

A Syracuse Rite Aid conjures historic Woolworth's: Changing with the city around it

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Tales of F.W. Woolworth: Do you have memories of the classic downtown “five and dime” at Fayette and South Salina streets, in Syracuse? If so, share them with Sean Kirst by emailing him at skirst@syracuse.com, writing to him in care of The Post-Standard, Clinton Square, Syracuse 13221 or sending him a message on Facebook or Twitter.

Even the Almighty recognizes the importance of downtown’s “100 percent corner.”

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Beth Crawford, a senior project manager for Crawford & Stearns architects, outside the Rite Aid building on South Salina Street. At Syracuse City Hall, officials hope Rite Aid will remove the rest of a wind-damaged sign that hides the original and ornate F.W. Woolworth design.

That’s been a quiet joke around Syracuse City Hall, at least **since a big January wind blew down part of the Rite Aid sign** at the crossroads of Fayette Street and South Salina Street.

The Rite Aid building was built in the early 1940s for the famed F.W. Woolworth Co., whose founder - Jefferson County’s Frank Woolworth - ran a prominent chain of department stores. The Art Deco landmark **had an elegant terra cotta design**. Passengers waiting to grab a bus at Fayette and Salina could glimpse the time of day from a clock above the store entrance.

For generations of Central New Yorkers, Woolworth's was part of the fabric of the city. Arlene Ciereck, 59, remembers riding the bus downtown with her best friend, then going to the Woolworth's lunch counter for hot fudge sundaes. Marshall Nelson, 77, recalls how he'd glance up at the clock to see if he had missed his bus.

And Thelma Bonzek, 89, said Woolworth's, in the days before fast food, was the place where she and her mom would often go for a roast beef sandwich. It was a hub for working people, Bonzek said; the folks with more money would eat their lunch at **Schrafft's**.

The clock and much of the facade were covered up by a bland metal sign after Rite Aid bought the building in 1979. When the wind blew off that covering in 1997, revealing a clock frozen at 1:06 p.m., pedestrians were delighted but Rite Aid quickly put the sign back up.



The Woolworth building in 1953: The exterior clock, visible in this photograph, still exists but is now hidden by a Rite Aid sign.

Onondaga Historical Association



The F.W. Woolworth building amid the heyday of retail shopping in downtown Syracuse, 1960.

Onondaga Historical Association

The wind returned a few weeks ago, dragging down another chunk of that sign. City officials, seeing an opportunity, contacted Rite Aid about the chance for a permanent exterior restoration.

“They’ve responded very favorably,” said Ben Walsh, the city’s deputy commissioner for business development. A connection between the city and the company had already been established. Walsh said thanks

to the “**Bank Alley**” project
and other nearby

improvements.

Walsh recalled how the first reaction at City Hall to news of the sign coming down was a concern that someone could have been hurt. Once downtown advocates knew there'd been no injuries, they chuckled quietly at the idea that even God wanted to see the original facade restored.

The building has particular visual importance. Walsh said the Fayette-Salina intersection is known by Syracuse planners as “our 100 percent corner or our 'First and Main,'" meaning it's seen as the most significant downtown crossroads. When the bus station was there, and nearby storefronts were often dusty and empty, the message was hardly one of vitality.

Now, bus travelers are using a new and impressive Centro hub a few blocks to the south, while work continues at Fayette and Salina on the \$25 million, four-building, residential and commercial restoration known as the Pike Block.

Amid those changes, Rite Aid officials recently completed a sweeping interior renovation. In an email Monday, company spokesman Eric Harkreader described the conversion into a “wellness store” that includes – along with overall expansion – much greater freezer space for groceries.

As for the striking Art Deco exterior, Harkreader wrote: “We continue to discuss with the city a range of repair options for that location.”

On the city's request, Crawford & Stearns architects are advising Rite Aid about the possibilities. Beth Crawford, a designer and senior project manager, said ornate old Woolworth buildings across the nation are being recognized as jewels; in downtown Los Angeles, for instance, **an original Woolworth's was recently transformed** into a dress store.

In Syracuse, Crawford said, the first priority for Rite Aid will be erecting prominent signs, hopefully in an historically appropriate way that can emphasize the Rite Aid presence while enhancing the original building design.

Both Crawford and Walsh are pleased about the tone of the meetings with Rite Aid representatives. The company, they said, seems to appreciate how its landmark building could be on the threshold of renewed prominence.

“They’re at the center of downtown,” Crawford said. “What a great place for them to be.”



The Rite-Aid building in January, after a big downtown wind in Syracuse first stripped off part of the old sign.

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