

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS AT 136-142 SENECA STREET

other names/site number _____

name of related multiple property listing N/A

2. Location

street & number 136-142 Seneca Street [] not for publication

city or town Buffalo [] vicinity

state New York code NY county Erie code 029 zip code 14203

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] nomination [] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [X] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [] nationally [] statewide [X] locally. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- [] entered in the National Register
[] see continuation sheet
[] determined eligible for the National Register
[] see continuation sheet
[] determined not eligible for the National Register

[] removed from the National Register

[] other (explain) _____

Signature of the Keeper

date of action

Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street

Name of Property

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5. Classification**Ownership of Property**(check as many boxes as apply) (Check only one box)
count)

☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property(Check only one box)

☐ building(s)
☒ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the

Contributing

3

Noncontributing

0buildings
sites

structures

objects

TOTAL**Name of related multiple property listing**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**N/A**6. Function or Use****Historic Functions**

(enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling (apartment)COMMERCE/TRADE/business(specialty store, restaurant)**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT**7. Description****Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH & EARLY 20TH C AMERICAN MOVEMENTS/Italianate, Commercial Style**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation stonewalls brickroof membraneother cast iron**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street

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8. Statement of Significance**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave
- ☐ **D** a cemetery
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE**Period of Significance:**1865 - 1958**Significant Dates:**1865; 1878; 1958**Significant Person:**N/A**Cultural Affiliation:**N/A**Architect/Builder:**Chester R. Phelps (310-312 Niagara Street;
320-322 Niagara Street); Block, Barnes & U
Orchard (324 Niagara Street)**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☒ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. **NPS # 37828, 37827**
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by historic American Building Survey

- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal Agency
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other repository: _____

Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street

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10. Geographical Data**Acreage of Property** _____**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

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Zone Easting Northing3

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Zone Easting Northing2

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4

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Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared Byname/title Annie Schentag, Ph.D.; Mira Koster; Kerry Traynor, MArch, MS; [edited by Johnathan Farris, NYSHPO]organization kta preservation specialists date 3/20/2025street & number 422 Parker Avenue telephone 716.864.0628city or town Buffalo state NY zip code 14216**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets**Maps**A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's locationA **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.**Photographs**Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.**Additional items**

(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner (Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO)

name _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)**Estimated Burden Statement:** public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20503

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Narrative Description:

The Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street Historic District is comprised of three contiguous brick buildings on Seneca Street in the City of Buffalo. The three- to four-story two-part commercial blocks were built ca. 1865 (the First Barker Store Building at 136 Seneca and the Boarding House Restaurant at 140-142 Seneca) and ca. 1878 (the Second Barker Store Building at 138 Seneca) during a period of rapid growth in the area east of downtown Buffalo. The Boarding House Restaurant at 140-142 Seneca Street was designated a local landmark in 1989.¹ Seneca Street was once densely lined with a mixture of commercial, manufacturing, retail, and residential properties. This density no longer exists, and the street is now characterized by an expanse of vacant lots. The three buildings are representative of the once typical nineteenth-century two-part commercial blocks with retail space on the ground floor and residential space above, once common on Seneca Street. The buildings' intact characteristic details include solid brick walls, cast iron storefronts, arched windows ornamented with stone keystones, and decorative wood and brick cornices.

The block where these three properties are located is bounded by Seneca Street to the south, Berrick Alley to the east, Swan Street to the north, and the elevated Niagara Section of the New York State Thruway (I-190) to the west. On this block, Seneca Street is two lanes wide with both lanes running east. The exit 6 off-ramp of I-190 N adds an additional lane to Seneca Street approximately 100 feet east of the Boarding House Restaurant. There is no significant landscaping around the three buildings, all of which are separated from Seneca Street by a public concrete sidewalk. To the west of the buildings is a grassy hill separating them from I-190, and to the north and east is a large asphalt parking lot extending north to Swan Street. Berrick Alley, an unmarked, informal route connecting Seneca Street and Swan Street through the parking lot, has been moved approximately 100 feet east from its historic location.

The buildings at 136 and 138 Seneca are four stories tall, and the building at 140-142 Seneca is three stories tall. All three buildings have box-like massing with flat roofs and solid masonry construction. Their primary elevations face south toward Seneca Street, forming a single continuous and cohesive mass despite the differing height and details of each individual building. The east elevation of 140-142 Seneca Street overlooks the former path of Berrick Alley (originally known as Barker's Alley), which has been moved approximately 100 feet east from its historic location. The east elevation features simplified fenestration that echoes the fenestration on the

¹ The building at 140-142 Seneca Street was given the name "the Boarding House Restaurant" when it was designated a local landmark in 1989. The building was known by this name from the 1970s until the restaurant closed in 1993. Although this name was adopted after the period of significance, the name is used throughout this nomination for the sake of consistency with the local landmark records. Historically, the building was known only by its address. Unlike the other two buildings in the district, which were constructed as rental properties, the Boarding House Restaurant was originally owner-occupied, being constructed by baker Heinrich Roese as a new location for his commercial bakery.

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primary elevation facing Seneca Street. Historically, the north elevation of each building was concealed from public view, as each faced either outbuildings on the property, or the inaccessible rear portions of the neighboring properties. Today, the buildings' north elevations all face the expansive asphalt parking lot which comprises the majority of the block. The west elevation of 136 Seneca Street faces a grassy hill and the elevated Niagara Section of the New York State Thruway (I-190).

The other brick buildings which once stood on the north side of Seneca Street between Centre Street and Berrick Alley were all demolished in the late 1950s to make room for the construction of the Niagara Section of the New York State Thruway (I-190). The three remaining buildings remained in use with businesses on the ground floor and residences above for several decades. The pawn shop at 138 Seneca has been closed since the early 1980s; the Boarding House Restaurant at 140-142 Seneca closed in 1993; and the United Loan and Jewelry Company, the oldest pawn shop in Buffalo, closed in 2008, leaving the entire block vacant. Although the brick exteriors of the three buildings are intact, this period of vacancy has left the buildings with deteriorated wooden windows and doors on the exterior, as well as dilapidated interiors.

The three buildings in the 136-142 Seneca Street Historic District are representative examples of mid-to-late 19th century commercial buildings, a once-common building typology that has been all but erased on Seneca Street, apart from a few isolated examples. In plan, material, and style, the buildings possess sufficient architectural integrity to convey their function as mid-nineteenth century commercial buildings with retail storefronts on the first floor and residential space on the upper floors.

The Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street Historic District consists of the following resources:

1.) The First Barker Store Building, ca. 1865

136 Seneca Street

The four-story, red brick late nineteenth century commercial building located at 136 Seneca Street was constructed ca. 1865 and retains a level of integrity. The building houses retail space on the first floor and apartments on the upper floors. The organization of the primary elevation, facing south toward Seneca Street, features an intact ground-level storefront with three cast iron pilasters and an angled recessed central entryway flanked by display windows. At the west, a pedestrian entrance with a wooden door and glazed transom provides access to the upper-level residential units.

Three segmental-arched windows are located on each of the upper floors. The window openings contain one-over-one double-hung sash of unknown material with applied exterior muntins. The low brick parapet wall has visible cap flashing, and a thin gray strip marks the former location of a cornice. The west elevation, facing a

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grassy hill and the elevated Niagara Section of the New York State Thruway (I-190), has a single boarded-up segmental-arched window at the third floor and remnants of painted advertisements for United Jewelers.

2.) The Second Barker Store Building, ca. 1878

138 Seneca Street

The four-story, red brick late nineteenth century commercial building located at 138 Seneca Street was constructed ca. 1878 and possesses some Italianate details. The building is roughly rectangular in massing with a main four-story portion at the south and a subordinate three-story portion extending north at the rear. The building houses retail space on the first floor and apartments on the upper floors. The organization of the primary elevation, facing south toward Seneca Street, features an intact ground-level storefront with three cast iron pilasters and an angled recessed central entryway flanked by display windows with glazed transoms. A narrow, covered passage at the west provides access to the upper-level residential units.

Three four-over-four double-hung wood sash windows are located on each of the upper floors. Eight of the nine masonry openings are segmental-arched; one window, located at the center of the second floor, is round-arched. The windows are all in a deteriorated condition, and several are covered by protective plywood boards. Each masonry opening is topped by a flared stone keystone ornamented with vertical and horizontal grooves. The third and fourth story windows each have a stone sill. At the roofline is an intact wooden cornice with eight grooved brackets.

The three-story rear portion of the building features four segmental-arched six-over-six wood sash windows (with some single-pane replacements) on the second and third floors of the west elevation, and a door accessing a non-extant rear porch or fire escape on each floor of the north elevation. The rear portion of the west elevation faces a grassy hill and the elevated Niagara Section of the New York State Thruway (I-190), and the north and east elevations face the large asphalt parking lot that takes up the majority of the block. Historically, the north, east, and west elevations were consistently concealed from public view by various outbuildings and additions that are no longer extant.

3.) The Boarding House Restaurant, ca. 1865

140-142 Seneca Street

The three-story, red brick late nineteenth century style commercial building located at 140-142 Seneca Street was constructed ca. 1865. The building's eastern and western halves (140 and 142 Seneca, respectively) are both rectangular in massing and approximately equal in width, with the western portion (140) being approximately two bays longer than the eastern portion (142). The building housed retail space on the first floor

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and apartments on the upper floors. The organization of the primary elevation, facing south toward Seneca Street, features two intact ground-level storefronts with nine cast iron pilasters and two angled recessed entryways. Between the storefronts, a central pedestrian entrance provides access to the upper-level residential units.

Seven round-arched, one-over-one, double-hung wood sash windows set into double-recessed openings are located on the second and third floors. The windows are arranged roughly symmetrically with a central group of three flanked by two pairs. The windows are arranged roughly symmetrically with a central group of three flanked by two pairs. The windows are all in a deteriorated condition, and several are covered by protective plywood boards. Each masonry opening is topped by a simple keystone, and the third and fourth story windows each have a stone sill with corbels. At the roofline is a corbeled cornice composed of geometric brickwork topped by dark coping stone.

The building's east elevation, overlooking where Berrick Alley once ran, now faces an asphalt parking lot. Berrick Alley, an unmarked, informal route connecting Seneca Street and Swan Street through the parking lot, has been moved approximately 100 feet east from its historic location. The elevation has seventeen round-arched windows: three on the ground floor, and seven each on the second and third floors. The ones that are left in the center bays of the east elevation have window muntins that imitate palazzo windows (e.g. Palazzo Medici Riccardi upper story windows). Although the east elevation originally faced a street (the narrow side street known variously as Barker's Alley and Berrick Alley), the simplified fenestration effectively communicates that this elevation is subordinate to the south elevation facing Seneca Street.

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Statement of Significance:

The Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street Historic District is significant under Criterion A for Commerce as a small streetscape that preserves the character and historical associations of the once densely packed mercantile neighborhood that grew up immediately south of downtown Buffalo in the third quarter of the 19th century. Although individual commercial buildings are broadly scattered across this area of Buffalo, these are the only contiguous ones of such scale and vintage within approximately a third of a mile. The two smaller contributing buildings at 136 and 138 were built speculatively to earn rental income, and initially housed clothing-related businesses. 140-142 Seneca, on the other hand, served a fine bakery and confectionary. The commercial uses of the buildings chart the fortunes of the neighborhood over time as well. In 1905, 136 Seneca became a pawn shop, which would remain its function through to the 1970s. While a shoe store occupied 138 Seneca from 1903 to 1928, thereafter the store space was relegated to a series of discount and second-hand commercial endeavors. A series of restaurants and saloons (with the emphasis increasingly on the latter function) and a hotel occupied 140-142 Seneca in the twentieth century. Aside from this little group of buildings, much of the historic fabric of the entire neighborhood was destroyed in the mid- to late-twentieth century to make way for the Niagara Branch of the New York State Thruway (I-190) and other Urban Renewal-era projects.

The period of significance begins in 1865, the approximate date of construction for both 136 Seneca and 140-142 Seneca. It ends in 1958 when demolition permits were issued for the other buildings on the block to make space for the construction of the Niagara Thruway. This change, which occurred during a period of general economic decline on Seneca Street, marked a definitive end to the street's chances of regaining its commercial prominence.

Neighborhood Context

The three buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street Historic District were built ca. 1865 (the First Barker Store Building at 136 Seneca and the Boarding House Restaurant 140-142 Seneca) and ca. 1878 (the Second Barker Store Building at 138 Seneca) during a period of rapid commercial growth in the area east of downtown Buffalo. Buffalo increased in population from 42,000 in 1850 to 155,000 in 1880. The proximity of the Seneca Street neighborhood to the Exchange Street railway station, just two blocks away, made it a thriving commercial and residential zone. The design and function of the three buildings are representative of the type of buildings that abounded in this dense corridor during a period of rapid growth in the area east of downtown Buffalo. By 1900, affluent citizens were settling further from downtown in more exclusively residential areas, cementing Seneca Street's reputation as a primarily commercial thoroughfare that accommodated transient residents in boarding houses and hotels. By the mid-twentieth century, the once-dense Seneca Street was

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characterized by increasing numbers of vacant and demolished buildings as Buffalo suffered a general economic decline. Vast swaths of the surrounding neighborhood were demolished in the 1960s and early 1970s to make way for the New York State Thruway (I-190) and other Urban Renewal-era projects, leaving the block of three buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street as a rare survivor of a bygone period of commercial activity in Buffalo's history.

Seneca Street in the Nineteenth Century

Seneca Street is an east-west commercial corridor running across the south portion of the city, just north of the Buffalo River and the network of canals and railroad lines that moved goods into and out of the city. Seneca Street was laid out and named in 1804 when Holland Land Company agent Joseph Ellicott designed his original street plan for Buffalo.

The area functioned for many years as a residential enclave between downtown to the west and industrial areas to the north and south, making it an attractive location for Buffalo's industry leaders. In the 1830s, Seneca Street was an important residential corridor for Buffalo's prominent citizens, including Russell H. Heywood, the first president of the Board of Trade.² By the 1850s, an increasing number of commercial and industrial buildings were constructed amidst the earlier residences on Seneca Street.

The area south of Seneca Street continued to develop as an important transportation hub in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1852, the Main and Hamburg Canal was completed just a few blocks south of Seneca Street on land acquired in 1835.³ The New York Central Railroad's passenger station on Exchange Street, a small building constructed in 1848 and replaced by a larger brick building in 1870, was the arrival point for most visitors entering Buffalo from out of town. In addition to the New York Central station, there was also the Erie Station at Michigan and Exchange Street, and the Lehigh Valley Station was nearby on Washington Street. Before the rise of the automobile, the Seneca Street business district attracted many travelers who passed the stores on foot on their way to and from the stations.

² Samuel M. Welch, *Home history*, (Buffalo: Peter Paul & Bro., 1891).

<https://archive.org/details/homehistoryrecol00welc/>, p.47.

³ Thomas X. Grasso, *The Erie Canal's Western Terminus: Commercial Slip, Harbor Development and Canal District*, <https://esd.ny.gov/sites/default/files/rfp/Erie-Canal-Bicentennial-Appendix-F-Erie-Canal-Western-Terminus.pdf>.

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Figure 1. Seneca Street between Main and Michigan on the 1856 Buell, Moore, and Quackenboss Atlas of Buffalo. The north side of Seneca Street is primarily lined by residences and small stores, many of which are set back from the street.



Figure 2. Seneca Street between Main and Michigan on the 1884 Matthews-Northrup Map of the City of Buffalo. Between Main and Michigan, both sides of Seneca Street are lined by brick buildings and a handful of frame buildings.

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During the mid-to-late nineteenth century, many banks and other important institutions were constructed in or moved to the southeastern portion of downtown, further boosting the area's foot traffic and relevance to city businessmen. Financial institutions and professional associations occupied buildings close to the city center on Seneca Street between Pearl and Washington Streets. The Board of Trade Building (1883) was located on the northeast corner of Pearl Street and the Curtiss Block on the northwest corner. The Evening News Building was located on the southeast corner of the intersection with Pearl Street. The Marine Bank Building (ca. 1890) occupied the southwest corner at Main Street, the Bank of Buffalo (ca. 1880) the northwest corner in the Granite Building, while office buildings were in the Brown's Building and Birge Building on the northeast and southeast corners respectively. The Post Office and Customs House was located at the northeast corner of Seneca and Washington Streets. Interestingly, the block between Franklin and Pearl Streets remained primarily residential on the north side of the street with retail storefronts on the south until 1950s, when it was razed.



Figure 3. 1889 Sanborn Map cover sheet showing notable buildings near Seneca Street. Note the Post Office at Seneca and Washington, the Board of Trade at Seneca and Pearl, the Union Depot and Erie Depot on Exchange Street, and the multiple hotels in the area. Source: 1889 Sanborn Map Company's *Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo, New York*.

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East of Ellicott Street, there were a larger number of manufacturers on Seneca Street. Altman & Company Clothiers, Cutting and Storage was located at the northeast corner of Ellicott Street, and the Niagara Envelope Company was located at the intersection with Wells Street. Brown's Hotel was located on the southwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Seneca Streets, while a drug store and Cigar Factory occupied the northwest corner.⁴ On the southeast corner was the Southern Hotel.

Commercial activity was predominant on this part of Seneca Street during the mid to late nineteenth century. Grimm's Block, Bunnell's Theatre, the Hotel Stendts and a row of shops were located on the northeast corner. The former shops at 192-196 Seneca Street, which were located between Grimm's Block and the Hotel Stendts, consisted of four single-story, frame structures and two, two-story masonry buildings. Within each block were a variety of professional offices, and manufacturing and retail businesses including clothiers, grocers, furniture shops, cigar shops, shoemakers, warehouses, hotels and liquor stores. The pattern of manufacturing and retail properties continued until Chicago Street. The properties between Chicago and Louisiana Streets tended to be simple frame properties, with an attached storefront facing Seneca Street, and between Louisiana and Spring Streets they were primarily residential. To the east was the neighborhood of the old Hydraulic Canal.⁵

In February 1889, an enormous fire destroyed dozens of buildings on Wells Street, Seneca Street, Carroll Street and Exchange Street. The fire was the most disastrous that had ever broken out in Buffalo in terms of the physical area burned, the value of property lost, and the length of time spent fighting the flames.⁶ Most of the stores on the north side of Seneca Street between Centre Street and Berrick Alley, including Miss Celia Brown's Millinery store at 136 Seneca and George Spencer's tailoring shop at 138 Seneca, had their storefronts damaged by the fire but escaped any structural damage. The *Buffalo News*, which reported extensively on the fire, described the condition of this block as follows:

On the north side of Seneca street two buildings were pretty well wrecked and others were badly damaged. The floors over most of these stores were used by families as places of residence and they were badly frightened. The glass windows were pretty generally cracked by the heat and the homes of the people more or less deluged with water.⁷

⁴ The 1889 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map* lists Michigan as a Street, whereas later maps refer to it as Michigan Avenue. Today the street is also known as Harriet Tubman Way.

⁵ Refer to the Multiple Property Documentation form for the *Historic Resources of the Hydraulics/Larkin Neighborhood*, 09MPDF00108.

⁶ "Unequaled! A Great Business Center Burned," *Buffalo Weekly Express*, February 7, 1889.

⁷ "Extra! Fire! The Worst Buffalo Has Ever Had," *The Buffalo News*, February 2, 1889.

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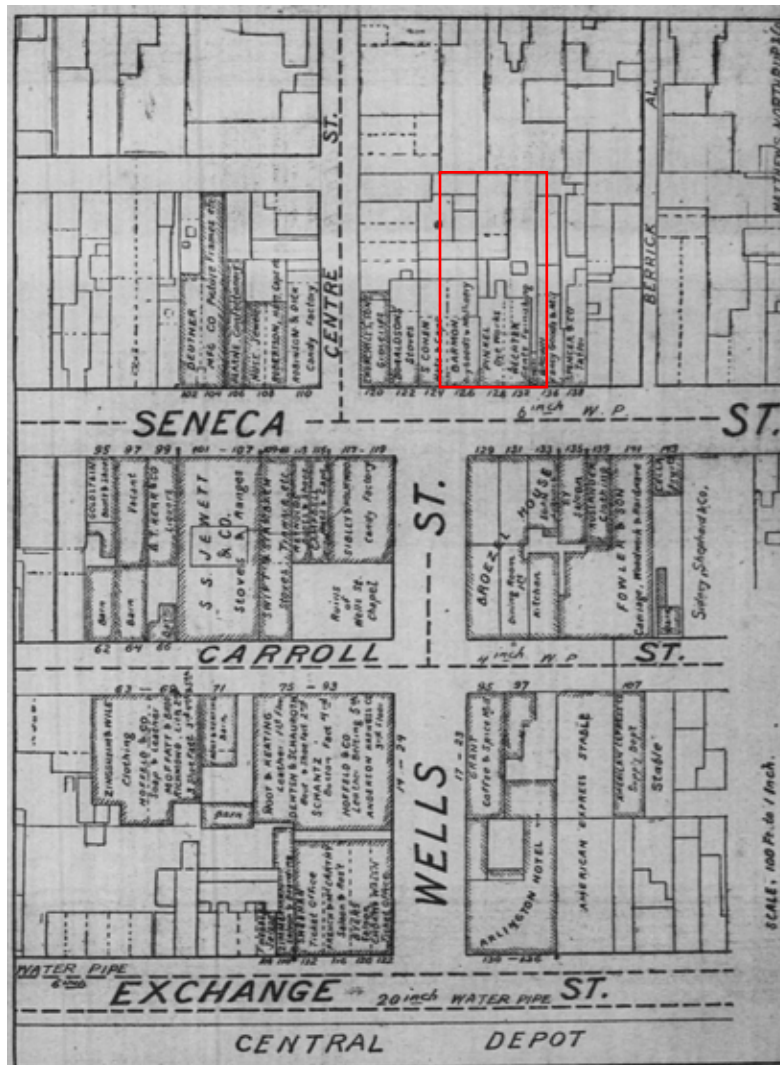


Figure 4. Map of the burned district in the 1889 Wells Street fire. Shaded portions represent damaged property; where only the front is shaded damage only affects that portion of building.⁸ The front façades of Brown's Millinery at 136 Seneca and Spencer & Co. Tailoring at 138 Seneca were damaged in the fire.

That the great Wells Street fire did little to temper the area's commerce is a testament to the vibrancy and hardiness of the Seneca Street business district in the late twentieth century. Within six months, "those black and ugly spots on Seneca Street, made by the great fire of last winter, [had given] way to handsome buildings" in the area surrounding the Historic District.⁹ Barker also improved his property in 1889 by replacing the frame

⁸ "Unequaled! A Great Business Center Burned," *Buffalo Weekly Express*, February 7, 1889.

⁹ "New Buildings," *Buffalo Courier Express*, August 18, 1889.

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cottage at the rear of the property with a single-story brick block, suitable for light manufacturing or for residential use.

Seneca Street's major period of commercial growth occurred between 1860 and 1880. An electric streetcar line opened on Seneca Street in 1891, further boosting its reputation as a destination for commerce. By the end of the nineteenth century, the street was densely populated with commercial and manufacturing buildings similar in size, setback, and style to the three remaining buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street. Interspersed between larger brick factories and hotels, three- to five-story brick commercial buildings formed an uninterrupted wall of retail storefronts with residential or office space above on either side of Seneca Street, particularly between Main and Michigan. Seneca Street was known as a bustling and eclectic business district in which no particular industry was dominant. Businesses were patronized by customers from near and far, including the residents of the boarding houses and hotels located between and above the Seneca Street storefronts; commuters from outlying neighborhoods in Buffalo who travelled downtown by streetcar; and visitors from out of town who entered the city via the train stations on Exchange Street.

At the turn of the century, Seneca Street was a popular shopping destination for people from all over Buffalo. The earlier single-family residences were mostly eradicated as affluent residents moved to more exclusively residential areas further from the city center. The remaining housing on Seneca Street mostly consisted of small suites in hotels and rooming houses, as well as multi-room flats for small families located above ground-level storefronts. Many Seneca Street residents lived above their place of work. The Hotel Broezel, located directly across the street from the Historic District at the southeast corner of Wells and Seneca, was a particularly popular destination that could accommodate more than 250 visitors per night.

Commercial Architecture and the Italianate Style

The three buildings in the district are representative examples of the nineteenth-century commercial buildings with sales space on the ground floor and residential space above, a once-common architectural typology on Seneca Street. The commercial architecture seen in the district, which exemplifies the typology known as the two-part commercial block, reflects historical patterns of function and use with roots stretching back as far as Roman antiquity. The Italianate details of two of the buildings reflects stylistic trends which dominated American architecture from the 1850s to the 1880s.

The shop-house combination building, wherein a shop would occupy the ground floor and a small residence would be located above, became a common form in Europe by the late Middle Ages. This typology remained common for centuries, emerging in colonial America as well. Architectural historian Richard Longstreth has observed that "not until the early nineteenth century did the design of strictly commercial buildings emerge as a

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major component of architecture.”¹⁰ As cities became increasingly dense due to new transportation networks, infrastructure, and industries, these “new patterns and typologies of building became dominant in a markedly expanded realm of commerce that constituted [large groups] of narrow-fronted stores shouldering each other for a foothold of frontage on solidly built-up streets.”¹¹ Indicative of a nation where financial prowess and capitalism reigned supreme, the establishment of densely packed commercial corridors along typical ‘Main Streets’ in the nineteenth century was an essential part of American identity during this time. These patterns of commercial development were evident in many American cities and towns by the mid-nineteenth century, and they “remained dominant for another hundred years, despite the spiraling growth of concentrated settlements... and new forms of transportation.”¹²

From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, a new typology of commercial architecture appeared in American cities in multiple stylistic interpretations that essentially all constituted variations on the same basic theme. Often arranged in a row on deep, narrow lots intended to maximize the number of lots on a single street, typical commercial architecture from this time reflected a desire to cluster several commercial spaces into a dense area and to provide each one with frontage on the street, filling as much available space as possible. The three buildings in the district demonstrate the type of footprint and massing that is common to the typology, where “tall narrow facades usually fronted very deep, clear-span spaces meant to flexibly accommodate a range of activities.”¹³ This flexibility was intended to be “easily adaptable for what would often turn out to be a fairly frequent succession of varied businesses.”¹⁴ Evident in the history of the many businesses that each building in the district housed over time, the adaptability of the ground-floor commercial space was an essential component of the typology.

The buildings in the district exemplify a type of commercial architecture known as the two-part commercial block, which is “the most common type used for small and moderate sized commercial buildings throughout the country.”¹⁵ A prevalent form of commercial architecture from the 1850s through the 1950s, the Two-Part Commercial Block is usually two four stories tall and is characterized by a horizontal division into two distinct zones. These zones include a commercial zone at street level and a slightly more private zone on the upper stories that usually accommodates apartments or offices. These zones are distinguished not only by their interior

¹⁰ Richard W. Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 12.

¹¹ Jeffrey Cohen, “Corridors of Consumption: Mid-Nineteenth Century Commercial Space and the Reinvention of Downtown,” *Visual Merchandising: The Image of Selling* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 20.

¹² Longstreth, *Buildings of Main Street*, 13.

¹³ Cohen, “Corridors of Consumption,” 28.

¹⁴ Cohen, “Corridors of Consumption,” 29.

¹⁵ Longstreth, *Buildings of Main Street*, 23.

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function but are also articulated on the primary street-facing elevation of the building as well. Through ornamentation, material, rhythm, or other design elements, these zones may appear harmonious but differ in character, or they may have little visual relationship at all. The buildings within the district used cast iron storefronts on the ground floor to visually set the commercial portion apart from the upper residential portion, while the upper residential floors were visually united by their fenestration pattern and consistent ornamentation. Regardless of their stylistic variations, retailers “recognized the need for their stores to invite entry, to be visibly distinct from private homes.”¹⁶ Articulation of the ground floor commercial space addressed this need and therefore is a character-defining feature of the typology.

When Seneca Street was developing into a commercial corridor in the second half of the nineteenth century, affluent citizens were moving further from downtown to settle in the city’s more exclusively residential areas. The frame houses they left behind were demolished, creating a demand for affordable housing in the vicinity of Seneca Street. This need to accommodate not only stores, but also residents, is evidenced by the inclusion of apartments in the upper zone of commercial buildings that were constructed during this time. The Two-Part Commercial Blocks in this district each contain residential space on the upper floors. In response to the increased density of the district, residential space became profitable on the upper floors. Despite the mixed-use nature of this typology, however, “even when commercial facilities in neighborhoods contained apartments above, the character of the shopping street differed markedly from adjacent ones lined with residences alone.”¹⁷ While residents lived on the upper floors of the buildings, Seneca Street was known almost exclusively as a commercial district.

Although the typology persisted in this common form from ca. 1850-1950, stylistic variations occurred as aesthetic trends changing over time. These variations are evident “not only on the more elaborated, architect-designed commercial buildings, but also the more typical ones that formed the far greater part of this new urban landscape.”¹⁸ Around the 1850s, following concurrent trends in residential architecture, more ornate styles of ornamentation became popular for commercial buildings. Among these styles, the Italianate style was dominant.

The American iteration of the Italianate style came about from a centuries-long series of translation and influence. The point of departure was the medieval farmhouses of the northern Italian countryside. The informal farmhouses were typically rambling, asymmetrical buildings with masonry walls and characteristic square towers. These farmhouses would come to be contrasted with the formal, neoclassical elite architecture that flourished during the Italian Renaissance, which in turn inspired an era of neoclassicism in England. In England

¹⁶ Cohen, “Corridors of Consumption,” 20.

¹⁷ Longstreth, *Buildings of Main Street*, 14.

¹⁸ Cohen, “Corridors of Consumption,” 21.

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in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Picturesque (or Romantic) Movement developed as a reaction against the period of neoclassicism. Rejecting the orderliness and formality of the eighteenth-century mode of design, Picturesque Movement architects borrowed from Italy's medieval farmhouses, which they saw as charming, irregular, and well-integrated with their natural surroundings. By the 1830s, Italianate style villas and mansions were popular in England.

The first known Italianate style houses were built in the United States as early as the 1830s. The Italianate style – as well as the Gothic Revival style – was further popularized in the 1840s and 1850s thanks to architectural pattern books published by influential landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing, including *Cottage Residences* in 1842 and *The Architecture of Country Houses* in 1850. Early on, the Italianate style was promoted for rural homes ranging from villas for the wealthy to cottages and farmhouses for the working class. By 1850, the Italianate style dominated American domestic architecture in both the city and the country. Common features of Italianate style residential architecture in America include cubic form, vertical proportions, low-pitched roofs with overhanging eaves, decorative brackets, towers or cupolas, and tall, narrow windows with decorative lintels and window hoods.¹⁹

Although originally used for residences, the style was highly adaptable to many different functions, including commercial buildings. Technological advancements in the production of wood, stone, and cast iron ornaments made certain decorative features more affordable at a time when builders and retailers were developing “a new taste for decoration and the increasing desire to have the buildings themselves perceived as ornaments to the community.”²⁰ Between 1850 and 1880, two-part commercial blocks were often detailed in the Italianate style, with the commercial and residential portions of the exterior being differently articulated. The Italianate storefront was often constructed of cast iron posts and beams with decorative pilasters, large display windows with wood mullions and kickplates, and a central recessed entryway with a glazed transom. The upper-level walls were of a different material – most often brick – to visually distinguish the residential space above from the commercial space below. Windows were typically tall, narrow, and arched in shape, with decorative keystones, molded surrounds, radiating voussoirs, or stone lintels. The roofline often featured a prominent cornice ornamented with decorative panels or brackets.²¹

Italianate commercial blocks abounded in Buffalo in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly on Seneca Street. The height of the Italianate style's popularity in America coincided with a period of rapid growth

¹⁹ Virginia Savage McAlester, “Italianate,” *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 282-302.

²⁰ Longstreth, *Buildings of Main Street*, 31.

²¹ Jan Jennings and Herbert Gottfried, “Commercial Buildings,” *American Vernacular Interior Architecture* (New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc., 1988), 369.

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in the area east of downtown. Builders filled in the densely packed lots along Seneca Street with long, narrow buildings that were three- to five-stories in height with commercial space on the ground floor and residential space above, seeking to maximize the income potential of their properties. The builders utilized mass produced Italianate style design elements, such as cast iron storefronts, window surrounds and keystones, and bracketed cornices, in order to “attain a distinctive appearance previously reserved for only the costliest edifices.”²² The three buildings in the Italianate Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street Historic District exemplify the typology of the Two-Part Commercial Block done in the Italianate style, the dominant typology on Seneca Street in their period of construction. Demonstrating this architectural typology both individually and collectively, the buildings in the district are rare remaining examples that attest to the broader patterns of building design and use in this period of development on Seneca Street.

The Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street

The Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street Historic District are representatives of a structural type that once lined Seneca Street. Vast swaths of the surrounding neighborhood were demolished in the 1960s and early 1970s, leaving 136 to 142 Seneca Street as rare remaining examples of a bygone period in Buffalo’s history. The First Barker Store Building at 136 Seneca and the Boarding House Restaurant 140-142 Seneca were constructed ca. 1865, and the Second Barker Store Building at 138 Seneca was added between them ca. 1878. Constructed during a period of rapid growth on Seneca Street, the three buildings matched the scale, setback, and style that were characteristic of the district at the time. All three buildings had retail storefronts on the ground floor and residential space above.

Seneca Street was an eclectic commercial corridor where no trade was dominant, and any two retailers might be found side-by-side. Throughout the buildings’ century-and-a-half-long history, their four ground-floor storefronts were home to many and varied businesses. In the final decades of the nineteenth century there were several bakeries, grocery stores, hat stores, and tailors, as well as a pharmacy, a shoe store, and a saloon. The storefronts experienced a high rate of turnover that was typical in the business district around Seneca Street during the late nineteenth century. Multiple additions and outbuildings were constructed and demolished at the rear of each property throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century to suit the needs of each owner.

The First Barker Store Building, 136 Seneca Street

The building 136 Seneca was constructed in the mid-1860s, and its first owner was William Barker, a wagon and carriage manufacturer who owned many of the buildings which once stood Seneca Street in the vicinity of

²² Longstreth, *Buildings of Main Street*, 13.

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the Historic District. Later, in the 1870s, Barker would acquire the adjacent property at 138 Seneca and replace the existing single-story brick store with a four-story brick building, completing the dense streetscape of this block of Seneca Street.

William Barker came to Buffalo in 1844 and established a wagon and carriage manufacturing business on Washington Street between North and South Division Streets. By 1855, Barker had moved his wagon factory to its permanent location on the north side of Seneca Street between Centre Street and Michigan Street (today known as Michigan Avenue). Barker accumulated additional property surrounding his wagon factory on this block throughout the 1860s and began constructing several income-generating buildings on the north side of Seneca Street in the 1870s; among these were his First and Second Store Buildings at 136 and 138 Seneca.

Barker's main project was the Barker Block at 146-152 Seneca Street, a large tenement building located across Berrick Alley (then known as Barker Alley) from the Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street Historic District. The four-story Barker Block, completed in 1874, was "one of those buildings into which people are crowded with apparently little regard to safety in case of fire."²³ Around 150 people, including 50 children, lived in apartments connected by narrow, winding, unlit hallways with only two fire escapes for the entire block. The poor conditions exemplified by the Barker Block plagued several Seneca Street tenements until the Health Commissioner and District Attorney took action to enforce the New York State Tenement House Act in 1904.²⁴

The First Barker Store Building at 136 Seneca Street was an income-generating property with commercial space on the first floor, three floors of residential space above, and a large stable in the rear. Barker himself never occupied the building; rental advertisements for the property directed interested tenants to find Barker at his wagon factory or tenement block further east on Seneca.

The first known commercial tenants opened their two stores in the ground floor storefront in 1869; the two businesses were separated by a thin, doorless partition, "one inch thick, made of wood... [through which] any noise that was produced by scuffling could be heard."²⁵ In the western half, F.J. Hill kept a variety store specializing in ladies' clothing, and in the eastern half German brothers Richard and Theodore Weber kept a jewelry store. The storefront was divided into four quadrants for use by the store's proprietors: each front room was used for the display and sale of goods, and each back room was used for cooking and eating. The Weber

²³ "A Tenement Trap: The Barker Block on Seneca Street Described," *The Buffalo Times*, April 12, 1887.

²⁴ "Tenement Crusade," *The Buffalo Commercial*, June 15, 1904.

²⁵ "The Suicide of Richard Weber," *Evening Courier & Republic*, February 25, 1870.

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brothers and Hill's family all slept in the upper-level flats, which likely lacked any cooking facilities of their own.²⁶

From the 1870s until the early twentieth century, a series of individual stores came and went from the first-floor storefront, seemingly abandoning the partition system used by the first tenants. Among these L. Israel's hat store, Harry Goldstein's dry goods store, Celia Brown's millinery shop, Nathan Saperston's men's furnishing store, and a hand ball and shooting gallery. By 1889, the stable at the rear of the property had been demolished and replaced by a single-story brick addition with two frame sheds.

In 1905, Meyer Brown opened Brown's Pawn Shop, the first long-lasting business at 136 Seneca Street. Brown received permission from the Commissioner of Public Works to maintain a pawnbroker's sign in front of the shop window in 1906.²⁷ The traditional pawnbroker's sign, a cluster of three golden balls that is often attributed to the House of Medici, was once a common sight on Seneca: beginning around the turn of the century, more than a dozen pawn shops, including Brown's, opened along Seneca Street and thrived there until the Great Depression.²⁸ Despite the general decline of foot traffic and commercial activity on Seneca Street as the twentieth century wore on, Brown's Pawn Shop remained a successful business well into the 1970s when it was purchased by the owner of a neighboring pawn shop.

The Second Barker Store Building, 138 Seneca Street

In the mid-1870s, William Barker, the owner of the First Barker Store Building at 136 Seneca, purchased the neighboring property at 138 Seneca Street. This property consisted of a small store at the front of the lot with a frame cottage in the rear, both of which Barker rented out for additional income. At some point between 1875 and 1880, Barker demolished the store and replaced it with the building which remains extant to this day. The new building was four stories tall with a single ground floor storefront, advertised as "a good location for any large business," and three residential floors above.²⁹ The frame cottage in the rear was left intact and Barker continued to rent it out as a dwelling.

The first three business tenants in the storefront at 138 Seneca were Byron Drake, who ran a fancy dry goods store from 1881 to 1884; George Spencer, a merchant tailor who sold men's suits and overcoats from 1885 to

²⁶ "Suicide! Richard Webber, a German Jeweler, Kills Himself with a Dagger," *Buffalo Courier*, February 24, 1870.

²⁷ *The Buffalo Commercial*, February 27, 1906.

²⁸ "City's Pawnshop Business Isn't All That It Used to Be: Seneca Street's Boulevard of Broken Dreams Is Hard Hit by Depression and Strike Talk," *The Buffalo News*, March 25, 1937.

²⁹ "To Let - Store No. 138 East Seneca street," *Buffalo Courier Express*, March 2, 1880.

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1892; and Hyman Oppenheim, who ran a shoe store from 1892 to 1894.³⁰ This high rate of turnover was typical in the business district around Seneca Street during this time period. Seneca Street was known as an eclectic commercial corridor where no particular industry was dominant, and any two retailers might be found side-by-side.

In February 1889, the great Wells Street fire impacted most of the stores on the north side of Seneca Street between Centre Street and Berrick Alley, including George Spencer's tailoring shop at 138 Seneca. The building had its storefront damaged by the fire but escaped any structural damage. The area built back quickly, and within six months, "those black and ugly spots on Seneca Street, made by the great fire of last winter, [had given] way to handsome buildings" in the area surrounding the Historic District.³¹ Barker also improved his property in 1889 by replacing the frame cottage at the rear of the property with a single-story brick block, suitable for light manufacturing or for residential use.

On New Year's Eve 1894, William Barker died suddenly in his home on Connecticut Street.³² He left his properties on Seneca Street to his four daughters. Barker's son-in-law, Mr. S.A. Torrence, became the manager and agent for the properties, a role he filled until at least 1925. In the final years of the nineteenth century, Torrence added additional rental space to the property at 138 Seneca by adding a new two-story brick dwelling at the rear of the lot. Between the main block facing Seneca Street and the two brick outbuildings in the rear, there was practically no undeveloped land left on the property's narrow lot.

The storefront at 138 Seneca Street housed a small grocery store from 1896 to 1900 and a confectionery from 1901-1903. From 1903 to 1928, the storefront was occupied by its longest-running business: a shoe store called Michaels' Shoes run by father and son team Joseph and Marcus Michael. The Commercial Supply Company, specializing in soap manufacturing and sales, operated out of one of the rear buildings from 1910 to 1918.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, a succession of short-lived businesses – a store fixture storeroom, a secondhand clothing store, a hardware surplus store, and a discount office furniture store – occupied 138 Seneca Street for a few years at a time. At some point between 1925 and 1951, the two brick dwellings at the rear of the lot were demolished, leaving only the three- and four-story main block extant on the lot.

³⁰ Various advertisements, *The Buffalo News*, 1881-1894.

³¹ "New Buildings," *Buffalo Courier Express*, August 18, 1889.

³² "Died: Barker," *Buffalo Courier*, January 1, 1895.

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*The Boarding House Restaurant, 140-142 Seneca Street*³³

The three-story brick building at 140-142 Seneca Street was constructed ca. 1865 on the former site of a frame house and a saloon. The first owner and occupant of the building was Heinrich (Henry) Roese, a German immigrant who had operated a retail bakery nearby on Seneca Street since his arrival in Buffalo in 1861. In 1866, Roese moved his bakery to his new purpose-built brick building.³⁴ In addition to two ground-level storefronts and two floors of residential space, the property boasted a brick bakehouse with three ovens, a brick stable, a brick icehouse, and several frame and brick sheds located in the rear. Roese resided in the building with his wife and four children, operating a well-known and successful bakery and confectionery on the ground floor, until his sudden and unexpected death by drowning on July 25, 1868.³⁵ His eldest son, Henry V. Roese, age eight, inherited the building and retained ownership of it until 1911, and the bakery remained in operation under varying owners until 1895.³⁶

A few months after Roese's death, baker and German immigrant Jacob Roskopf Jr. assumed the proprietorship of the bakery and confectionery at 142 Seneca. The bakery became well known as the largest in the area, and Roskopf fostered a reputation as a public benefactor who frequently donated confections and refreshments to church festivals, public schools, and local charities. Roskopf employed over a dozen bakers, cooks, and clerks, many of whom boarded with him on the second and third floor of the building.³⁷ During his thirteen years at 142 Seneca Street, Roskopf expanded the business beyond the confines of the first-floor storefront into the building's basement and rear outbuildings. The *Buffalo Courier Express's* description of J. Roskopf's Bakery, Confectionery, and Dining Hall paints a picture of the layout, use, and appearance of the building in 1871:

J. Roskopf's Bakery, Confectionery, and Dining Hall, No. 142 Seneca Street ... is built of brick, and is three stories high above the basement. Its depth is immense, and is used for various purposes. In the basement are three rooms. In the front we noticed, among the prominent articles, five soda fountains and one generator, of Mathews' manufacture, New York. In the middle of the room is the kitchen, with every appropriate apparatus. In the rear is the dining-room. In front of the ground floor are two spacious and elegant show windows. The entrance leads into the sales-room. This is filled with bread, cakes,

³³ Although this name was adopted in 1989, after the period of significance, the name is used throughout this nomination for the sake of consistency with the local landmark records. Historically, the building was known by its address, though it may also have been referred to as "the Roese Building" in its early years.

³⁴ "New and Elegant Store," *Buffalo Daily Dispatch and Evening Post*, May 4, 1866.

³⁵ "Drowning of Henry Roese," *Buffalo Courier*, July 27, 1868.

³⁶ Preservation Coalition of Erie County, "Application for Landmark Site Status for: The Boarding House Restaurant, 140-142 Seneca Street," *Application for Local Landmark Designation*, Buffalo, NY: 1989.

³⁷ 1870 United States Census Ward 2, p.145-146, and 1880 United States Census 11-117, p.49-50.

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candies, etc. ... In the rear, and on the ground floor, is the magnificent dining hall. There, on marble tables, ladies and gentlemen find the luxuries of every clime... On the ground floor of the rear building, and over a large cellar, are the ice-house, ice cream and milk-rooms, spacious ovens, etc. ... The large lofts above are filled with barrels of flour, sugar, machinery for making crackers, etc.³⁸

In 1882, Roskopf retired and the bakery was succeeded by Julius Richter and Sons, which was advertised as the largest retail bakery in Western New York.³⁹ Richter continued Roskopf's practice of offering room and board to his employees in the residential units above the bakery.⁴⁰ In 1895 the business was seized and sold by the Sheriff to satisfy unpaid debts, and for the first time in three decades the storefront at 142 Seneca was no longer occupied by a bakery. Henry V. Roese listed the store, upper floors, and a barn in the rear of the property for rent later that year.⁴¹

From the mid-1860s to the late 1880s, a series of milliners and tailors set up shop in the adjacent storefront at 140 Seneca. The storefront at 142 Seneca housed the Harmon Furniture Company for a short period in 1896 and 1897, and from 1898 until 1912 it was occupied by Coulson's Drug Store.⁴² William Coulson moved from Ontario to Buffalo in 1870 and quickly made a name for himself as a druggist with a series of popular and prosperous pharmacies on Buffalo's East Side. He worked in his well-established drug store at 142 Seneca from 1898 until his death in 1907, after which point his son Robert J. Coulson took over the business.⁴³

In 1889, Albert Ey opened a new saloon and restaurant called the Buffalo Palace Sample Room at 140 Seneca. The opening was attended by several leading members of the press and the establishment was lauded as an elegant place with an interior "rich in artistic effects of a high character."⁴⁴ Ey had previously operated another restaurant across the street at 135 Seneca, but this building burned down in the great Wells Street fire of February 1889. The building at 140-142 Seneca Street was the only building on its block of Seneca Street that entirely escaped the flames; all of the neighboring buildings to the west – including 138 and 136 Seneca Street – had their storefronts damaged by the fire, although they all remained standing.⁴⁵ A historic photo of Ey's Buffalo Palace Sample Room, possibly taken at the restaurant's opening celebration in 1889, provides a record of the typical building conditions and details within the district in the late nineteenth century.

³⁸ "Holidays," *Buffalo Courier Express*, December 16, 1871.

³⁹ Advertisement, "Go To Richter's Bakery," *The Buffalo Sunday Morning News*, January 8, 1893.

⁴⁰ "The Bakers' Union: Julius Richter Makes a Sharp Reply to the Association," *The Buffalo Republic*, April 16, 1886.

⁴¹ "Stores to Let," *The Buffalo News*, October 15, 1895.

⁴² Buffalo Business Directory? Published by the Courier Company of Buffalo?

⁴³ Grace Carew Sheldon, "Buffalo of the Olden Time: William Coulson," *The Buffalo Times*, September 4, 1910.

⁴⁴ "A Palace in Earnest," *Sunday Truth*, September 1, 1889.

⁴⁵ "Unequaled! A Great Business Center Burned," *Buffalo Weekly Express*, February 7, 1889.

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Figure 5. Historic photo of Albert Ey's Buffalo Palace Sample Room, ca. 1889. Note the plate glass windows, the recessed entry, the Corinthian style cast iron pilasters, and the wooden double doors leading to the upper-level residential units. Courtesy of the Buffalo History Museum.

Albert Ey died in November, 1889, just months after opening the Buffalo Palace. His widow ran the saloon until the mid-1890s, after which a series of different proprietors managed the saloon. In late 1894 or 1895, a single-story brick addition constructed in the hollow between 138 Seneca and 142 Seneca. The addition required bricking in the first-floor windows at 138 Seneca, but left the upper-story windows uncovered. The single-story addition containing four bowling alleys, and the establishment became a popular meeting place for

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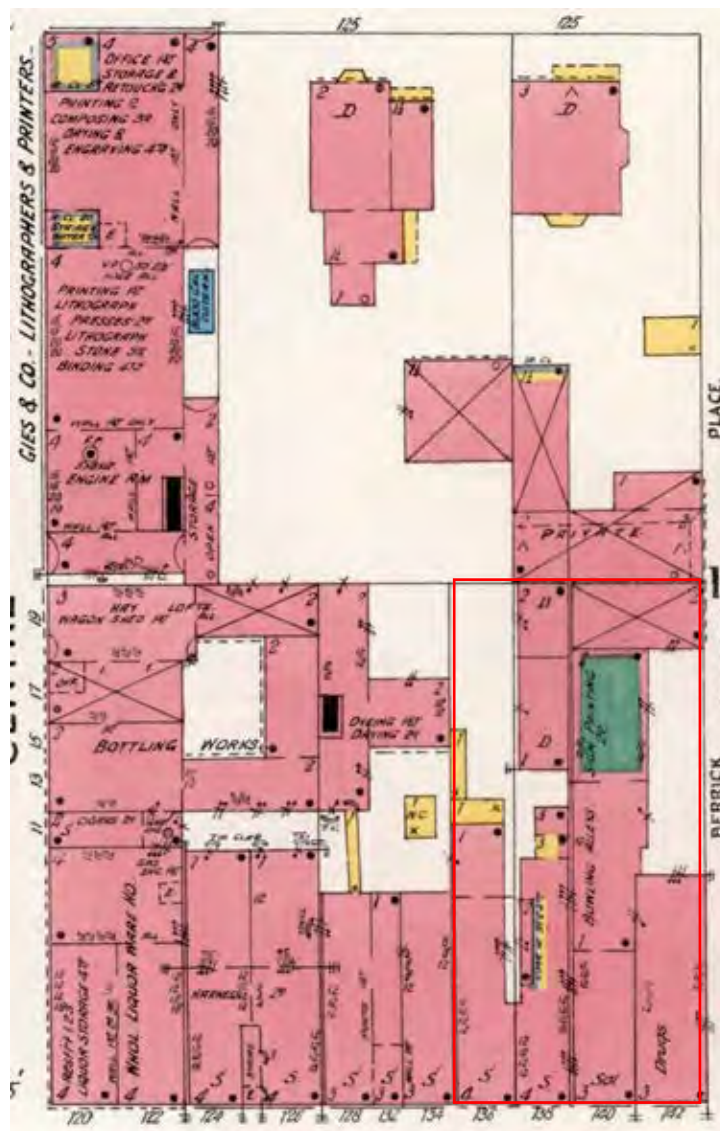
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recreational bowling leagues.⁴⁶ In 1899, the two-story brick building that had originally housed Henry Roesse's bakeshop was converted into a two-story light manufacturing space occupied by a sign-painting shop.⁴⁷ These alterations left only a narrow portion of the property bordering on Berrick Alley undeveloped.



⁴⁶ "Sporting News," *The Buffalo Enquirer*, October 16, 1895.

⁴⁷ See the 1899 Sanborn Map Company's *Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo*, Volume 1, Sheet 4.

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Figure 6. 1899 Sanborn Map. Note the new brick bowling alley and sign-painting shop behind 140 Seneca and the new two-story dwelling behind 138 Seneca. The single-story brick and frame additions behind 136 Seneca were constructed in the 1880s.

The storefronts at 140-142 Seneca Street were the home of several associated businesses during the early twentieth century, all of which shared the name “Palace.” The Buffalo Palace saloon was succeeded by the Palace Gardens and, later, the Original Palace Café. In 1912, Coulson’s Drug Store at 142 Seneca closed and the two storefronts at 140-142 Seneca were combined into a single business for the first time shortly thereafter. Various restaurants continued to use two storefronts in combination for the majority of the twentieth century. The bowling alley in the rear addition, a separate business with its own independent management, was known as the Palace Alleys. The name was later applied to the entire building, which was known as the Palace Hotel from approximately 1902 until 1922.⁴⁸

In 1923, the hotel’s name was changed from the Palace Hotel to the Ritz. A three-story frame porch was added to the rear of 142 Seneca in the late 1910s or early 1920s to serve as a secondary means of egress for hotel patrons. Rooms and suites in the Ritz Hotel were advertised at rates ranging from \$1 a day to \$4, \$5, or \$6 a week, although the hotel offered discounted rates for permanent resident as well.⁴⁹ Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, the building oscillated between the labels of “hotel” and “rooming house” in newspaper advertisements and directory entries. These changing terms likely both referred to the same style of accommodations: a collection of units of varying sizes available for short- or long-term rental by low income or transient residents. The size and arrangement of the residential units is unknown, but it is possible that the upper stories had a highly flexible layout to respond to the changing needs of the building’s clientele.

From the 1930s until the 1960s, Edward M. Forbes (often using the false name Eddie Ryan) operated both the hotel and the ground floor businesses at 140-142 Seneca. He introduced live music and cabaret shows in the restaurant located in the twin storefronts at the front of the building. The hotel and restaurant, which frequently changed names throughout the 1930s, were known as Ryan’s Hotel and Grill beginning in the 1940s. Although many other hotels, restaurants, and businesses on Seneca Street closed during this time period, Ryan’s Hotel and Grill managed to draw enough business to survive and thrive for three decades.

⁴⁸ *The Buffalo Directory*, Courier Company of Buffalo, 1870s-1900s.

⁴⁹ Advertisement, “Ritz Hotel,” *The Buffalo Enquirer*, May 24, 1923.

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In 1935, a man named George Barusic purchased the building.⁵⁰ The bowling alley in the rear of the building closed in the 1930s and, by 1951, the addition that once housed the alleys had been demolished and reconstructed as a single-story auto storage space on a smaller footprint in the hollow between 138 and 142 Seneca. The other two-story brick outbuildings – the stable and the former bakehouse at the rear of the lot – were also demolished by 1951.⁵¹ By this time, parking lots and vacant storefronts were growing increasingly common on Seneca Street. Ryan's Hotel and Grill remained open until the late 1960s, beyond the end of the period of significance for the Historic District.

The Decline of Seneca Street

With the rise of the automobile in the early twentieth century, Seneca Street's reputation as a major commercial corridor began to slip away. In 1925, the Seneca Business Men's Association (formed in 1910) issued an urgent call for improvements on Seneca Street to cater to automobile traffic. According to shoe store manager Roland Forsythe, conditions on Seneca Street were not suited to the needs of the motoring public:

Before the advent of the automobile, trade on Seneca Street was good because among other advantages so many people were passing the stores on their way to and from the [train] stations. When the automobile came, adequate provision was not made and continued on Seneca Street for parking and even for running them.⁵²

Another business owner described Seneca Street as "a shame to our city... in such poor condition that it is almost dangerous for pedestrians to walk across the street."⁵³ The lighting was dim, the parking facilities inadequate, and, most importantly, the street was unpaved. Association members were hopeful that paving the bumpy, uneven stone street with asphalt would allow Seneca to assume once again "the commercial vitality that in days past made it one of the principal streets of Buffalo."⁵⁴

After years of rallying on the part of the Seneca Business Men's Association, the Department of Public Works widened and paved Seneca Street from Main Street to Spring Street in 1929. Seneca Street saw an increase in automobile traffic and became the gateway to the heart of Buffalo for the outlying towns to the South and

⁵⁰ Preservation Coalition of Erie County, "Application for Landmark Site Status for: The Boarding House Restaurant, 140-142 Seneca Street," *Application for Local Landmark Designation*, Buffalo, NY: 1989.

⁵¹ See the 1951 Sanborn Map Company's *Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo*, Volume 1, Sheet 24.

⁵² "Seneca St. Business Revival," *The Buffalo Times*, December 20, 1925.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

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West.⁵⁵ The Association celebrated the paving and widening of Seneca Street as a sure sign of commercial rejuvenation.

However, changes to the city's railroad network in the 1930s put Seneca Street at a disadvantage once again. In June 1929, the New York Central Railroad opened a new terminal on Curtiss Street in the Broadway-Fillmore neighborhood, 2.5 miles east of the Exchange Street station. The Exchange Street station was kept open to accommodate commuter traffic, but this limited ridership could not provide enough spending to support the many neighborhood businesses that had once benefited from the station's foot traffic. In 1935, the station was closed and left abandoned for several months before being razed later that year.⁵⁶ The Erie Railroad Station at Exchange Street and Michigan Avenue was also closed in 1935, and the six-story Hotel Broezel across Seneca from the Historic District closed shortly after. Many other hotels and businesses followed suit throughout the 1930s and 1940s, leaving Seneca Street and the surrounding area studded with vacant and demolished buildings by the early 1950s.



Figure 7. 1951 Sanborn Map. Note the parking lots, gas stations, and stores labeled “Vacant” on and near Seneca Street. Note also that the multiple brick dwellings and garages at the rear of 138-142 Seneca Street have been demolished, leaving only the main buildings.

⁵⁵ “\$2,500,000 Will Be Expended by City in New Paving Program,” *The Buffalo Times*, January 13, 1929.

⁵⁶ *Buffalo Evening News*, November 13, 1935.

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Having reached its peak in the 1950s, the population of Buffalo steadily declined in the second half of the twentieth century, and this change was notable on Seneca Street.⁵⁷ Buffalo experienced an economic decline primarily as a result of a loss of the city's industrial base. A decline in the railroad industry; the 1957 opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, which provided an alternative route between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean; the resulting decline in grain storage and milling; the fall of the steel industry and the relocation or closure of other manufactures and industries all contributed to the decline in Buffalo's economy, its population loss, and the city's deterioration. As industrial and blue color jobs left the city, so did the residents. The loss of its residential base in the city also led to the decline of retailing in Buffalo during the second half of the twentieth century, as new auto-centric plazas and shopping malls began to spring up in suburbs, drawing retailers and shoppers away from downtown and away from the historic district on Seneca Street.

After the Period of Significance (1958-2024)

The period of significance ends in 1958 when demolition permits were issued for the other buildings on the block, which dramatically reduced commercial activity on the street. Urban Renewal policies, post-war suburbanization aided by the G.I. Bill, and the rampant building of interstate highways, including the Niagara Branch of the New York State Thruway (I-190), further altered the face of the City of Buffalo.⁵⁸ The 14-mile Niagara Thruway, which connects Cheektowaga to the southeast with Lewiston to the north, was constructed in stages throughout the 1950s and completed in 1959. The portion near the Historic District was constructed along the rights-of-way of the in-filled Erie Canal and the Main and Hamburg Canal.

In September 1958, demolition permits were issued for 120-128 Seneca Street and 117-121 Swan Street, leaving the three buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street moored on an otherwise empty block.⁵⁹ In the late 1950s, fifty-five buildings between Exchange Street, Swan Street, Washington Street, and Michigan Avenue were razed to make way for a portion of the Niagara Thruway.⁶⁰ With the modernized interstate running parallel there was no longer a need to commute along Seneca Street. As people moved out of the region or to the suburbs and new highways allowed city neighborhoods to be essentially bypassed, many of the retail storefronts on streets like Seneca could no longer survive. Thanks to passionate business owners, a supportive customer

⁵⁷ The population of Buffalo decreased from 580,131 in 1950 to 532,759 in 1960.

⁵⁸ The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known commonly as the G.I. Bill, provided World War II veterans with a variety of benefits including low-cost mortgages and zero down payment home loans. This allowed returning veterans to move out of urban cities and into the suburbs.

⁵⁹ Building Permits, *The Buffalo News*, September 11, 1958.

⁶⁰ Greg Faherty, "End of 1959 is Target for Niagara Thruway," *Buffalo Courier Express*, August 31, 1958.

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base, and no small amount of luck, the three buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street remained standing and open for business into the 1990s and beyond. The row of three contiguous commercial buildings exemplifies the density, scale, and architectural detailing that once characterized Seneca Street.

Despite the loss of retail and manufacturing businesses along Seneca Street and the subsequent loss of buildings in the second half of the twentieth century, the businesses in the three buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street survived for several decades after the 1950s. In 1958, 136 Seneca was occupied by Brown's Pawn Shop (opened in 1906) and 140-142 Seneca was occupied by Ryan's Hotel and Grill. United Loan and Jewelry Company, a pawn shop that had opened at 134 Seneca in 1919, moved into the empty storefront at 138 Seneca after its original location was demolished for the Niagara Thruway. The two pawn shops at 136 and 138 Seneca were consolidated into one business owned by Louis Kimmel in 1978; it closed in 2008. The Boarding House Restaurant (formerly known as Major Hoople's) at 140-142 Seneca was designated a local landmark in 1989 and closed in 1993.

At some point between 1951 and the 1980s, the single-story brick bowling alley at the rear of 140 Seneca Street was replaced by a single-story auto storage space on a smaller footprint in the hollow between 138 and 142 Seneca. The front elevation facing Seneca Street underwent reversible alterations: the pressed red brick was painted white and a clay tile shed canopy was added below the second story windows.

In the late 1970s, even more buildings on Seneca Street and the surrounding area were demolished to make way for the Elm-Oak Interchange and for a proposed high technology industrial zone in the area bounded by Michigan, Oak, Seneca, and Goodell. Elm-Oak Interchange, first proposed in 1976 and completed in 1980, connects the Kensington Expressway at Goodell Street to the north with the Niagara Thruway at Seneca Street to the south. The southern portion of the interchange brings motorists from the Niagara Thruway over Seneca Street before coming down to grade at Swan Street.

The final blow to Seneca Street, furthering the impact of the construction of the I-190, was the 1988 construction of Pilot Field, a baseball stadium that literally severed the street west of the nominated building and its connection to the city core in two. Pilot Field, now known as Sahlen Field, was constructed in the block bounded by Swan Street to the north, Washington Street to the west, Exchange Street to the south and Oak Street to the east.⁶¹ The properties along Seneca Street in this block were razed and the stadium became a physical barrier to the city business core.

⁶¹ Pilot Field has been known by a variety of names including Downtown Ballpark, North AmeriCare Park, Dunn Tire Park and most recently Coca Cola Field. Oak Street did not continue past Swan Street until after 1950.

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Figure 8. 1974 photograph of 136-142 Seneca Street. Note the clay tile shed canopy and white painted brick on 140-142 Seneca Street, occupied by Major Hoople's restaurant (later known as the Boarding House Restaurant).

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Figure 9. 1978 aerial photograph showing the Seneca Street off-ramps from the Niagara Thruway. The Thruway was built on the filled-in Erie Canal and the Main and Hamburg Canal; the two Seneca Street off-ramps were built on the former Wells Street and Centre Street.

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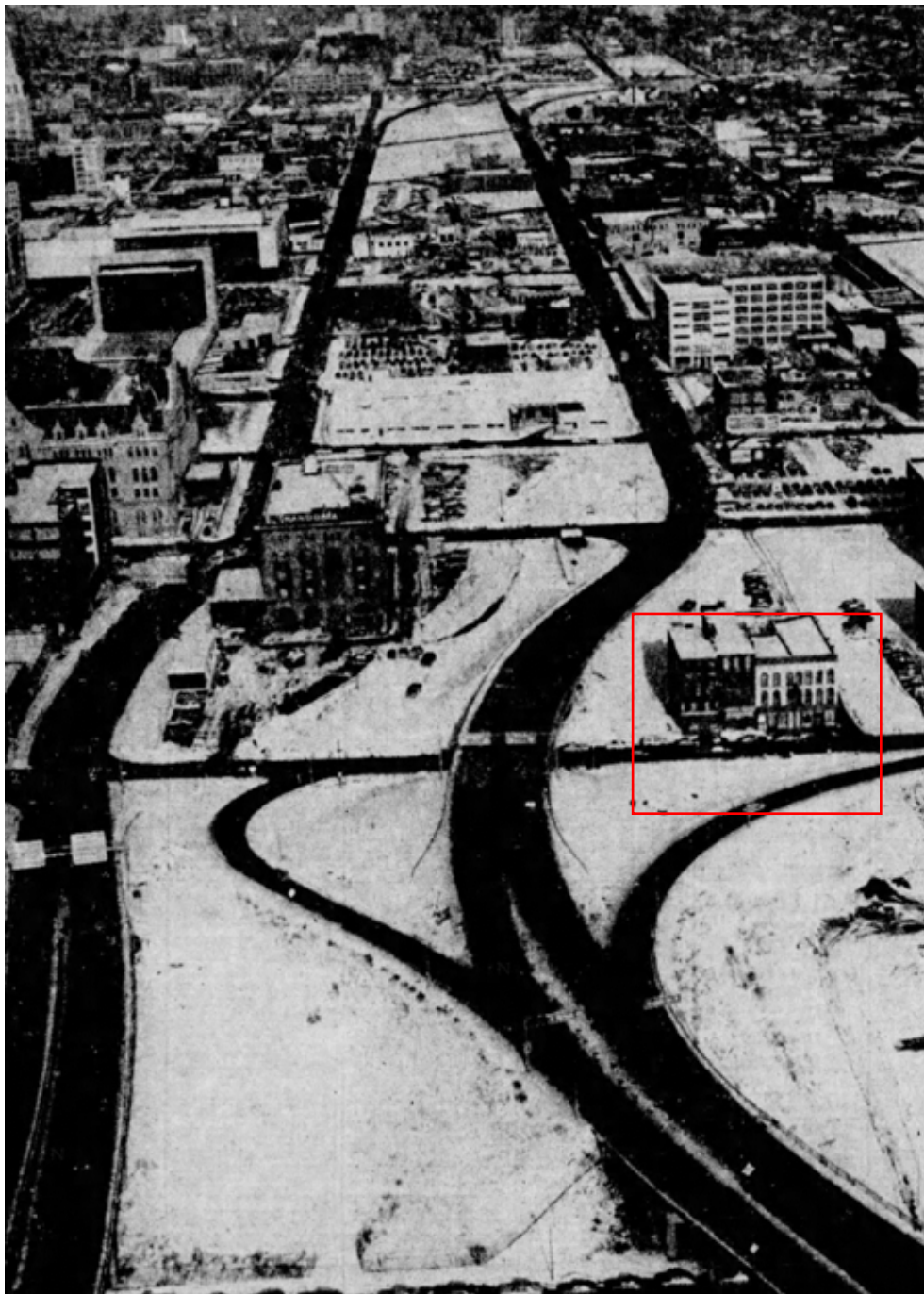


Figure 10. 1980 aerial photograph of the newly constructed Elm-Oak Interchange. The interchange brings traffic north over Seneca Street before coming down to grade at Swan Street.

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Today, little remains of what was a dense retail, manufacturing, commercial and residential neighborhood. Except for a small amount of new construction, Seneca Street is defined by vacant lots. Little historic fabric recalling the densely populated commercial and manufacturing buildings, and retail storefronts often with their associated vernacular residences off the back remain along Seneca Street. Of the hundreds of properties, only thirteen late nineteenth and early twentieth century properties remain extant along Seneca Street. As a result, there are few properties remaining that are intact enough to convey the significance of this once-thriving commercial corridor during the turn of the twentieth century. The three buildings in the district are the best representative examples remaining on Seneca Street of the two-part commercial blocks that were once so popular in the area. Standing in a contiguous row, they represent the density, as well as the architectural style, that once characterized the larger commercial corridor.

Summary

The district is significant under Criterion A for Commerce as a rare remaining collection of remaining intact examples of contiguous commercial buildings from the 1860s and 1870s on Seneca Street, where much of the historic fabric was destroyed in the mid- to late-twentieth century to make way for the Niagara Branch of the New York State Thruway (I-190) and other Urban Renewal-era projects. The three buildings survived the many changes that devastated the once-thriving commercial district of similar commercial buildings around them. The three buildings retain sufficient architectural integrity to convey the broader commercial history of this area for a time period that has been all but erased on Seneca Street.

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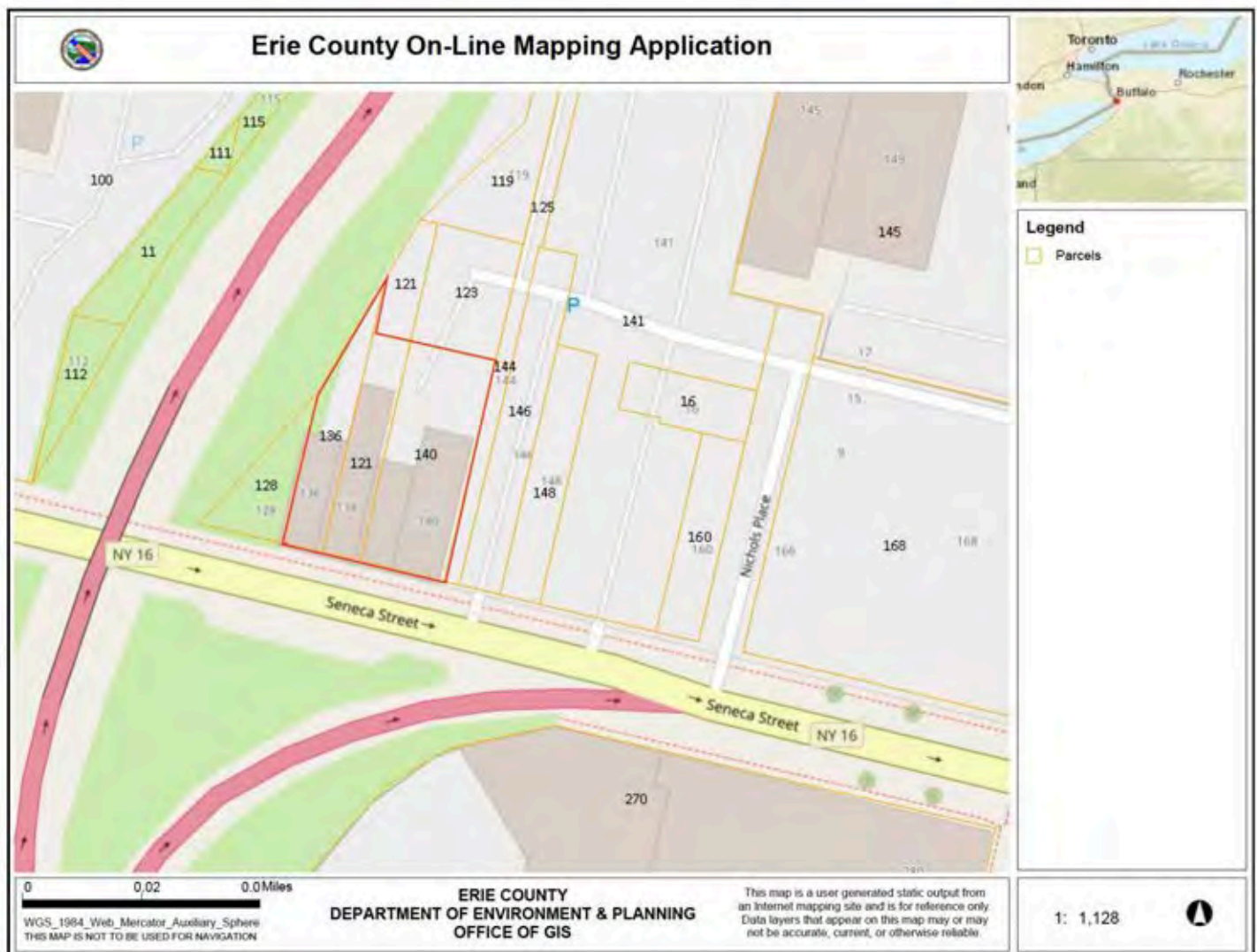
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Verbal Boundary Description

The district is located on three parcels spanning 136-140 Seneca Street, on the north side of Seneca Street to the west of Nichols Place.

Boundary Justification

The boundary encompasses the parcels containing the buildings at 136, 138, and 140 Seneca Street, as these are the three continuous buildings associated with the commercial history and significance of the commercial buildings, the best extant examples in this portion of the city.



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Additional Information

Photo Log:

Name of Property: The Commercial Buildings at 136-142 Seneca Street
City: Buffalo
County: Erie County
State: New York
Photographer: Johnathan Farris, Ph.D.; kta preservation specialists (4, 7, 8, 11, 13)
Date Photographed: April 29, 2025; October 2024 (4, 7, 8, 11, 13)
of Photographs: 15

Photograph:

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0001

View looking north showing south elevation. Buildings 136, 138, and 140 Seneca Street (west to east).

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0002

View looking north showing south elevation of 136 Seneca Street and 138 Seneca Street (west to east).

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0003

View looking north showing south elevation of 140 Seneca Street.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0004

Looking south at north elevation of 140-142 and 138 Seneca.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0005

Looking east at west elevation of 138 and 136 Seneca. Note that 138 Seneca is only three stories tall at the rear.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0006

Looking northwest showing east and south elevations of district.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0007

Looking south at north elevation of 140 Seneca and west wall of 142 Seneca.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0008

Looking south at west elevation of 138 Seneca Street and north elevation of 136 Seneca Street.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0009

View showing west storefront at 140-142 Seneca Street. Note the historic cast iron pilasters.

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NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0010
Storefront of 136 Seneca Street

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0011
Looking west at storefronts of 136 and 138 Seneca Street.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0012
Upstairs window detail of 138 Seneca Street.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0013
Looking west at east elevation of 140 Seneca Street. Note the historic two-over-two double hung wooden sash, stone keystones and sills, eight diamond-shaped masonry ties, and temporary metal bracing.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0014
Parapet detail of 140-142 Seneca Street. Note brick color indicating circa 1890 rebuilding.

NY_Erie County_CommercialBuildingsSenecaSt_0015
Partially bricked in window on ground floor of east elevation of 140-142 Seneca. This elevation had windows on all floors because it abutted Berrick Alley and not another building.

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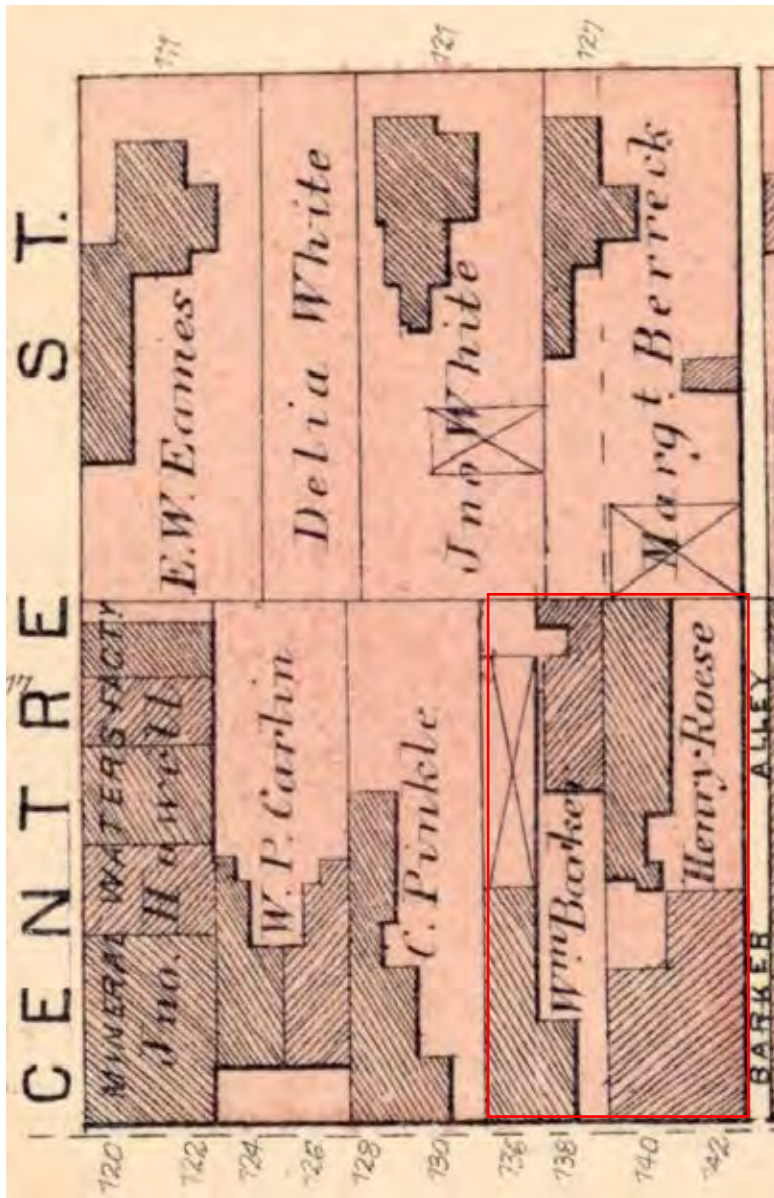
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Historic Maps



1872 G.M. Hopkins Atlas of Erie County, New York

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The district is outlined in red. At this time the Second Barker Store Building at 138 Seneca Street has not yet been built.

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1884 G.M. Hopkins Atlas of Erie County, New York

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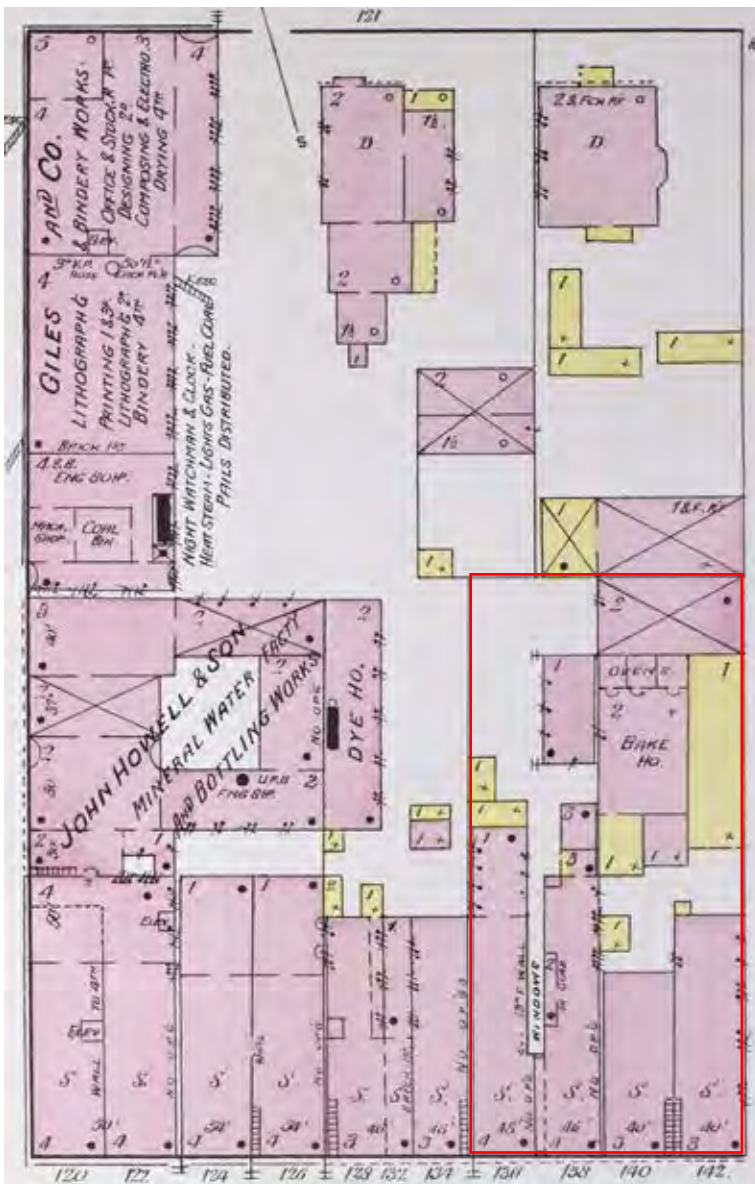
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1889 Sanborn Map Company's Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo, New York

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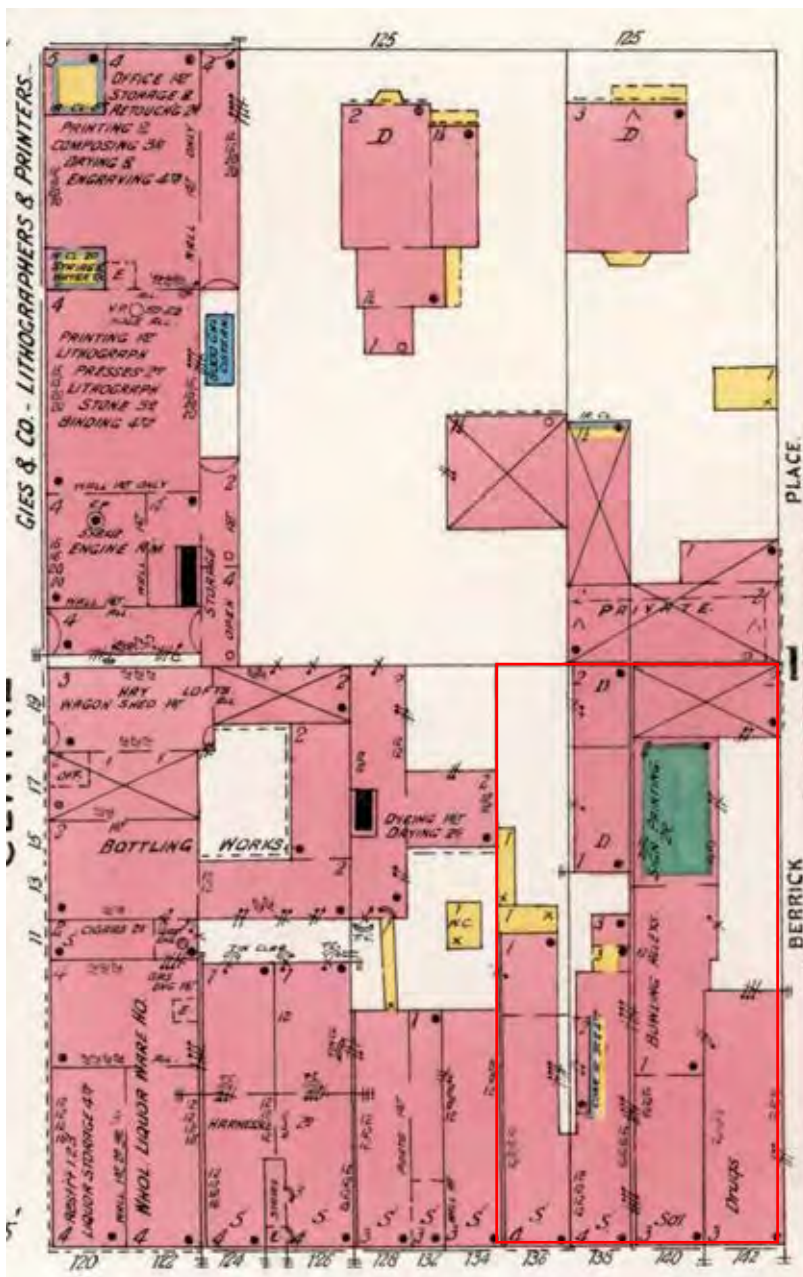
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1899 Sanborn Map Company's Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo, New York

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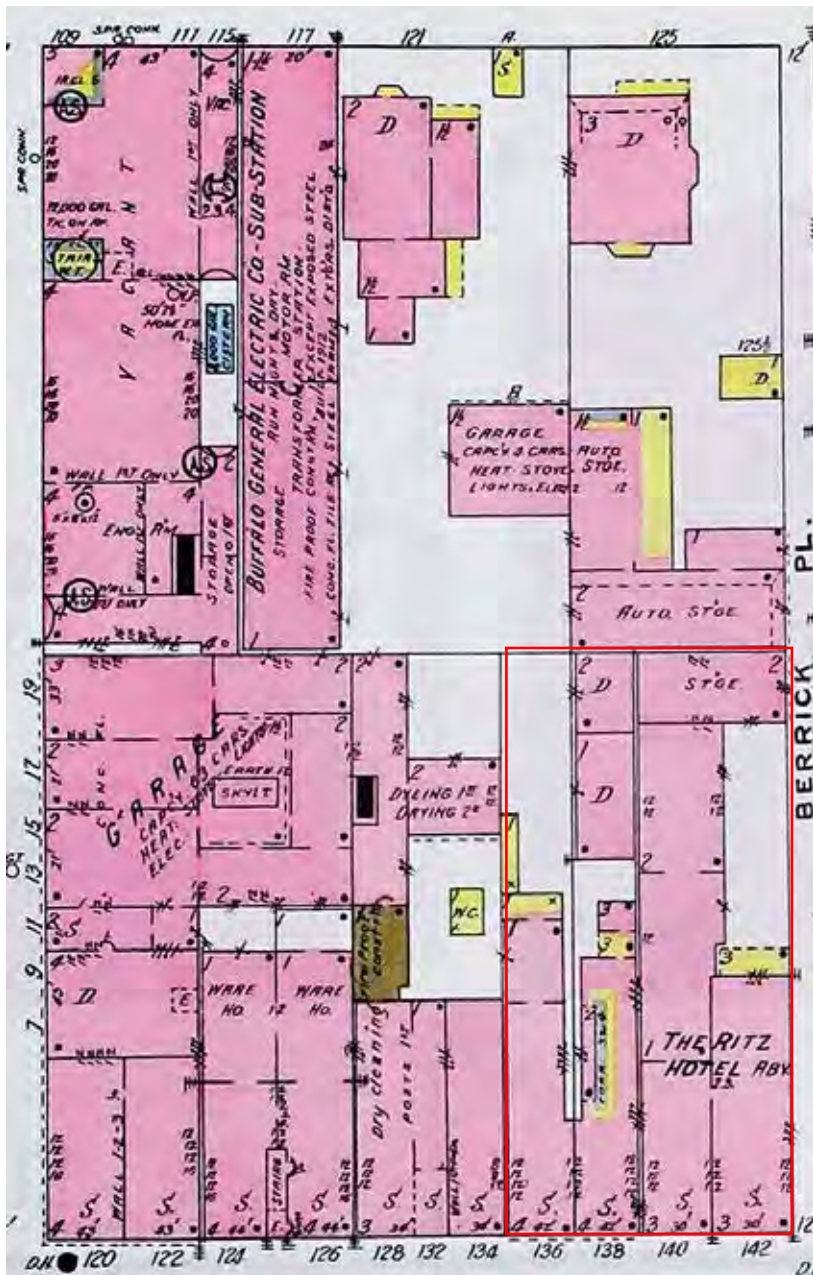
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1925 Sanborn Map Company's Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo, New York

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1951 Sanborn Map Company's Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo, New York

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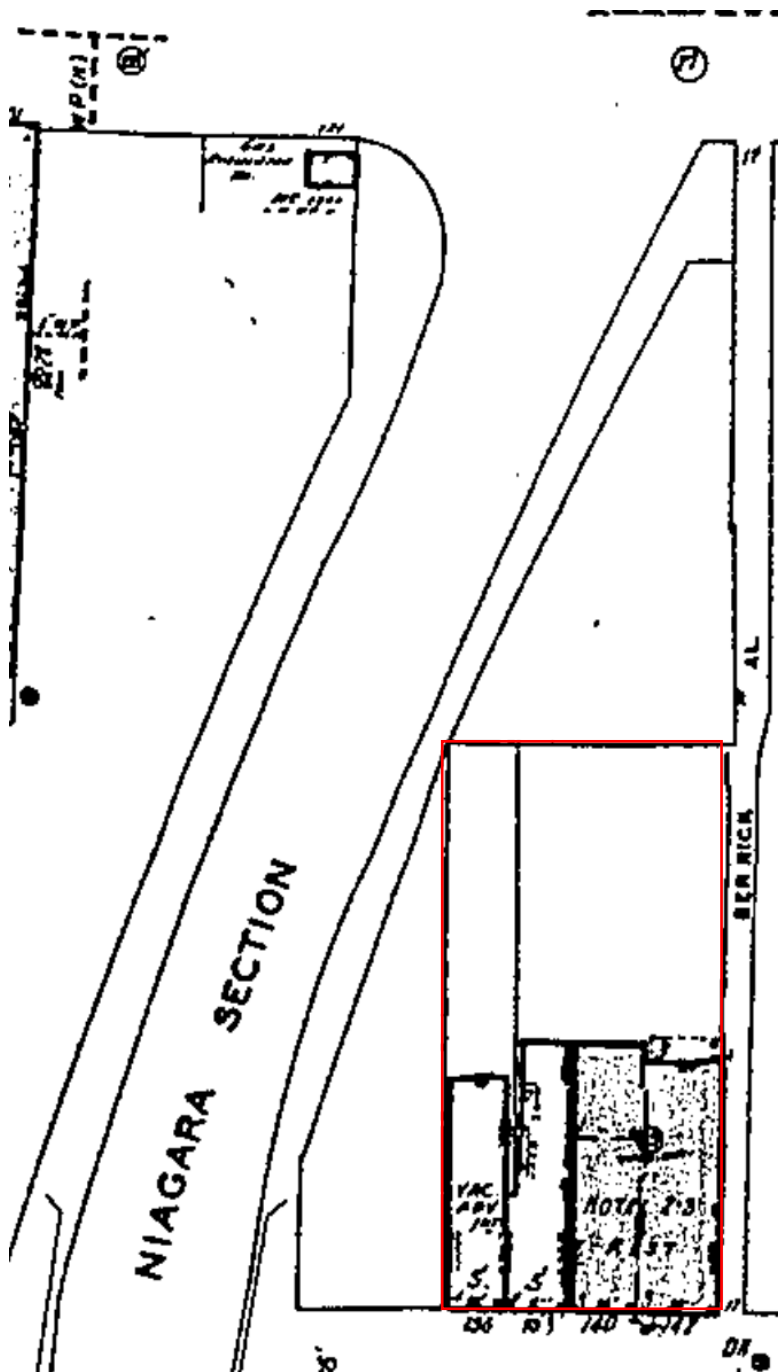
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Ca. 1989 Sanborn Map Company's *Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo, New York*

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