

The First National Bank of Havre de Grace, Md., Charter 3010

by J. Fred Maples

This bank was chartered July 21, 1883 with Arthur Vosbury, president, and Robert K. Vanneman, cashier. The bank was successful right away as the Baltimore Sun reported on November, 19, 1883: "The First National Bank of Havre de Grace was only opened for business on September 1, yet the deposits already amount to \$152,000, and the earnings have been between three and four thousand dollars...The bank building, a very pretty affair, is on Washington street. Besides having a fine burglar-proof safe, the

bank is further protected by the cashier's residence being above." Over its 52-year lifespan this bank issued \$633,640 in 1882 Series, 1902 Series, and 1929 Series notes, averaging about \$20,000 in circulation, and continued through the end of the national currency period. Vosbury served as president until 1889 and was followed by Abram P. McCombs 1889-1916, Stephen J. Seneca 1916-1918, and finally Charles B. Silver 1918-1935. Vanneman was followed by William N. Coale as cashier from 1913 to 1935.



Figure 1: \$50 1902 Red Seal. The First National Bank of Havre de Grace, Md. This beautiful note was issued to the bank May 2, 1906, where the meticulous pen signatures of R.K. Vanneman, cashier, and A.P. McCombs, president, were applied. The fun bank serial #44 adds appeal. This bank issued just 124 sheets of \$50 and \$100 1902 Red Seals between 1904 and 1909. Interestingly \$50 in 1906's dollars would be worth over \$1,400 today.

The best available note from this bank for collectors today – and arguably from all of Maryland – is this \$50 1902 Red Seal, Friedberg # 664, certified by PMG Very Fine 30. This note is wonderful in all respects, combining rarity and grade, with great color, bold pen signatures, and eye appeal. This note is one of only five known \$50 Red Seals from Maryland, and the only one from outside of Baltimore, and according to the National Bank Note Census, one of only 104 known from all banks in the country. This note has a distinguished pedigree, most recently as a highlight of Marc Watts' Maryland collection when it sold for \$66,000 in Heritage's 2018 FUN sale, Lot 20973. Watts remembers buying this note from a Spink auction in the 1990s for about \$40,000 against a crowd of bidders, and afterward he "loosened up to buy the big notes". Previously this note was in Bob Cohen's collection of the 1970s, who likely bought it from the 1982 Hickman & Oakes Memphis sale, Lot 299, where it fetched a then-princely sum of \$1,500. This

note was also included in Lyn Knight's 1978 Memphis sale asking \$2,250.

The short-lived series of 1902 Red Seal national currency notes was authorized by The Act of April 12, 1902, which provided for reputable, established banks to extend their charters for another 20 years and for new banks to gain a 60-year charter. Like all national currency notes, 1902 Red Seals were secured by federal government bonds deposited with the U.S. Treasurer. All 1902 Red Seals include the impressive portrait of John Sherman, secretary of the Treasury from 1877 to 1881, and secretary of state from 1897 to 1898. In the early 1860s Sherman, then a senator, conceived of the idea of national banks. Sherman was also the author of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 that authorized the now-popular Treasury Notes (also called coin notes). The 1902 Red Seals were issued until the Aldrich-Vreeland Act of May 30, 1908, went into effect, when they were abruptly replaced by the 1902 to 1908 Date Backs, which

provided more elasticity and were guaranteed in bonds "and other securities".

This bank continued to grow and remained an important part of the Havre de Grace community as the Baltimore Sun reported September 1, 1906: "Today on its twenty-third anniversary, the First National Bank of Havre de Grace will begin business in its new home. The new building of the bank is 30 by 65 feet, 22 feet to the square, with a 12-foot L. It is constructed of cut and rock-face granite from the McClenahan quarries at Port Deposit, with copper cornices and Spanish the roof, and was designed by Architect W.L. Plack, of Philadelphia, the work being done by the John A. Sheridan Company, of Baltimore. The building is fireproof, the basement and first floor being of reinforced concrete and masonry. The banking apartment is large and roomy, with mezzanine floor and six beautifully ivory-capped onyx columns and apple-green walls. The vestibule is lined with mahogany, with a base of verde antique, while the banking room is lined with Norwegian marble, with cap and base of Italian verde antique. The doors, desks, partitions and furnishing are of the finest African mahogany."

As president Abram P. McCombs signed this \$50 1902 Red Seal, along with Robert K. Vanneman as cashier. Both men were noted and respected citizens of Havre de Grace. McCombs was an iron works manager, coal dealer, newspaper founder and editor, and town commissioner, who lived into his 90s. Per the Havre de Grace Democratic Ledger of January 15, 1916, McCombs' obituary reads in part: "Mr. Abram Prizer McCombs, 93 years of age, died at his home on Union Avenue about 11 o'clock Thursday night. He was senior editor of the Havre de Grace Republican, having founded that newspaper in 1868. Mr. McCombs was born in Coventry, Chester County, Pa., and came to Harford County in 1855, and located at Sarah Furnace in the Fourth district. In 1865 he went to Ashland Iron Works, Baltimore County. A year later he came to Havre de Grace and organized the Havre de Grace Iron Works. He was deputy collector for eight years and served under Collectors Thomas and Burchnal. In 1878 he was candidate for Congress on the Greenback Labor ticket, but was defeated. In 1883 he helped to organize the First National Bank here, being a director since its organization and its president since 1889 until last Tuesday, when he was succeeded by Mr. S.J. Seneca. In 1849 he married Miss Maria C. Schott at Lebanon, Pa., who survives him, together with one son, Mr. William S. McCombs, and one daughter, Mrs. Mary Packard. Mr. and Mrs. McCombs celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary a few years ago."

Conversely Vanneman's obituary of Baltimore Sun, July 9, 1912, reads: "The death of Robert K. Vanneman, former Mayor of Havre de Grace and cashier of the First National Bank, of this city, which occurred at Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, at 1 o'clock this morning marks the close of a long career of business usefulness. Mr. Vanneman had been in poor health for the last three years, but had attended work until last Thursday, when he collapsed and was hurried to a specialist. Death was due to a complication of liver, kidney and stomach troubles. Mr. Vanneman was 59 years old, a native of Cecil county and son of the late John and Caroline Carr Vanneman. At the age of 17 years he entered the Cecil Bank of Port Deposit, beginning as a runner. He lived at Havre de Grace for 29 years, having come to the city in 1883, when the First National Bank was organized, to become its cashier. He was one of the most prominent men of this place and was widely known, having been connected with large and varied business interests. He was elected to the Havre de Grace City Council in 1892, and became Mayor in 1895, serving six successive terms, until 1901. During his administrations many public improvements were made, notably the erection of the handsome school building and the remodeling of the old town hall into a modern opera house. His ideas were progressive and far reaching."

Havre de Grace, Maryland, is on the Susquehanna River in Harford County, and was incorporated in 1795. In 1782 General Marquis de Lafayette, a Frenchman, crossed the Susquehanna at the Lower Ferry, and was amazed how the place closely resembled Le Havre, France. Havre de Grace means "Harbour of Grace" and comes from Le Havre, France, whose earlier name commemorated a chapel dedicated to Notre-Dame de Grace. An earlier French traveler exclaimed "C'est Le Havre; Le Havre de Grace!" Lafayette agreed and was equally enthused, and soon the new name took hold. Later Havre de Grace became the county seat, and during the first Congress in 1789 was almost chosen as the United States capital, but the deciding vote for Washington, D.C. was cast by the Speaker of the House. The town was burned and plundered by the British army during the War of 1812. The first railroad access came to Havre de Grace around 1840. Interestingly railroad track was laid right on the winter ice of the Susquehanna River in 1852, as that winter was cold enough to freeze the river sufficiently, and railroad cars crossed with no problems for six weeks.