

Designed by Joseph Lyman Silsbee and opened in 1876, the former Syracuse Savings Bank building in Clinton Square is known for its Gothic Revival style. (Photos by Rick Moriarty / rmoriarty@syracuse.com)



Banking on APARTMENTS

Upper 3 floors of former Syracuse Savings building will become high-end residences

By Rick Moriarty
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The upper floors of the historic Syracuse Savings Bank building, known for its over-the-top Gothic Revival-style architecture, are to be converted into high-end apartments.

Tony Fiorito and John Funciello, who bought the ornate, 139-year-old bank building seven years ago, plan to build 22 apartments on its upper three floors. Its bottom three floors will continue to be occupied by Bank of America.

Fiorito and Funciello have submitted plans for the conversions to the Syracuse Landmark Preservation Board and are seeking state and federal grants to help offset the estimated \$3 million cost of the conversion. Fiorito said they hope to begin construction by the end of the year and have the apartments ready for occupancy next summer.

The six-story bank building was designed by a young architect, Joseph Lyman Silsbee, whose proposal was chosen over those submitted by a number of other noted architects, including Archimedes Russell.

When it opened in 1876, it was the tallest building in



Owner Tony Fiorito holds a photograph of the Syracuse Savings Bank building while standing in the tower of the historic structure.



Property manager Richard Ferris stands on the catwalk inside the building's tower.

Syracuse, with a central tower reaching 170 feet into the air. It also was the first building in Syracuse with a passenger elevator.

The building stands out for its many Gothic Revival details, including steep roof peaks and windows with pointed arches, also known as hoodmolds. Its tan sandstone walls are highlighted with reddish-brown sandstone.

Silsbee is said to have put his offices in the top of the tower until he moved to Chicago in the 1880s. However,

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Downtown living trend reviving underused office buildings

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the top of the tower now has no floor, only a metal catwalk that provides a view out the tower's windows. The floor, if it existed, might have been removed when steel framing was added to the interior of the tower to improve structural support in the 1930s.

The building is a Syracuse icon, appearing in many historical photos of Clinton Square, with the Erie Canal running past the Syracuse Savings Bank.

Its design is unusual in that its many architectural features even appear on the side of the building that faced the canal, which was filled in in the 1920s and is now Erie Boulevard. Generally, the canal side was considered the back side of a building, not worth the expense of a fancy facade.

The upper floors have been used as office space since the building opened on the east side of Clinton Square, but have had high vacancy rates in recent years. Fiorito said he has relocated two office tenants to his other properties.

Two years ago, Fiorito, a former architect, converted the three upper floors of the historic White Memorial Building on Washington Street into 12 apartments. He is also considering converting the upper floors of another historic building, the



The offices on the top three floors of the Syracuse Savings Bank building are vacant. (Rick Moriarty / rmoriarty@syracuse.com)

nearby 23-story State Tower Building, into apartments, but he said the cost of that conversion might be prohibitive because of the need to add a second staircase.

Fiorito said it's fortunate that the trend toward downtown living has provided a means for re-using vacant and underused office space.

"I love renovating these buildings," he said. "It's a challenge, but it's really part of our city. It's rewarding to bring back some of the original architecture."

Dennis Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association, said the fact that it is a bank building explains its design and longevity.

"The bank wanted to create a sense of prominence and stability, and it had the

resources to do an over-the-top building like that," he said. "Even in the days of urban renewal, when they hacked buildings down left and right, this one was preserved."

Syracuse Savings operated from 1849 until 1987, when it was acquired by Norstar Bank.

Fiorito said he expects the apartments to appeal to young professionals, the same demographic that has been filling up many of the other downtown apartments the past few years.

"The (residential) market is so strong now, especially anytime you have an historic building that has a lot of character," said Fiorito. "And location is another key. This is right on Clinton Square."