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Syracuse struggles with 1,900 vacant buildings including some with long histories

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David Lassman/The Post-Standard

This home at 406 Danforth St. on Syracuse's North Side was built in the mid 1850s by a Syracuse man who became state Senator. It also was home for a family that owned some of the area's salt works.

There are about 1,900 vacant structures in Syracuse. A few of them stand out. One pick of mine as the Empty House of the Week is the Italianate brick building at 406 Danforth St., at North Salina Street, in what was the original village of Salina. Syracuse came to be as a city in 1848. Experts, according to information on file at the Onondaga Historical Association, figure the house was built about this same time, 1849-1850. It remains one of the grandest houses in the neighborhood, despite the fact it's been empty for years. We're told the house was built for James Noxon, a prominent Syracusan who was elected to the state Senate twice. Perhaps the house is best known as the home of the Murrays, a well-known local couple, Catherine and Michael, who were

wealthy salt-makers during the years Syracuse was the "salt city." Michael was a big-time salt manufacturer. He died in 1866, only two years after the Murrays bought the home. Catherine Murray inherited an extensive estate, most of it salt holdings, which she managed successfully. When she died in 1908, she was called one of Syracuse's wealthiest women, one of the few of her sex ever to run a major salt-manufacturer in this town. The modern owner of the home is listed in Syracuse tax assessment records as Crystal Flowers and Surprises. Water bills as mailed to Myra Ortiz of Yonkers. David Clifford, the assessment commissioner, said taxes on the house have not been paid since 2008. Crystal Flowers owes Syracuse around \$12,000. Dave says Myra also owns a house in the 1000 block of LeMoyne Avenue, but taxes are current on that property. The second stand-out among vacant houses is at 515 West Onondaga St., in a neighborhood where some of the city's finer homes stood. A few remain. According to the book, "Syracuse Landmarks," by Evamaria Hardin, No. 515 was put up in 1877 as the home for Syracuse lumberman William N.



Gillette and his family. It's of the Second Empire style, with "elaborate detailing around the windows and doors and a mansard roof covered with multicolored tiles, topped by iron crestings." All wooden elements of the exterior and interior "were fashioned in Gillette's own molding mill," according



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This home at 515 West Onondaga St. was built by a local lumberman for his family in 1877.

to the book. The house was purchased by Trinity Episcopal Church in 1957, which is close by on the corner of South Avenue and West Onondaga Street. It was used for years by the church as an exchange shop. The handsome church closed in 1994 and is now home to Faith By Love Church, the current owner. It is, of course, tax exempt, as is the old house. The place's most recent use was as an AIDS hospitality center but it is vacant now, its

upstairs windows broken, with curtains flapping in the breeze. It's a sad part of modern life in Syracuse that we have so many vacant properties, both residential and commercial, according to city officials. Some 1,900 of them seems like a lot to me, but what do I know? It appears to be a huge waste of space, but it's our economic conditions, I guess. Even the new building projects look to be having trouble getting started. These two buildings I've been talking about have been part of Syracuse for years. They deserve more respect than they're getting. Failure Club? My neighbor Stacy Schaefer has a new project; she's trying to start up a new group in Syracuse. It's called a "Failure Club." Hold up, this is not a group for wash-outs. Stacy explains it's called that because it addresses "peoples' greatest concern with starting something new: failure." She says various groups – called "pods" – are starting up all over America. One's in New York City, as we speak. "They are gathering to support each other in their endeavor – and to be accountable to someone," Stacy says. She's decided to start a Central New York pod and is looking for few more members. The first meeting of the Failure Club will be at 6:30 p.m. Feb. 9, at Liverpool Public Library. Also, if members are willing, Stacy says "I would welcome a film student who may be interested in following every person's progress." The New York City pod is doing this. Stacy can be reached at this email: failureclubcny@yahoo.com. Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254 or by e-mail, dcase@syracuse.com.

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