



# THE PRESERVATIONIST

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2022

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## *A Message from the President*

Dear Landmarkers,

I hope you all had an enjoyable New Year's! And I hope you all enjoyed waving good bye to '21 as much as I did! Thankfully, 2022 is shaping up to be a much more productive year for the Society. There is no denying the disappointments of last year, but to be fair, Landmarks did end the year on a high note. The Harvest Tea, the Annual Dinner and Awards Ceremony and the Holiday House Tour at the Miller-Conkling-Kernan Mansion were very successful. Hopefully, the momentum those events generated will keep going this year!

Speaking of events, we have a number of things already planned and quite a few more are in the works. For the winter months, we are going to get back to our Historically Happy Hour events and we hope to host a monthly presentation on local history. We are also in the planning stages for the spring and summer events that we were forced to cancel last year. So, stay tuned and get ready to mark some dates on your calendar!

Another thing we are going to get back to is historic preservation. After all, that is the very reason why this organization was founded! Sadly, for a number of Covid-related issues, no preservation or restoration work took place last year at Rutger Park. We hope to get the momentum going again there also. So far, discussions with contractors have seemed favorable for some roof work to resume sometime this summer.

And going back to when we were founded, we are fast approaching our 50th anniversary. That is hard to believe! When did the Landmarks Society get its charter? What large and well known Utica landmark celebrates its centennial this year? What other area landmarks are close to a significant milestone? Give some thought to the answers and then share them with me at Happy Hour. See you there!

*Steve Grant*

President



JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2022



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## MERCHANDISING

Our Merchandise Committee is at work with plans to increase our Landmarks Society shop. New ideas include mugs, glassware, t-shirts, and so much more are being considered.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO RECEIVE AN EMAIL VERSION OF OUR NEWSLETTERS - CONTACT US AT 315-732-7376.



## INVEST IN THE FUTURE OF PRESERVATION

### Invest in your Landmarks Society!

For nearly 50 years, the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica has been the premiere organization in the region promoting and advocating the preservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse of historic buildings, neighborhoods, and landscapes. We also provide a number of programs and services that instruct, inform, and empower individuals and groups in their efforts to "preserve the past and protect the future."

There are many ways in which you can give back to the Landmarks Society to help ensure we are able to continue this valuable and vital work in our community.

#### Ways to Give

##### **Outright Gifts:**

This can be a check, money order, or credit donation, and it can be used as a charitable deduction on your taxes.

##### **Wills:**

The Landmarks Society can be named as a beneficiary in your will by designating a specific dollar amount or a percentage of your estate.

##### **Life Insurance:**

The Landmarks Society can be named as a beneficiary of your life insurance policy.

##### **In Memory of Loved Ones:**

You can honor the memory of a loved one by making a donation to the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica in their name, and asking others to do the same in lieu of flowers.

All of the funding received by the Landmarks Society goes directly back into our programs and services, and the maintenance and restoration efforts of our Rutger Park properties.

## NEWS FROM AROUND GREATER UTICA

### "The Point of No Return"

#### **An excerpt from "The Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck, (1939)**

**"if these walls could talk...."** We often drive by forlorn and abandoned houses, buildings and barns in various states of dilapidated conditions and never give it a thought on how these once habitable structures got to their current state of "decrepitude". Countless families called them home, children were born, raised, and may even have died there, but at some point, it became vacant, unused, unsold, and nature began its relentless task of reclaiming her own. The following excerpt from the timeless classic Steinbeck novel **"The Grapes of Wrath"** is a visceral narrative of what may occur as a building becomes abandoned and proceeds down that long, slow, inexorable decline.

*"The doors of the empty house swung open, and drifted back and forth in the wind. Bands of little boys came out from the towns to break the windows and to pick over the debris looking for treasures. And here's a knife with half of the blade gone. That's a good thing. And - smells like a rat died here. And look what Whitey wrote on the wall. He wrote that in the toilet in school, too, an' teacher made 'im wash it off.*

*When the folks first left, and the evening of the first day came, the hunting cats slouched in from the fields and mewed on the porch. And when no one came out, the cats crept through the empty rooms. And then they went back to the fields and were wild cats from then on, hunting gophers and field mice and sleeping in ditches in the daytime. When the night came, the bats, which had stopped at the door for fear of light, swooped into the house and sailed about through the empty rooms, and in a little while they stayed in dark room corners during the day, folding their*





wings high, and hung head – down among the rafters, and the smell of their droppings was in the empty houses.

And the mice moved in and stored weed seeds in corners, in boxes, in the backs of drawers in the kitchens. And weasels came in to hunt the mice, and the brown owls flew shrieking in and out again.

Now there came a little shower. The weeds sprang up in front of the door step, where they had not been allowed, and grass grew up through the porch boards. The houses were vacant and a vacant house falls quickly apart. Splits started up the sheathing from the

rusted nails. A dust settled on the floors, and only mouse and weasel and cat tracks disturbed it.

On a night the wind loosened a shingle and flipped it to the ground. The next wind pried into the hole where the shingle had been, lifting off three, and the next, a dozen. The midday sun burned through the hole and threw a glaring spot on the floor. The wild cats crept in from the fields at night, but they did not mew at the doorstep any more. They moved like shadows of a cloud across the moon, into the rooms to hunt the mice. And on windy nights the doors banged, and the ragged curtains fluttered in the broken windows."

## Prospect Falls Winery

400 Academy Street, Prospect, NY

"Wine Before Wilderness"

The Greater Utica Area is blessed with many magnificent locally-owned and home-grown business establishments that are wonderful and remarkable. Many of these entities are located in old and/or historic structures as creative adaptive reuses. A surprising favorite is the **Prospect Falls Winery**. They just celebrated their 6th anniversary in its current location, but the business dates back to 1995 and began, not strangely, as a hobby. Nick and Margaret Keblish knew nothing about winemaking before that. In fact, Nick wasn't even much of a wine drinker, preferring beer. (By the way, the Keblishes are aunt and uncle to Steve Keblish, husband of Landmarks Trustee Jay Groah).

Twenty-seven years ago, in January of 1995, Prospect fall Winery was established. Prior to that, Nick had a job with Avery-Burrell Company, a stainless steel tank manufacturer just as they were breaking into the burgeoning New York State wine-making industry. He became interested in the idea of wine making, primarily as a "fun, retirement job," and began to research the

"how to" through a series of books (this was prior to the age of Google, Wikipedia and the internet). Nick and Margaret began to experiment with different wine blends and came up with a number that they thought were appealing. They were home winemakers for over 26 years.

The Keblishes partnered with George May who inspired and encouraged them to take their hobby and make it into a winemaking business. They produced seven varieties, and, on a whim, submitted them to the New York State Fair in 2013 "to be judged." Of those seven submitted, ***all seven received medals***, from double gold to bronze. The dye was cast, there were no excuses now, this would officially become a business!

So began the licensing and permitting process, and the search was on to find a suitable location from which to operate. The former Prospect ambulance building was available after the dissolution of the village and fire department. A deal was struck, closing on December 31st, 2013 and renovation and remodeling begun, essentially a rapid, total interior gutting of the building.

The first juice shipment was scheduled for January of 2014. Two days prior to that shipment, George May passed away. Nick and Margaret were too far along with the project to turn back at this

## MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Landmarks Society is to actively promote the preservation and restoration of historically and architecturally significant buildings and sites in the Utica area. Through projects, community education, advocacy, marketing and planned activities, the Society engages its members, partners and the community in preserving the past and protecting the future.

The Landmarks Society was chartered by the State of New York in October 1974 as a nonprofit, educational corporation. The purposes for which the Landmarks Society was created include the following: 1) To protect, enhance, perpetuate and preserve buildings, landmarks and other districts of historic, architectural and cultural significance; and 2) To acquire by purchase, gift, devise, or otherwise, the title to, or the custody and control of sites, buildings and areas of historical and cultural significance."

## SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR NEW & RENEWING MEMBERS!

Dennis & Darsy Webster

**During these Covid times, please consider a donation to The Landmarks Society to help further our mission of Historic Preservation.**

*Please consider The Landmarks Society in your Estate and Legacy planning.*

## THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS!





NICK KEBLISH BEHIND THE COUNTER AT PROSPECT FALLS WINERY



also have two very popular limited edition seasonal wines, a blueberry produced in July and a peach in September, both which sell out rapidly

Prospect Falls Winery is open Wednesday to Saturday, from 10 am to 5 pm, and Sunday from 12 noon until 5 pm. They have wine tasting anytime that they are open, \$4.00 for seven samples. In the summertime, they have bands that play on the weekends. They are a part of the **Friends of Fermentation Trail** that includes Woodland Farm Brewery, F.X. Matt Brewery, Bagg's Square Brewing Company, Copper City Brewing Company, and others.

[prospectfallswinery@gmail.com](mailto:prospectfallswinery@gmail.com) | [ProspectFallsWinery on Facebook](#)

point, and chose to press on. The rest, as they say, is history.

They currently produce from 17 to 22 varieties annually, and are continually developing new combinations. Most recently, they came up with 2 holiday wines, both cranberry-based. They

## [Uptown Theatre for Creative Arts \(UTCA\)](#)

### [2014 Genesee Street, Utica](#)

It was recently announced that the Not For Profit Uptown Theatre / UTCA was the recipient of a \$500,000 Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) grant to help restore the main auditorium part of the theatre. It is, however a **matching** grant that requires a one-to-one dollar match in order to receive the entire granted amount. It is a tall order, but one that is not insurmountable. UTCA is conducting a **Save the Seat** fundraising campaign, and every dollar received counts toward the required match.

Uptown Theatre for Creative Arts was formed in 2017 to provide Utica and surrounding communities with diverse programming that inspires, educates, engages and entertains. Through these activities, and the restoration of the Uptown Theatre, UTCA will help revitalize Utica's Uptown neighborhood so it reaches its potential as a cultural, social and economic asset to the region. As part of their mission, UTCA offers a dynamic range of constantly evolving programs to their constituents, on stage

and on screen, in a multi-functional entertainment space. They offer a robust workshop curriculum geared toward the performing and creative arts. Most programs are currently held in the beautiful lobby, particularly during the colder months. They offer world-class



programs featuring today's most influential and provocative writers, artists, craftspeople, musicians, and comedians.

Landmarks has been following this saga for many years, and we are **highly** encouraged by the positive vibes and activity coming out of the UTCA organization. We will continue to follow and support their efforts to restore the Uptown Theatre and provide a much-needed and wanted venue in this unique and special Utica neighborhood.

[www.utcany.org](http://www.utcany.org)

## [Nostro Restobar and Lounge](#)

### ["Your Local Gathering Spot"](#)

### [268 Genesee Street, Utica](#)

After a long Covid-delayed opening, **Nostro** in Downtown Utica has finally opened.

Located in the former Oneida National Bank and Trust Company Headquarters on Genesee Street, across from The Stanley Performing Arts Center, it offers a unique, modern Italian cuisine in a more relaxed, user-friendly, sample and share-ready style, in a mid-20th century edifice. It is entirely appropriate that Utica embraces and saves its more modern landmarks, as all are a part of the architectural story and history that makes up the Greater Utica area.

*"The Oneida National Bank lobby delivers a stylish scene starring simple, user-friendly dishes paired with classic cocktails and prosecco. The spacious yet intimate dining room mingles along side the lively energy of the lounge, offering cozy seating for a perfect social setting. With an atmosphere constructed of rich leathers, cherry woods, terrazzo and a scenic backdrop of a museum-worthy bronze mural, Nostro provokes your senses and fuels your desires*

to make 268 Genesee Street your new gathering spot," So proclaims their website. And, from personal experience, the food and service were exceptional.



THE DRAMATICALLY LIT INTERIOR OF NOSTRO

The main lobby has been kept primarily intact, and the stunning mural map that depicts the territory of the Oneida Indian Nation remains and is actually highlighted. It is the perfect complement to an elegant architectural indoor space lovingly adaptively reused for this new and exciting purpose.



Nostro is open Tuesday to Thursday from 4:30 pm to 10 pm, Friday from 4:30 pm to 12 midnight, and Saturday from 4:30 pm



until 1am. It is closed on Sunday and Monday, A plethora of parking is available either on-street or in the parking lot to the west and behind the building via the driveway located on the north side of the building.

The Joseph Putrello Coffee Barista Bar is a separate but complementary business located in the front lobby and serving authentic Italian specialty coffee drinks, a true Italian coffee

experience.

It is open seven days a week from 8 am until 5 pm.

[nostrorestobar.com](http://nostrorestobar.com)

**Nostro will play host to our second *Historically Happy Hour* on Wednesday, February 16 from 6:00 pm until 9:00 pm.**



## **Canastota Public Library - A Carnegie Library**

### **125 Years 1896-2021**

We take a slight detour from the Rural Libraries of Greater Utica and Oneida County to nearby Madison County and celebrate a 125-year milestone. In the spring of 1896, a group of Canastota citizens began to rally for a public library. They consulted with the New York State Board of Regents and soon steps were underway to establish a facility for the village. By August of 1896, the local school board had appointed a library board and had voted to start the library with an initial outlay of \$200. New York State matched those dollars, and private subscriptions were solicited to add to that fund.

An agreement was reached with Miss Julia Perkins to furnish a room and to care for the books. The Canastota Library officially opened on September 24th of 1896 in Miss Perkins' home on Center Street (which eventually became the White Elephant Restaurant in the 1950s). When the library first opened, its collection consisted of 774 books and 11 magazine subscriptions.

The NY State Board of Regents issued the library's charter on October 15, 1896, and established the Canastota Public Library as a school district library.

The immediate popularity of the library soon demanded more space. In 1902, the **Carnegie Fund** offered the village \$10,000 toward the construction of a new facility. Carnegie's stipulation was that the community raise \$1,000 per year for the maintenance and operation of the building and the purchase of library equipment. A special election was held and both propositions passed by a 341-25 vote. Plans for the new building were rapidly undertaken.

A plot of land a quarter mile west from Miss Perkins' house at the corner of Center and Main Streets was purchased from Mr. Clarence P. Colton for the sum of \$900. The noted Syracuse architect **Archimedes Russell** was commissioned to design the new structure and construction was by William Funda and Dellamonica Brothers Construction of Syracuse. Nearly 100 people attended the grand opening of the new library in 1903.

#### **A Brief Timeline:**

- 1951 : First major library renovations. "Antiquated furnishings from the 1900s were replaced (*if they only knew then what they know now...*)
- 1960 : Canastota joins the Tri-County System (now known as the **Mid-York Library System**).
- 1984 : Library automation arrives, Bar codes are added to all materials and the Mid-York online catalog.
- 1988 : Second major renovation. New meeting rooms are created in the basement area, stairway to lower level is added, and ceilings are repaired.
- 1993 : Elevator is installed.
- 1996 : 100th anniversary of Library Charter celebrated.
- 1998 : Minor renovations occur, including new carpeting and repainting. Graphical internet terminals provided to the public.
- 2003 : Grand reopening gala to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Carnegie Library building.
- 2004 : Stairs at the front entrance replaced and railings redesigned to match the transom window pattern.
- 2006 : Local history room reorganized.
- 2008 : Front circulation desk and kitchen renovated.
- 2010 : Magazine room reorganized and renamed to "Pete's Place" to commemorate long time employee, Pete Leggett.
- 2012 : Public computer center established.
- 2013 : Second floor Children's Room renovated and renamed to Helen Chariton Memorial Children's Room.
- 2021 : Celebrated 125 year Anniversary

**From "Library History", provided by the Canastota Public Library, Elizabeth Metzger, Director.**



A VIEW FROM THE EDITOR'S OFFICE WINDOW IN THE GALLERIES OF SYRACUSE OF THE ONONDAGA COUNTY COURT HOUSE ON COLUMBUS CIRCLE, DESIGNED BY ARCHIMEDES RUSSELL (1904-07).

## Carnegie Libraries

A Carnegie library is a library built with money donated by Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist **Andrew Carnegie**. A total of 2,509 Carnegie libraries were constructed between 1888 and 1929, including some belonging to public, school, and university library systems. Of those, 1,689 were built in the United States, 660 in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 125 in Canada, and others in Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Serbia, Belgium, France, the Caribbean, Mauritius, Malaysia, and Fiji.

At first, Carnegie libraries were almost exclusively located in places with which he had a personal connection – namely, his birthplace in Dunfermline, Scotland and the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area (Allegheny), his adopted hometown. Yet, beginning in the middle of 1899, Carnegie substantially increased funding to libraries outside of these areas, including Canastota. The Carnegie Free Library of Braddock, in Braddock, Pennsylvania, was the first Carnegie Library built in the United

States. As Carnegie's library funding progressed, very few of the towns that requested a grant, committing to his terms for operation and maintenance, were refused. Nearly half of those built with Carnegie funding in the United States are known as Carnegie libraries.

## Archimedes Russell - Architect of the Canastota Library

Archimedes Russell was an American architect most active in the Syracuse area. Born in Andover, Massachusetts in 1840, he trained under local architect Horatio Nelson White. He served as a professor of architecture at Syracuse University from 1873 until 1881. He died in Syracuse on April 3, 1915.

He lived and worked during a time of mounting variety in architectural styles, and this is reflected in his eclectic styles over the course of his 40-plus-year career. He was identified with and designed innumerable buildings, residences, business blocks, public buildings and churches. In total, he designed more than 850 buildings in the Syracuse area and has been credited with being responsible for designing more buildings in the city than any other architect.

Russell also was appointed to and served as adviser to the Capitol Commission during the construction of the State Capitol Building in Albany in 1895.

A large number of Russell's work is now listed on the **National Register of Historic Places**; these include:

**The Overlook (Burrell Mansion)**, Little Falls, NY 1889

**Otsego County Courthouse**, Cooperstown, NY 1880

**Third National Bank**, (Community Chest Building), James Street, Syracuse, NY 1885

**Central Technical High School**, South Warren Street, Syracuse, NY 1900

**Crouse (Memorial) College, Syracuse University**, 1889

Information derived from *Wikipedia*

All photos by Michael Bosak

# **SAVE THE DATE**

***Note: These dates are tentative at this point***

**Annual Banquet, Meeting & Awards Ceremony**

**Thursday, November 17th, 2022**

**Motor Coach Tour – Christmas at Florissante**

**Friday, December 2nd, 2022**

**Holiday House Tour**

**Saturday, December 10th, 2022**

# Programs & Events

## **Landmarks Winter Talks Series Returns!**

### **Free admission**

After a “longer-than-anticipated” hiatus, the Winter Talks Series returns to help defeat the winter doldrums and counteract cabin fever.

### **From 6:00 pm until 8:00 pm**

**Dunham Public Library Community Room, 76 Main Street, Whitesboro**, Free and open to members and to the public

*Face Masks are required in the library*

(come in the main entrance off of Main Street; Community Room is off of the entrance lobby.)

## **Wednesday, January 26th:**

### **Savage Arms, presented by Rick Giffune**

Savage Repeating Arms Company was formed in Utica, NY in 1894. In 1895, Savage begins selling ammunition, which continues until 1897. In 1897, the new corporation of Savage Arms is formed with eight key stockholders. In 1915, Driggs Seabury Ordnance Company buys Savage Arms and shortly thereafter began production of heavy war materials for World War 1. Savage also purchased Steves Arms Company of Chicopee Fall, MA in 1920 and A.H. Fox Gun Company of Philadelphia a decade later.

Beside production of rifles, Savage was also known for partnerships that produced the Thompson sub machine gun, and 30 and 50 caliber Browning machine guns.

After World War 2, Savage Arms closed its Utica plant in 1946 and moved all operations to the Stevens plant in Chicopee Falls which then consolidated once more in 1960 in Westfield, Massachusetts where production continues today.

Rick Giffune had many family members who worked at the Utica plant, and he offers a personalized perspective on this fascinating local subject.

## **Wednesday, February 23rd**

### **The Utica Observer-Dispatch Building, presented by Frank Tomaino**

With all of the recent talk about the sale of the Utica O-D building, it is most appropriate to take an enlightened look at the history of this iconic and historic structure with someone who has literally spent a lifetime within its walls. Historian, former City Desk reporter, and celebrated weekly historical columnist Frank Tomaino will give us “the inside scoop” on this building as it prepares to (hopefully) find a new and exciting adaptive reuse that will propel it well into the next decades.

## **Wednesday, March 23rd:**

### **Lost Aspects of Utica’s Olmsted Heritage, presented by Phil Bean**

Utica is blessed to have a remarkable Frederick Law Olmsted legacy, especially for such a relatively small city! It is, however, in great company: New York City, Boston, Buffalo, Asheville, NC....and many others. However, like many historic and/or natural elements, development, neglect (benign or otherwise) and simple time takes its toll. While it is important to chronicle and celebrate aspects of this wonderful heritage that once were, it is arguably more important to acknowledge and seek to preserve, protect and enhance those aspects that we still have.

Phil Bean is a Landmarks Trustee who has a unique and passionate regard for the dynamic that the Olmsted firm established here and the resolve to follow through on its preservation. He is happy to share his perspective and passion with us, and we are happy to have him do that!

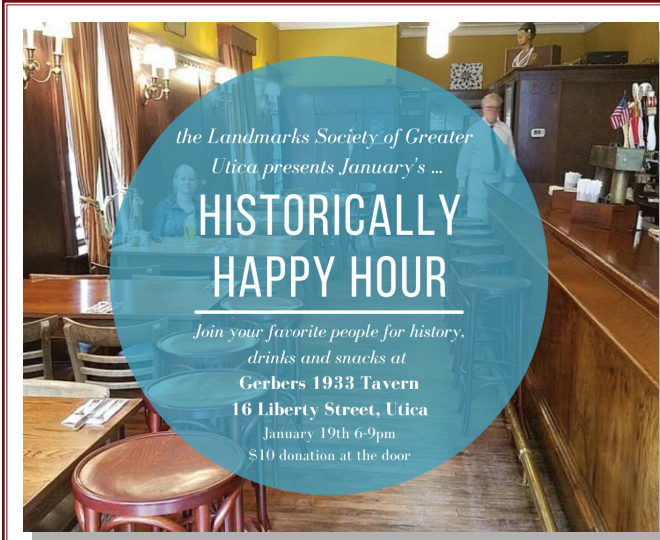
## **Wednesday, April 27th:**

### **The History of Coffee, presented by John DeTraglia**

#### ***What? You think that coffee isn’t historic?!?!?***

No one knows exactly how or when coffee was discovered although there are many theories and legends about its origin. Coffee growers worldwide can trace its heritage back centuries to the ancient coffee forests of the Ethiopian plateau. There legend says the goat herder Kaldi first discovered the potential of these beloved beans. The story goes that Kaldi discovered coffee when he noticed that his goats became very energetic after eating the berries from a certain tree, even to the point of not wanting to sleep at night.





the Landmarks Society of Greater  
Utica presents January's ...

## HISTORICALLY HAPPY HOUR

Join your favorite people for history,  
drinks and snacks at  
Gerbers 1933 Tavern  
16 Liberty Street, Utica  
January 19th 6-9pm  
\$10 donation at the door

### **And the Historically Happy Hours!!** to benefit the Landmarks Society

from 6 pm to 9 pm  
\$10 at the door

Light Snacks · Cash Bar \*  
(\* Nostro is a cashless establishment only)

**Wednesday, January 19th, Gerber's 1933 Tavern**  
16 Liberty Street, Utica

**Wednesday, February 16th**  
Nostro, 268 Genesee Street, Utica

**Wednesday, March 9th**  
Irish Cultural Center Five Points Pub

**And more to come!! Stay tuned!!**



### **#3 Rutger Park decked out for the Holiday House Tour on December 11th** Presented by The Jay Groah Group



THE SALON



THE LIBRARY



THE DINING ROOM

## **Scenic and Historic District Report**

**A Revisited and Updated Spotlight on a Landmark:**

**The Olbiston Apartments c.1899**

**by Michael Lehman, AIA**

*This Article originally appeared in its entirety in our March – April 2017 Preservationist*

*The imposing red Medina sandstone and brick edifice at 1431 Genesee Street looks oddly out of place and scale until we gain an understanding of the circumstances and forces that shaped its design in 1898 including a tragic fire, social attitudes about family and home, and a very desirable location.*

### **The Site**

The building sits on *Genesee Hill* at the northeast corner of Utica's main thoroughfare, Genesee Street and Clinton Place. The large, irregularly shaped 1.03-acre site was easily accessed from downtown by the city's busy Genesee Street trolley lines which were electrified in 1890.

The surrounding neighborhood was a fashionable residential district of large freestanding houses and mansions that counted among its genteel inhabitants Vice President James Schoolcraft Sherman, Utica mayors, physicians, attorneys, and many prominent old Utica families. In 1908 Olbiston residents at the south end apartments would have had a bird's eye view of VP Sherman's front lawn Notification Day celebration.



The site was previously occupied in 1892 by the 7 story *Genesee Flats apartments* which burned to the ground in a tragic 1896 fire. Prior to the Genesee Flats the site was three vacant building lots with 300 feet fronting on Genesee Street.

The *Olbiston* was built between 1898 to 1900 mainly on the slightly smaller footprint of the Genesee Flats in a group of buildings extending back toward Oneida Street. In its heyday the complex grew to include a coal-fired brick power house- that provided heat, hot water and electricity to the *Olbiston* and the developers' other large upscale apartment projects including the *Kanatenah* Apartment, a stable with a blacksmith shop later auto storage & repair garages, an icehouse, and a landscaped lawn on Clinton Place for the use of residents & their children. The only vestiges remaining are a partial stone garage foundation wall near the north border at the rear end of the site and one of the long wooden stable buildings which has been subdivided and converted into garages for 3 houses built more recently on the Clinton Place lawn. *The Olbiston is in the City of Utica Scenic & Historic Preservation District, adjacent to the developing Oneida Square Arts District.*

## The Architect

**Richard A. George** (1859-1922) was born in Leipzig, Germany and studied the principles of building and architecture in the building schools of Leipzig, Munich, Dresden, St. Petersburg, Rome, and the School of Fine Arts in Paris. In 1878 he completed his education at the Hoexter, Germany Polytechnic & Building School. He then apprenticed in Berlin. He moved on to Peisic, Germany from 1881-1884, then to New York City for one year, and finally came to Utica in 1885 where he entered the employment of architect Adolphus I. Simmons. In 1890 George opened his own office.

He worked closely with developers Northrup & Latcher on several other apartment projects including the *Kanatenah* across Genesee St from the *Olbiston* which with it shared a boiler house, the *Bellevue* (later the *Chelsea*) on South at Steuben Street, and the *Oswego* and *Lorraine* apartment houses on Oswego Street. Of these five buildings only the *Olbiston* remains.

George also designed the elaborate Queen Anne style residence for Joseph B. Nelbach still standing at the southeast corner of Genesee and Jewett Place, the Moravian Church on Cooper Street, St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, the Savage Arms plant in East Utica, the Chancellor Block on Park Avenue, the Jones apartment house at Mary & First Streets and many other buildings in Utica.

Mr. George was a member of the Utica Turn Verein, a German athletic and social club still standing at 509 Lafayette Street. *Their extant brick club house considered by the NYS Historic Preservation Office as a "rare" example of German Romanesque revival architecture is currently scheduled for demolition by MVHS for surface parking lots to serve their downtown Wynn Hospital campus.*

## The Building

This large, imposing, purpose-designed structure is actually 8 separate buildings each with its own entry stoop, interior communicating stairwells, light wells and masonry firewalls. The 7 five story elements surround 1 seven story central tower. At each floor a common rear corridor runs the entire length of all 8 buildings connecting them to the elevator/service core and rear fire escapes. The building featured five round turret components with now gone conical tile roofs.



OLBISTON, C. 1915

Construction appears to be of fireproof masonry brick load bearing walls with a brick vault floor system between levels supported by steel I beams. All belt and suspenders mechanical systems were state of the art technology at the time- including 2 all night elevators, dumbwaiters at each apartment, fire alarm cells, staff call bells, and an apartment-to-office and apartment to apartment telephone system which could also be used to contact residents in other Northrup & Latcher buildings across Genesee Street.

The front and west facades are clad in red sandstone with Ionic column portals at seven of the entries, elaborately carved pilasters at the main central entry which included a five-pointed star motif repeated on interior



THE GENESSEE FLATS- 1892



light fixtures, and carved faces at window lintel keystones. Large double hung wood windows, some with curved sash and arched heads, provide abundant light to the units.

Described as elegant and palatial in newspaper ads of the day the Olbiston featured exterior wrought iron balconies at each apartment. Elaborate wrought iron railings at the interior communicating stairwells are just one of the features designed to appeal to potential well-to-do.

The building originally contained 76 three-bedroom family apartments and 16 bachelor apartments which featured a parlor with street view bay/turret windows, rear dining room, kitchen, bathroom, lavatory, private hall and clothes closets. Some parlors contained decorative wood mantles and marble window sills. All rooms had ivory painted or natural oak wood trim. Floors were polished hardwood in all rooms, with white marble floors and bases in the kitchens and baths. For fire safety all public hall doors are metal clad with embossed decoration and all ceiling/sidewall light sconce fixtures and kitchen stove were originally electric rather than gas with a wall outlet for fans and other early electric appliances such as toasters and coffee pots.

Shared luxury amenities included an office with reception area fireplace and secured vault for tenants' valuables, a long-distance phone booth, barbershop, dining room/café, reading room, public smoking room, ladies' parlor, card room, individual basement storage for each unit, and bicycle storage. The public halls, dining room/café and office have white marble floors and 4-foot-high white Italian marble wainscot trimmed with grey marble. The main center entry hall contains elaborate wall plaster work.

### The Residents

In the first half of the twentieth century, the building enjoyed long term tenures of many well-to-do and prominent local citizens. Often it was used as a winter residence with summer bringing migration to cooler rural, mountain, or seaside retreats. Those who called the Olbiston home included Miss **Blandina Dudley Miller**- granddaughter of Judge Morris Miller, who grew up in #3 Rutger Park, **Richard W. Sherman**- Utica mayor & civil engineer, **Horatio Seymour**- nephew of Governor Horatio Seymour/an attorney and State engineer and his wife, Attorney/Utica mayor and later #5 Rutger Park owner- **Thomas Kinney**, Episcopal Suffragan Bishop of CNY **E. Huntington Coley**- president of the Oneida County Historical Society, **Mathew Carton**- community benefactor of St. John's Orphanage and St. Elizabeth's Hospital, **Hobart Roberts**- VP of John A. Roberts dry goods store, **Maria T. Hunt**- the widowed daughter -in-law of US Supreme Court justice **Ward Hunt**, jewelry & art auctioneers, doctors, lawyers, musicians, and business owners.



BLANDINA  
DUDLEY MILLER



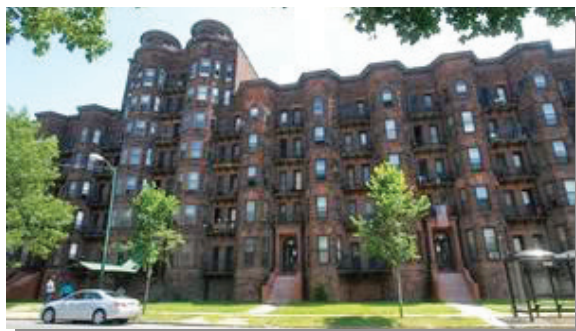
MAYOR  
THOMAS KINNEY



BISHOP E.  
HUNTINGTON COLEY

Changing tenant demographics and space requirements over time resulted in the original 96 apartments being subdivided beginning in 1920 to 156 by 1935. The vacancy rate, only 14% in 1910, reached 46% in 1934 during the Great Depression.

### Conclusion



Olbiston developers Northrup and Latcher had a vision for meeting the evolving, varied housing needs of a new diverse population in a vibrant, growing, and rapidly changing Utica. Guided by a strong faith in Utica's future, they successfully accommodated the space and service demands of well-to-do empty nesters and widows, young middle-class families just starting out, and single professional business men and women. With the help of their talented local architect Richard A. George they created a new residential building type in upstate New York not previously seen between New York City and Buffalo.

Years of severe and willful deferred maintenance by Rizaro Utica LLC and other previous owners has taken its toll, but an opportunity has presented itself and a solution appears to have been found!

Just as the "new" Olbiston, technological marvel that it was in the early part of the last century, rose from the ashes of the Genesee Flats in 1900 this historic residential structure shall be reinvented again in 2022.



## Update

*A new steward with the same vision has stepped forward!*

Just months after the City of Utica Codes department evacuated residents due to ongoing code health & safety violations, a Rome, NY based developer- **Liberty Affordable Housing Inc. (LAH)** has acquired and plans to restore the Olbiston. "This is an extensive project that we have a lot of interest in seeing through to full completion", said Randell Denton, executive director of LAH.

According to Steve Howe, city reporter for the Utica Observer-Dispatch:

- LAH have received preliminary site plan approval from the Utica Planning Board.
- The proposed project would create approximately 150 affordable and workforce residential units including studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom apartments. The 6th and 7th floors at the center tower would provide community gathering and office space.
- Renovating the Olbiston is expected to be expensive with \$50 million mentioned during the planning board meeting.
- LAH will seek historic tax credits through the State Historic Preservation Office and National Park Service, as well as funding from NYS Housing and Community Renewal.
- The intention is to restore the building to its former glory, including restoring cupola-style roofing (conical turret roofs?), exterior balconies, and other features distinctive to the building.
- The renovations will add a rear vestibule entryway adjacent to the elevators to comply with modern accessibility requirements with a large 105 car rear parking lot for residents. Landscaping, including trees, will be used to buffer the parking lot from adjacent properties.
- Now that ownership has been transferred, LAH has begun emergency roof repairs that are currently ongoing, with the remainder of the construction to begin shortly thereafter. The estimated cost of the project is \$55 million.

LAH operates nearly 3,000 affordable units around upstate New York, including Kennedy Plaza Apartments and Parkedge Townhouses in Utica and Park Drive Manor in Rome. "We have a great team in place and a great plan to complete this and bring this property back into prominence", Denton said.

### **Editor's Note:**

In my professional life with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Rural Housing Service, I had personal dealings with Liberty Affordable Housing of Rome, the newly announced owners of Olbiston Apartments. Not all purveyors and developers of affordable housing are created equally or are exceptional (although, I have to say that there are many that I've dealt with who are very, very good, and very honest). I would put Liberty Affordable Housing in the top 10 percent of these types of developers based on my experience, which is excellent news for the beleaguered Olbiston and ultimately, for Utica.

**Landmarks** is very encouraged by the many positive recent announcements, ongoing work and developments regarding the **Olbiston**, the **Uptown Theatre**, **Utica Coffee Roasters Warehouse**, the **Mayro Building**, **Lofts at Globe Mill**, **Commercial Travelers** and others. It is, in part, a testament to the legacy of the Landmarks Society and our ongoing nearly 50-year commitment to historic preservation and adaptive reuse. In effect, it validates our mission statement and our message, which has never been more relevant than today as exemplified by the aforementioned projects.

- Micheal Bosak

SOURCES: Cromley, Elizabeth Collins. *Alone Together: A history of New York's early apartments*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca & London. 1990. • *Oneida County Atlas-1907* • Photos- OCHC, Library of Congress, Virginia B. Kelly, City of Utica Assessor office Sanborn Map- 1907 • *Schenectadyhistory.org/History of the Mohawk Valley: Gateway to the West 1614-1925*. • *Utica Atlas- 1896* • *Utica City Directories - 1895/1896 to 1935* • *Utica Daily Press* • *Utica Herald- Dispatch* • *Utica Saturday Globe* • *Utica Sunday Journal*

## **INTERESTED IN BEING MORE INVOLVED WITH LANDMARKS?**

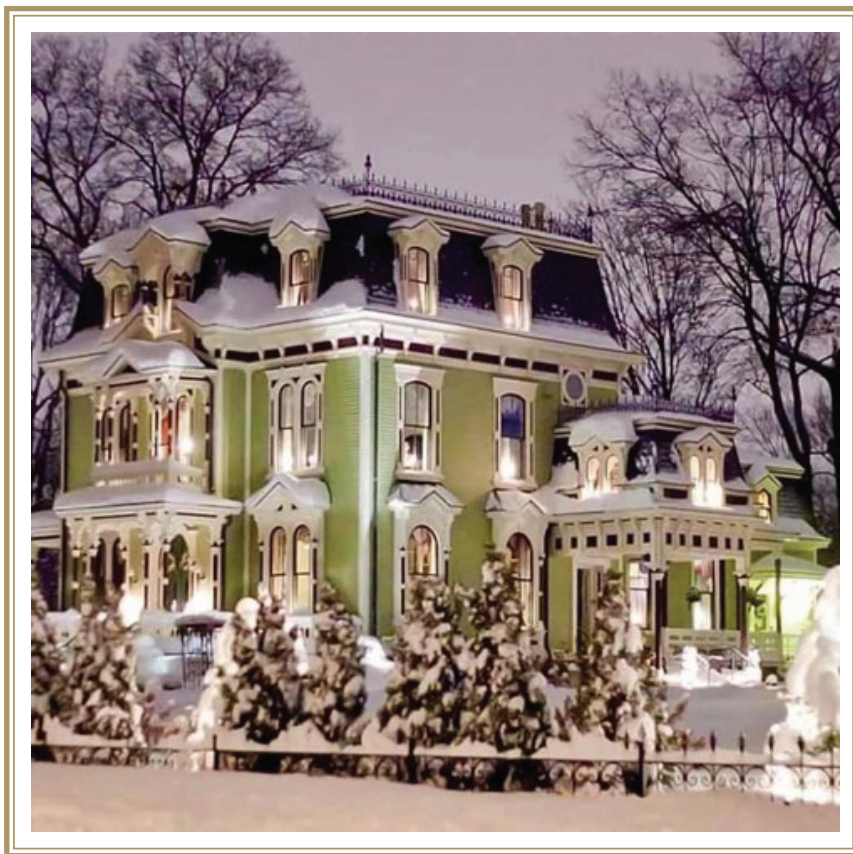
The Landmarks Society of Greater Utica is looking for "a few good people" to fill several vacancies on the Board of Trustees. We are meeting once a month on the second Wednesday.

If you are interested, please contact us at:  
315.732.7376 or at [uticalandmarks@gmail.com](mailto:uticalandmarks@gmail.com)

*Preserving the Past – Protecting the Future*



# *THE PRESERVATIONIST*



The Silas W. Robbins House was built in 1873 for Silas Robbins, an owner of the seed business, Johnson, Robbins and Co. It is located in what is now the Wethersfield Historic District. It is now operating as a Bed & Breakfast; the residence offers two full stories with a mansard roof and dormers, creating a unique third floor living space. It has "five elegantly appointed rooms, each with a private bath, lush towels and bedding, and beautiful interiors reflecting the period of this home."

*Facebook, Dustin Van Fleet Design Preservation Nation*

<https://www.silaswrobbins.com>

**"SECOND EMPIRE" SILAS W. ROBBINS HOUSE, WETHERSFIELD, CT**