Spotlight on a Landmark
the Charles A. Yates Mansion/Knights of Columbus Clubhouse

The building at 307 Genesee Street sits patiently like a dignified society dowager in Utica's new Arts District and evolving Oneida Square neighborhood awaiting the next partner on her dance card. Located next door to the Utica Public Library and opposite MWPAL, she stands as a testimony to Utica's prosperous development, the financial rewards gained by its past owners through innovative entrepreneurship and as a reflection of their civic pride.

In its day, this fashionable address would have counted the Proctor families, US Senator Orsamus Matteson, several Utica mayors, and other prominent citizens as neighbors.

This elegant edifice has served as a residence for several successful business owners and later as a local headquarters for a venerable and community-minded fraternal organization.

Site Timeline
1860 Utica city directory listed Charles A. Yates living at 307 Genesee St. possibly in an earlier house on the site.
1863 Construction started on the new mansion, designed by upstate architect Azel J. Lathrop. Work on the house appeared to have been delayed by the Civil War.
1867 Charles A. Yates moved in with his family in December. Charles & his brother R.V. started a ready-made clothing business c.1840
1896 Sanborn map shows Irvin A. Williams living at 307 Genesee Street

Irvin A. (Abijah) Williams founded the US Headlight Company in 1894 serving as its president. This company grew out of the Utica Head Light works started in 1854 by Williams in the Phoenix Iron Works foundry building at First & Blandina Sets. Williams, who was considered the originator & inventor of the locomotive headlight in America, began working on his invention in 1851 and patented it in 1854. The impact of this safety device made night train travel possible and spurred the growth of this means of transportation across the US.
1897 Charles A. Yates is listed at 23 Rutger St, and prior at 17 Rutger St.
1904 Utica Public Library was built next door and to the north of 307 on land donated by the Proctor family
1907  The Knights of Columbus purchased the Mrs. J.E. Barber Estate at 309 Genesee St. moving in on February 26, 1908. K of C Utica chapter was founded in 1898. Their first meeting was in the new Arcanum Club on Devereux St. In 1899 they moved to the Seneca Building, in 1900 they bought a building at the corner of Devereux & Charlotte Streets, in 1903 they moved into the Fosters Bldg., and in 1913 the final move was to 307 Genesee Street.

1913  K of C purchased the I.A. Williams residence next door to the north at 307 Genesee St., remodeling it with a rear three story addition for use as their clubhouse. The Daughters of Isabella then purchased 309 Genesee St. from K of C using it until 1931-32 when it was demolished to make way for the new St. Francis de Sales School.

1917  K of C built a rear addition at the 307 Genesee location fronting on Park Avenue. The architect was Edward J. Berg. The addition included a basement swimming pool & bowling alley, main floor gymnasium with mezzanine level running track on four sides and a lecture hall on the top floor with a balcony above including fixed seating on three sides and orchestra stage at rear. An interesting structural engineering design had both the running track and seating balcony suspended from the floors above using steel tie rods leaving the main floor area underneath each balcony unobstructed by support columns.

The Mansion c. 1863-1867

This residence for Charles A. Yates, a wealthy ready-made clothing manufacturer and merchant was built c.1867 on Utica’s main street among homes of comparable size and grandeur. The designer was prominent New York State architect Azel J. Lathrop of Utica who employed a combination of the Italianate and Second Empire styles popular at the time.

The house is set back from the street line on a small lawn which slopes steeply down to the side walk. From 1863 until the 1920s trolleys on Genesee Street would have run right past the front door of the house.

Early photos from the mid to late 1800s show a cut stone retaining wall along the Genesee Street side of the property, a large side and rear yard with garden fronting on Park Avenue, a rear gravel access carriage drive, and a two story lattice garden gazebo topped with a whimsical birdhouse. Such site features, along with fountains and extensive ornamental landscaping, were typical of wealthy homes during this period in the neighborhood.

Exterior features included bay window elements at the second floor Genesee Street and south facades creating pleasant seating alcoves within the adjoining rooms. Centered on the front of the house was one of three very elaborate covered porches. A balustrade which topped this porch in front of the bay window has been removed. Ornate wooden brackets support all eaves at the porches, bay window elements, and main roofs. Large hood mouldings above doors and windows which end in drop elements include generic stylized shields as part of the keystone design. The north elevation features a unique narrow vertical racetrack shaped window, which appears to have been one of Lathrops signature design elements.
The original front entry with arched glass transom above to match the window configurations is missing having been replaced by a 1960s commercial glass store front enclosure. A typical design of this time period would have included a set of very large, heavy, carved wood double doors befitting the importance of the residence. A Second Empire style slate mansard roof with imposing hipped gable dormers crowns the building.

Lathrops love and skill for detail learned as a cameo miniature carver are evident in the intact very elaborate exterior and interior detailing rendered in stone, carved wood and plaster - window and door surrounds, ornately paneled arched top doors (some painted to imitate wood graining), interior folding window shutters, recessed wall niches for displaying objects de art, ornate marble fireplace mantels with intricate tile inlays and sculpture keystones above the fire box, heavy ceiling crown mouldings and ceiling medallions in all major rooms and at the front entry hall. Such details would have been typical and expected by buyers of more expensive houses of the era.

The main stairway maintains its dark stained unpainted newel posts and balustrades from the principal floor uninterrupted up to the third floor attic rooms which are lite by small dormer windows at regular intervals and at one time by a large Second Empire style cupola

The rooms in the mansion were converted by the Knights of Columbus for use as administrative offices, officers’ room, a music room, library, reception room, and a ladies’ parlor for visitors.

The main feature on the second floor is a very large room, referred to as the Parlor, which extends the full length of the Genesee St facade including a deep central bay window alcove affording an excellent view of the street below in both directions. This room was possibly originally a ballroom which was a popular feature at the time or may have been a central sitting room with mirror image bedrooms on either side. No clothes closets are evident. Residents would have uses freestanding armoires or a separate dressing room for clothes storage.

Three wall mounted gas fixture jets which remain at the 2nd floor hint at the transition over time from oil lamps to gaslight to electric lighting. Fireplaces in all major rooms provided heat from wood & coal in the early days prior to the advent and evolution of coal and gas fired central heating systems.

The first Knights of Columbus addition- c.1913

The 1913 addition, built after K of C acquired the mansion, replaced a small two story service wing and covered porch at the rear of the 1867 house. The new exterior design complimented that of the mansion with matching materials, detailing, and mansard roof with rows of imposing third floor dormers on each side.
The interiors featured Arts & Crafts style popular at the time, including an ornate brick fireplace with mantle, leaded windows with stained glass K of C crests in the members lounge, and craftsman style brass lighting fixtures. Coffered ceilings and paneled walls graced the reading room, billiard room, card room and bar. Simple Stickley style wood furnishings were also purchased for the various rooms further reenforcing the masculine club-like atmosphere.

**The Lecture Hall & Gymnasium wing - 1917**

Utica architect Edward J. Berg designed an eclectic Italian palazzo scheme with Arts & Crafts detailing, including red tile roofs and ornate craftsman style wood bracketing, to accommodate the Knights’ space requirements for an increased membership and expanded program offerings.

The new wing contained a gymnasium with suspended running track at mezzanine level, with a lecture/performance hall above that containing 3 rows of fixed seating on a three sided balcony level (also suspended from cables over the main floor hall), meeting rooms, a bowling alley, swimming pool, locker and shower rooms, boiler room, storage spaces, and a ticket office for the lecture hall at the Park Avenue entry level.

Both gymnasium and lecture hall contain ornate decoration and detailing throughout with K of C crests rendered in plaster and tiles. Columns flank a ceremonial stage in the main lecture hall. Some doors still retain their original intricate door hardware with K of C shields intact.

**About the Architects**

**Azel J. Lathrop**

Lathrop started his career in Utica as a skilled carpenter, designer, and cameo miniature carver (according to the 1839 Utica City Directory), and went on to become one of the first commercially successful architects in New York State during the second half of the 1800s. He was a contemporary of fellow Utica native and cameo miniature carver Erastus Dow Palmer who became a nationally renowned sculptor.

According to the 1860 Census, Lathrop and his wife had 9 children- 8 daughters and a son, Charles, who also became an architect following in his father’s footsteps. They lived in a house at 121 John Street designed by the architect, now gone. Lathrop Place which parallels John St to the east near Rutger St. was named in his honor.

**Buildings designed by Lathrop included several residences, commercial, and institutional buildings in the Mohawk Valley and upstate New York:**

- Marble Block in lower Genesee St. “long block” (gone)
- First Faxton Hospital (gone)
- Faxton Home for Elderly Women (adjacent to first hospital- gone)
- Faxton Hall, cor. Court & Varick St, 1867 (extant)
- Churchill-Buxton house, 296 Genesee St. c. 1871 (extant)
- Former bank/town offices, Boonville, NY - NRHP (extant)
- Dodge-Pratt House Arts Center, 1878, Boonville, NY-NRHP (extant)

**Other buildings that may be attributed to Lathrop include:**

- Senator Matteson house, 294 Genesee St., Utica, NY (extant)
- First Oneida County Offices, Utica, NY (gone- just south of Old City Hall)
- The Arcade Building, Genesee St, Utica, NY (gone)
Edward J. Berg

Mr. Berg was a successful local architect whose commissions included commercial buildings and residences. His collaboration with the H.R. Jones Company produced several houses on Proctor Boulevard as it was developed from 1914 through the 1930s. His design for the addition was very ornate with intricate arts & crafts detailing. He incorporated many K of C symbols and iconography into the exterior and interior building elements.

Conclusion

Fortunately, despite a small fire in the basement prior to the K of C sale of the building to the current owners, much of the extraordinary original exterior and interior details with their irreplaceable craftsmanship remain intact. This landmark, located in Utica’s Scenic and Historic Preservation District, awaits repurposing by a new private or not for profit steward. Currently owned by two Boston area developers who also own other historic properties in the city including #4 Rutger Park, 307 Genesee St. is currently vacant, undergoing basic stabilization by the owners, and is for sale. The ideal buyer would appreciate the building’s substantial contribution to Utica’s authenticity of place, its significance as a part of our city’s unique story and would also have a vision as to the role it could play as Utica continues to reinvent itself. The possibilities are truly exciting and limitless.

Sources:

Photos:
- Internet
- Oneida County Historical Society, Utica, NY
- Wood & Stone-Landmarks of the Upper Mohawk Region