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SHORT NORTH GAZETTE

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TRUE STORAGE

FROM PAPER TO PIXELS: Fireproof Records Center changes with times for a century of safekeeping



Story by Jennifer Hambrick p. 16

From paper to pixels, Fireproof Records Center changes with times for a century of safekeeping

From the outside it's an unimposing, prefab-looking structure nestled in the crook of a two-lane street that winds its way through a Grove City office park. Step inside, however, and you step into the future.

Fireproof Records Center's new Grove City facility may look like only a distant cousin of the company's historic hulking brick structure on High Street in the Short North, but it's carrying on the work that for one hundred years has made the family-run company synonymous with quality and security.

Once a household moving and storage company under the name Fireproof Warehouse & Storage Co., Fireproof Records Center has given up moving and housing the contents of homes and offices in favor of storing and securing the confidential records of law firms, hospitals and other businesses.

The company's technological journey from the 19th century to the 21st, as well as its expansion from the fortress-like building in the Short North to a small empire in and beyond Columbus, has all taken place since 1980. In 2009, the centenary of the company's founding, Fireproof CEO Mike James says his company's new high-tech ways may keep the family-run business alive for the next hundred years.

"All glass used is fireproof"

Columbus might not have been much in 1909, but it was something. At the very least, it was the capital of the state of Ohio and, as such, routinely saw the traffic of politicians, business people and visiting dignitaries. Certainly by 1909, High Street was becoming a major artery for the horses that clip-clopped with their buggies to and from Downtown.

And certainly Columbus was well on its way to establishing its own wealth. Many of Columbus' families of means lived in the fine houses along Neil Avenue, only a few blocks away from High Street. Some folks may have moved to Columbus to join what must have seemed an area growing in numbers as well as erudition, with the Ohio State University right in its midst.

Percy A. Dolle may have been in the right place at the right time when he opened his moving and storage company in Columbus in 1909. He had been a superintendent for a different moving company, Jay Trowbridge Furniture and



Top: Edward James and William Palmer (seated) became Fireproof's new co-owners in 1970. Palmer later left the business when he retired in 1981.

Right: Mike James, Fireproof's current CEO, strikes a similar pose with his father, Edward.

Storage, since 1907 and may have thought he had the experience necessary to launch his own moving venture. His crew could help move newcomers to Ohio's capital, and when the Neil Avenue set took their long vacations in Europe in those days before electronic security systems, they could put their furniture, pianos, furs, jewels and Oriental rugs in safe storage with him.



Dolle founded Percy A. Dolle & Co. Transferring, Storage and Packing at 1190 N. High St. and immediately set to work building a new facility down the road. For about \$50,000, Dolle had his company's new building on High Street constructed of concrete, brick and steel and made it so strong that even the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse couldn't vanquish it. But he was still concerned about fire, and with the great Chicago Fire of 1871 only a generation or so behind them, Dolle knew everyone else would be too. "All glass used is fireproof," Dolle wrote of the new building in a description to the Central Building Loan & Savings Co., "and window frames are of metal." In 1909, the Fireproof Warehouse & Storage Co. was born.

The Dolle family ran Fireproof with the Murrin family from at least the 1920s. James Murrin joined the company's strategic leadership in the 1930s and in 1946 hired an accountant, William Palmer, to manage the business. The only major change in the first half century of Fireproof's business was that in the 1940s it became an Allied Van Lines agent. Now it worked under the banner of one of America's major van lines.

But in 1950 America and Fireproof saw the invention of a life-changing technology: Xerox's first commercially available photocopier. The copier may have changed how offices did business, but it thoroughly revolutionized how much paperwork businesses generated. Boxes containing copies of documents began to usurp space in office storage closets, rented basements and storage warehouses. Somewhat poetically, paper would become Fireproof's best friend, but only after the moving industry made a turn for the worse.

"Our industry was passing through the severest depression in history"

When the Murrin family offered Palmer a chance to buy Fireproof in 1970, Palmer wanted to take them up on their offer, but he didn't want to do it alone. He contacted his friend Edward James, who was working for a family-run mover in Dayton, and offered him half the company's stock. Palmer and James became Fireproof's new co-owners.

At that time, Fireproof continued household moving and rode the wave of corporate relocations to Columbus and business office moving within Columbus.

But even with the boon of handling American Electric Power's corporate relocation from New York City to Columbus in 1981, James says Fireproof did more storage than long-distance moving in the '70s and '80s, difficult decades for long-distance movers. During the '70s Congress was considering deregulating many of America's industries, including the moving industry. The Household Goods Transportation Act of 1980 meant that virtually anyone with enough money to buy a truck could call himself a mover and compete in price wars with the existing major van lines. Hoards of new movers brought a Wild, Wild West style of competition to an industry that had previously operated under the microscope of the federal government.

Around the same time, Edward James realized that it was getting harder to find good help.

"It's hard work. It was just hard to find people who you could go (to) and say, 'I don't know when you're going to come home.' It was not a job that was attractive to married guys with families," Edward James said. "It was hard to find good people that cared or were dependable and reliable."

The situation looked so bleak for movers that James's view of his industry echoed – somewhat hauntingly – the view one Fireproof leader expressed in his yearly report of 1930. "We have been confronted with a year of adversity, one in which all lines of trade have suffered and suffered severely. Many old substantial reliable concerns have found themselves unable to cope with these new unstable conditions and have been forced to pass into eternity either through consolidation, mergers or otherwise. It is the opinion of the warehousemen of all sections of the United States and Canada . . . that our industry was passing through the severest depression in history."

James noticed a trend toward diversification among his competitors nationwide. Seeing the writing on the wall, he started looking for other ways to keep Fireproof afloat. An observation he had made while carrying out Fireproof's office relocation work saved the day.

"I had noticed in moving offices in the Columbus area that whenever we moved a law firm or another business, one of the things that came along was the file room and what to do with it," James said.

In these murky rooms full of banker's boxes stuffed with documents James spotted a new revenue stream for his company and envisioned the document storage industry that may help sustain Fireproof through its next 100 years of business. Those Xeroxed documents had to go



Fireproof Records Center's historic location at 1024 N. High St. in the Short North.

somewhere, but was another murky storage room in the new office the place to put them? "We could store a box for less than the (per square footage cost) of a high rise," James reasoned with his prospective document storage clients. It seemed the perfect solution: pay someone else to take on the burden of your profuse records for a fraction of the cost of shouldering it yourself.

As perfect as the idea seemed to him, James found that Columbus companies, long accustomed to having complete control (or at least the illusion of complete control) over their own records didn't initially like the idea of anyone else handling their company archives.

"It was a tough sell changing the culture of Columbus because at that time

everybody would store their records in the basement of the building they were in (or in) a mini-warehouse, and they'd send their office people down to get records from it. People were used to not letting loose of their information. Businesses were, 'how secure is it?' This was about as foreign as if you had woken up somebody in 1970 and put them in front of a computer," James said.

As a response to the question of security, Fireproof's historic High Street location was a blessing and a curse. Around the time James was beginning to transition Fireproof out of moving and household storage and into business document storage, the area around the building, which today we call the Short North, was in the throes of its seedy phase. Prospective clients questioned how safe it would be to send their employees down to that part of town to retrieve records archived there. Here, too, James had answer: Fireproof offered a document delivery service. And he had a little extra insurance on the outside, too.

"The White Castle (at 965 N. High St.) was a hot spot for coffee. The police would get coffee, and I would try to encourage them to drink their coffee break parked in our lot, and they would. So that was kind of a visual deterrent that people would see," James said.

But Fireproof's building erased any reservations about its ability to protect documents on Columbus' seamy near north side. Today's lick-and-a-promise school of construction hadn't yet emerged when Fireproof's brick-and-mortar behemoth was rising up from High Street. So solidly was Fireproof's building made – with 24-inch-thick concrete, steel and brick walls and ceilings – that it had been commissioned a civil defense center during the 1940s.

"It's built like a fort. It would show so well when you'd bring someone down for a tour. Once they got into the building, it sold itself for us," James said.

"I saw the opportunity"

By 1983, James knew he was onto something, and although Fireproof the building could sell itself as a secure facility, Fireproof the company needed more clients to buy into the cutting-edge concept of records management. That year James hired Susan Eichinger to sell Fireproof's records storage services – in essence, to recruit clients. Eichinger had worked in records management for the state Department of Commerce's Division of Securities, and her name was floated when James met with members of the



Photos/ Greg Miller

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Fireproof cont.

Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA International) to root out a top records professional for his company. She and James met, and he lured her away from a secure state job to sell Fireproof's new line of services in what was then still a fledgling industry.

"I had never sold before, but I knew what the industry was about," said Eichinger, now Fireproof's President and Chief Operating Officer. "Most of the people in the records community knew me as one of them, so it was relatively easy to get in and talk about our services because they already knew me."

And Eichinger knew records storage wasn't an industry about letting boxes of paper sit in warehouses. She saw it as a dynamic industry that followed documents through their entire life cycle, and with this knowledge she began to change the complexion of Fireproof's operations.

"Initially we had a lot of archival information, information that basically just sat," Eichinger said. "We started going after more active records, therefore we had to increase services: pick up and delivery, retrievals and refills. That changed things because we became a lot more active."

The move to active records storage brought with it many questions: where and how should the photocopy of an employee's personnel file be stored so that it is secure? How long should a law firm's records for inactive cases be retained? How quickly can an accounting firm retrieve its archived records should the need arise? How will the retrieval of those records be tracked to ensure the records remain safe and confidential? If archived records need to be destroyed at some point, what is a safe way to do it?

Fireproof answered the last question in 1983 when it bought its first paper shredder and inaugurated its document shredding service, a service that was as novel an idea as that of a business storing its confidential records off site. Recycling the shredded documents for the sake of the environment was an even more foreign concept.

"We were probably the first shredder in the Midwest," Mike James said. "It was not a concept that people were really attuned to. If you're in your office, you just throw it in the trash. Recycling was not even really a big buzzword back then. We did recycle it (the shredded paper). We worked with the paper companies and got rid of it as a paid value, but it was not a concept that people thought, 'Hey, let me store up all that stuff and then recycle it.'"

As important as the cradle-to-grave handling of paper documents may have been to companies, by the early 1980s the rise of the computer meant that businesses were generating at least as much electronic data as paper data. In 1984 Ed James oversaw the conversion of Fireproof's old piano storage room into the company's first state-of-the-art climate-controlled vault to house corporate computer backup tapes. The age of electronic storage had dawned, and Fireproof was there to enjoy the sunrise.

"As the mainframe became more and more of a big part of a business, they'd back up that data and put it someplace safe," Mike James said. "As more and more businesses become computerized, you'd better have a back-up and you want it in a safe place."

Today, the entire first floor of Fireproof's High Street facility contains four 2,500 square-foot climate-controlled



Fireproof's corporate headquarters in Grove City. The expansion to the 48,000 square-foot building began in 1997.

Mike James and Susan Eichinger at a groundbreaking for the Grove City facility.



vaults, each with expandable shelving neatly lined with, Mike James says, "millions" of computer back-up tapes.

To showcase the panoply of Fireproof's records storage services for prospective clients, Edward James created Information Cycles as the company's consulting division. Information Cycles provided a context in which Eichinger and Karen Preston, whom Edward James hired as Fireproof's Director of Sales in 1985, could not only sell prospective clients on the notion of housing their business records off site, but could also help a business develop its document storage policies. If you were a new Fireproof client, Eichinger could help you establish a records retention policy in compliance with the rules and regulations of your industry and in keeping with your company's best practices, determine how and where your records would be held, index the containers that held your records, maintain your records in a safe, dry environment, retrieve them for you at a moment's notice upon your request, have them delivered to your office within hours of your request and, when the day comes, shred your documents per your retention schedule and discard the shavings in a manner safe for both your business and the environment.

Eichinger says the rationale for establishing Fireproof's full-service Information Cycles model was, once again, diversification. But the Information Cycles approach brought about another, equally important change for Fireproof's operations: continuing relationships with clients. Fireproof's moving and storage business had been a one-off affair: once a client was moved from point A to point B, he probably didn't need Fireproof's services again for a while, or maybe ever again. Managing a company's records means that company needs you on an ongoing basis.

"I saw the opportunity and I felt that it was a very good business from the standpoint that you were dealing with customers on a regular basis," Edward James said. "Once I got your records, once I did work for you, it was hard for you to get rid of me."

And Fireproof's clients generally don't want to get rid of them. Karen Scurlock, office manager for the Columbus law firm Isaac, Brant, Ledman & Teetor, says Fireproof made it possible to move her firm's records out of the old basement where they were once stored and into a more secure environment. Fireproof's retrieval and delivery service means that

Scurlock now no longer has to make the daily (sometimes twice daily) trips to the basement of the building where the firm's records were housed to forage through boxes for the right documents). Instead, she submits an online document request and her documents are delivered to her.

"It's saved me a lot of time from just going over to that building and going through boxes," Scurlock said. "It gave me peace of mind that I wouldn't get hurt over there and nobody would know I was over there."

She also says there have been no breaches of security, no damage done to any of their documents and no delivery hold-ups in the 25 years Fireproof has been storing the firm's records. She credits this track record to the system Fireproof has put in place to ensure the safety of the records they store and to the mindset of Fireproof's employees.

"They care about their customers," Scurlock said. "They are hired on the qualifications of already having the inward sense of customer service, which I don't think a lot of times you can teach people. You have to have some of that inside yourself, and they (Fireproof) hire those kinds of people."

But no one praises the customer service instincts of Fireproof's employees more loudly than Eichinger.

"We have a group of people that are employed here that really understand customer service and that really care about the service we provide," Eichinger said. "They don't just come to work and go home and forget about it. They really care that the customers are happy and that they get what they need."

Examples of Fireproof employees' dedication to their customers are legion, but Eichinger likes the one from years ago about a client who got a flat tire on S. High Street while driving to Fireproof's Short North facility to review some of her firm's documents in advance of an upcoming audit.

"Unbeknownst to me at the time, our operations supervisor heard about that (the flat tire), drove down there, changed her tire, brought her back here," Eichinger said. "Just small things like that that really make an impression on our customers. People really care."

"Keep your eye on the horizon and change accordingly"

It was out of concern for Fireproof's future that – also in the 1980s – Eichinger and Edward James unwittingly brought on Fireproof's future CEO. Having overseen the company's difficult transition from the deregulated moving and storage industry to the nascent records storage business, James had little desire to see any of his five children follow in his footsteps. He also hoped to spare Fireproof and his own family from the power struggles he had witnessed in other family-run businesses.



CEO Michael James, Founder Edward F. James, and President Susan Eichinger.

"I served on the board of directors of Allied Van Lines for a number of years. I saw nepotism ruin more families, brothers not talking to brothers," Edward James said.

"My dad was anti-nepotism. He wanted you to work hard, study hard and get a different job," Mike James said.

There was little chance of that, though. Mike James spent some of his earliest days in the service of the family business.

"He used to go down with me and clean the offices with me on High Street as a little boy," Edward James said.

He also worked part time for Fireproof throughout high school and college, moving furniture when Fireproof was still in the moving business, making deliveries when Fireproof's document delivery service started up and shredding paper on request.

"I came in . . . did the cleaning jobs, did whatever, worked on crews, but really grew up in the blue-collar side of it," Mike James said.

After graduating from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1987, Mike James took his experience as a lacrosse All-American to Australia, where he played for a year.

It was Eichinger, not Edward James, who in 1988 eventually lassoed Mike James to run the company's operations.

"She asked me if it was all right," Edward James said. "I said, 'As long as you can handle it.' So Susan called him and said, 'Hey, how about coming back and doing this?' Mike was either ready or had run out of money, I don't know what it was. But he came back."

In 1988 Mike James' first assignment as a Fireproof full-timer was to sell the company's shredding service. He was on board to see Fireproof expand into its second storage facility, on Mound Street,

in 1990, and to watch the addition of four more climate-controlled vaults in the High Street building over the next ten years.

Mike James was also on board to see Fireproof take its first steps into what may well be its next hundred years in business.

The proliferation of the PC and the desktop computer changed the complexion of the workplace forever, and prognosticators augured the demise of paper documents altogether. "Paperless office" became a catch phrase among the technoscenti and the environmentally concerned. What would happen to Fireproof if paper documents went away? This nagging question prompted Mike James to pull out his crystal ball. New imaging and electronic storage technologies could convert documents from paper to pixels, but those documents would still need to be stored someplace, even if that place was identified by a URL instead of a P.O. box number.

So in 1997 Fireproof started offering a digital imaging service. Businesses could now send their paper documents to Fireproof, where they would be scanned and housed as digital files in electronic storage, which clients could access online. With Fireproof's scanning services actual documents became virtual documents. And documents that begin life electronically – email, for instance – can now be "housed" securely with Fireproof in electronic vaults.

"The data side of the business has grown immensely," Mike James said. "If they go paperless, then obviously the backup of that data becomes very critical from the standpoint of offsite storage. And document imaging was kind of a logical extension of our service. E-mail is a huge form of information and people are struggling with managing it, so we're helping compa-

nies from an email archiving perspective. We're helping them from an e-vaulting standpoint, so instead of going to tape, you electronically vault to a place. Or as an image repository: we've got all these documents, how do we organize them and manage them and have a storage for those?"

As new wave as all this sounds, Edward James looks at Fireproof's digital imaging and electronic storage services and thinks, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

"We came full cycle," Edward James said. "The primary business at that location on High Street was storage. We basically are a storage depository, it's just not furniture anymore."

And Fireproof has been pleasantly surprised that the oracles that so vociferously declared the death of paper documents were wrong.

"Paper is a big part of our business," Mike James said. "It's still growing, remarkably, even though we help hundreds of companies go paperless. As litigious as we are, our society, there's still a big demand for paper."

Which means that Fireproof won't let go of its paper document storage services yet either, even as it expands its menu of paperless document imaging and storage services.

Still, Edward James sees Fireproof's future in electronic storage. And although Edward James' retirement in 2000 made Fireproof's future officially Mike James' game to call, it looks like he too is calling it for digital storage. In 1997 Mike James oversaw Fireproof's further expansion into a 48,000 square-foot facility in Grove City that houses the company's paper storage and document imaging operations. In 2007 Mike James, who had been named Fireproof's CEO in 2003, transferred Fireproof's corporate headquarters to Grove City, where the company's imaging operation is housed.

So will Fireproof be leaving the Short North? Mike James says he has no plans to give up Fireproof's historic High Street building. But he does plan to expand the company beyond its Columbus locations and the single Cleveland facility James opened in 2006.

Fireproof's future looks bright, but as with all ventures, it will be what its leaders make of it.

"I think that if it is managed as it has been and is now, where you manage your business and don't have your head in the sand and are looking for opportunities – the management of information I don't think is going to diminish. It's such a valuable part of our society today. The people who are looking for bailouts aren't the people of digital growth. If you keep your eye on the horizon and change accordingly, I think you can survive." □

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