

"On Guard" — Security at the National Bank of Chester County, West Chester, Pennsylvania

submitted by Bob Cochran

Part One — Man's Best Friend

The first electrically-operated burglar alarm was installed in 1870, but not wholly trusted. Two watchmen still slept inside the building at night just in case the new-fangled invention failed to function. One of these guardians comes down to us from the mists of time via the DAILY LOCAL NEWS.

Humphrey Haws, for a quarter of a century, has seen winter's frosts and summer's green come and go as night watch at the old white Chester County Bank (predecessor to the National Bank—correct name: Bank of Chester County). During that time very little has been done to disturb his peaceful slumbers.

This idyllic condition was not to last.

Humphrey had a dog who shared his dreams and guardianship. One night a large weight in a window fell with a crash. Humphrey thought the building was attacked. The reporter wrote, "The dog, a faithful watchman with a poor salary (Humphrey was paid only fifteen dollars a month), leaped from his bed." But there was no cause for alarm and Humphrey and his pooch returned to their rest.

The reporter, scenting a follow-up story, went to the First National Bank to see if its watchman had a canine companion. Piqued by the publicity that Humphrey had received, his rival said scornfully, "We don't want any dog in our bank for there would soon be fleas on the banknotes as well as ourselves."

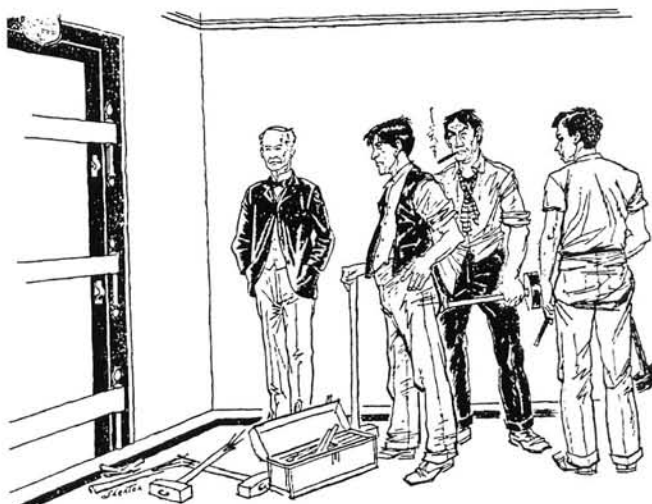


Humphrey Haws and his "assistant."

Part Two — Some Disassembly Required

The Bank, in 1890, expanded its Safe Deposit service, established in 1866, by installing 508 additional boxes. To hold them, a new vault was ordered. When it arrived at the West Chester railroad depot and was loaded on a wagon, it was so heavy that "the vehicle was crushed like an egg shell." Planks were laid on Market Street and the six ton vault was brought

to the Bank "by the aid of rollers, rope and tackle and a horse." Here it had to be disassembled and carried piece by piece into the building where it was put back together.



Cashier I. Cary Carver (at left) and the "experts" contemplate the stubborn vault door.

The manufacturers had guaranteed it burglar-proof and this was no understatement. On a Saturday morning two months later, the inner door "refused to do the bidding of the Bank officials." Which, translated into current English, means it wouldn't open. After Cashier I. Cary Carver had worn blisters on his fingers without result, three experts were rushed from Philadelphia. Like many mechanics, they forgot their tools and had to return to the city. Tools and experts finally arrived together and, just before midnight, set to work.

The door was constructed of five layers of welded steel and iron with a central plate of Franklinitite, a metal claimed to be impervious to drill or chisel. It was. (Also impervious to the efforts of the experts.) The *Philadelphia Record* reported: "For three hours they hammered away without making an impression. Chisel after chisel and sledge hammer after sledge hammer were thrown aside and tactics in that direction had to be abandoned. It was then decided to cut away the groove plate, which extended all around the door."

The experts, reinforced by two more experts, after seven hours of labor, were able to cut a hole twelve by six inches, reach in and release a tumbler of the lock that had jammed. The crisis was over.

REFERENCE

Shenton, E. (1964). *150 years of a bank and people*. National Bank of Chester County and Trust Company: West Chester, PA.