

V  
E  
R  
T  
I  
C  
A  
L

G  
R  
O  
W  
T  
H

**CAPITAL PROJECT:** Delaware Elevator Inc. (DEI) modernized the elevator at the Washington Monument. Below, President and Chief Executive Officer Pete Meeks stands with daughter Charley who, along with her two sisters, also works for DEI.





# The story of Delaware Elevator covers 90 years, four generations, 500 employees and thousands of elevators—in hotels, hospitals, offices, apartments, museums, dams, embassies, military facilities and anywhere else people need to go up and down.

BY CHRISTOPHER DURSO

**T**he thing about working for an elevator company that's been hired to modernize the elevator in the Washington Monument is that, due to the very nature of the project, the only way to get to the machine room at the top is to walk. That's up 897 cold iron steps, in a narrow, windowless staircase that spirals within the 555-foot-high structure.

Jose Carrasco thought it was great. The stairs have been closed to the public since the 1970s, but when Delaware Elevator Inc. (DEI) got the job to lift the monument's elevator into the 21st century, Carrasco—the company's vice president of construction modernization—relished “the opportunity that not many people have to walk the steps.”

Noteworthy as the experience was for Carrasco and his team, in many ways it was just another day on the job with DEI, a full-service elevator company headquartered in Salisbury, Maryland, that over nearly 90 years and four generations of family ownership has built an international portfolio of business. In addition to the usual mix of offices, hotels, apartments and hospitals, the company works not just on high-profile, culturally resonant projects like the Washington Monument but also on the occasional below-the-radar job for U.S. embassies and military bases across the country and around the world.

“I never really planned that,” says Charles “Pete” Meeks Jr., DEI's president, chief executive officer and third-generation owner. “But I've worked hard and invested in people. I've always said that the customer comes first, and if you do quality work, then the rest will take care of itself. If you treat your customers right, treat your employees well, the rest of it will follow suit.”

## WHEN CHARLIE MET SHIRLEY

How does a company called Delaware Elevator come to be headquartered in Salisbury, Maryland, on the Eastern Shore, in the first place? It was because of a Rockette.

DEI was first founded in 1936, right about where you'd imagine, in Wilmington, Delaware, by a man

named Paul L. Meeks, who balked when the big elevator company he was working for wanted to relocate him to Denver. Instead, he opened his own shop—a merit outfit, in a part of the country where the profession was and remains highly unionized—and trained his sons and a few other family members to work for him.

Not long after, one of those sons, Charles “Charlie” Meeks, began traveling regularly to a job a few hours south of Wilmington, servicing the lone elevator at the hospital in Salisbury. He met a local waitress and dancer named Shirley Farlow, whose family had moved to Maryland from New Jersey during the Depression, and that was it. They were apart during the war—Charlie in the South Pacific, serving as a U.S. Army combat engineer, Shirley in New York City, performing with the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall—but when he came back, he settled in Salisbury, not Wilmington.

Charlie married Shirley and decided to take a page from his father's book. A few pages, actually. “He stole some business cards from his father, scratched out ‘Wilmington, Delaware,’ wrote ‘Salisbury, Maryland,’ and started his own company in 1946 in Salisbury, and just left the Delaware Elevator name,” says Pete Meeks, Charlie and Shirley's son, and Paul's grandson. “He couldn't really afford a business card at the time.”

Today Pete's three daughters all work for DEI—Kaitlind as a sales representative, Lindsay as an elevator technician, Charley as a marketing director and sales rep—making the company a four-generation family business. And something a whole lot bigger than Paul Meeks probably imagined when he decided not to move his family to Denver 86 years ago.

## THE BUSINESS OF PEOPLE

For a while there were two companies called Delaware Elevator—Paul's shop in Wilmington and Charlie's in Salisbury. Paul's “kind of went by the wayside” when he passed away in the early 1970s, according to Pete Meeks, while Charlie's kept going into the next decade, until he became ill with cancer. Pete, who had worked



DELAWARE ELEVATOR

**UPS AND DOWNS:** DEI's clients include The Don CeSar hotel in St. Pete Beach, Florida (above), and the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. (top). Most projects use equipment produced by the company's Delaware Elevator Manufacturing division (right).



for his father during high school, came home after a year of college and took over running the company. It was 1985; his father died the following year.

"I got thrust back into it when [DEI] was very small," Pete says, "and decided to stick it out and stay with it. And I'm still here."

He began with the basics, hiring and training good people, and treating them well, and started doing jobs "here and there" on Maryland's Eastern and Western shores. Working on the elevators for the activity center at the U.S. Naval Academy with Whiting-Turner led to projects with other large companies. "It just kind of blossomed," Meeks says. "Our name got out there, and we started doing more and more work in the Baltimore–Washington area."

Eventually, Meeks' focus on identifying and retaining quality personnel turned into a growth strategy. When someone in Charlotte contacted him about coming to work for DEI but preferred not to relocate, DEI opened a small office in the North Carolina city. When a few workers in Salisbury wanted to move to Florida, the company opened a branch in Orlando. Today, DEI has nearly a dozen branch offices, including five in Florida and one in Mexico, and close to 500 employees. Meeks even returned to his grandfather Paul's neck of the woods, opening a location in Newark, Delaware, 20 years ago.

That people-centric approach to growth is a big reason that Jason Farkas joined DEI as vice president of service two years ago after a 15-year stint with a global





**ONE BIG HAPPY:** DEI has close to 500 employees, with nearly a dozen branch offices, including five in Florida and one in Mexico. “If you treat your customers right, treat your employees well,” Pete Meeks says, “the rest of it will follow suit.”

elevator company. “When you spend as much time as I did with a publicly owned company and the corporate

ago, a multinational company acquired one of DEI’s major suppliers, and Meeks, not wanting to buy from

situation that a lot of times accompanies that,” Farkas says, “you really come to appreciate what we have here as a private, family-owned independent.”

Carrasco agrees. He came to DEI as a coordinator in the modernization division 15 years ago and before long was taking on additional responsibilities, “helping as much as possible, in any area that we can, to grow the business.” Now Carrasco has more than 80 people working under him and estimates that 80% of them have been with the company for at least 10 years. “That tells us that we are doing something right,” he says.

Including making their own opportunities. About 20 years

a competitor, decided to start his own manufacturing division in Salisbury. He estimates that Delaware Elevator Manufacturing now makes 70% of the cabs, hydraulics, cable, power units and other equipment that DEI installs. The company further boosted that capacity five years ago by acquiring Riviera Beach, Florida-based IDEC Elevator Products.

While in-house manufacturing has been a big success in helping control quality and manage lead times, Meeks hasn't lost sight of DEI's DNA. "We've been going pretty strong on the manufacturing side, but we're a contractor at heart," Meeks says. "That's how we started, and that's what our predominant business still is today."

### EVERYONE'S ELEVATOR

Trying to get your head around the predominant business can be a little dizzying, which for Farkas is part of the appeal. "It's the uniqueness of the industry," he says. "It's very specialized. It's difficult to gain the skillset that you need to be successful in this trade—especially in the field, as far as certifications and qualifications go—and it's so critical to the operations piece of any building. I like how critical it is to everything that functions within a building."

Carrasco tells new and prospective hires to "be prepared to learn, because this is something you will never stop." He says: "Elevator work has that unique opportunity where you can see everything in one place. We deal with mechanical issues, electronics, electrical installations. We have to learn plumbing; we have to learn construction. We have to do a little bit of everything to make sure the elevator is 100% done. And another unique part of elevators is, moving people is a safety concern all the time, so everything you do has to be at a high safety level."


Plus, just about every building of every type that's more than one story high needs elevators. Hence DEI's expansive book of business, encompassing design, installation, maintenance and repair. The portfolio includes bread-and-butter projects around the mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions—high-rise hotels and condos lining the beaches of Maryland, Delaware, the Carolinas and Florida; federal and other office buildings in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia; and so on. There are also interesting one-offs like the Air Force Academy's Falcon Stadium in Colorado Springs, the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington state and the NASA Goddard Exploration Sciences Building in Greenbelt, Maryland. There are numerous high-profile, only-in-D.C. gigs like the National Gallery of Art, the

**"We're a contractor at heart. That's how we started, and that's what our predominant business still is today."**

National Museum of the American Indian, the National Air and Space Museum and, of course, the Washington Monument.

"That equipment is in the top of the monument, so there's no way you can access it even with a crane to remove the machine," Carrasco says. "We had to rebuild the equipment that had been there for 60 or 70 years. We replaced all the key components and upgraded all the security systems as well." Meeks adds: "That was a very prestigious job for us. It's a high-speed elevator, it has some special features and functions, and during the one-year warranty period, I don't think we had one warranty issue, which is pretty unheard of."

And then there are the projects that Meeks can't really talk about, such as missile silos, embassies and military bases, which require workers with security clearance and often demand custom components such as explosion-proof elevators. "We've been in Africa, we've been in Asia, we've been in the Middle East, we've been in South America," Meeks says. "We're doing a job right now in Guam, where there's a big military buildup. We look for niche projects from time to time overseas. It's not a huge volume of our work, but it's something we do."

But no matter the job—whether it's underneath a top-secret government facility or out in the open on the National Mall—Meeks never forgets who he's responsible for: his employees and his customers. "Our main focus is safety and training, and to get the word out that the elevator industry is one of the best trades out there," he says. "It's a lot of different trades wrapped in one, so we never do the same thing daily. It's always something different. That's what energizes me." 

---

*Christopher Durso (durso@abc.org) is editor-in-chief of Construction Executive.*