



PEACE, INC

at 'The Heart of Syracuse'

by Shirley Dawson

archive photo from Onondaga Historical Association

SOUTH SALINA STREET, FROM WASHINGTON STREET, SYRACUSE, N. Y.

In the loud, tawdry, throwaway culture of modern television, we need stories of a quieter kind, a longer lasting kind, a kind with character. And communities have stories. Without a story, who are we? Destroy the past, abuse the past, turn your backs on the past, and you're turning your backs on and destroying all we have.

- David McCullough

PEACE 50

EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO THRIVE | EST. 1968

If you were traveling through Central New York centuries ago, unless you lacked appreciation for your life, there is little likelihood you would have spent much time in the dismal, fetid swamp that occupied what is now downtown Syracuse. The tiny settlement of Salina to the north, too – it housed but a motley collection of “salt boilers” who died by the score each summer when the fever struck. The Onondagas of the Iroquois Nation were far shrewder. Their village was several miles to the south in what is now Onondaga Valley. Most early settlers, while developing salt wells along the Onondaga Lake shore, went home at night to Onondaga Valley or the highlands near Onondaga Hill.

Still, the downtown area had a lot going for it. It was level. It was close to the salt supplies. And, it had talented pioneers supporting it - among them, James Geddes and Joshua Forman. They convinced the state legislature that a canal through the region would enable east to meet west. Geddes took things a step further. He surveyed the route from Albany to the west, leading it through what is now downtown Syracuse. Almost overnight a lively community of hotels, shops, and factories appeared along the bank of the canal and the paralleling Genesee Turnpike at what is now Clinton Square.

Named Syracuse in 1820 by John Wilkinson after a city of similar geographic appearance in Italy, the village continued to expand as the railroad came through in 1839. Nine years later, the villages of Syracuse and Salina voted to merge, forming the City of Syracuse. By the mid-19th century, Syracuse was well established as the heart of the Upstate region with roads, rails, and canals extending north, south, east and west. The salt industry was reaching its peak. A water system was established. And banks were formed to finance new businesses and a growing agricultural economy.

Downtown continued to emerge as the center of the city, which by the pre-World War II days had a population of more than 210,000. The core area offered fine entertainment through theaters, movie houses, movie palaces, hotels, and a number of prominent local department stores.

One of the early prominent local stores was McCarthy Dry Goods established in 1808. Thomas McCarthy, a prominent salt manufacturer and merchant, settled in Salina and established the original McCarthy’s dry goods store. It was a modest log cabin “crudely built, near the side of a road that was often deserted.” The store sold shoes, oil, bread, boots, wax, fruit, and cabbages. It also quickly became a meeting place of settlers.

After his death, his son, Dennis McCarthy, Sr., continued the business alone in Salina until 1846. In 1894, McCarthy moved his father’s business to the city where he ran it until his death. The five-story building was designed by architect Charles Erastus Colton, who also designed Syracuse City Hall.

The downtown McCarthy store took the place of the First Presbyterian Church. For one year it was the tallest building in Syracuse. Dennis McCarthy, Jr. took over the business and ran it until he retired in 1906. Also, at that time he sold the building/store to the Utica Company A. S. & T. Hunter. On September 15, 1934, reporter Richard Welch wrote the Hunter store boasted a “fine commercial record” and two more floors were added.

Advertisements were painted on buildings back in the 1900s. This was before billboards became mainstream.

Many people say they work in the heart of Syracuse. For many that phrase simply refers to working downtown, not many know that, that refers to the McCarthy Building - “The Heart of Syracuse.” These words are still on the upper side of the building. The McCarthy Building dates to 1894. It remains a distinctive, gingerbread building downtown today - with a rich tan exterior dotted with ornamental ribbon and wreath inlays.

Since its construction, the building has housed three different department stores and a gaggle of offices. An article in the Syracuse newspaper in 1906 called the McCarthy’s business “the oldest in the city: much older than the city, in fact.”

Today, it’s a bustling spot with people milling in and out of Dunkin Donuts, Liehs & Stiegerwald, Aloha Japanese Bento, New York State Department of Health, Bersani Gallery, Satter Law Firm, Melvin & Melvin Law Firm, and the main office for PEACE, Inc. – an organization with the mission of “Helping people in the community realize their potential for becoming self-sufficient.”