The one that got away

Pottstown has lost many of its industries and businesses over the last five decades, but none was as painful as STV, originally known as Sanders and Thomas Engineers.

The firm was started by Whitney Sanders and Ralph Thomas on the third floor of Sanders’s house on Queen Street in 1945. The men met when they both worked for Jacobs Aircraft (later the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. plant) during World War II.

STV has grown to be an international business with 1,700 employees in offices from coast to coast. STV engineers, architects, planners and construction managers have designed and built some of America’s finest bridges, buildings, and transit lines.

STV was a mainstay of Pottstown for decades, providing hundreds of family-supporting jobs, until it moved its home office from Pottstown to Douglassville in 1995.

In the 1950s, Sanders and Thomas occupied the upper floors of the Security Trust building at High and Hanover Streets.

In 1962, it designed the five-story office building across the street, which is now BB&T bank. It moved into the building’s third and fourth floors.

A decade later, the company needed more space, so it moved into larger quarters at Griffith Towers, King and Charlotte streets, which it also designed.

In 1980, the firm needed even more space, and it wanted to stay downtown, preferably on High Street in the area now occupied by Borough Hall.

But Pottstown Council was indifferent, so STV (at it was now called) moved to the Pottstown Business campus off Shoemaker Road, removing about 300 jobs from downtown Pottstown.

In 1995, Pottstown lost STV altogether when the company moved to its current offices in Douglassville. The company announced it was looking for new offices within 25 miles of Pottstown, and it would have gladly stayed in the borough. Unfortunately, the borough made no concerted effort to keep the firm in Pottstown, and the company decided its best option was to leave.

Five years ago, the newly-reorganized board of Pottstown Area Industrial Development Inc. (PAID), adopted by-laws requiring PAID’s economic development director to submit an annual progress report and to conduct an inventory of all borough businesses.

That still hasn’t happened. STV shows the consequences of not working closely with the firms you already have.

Commentary by Tom Hylton

STV, an international engineering firm, was founded in Pottstown in 1945. STV designed and occupied several downtown buildings, including the BB&T building, above, but left for Douglassville in 1995, below, because nobody tried very hard to keep the company here.