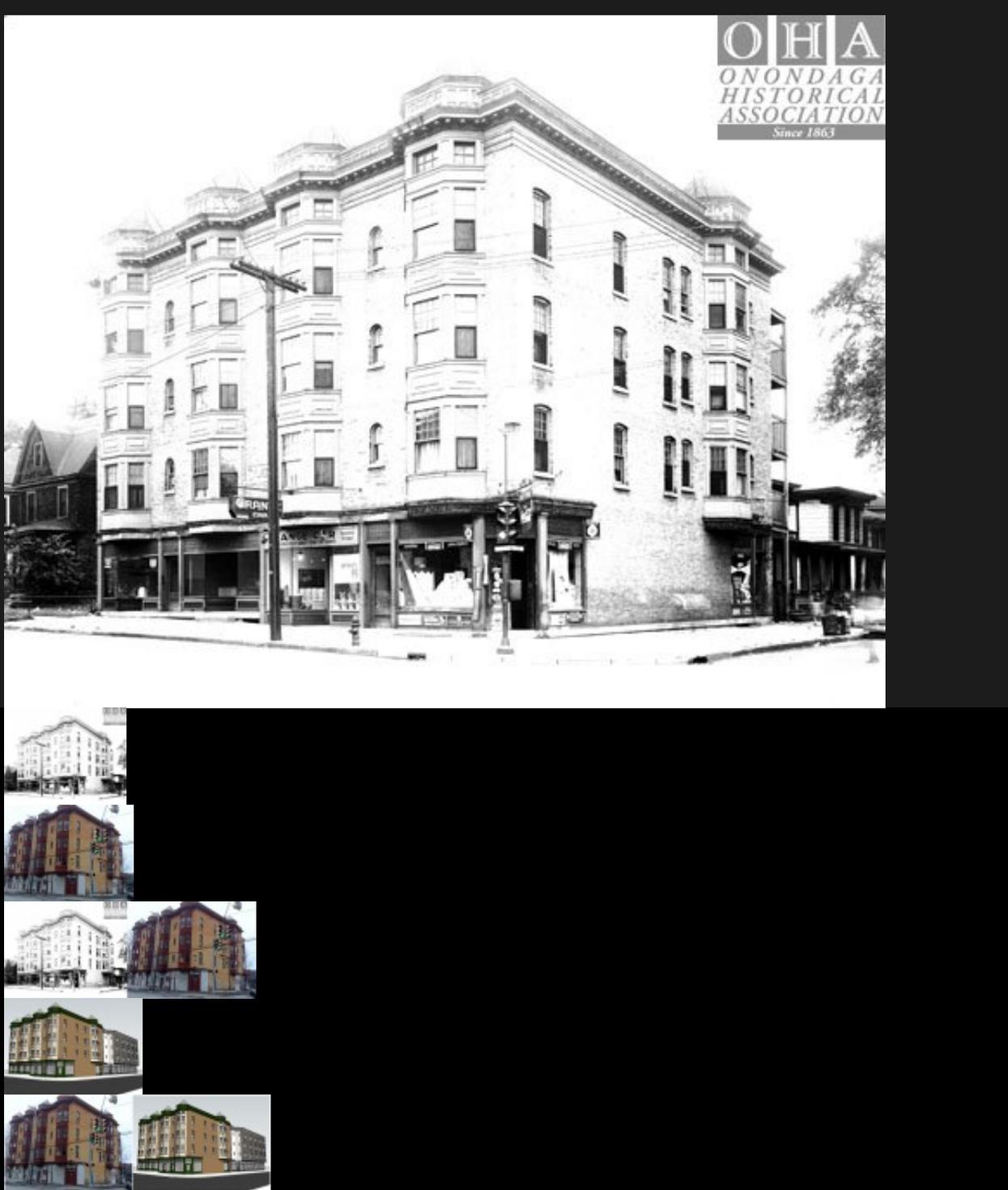
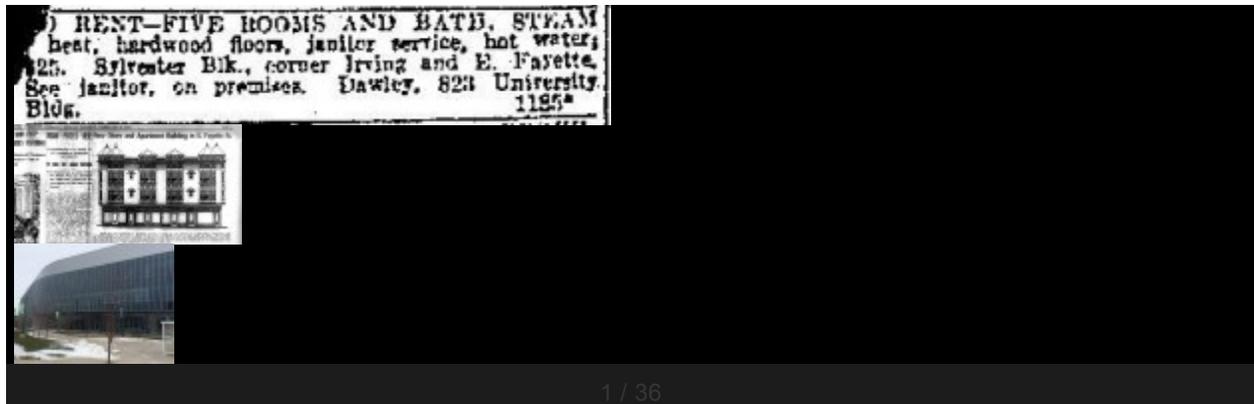


Century-old Syracuse apartment building to be renovated, expanded







The Sylvester building at the southeast corner of East Fayette Street and Irving Avenue in Syracuse is shown in September 1948. (Onondaga Historical Association)
Onondaga Historical Association

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on February 16, 2016 at 11:01 AM, updated February 16, 2016 at 9:42 PM

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Syracuse, N.Y. — A vacant 106-year-old apartment and retail building purportedly built for one of Syracuse's better-known "madames" and designed by one of the city's best-known architects is set to be renovated and expanded.

Three developers from Long Island plan to renovate the 12 apartments on the upper three floors of the Sylvester building at 900 E. Fayette St. and build an addition that will have 30 more apartments.

The developers — Christopher Geiger, Scott Smith and Andrew Charles — say the expanded building will also have 13,000 square feet of commercial space, which could include a restaurant, on the first floor. In total, the project will cost an estimated \$8.5 million.



An article in The Syracuse Herald in 1910 shows plans

for the Sylvester building at 900 E. Fayette St., Syracuse. The plans show a three-story building, but the structure was built with four stories. (Click to enlarge)*Courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association*

Built at the southeast corner of East Fayette Street and Irving Avenue in 1910, the building has been designated an historic structure by the State Historic Preservation Office — a status that will make the renovation eligible for historic preservation tax credits.

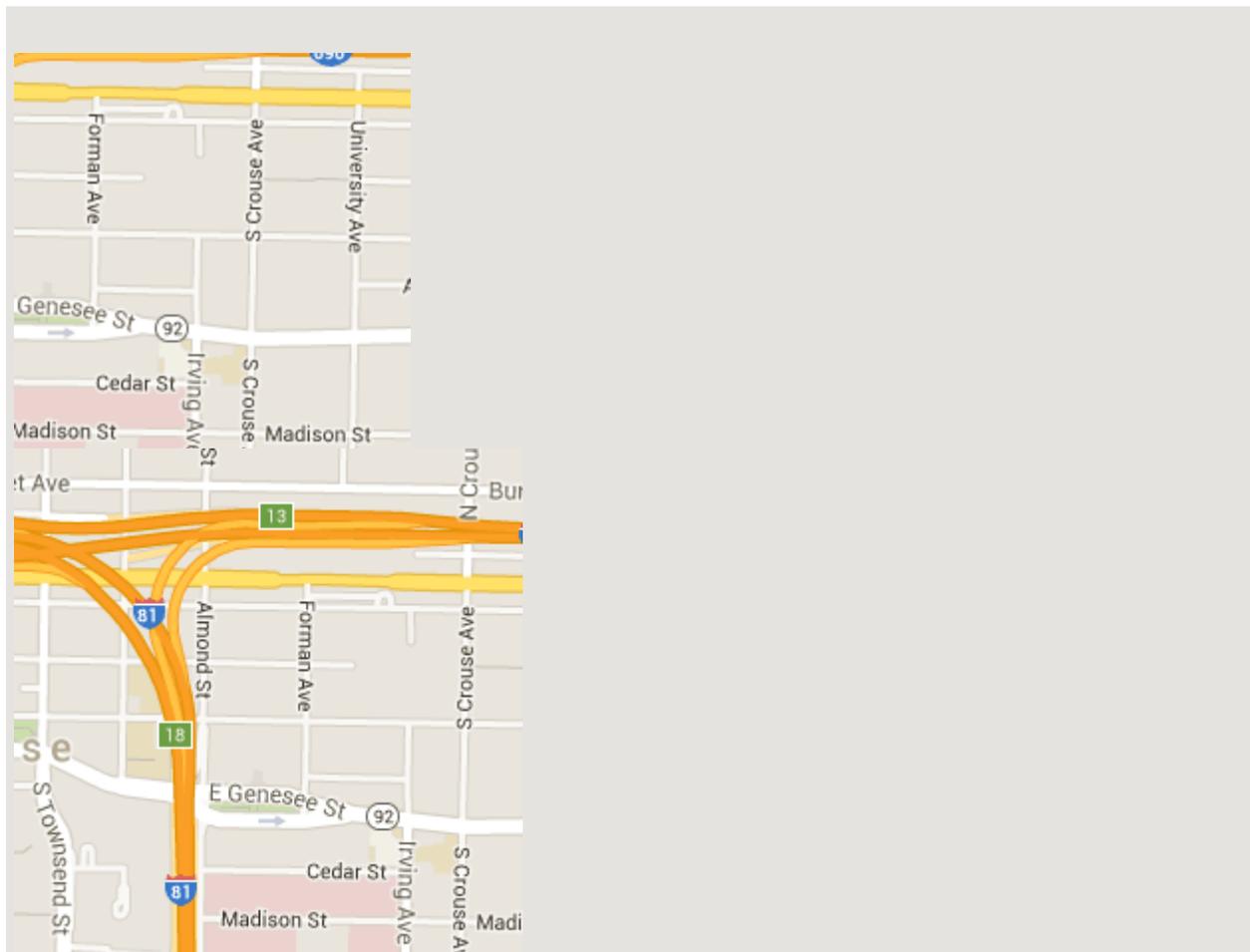
The building received the designation partly because it is an example of one of Syracuse's early 20th century apartment buildings and partly because of its association with the [Progressive Era](#) and "one woman's attempt to move from notoriety to respectability within her community," according to the developers' application for historical building status.

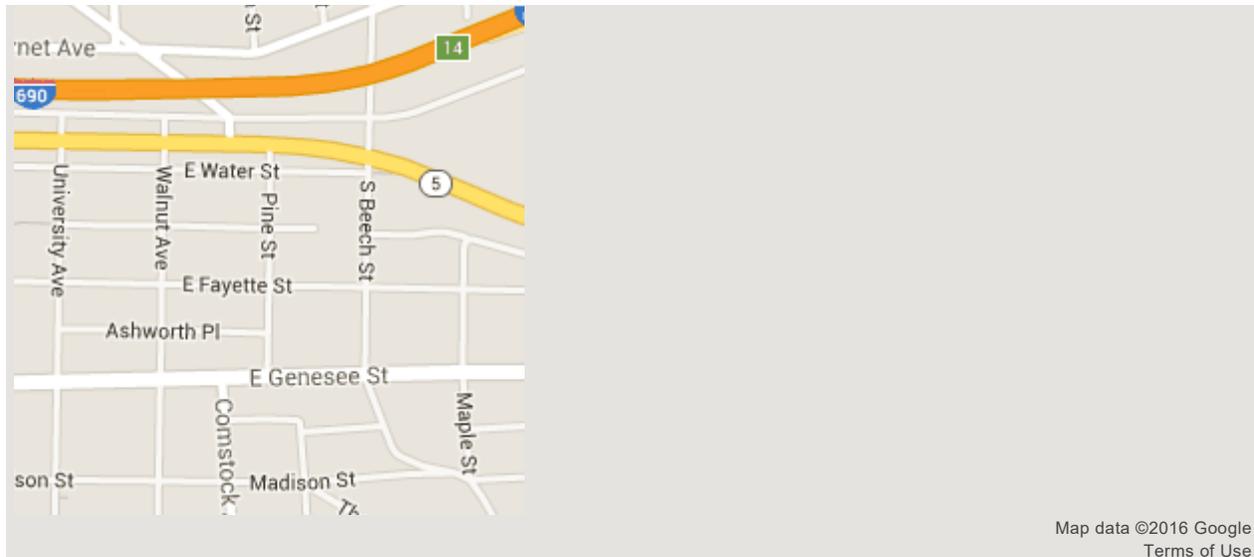
Progressive Era reforms (1890 to 1920) included efforts to stop prostitution in American cities, many of which, including Syracuse, had "red light" districts where prostitutes openly plied their trade.

According to the developers' application, the building's first owner was Mary B. Hand, a prostitute and "madame" well known in Syracuse's red light

district (a three square block area between the Erie Canal and East Washington, Montgomery and Townsend streets) between 1886 and 1906.

As Progressive Era reformers were pushing to toughen laws against prostitution, Hand began investing in Syracuse real estate in an apparent effort to turn into a legitimate business person. She mostly bought existing buildings. But in this case, she decided to build an apartment building — to be used not as a brothel, but as a place for the city's growing middle class to live. The first floor would contain storefronts.





Map

Satellite



To drive the point home even further, Hand hired [Charles Erastus Colton](#), who designed Syracuse City Hall in 1889 and was one of the city's most prominent architects of the day.

The building may be the only one that Colton ever designed for a working class client, according to Renaissance Studio, the Syracuse firm that researched the building's history and prepared the application to the Park Service.

"Colton designed dozens of residences for wealthy clients in and around Syracuse, but although Mary Hand had become a wealthy woman, hers was not the respectable wealth of the local industrialist, esteemed professional or social leaders who were Colton's traditional clients," Renaissance Studio said in its report.

A 1913 ad in the Syracuse Herald touted the building's "steam heat, hardwood floors, janitor service and hot water." Hand named the building after her deceased brother, Sylvester. His name appears in a stone plaque on the front of the building.

The yellow brick building is also notable for its six three-story galvanized iron bay windows on the upper floors. Each bay has an octagonal roof, creating the appearance of a tower. Other windows on the building's upper floors have arched heads and stone sills.

An unusual feature of the building is a light well that runs down its center, bringing sunlight to the interior.

The building's empty storefronts still have their tin ceiling panels. Their large glass windows facing East Fayette Street are long gone, replaced with small windows and metal siding. However, the storefronts will be restored to their original appearance, with large windows, as part of the renovations.

"Whether Mary was ever able to move beyond her notorious past is doubtful, but she did leave a lasting, positive legacy in the elegant apartment block at the corner of East Fayette Street and Irving Avenue," Renaissance Studio said.

Geiger, 1995 Syracuse University graduate, and Smith own approximately 130 apartments in Syracuse and DeWitt. They and Charles are close to completing construction of a [39-unit apartment building](#) two blocks from the Sylvester building at 712 E. Fayette St.

The Sylvester building has been vacant for about 10 years. Geiger, Smith and Charles bought it for \$660,000 in February 2014.

Geiger said they at first planned to demolish the building and build a new one in its place. But at the suggestion of Ben Walsh, deputy commissioner of the city's Department of Neighborhood & Business Development, they decided to renovate and expand it instead.

The partners have applied for 10 years of [property tax discounts](#) available to development projects in distressed areas and for \$335,000 in sales and mortgage tax exemptions.

Geiger said they see the building's tenant base as being graduate students and young professionals from nearby University Hill, home to Syracuse University, Upstate Medical University, Crouse Hospital and the Syracuse VA Medical Center. That's the same market they see for the apartments they are building two blocks away.

Monthly rents will range from \$1,100 to \$1,300 and will include heat, central air conditioning, high-speed internet, cable television and use of a fitness center. Construction is to start this spring and will take about a year. VIP Structures will be the general contractor and Holmes-King-Kallquist & Associates is the architect.

The Sylvester building sits kitty-corner to the Central New York Biotech Accelerator, the first building in [Loguen Crossing](#), a mixed-use development planned by Upstate Medical University and Fayetteville-based COR Development on the former site of the Kennedy Square public housing project.

It was revealed in 2014 that COR had drawn up plans to build a \$500 million sports arena, a replacement for Syracuse University's Carrier Dome, at Loguen Crossing. Plans for the new arena [went nowhere](#) after Mayor Stephanie Miner objected to not being included in the discussions and called for more study of the proposal.

No further construction has occurred at Loguen Crossing. Geiger said he would love to see more activity there. However, he said he is optimistic about the area's future.

"We took kind of a big gamble on this area, and I think it's going to pay off," he said.

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