

The old Woolworth store's clock, uncovered at the Salina Street Rite Aid in 1997. (Dick Case / The Post-Standard)



# At Syracuse landmark, Turning back time

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Patricia Calpeter thought the clock was a lost piece of her youth. Almost 60 years ago, she was a student in a work-study program at the old North Syracuse High School, and her teachers would let her out a little early so she could catch a bus to her job. Calpeter was a clerk at F.W. Woolworth's, a five-and-dime department store at South Salina and Fayette streets, in the heart of downtown Syracuse. Getting there on time was important, said Calpeter, now of Salina. The manager was Margaret Hampton, a woman whose name Calpeter recalls distinctly. While the clerks liked and respected her, Hampton was all business.

"You didn't want to test her," Calpeter said.

The teenager would jump off the bus near the old E.W. Edwards department store, and she'd hurry toward the front door of Woolworth's. It was easy to check to see if she'd made it on time: There was a big clock above the door, visible on nearby streets, a kind of centerpiece for warm memories from Calpeter's youth. She's 75. She remembers when Woolworth's closed in the 1970s, part of the sweeping loss of retail in those years in the center of the city. Rite Aid took over the building. The drugstore chain blanketed the once-striking terra cotta facade with a drab brown metal wrap. It covered the clock and turned the structure into just another building.

So Calpeter reacted with joy Tuesday when she learned Rite Aid has worked out an agreement with the city: The company expects to soon start restoring the exterior to closely resemble the way it looked when Woolworth's opened, in the early 1940s.

"Oh, no kidding! Isn't that wonderful?" Calpeter said. "Because, you know, that's how it was when I was young, and it truly was a gorgeous downtown."

City officials and downtown merchants feel much the same. "What really started the whole conversation was the wind," said Kate Auwaerter, a city preservation planner who worked with Rite Aid on the design. She was speaking of a storm that led downtown advocates to say even the Almighty wanted the facade restored.

Two years ago, a powerful January wind ripped off a chunk of the brown metal wrapping. The same thing had happened in the 1990s, briefly exposing the beloved clock. But Rite Aid, at the time, simply put the metal covering back.

This time, the drugstore chain had a different response. Auwaerter said Rite Aid had recently invested in a major renovation of the store's interior, and it made sense to continue with facade improvements.

"I think they recognized what was going on around them," Auwaerter said, speaking of a downtown residential boom that contributed to such



Jefferson County's Frank Woolworth built an empire of five-and-dime stores. In the 1940s, the chain put up this landmark store (in undated photo on the left) at Fayette and South Salina streets in Syracuse. It became a popular place to grab a bite at the lunch counter or do some shopping. Rite Aid bought the building in 1979 and covered up the clock and much of the facade. At right is the Rite Aid building as it appears today. (Kevin Rivoli / krivoli@syracuse.com)



A model of new plans for the Salina Street Rite Aid storefront. The project restores some of the look of the original Woolworth store. (Courtesy of Bruce Ronayne Hamilton Architects)

### "It truly was a gorgeous downtown."

— PATRICIA CALPETER, 75, OF SALINA, WHO WORKED AS A CLERK AT THE DOWNTOWN WOOLWORTH'S WHEN SHE WAS A STUDENT AT NORTH SYRACUSE HIGH SCHOOL.

projects as the \$25 million restoration of the Pike Block, on the opposite side of Fayette and Salina.

Administrators with Rite Aid took a look at some recommendations from Crawford & Stearns, a Syracuse architectural firm that specializes in historic properties. With the help of a \$25,000 grant from the Connective Corridor, the drugstore chain agreed to pull down the metal wrapping, which will be replaced with prominent lettering, similar in style to the original Woolworth's sign. There will also be a classic "vertical sign," with a kind of 1940s look, hanging above South Salina Street.

Most important — at least sentimentally — Rite Aid is bringing back a clock.

Dennis Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association, described the location as "one of the most important intersections in the city." The terra cotta style of the building follows what Connors called "art moderne" design, popular toward the end of the lush art deco style made famous in the

1920s and 1930s. Local officials were aware that in other cities across the nation, similar Woolworth's buildings have become focal points for downtown revivals.

The emotional importance of the old store was evident two years ago, when we asked readers to send in their memories of Woolworth's. This was clearly a building that touched everyday lives: We received a flood of replies about the old lunch counter, warm cashews, banana splits, a doughnut machine and Christmas shopping. ... It was the kind of store that mattered to working people, in a quiet but important way.

Kristin Kellum, a Rite Aid spokeswoman, said in an email that her company wants to begin construction in the spring.

The project "will reflect the historic nature of that corner but will also meet (Rite Aid's) needs," said Andy Maxwell, director of the Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency. "The beauty of this is their willingness to work with us," he said of Rite Aid, "and to do it in a way that builds a

more beautiful city while embracing our historic past."

Maxwell and other planners speak of the Salina-Fayette crossroads as the city's "100 percent corner," or the commercial center of downtown. Until a few years ago, it held the main Centro transfer station, now located a few blocks to the south. The intersection retains three commercial anchors: the Woolworth's Building, the Pike Block and the McCarthy Building.

For the fourth corner, the city is holding a competition of major national design teams to come up with a new plan for the area known as Perseverance Park.

Beth Crawford, a designer and senior project manager with Crawford & Stearns, toured the old Woolworth's when her company was studying the landmark. She said the empty upper floors offer a well-preserved and spacious "opportunity for development."

While Rite Aid has not announced its plans for the entire building, officials dream of new apartments above the heart of downtown. "We'd love to see the lights go on upstairs," Auwaerter said.

For now, the impending reappearance of the original facade is enough to trigger a quiet celebration. Like thousands of Central New Yorkers,



Calpeter remembers when Woolworth's was crowded with shoppers. She remembers the holiday season, when the windows would be filled with bright decorations and the clerks would stay late, filling gift bags with candy.

All of that, to her, seemed lost in the past. So to know the old Woolworth's building will soon look much the way it did when she was young, and that once again a landmark clock will hang above the door?

In downtown Syracuse, for Calpeter, that change comes right on time.

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In what could be a late-summer day, shoppers stroll past Witherill's, a local department store, across the street from Woolworth's.

(Photo courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association, circa 1946)