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Syracuse's industrial past highlighted in preservation of historic building



Sara Schleicher | Staff Photographer

The Lipe-Rollway Corporation building is listed on the State and National Register of Historic Places. A mural is on the side of the building where history meets present day, painted by Army veteran Camden Noir.

By [Taylor Watson \(/writers/taylor-watson/\)](#) ASST. FEATURE EDITOR

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The Lipe-Rollway Corporation building towers over West Fayette Street. Easily identified as one of Syracuse's trademark buildings, it holds a charm that grounds Syracuse's industrial past in its present.

Now, the building is being recognized for its architectural and historical significance. It was recently listed on the State and National Register of Historic Places, adding to the catalog of recognized buildings in the area. The approval by the New York State Review Board came last December, said Cosmo Fanizzi, the owner of the building.

Fanizzi came up with the idea to nominate the building for the state and national registers. He purchased it in 2014 and said the building was underutilized at the time. As a lifelong resident of Syracuse, he was aware of the history held within its walls.

Building J, as the building is also known, was constructed from 1920-21 as an extension of the work done by area inventors Charles and Willard Lipe, according to the building's National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (<https://parks.ny.gov/shpo/national-register/documents/nominations/LipeRollwayCorporationBuildingSyracuseOnondagaCounty.pdf>).

Charles Lipe and the Rollway company were an incredible success, said Robert Searing, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association. They were an asset to the community at a time when Syracuse was a major player in the American economy, particularly in manufacturing.

"If you're going to know where you're going, it's important to know where you've been," Searing said. "The history of the city is really tied to these large industrial corporations."

In 1880, Charles Lipe acquired a building on South Geddes Street, where Lipe and fellow inventor Alexander Brown invented a bicycle gear. Their product, the Bi-gear, enabled bicyclists to have two speeds, according to the registration form. They formed the Brown-Lipe Gear Company to manufacture the product.

"This was like a cradle of industry," Searing said of the Lipe Shop. "You had a lot of mechanical geniuses working there."

After the death of Charles Lipe in 1895, Brown adapted the bicycle gear for use in the automobile. He and Willard Lipe facilitated the shift from a bicycle gear company to a company focused on automobile technology, per the form.

Several inventions and companies stemmed from the original work done at the Lipe Shop on South Geddes Street, including the Railway Roller Bearing Company, which manufactured components for railway cars. When the company diversified, it was renamed the Lipe Rollway Corporation.

In 1920, the corporation had a new building constructed at 1153 W. Fayette Street — the building that was recently added to the register, Building J.



Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

Building J was one of a number of buildings in the Brown-Lipe Gear Company complex, most of which are gone, said Cynthia Carrington Carter, historic preservation specialist and Syracuse Landmark Preservation Board member. She was hired as a consultant to write the nomination form and identify character-defining features of the building that need to be protected.

In Building J, workers manufactured roller bearings from railroad cars as well as other bearings and automobile parts, Carrington Carter said. She also expressed that it is paramount to preserve buildings like Building J because they contribute to the character of the city.

“In the history of our city, if we lose everything, then we don’t have an identity,” she said. “And to keep our identity is part of what makes Syracuse unique.”

After years of use as a manufacturing facility, Building J was one of two entities in Syracuse taken over by the United States government during World War II and was used to build components for tanks, Carrington Carter said.

“Because what they were doing was so key to success of the war effort, (the government) needed to have control over these factories,” she said.

The other entity taken over by the government during the war was the General Electric Plant, she said.

Fanizzi, the current owner, said that after WWII the building went into a dormant period. It opened again in 1950 as Morris Distributing Co. Inc., per the registration form. The building stored warehouse goods that were then manufactured overseas to be distributed. After that, a few owners came and went until Fanizzi purchased the building.

Fanizzi said he will work to restore the building and stay true to its architecture. He said he hopes to begin construction within the next couple years, and once construction commences, it will be roughly a year-long project.

Fanizzi said he plans to use tax credits to assist in the cost of the construction — a benefit of being on the register.

The owner of a building on the register can apply for tax credits if they rehabilitate the building in a way that stays true to its architecture in the name of historic preservation, Carrington Carter said. Such tax credits have been used to revitalize Franklin Square, an area that was once a hub of the industry in Syracuse.

The architecture of Building J is simple, Fanizzi said — it's essentially a reinforced concrete frame with large windows.

"These buildings were referred to as daylight factories," Fanizzi said. "And it kind of revolutionized the way people felt about their work environment because they were exposed to daylight and fresh air."

The building is now home to entities including Knitty Gritty Yarns, an arts and crafts store, and Stout Beard Brewing Company.

It is important to save and repurpose older structures, Searing said, which is exactly what is happening with Building J.

"It allows new generations to hear stories of the past," he said. "The more preservation that we can do and the more we can sort of tie it in to bringing Syracuse back economically and culturally, I think it's really, really significant."

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