

OCEAN CITY, MARYLAND – *THEN & NOW*

LOT 48 – “The McGregor Building” and “The Bank of Ocean City”

By Gordon E. Katz

The original plat of Ocean City was laid out in early 1875, a few months before the seaside resort’s first hotel, the Atlantic, opened on July 4. The plat encompassed the land between the ocean and the bay from what are now South Division Street to North Division Street. Lot 48 on that plat is situated on the northeast corner of Dorchester Street and Baltimore Avenue.

The 104 stockholders of The Atlantic Hotel Company, who had provided the financing for construction of the hotel, gathered on August 31 to select certain building lots for themselves, a benefit that came with their investment. One by one, names were drawn from a jar by a blindfolded boy. Upon hearing his or her name called out, that stockholder could then choose one of the available lots. The stockholder received a certificate redeemable for a deed upon the payment of \$100. Predictably, the choicest lots along the oceanfront were among the first taken. Lot 48 remained available until the boy drew the sixteenth name, Hampden H. Dashiell, one of the seven stockholders representing Somerset County, who picked lot 48 for himself.

Dashiell made no effort to improve the lot, obviously too busy with both his business affairs in Princess Anne and the active role he took in state and local Democratic Party politics to spend much leisure time in Ocean City. He did serve as president of The Atlantic Hotel Company from 1887 until the company was forced into bankruptcy by one of its principal creditors in late 1889. In 1894 Dashiell made his own assignment for the benefit of his creditors, and ownership of lot 48 passed to his bankruptcy estate’s trustees. At about the same time, he was appointed to the post of collector of customs for the port of Crisfield. Less than a year later, on Saturday morning, June 15, 1895, Dashiell died while working at his desk in the custom house.

One of Dashiell’s sons, Hampden P. Dashiell, purchased lot 48 from his late father’s estate in 1898 for \$250. The lot sat vacant for nearly another decade, and Dashiell finally sold it for \$800 in 1907 to Robert Fulton Powell, a banker and lumberman from Stockton, Maryland. Powell and his wife, Cora, were occasional summer visitors in Ocean City, and it’s possible that he was planning to build a cottage on the lot. But his mercantile and banking responsibilities in Cape Charles, Virginia, and Leonardtown, Maryland, kept him fully occupied. Less than a year later he sold lot 48 to a young entrepreneur from Berlin, Charlie McGregor, who paid \$400 for the unimproved property, financed by a mortgage that Powell took back. The purchase price reflected the general drop in Ocean City real estate values that followed the enactment of a prohibition statute in Worcester County effective April 1, 1908.

The McGregor Building

Charles Asher “Charlie” McGregor was born on his father’s farm near Berlin in 1882. Described as short in stature with a slim build, he was not particularly well-suited for farm work. He found work instead as a salesman in a general store in Berlin. The 1900 federal census report shows 18-year-old Charlie rooming with his business partner, 28-year-old Ara Burbage, in a Berlin apartment.

OCEAN CITY THEN & NOW

Charlie spent the summer of 1904 in St. Louis, possibly working at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, also known as the St. Louis World's Fair, that ran from April 30 to December 1 of that year. Following his return to Berlin in September, he moved to Ocean City where he continued to work as a "general store retail merchant". He was evidently a popular young man, especially among the young women in town. His name was listed among the eligible gentlemen attending the first ball organized by the Thelma Social Club, held on April 25, 1906 at the Seaside Hotel on Baltimore Avenue at Wicomico Street. The following anecdote, published in the *Democratic Messenger* on November 28, 1908, provides another glimpse into his personality:

As Charles McGregor was walking down to Ocean City last Sunday night, he displayed all the elements of a hero in rescuing a kitten from a watery grave. In the darkness he climbed down under the bridge, and came near having to spend the night there, perilously near the rushing tide, but "all's well that ends well," and he finally reached a place of safety, and gave kitty a warm berth in his store. As Mr. McGregor is quite a lady's man, his kind heart and unselfishness should score a point with his "best girls."

One of those "best girls" was Helena Johnson, usually called "Lena", a daughter of Ocean City police officer Samuel Johnson. Charlie and Lena were married on July 20, 1909, an event that elicited this report in the *Democratic Messenger* a few days later:

An event of interest was the marriage Tuesday of Mr. Charles McGregor, the popular young merchant of Ocean City, to Miss Lena Johnson, daughter of Mr. Sam Johnson, of that place. Charlie is such a ladies' man that the girls will feel sad at his entering the benedict class. May all happiness follow them in their married life.

Charlie and Lena were active in the local community, with Charlie being appointed as a notary public, and Lena working in the Ocean City post office and assisting other women with planning the annual Firemen's Ball.

After purchasing lot 48 in 1908, Charlie began making plans for building his own store on that corner. In 1910 he borrowed \$2,100 from his cousin, Thomas J. Fassitt, to commence construction, as reported in the *Democratic Messenger* on September 24:

Store buildings and cottages, partly of concrete, are contracted for at Ocean City, to the number of a dozen, something unusual at this time of the year. Mrs. Shreve will make a large and handsome addition to "The Plimhimmon," and a railroad sub-station just beyond the Catholic Home, which is to be turned into a family hotel, are all soon to be seen. The concrete store buildings of Charles McGregor and Edgar Gaskins will soon be ready for occupancy.

Work on the new building was held up in early 1911, according to this account published in the *Democratic Messenger* on January 21:

Mr. Charles McGregor, who is building a handsome concrete store house at Ocean City, has been forewarned by a Baltimore firm from using tile shingles, which he had bought. They claimed a patent right to them. This has delayed his building, and caused considerable hardship.

OCEAN CITY THEN & NOW

Charlie was able to open his store in time for the 1911 summer season. Figure 1 pictures “The McGregor Building” at the corner of Baltimore Avenue and Dorchester Street as it appeared that year. The building featured a general store on the first floor with apartments on the second floor. The Sanborn Map Company insurance map from 1911 shows a two-story general store on the corner with a one-story commercial bay on the north side labeled as a “market”.

Charlie had big plans, and he was already looking ahead to expanding his operation. His store occupied only the southerly portion of lot 48, leaving him room to grow. The *Democratic Messenger* reported on July 29, 1911, that “Notary Public Charles McGregor will erect another large cement-block building at Ocean City in the fall. His apartments were so popular that he will supply more.” The new building did not materialize, but Charlie did enlarge the second story of his existing building and added a wrap-around porch above the ground level porch.



Figure 1: The McGregor Building in Ocean City. *The Berlin Advance*, July 28, 1911.

From the Salisbury University, Edward H. Nabb Research Center Digital Collection.

He was able to move ahead the following year, evidenced by this report in the *Democratic Messenger* on November 16, 1912: “Mr. Charles McGregor is building two new stores on Baltimore Avenue, and a warehouse on Philadelphia Avenue.” The two new stores were added to the north end of the store built the previous year. The warehouse was located on the southwest corner of Talbot Street and Philadelphia Avenue, on a lot that Charlie leased from Nathaniel F. Quillin.

But Charlie’s ambitions were apparently unrealistic. There were several stores competing in downtown Ocean City for the business of the small local population and the seasonal summertime crowds. In August of 1913 he was forced to sell the lot and buildings on Dorchester Street. Three men partnered to buy the property: Levin D. “L. D.” Lynch, the owner of a fishing company; William B. S. Powell, the mayor of Ocean City and part owner of the Atlantic Hotel, and John S. Hallett, a butcher from Milford, Delaware. Charlie’s financial situation worsened in 1914 and he landed in bankruptcy court. On October 29 of that year a public auction was held to sell off “all the stock of goods, wares, and merchandise and personal property of the said Charles A. McGregor, Bankrupt” stored in the warehouse on Philadelphia Avenue.

OCEAN CITY THEN & NOW

Perhaps the cruelest blow was the death of Charlie's wife Lena on April 20, 1915 at the age of 27. He eventually joined five other Ocean City men in 1917 who had formed The Atlantic Fish Company. Charlie did well enough to purchase a property on the northeast corner of North 2nd Street and Philadelphia Avenue, perhaps with the intention of starting a new business. But the pound fishing business was in a serious decline by that time, and one by one the partners dropped out. Charlie sold his interest in the company to Turner Cropper and William Gibbs in March of 1920, a decision no doubt the result of the devastating winter storm that had rocked Ocean City a month earlier on February 4 and 5. The storm did heavy damage throughout the resort, including to the fishing camps located at the southern end of town. But it also created a natural inlet about four miles south of the camps that would resurrect the fishing industry (and help create a new bootlegging industry) until the inlet closed up by the end of the decade. Five months later Charlie sold the property on Philadelphia Avenue.

Charlie McGregor left Ocean City shortly afterward and moved to Roanoke, Virginia. It isn't clear why he chose to relocate to that city; he might have had relatives or friends there. He worked as a produce salesman, remarried to a lady named Nellie Gunter and died there on December 13, 1970 at the age of 88.

The Bank of Ocean City

The first effort to open a bank in Ocean City was undertaken by a group of five local businessmen in the late summer of 1914, as reported in *The Baltimore Sun* on September 2:

Application has been made to State Bank Examiner J. Dukes Downes for permission to organize at Ocean City a bank to be known as the State Bank of Ocean City. It is proposed that it shall have capital of \$10,000 and surplus of \$2,500 when business is started.

Those signing the papers asking permission are Irving S. Mumford, George B. Conner, John M. Mumford, Lemuel Wyatt and Harry J. Cropper.

The five men represented a cross-section of the various business interests in the town. Irving Mumford was a real estate broker, George Conner operated a restaurant on the Boardwalk, John Mumford headed a fishing company, Lemuel Wyatt was a builder and boarding house operator, and Harry Cropper owned a hardware store. It isn't known why, but the application was later withdrawn.

A new effort was organized in the spring of 1915. *The Baltimore Sun* portrayed the new initiative this way on May 9:

Tired of having to go six miles to Berlin to deposit their money, and thinking it time to have a bank of their own, residents of Ocean City have made application for authority to J. Dukes Downes, State Bank Commissioner, to build a bank. The applicants are Levin D. Lynch, John M. Mumford, William B. S. Powell, Thomas W. Taylor and Charles T. Jackson, all of Ocean City. The bank is to be known as the Bank of Ocean City, and the capital is to be \$20,000.

John Mumford, the only holdover from the previous group of applicants, and L. D. Lynch and his business partner Thomas W. Taylor were all in the commercial fishing business. William B. S. Powell, still the mayor at this time, would soon become the largest real estate owner both in Ocean City as well as in much of the beach and mainland adjoining the resort on the north and south. Rounding out the group was Charles Jackson, who worked as a railroad engineer.

OCEAN CITY THEN & NOW

The application process did not go smoothly. Commissioner Downes told the men that he would approve their application only if they signed a letter stating that a man named Paul Clark would have nothing to do with the bank. Clark, who hailed from Virginia, was providing a third of the start-up capital and had been proposed for the key position of bank cashier at an annual salary of \$1,200. Downes had received negative reports from banking authorities in Virginia and North Carolina about Clark's activities in those states and would not permit him to be associated with the bank in any capacity. He also objected to the proposed salary that Clark was to receive, stating that the amount was unaffordable to a start-up operation with limited capital. The men refused to sign the letter and Downes turned down the application.

On June 15, the applicants filed a petition in the Superior Court of Baltimore demanding a writ of mandamus to compel Commissioner Downes to approve their application, arguing that the Commissioner had unlawfully withheld his consent and abused his discretion. Arguments were heard on the petition on July 14. The judge was not favorably inclined to grant the petitioners' request, and the group finally acceded to the Commissioner's demand. *The Baltimore Sun* announced the outcome on July 23.

Ocean City, Md., will have its bank, the opening of which has been delayed by a controversy between its proposed incorporators and J. Dukes Downes, State Bank Commissioner ... Levin D. Lynch will be president of the new bank and John M. Mumford will be the cashier ... It had been settled that a man named Paul Clark should be cashier, but Commissioner Downes refused to approve the charter until it was agreed that Clark should not be employed in any capacity in connection with the bank. It was said yesterday that Clark had gone back to Virginia. Besides Messrs. Lynch and Mumford the incorporators will be Captain Powell, Thomas W. Taylor and Charles T. Jackson.

The Bank of Ocean City opened its doors for business on January 3, 1916. The bank shared space on the first floor of the former McGregor Building (of which two of the incorporators, Lynch and Powell, were part owners) with a general store. John Hallett, the other part owner, ran his butcher shop next door. Figure 2 shows the building as it appeared around 1920.

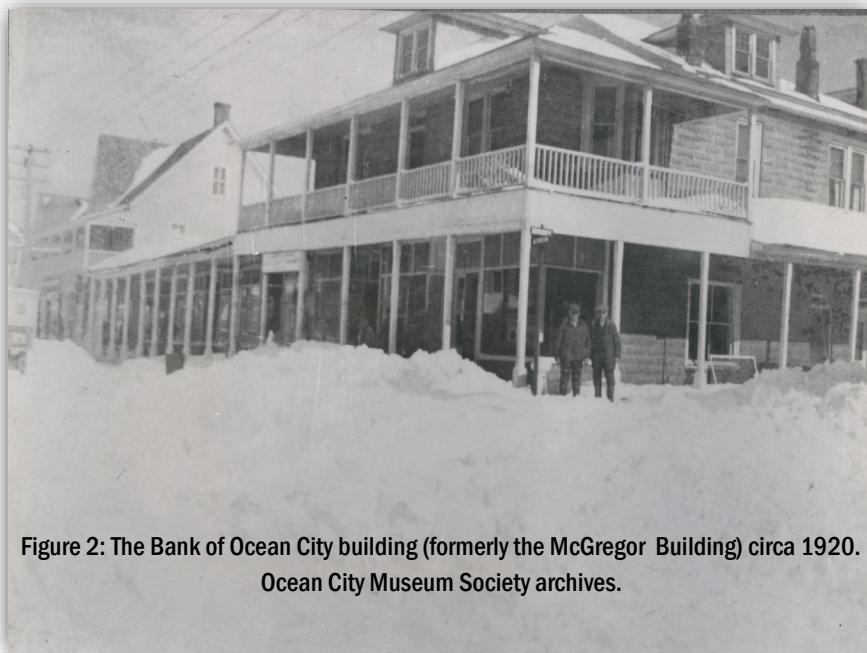


Figure 2: The Bank of Ocean City building (formerly the McGregor Building) circa 1920.
Ocean City Museum Society archives.

OCEAN CITY THEN & NOW

The 1921 Sanborn map depicts a building with four adjoining bays along the east side of Baltimore Avenue, with the bank and general store in the two-story building on the corner, and a market, a dry goods store and a hardware store occupying the three attached commercial bays. Hallett operated his butcher shop in the “market” space; the other occupants are not known. L. D. Lynch, the bank president, acquired full ownership of the property after buying out William B. S. Powell’s interest in 1921 and John Hallett’s interest in 1927.

The bank faced one of the biggest challenges to its continued operation in 1931, as the U.S. economy was sliding into the Great Depression. The *Evening Journal* provided this account on Friday, October 2:

The Bank of Ocean City, which is patronized largely by the fishing industry of this resort, closed its doors today, pending the arrival of one of the State bank examiners ... The fishing industry’s poor season is also blamed as a contributing factor to the bank’s plight. Two of the officials are heavily interested in the fishing industry, and the bank has gotten the greatest share of this trade. However, storms have played havoc with fishing property, and the business itself has been poor.

The latest report showed that the bank had \$300,000 resources and \$125,000 in deposits. The latter account, however, is said to be very fluctuating due to the fact that many of the depositors are summer residents who draw their money out after the summer season is over.

Another report in the *Evening Journal* on October 5 stated that “the closing of the bank was brought about due to the fluctuation of the market on bonds, in which the Bank of Ocean City had invested. Officials and directors, realizing that the bond market was falling off, decided Friday to close the institution at once, rather than suffer a collapse.” Both factors likely contributed to the crisis. The bank was required to raise \$15,000 in new capital, with the current stockholders accepting a 50% dilution in their ownership interests, and depositors’ withdrawals were limited for a period of 90 days. The necessary funds were raised, and the bank reopened on Saturday, November 14. According to a report in *The Baltimore Sun* on November 19, the Bank of Ocean City “received a substantial increase in deposits promptly on reopening.”

The Bank of Ocean City was closed again on Monday, March 6, 1933, following President Franklin Roosevelt’s declaration of a national “bank holiday” to halt widespread bank runs around the country. After an examination of its books, the bank was allowed to reopen on March 15. The bank’s financial condition was sound enough for regulators to permit depositors to withdraw 100% of their account balances; depositors in many other financial institutions had limited access to their funds, in some cases as little as 2% could be withdrawn at one time.

A New Look

Following the end of World War II, bank president L. D. Lynch decided that the bank building needed a new look. During the winter of 1946 and spring of 1947, the building was dramatically changed, both inside and out. The second-floor porch was removed and replaced with large columns. A brick façade was added. The *News Journal* approved of the facelift on May 9, 1947:

OCEAN CITY THEN & NOW

One of the most notable improvements in the business section here is the recently remodeled and refurnished building of the Bank of Ocean City.

Resplendent with a new and enlarged vault, six tellers' desks, new furniture and lighting, and last, but not least, a new and up-to-date alarm system, the banking house, located at Baltimore Avenue and Dorchester Street, presents a prosperous appearance.

New tenants also occupied the commercial bays next to the bank. One of the new tenants was Bernie Goldenberg, the brother-in-law of boardwalk amusements operator Nathan Rapoport. According to Bernie's daughter Mona Strauss, "In 1949, my father moved to the location next to the bank from a location on the west side of Philadelphia Avenue just south of the Route 50 bridge. The small building had previously housed the Railway Express office. He was open from 8 in the morning to 9 at night, 7 days a week from April 25th to October 15th. He was quite a character. His mantra was 'Lovely things for lovely people'. He was the first to advertise on the airplane banner along the beach. He carried a complete line of beach chairs, beach umbrellas, T-shirts, sweatshirts and swamp jackets." The store was called "Bernie's Super Discount" and remained in operation through the summer of 1973, after which Bernie sold the business and retired.

L. D. Lynch passed away on July 4, 1965, and ownership of the Dorchester Street property passed to three of his children, Ellen Lynch Weaver, Sarah Lynch Purnell and Charles E. Lynch. The three siblings sold the property to the Bank of Ocean City in 1986. Lot 48 was subsequently subdivided into two parcels: lot 48A, the bank building property, and lot 48B, the adjoining commercial property. At the same time, the bank sold lot 48B to Sam Shrem, a developer from Brooklyn, New York, for \$115,000.

The commercial building has housed various tenants since 1986. In 1992 "The Artisan's Bazaar" featured "the works of many artisans who display their work daily in an inside mini-mall environment". An Italian restaurant took over the space in 2000, after Shrem sold the building to Joseph T. Myles, Jr., the year before. "Little Italy on the Shore" had its grand opening on July 23, 2000. The *Daily Times* plugged the restaurant on July 17 as a big step forward in the effort to revitalize downtown Ocean City.

Little Italy on the Shore will hold its grand opening Sunday in downtown Ocean City. Town officials hope the restaurant will be just what the downtown needs to continue its return to grandeur. And with a restaurant that serves homemade breads and cheese cakes, there are possibilities. The restaurant is at 215 S. Baltimore Ave., between Dorchester and Talbot streets. The grand opening is scheduled for Sunday at 4:30 p.m. Guests will include Mayor Jim Mathias and Town Council members.

Little Italy on the Shore closed around 2008 and was replaced first by the O.C. Kabob House and in 2016, by Joe's Pizza and Subs. Joe Myles sold the building in 2019 to Xiu Hui Liu for \$450,000. OC Today reported on Ms. Liu's new venture in Ocean City on July 12:

The OC Poke Sushi and Teriyaki House on 215 South Baltimore Avenue in downtown Ocean City offers fresh sushi, poke bowls and teriyaki meals.

The restaurant, which opened at the beginning of June, allows customers to build poke bowls (pronounced "poe-kay)," a Hawaiian dish traditionally consisting of diced raw fish served either as an appetizer or as a main course.

OCEAN CITY THEN & NOW

The Bank of Ocean City decided in 2019 to close its branch on Dorchester Street. Rather than sell or demolish the over 100-year-old structure, the board of directors instead approved a plan to convey the building to the Town of Ocean City for the exclusive use of the Ocean City Museum Society. The *Dispatch* announced the transaction on January 15, 2020.

Efforts to transform a historic downtown building into a museum will move forward thanks to the generosity of a local bank.

On Dec. 31, the Bank of Ocean City closed its branch on the corner of Dorchester Street and South Baltimore Avenue. But instead of having the historic building sit empty, officials are hoping to convert the site into additional exhibit space for the Ocean City Life-Saving Station Museum.

“It will go to the city for the exclusive use of the museum,” Bank of Ocean City President and CEO Reid Tingle said. “It will be maintained and known as the Bank of Ocean City building.”



Figure 4: Architect's rendering of the restored Bank of Ocean City building.

The Dispatch, January 15, 2020.