

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

1970s

Pottstown loses industry, history

At a recent Progress Pottstown luncheon, borough officials expressed optimism about Pottstown's future. The following is one of a series about where we've been in the last five decades.

In 1960, Pottstown's population peaked at 26,144 residents. Ten years later, the borough still had 25,355 residents, and the Pottstown School District enrollment peaked at 5,000 students.

The 1960s might be considered Pottstown's golden era. The borough boasted thousands of secure, well-



Commentary by Tom Hylton

paying jobs in such heavy industries as the Bethlehem Steel Co., Dana Corporation, and Firestone Tire and Rubber Co.

Numerous doctors, lawyers, and other professionals still lived in the borough, and the Pottstown School

District was highly regarded.

Downtown Pottstown was the retail hub of the tri-county area, with more than 50 stores and agencies on High Street between York and Evans streets, including a Sears and three other small department stores.

Retail decline

But even as Pottstown prospered, there were signs of decline. The opening of the Coventry Mall in 1967 drew away Sears and other merchants with a promise of unlimited free parking.

Venerable institutions like the First Presbyterian Church and the YMCA moved to the North End, where there was room to expand, leaving parking lots behind.

Historic buildings demolished

In an effort to retain merchants downtown by creating more parking, the Bahr Arcade, High Street's most magnificent building, once home of an auditorium, markets, stores and professional offices, was demolished in 1973.

An urban renewal plan for High Street adjacent to the Reading Railroad passenger station led to the demolition of the Shuler House hotel and restaurant in 1975. Redevelopment plans fell through, leaving a gaping hole



THE BAHR ARCADE at High and Charlotte streets was one of several irreplaceable buildings demolished in the 1970s

in the downtown that lasted 25 years.

The great flood

Meanwhile, the Hurricane Agnes flood of June 1972 devastated industries along the Schuylkill River such as Mrs. Smith's Pies, U.S. Axle Co., and Bethlehem Steel.

But the biggest blow was the closure of the Bethlehem Steel fabricating plant in 1976, with the loss of 1,000 union jobs, among the best-paying jobs in the region. It was the first of many plant closings to follow.

As construction of the Limerick Nuclear Power Plant gained momentum, many Pottstown homes were converted to apartments housing temporary workers at the plant, a situation that would haunt the borough in years to come.



THE HURRICANE AGNES FLOOD of June 1972 contributed to the decline of Pottstown as a healthy industrial town.