

History of 644/642 West Main Street, Radford, Virginia

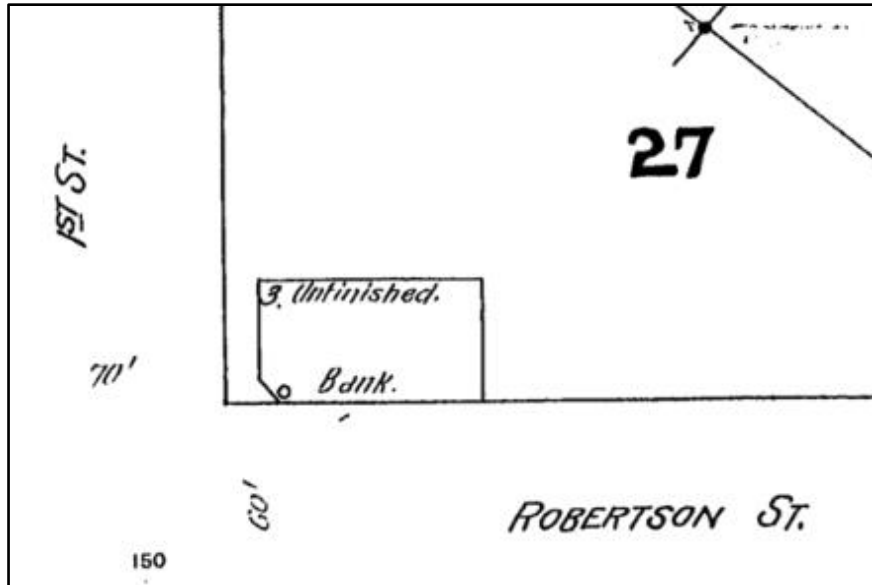


The land on which the buildings at 644 and 642 West Main Street are now located was originally owned by General Gabriel Wharton. In 1887 Wharton sold 585 acres of this land to the Radford Land and Improvement Company, retaining ownership of 5 acres surrounding his family residence, Glencoe. Glencoe now houses the Radford Museum and is located on the opposite side the street from 644/642 West Main.

In 1890 the 585-acre parcel was acquired by the Southwest Virginia Real Estate Investment Company. The Company immediately began construction of a bank at the corner of 1st (now Main Street) and Robertson Streets. The 1891 edition of the Sanborn Fire Insurance map for Radford recognized an unfinished bank building at this location.¹

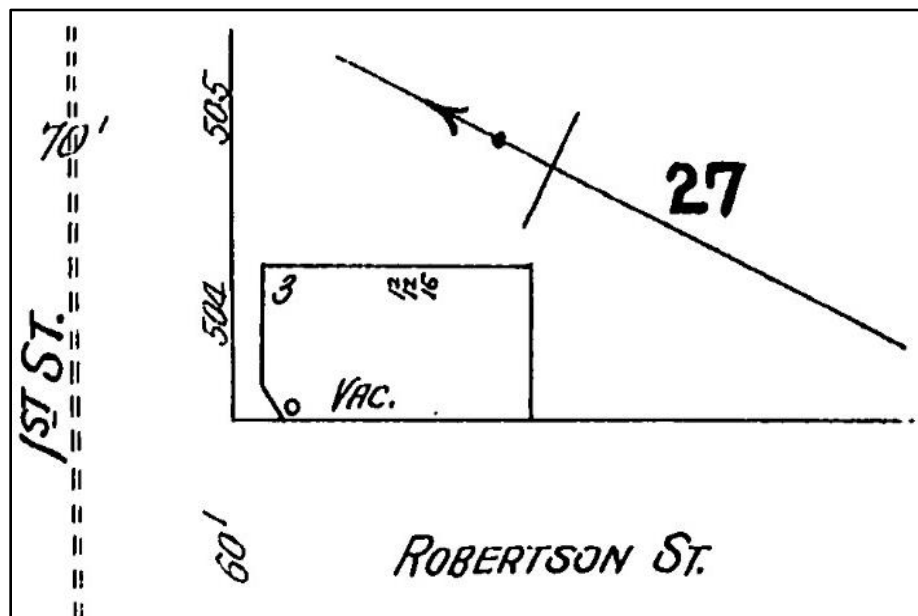
Building a bank in Radford in 1890 was a sound economic decision. It was the beginning of an unparalleled economic boom for then Town of Radford. There were abundant coal and iron deposits in the nearby in mountain regions of Southwest Virginia and outside investment poured into a growing iron industry in the town. The early economic development took place primarily in West Radford. Radford's population grew from close to 3,000 in 1890 to about 5,643 residents in 1892, the year the town was incorporated as an independent city. Radford's economic potential looked bright and the building on First and Robertson was to be among Radford's earliest banks.

¹ Sanborn Fire Insurance maps were usually published every five years.



Sanborn Map for Radford, June 1891

The Great Panic of 1893 took the United States into an economic recession that the country did not recover from until 1897. Local impacts included a population exodus (there were less than 3,400 Radford residents in 1900) and halted projects, apparently including the bank at 1st and Roberson. The Sanborn map for June 1886 labeled the commercial building as vacant. Southwest Virginia Real Estate Investment Company retained ownership of the building until 1899 when it was sold to an unlikely buyer, Blanche Adams.



Sanborn Map for Radford, June 1896

Blanche Adams was a 44-year-old English woman at the time of the transaction. Adams had emigrated to the United States in 1893 and enrolled in a two-year program at the New York Training School for Deaconesses which was a “two-year residential course for women interested in becoming deaconesses, serving as missionaries, or working in Christian education”. The school was a relatively new project of the Episcopal Church and had opened two years earlier in 1891. After graduation in 1895 Adams relocated to Radford to become the governess for the Eskridge and then the Wharton families.

It is unclear for what purpose Adams intended to use her building. However, records indicate she had extensive work experience with institutions for children. At age 26 Blanche was listed in an English Census as a school governess for an unnamed institution. Ten years later at the age of 36, the Census reported Adams’s occupation to be an officer with the Girls Village Home for Orphan, Neglected and Destitute Girls in Essex, England.

Blanche Adams owned the building for 19 years during which time she was ordained a deaconess at Grace Episcopal Church in 1908 and subsequently called to service at the Keokee coal camp in Lee County, Virginia.



Deaconess Blanche Adams at St. Andrews Mission,
Keokee, Lee County, Virginia

After nineteen years of ownership, Deaconess Adams sold the building to Luther Hanks of Radford in 1918. He sold it to Teaton S. Simpkins of Radford the following year on August 16th, 1919. Mr. Simpkins in turn sold the property to Charles O. McDonald and J.P. White on October 14th, 1919. The building remained in the McDonald family for decades. A major extension to the original three-story building was constructed in 1926 under McDonald's ownership and became 642 West Main Street.

Adams retired from mission service at the age of 74 and relocated to Roanoke under the care of the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia until her passing on July 1st, 1931, at age 79. Adams was buried at the West View Cemetery in Radford in accordance with her wishes. Her epitaph reads "She hath done what she could". In her memory the Diocese installed a stained-glass window at Grace Episcopal Church in Radford.



Photo added by Cindy Akers

Sources

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