



HARRISONBURG'S CITY EXCHANGE BUILDING PRESERVING 100 YEARS OF HISTORY.

BY BARBARA FINNEGAN

Steeped in our region's rich agricultural history, the old City Produce Exchange building in Harrisonburg sits at the convergence of Main and Liberty Streets, Black's Run and the railroad tracks in the Harrisonburg Downtown Historic District. An old loading dock still runs the length of the building, and scores upon scores of windows, over three feet wide, line every level and all sides of the four-story building. The building is constructed of 18-inch-thick brick walls and rests on a stone foundation laid on solid rock. In many ways, it tells the ongoing story of the city of Harrisonburg.

Initial construction of the City Produce Exchange began in 1911, followed by three additions in 1913, 1916 and 1922. The huge building was once a bustling center for trade in butter, eggs and poultry, which were carried by train throughout the eastern U.S. Floor space eventually totaled 50,000 square feet—well over an acre. It included three freight elevators, an ice plant,

cooler rooms and a private siding large enough for four rail cars. City Produce had a feeding capacity for over 60,000 chickens at one time, and in the early days of the poultry industry, it was the largest chicken-fattening and egg production enterprise of its kind in the U.S., and possibly in the world.

Gabriel Blosser, his brother, Emanuel, and Hershey H. Weaver established the business in 1908, when Gabriel was only 28 years old. During the company's heyday, it operated branches in Elkton and Staunton. By the mid-1940s, the produce industry had changed, and the owners began leasing portions of the enormous building to Harrisonburg businesses—including the Wetsel Seed Company—for storage and other uses. City Produce ceased operations in August, 1948.

Wetsel Seed Company got its start during the same year that City Produce Exchange began construction of its building—in 1911. By 1949, the seed company was bursting at the

seams at its West Market Street location in Harrisonburg. Virginia's role as a top U.S. orchard grass seed producer was growing and Wetsel Seed was one of the world's primary sources for this type of seed. More space was critical to the future of the company. Earl Wetsel and City Produce co-owners Emanuel Blosser and Hershey Weaver struck a deal. According to an article in the Daily News Record dated September 14, 1949, Wetsel Seed Company purchased the entire building for an amount "in excess of \$100,000." At the time, the deal was considered the largest real estate transaction ever made in Harrisonburg.

The Wetsel Seed Company was one of the largest seed companies in the eastern U.S. at the time it purchased the building. The company planned to use the new space for seed cleaning with its existing equipment, and as they expanded, they would have plenty of space to install new equipment. Farmers who raised their own grain for seed

depended on Wetsel to clean their seeds each season. But new techniques were on the horizon.

The seed industry, like the produce industry, was experiencing significant changes by the late 1940s. Many buyers wanted to purchase better-quality grains than they produced on their own farms. Some buyers required certified wheat, oats and barley. In order to keep up with changing seed processing expectations, the company needed modern equipment and a laboratory for testing seeds and grains for purity, germination and moisture content. The Exchange building could house all of Wetsel's old and new operations, plus provide many thousands of square feet of storage space. Their former location, on West Market Street, would be used as a garden center and a retail outlet for their famous seeds.

But, like the City Produce Exchange, Wetsel Seed experienced changes in its production processes over the years, and by the turn of the 21st century, began leasing portions of the building to other companies, including Rosetta Stone, which had outgrown its downtown office space. In 2005, Wetsel Seed sold the building to Andrew Forward and Barry Kelley.

The sale put in motion the most recent metamorphosis of the venerable old building—construction and renovation to create The Flats at the City Exchange. New owners Forward

and Kelley, and architect Tom Clayton of Frazier Associates in Staunton, worked closely with Virginia's Department of Historic Resources to ensure that all construction met the guidelines required as a part of the Harrisonburg Downtown Historical District. For example, most of the windows were painstakingly refurbished and reused. For each window beyond repair, the owners requested permission from the state to install a new, matching window.

The effort was a labor of love for the owners, and Andrew Forward said the project could not have been completed without historic restoration tax credits. The owners managed the nine-month construction of the new flats, some of which have lofts. "We reused old doors, beams and other existing features whenever possible," said Forward. The partners decided to restore the original company name to the front of the building, and it now reads "City Produce Exchange Butter Eggs & Poultry Established 1908."

Thoughtful architectural planning and refurbishing of many old materials have successfully preserved the structure's sense of history and place. The project was completed in 2006, and The Flats at City Exchange now provide upscale living space that serves the rapidly growing demand by young professionals for housing in downtown Harrisonburg.

Forward and Kelley also oversaw restoration and construction for a restaurant and bar located in the ell at the north end of the main building. Occupied since October 2009 by The Local Chop and Grill House, dining space includes a covered outdoor patio area. Valet parking at the restaurant makes it easy to come and go, and Executive Chef Ryan Zale creates unique dishes based on locally grown produce and meats—a modern-day connection to the agricultural history of the building. An array of regional brews and wines is available at The Local Bar, adjacent to the dining room and located in the former storage area of the City Produce Exchange.

The building's tenants have changed throughout the years, but the old City Exchange remains a vibrant center for downtown Harrisonburg, and a place to live, relax and enjoy life with friends and family. So, when you pass through the thick wooden doors at The Local Chop and Grill House, remember that you're walking into a century of regional history and a legacy we can pass on to coming generations.

