SYRACUSE SAVINGS BANK

.....architecture worth saving
In this bicentennial year Americans are re-examining our past with an eye toward rediscovering and preserving the best of the legacy from our forebears. In this spirit the New York State Council of the Arts and the Syracuse University School of Architecture recently published a study entitled Architecture Worth Saving in Onondaga County. This is the first in a series to be published throughout the state aimed at making the public more aware of the architectural treasures in their communities and, consequently, more willing to conserve them.
The Main Office of Syracuse Savings Bank in Syracuse, New York, is a prime example of such architectural excellence found in the Onondaga County study. Since it was built in 1875-76 this unique commercial building has been continuously occupied by the same banking institution responsible for its design and construction. Today Syracuse Savings Bank is 40th in size among the state’s 118 mutual savings banks and 55th in size in the nation with total assets of $600,000,000 as of January 1, 1976.

Syracuse’s first Bank, founded in 1849, outgrew six previous locations before it moved into its present home in June, 1876.

For two years the trustee’s building committee studied plans from six architects before they chose those of the nationally reknowned Joseph Lyman Silsbee. Silsbee’s design, dominated by pointed arches, trefoils and Gothic mouldings, is in the Venetian Gothic tradition. This choice was inspired by the similarity between the setting of the palaces of the Doges of Venice, which overlook that Italian city’s famous canals, and the Syracuse site adjacent to the legendary Erie canal.

Before the canal was abandoned and filled and became Erie Boulevard, barges laden with goods and passengers on the first leg of their westward journey passed along the 127 foot length of this magnificent, six story building. Stately James Street bordered the opposite side, with the main entrance to the bank on Syracuse’s main thoroughfare, Salina Street.
Those early travelers must have been as impressed as we are now with the intricate details of Sibbey’s design, highlighted by the fine, decorative carvings of Italian stonemasons. The second most striking feature of the building is the pale buff color of the Ohio sandstone used in the construction of the walls. Layers of red, New Jersey sandstone provide accents between floors and at the spring line of window arches. Only the finest of materials and construction
techniques were used by master builder John Moore, who also built the Colorado State Capitol. The total cost of construction was $281,000, including $10,000 for vaults, $20,000 for fireproofing, and $5,300 for tile floors.

After the original construction, a coordinated system of electric clocks were installed throughout by Charles Fasoldt of Albany, whose work was admired statewide.

Originally, the ornate main entrance was a stairway leading to the second floor and the offices of Syracuse Savings Bank. The first floor was rented to other banking tenants and the upper stories to various local businesses.

When it was built, it was the tallest structure in Syracuse with the thirty-foot-square tower rising to a height of 170 feet. The tower contained the first public passenger elevator in Syracuse, and for years visitors enjoyed the ride to the top of the tower to enjoy the view over the city and its surroundings. On the way up they might even have seen Joseph Lyman Silsbee himself. He admired his creation enough that he kept his architectural offices in the top of the tower until the 1880’s when he moved to Chicago to continue his distinguished career.

In the years following the construction of its superb, new office building, Syracuse Savings Bank continued to grow. However, rather than move to a new location, the interior of the Salina Street office was renovated several times to accommodate the new demands. The last of these major renovations took place in 1928-1929.

By then the bank’s assets had grown to more than $24,000,000 with more than 30,000 savings accounts. Additional space was then needed to provide improved facilities for handling this volume of business. The entire front portion of the second floor was removed, leaving the remainder of that floor as a balcony area and a Board of Trustee’s Room. The first floor and its new forty-foot ceiling then became the home of Syracuse Savings Bank main business office. The traditional interior of marble columns and impersonal grill work gave way to an open design more appropriate for modern “thrift services”. Through all of the renovations a conscious effort was made to keep the quality of the interior design compatible with the majesty of the original exterior.

In 1958, the bank installed what was later dedicated as the Frederick W. Barker Memorial Carillon. With the
speakers mounted high in the tower, the entire downtown business community can hear musical selections as well as the hour strike on this seventy-three bell carillon. The clear, noble tones of the bells are a fitting voice for the remarkable building from which they emanate and advertise.

With only some minor alterations at the entrance, the exterior of the building is exactly as Silsbee designed it. Syracuse Savings Bank has meticulously maintained this architectural landmark so it may continue to be an island of traditional beauty in the heart of a growing community.