



The White Memorial Building, photographed in 1880. (Onondaga Historical Association)

# Clark will revive more than his ale house

By Sean Kirst  
skirst@syracuse.com

Ray Clark drew an invisible border in his mind. Once he decided he was going to open a new version of Clark's Ale House in downtown Syracuse, he was willing to move only so far from his original spot at South Clinton and Jefferson streets.

And what he would not do — as in absolutely not — was even consider any location on South Salina Street. Clark didn't believe his faithful customers would go quite that far. He kept his attention focused on Armory Square or its borders. He was intrigued by the transformation of the nearby Pike Block into four buildings of new apartments, office and commercial space. He looked hard at a storefront on South Clinton Street.

Yet Clark kept getting calls from agents or property

owners who wanted to show him other downtown options. Among them, he said, was Marty McDermott, a senior vice president with JF Real Estate, who suggested Clark walk through the landmark White Memorial Building at the corner of Washington and South Salina.

Clark balked. He knew some of the history. For much of the 20th century, the spot was the home of the H.J. Howe Jewelers. Thirty years ago this year, the space was converted to restaurant use. Since then, several businesses have tried it and gotten out, including — most recently — the Wise Guys comedy club.

Reluctantly, Clark agreed to take a look. He went inside on a freezing day, and he was immediately intimidated by what he described as "the cavernous" size of the place. It was also, he said, "a majestic location."

There was a gleaming wooden bar, a tile floor and etched glass — offering the kind of atmosphere that Clark could only dream about at his old place.

"I was petrified," he said, "but I think I know what Syracusans want and need." Last week, he announced a new Clark's will open in the White Memorial space, most likely in January. That triggered a celebration among devoted customers who always loved his tavern's against-the-grain ambience: No television. No music. Just good beer, sandwiches and conversation.

The decision is equally joyous for many planners and downtown loyalists, because the location — if it works — could represent dramatic change. The original Clark's, opened in 1992, was both an anchor and a catalyst during the boom years in Armory Square.

The hope is that the new ale house could play the same role at South Salina and Washington. "This is a special one," said Ben Walsh, deputy commissioner of neighbor-

hood and business development in Syracuse. "It really bridges a gap and starts to connect the dots."

What's important, Walsh said, is that Clark's will convince people to "walk the extra block," meaning it might spread downtown energy beyond ... well, beyond the borders Clark once had in his mind. He speaks of his tavern as a "lost link," which addresses a major challenge of the past 20 years:

Both Armory Square and Hanover Square have gone through commercial and residential revivals. Go to either district on a pleasant summer's evening, and you'll see tavern and restaurant customers relaxing at sidewalk tables, a trend that used to be much rarer downtown.

The dream is creating a similar feeling on South Salina Street, the city's main thoroughfare. That strip has not been the same since the big retail stores began collapsing or moving away in the late 1960s, a descent that continued for many years.

The White Memorial Building, in that context, has extraordinary meaning. Built in 1876, it was designed by Joseph Silsbee, the same architect responsible for the Syracuse Savings Bank — and a guy who later mentored Frank Lloyd Wright and Irving Gill, two of the great architects in American history.

Andrew Maxwell, director of the Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency, said the 200 and 300 blocks of South Salina are "the identifiable heart of not just the city, but the county and the entire Central New York region."

When that area was desolate — as it was for all too long — it sent all too clear a civic message.

Clark said he would not have made the jump without evidence of a deep change. The \$25 million Pike Block restoration will include a walkway intended to serve as a channel for foot traffic from Armory Square, to South Salina. Clark sees it as a gateway for potential customers. And he won't be far

from either Hanover Square or the nightly energy of the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, to his north.

Ousted from his original location by the expansion of the Landmark Theatre, Clark said he's made peace with the Landmark's operators. "I carried a chip on my shoulder for a year and a half," said Clark, who thought about "giving up" and never bringing back his tavern.

But he missed his operation, he said. He was touched by the passion of city officials and longtime customers who urged him to return. And the decision was sealed after he contemplated what he could do in the White Memorial Building, which offers so much room — and four times as much nearby parking.

"Now I'm a nervous wreck," Clark said, "but I think I can rise to the occasion."

His original tavern was inspired by two establishments: McSorley's Old Ale House in Manhattan, with its famous cheese and crackers, and The Old Toad, a British-style pub in Rochester. On Clark's early tours of what will be his new ale house, he said he was engulfed by an overwhelming feeling that "this is what I wanted Clark's to be, all along."

He often thinks about his last night of operation at the old place, three years ago this month. The line of mourning customers stretched out the door and down the block. With only hours left before he closed the doors, Clark recalls how he kept thinking that he needed to do better.

"These people," he said, "are waiting way too long."

For greater Syracuse, in January, that wait comes to an end.

Write to columnist Sean Kirst in care of The Post-Standard, 220 Warren St., Syracuse 13202. Visit his blog at [syracuse.com/kirst](http://syracuse.com/kirst), send him an email at [skirst@syracuse.com](mailto:skirst@syracuse.com) or send him a message on Facebook or Twitter.

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