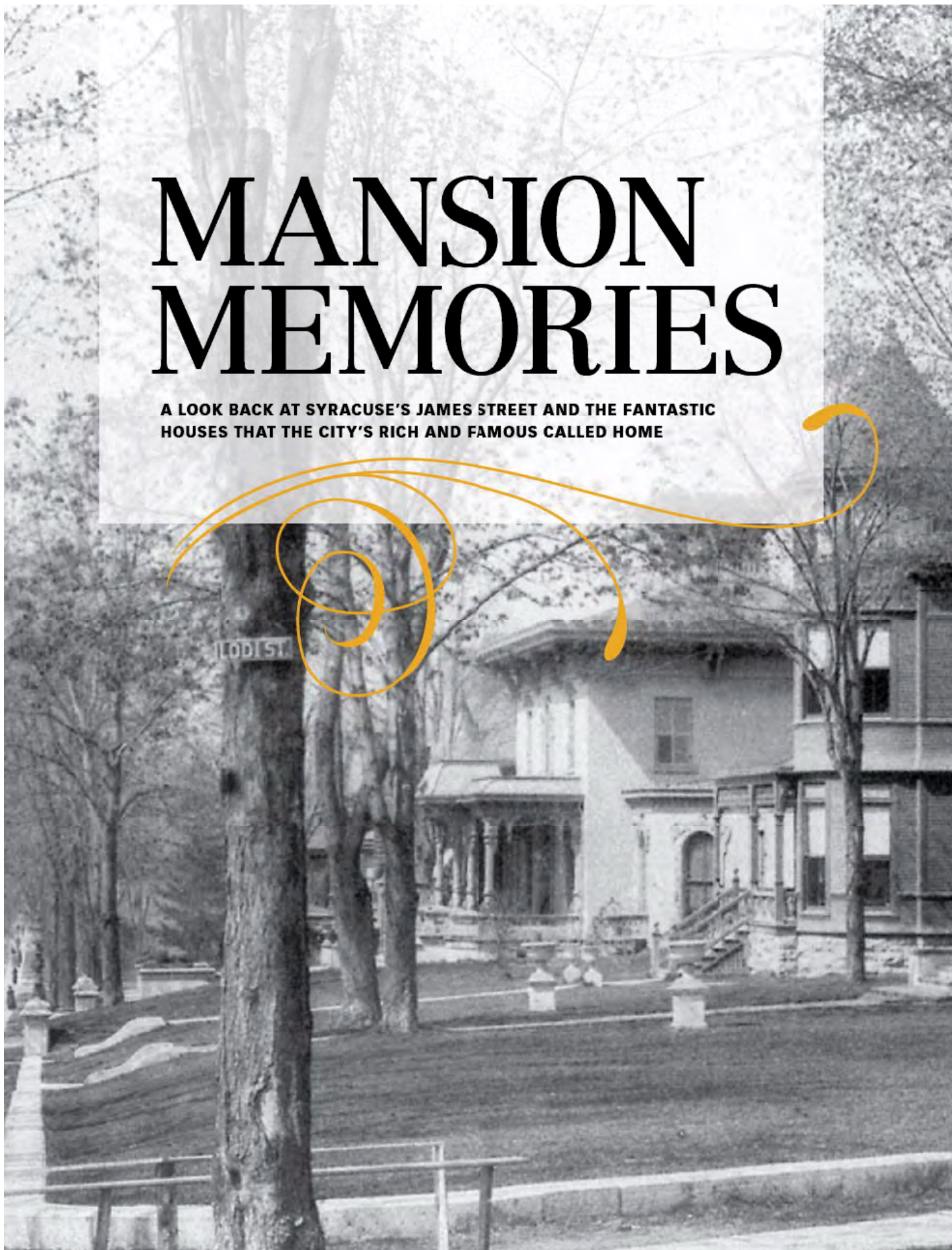
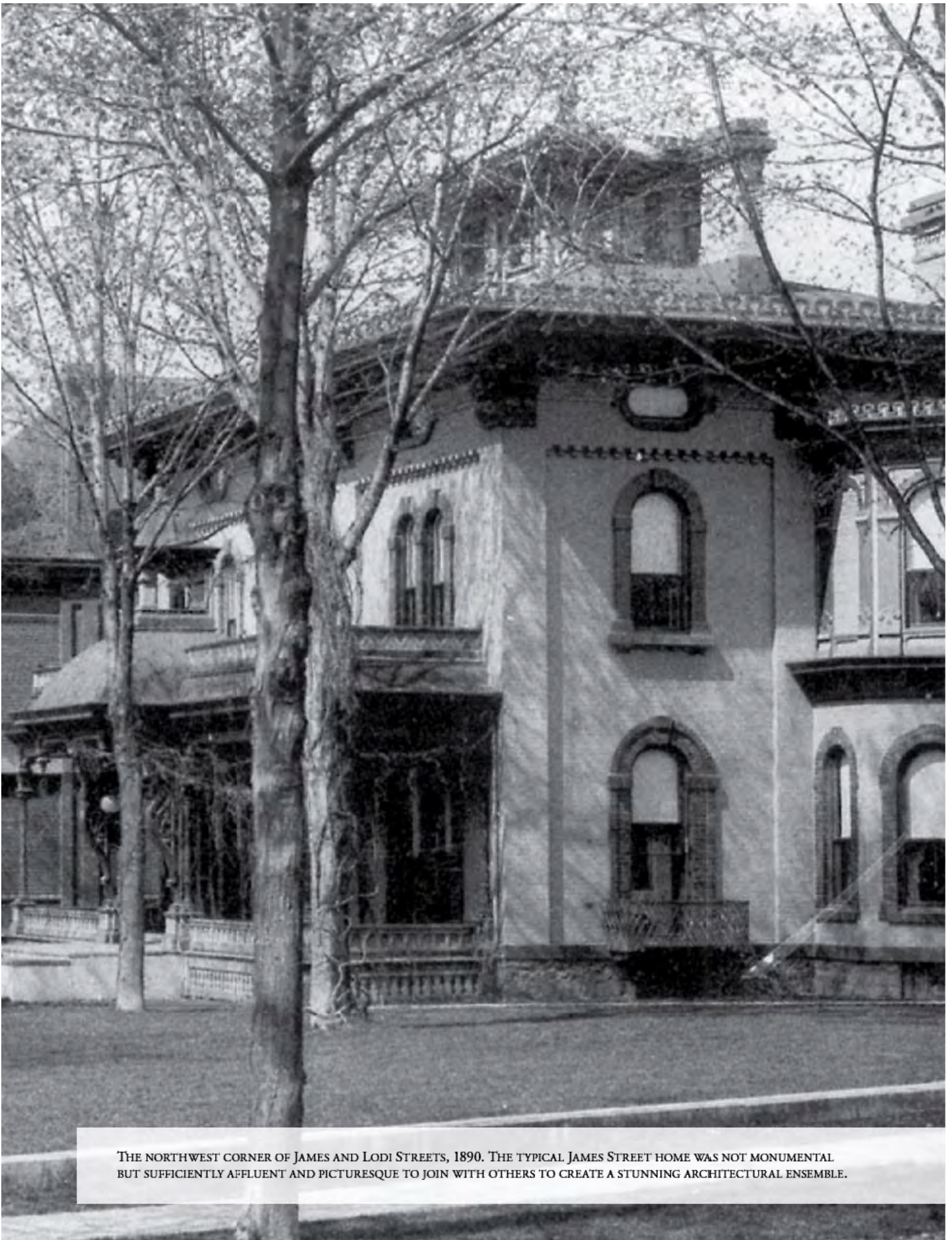


MANSSION MEMORIES

**A LOOK BACK AT SYRACUSE'S JAMES STREET AND THE FANTASTIC
HOUSES THAT THE CITY'S RICH AND FAMOUS CALLED HOME**





THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF JAMES AND LODI STREETS, 1890. THE TYPICAL JAMES STREET HOME WAS NOT MONUMENTAL BUT SUFFICIENTLY AFFLUENT AND PICTURESQUE TO JOIN WITH OTHERS TO CREATE A STUNNING ARCHITECTURAL ENSEMBLE.



THE DEMOLITION OF THE D.M. EDWARDS HOME IN 1960. THE POINTED PROFILE OF WHERE THE CONSERVATORY WAS ATTACHED IS CLEARLY VISIBLE. THE HOUSE WAS AT 953 JAMES ST., NOW THE SITE OF BRYANT & STRATTON COLLEGE.



BY **DENNIS CONNORS**
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF
THE ONONDAGA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Most 19th-century American cities had residential avenues where conspicuous wealth was showcased. Syracuse gave birth to three such spots: West Genesee, West Onondaga and James streets.

One-hundred years ago, they were lined with the prestigious homes whose occupants were the community's power brokers: local industrialists, judges, bankers, politicians and society dames. Most featured bold architecture that would cost millions of dollars to replicate today.

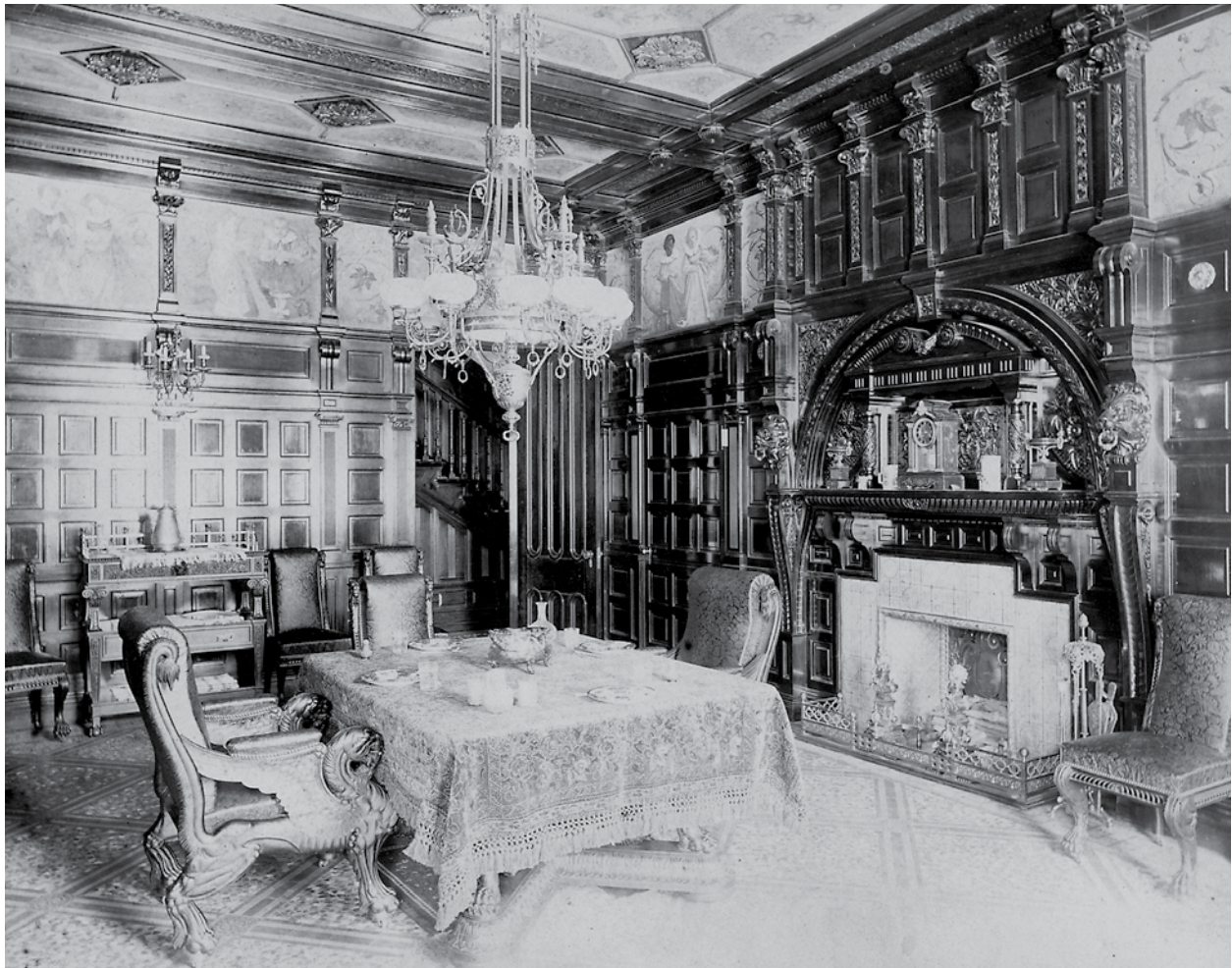
Changes in lifestyles and economic fortunes, along with suburban growth, made these American castles obsolete by the end of World War II. Most Upstate cities lost some por-

tion of this glorious architectural heritage but none more so than Syracuse.

All three streets had started as important roads, connecting Syracuse to other early 19th-century settlements in the region. Once established as avenues for those with disposable income, their status as the place to build an impressive home was set. James Street became the leader because it had topography in its favor. It offered that aesthetic advantage, soon enhanced by towering arches of elm trees, and including views toward the picturesque hills of southern Onondaga County.

In 1897, one "prominent citizen of Chicago" who was visiting the city remarked:

"I know of no city in the country which possesses a more attractive residence street. By reason of its incline, as well as by reason of its foliage, which intertwines in most beautiful and fantastic fashion ..."



His thoughts echoed those of the novelist Henry James, who, upon visiting Syracuse in 1883, had written:

“... James Street, the Fifth Avenue of Syracuse, one of the handsomest American streets I have ever seen.”

Interestingly, the street had been named after his grandfather, William James, an early Albany investor in local real estate.

Two residents gave James Street its early prestige by the 1840s. One was Moses D. Burnet, agent of the Syracuse Company, which was a land speculation firm, developer and builder, with interests ranging from hotels to salt evaporating fields. Burnet became a prominent driver of business in Syracuse and he chose the corner of James and Townsend streets as the place for his imposing Greek Revival residence. Today, it is the home of the Century Club.

Shortly after, Elias Leavenworth, who would become Syracuse's second mayor, built his equally impressive Greek Revival mansion a few lots up on James. The lower end of James Street began to fill in with other grand homes. The lots on those first blocks were not particularly large, like most in the early village, but as development spread up the now prestigious hill, lot size expanded to be measured in acres.

As Syracuse's population increased throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ►

THE DINING ROOM OF THE BARNES-HISCOCK MANSION, 1890. THE HOUSE, WHICH STILL STANDS ON JAMES STREET, WAS BUILT IN 1853 BUT WAS EXTENSIVELY REMODELED BOTH INSIDE AND OUT OVER THE YEARS. THIS ROOM WAS DESIGNED BY SYRACUSE ARCHITECT JOSEPH LYMAN SILSBEE IN 1882 AND REMAINS ESSENTIALLY INTACT TODAY.

downtown's commercial space grew outward from its Clinton Square core. Nearby residential lots succumbed to the pressure for conversion.

West Genesee Street went first, its estates leveled as their acreage was converted by the 1930s to automobile dealerships and other commercial uses. Lower James, where houses were closer together and much nearer to downtown, was already seeing many homes being converted to rooming houses and broken up into low-income rental flats.

Additionally, new generations of the affluent families, coming of age in the 20th century, gravitated toward different lifestyles. Some had moved out of town for various reasons; others to newer developments like Sedgwick Farms, Strathmore and Bradford Hills. These places offered "contemporary" style homes designed for more modern living. The availability of autos made the longer commute easy. All of this increasingly made many mansions obsolete as single-family residences by the 1940s.

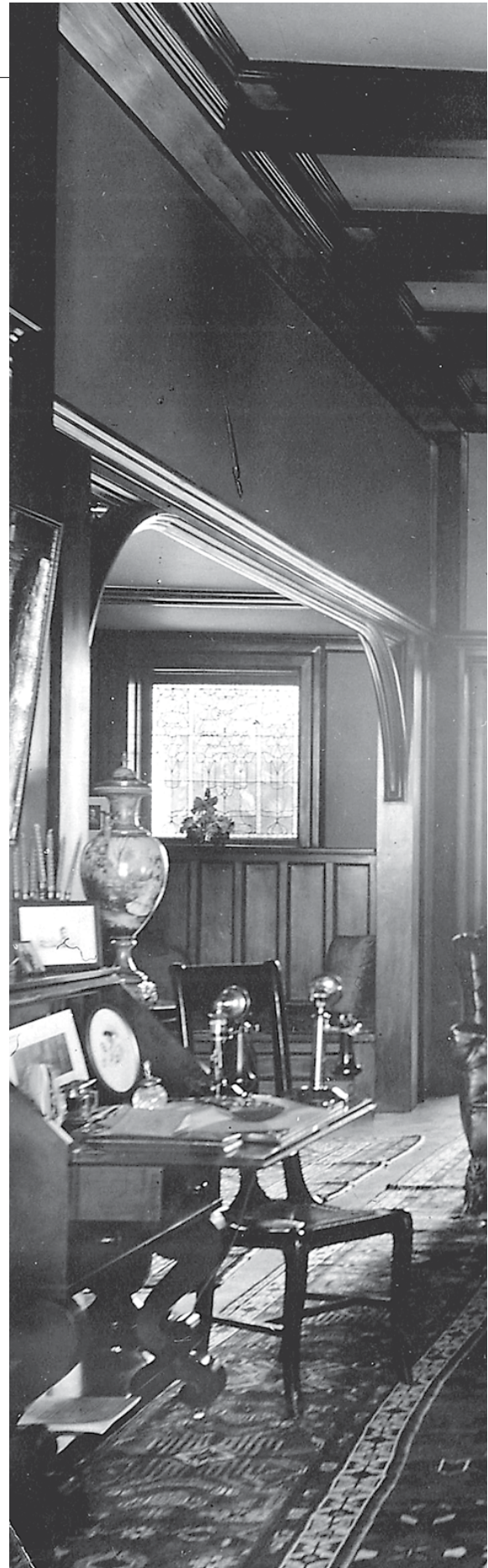
There was growing concern that this pattern would turn James Street into a coarse commercial strip, as had happened to West Genesee Street. The city hoped to encourage a higher level of development along James, primarily garden apartments such as the Schopfer Court complex, already built in 1917 near Catherine Street. World War II postponed matters, but the concern remained.

A few homes were spared, for a while, by new uses. The former classical revival residence of D.M. Edwards, owner of the local Edwards retail store, survived as an annex for Le Moyne College from 1946 until it was demolished in 1960. The grand Georgian Revival home of Judge Frank Hiscock became the Corinthian Club in 1949 and now is being developed as an historic house museum – perhaps the only place where the public can still experience a slice of James Street's faded glory.

Many believe the demolition and loss in 1950 of the Leavenworth house was the watershed event. This home was still essentially a single-family residence, shabby but intact. Its significance was well documented in national architectural publications. Measured drawings and photos of the home had been prepared by the federal government during the 1930s as a particularly fine example of the Greek Revival style.

It was proposed to build an apartment building on the site. Many citizens were upset at such a thought. There even was a Post-Standard editorial encouraging its preservation. There was little effort made to save it, however, and down it came. This helped to create a mindset. If the Leavenworth house, with all its significance, could not generate sufficient motivation in the citizenry to rescue it, it was likely that others would not, either. ►

THE LIVING ROOM OF THE D.M. EDWARDS HOME, EARLY 20TH CENTURY. THIS VIEW SHOWS THE MAIN STAIRWAY ON THE RIGHT AND A VIEW INTO THE ATTACHED CONSERVATORY.







THE 600 BLOCK OF JAMES STREET, AROUND 1925, WHEN ELMS TOWERED OVER THE STREET, CREATING A LEAFY GREEN CANOPY.

Still worried that continued speculation would lead to disorder; the city enacted rezoning in 1954. It allowed for more commercial development but also re-use of the old mansions for professional offices and clubs. But historic preservation was not in vogue, nor were there the financial incentives in place like today's preservation tax credits. Developers continued to push for demolitions for new commercial buildings, with the large lot sizes allowing for adjacent parking lots, unlike downtown offices. In 1957, the impressive stone chateau of typewriter king Lyman Smith, romantically named Uarda, succumbed to the wrecker's ball. It was not even 75 years old.

In the early 1950s, a large apartment building was proposed for the intersection at Lodi Street, then the site of three impressive Victorian mansions. City planning officials decided this was an unstoppable trend. The site gave way to the Skyline Apartments.

More followed as the pattern was now established. Stylistically, the results were generally ordinary. The architecture of James, once the grandest, died its slow death during the 1950s and 60s; an era not generally known for its inspiring new architecture.

In 1964, the authors of the book "Architecture Worth Saving in Onondaga County" wrote:

"Lower James Street ... was until about 20 years ago one of the most handsome residential streets in the state of New York. Its houses, ranging in date from the 1830s to the 1890s, were not only fine in themselves, but they constituted a beautiful ensemble. They have all disappeared,

and James Street has as little character today as the average street from Long Island to Los Angeles."

Outer sections of James, developed in the early 20th century, have fortunately been protected through local historic preservation legislation.

Perhaps the best or worst example of what could happen, once this commercial re-zoning mentality caught hold, relates to what was commonly called the old Everson Museum. It originally was built around 1851 as a private home for William Blair, a salt manufacturer and dry goods merchant. By the early 20th century, it was converted to a facility for the Knights of Columbus and expanded. Then in 1937, it was taken over by the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, predecessor to the Everson Museum of Art, which used it until the new Everson opened in 1968.

In April 1968, both the city council and the planning commission approved a special permit for the site to allow construction of a gas station. They attached several conditions to the permit to assure, in part, that the site would be attractively landscaped.

Looking at the northeast corner of James and State streets today, one could ask if there is a better example of weak design review. In reality, the motivation was more likely that the proposed property assessment for the gas station was estimated to be around \$100,000 while the old museum site was valued at about \$31,000. The city would clearly see its tax revenue rise with the new gas pumps.

Fortunately for us today, there are lessons to be learned from the loss of lower James Street, including the impor-



tance of design in planning decisions and the value of historic preservation to a city's soul. Also, fortunately, much of the visual, social, economic and architectural history of James Street is preserved in the collections of the Onondaga Historical Association.

The Former Blair-L

ynch mansion at James and State streets had been extended to the north and converted to institutional uses by the 1930s, including the first Everson Museum of Art.

In 1968, it would give way to a gas station.



Dennis Connors is curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association.

GRAVES-EDWARDS HOUSE

953 JAMES ST.



YEAR BUILT: 1865

RESIDENTS: The house was built for Nathan Graves, who was in banking and served as Syracuse mayor for a single term in 1874. The house was purchased in 1905 by Daniel Murray Edwards, the owner of Edwards Department Store in downtown Syracuse.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: The house was known for its two-story classical portico. Edwards had the house extensively remodeled in 1913 into a Colonial Revival style.

YEAR DEMOLISHED: 1960. It is the site of Bryant & Stratton College.



UARDA, THE SMITH HOUSE

918 JAMES ST.



YEAR BUILT: 1883

RESIDENTS: The house was built for Howard G. White, the owner of The Syracuse Standard. It was purchased by Lyman C. Smith, typewriter manufacturer, in 1895 and extensively redecorated on the interior. The Smith family named the house Uarda.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: The architectural style was considered Chateausque Gothic. The stone exterior was somewhat severe but the house was known for its highly decorated interior, with elaborate stenciling, allegorical murals on the ceilings and a Moorish-inspired room known as the Alcazar Room.

YEAR DEMOLISHED: 1957. It is the site of James Square Nursing Home.



LEAVENWORTH MANSION

601 JAMES ST. (NORTHEAST CORNER OF MCBRIDE STREET)

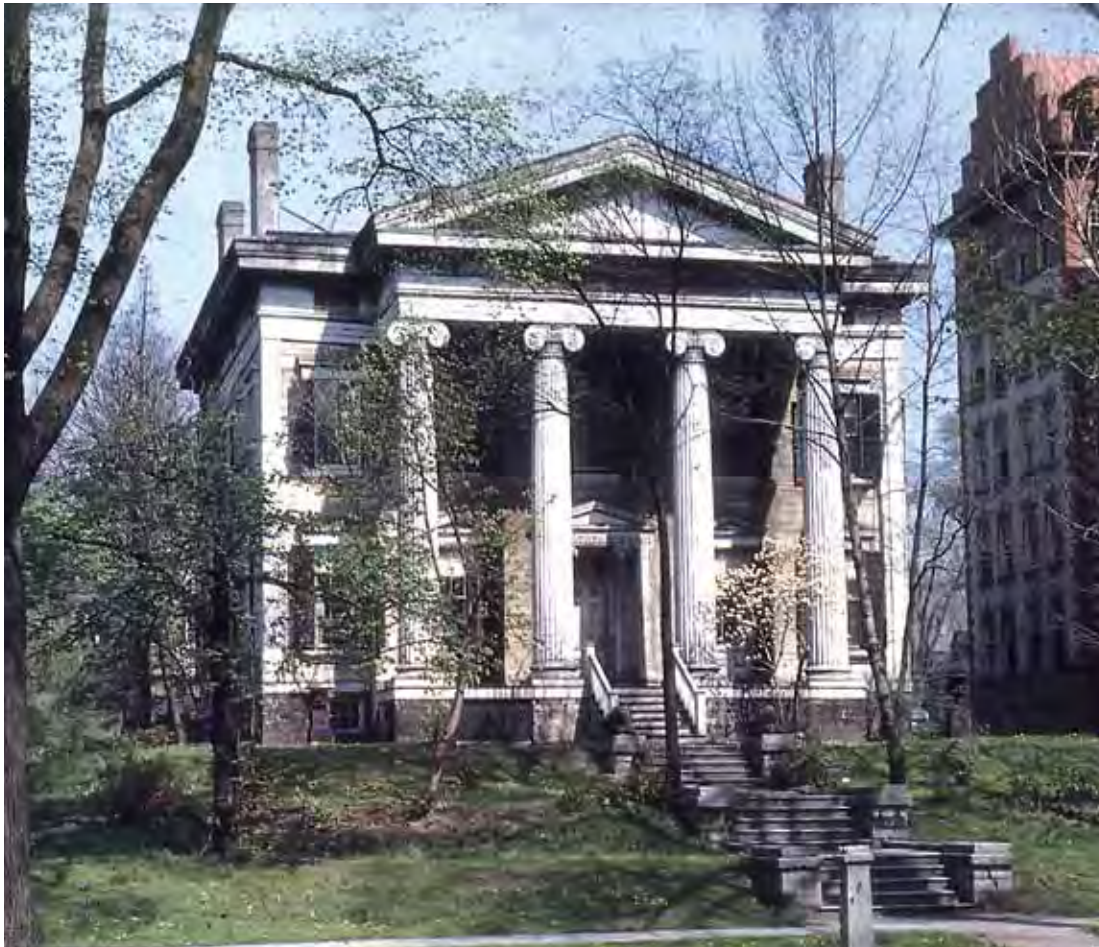


YEAR BUILT: 1839.

RESIDENTS: The house was built by Elias Leavenworth. He was active in many areas, but primarily a lawyer, and perhaps best known as the second mayor of Syracuse in 1849. He also served in the state legislature and as New York secretary of state. Leavenworth is considered the driving force in creating Oakwood Cemetery.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: The house was a particularly fine, intact example of Greek Revival, not only in its overall form, but in the execution and proportion of many details, such as moldings, doorways and windows.

YEAR DEMOLISHED: 1950. An office building is on the site today.



LONGSTREET HOUSE

757 JAMES ST.



YEAR BUILT: Around 1852.

RESIDENTS: The house was built by Henry K. Brown, who sold it to Alonzo C. Yates in 1858. Meanwhile, Cornelius T. Longstreet had built a massive gothic castle on what would become University Hill. Eventually, not satisfied with the remote hillside location, Longstreet traded his home with Yates in 1867 (hence it becoming known as Yates Castle) and the Longstreet family moved to the James Street house.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: The house, eventually called the Yates-Longstreet House, was a classic example of the early Italianate style, with its broad, bracketed eaves, rounded windows and decorative porch.

YEAR DEMOLISHED: 1950. The Skyline Apartments are on this site.

