

Far more than just a building: Seeking your favorite memories of the Hotel Syracuse



Paul Colabufo, of the Believe in Syracuse civic organization: Just walking in the door of the Hotel Syracuse triggered a flood of memories. (Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com)

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Favorite memories of the Hotel Syracuse? Leave them here, as a comment, or [email me](#).

Donte Graham was walking out of a bank in downtown Syracuse last week when I asked if he'd help with testing out a theory:

It's been said that just about everyone in Central New York - at least everyone of a certain age - has some memory, some personal story, involving the [**Hotel Syracuse**](#).

Graham is just old enough to prove the point. In 2004, when he was a senior at Henninger High School, he and a few close friends rented a room at the hotel, not long before it closed. Graham would soon be on his way to college at St. John Fisher. Staying for a night at that imposing downtown landmark, built in 1924, was both an affirmation of childhood friendships and a step toward independence.

He and his buddies watched television. They got themselves some pizza and chicken wings. They marveled at the creaking majesty of the then-crumbling structure, "which definitely had some nooks and crannies," Graham said.

The hotel shut down 11 years ago. For a long time, the city struggled to get the building into the hands of a reliable owner. Talk rose and fell of putting up a new convention center hotel a few blocks away, a project that would have been a dagger in the heart of the Hotel Syracuse.

There were fears the old building was simply big, too overwhelming, to bring back. Central New Yorkers glanced wistfully at the dark windows of the towering old structure. They braced themselves for the possibility that a wrecker's ball might someday level a beloved landmark.

Instead, in the past couple of years, [**developer Ed Riley pieced together a restoration plan involving tens of millions of dollars**](#). Construction is underway. Riley says the appreciative reaction of people he sees throughout the community provides a daily reminder: [**Few buildings in the region carry such deep emotional resonance**](#) for such a cross-section of the community.

Like the [**Onondaga County War Memorial**](#), or the old [**New York Central train station**](#), it is the kind of building where cascading generations of Central New Yorkers built very personal memories: Wedding receptions were held at the hotel. And high school proms. And first dates. And company parties. And community forums. And fashion shows. And election night vigils for political candidates

For Riley and his new staff, the newest challenge: Documenting such powerful affinity.

They've started a "memories page" at www.hotelsyracuserestoration.com, and they're inviting anyone to share stories and photographs. Maybe it involves a marriage, or some other family celebration. Maybe it involves crossing paths with [John F. Kennedy](#) or [John Lennon](#) or any of the legends who stayed at the hotel.

You can also send those memories in writing to The Post-Standard, in care of Sean Kirst, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202. I'll build a column from them and send them on to Kay Frizzell, who's helping to coordinate the project .

The purpose of the "memories page" isn't entirely sentimental, said Al Gough, chief financial officer for the hotel. Riley is doing a careful historic restoration, Gough said, and "we want to build up a better idea of what people really loved the most about the hotel, and what they miss."

Gough said the architects want to know about any beloved elements they might have overlooked in creating a design.



The Hotel Syracuse: An attempt to collect personal and meaningful community memories. David Lassman | dlassman@syracuse.com

As for the theory that most Central New Yorkers who are, say, 35 or older hold very personal Hotel Syracuse memories? The idea was reinforced Thursday, in a big way, as I walked through downtown. After speaking to Graham, I spotted Frank Montalto, a letter carrier, busy at his job. It turns out the hotel – inaccessible from the street, because of construction – is not yet using its own mailbox. Once it happens, Montalto will be the guy who brings the place its mail.

"Do I remember?" he asked. "Sure! Years ago! The Persian Terrace! New Year's Eve!" Montalto said he's enjoyed seeing life return to that part of his route, and he described the hotel as critical to the fortunes of downtown.

"I'd just love to see it work," he said.

A block away: Shelia Kithcart and Barbara Wilkerson Smith, old friends who were shopping together, had distinct memories. Years ago, Smith used to go to what was known as "The Library," a hotel nightclub with walls lined with books. Kithcart recalled how her church held a big ball that included a fashion show, at the hotel.

Pat Reagan, a court stenographer walking along Fayette Street, remembered Kiwanis Club meetings "that had to be 25 years ago," meetings always accompanied by elegant music from a guy on the piano. Mary Beth Alberts, who said she loves being downtown, remembered walking into the hotel lobby just to soak in the glory of the view.

And John Rooke, behind the wheel of a W.B. Mason truck, said he dressed as Frankenstein for a Halloween party there in the 1980s. The image that stays with him is the grand entrance:



The Hotel Syracuse, under construction in the 1920s at the corner of Harrison, East Onondaga and South Salina streets. In the foreground is the Fourth Presbyterian Church, built in 1877. The church was torn down to make way for a parking lot in 1943. Onondaga Historical Association | Submitted image

"Those big stairs," he said, of climbing toward the gleaming lobby. "They reminded me of 'The Titanic!'"

He meant that, he emphasized, in the architectural sense.

Rick Deragon, who was doing some painting inside the Galleries of Syracuse, broke the pattern: He's lived in Syracuse since the 1970s, and he said he'd never been in the hotel. But Rick Meagher, working with Deragon, said he went there in 1976 for a couple of balls held by Liverpool High School.

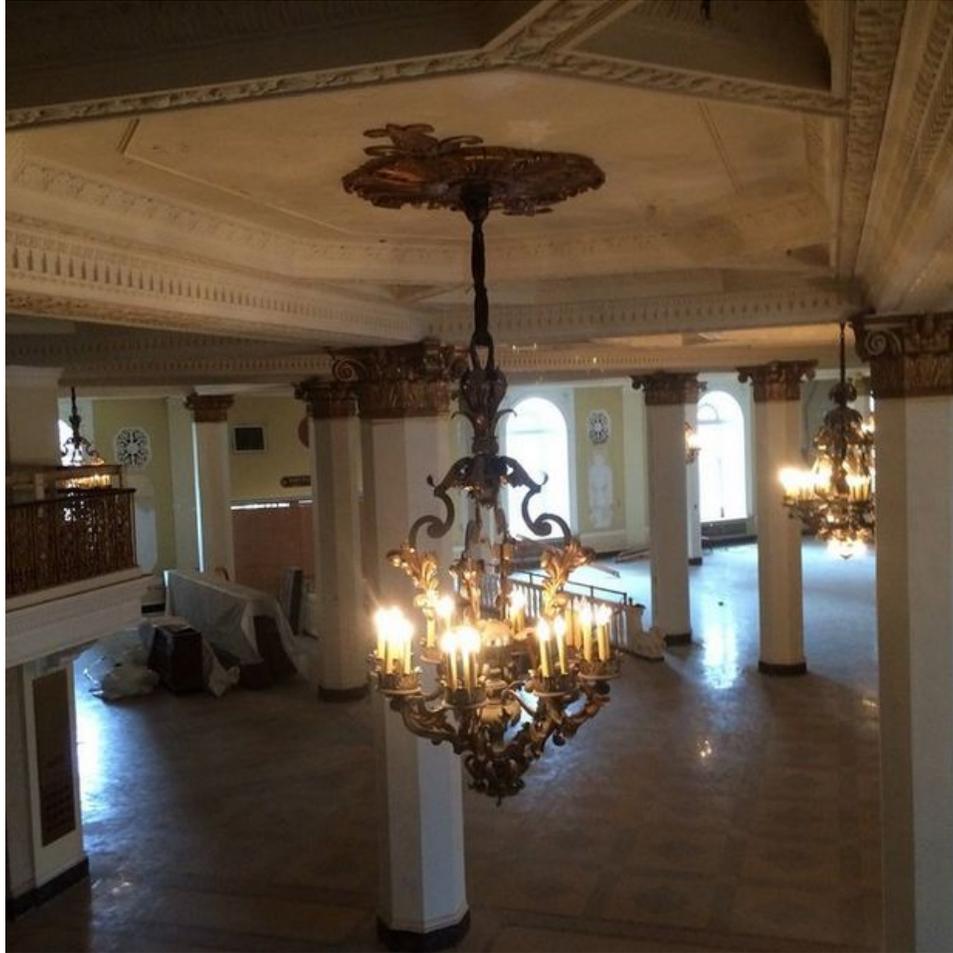
The ballroom "was pretty run-down," Meagher said, but even in decline it was haunting, evocative. As for the restoration, Meagher said he's most excited for his children:

"It'd be nice to see my kids have their own chance at their own memories there."

Paul Colabufo was at the hotel Thursday, with other leaders of a group called "Believe in Syracuse," talking about an event they're considering next year at the hotel. To Colabufo, just walking through the door set loose a flood of images: His father, Sandy Colabufo, is a musician, and Paul used to watch his dad play at the hotel as part of an annual civic celebration on St. Patrick's Day.

"It would be packed," Paul said. "There'd be a band in the lobby and a band in the Imperial Ballroom and a band in the Persian Terrace, and you could wander from room to room and hear music everywhere."

Standing at a railing, looking toward the area that will soon greet incoming guests, Sandy said he feels a kind of jubilant disbelief that not only is the project really happening, but the reopening is "on the near horizon."



The main lobby, Hotel Syracuse, amid restoration. Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com

On the way back to my car, I spoke with Teresa Wright, whose voice grew wistful, faraway, when she spoke of the hotel. In the 1980s, she worked for Joseph Davoli, a Syracuse lawyer who'd hold magnificent holiday celebrations in the building.

"It was very beautiful in there," Wright said, "and the parties were legendary."

She remembers how they'd all dress in fine clothes, and they'd enter through a pedestrian bridge so they didn't need to walk through the snow. The hotel would be warm and glittering, filled with Christmas trees and lush decorations. On South Salina Street, on a pleasant summer's day, Wright could still see it

So yes, she said, she's thrilled the place will soon reopen. That joy isn't simply about what used to be, because to Wright the revival sends a much deeper message. To her, that landmark isn't simply an old hotel.

"It's Syracuse," she said, and she wants it to come back.

Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. Send him your Hotel Syracuse memories at skirst@syracuse.com, or by mail in care of the Syracuse Media Group, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202. You can also reach Kirst on [Twitter](#).