

A New Owner for an Historic Building in Dedham Square

The most architecturally significant building in Dedham Square changed hands this past summer, ushering in a new phase of renewal for the much-admired landmark at 601 – 603 High Street. The new owner, Mark R. Epker, is passionate about historic architecture and has spent his professional career pursuing high-impact real estate projects, including restoring old buildings. Now the Principal of Vantage Real Estate, LLC, Epker lives with his family in Dedham's Connecticut Corner historic district and for a decade walked by the building daily. "I've always been in love with this building. The architecture is just so striking," says Epker, "and downtown Dedham is really thriving. I want to be a part of preserving Dedham Square."

Long known locally as the Schortmann Insurance Building, 601 – 603 High Street opened in 1892 as the new home of the Dedham Institution for Savings, a bank with a venerable history in town and one of the oldest community banks in the country. Founded in 1831, the bank's first home was in the law office of Treasurer Jonathan H. Cobb at 18 Norfolk Street. After three years it moved to the basement of the Court House and from 1847, after the completion of the Norfolk Mutual Fire Insurance Company building at 4 Pearl Street, the bank occupied rooms there for over 40 years. All the earlier premises survive, a remarkable record of the bank's physical continuity. By the late 1880s it was clear that the steady growth of the Institution was such that it was rapidly outgrowing its quarters and needed a new location of its own.

After due deliberation, the Trustees purchased the property on High Street and engaged the services of the well-respected Boston architectural firm of Hartwell and

Richardson to design the new building. Henry Walker Hartwell and William Cummings Richardson (no relation to the architect H. H. Richardson) began their partnership in 1881 and quickly established a reputation for designing schools, churches, offices and municipal buildings that were handsome and well-constructed. Over 130 of their buildings are still in use in the Boston metropolitan area, including a later Dedham commission, the Oakdale School of 1902. The new Institution for Savings was designed with narrow “old gold fire flashed” brick and brownstone trim. The façade is distinguished by three dramatic arches on the ground floor, large cast panels of foliate ornament at the cornice line, and whimsical brownstone carvings that accentuate the ends of the arch surrounds and the braces of the downspouts. High above the center arch the year “1892” has been impressed into the front sides of the copper downspout header boxes. The decorative character of the building reflects a time when high levels of craftsmanship were used to make even a commercial structure an ornament to the community.

From the beginning the building was planned to house several different enterprises. The entrance to the Dedham Institution for Savings was through the arched opening on the left, while the arch on the right led into the Dedham National Bank, a local commercial bank that was ultimately absorbed by larger entities. The window of William Hurley’s drugstore filled the arch in the middle. The second floor was leased to the Fisher Ames Club, a social organization for men. At some point in the building’s history the re-configuration of the interior required a central entrance and the side arches became windows. Although much has changed within, the bank’s impressive vault remains as well as handsome oak paneling and original fireplaces in several of the

offices. Today a number of law firms, service companies, and the Foley Palenscar Schortmann Insurance Agency, a successor to the Schortmann Insurance Agency, rent space in the building.

In 1892 the opening of the new bank caused a sensation in Dedham. "Already depositors are finding their way into the new Savings Bank building," noted The Dedham Transcript in July of that year, "and patiently wait at the counter until the janitor informs them that business is still done at the old stand. Probably next week will find the new quarters occupied..." A month later the newspaper reported that "The new bank building is now a beehive of industry....The building is fitted throughout with the best of furniture and contains every modern convenience." In October of 1892 The Dedham Historical Register devoted a lengthy article to the history of the bank and its new headquarters. "The whole building is beautifully finished and furnished in all its apartments," the Register enthused. "...it is an ornament to the village and finely adapted to the purposes of the Institution."

Epker, who occupies an office on the second floor overlooking High Street, is not planning any radical changes for the future. "My goal is to preserve and maintain the building," he says. Marked improvements are already apparent in the exterior landscaping and attractive new plantings have appeared in the window boxes. Repainting, repointing, and cleaning of exterior elements will take place in due course, enhancing the building's stately presence in Dedham Square for many years to come. "Having a local owner who is invested in our community makes a huge difference," says Amy Haelsen, Executive Director of Dedham Square Circle. "Mark has been a longtime supporter of our efforts to revitalize the Square and preserve its rich history. The

property is stunning and adds so much to the character of the Square. Our downtown wouldn't be the same without it."