

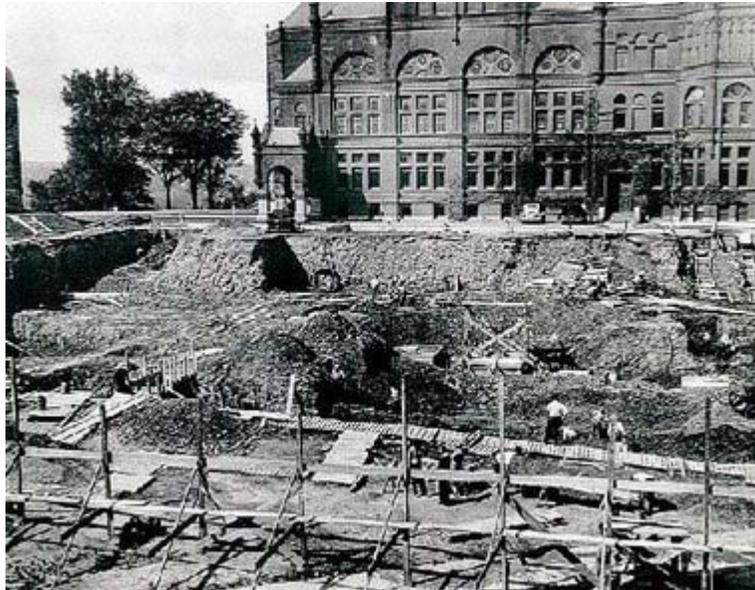
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## Legend of the buried steam shovel at Maxwell Hall is unearthed

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By



Provided photo

Photo from the mid 1930s shows the excavation work done in preparation to build Syracuse University's Maxwell Hall.

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Is there an old steam shovel buried at Syracuse University?

Was it the same machine that dug the foundation for the Maxwell Hall, which opened in 1937?

An article in the Fall 2011 issue of Maxwell Perspective, a twice-yearly magazine published by the Maxwell School explores that interesting possibility in a piece by the editor, Dana Cooke, titled "Resting Place."

Two sources are quoted about what the article calls "the legend:" Virginia Denton, retired director of SU design and construction, and Jim Breuer, president of Hueber-Breuer, the construction company that built Maxwell. I talked with both of those folks last week.

The burial site would be under the small courtyard east of Maxwell. This is where SU placed a statue of Abraham Lincoln by James Earle Fraser in 1968.

Virginia "Ginny" Denton said she heard the buried steam shovel story from her first boss at the university, the late George Chaput, who served as the SU architect for many years.

Chaput's story to Ginny was that the shovel excavated the foundation for Maxwell Hall and then, "as the project wound down, it rolled a few yards east. The steam shovel had dug its own grave."

And, she adds, "George didn't make stuff up. It's part of the earth now."

Jim Breuer says he got the story from a good source, his grandfather, Francis Hueber, who supervised building

Maxwell Hall. Francis headed the Syracuse firm back then.

Breuer was a young engineer (and SU graduate) in those days. He recalls being ushered into his grandfather's office. Francis showed him a safe, where a folder full of original documents, and the Maxwell job, was kept. The file included photographs of the Maxwell project, including the one used with today's column.

"He was very proud of this project," Jim said.

He also remembers his grandfather saying "some day, they're going to dig up that quad and they're going to find the steam engine I buried there."

Ginny Denton points out that the site of the assumed burial has not been disturbed since the 1930s. None of the university's underground utility lines runs through the site. She said nothing unusual was found when the Lincoln statue footer went in, with its six-foot deep hole for the base.

I picked up good vibes about the Hueber-Breuer family's legacy in the community, talking with Jim Breuer. Hueber-Breuer was founded in 1880 by Louis Hueber, a stone mason who immigrated to the United States from the Alsace-Lorraine area of Germany.

Francis Hueber, one of Louis' four sons, took over the business when his father became ill. Other brothers went into the coal (Hueber Coal) and liquor (Westcott Cordial Shop) businesses. The sixth generation of family members, Jim's sons Jim and Andrew, work for the company.

Hueber-Breuer's many projects include area schools (Central High and Grant Junior High School) as well as the university jobs, such as Maxwell and Eggers Halls, the Whitman School, Manley Field House and the new SU Law College.

Four generations of Huebers and Brueuers hold SU degrees, including Jim, who is also a member of the university's Board of Trustees.

Jim speculates the steam shovel had outlived its usefulness in 1935. It was decrepit and soon to be displaced by a diesel model.

"The image of the shovel rolling into its own hole and workers gathering around to inter it is oddly compelling," editor Dana Cookie writes.

I'll give Ginny Denton the final say in the matter:

"Oh, it's there," she told me. "I believe that."

**More architecture**

Onondaga Historical Association has two programs on Syracuse architecture scheduled this week in its lunchtime lecture series:

At noon Wednesday, three architects connected to the new Syracuse Center for Excellence will discuss “the birth and life of the industrial age” in that block, bordered by East Water, Almond and Washington streets and Forman Avenue. This is where Smith typewriters were made and Onondaga Community College was founded.

At noon on Friday, Jan. 27, Russ King of King and King Architects, the oldest architectural firm in the state, will talk about the firm’s history, from its founding by Archimedes Russell in 1868.

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