End of an era

The Pottstown Mercury building will close at the end of this month.

The handful of employees putting out the newspaper will work out of their homes or at the newspaper’s printing plant in Exton, which also prints several other suburban Philadelphia papers.

The Mercury building was built in 1926 for The Pottstown News, which had been publishing for 50 years when The Mercury debuted in 1931. Within two years, The Mercury bought out The Pottstown News and moved into its building.

Constructed of masonry, concrete and steel, with limestone columns and trim, The Mercury building is one of the most distinctive in Pottstown.

The newspaper was originally printed in the basement, but the Mercury purchased and demolished the adjacent building in the 1960s and replaced it with a three-story glass-faced building to house a newer and larger printing press.

In 2002, printing of the Mercury moved to Exton, and the press building was reconstructed for upper floor offices and a first floor newspaper distribution center.

When I started at The Mercury in 1971, it had about 150 employees, many of them in the composing room, which took up the entire second floor. As the newspaper converted from hot metal typesetting to computer typesetting, the number of compositors and the space needed for them shrank dramatically.

With the rise of the Internet, newspaper circulation worldwide has also declined. When I left The Mercury in 1994, its print circulation was 29,500. Now it is about 8,000.

The Mercury building is far larger than needed, and closing it makes economic sense.

But I can’t see how The Mercury can call itself our “local” paper when it has no physical presence — not even a small office — in Pottstown.