll County.