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Days are numbered for Otisca Building that once housed brewery on Syracuse's North Side

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By



Frank Ordonez / The Post-Standard, file photo, 2011

The Otisca Building on Butternut Street once houses Ryan's Brewery, one of many North Side breweries. Ryan's closed in 1924. The city plans to tear down the vacant building this month.

Say good-bye to the last of the old-time breweries in Syracuse that's still standing.

Actually, no one has made beer at 500 Butternut St. since the 1920s but the memory lingers, especially of the smell.

"When they were cooking hops, you could smell it," Joe Deloia once told me. He's lived on the North Side all his life.

Paul Driscoll, the city's commissioner of neighborhood and business development, predicted Wednesday demolition of the eyesore at Butternut and McBride Streets could begin some time this month. The city has an emergency demolition

order



on the structure, which has been empty and falling apart for years. It's to be replaced by 30 "affordable" apartments, Paul said.

At the moment, the building still belongs to the Otisca Co. of LaFayette, which once had it to try to make an alternative fuel, using coal slurry. Otisca bought the nearly block-long structure in 1979. The city plans to seize it for back taxes, estimated at more than \$577,000. Paul Driscoll says the company "exists only on paper," as far as he knows.

A historical photo of the Ryan's Brewery building at 500 Butternut St. in Syracuse. Photo is courtesy the Onondaga Historical Association.

Paul said the city had planned to begin demolition Jan. 1 but that was delayed so National Grid may relocate electrical poles on North McBride Street.

He expects this to take two to three weeks.

Then, the city will transfer ownership to a subsidiary of Home Headquarters, a Syracuse non-profit agency, which will pay for demolition. Once that's finished, the property will be conveyed to another non-profit, Housing Visions, which he said plans to apply for a state grant this spring to build 30 apartments and store fronts on the site.

This block of Butternut Street once was a hub of making beer in Syracuse in the late 1800s. Haberle Brewing used to be right across the street, where a shopping center now sits. Haberle was the last of the "giants" of brewing in our town. It closed in 1962 and the brewery was demolished.

What did not disappear as the legend that a tunnel ran under Butternut Street, connecting Ryan's Brewery, the Otisca site, to Haberle, where the best-known product was Congress beer.

Paul Driscoll said he'd not heard that story but he'd look into it.

Stories of tunnels where beer was stored – it was a natural cooler and the tunnels were said to be lined with cork – rattle through the history of the North Side. I've talked to folks who swear there's a tunnel under Butternut and it will be found when demolition begins. It's said the Haberles continued to use the space after Ryan's went under in 1924.

And there were tunnels elsewhere, including on Pond Street, where the county jail once sat, and others that extended to the Liederkrantz, a German club that used to be where the Burger King restaurant is on Butternut.

I have been shown what purported to be tunnel entrances on Pond Street and near Lodi Street off of North Salina Street. The story that went with the Pond Street tunnel was that it was "used to transport prisoners."

Ryan's brewery was one of about 10 that flourished on Syracuse's North Side. The Butternut Street building dates to 1865. At one time, Thomas Ryan, who was mayor from 1883 to 1885, had controlling ownership. It made a beer called Onondaga Lager, among others. The brewery is remembered for the huge electric sign that once stood on the roof. It showed a bottle of beer being emptied into a schooner.

Ron Wolf, an expert on beer-making in Syracuse, believes the Ryan building is the last of the old breweries in our town. The former Zett's brewery is a ruin at Court and Lodi streets. No beer has been brewed there since 1937. National Brewing Co. collapsed into I-81 and had to be torn down in 2010.

That Danforth Housey/(Z);p

Paul Saucier called with an interesting story about another North Side landmark, the house at 406 Danforth St.

I wrote about the house Tuesday, as one of 1,900 vacant properties in Syracuse. It's been empty for years. The

Italianate brick structure, next to North Salina Street, is owned by a woman in Yonkers. No taxes have been paid since 2008.

Paul said about a year and a-half ago he noticed a "For Sale" sign in front of the house. When he inquired about the selling price, he was told it was \$49,900.

"I'm told the whole interior has been gutted," he continued. "Right down to the studs. It needs a lot of work but the bones are beautiful."

No. 406, in the late 1800s, was the home of the Murrays, who owned extensive salt lands. Catherine Murray, when she died in 1908, was said to be one of the wealthiest women in the city. She ran the salt companies she owned.

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