

# The heart of Syracuse's heart

The paint has faded, but the historic McCarthy Building is still beating strong

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**L**ots of people say they work in the heart of Syracuse. For many, that phrase simply refers to downtown.

For Richard Storto, however, his office is located in the literal "Heart of Syracuse," a two-story-high heart painted on the McCarthy Building at 217 S. Salina St. The heart is quite faint after 20 years of exposure to Syracuse winters.

The McCarthy Building dates to 1894. It remains a distinctive, gingerbread downtown building, with a rich tan exterior dotted with ornamental ribbon and wreath inlays.

Since its construction, the building has housed three different department stores and a gaggle of offices. It's a bustling spot with people milling in and out of Dunkin' Donuts, Liehs and Stiegerwald and Aloha Japanese Bento Express.

Storto, an attorney with the Melvin & Melvin law firm, has been working in the Heart of Syracuse since 1995. He laughed at the synchronicity, when he was named president of CNY's American Heart Association chapter from 1998 to 1999.

"Just as Syracuse is in the heart of New York, we're in the heart of Syracuse," said Storto. "We're in the heart of hearts."

## AS OLD AS THE CITY

Thomas McCarthy, a prominent salt manufacturer and merchant, settled in Salina and established the original McCarthy's dry goods store in 1808. It was a little log cabin that newspaper archives describe as "crudely built, near the side of a road that was often deserted."

The shop sold shoes, oil, bread, boots, wax, fruit and cabbages. It also quickly became a meeting place of set-



"The Heart of Syracuse" was repainted 20 years ago on the side of the McCarthy Building at 217 S. Salina St. in Syracuse.

tlers "who came to thrash out their problems around the pot-bellied stove."

After Thomas's death, his son, Dennis McCarthy Sr., continued the business alone in Salina until 1846. A politician as well as a businessman, McCarthy served as the mayor of Syracuse in 1853 and a member of the New York State Senate from 1876 to 1885.

In 1894, McCarthy moved his father's business to the city, where he ran it until his death.

The five-story building was designed by architect Charles Erastus Colton, who also designed Syracuse City Hall and several more structures on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.

According to archives, the original McCarthy Building had a rooftop bicycle track and an observation deck that was open to shoppers. For one year, it was the tallest building in Syracuse. Dennis McCarthy Jr. took over the business and ran it until he retired in 1906.

In 1906, the Utica company A.S.&T. Hunter bought the property. Hunter employed 300 men and women and installed three automatic elevators in the structure. On Sept. 15, 1934, reporter Richard Welch wrote that Hunter's store boasted a "fine commercial record." Two more floors were added.

The store changed ownership again in 1935 and continued operating as Lincoln's department store until 1962. Afterward, it was known as the Onondaga Plaza Building.

In 1965, white monolithic panels were installed over the building and several others. The McCarthy Building's ornate neoclassical architecture was hidden for decades.

## A NEW BEGINNING

For several years, the Heart of Syracuse was empty.

The McCarthy Building's condition and occupancy declined in the 1980s as economic conditions soured.

An old Syracuse postcard



Attorney Richard Storto works in the office directly inside the McCarthy Building's "Heart of Syracuse." (Photos by Katrina Tulloch / ktulloch@syracuse.com)



An early 1900s postcard shows a vivid "Heart of Syracuse" painted on the McCarthy Building.

shows the Heart of Syracuse mural in the same place on the McCarthy Building at the turn of the century. In 1942 photos, however, the heart is gone. Painted over.

The shiny, colorless sheet metal fronts were removed in 1994, and OnBank gave the building a \$1 million facelift in 1995. JCM Architectural Associates hired craftsmen to reinstate the terracotta molding and columns. The firm went through Onondaga Historical Association archives to restore the building to its former grandeur and to apply for historical tax credits.

That's when they found a picture of the original heart — a possible promo for an early-1900s advertisement company. Advertisements were painted on buildings then, before bill-

boards became mainstream.

Daniel Manning, then partner at JCM, said their painters recreated the image as exactly as they could.

Today, Washington Street Partners owns the McCarthy Building (along with the Merchants Commons Building, of which Syracuse Media Group is a tenant).

Its current office and retail tenants include the New York State Department of Health, P.E.A.C.E., Adelpia Deli, Bersani Gallery, Satter Law Firm and Melvin & Melvin.

After working in the heart of Syracuse for two decades, Storto has enjoyed watching the downtown scene change and grow from his perch.

"Syracuse is a small city, but there are those of us who love it," he said.

