

'A lesson to everybody': How we lost the Genesee Theatre, in Westvale



In 1996, Chris Chiappone led a community campaign to save the Genesee Theater from demolition. In the end, despite the community effort, the old movie house got knocked down. (Suzanne Dunn | *The Post-Standard*)

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By [Sean Kirst](#) | skirst@syracuse.com

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While the **Onondaga Historical Association** does regular submissions to syracuse.com, this week's entry was especially painful: The OHA's Dan Connors recalled how it's been 17 years since **bulldozers took down the beloved Genesee Theatre** on West Genesee Street, in Westvale.

The old movie house was replaced by a Pep Boys retail store, which quickly closed. The pointless demolition led to the usual vows that this sort of thing would not happen again - but it did, and quickly. A year later, Onondaga County - for no logical reason - **demolished the historic county**

poorhouse on Route 173, which at the time was the oldest public building in Onondaga County. The decision only grows more maddening with time, since Onondaga Community College later restored two other old buildings - **including the old poorhouse hospital** - as attractive additions to the OCC campus.

Did we learn our lesson? Hardly. This spring, **a developer evicted a family and then leveled an old carriage house in Camillus** that was the last existing piece of the historic Geddes farm that gave Fairmount its name.

Considering that history of repeating and repeating mistakes, it's worth another look at a column from 2000 that recalls how the Genesee Theatre was lost - a piece that recalls how plenty of everyday people understood it was a colossal mistake, and tried to stop that demolition from happening:

SOMETIMES YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU GOT 'TIL IT'S GONE

Sean Kirst, Post-Standard columnist

Nov. 3, 2000

Chris Chiappone is searching for a silver lining.

In 1996, she rallied the community in support of the old Genesee Theater in Westvale. It didn't work. The Genesee was razed, replaced by a Pep Boys auto parts "super center." Solvay politicians said Pep Boys translated into jobs and progress.

Last weekend, that auto parts shop closed its doors.

"I hope this is a lesson to everybody," Chiappone said. "I just don't know why, for whatever reason, Syracuse isn't as interested in preserving its past as other cities. Why does everything have to be thrown away? When are we going to find the caretakers for these kinds of things?"

Chiappone is a first-grade teacher on Onondaga Hill. As a child, she was a regular at the Genesee. That's where she first saw "Gone With the Wind." She loved the big screen, the soft feel of the seats, the ornate walls that gave the place a sense of history.

As a mom, she'd take her own children to see family films at the Genesee, built in 1949. It was cheaper and easier than going to a multiplex, inside a mall.

When her kids got older, she could drop them at the door and watch them run inside.

Four years ago, Pep Boys announced it planned to raze the theater. Chiappone and her allies collected thousands of signatures in opposition. Movie fans and preservationists argued that Pep Boys would replace a unique family landmark with a bland commercial box.

"I hated to see it go because it still had a lot of potential," said George Read, 66, who managed the Genesee from 1959 to 1974.

In the end, the uproar didn't make a difference. The theater was privately owned. A Solvay code inspector called the building "a two-story wood firetrap."

The Pep Boys proposal sailed through all its government approvals. Village officials cheerfully predicted new jobs and tax dollars.

Now, with Pep Boys already gone, the people who worked so hard to save the theater take no solace in knowing they were right.

"This is the story of Syracuse, isn't it?" asked Phil Serling, president of the movie-loving Syracuse Cinephile Society. "They did the same thing downtown with the Keith Theater, and the Paramount Theater, and the Empire Theater, all within a block of each other. They tore all those wonderful buildings down."

Serling lamented a local pattern of razing irreplaceable landmarks, often on the empty hope for something better. "Afterwards, there's always this hue and cry," Serling said. "How could they do it? How could they do it?"

He wonders if it's time for all of us to stop blaming it on "them."

While most rising American cities celebrate their architectural legacy, the Genesee points to a community going the other way. "The light has not gone on here," said Beth Crawford, vice president of the Preservation Association of Central New York.

"In this city," said Barry Pyke, a Syracuse resident who also mourns for the theater, "we just seem so ready to get rid of gorgeous buildings."



The demolition of the old Onondaga County poorhouse, in 1998:

Knocked down to make way for nothing. Gary Walts | gwalts@syracuse.com

The Eastwood SportsCenter - a hangout for many great basketball players, the place where Danny Biasone and Leo Ferris haggled over the details of the historic 24-second clock - was knocked down a year ago. There was almost no public discussion before the razing last summer of the magnificent "Solvay Castle," the historic headquarters for Allied Chemical.

And Chiappone drives each day by the vacant land that once held the old stone poorhouse, demolished two years ago on Onondaga Hill.

"It's the same thing," Chiappone said. "They have a little sign saying what used to be there. Why not just keep the whole building?"

Still, some of the core issues of preservation in Syracuse remain to be decided. Can the well-preserved North Salina Street corridor evolve into something extraordinary? Can the mansions of West Onondaga Street become the centerpiece of a diverse and eclectic neighborhood? Can a creative revival bring back the old warehouses, factories and breweries of Syracuse, in the fashion of high-tech districts in flourishing cities?

The Genesee Theater was not a rich man's showpiece. It was a refuge for everyday people, a place designed to bring comfort and escape from the routine of working lives. "There was nothing quite like it," Chiappone said.

Then they knocked it down.

Sean Kirst is a columnist with *The Post-Standard*.