
Elk Town Center

106 E. Main Street:
A Survey of the
Historical Literature

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study

This report, which has been prepared for Main Street Renaissance, LLC examines the past of a commercial property in downtown Elkton, 106 E. Main Street. It consists of a brief overview of Elkton's formative years, an examination of extant records, a timeline, and an analysis of the findings. Located in the heart of the central business district of this ancient colonial town, the parcel is on the south side of Main Street, right where North Street begins its journey toward the fringe of the municipality. Until recently, it was occupied by the J. J. Newberry Company, a retailer that had done business at this location for over half a century.

Scope of Study

This study consulted extant records groups in the holdings of the Enoch Pratt Library, the Maryland Historical Society and the Historical Society of Cecil County. These consisted of cartographic data, including Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps and other general-purpose drawings. It also included an analysis of surviving visual record, which included photographs of Elkton's Main Street, beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century. For textual data, newspapers, business directories, tax records, and other printed sources were surveyed. Legal documents at the county courthouse, such as land records, were not studied.

BACKGROUND

The Town of Elkton is located at the head of the Elk River, the northernmost reach of the Chesapeake Bay. From its first, the community depended on its strategic location astride major routes of transportation to provide development. The Town grew as a village serving travelers on the Post Road, established around 1666, between Philadelphia and the southern territory. The Revolutionary War found Elkton being used as a staging point for troop movements and shortly after the war, in 1787, the settlement lining the dusty road was incorporated as a municipality. It had also become the county

seat and a courthouse was built directly across from the property. This seat of justice and local government became the focus of a growing commercial area. In the 19th century, as the Elk River gradually filled with silt, storekeepers along the old road stopped using the barge landings behind their stores and turned toward the rails for their transportation needs. From its beginning, Elkton depended on transportation to drive its development. Its role as a place on one of the most important transportation corridors on the Eastern seaboard has continually shaped its development.

THE DATA

The Street

Elkton's Main Street is one of the oldest roads in the nation. Serving as one section of the Post Road, providing a rapidly growing transportation pathway between Baltimore and Philadelphia, the route existed by the end of the 17th century. However, it had served as a trail for Native-Americans traveling between the waters of the Delaware and the Chesapeake. In the 18th century, George Washington frequently traveled this municipal roadway and the great and the near-great took stagecoaches between the two population centers of the colonies, right past the study property. When steam began replacing horse-drawn coaches, the railroad company built its tracks of steel just north of this important road and for a long time travel declined on the old route.

The Property

Once the county courthouse was built on the northeastern corner of Main and North streets, directly across from the property, a commercial district started evolving in what would become the central business district. By the time the dark days of the Civil War closed in on Cecil County, there were a variety of small vernacular style buildings and commercial enterprises on the south side of Main Street, where it meets North Street. The first detailed Sanborn Map of Elkton, with a scale of 1" to 50', was drawn in June 1886. It showed four or five small, two and three story structures there containing commercial endeavors, including millinery, drug, clothing, and fancy good stores, as well as an office and a tailor.

In 1918, the commercial properties in the area are identified by Frazier. Where the Ritz Hotel stands was the Well's Drug Store, which had previously been Mitchell's Drug Store. In its basement, Daniel S. Terrell concocted a soda drink, the Mo-Ro, which he bottled and sold county-wide. Immediately to the east were other retailers and offices. Those included Lipman's Clothing Store, a bakery and the law office of Henry M. McCullough.¹

The small buildings and stores in this area were acquired by the William H. Pierce Amusement Company in the next decade. By 1922, the amusement company was putting up a modern structure on the property. The project combined a 32-room hotel and restaurant with a 675-seat theatre. Finally, one October night in 1923, the house lights dimmed and the screen flickered as the Elkton Community Playhouse came to life. The features were "Circus Days" and "Electric House," and adults paid twenty-five cents for admission, while children had to dig for ten-cents. The latest type of moving picture machine, the Power 6 B Cameragraph had been installed.² About the time this was going on, the State Highway Administration was busy paving Main Street for the first time. They were putting down concrete.³

As the nation stood at the edge of World War II in 1940, it was announced that the M. & M. Construction Company was razing the Jeffers Store and office building at this location, in order to build a structure for the Chain Store Realty Development Company of Cleveland, Ohio, which had granted a lease to the Newberry Company for a "cent to a \$1 store." The property, newspapers reported, was formerly known as the May building, one of the oldest landmarks and it was just east of the hotel.⁴

One September day in 1940, the screech of pulled nails and the cracks of timber and masonry distributed the peace on this corner. The 18th century courthouse, a place that had stood watch at this intersection since George Washington's presidency was being knocked down. This seat of justice had observed a timeless pageant of history and many had come here to prepare for war, to celebrate peace, to form social, political and fraternal alliances, to hear religious services and lectures and to hear news from an ever

¹ F. Rodney Frazer, *Parts of Elkton As I Remember it in 1918*, Historical Society of Cecil County: Elkton

² *Cecil Whig*, October 13, 1928

³ *Cecil County News*, Minor Locals, November 15, 1922 p. 5

⁴ *Cecil Whig*, Another Landmark to Go, October 26, 1940

widening world. With its removal, the County Commissioners turned the property over to the Town of Elkton. The Town decided it wanted a modern office building, and the three-story structure was razed, it being replaced with the one-story colonial-style brick town hall, which still stands on the northeastern corner of Main and North streets.⁵

The J. J. Newberry Company opened its Cecil County Store in its new building on the site of the former Jeffers property in 1941. Newspapers reported that thirty clerks were on hand as hundreds of shoppers visited the new store.⁶

In the pre-dawn darkness of a December night in 1947, the town's fire whistle sounded, piercing the silence of one of the longest nights of the year. The telephone operator had received a report of smoke seeping out of the Janis Shoe Store on Main Street, a few doors west of the study property. On that Saturday morning the temperature stood at 16-degrees F., just before the first rays of sun poked over the horizon, as guests of the New Central Hotel awakened to the shouts of fire and the smell of smoke. Soon the fire was spreading rapidly through the old brick, wood, and plaster buildings of Main Street. Finally, the fire which had raged for almost seven hours and burned a half-million dollar whole in the center of Elkton's business district, destroying some of the largest and most important structures in the town, was controlled. The buildings on the south side of Main Street destroyed by the blaze were those clustered around the foot of North Street.⁷

Though the fire had swept through a central block of the business district, leaving charred or destroyed structures in the heart of the community, the town regrouped and moved forward. In light of the disaster, an architect, Ralph Aubrey Jeffers, had an idea: "Why not have the Town buy the right-of-way through the destroyed properties?" Such an approach would provide a badly needed access way to Howard Street from North Street, allowing merchants to take advantage of doing business on two streets instead of one, he argued.⁸

Nothing came of this idea, and the theatre moved a couple of blocks up North Street where the present Town Hall is located. As for the fire damaged properties, the J.

⁵ Michael Dixon, the *Cecil Whig*, Razed But Not Forgotten, May 2, 2001, C1

⁶ *Cecil Whig*, Newberry Opens New Store in Elkton Wednesday, March 6, 1941

⁷ Michael Dixon, *The Times*, Anniversary of Elkton's Largest Fire, January 5, 1998

⁸ Ralph Aubrey Jeffers, *the Cecil Democrat*, Letters to the Editor, January 10, 1948. The idea of putting a street through the block is still discussed today. Mr. Jeffers said he first proposed the concept in the 1930s, while working with the town on a plan.

J. Newberry Company purchased the adjoining New Central Hotel tract, a property that had been badly damaged in the fire a few years earlier, from Sydney N. Glavin for approximately \$35,000 in 1952. The firm said it was expecting to build a modern department store on this part of the Town’s main thoroughfare.⁹

Soon the structure for the expanded department store, the one that still stands on Main Street, opened. And for the next fifty years, the J. J. Newberry Company operated its retail outlet in the Town of Elkton. During that time the nature and characteristic of the central business district underwent substantial changes, as many old Maryland towns reacted to the challenge of nearby shopping centers and large shopping malls. Finally, at the top of the 21st century, the old store closed. The year was 2001.

TIMELINE

1787	Town of Elkton incorporated
1790s	County courthouse built on northeastern corner
Early 1800s	Small commercial structures develop on south side of Main Street
1923	Theatre opens on the tract
1940	18 th Century courthouse torn down
1941	Earlier J. J. Newberry Store opens adjacent to present location
1947	Fire severely damages the area
1952	J. J. Newberry acquires adjoining theatre property and builds present-day store

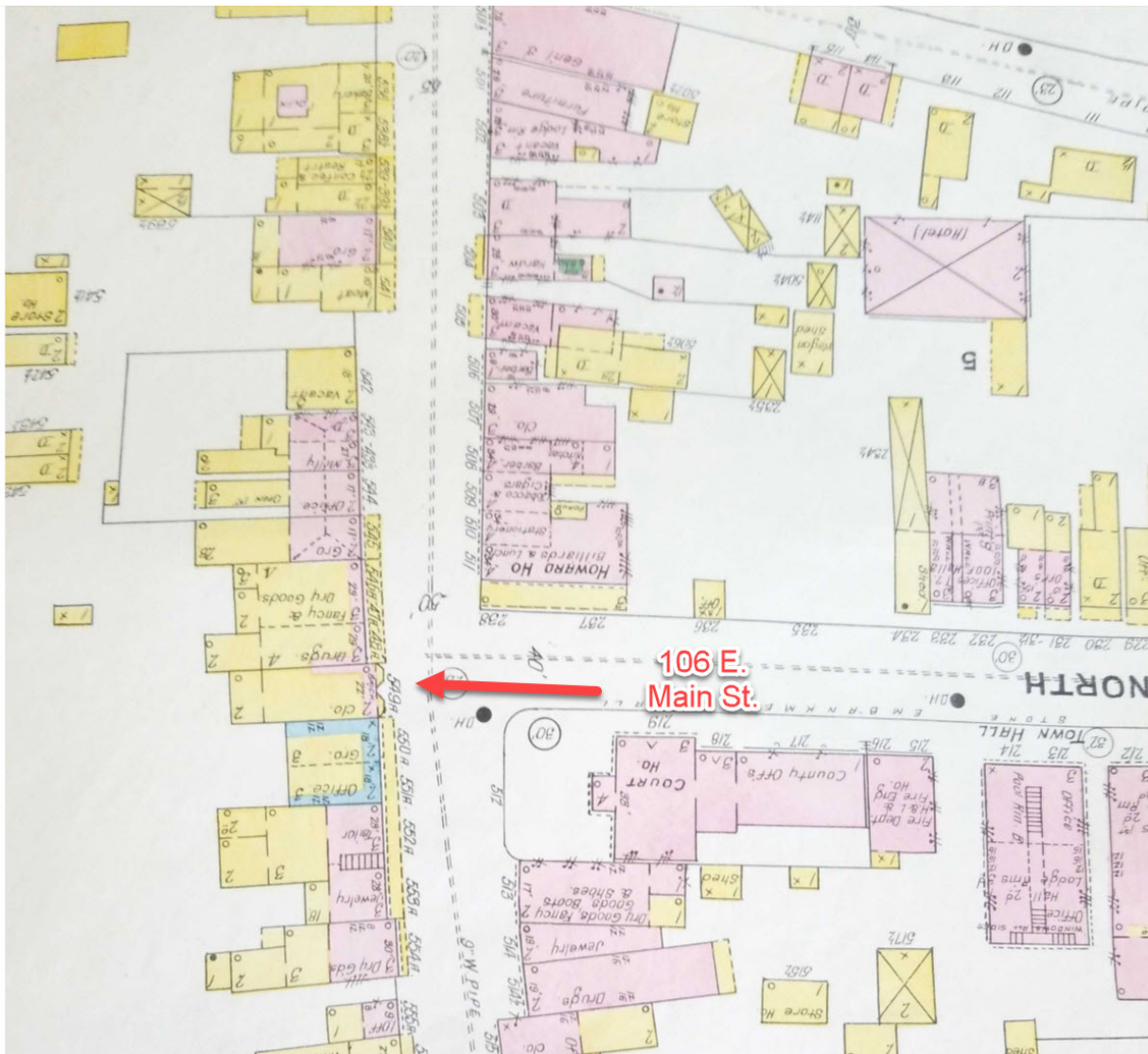
⁹ *Cecil Whig*, Newberry Buys Main Street Tract, January 3, 1952

CONCLUSION

The Main Street property at the foot of North Street in the heart of Elkton, an old colonial town. During the colonial period, development first occurred on the north side of Main Street and some of Elkton's finest dwellings quietly stood watch over the old turnpike that faced the road and the more distant creek. Some of those dwellings still stand, such as Henry Hollingsworth's House (home of the American Legion), the Mitchell House (Lawyer's Office) and Samuel Hollingsworth's House (Litzenberg Insurance). Others such as the ancient seat of justice and the Rudolph building have yield to the demands of a growing town.

Eventually more demand for structures in the central business district increased as the county seat was located here in 1787, and travel in the colonies increased, making passage on the old pike more and more common. With those increasing demands merchants began building smaller, vernacular structures on the south side of the street. By the time the 19th century got well underway, there were a variety of small merchants and offices on this section, though none of the buildings appear to be of the grand style found on the other side of the street.

In the era before the Great Depression, a modern theatre, hotel and restaurant were built on part of the tract. As the nation approached the Second World War, a national department store, the J. J. Newberry Company built a store on a portion of the property to the east of the present building. A few years after the disastrous fire of 1947, the J. J. Newberry Company expanded its operation, building the structure that still stands on Main Street. At the top of a new century, the store closed.



The 1907 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map for the intersection of Map and North streets in Elktion. This was prior to the construction of the New Central Hotel on this parcel.



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for 1931 shows the New Central Hotel. Source: Sanborn Map, Historical Society of Cecil County.



A circa 1907 postcard of Main Street at North Street: Source: Historical Society of Cecil County Online Collection



The New Central Hotel and J. J. Newberry Five and Dime shortly after World War II. Source: Historical Society of Cecil County