

GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

| BY DENNIS CONNORS

A city is always evolving, but if it is fortunate, it is home to structures that are old and new. But sometimes there are city landmarks that become lodged in our collective memory long after the physical structure is no more or it barely resembles what it once was. With that in mind, we look back at just a few CNY landmarks that are gone (or almost gone), but certainly not forgotten.



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1930s



TODAY

AMBOY AIRPORT

LOCATION: 6291 Airport Road, Camillus

ABOUT: Syracuse's first true municipal airport was located in the little hamlet of Amboy in the town of Camillus. It served from 1927 until Hancock Airport opened in North Syracuse shortly after World War II. Celebrities landed at Amboy Airport, including Charles Lindbergh, who was on a cross-country promotional tour following his Atlantic crossing.

TODAY: Amboy Airport is Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency's Amboy Compost Site. Its buildings are gone, but the faint outline of the runway can be traced on aerial views, such as Google Maps. Hancock Airport is now known as Syracuse Hancock International Airport. It is named after Congressman Clarence E. Hancock, who served from 1927 to 1946.

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1930



TODAY

NORTH HIGH SCHOOL

LOCATION: 135 Mary St., Syracuse

ABOUT: After Central High opened in downtown Syracuse in 1902, residents of the North Side wanted a second high school in their area. They advocated for the prominent hillside location of the old penitentiary at Pond and Lilac streets. "North" High opened on that site in 1908.

The building was designed by Archimedes Russell in the Beaux Art classical form popular then, the same general style he used earlier on Central High and the Onondaga County Courthouse. A large addition was made to the school's south side in 1927 to house gymnasium and cafeteria facilities.

TODAY: North High served students until 1964 when it was replaced by Henninger High School. The city of Syracuse demolished the original 1908 portion in 1965 and converted the newer addition into a recreation and community center. In 1986 the surviving portion was razed and the site was used to build housing for low-income and elderly residents. For an older generation of area residents, many first and second generation Italian-Americans, North High still forms a treasured landmark in their memories.



1940



TODAY

LEAVENWORTH MANSION

LOCATION: 601 James St., Syracuse, northeast corner James and McBride streets

ABOUT: There once were many large 19th-century mansions on James Street in Syracuse. In the decades immediately following World War II, most succumbed to commercial development.

One of the first significant mansions to be threatened was the Leavenworth estate – a classic Greek Revival home of the early 1840s. While worn by 1950, it still retained much of its historic integrity. Its architecture and interior details were of such note, that it had been documented with both photographs and detailed measured drawings in 1934 by the Historic American Buildings Survey. It was the only James Street mansion to be so recorded and one of the few in Onondaga County.

Interest in making the site attractive for development led to threatened demolition in 1950. Many citizens protested but there were no historic preservation laws at that time and down the mansion came.

TODAY: A non-descript commercial building is on the lot. Ironically, the lot sat vacant for several years after the mansion was torn down.

1931



TODAY



THE CAFÉ DEWITT

LOCATION: East side of State Street between Erie Boulevard and Water Street, Syracuse

ABOUT: In 1931, with the country deep in a depression, inventor and sometime entrepreneur Julian Brown decided to open a spectacular night club to lift the spirits of his fellow Syracusans. The site that he chose was a former lumber yard adjacent to the Erie Canal.

Brown was the son of the recently deceased local industrialist, Alexander Brown, and Julian had inherited money to burn. He spent a reported \$250,000 on his stunning art deco club or close to \$4 million today. The Café Dewitt offered entertainment and glamour, but Julian seemed to lose money on most of his ventures. Selling liquor was still illegal in 1931, which put a dent in his club's income. Once Prohibition ended in 1933, it could serve alcohol at its 42-foot long bar, but the Café Dewitt never succeeded financially. Brown's nightclub was seized by the city in 1938 for back taxes and was demolished in 1939.

TODAY: A string of gas stations have marked the former site of the Café Dewitt, the latest being a Hess gas station.

1922



TODAY



KEITH'S MOVIE THEATER

LOCATION: West side of 400 block of South Salina Street, Syracuse

ABOUT: Perhaps nothing is as nostalgic to an older generation of Syracusans as the numerous movie houses that once populated the city. One of the grandest was RKO Keith's. Keith's theater opened on Salina Street in 1920 as a grand vaudeville house, but soon became a motion picture venue as Hollywood cinema took Syracuse and the nation by storm. Keith's interior featured elegant classical detailing as seen in views of the balcony lobby and the main auditorium. The theater's architect was Thomas Lamb, the same designer who would later turn to much more exotic forms in visioning Syracuse's Loew's State movie house, now the Landmark Theatre. Keith's lasted until the 1960s, when it was demolished during the urban renewal era to make way for Sibley's department store.

TODAY: The former Sibley's is scheduled for conversion to City Center, a multi-use arts complex that will house the Redhouse Arts Center.



ONONDAGA HOTEL

LOCATION: Northwest corner Warren and Jefferson streets, Syracuse

ABOUT: The renovation of the Hotel Syracuse is much in the news, but long-time residents will remember that the city once had another grand hotel, the Onondaga. The 11-story building opened in 1910. Its style was Classical Revival, designed by Buffalo architects Esenwein & Johnson. James A. Johnson, the primary designer, was born in Brewerton and graduated from Central High. Its public rooms were elegant and the Onondaga rivaled the Hotel Syracuse for many years.

The Onondaga's Travel Room Lounge premiered in 1941, the epitome of art deco sophistication. But the hotel closed in 1967, a victim of competition from suburban motels, its outdated rooms, high downtown property taxes and a lack of parking. It briefly housed the Powelson Business Institute during 1967-68. Then demolition came in 1970.

TODAY: Marine Midland Tower rose on the site and its lower floors provided parking for Dey Brothers department store. It is now called Onondaga Tower.



STREET CAR INFRASTRUCTURE

LOCATIONS: 720 Erie Blvd. W., 926 Wolf St., 1009 Wolf St., all in Syracuse

ABOUT: At the beginning of the 20th century, the Syracuse area had an electric-powered mass transit system. Streetcars ran throughout the city and inter-urban cars linked downtown with surrounding cities, towns and villages. By the early 1940s, they were all gone, replaced with buses.

TODAY: The streetcars might have vanished from city streets, but some of their infrastructure remains. Occasionally, a section of buried track will appear through a pothole in the pavement. Larger evidence also exists, however, in former buildings used by the electric transit system:

The former Tracy Street power plant, defined by the vestiges of its smokestack, sits at 720 Erie Blvd. W., hidden behind newer additions.

A portion of a city street car barn, built in 1893, remains at 926 Wolf St. (It is pictured above.)

A large car repair shop building, dating to 1909, still stands across Wolf Street.

1910



TODAY



SOLWAY PROCESS LANDMARKS: THE CASTLE AND GUILD HALL

LOCATION: Milton Avenue at Caroline Street, Solway

ABOUT: Allied Chemical closed its massive Solway plant in 1986, almost 30 years ago. Almost all traces of it have now been removed as the land was shifted to other uses. No one much missed losing the maze of unsightly industrial structures and miles of pipes, but folks were sad to see two landmarks along Milton Avenue torn down. The 1889 administration building, nicknamed "The Castle," was a late Victorian brick structure formed in the massive Richardsonian Romanesque style. In other cities, it could have passed for a court house or city hall. Nearby stood Guild Hall, a Shingle style community center built in 1893 for the company's once pioneering programs in social engagement and educational activities for its employees.

TODAY: Guild Hall was razed in 1989 and the castle (pictured above) followed in 2000. The goal was to make way for new industries that would provide jobs and taxes. Berry Plastics Corp. is now on the site.

1955



TODAY



SHOPPINGTOWN PLAZA

LOCATION: Erie Boulevard, DeWitt

ABOUT: Shoppingtown's recent owners have struggled to find a formula that will make the mall successful in the ever-changing world of retail. Most everyone today knows it as an enclosed mall, but it did not start like that. It opened in 1954 as one of the first and most ambitious of the suburban strip shopping plazas. It provided some of the heaviest and earliest competition to the traditional downtown retail district. The trend by the 1970s, however, had become enclosed malls and Shoppingtown was converted to one in 1974.

TODAY: Recent renovation plans call in part for demolishing a portion of the mall and converting that section once again into a strip shopping plaza.



1912



TODAY

ROSE HILL CEMETERY

LOCATION: Northeast corner of Lodi and Willow streets, Syracuse

ABOUT: With completion of Erie Canal in 1825 Syracuse's population began soaring. Its old burying ground on West Water Street was small so a new cemetery was laid out, northeast of downtown, and named Rose Hill. By 1841, lots were being sold and burials under way on the sloping hillside along Lodi Street.

A gothic-style gatehouse, which included quarters for the resident city sexton, was added in 1856. Rose Hill accepted a few interments as late as the 1930s, but it had long been eclipsed by other cemeteries. For its first 20 years, however, it was Syracuse primary cemetery for both the rich and indigent. Its most famous occupant is Syracuse's first mayor – Harvey Baldwin.

TODAY: Many gravestones were buried or removed later for safety reasons, but many remain, and the grounds still contains thousands of burials to this day.



1975



TODAY

SUBURBAN PARK

LOCATION: Suburban Park Apartments, 8100 Cazenovia Road, Manlius

ABOUT: Suburban Park, just south of the village of Manlius, is fondly remembered by today's aging Baby Boom population. The Syracuse & Suburban electric streetcar line started a modest resort there in 1898, giving the spot its identity as "Suburban" Park. Later operators built bowling alleys, and rides began appearing in the 1920s, including a roller coaster. In the 1950s and 1960s, more rides were added and many families enjoyed visits as part of company picnics hosted by firms such as Pass & Seymour, Syracuse China and Bristol Labs.

By the 1970s, suburban growth in the eastern suburbs was increasing land values. The owners began entertaining offers from developers looking to build apartments. A sale was made, and 1973 became the last season for Suburban Park.

TODAY: Suburban Park Apartments was built on the site. On the Suburban Park Facebook page, followers comment fondly about memories of roller skating and band concerts, and of course the rides that included the Tilt-A-Whirl, Comet roller coaster, the Whip and the Scooter bumper cars.

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