

Site of planned German pub was part of Syracuse's salty past





1 / 17

The Syracuse brine pump house at the corner of Spencer and Maltbie streets played an integral role in the city's salt industry. Photo circa 1890s. The former D.R. Casey Construction Co. building stands on the same site today. (Courtesy of Liverpool Public Library)

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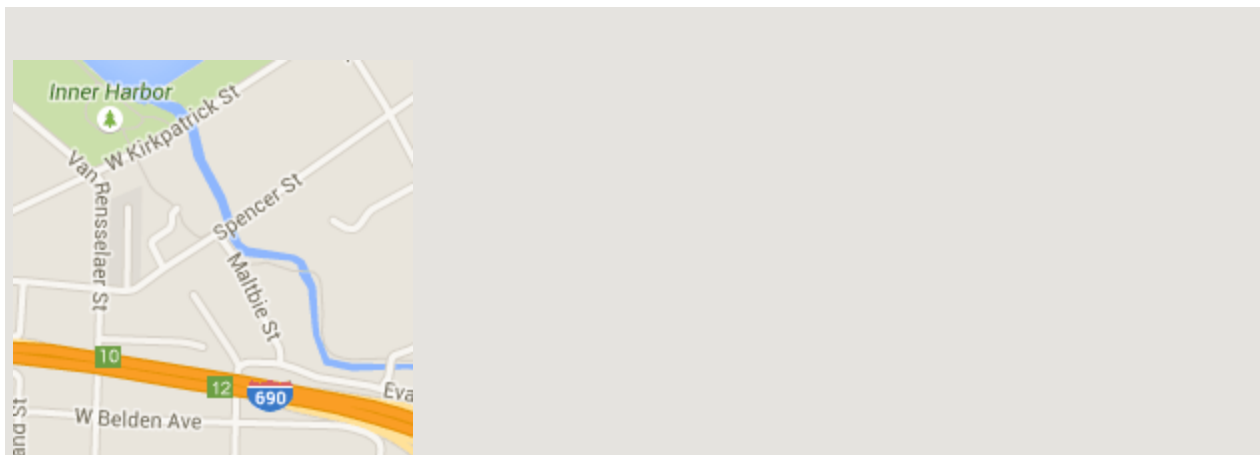
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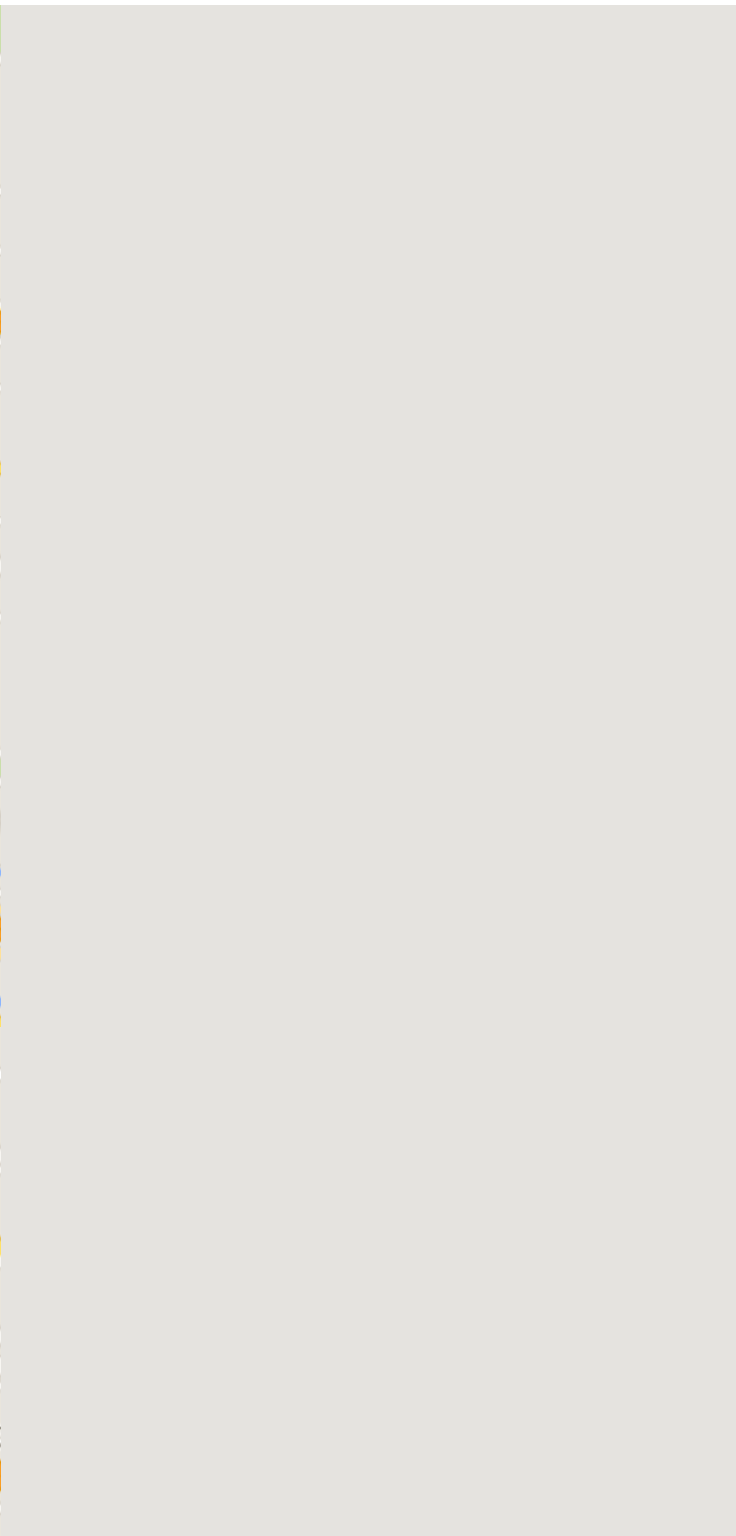
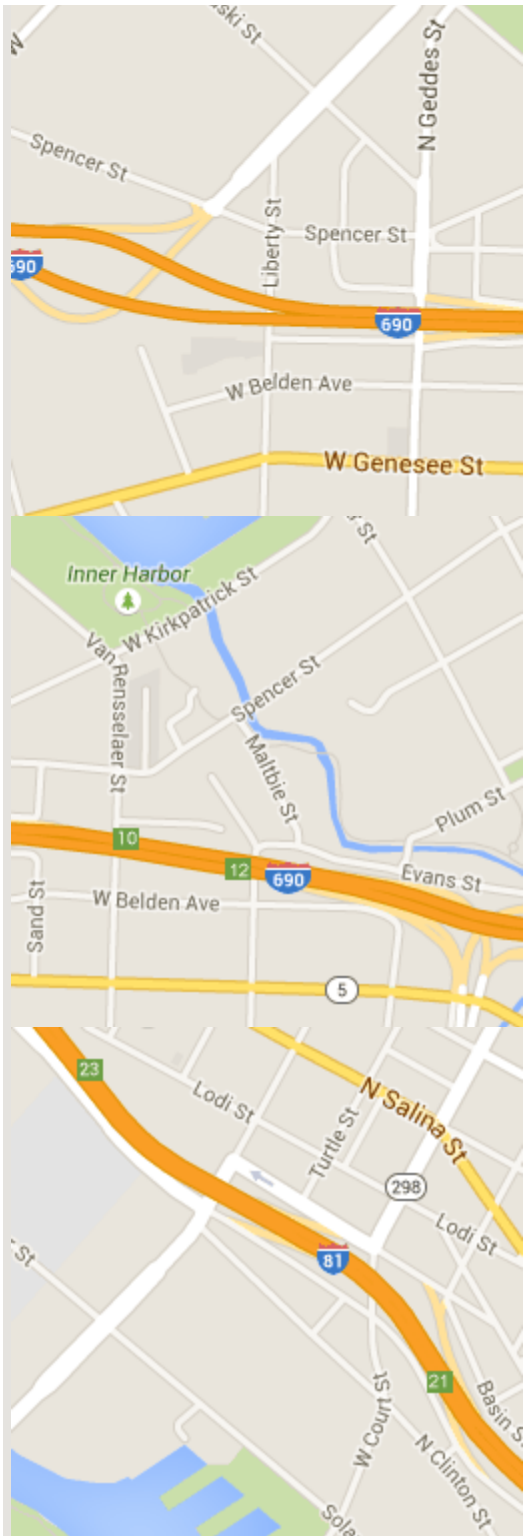
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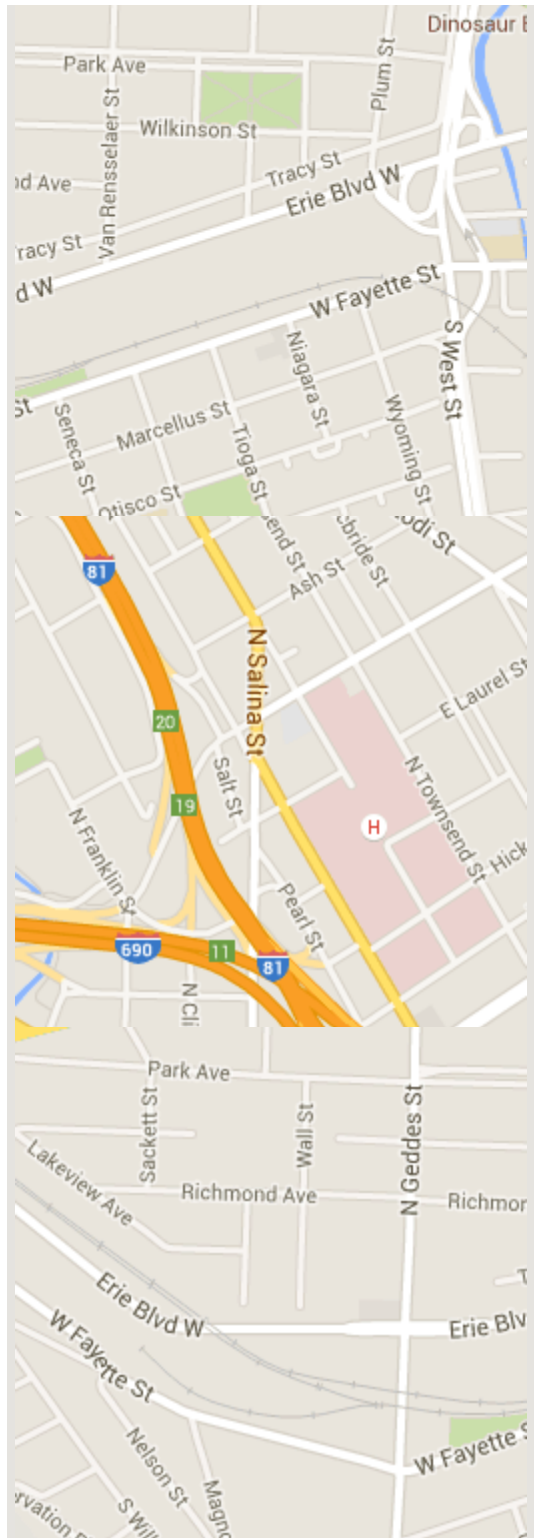
Syracuse, N.Y. — A local historian is hoping a project to turn a rundown industrial building into a German pub unveils rare artifacts from the industry that gave Syracuse its nickname, Salt City.

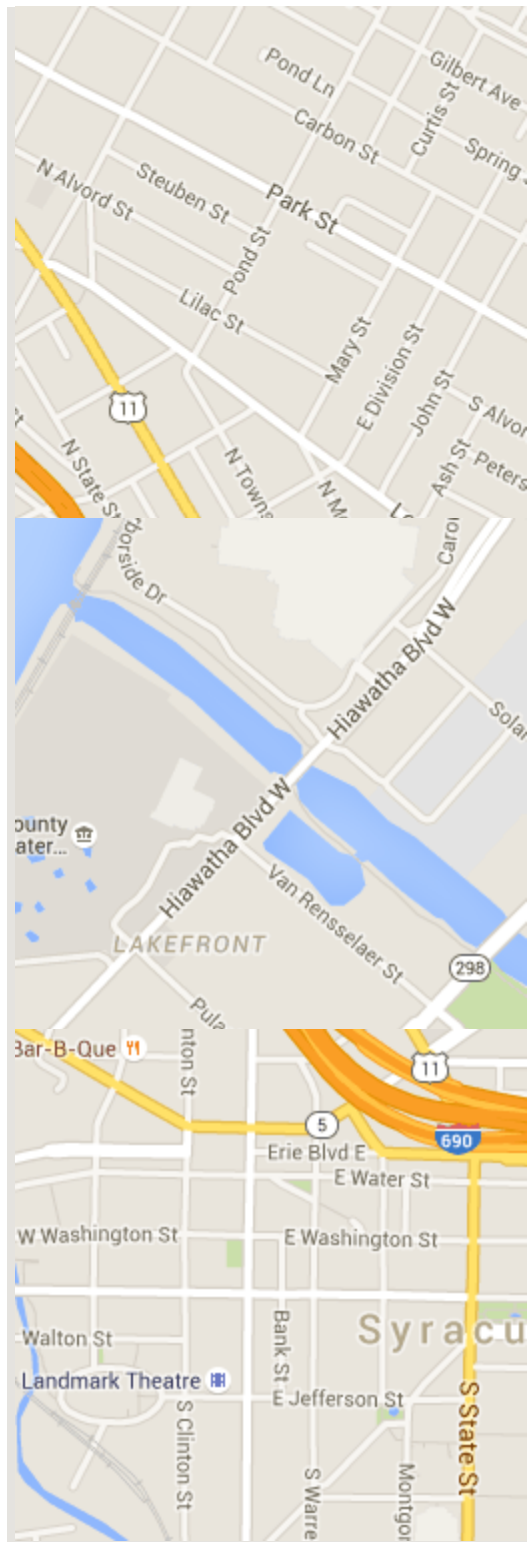
Dennis Connors has asked the owner of the former D.R. Casey Construction Co. building to search for remains of a stone pump house that played an integral role in the city's salt industry in the 1800s.

Salt manufacturing was Syracuse's first major industry and drew many settlers to the city, but there are few artifacts of the industry still in existence.









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"It's rarer than any Erie Canal structure," said Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association. "There are pieces of the Erie Canal all over the place."

Connors is one of the few people in Syracuse who would even know that the pump house once stood at the corner of Spencer and Maltbie streets.

One of only three in the city, it was built into the side of a hill in the 1860s by the state, which controlled the salt industry. The building contained a large pump powered by a water wheel. It pumped brine from the many salt wells surrounding Onondaga Lake into reservoirs. The brine was then sent to manufacturers who extracted the salt using boiling blocks and solar sheds.

When Connors saw a [story on syracuse.com](#) recently about plans to turn the Casey building into a German beer garden-style pub, Connors contacted the building's owner, **Len Montreal**, and asked if he would search for whatever may remain of the pump house's foundation and to preserve it. Montreal agreed to do so.

The pump house was demolished sometime between 1908 and 1924. (It can be seen in a 1908 city atlas but not a 1924 atlas.) However, Connors said a portion of the building's back wall likely was left in the hill to act as a retaining wall.

A similar pump house off the 1800 block of Erie Boulevard West, known as the Geddes pump house, was demolished in the 1930s. A section of its back wall was left as a retaining wall, though it is now covered in heavy vegetation and inaccessible to the public. It, too, had been built into a hill to provide elevation for its overshot water wheel. (As with all three of the city's pump houses, the design used the weight of the water and the force of gravity to spin the wheel.)

Nothing at all remains of the city's third pump house. Called the Salina pump house, it was located at the corner of Hiawatha Boulevard and Park Street, where a Babies "R" Us store now stands.

Syracuse's salt industry died out early in the 20th century due to Onondaga Lake's declining salinity and competition from salt producers out west. The many salt wells, boiling blocks and solar sheds that dotted the city's lakefront were made of wood. When they were torn down, there was nothing left, Connors said.

The only significant salt industry artifacts known to exist in Syracuse are the remains of the Geddes pump house foundation; two water wheel hubs salvaged from the Geddes pump house, one displayed at Onondaga County's Salt Museum in Liverpool and the other in Syracuse's Franklin Square; the head of the Gale salt well off Onondaga Lake Parkway; and a portion of a salt block chimney, displayed at the Salt Museum.

A syracuse.com reporter and Eric Paparo, director of corporate services for Montreal Construction Co.'s real estate arm, Allegiance Realty, searched the Casey building property and could find no evidence of the pump house's foundation in the hillside. Connors said it is possible that soil is covering up any remains of the foundation.

The reporter and Paparo did find the corner of a stone foundation at the bottom of berm that separates the property from Spencer Street. That's the approximate location of a building that can be seen near the pump house in a photo from the 1890s. The building had wood siding, but it's possible that it had a stone foundation.

The berm was not present in the 1890s photo, so it's appears likely that a portion of the building's foundation was left in place as a retaining wall for the berm.

Montreal said he plans to bring in construction equipment to dig into the hillside behind the Casey building to search for any remaining pieces of the pump house.

"I'd like to be there to see what shows up," Connors said. "It may not be much to look at, but it may be all we've got."

Montreal said he will preserve anything he finds and has agreed to allow the historical association to install a marker detailing the site's history.

Once redeveloped, the Casey building will be leased to restaurateurs Danny Vault and Doug LaLone. Vault, owner of The York restaurant in Armory Square, plans to operate a German pub in the building. LaLone, operator of The Gem diner, plans to open a yogurt shop in the building.

Salt was first discovered near Onondaga Lake in 1654 by Father Simon Le Moyne, a French Jesuit missionary, and became a major industry for the city, attracting many settlers because of the jobs salt making provided.

Even though the industry died more than 100 years ago, Syracuse is sometimes still referred to as Salt City.

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