

Syracuse, as Webster saw it: View from a famous balcony on Saturday's downtown living tour



Jim Prioletti, owner of the Courier Building in downtown Syracuse: The balcony behind him is where Daniel Webster delivered a famous speech, warning abolitionists to stand down, on May 26, 1851. *(Dennis Nett | dnett@syracuse.com)*

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There are certain historic, out-of-the-way places in any community that everyone, at some point, should get a chance to see; indeed, there is a whole list of them in Syracuse, spots that many folks would love to explore and simply can't, a subject we'll take up in another post.

Yet one of those rarely visited, extraordinary places will be open Saturday to those with tickets for [the downtown living tour](#):

The Daniel Webster balcony, on the second floor of the [old Courier Building](#).

The view from that balcony will soon fall within someone's living room. It is part of one of the available apartments in the building, which owner Jim Prioletti has transformed into new commercial space, with nine residential units. That means the tour offers the chance to look out from the same vantage point once used by Webster, a major 19th century American figure intertwined with some of the most legendary events in regional history.

The story goes like this:

Webster, as secretary of state for President Millard Fillmore, came to Syracuse in May 1851, exactly 164 years ago this month, to offer a warning. Syracuse had become a national hotbed of the movement to abolish slavery, and African-Americans escaping bondage in the South often passed through the city en route to Canada and freedom.



The Webster balcony, Montgomery Street, with St.

Paul's Cathedral in the background. Dennis Nett | dnett@syracuse.com

To Webster, this city was "**a laboratory of abolitionism, libel, and treason.**" On May 26, he stood on a small metal balcony on the **Courier Building** - at what is now Montgomery and Washington streets - and issued a warning to the crowd below: Any violation of the Fugitive Slave Law, which called for returning those in flight into bondage, would be "treason, treason and nothing else."

A few months later, on Oct. 1, an angry collection of local citizens offered a very public answer: They stormed a downtown police station, knocked down the doors and **freed William "Jerry" Henry, who'd escaped slavery.** He continued his journey toward Canada, and liberty.

A monument at Clinton Square, a few blocks from the Courier Building, honors that rescue. [Dennis Connors](#), curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association, said the balcony is apparently the one upon which Webster actually stood: Old images at the OHA indicate it hasn't changed, over the years.

From the balcony, Connors said, Webster could look upon Market Square and an older and smaller City Hall than the one today. The Erie Canal was a block away, to his left; if he couldn't see it, there was a good chance he could smell it. To his right was Washington Street, upon which trains rumbled back and forth, in the heart of Syracuse.

It's easy to forget the power meaning of the moment, Connors said. The nation's secretary of state - already a famous historical figure - was offering a direct warning in Syracuse, because the city was seen as such a hotbed of dissent.

The visit also highlighted what Connors describes as Webster's "moral crisis:" The longtime senator and statesman from New England moved from being a young man fiercely opposed to slavery into a secretary of state who saw abolitionists as "extremists," who threatened to ruin the union.



The Jerry Rescue monument, Clinton Square:

Recalling local defiance to a nearby warning from then-Secretary of State Daniel Webster. *Ellen Blalock | eblalock@syracuse.com*

As for the Courier Building, built in 1844, Connors and Prioletti both said it is among the oldest surviving buildings in Syracuse. It took its name from being the longtime home of the old Courier newspaper. Later, it'd be the headquarters for the Loyal Order of the Moose; workers found some old Moose banners and memorabilia, between the walls.

By the 1980s, the future of the landmark seemed uncertain: George Koulouris, who bought it in 1990 and turned it into the old Daniel Webster's restaurant, said he feared, at the time, it might get leveled for parking.

Later, in the years before Prioletti bought it, the building housed [L'Adour, a French restaurant that closed in 2013](#). Koulouris, who owned it years ago, said he still drives by the place, to admire what's happening - "I saved it so other people could do better things with it" - and Prioletti said the project has turned into one of the great passions of his life.

His father, he said, was a restaurant captain at the [Hotel Syracuse](#). His wife's father worked as a barber at the old Yates Hotel, which used to be across the street from Prioletti's building. The city recently added an "East Genesee Street" sign to the pole in front of the structure; even though that street was rerouted years ago, that's still, officially, the Courier Building's address.

'We've destroyed so much,' Prioletti said, "and a building like this helps identify what we were, what we might have been and what we became."

The entire restoration, he said, cost about \$2.2 million, although the balcony needed only minor work. He'll have flowers on it when people go there Saturday as part of the [Downtown Living Tour](#), and they can look up from the sidewalk and imagine how it was when Webster offered his address

Or go inside, to look out from one of those spots we all should get the chance to see.

- [Sean Kirst](#)