



JUST ASK

Downtown Buildings are Grand, Storied, Reusable

A Historical Wander Down St. Paul Street in Search of the Future

BOB MARCOTTE, Democrat & Chronicle, June 2005

(This is the first of a series of occasional pieces examining the history in the old buildings and architectural features along our downtown streets.)

As you enter Jasco Tools at 195 St. Paul St., you'll notice small images of vehicles above the entrances. They represent taxi cabs, Jasco CEO John Summers explained.

At one time, the building housed taxis that served the old central railroad station nearby. And, indeed, a 1926 city plat map shows a Yellow Cab Co. garage at this location. Later, in the 1960s and '70s, the building was used by Tommy's Roller Palace - a roller skating rink - which was perfect for Summers' company to later move into because it provided a nice wooden floor for the workers.

A previous Just Ask column related that our old buildings and their architecture are like footnotes of local history.

The fact that they have survived and even been used for entirely different purposes is a testament to their durability, beauty or functional design.

But they also remind us how fragile even the most successful business enterprises can be when tides of history, economy or consumer preference turn against them.

There's no better example of this than the downtown section of St. Paul Street from Main Street north to the Inner Loop. A five-minute walk takes us by the palatial headquarters of Rochester's former patent medicine king, past remnant structures of a once-booming clothing industry, and even past a reminder that as recently as the 1930s Rochester had not one but three mass-circulation newspapers.

Here, too, can be found the work of three of Rochester's preeminent architects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It all started in the early 1880s when the New York Central Railroad finally agreed to elevate its tracks along the north edge of downtown.

This immediately alleviated the problem of people getting run over by trains. It also required relocating the New York Central station from the west side of the river to the east side in 1883. And that's when St. Paul Street, including sections farther north toward the city line, really began to boom.

It "became the principal wholesale district, attracting especially the clothing men whose firms were growing most rapidly," wrote former city historian Blake McKelvey.

An example is the brick, six-story Atrium building on the northwest corner of St. Paul and Andrews streets. It was built in 1884 for Tichner and Jacobi tailors for \$60,000. When the three top floors burst into flames 10 years later, attracting a throng of onlookers, three clothing manufacturers were located there.

That year also saw the completion of H.H. Warner's ornate patent medicine building, which still stands at 72-78 St. Paul. Note the namesake W's carved in the stone trim. Warner spared no expense in erecting what the Landmark Society of Western New York calls a "renowned example of 19th century cast-iron architecture." Some 4 million common bricks, 25,000 Philadelphia pressed bricks and 1,300 tons of iron were incorporated into the structure, the Union and Advertiser reported in 1884.

This is the same H.H. Warner, by the way, who used the profits from his Warner Safe Liver Pills to build the famed Warner Observatory for Rochester astronomer Lewis Swift. And the same H.H. Warner who abruptly went bankrupt in 1893.

The 1880s also saw construction of the Cox Building at 36-48 St. Paul, which is typical of the buildings that once lined both sides of the street. It is a good example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, with round arched windows on the upper floors and heavy carved stone piers on the lower ones, the Landmark Society notes.

Along this same stretch of St. Paul can be seen the handiwork of three of Rochester's famous architects. Harvey Ellis, far ahead of his time in emphasizing the vertical in urban structures, designed the Smith-Gormly building at 180 St. Paul (and the Ellis Building just to the west at 185 N. Water St.). J. Foster Warner's first major commission was the Granite

Building, erected in 1893-94 for the Sibley, Lindsay & Curr department store at St. Paul and Main, then rebuilt after a disastrous fire in 1904 and still standing as the city's "best surviving example of the Beaux Arts style of architecture."

Claude Bragdon's last major Rochester commission was the Chamber of Commerce building at 55 St. Paul, built in neo-classical style in 1916 and now the home for SUNY Brockport's MetroCenter.

Of less architectural significance, perhaps, but interesting nonetheless is the old Journal-American building at Andrews and St. Paul. The Hearst newspaper flourished in the 1920s and '30s when its chief competitors were the Democrat and Chronicle and the Times-Union.

Most of these buildings no longer house the companies for which they were built. But many of them have found modern uses as loft apartments, restaurants and offices. In other words, the same buildings that signaled St. Paul Street's emergence are showing they can be just as important to downtown's revival.

To learn more

Visit the Landmark Society of Western New York Web site, www.landmarksociety.org, click on "Tours" and download detailed maps and descriptions of a half-dozen downtown walking tours featuring historic buildings. Also, the Rochester Public Library Web site, www.rochester.lib.ny.us, has a "Rochester Images" link that will take you to "Architecture Pathfinders" with similar information.