

HISTORIC BACKGROUND
January 11, 2011

THE H. SEEBERG BUILDING
113-125 Genesee Street, Buffalo, Erie County, NY



The H. Seeberg Building, seen from Genesee Street ca. 1940

← | 125 | 123 | 121 | 119 | 117 | 115 | 113 | →

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The H. Seeberg Building

The H. Seeberg Building is a rare remaining example of mid-nineteenth century commercial architecture in the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood. Once a part of one of Buffalo's most thriving commercial districts, this building is now under threat from neglect, previous construction work, modern development along the Route 33 corridor known as the Oak-Elm arterial to the immediate east and other factors. Despite the years and functional changes, the exterior of the building remains a good example of commercial two-part architectural design stretching from the 1840s to the 1930s. The H. Seeberg Building is a contributing building to the local Genesee Gateway Historic District based on Criterion C for its architecture. The period of significance for the architecture of the Genesee Gateway Historic District is ca. 1840s- ca. 1930s. Because of the odd angle of the block, formed from the union of the radial and grid street plans devised by Joseph Ellicott in 1804, the building is also a unique example of architecture which negotiates the resulting irregular parcels and sharp corners. Throughout its over 150 year history, the H. Seeberg Building has served as a vital commercial location and has served a wide variety of purposes.

The H. Seeberg Building contains portions which are among the oldest architecture in the neighborhood and in the City of Buffalo. Based on the 1854 fire insurance map and city directories, portions of this building appear to date to ca. 1845, making this building a rare example of pre-Civil War commercial architecture in Buffalo. Clues now visible on the building's interior indicate that the building which is now 123-125 was originally configured as a two-and-a-half story side-gabled building dating to the 1840s and was later enlarged, modified and altered (1-2). Maps indicate that this may have occurred ca. 1872 when the building was enlarged to a full three stories with a slate covered mansard roof on the fourth floor (image 21). This type of alteration is not rare in both commercial and residential architecture; it was not uncommon for older "outdated" buildings to be renovated and altered to make them more functional and fashionable, and one of the most common alterations is the addition of Second Empire mansard roof levels to buildings in the 1870s and 1880s when this style was popular. Like many commercial buildings during this period, it appears to have served both as a commercial space and also as a residential building as well. The 1854 fire insurance map for Buffalo describes it as a "first class brick dwelling, walls coped, part store, shingle roof."

The earliest known occupant, and likely the builder and owner of the 123-125 corner building is Henry Urban, who emigrated from Alsace, a French-controlled but culturally German region. Opened with partner George Beyer, the grocery shop of Beyer and Urban was located at the corner of Genesee at Oak Street as early as 1847, and in the 1850 census Henry Urban's property was valued at \$3,000 indicating his ownership of the building. In 1872 Henry Urban was noted as having both his shop and residence in the building at 123-125 Genesee Street.¹ During the nineteenth century, the corner of Genesee and Oak was heavily occupied by the

¹ This is confirmed by family lore. Urban descendants note that an Urban worked at this location until the H. Seeberg Company purchased the building ca. 1930.

Urban family, including George Urban Sr.'s wholesale flour business located at the north-east corner (established in 1846) and later his son George Urban, Jr.'s Urban Roller Mills business was established in 1881 located at the north-west corner at 324 Oak Street. The Urban Roller Mills was the first mill in Buffalo to introduce the use of metal rollers in grain milling, with previous milling being done with large mill stones, and the Urban Milling Company became one of Buffalo's most prominent companies (image 8, 9, 10).² Henry Urban the elder may have died sometime before 1860, since his seven year old son, Henry J. Urban, appears residing at 111 Genesee Street in the house of grocer Louis. P. Adolf in the 1860 census. Henry J. Urban continued the family legacy in the grocery business, operating his own store from the building at 123-125 Genesee Street (perhaps an inheritance from his father) from about 1878 until at least 1902. Henry J. Urban not only ran the grocery store and resided in the building, but for a short time around 1880-81, he also operated a saloon from the building at 123 Genesee Street.

The units at 115-119-121 Genesee Street share similar exterior details and forms and appear to have been constructed as a group. Constructed ca. 1850s, this series of brick commercial buildings housed a wide variety of services and shops. Uniquely, because of the confluence of the angled lot lines in this portion of the building, the small 115 unit was originally a small, triangular shape building which did not have southern exposure. One of the most noteworthy shopkeepers in this portion of the H. Seeberg Building is Christoph Wagner, who both lived and ran a shoe business at 121 Genesee Street from about 1872 (possibly even as early as 1868) until the turn of the twentieth-century (image 19). Another early occupant of the building at 123-125 Genesee Street was John Armbruster, a local tinsmith. These buildings hosted a wide variety of tenants and residents during its history including Charles P. Korn, a shoemaker who also made his residence in 117-119 Genesee Street which he likely built, as well as John Grossman, tailor. John Mesnard ran his confectionery shop from 115 Genesee Street in 1861, with his residence also in the building. Additionally, this same building served as the house of Mrs. Henry Burkholder. In 1890, 121 Genesee Street also was home of William J. Schwinn, decorator and younger brother of the Schwinn's who ran the successful umbrella manufactory and shop from the neighboring 111 Genesee Street, indicating how intertwined the families and buildings of the Genesee Gateway Historic District were during its heyday. These businesses reflect the nature of a local design, production, sales and sometimes residential economy, combined and accessible in one neighborhood; a model seldom seen in American today.

The 113 unit has slightly different architectural features and was likely constructed ca. 1860. The first known occupant of a building at 113 Genesee Street is August Datt, who ran his business from the 113 Genesee Street building as early as 1861, at which time it was recorded as having an address of 73 Genesee Street. Datt, like many residents in the area, was also of German descent. August Datt, maker of

² Due to the growth and prosperity which started at the Oak Street location, the Urban Milling Company constructed a new larger mill on Urban Street in 1903. This new mill, like his original mill, was innovative- it was the first mill in Buffalo to be run wholly utilizing electrical power. Refer to Genealogical Publishing Company (N.Y.). *Memorial and family history of Erie County, New York*. New York: Genealogical Company, 1906-8: 120-123.

hats, caps and furs operated out of 113 Genesee Street between the mid-1860s and 1880s. A permit indicates that the storefront was altered in 1898, and in 1902 the building was occupied by Gotthilf Buckenmaier, who sold “hair goods” and wigs from a small space on the second floor. In 1925, replacement windows were installed on all three floors, and new flooring was also installed along with various “necessary repairs.” In the late 1920s, the building was home to A. Haefner who sold art and religious supplies.

In 1929, portions of the building became the home of H. Seeberg, Inc., a specialty men’s clothing factory and shop run by Harry Seeberg. Born in Russia, Seeberg immigrated to America with his family at age 2. The son and brother of successful clothing retailers, each in their own right, Harry Seeberg founded his own store in the nearby Village of Depew in 1910. Seeberg first appears to have opened his shop from 119 Genesee Street in 1929 and quickly began expanding his operations. By 1937, Seeberg grew his factory and retail shop on Genesee Street, opening portions of the interior walls to allow access between the previous smaller buildings and creating one large commercial space located between 113-125 Genesee Street. A ca. 1940s photograph reflects this enlargement, and the building features large, 1930s/40s era storefront facades which largely modified any earlier nineteenth-century commercial storefronts (image 6). This storefront was likely installed in 1934 or 1935 to the 113-117 storefronts and to the 121 and possibly 123-125 storefronts in 1945 as noted in several building permits issued to Harry Seeberg. Some manner of darkly colored material, perhaps glass tile or even marble, ran the entire width of the Genesee Street storefront façade, with metal letters spelling out the Seeberg name. Long advertisement signboards were installed along the entire length of the building on upper floors, serving to visually unify the various earlier architectural components and presumably overcoming the previous quaint individual storefronts with massive signage signifying retail power in the 1930s automobile age. The elegant 1870s-era slate mansard roof with its round-headed dormer windows is also clearly visible, marking the location of both the Genesee Street-Oak Street corner and the location of the primary entrance as well.³

The H. Seeberg Building, like others in the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood has faced alteration and has suffered from general neglect towards the end of the twentieth-century. Work done in 1945 by well-known local architect Louis Greenstein (information to follow) included a new fire escape along the eastern façade of the building, as well as interior alterations. A 1970 building permit notes that while repairs to the building occurred, the storefront windows were blocked in with stucco. By 1974, portions of the building were vacant. The H. Seeberg Company continued to own the building until at least 1980, at which time the company appears to have gone out of business.⁴ A 1980 photograph of the building depicts a neglected

³ At the time of his death in 1962, Harry Seeberg had expanded the H. Seeberg, Inc. company to include six retail locations at 1094 Broadway, 333 Main, 2231 Harlem Road in Cheektowaga, 3670 Delaware Avenue in the Town of Tonawanda, 1219 Abbot Road in Lackawanna and his flagship store on Genesee Street which also functioned as the company’s factory. Seeberg also owned and operated Charlie Baker, Inc. men’s clothing shops which had two locations- one being located in 101-103 Genesee Street just down the block from the H. Seeberg Building. Refer to “Harry Seeberg, 74, Head of Firm, Dies.” Courier Express. 29 Oct 1962, 28. Also refer to 1960 and 1961 city directories.

⁴ Rizzo, Michael F. *Nine Nine Eight: The Glory Days of Buffalo Shopping*. Lulu.com, 2007:49.

commercial building with an enclosed storefront, accessed through one primary entrance on Genesee Street, with the fourth-story slate covered mansard roof now sheathed in some manner of board siding (image 7). The buildings were subsequently purchased by Willard A. Genrich of PlatinumDome, Inc. who in 1986 started a rehabilitation project which stripped the interiors of all the buildings down to the studs and brick. Genrich in 1988 replaced the wood framing and flooring systems in the building, installing a fireproof steel frame in the building shell. The wood framed mansard roof was replaced by this point with a concrete block structure which approximated the shape and design of the original. Windows were removed, leaving gaping voids in the building and leaving the interior open to the elements. In 2007 the H. Seeberg Building was purchased by Genesee Gateway LLC, with support from the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation. Spearheaded by CityView Construction Management, the Genesee Gateway project is rehabilitating the vacant buildings along Genesee Street between Ellicott and Oak Streets, creating a series of commercial and office spaces.

Louis Greenstein, Architect

Louis Greenstein was a well-known and respected architect who worked in Buffalo during the early and mid-twentieth century. Like many architects of the time, Greenstein was a sort of “journeyman” architect, working on primarily smaller, less high-profile projects yet building a solid reputation throughout the community. Born in Buffalo on November 10, 1886, Greenstein worked as a junior draftsman in the office of McCreary, Wood and Bradney in Buffalo in 1907, as well as working as a senior draftsman with Green & Wicks in 1908. In 1908 Greenstein took a position as Chief Draftsman, Associate Designer and Superintendent of Construction with the firm of Edgar E. Joralemon who had offices in Niagara Falls, Buffalo and New York City. Greenstein appears to have transferred to Joralemon’s New York City office (where he worked until 1913), as he attended and graduated from Columbia University’s School of Architecture in 1909. Between 1913 and 1914, while continuing work at Columbia University, Greenstein was a part of the Columbia Atelier of the Society of Beaux Arts Architects, an organization in New York City which trained architects in the same atelier manner as the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. By 1914, Louis Greenstein returned to Buffalo to establish his own practice, setting up his office in the Adler and Sullivan-designed Prudential (Guaranty) Building (1895, NR 1973, NHL 1975).

Like many of his time, Greenstein was active in the Buffalo-area architectural scene. He was an active member of the Buffalo and Western NY Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), joining as a member in 1920 and serving as Secretary in 1920, Treasurer in 1922, and President in 1923-24. He also served on the Buffalo AIA chapter’s executive board for several terms and was the chapter’s historian for over 20 years. Greenstein published work on architecture for the Buffalo Torch Club, and in the New York State Architect magazine. He was a member of other organizations outside of architecture as well, including the Buffalo Consistory, Buffalo Torch Club, Buffalo Construction Club, Grand Lodge Free & Accepted Masons (F & AM) and several others. Greenstein was also an organizer of the Buffalo Rectagon Atelier, a part of the Society of Beaux-Arts organization at which

he had trained in New York City. The Rectagon atelier was led by several prominent architects in Buffalo between 1923 and 1940 and at the University at Buffalo following World War II in 1947-48, and helped to educate young Buffalo-area architects who could not attend an architectural college program or a Parisian or New York City-based Beaux-Arts program.

Greenstein's work can be found throughout Buffalo and Western New York. Notable projects include the Coplan Mansion in Amherst, NY (1918-1919, Amherst Local Landmark 2007), Willowdale Country Club in Williamsville, NY now known as Westwood Country Club (1923), the Medical Arts Office Building in Buffalo (1925), Bryant & Stratton Business Institute/Tapestry Charter School (1925), Buffalo's Temple Beth-David on Humboldt Parkway (1926), the Art Deco Lederman's Furniture Store building (1929) and the Niagara Memorial Park Chapel and Gates in Lewiston, NY (1937-38). Greenstein was also involved in the Kenfield Housing Project (1935-36), and the construction of Buffalo's Memorial Auditorium (1938-40, demolished). Beyond new construction, Greenstein worked on several early rehabilitation projects on historic buildings throughout Buffalo including work on the Stewart and Benson Travel Service Building at 501 Main Street (1957, building dates to ca. 1870s, contributing building to NPS certified 500 Block of Main local district) as well as his 1944/45 work to the H. Seeberg Building. Working in a time before historic preservation standards were written and where many small-scale historic buildings were demolished for new construction, Greenstein's work on rehabilitating and adapting historic buildings during the 1940s and 50s makes him perhaps an early preservation advocate.

Louis Greenstein also appears to have made other contributions to Buffalo, beyond his architectural work. He designed the flag and logo used during Buffalo's Old Home Week celebration in 1907. In 1924 a contest was held for a new flag for Buffalo, and out of seventy-three designs, Louis Greenstein's was selected. In 1925 he designed the official seal of the City of Buffalo. Louis Greenstein died in April 1972.

Commercial Architecture in the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak Neighborhood

Commerce and commercial architecture have evolved greatly from the mid-nineteenth century into the twentieth-century. Early commercial buildings of the nineteenth-century were typically long and narrow, allowing for numerous buildings to be constructed abutting the main traffic artery of the street, maximizing the number of retailers and shops which could be constructed on any given street. Within these buildings, typically the building would house a ground floor storefront which housed the primary commercial business and was easily accessible from the street level. Production and manufacturing of goods or products typically occurred at this ground level, sometimes at the rear of the building. Upper floors generally contained residential space, and it was not uncommon for a shopkeeper to live directly above his store. With the development of new technologies including the steel skeletons and the elevator in the late nineteenth-century, commercial buildings grew taller and grander in scale. Retailers could occupy several floors of a building, and patrons could use elevators to reach upper floors. The Industrial Revolution of

the late nineteenth-century allowed many retailers to streamline their production, no longer having to produce each item individually by hand, and as a result stores could offer a wide variety and selection of products to consumers. It is at this period that production capacity outgrew many of the traditional small-scale buildings, in some cases requiring large, specialized buildings, typically located outside of residential areas. Retail and shops continued to be located in commercial areas adjacent or inside of residential neighborhoods, bringing the goods to the consumers. This trend effectively separated production from sales, which had been the norm for centuries. The vast new selection and quantities of products and goods meant expanding the space used to display and store the items, and as a result many commercial businesses began increasing the size of their shops in the early twentieth-century. This phenomenon has evolved into the current mega-malls, big box chain retailers and large commercial buildings located outside of residential areas which are now typical of American commercial architecture. The multi-use, pedestrian oriented neighborhood of the mid-1900s has been overcome by the centralized shopping center and automobile access.

The H. Seeberg Building is an excellent example of this evolution of commercial architecture from the 1850s until the 1950s. As previously discussed, originally the building was composed of several small, narrow, oddly shaped commercial buildings which conformed to the unusual lot lines on the block, two or three stories in height. These buildings were built utilizing every square inch of their lot since land was already becoming increasingly scarce and expensive in the Genesee neighborhood in the mid-nineteenth-century. These buildings were typical of nineteenth-century commercial buildings with many serving as the residence of the shopkeeper. In the early 1930s when the H. Seeberg Company moved in, they purchased the entire row of commercial buildings and opened several voids in the walls in order to create one large retail and factory building for the company. The small individual spaces of the buildings no longer served the needs of a company in the 1930s, and the Seeberg company modified the buildings to suit the “modern” needs of large retailers. The H. Seeberg Company retained the original exterior building envelope, retaining the original footprint of the building block. This new unified larger scale commercial building is especially evident in a photograph from the early 1940s which depicts the building as one large corner block along Genesee Street (image 6). The once individualized storefronts were treated in a similar manner, making them appear as several entrances to the one larger building. The different window types, arched or flat-headed, were concealed behind long continuous bands of signage which served to bind the individual buildings into one, unifying the appearance of the building. The mansard roof acted as a spatial marker of the corner entrance into the building. The individualized identity of each small, modestly ornamented building was then regulated to create the new appearance of a large, singular building, reflecting that the H. Seeberg Building was throughout its history a building in transition, reflecting the varying needs in space, size and appearance of commercial architecture through nearly a century.

The H. Seeberg Building is also an example of a rare breed of buildings which is unique to Buffalo. Because of the city’s radial street plan overlaid on a traditional street grid, Buffalo has a series of oddly shaped, irregular blocks which result from

Joseph Ellicott's Baroque city plan of 1804. These triangular and pointed city blocks create unique challenges to the architecture and built landscape of Buffalo, both historically and still to this day. Often time as a result of these irregularly shaped blocks, individual parcels or plots within were also oddly shaped. Parcels could be regularly created along one street, but then forced to alter their direction or shape when confronted with an intersecting street which ran at an oblique angle.⁵ Buildings in Buffalo have been forced to deal with these non-rectangular uniform blocks in their parcel and plot boundaries, overall form and design, and their orientation to the primary street particularly how the building responds to the oddly shaped corners. In an age when typical commercial and residential architecture was based on a similar rectilinear "box" construction and spatial system, many of Buffalo's buildings had to be constructed at odd angles fit to the confines dictated by the radial street plan. The result of this negotiation has been some of Buffalo's finest architectural treasures, many of which are State and National Register listed. By following Genesee Street, such buildings include the Electric Tower (1912, NR 2008), the Buffalo Savings Bank building (1901, NRE), and the former Genesee Building (1922-23). Even Buffalo City Hall (1929-31, NR 1996) reflects the negotiation of Ellicott's street plan in its octagonal footprint, created by combining two parcels at the western edge of Niagara Square.

Buildings in Buffalo which are sited on these oddly shaped blocks typically exhibit one of two responses. One response is to deny the presence of the odd angle or sharp corner and attempt to regulate and normalize the appearance of the building. Buildings which deny the irregular angles typically present an "ordinary," rectilinear façade to the street, regardless of the shape of the parcel or plot on which the building is sited. One could stand on the street and view this building and not immediately understand that the building was at an unusual angle or irregularly shaped plot. An example of this phenomenon is exhibited by the building at the western end of the Genesee Gateway buildings, located at 85-87-89 Genesee Street and known as the Caulkins Building. When viewed from Genesee Street, this building appears to be a typical, three-story rectangular brick building, and it is assumed that the walls of this primary façade are perpendicular to the elevation, creating a rectangular box-like building behind. In reality, this building was a miniscule building, with a triangular form. The small building was forced to adjust its perimeter to the small, wedge shaped parcel formed by the boundaries of lots to its east which ran nearly parallel to Ellicott and Oak Street along Genesee Street, with the abrupt meeting of the boundaries of parcels which ran perpendicular to Ellicott Street (image 19). Because of the knife-edge western corner of the building formed from its unique triangular form, the western bay of the building was forced to accommodate an internal stair, concealed behind a continuous storefront façade,

⁵ An 1847 map of the City of Buffalo depicts the south block of Genesee Street between Ellicott and Oak Streets as being bisected by a small street called Blossom Street, north to south. Blossom Street is still partially extant as an alley running between East Huron and Broadway Streets but has disappeared further north. The presence of a right-of-way may account for the form of the parcels along this portion of Genesee Street. Parcels to the west and eastern corners appear to run parallel or nearly parallel to Ellicott and Oak Streets, but parcels in the middle of the block run perpendicular to Genesee Street. This may reflect that the parcels were divided during two different times; one early, perhaps in the 1820s-30s when settlement of the area first occurred, and one later, perhaps in the 1850s when this small alley disappears and was turned into valuable Genesee Street commercial property.

relegating dwelling space to the eastern portion of the building. Because commercial space in this area was at a premium in the 1880s when the building was constructed, the Caulkins Building presented as large a commercial façade as possible to the busy street, a sort of “false-front,” denying the form of the building behind.

An opposite reaction is that the building embraces the corner or angle, acknowledging the situation of the unique form of the block in its architecture or design. Buildings which exhibit this approach often have architectural features such as columns, moldings, porches or other elements which are pointed directly at the corner. In some cases the building is turned slightly to present a primary or secondary façade to the corner. This is the response which the H. Seeberg Building presented. The 123-125 unit of the H. Seeberg Building embraced the corner location. The chamfered corner of the building contained a small but remarkable entrance into the building, marking the importance of a corner location by recognizing and conforming the building to the location. This was further augmented by the placement of the mansard roof at the corner of the 123-125 unit in the 1870s which further emphasizes the prominence of the Genesee-Oak Streets location. This chamfered edge becomes a small façade which, because it alters the form of the building away from the box, becomes notable. This cut-away turns the profile of the H. Seeberg Building slightly towards the east, heightening the sense of perspective since the viewer wants to examine the building from the corner rather than straight-on, drawing the emphasis away from the larger northern façade and placing more emphasis on the corner.

The Genesee-Ellicott-Oak Neighborhood

The Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood has its origins as a rural area which was located on the north-eastern fringe of the Buffalo settlement areas. The first landowner in the area was Major Andre Andrews. Born in Cornwall, Connecticut on July 8, 1792 and trained as a lawyer, Major Andrews relocated to Buffalo in 1820 at a time when the city was rapidly growing, where his likely business was investing and dealing in real estate. His arrival was well timed; Major Andrews arrived in Buffalo only about 16 years after Joseph Ellicott formally laid out the city streets. He arrived at a time when Buffalo was quickly emerging as both a commercial and economic powerhouse following the heated battle and ultimate victory over the neighboring community of Black Rock for the western terminus of the Erie Canal, and the subsequent construction of the canal between 1817 and 1825. Major Andrews' first known land purchases were lots 202 and 203 from the Holland Land Company at the intersection of Genesee and Huron Streets (site of the current General Electric Tower) made in 1821, where he constructed his residence. He also purchased lots 120 to 132 totaling 79 acres at the edge of the growing village of Buffalo, including lots 131 and 132, in the area known as the “Outer Lots,” which would develop into the site of the Genesee Gateway buildings (image 15). While Genesee Street was a primary road leading east at the time, the lack of any other notable intersecting roads indicates that this area was largely unsettled field and

farmland during the early 1820s.⁶ Andrews likely realized the potential for dividing and selling this land in the future, as the growth of Buffalo pushed into this area. Major Andrews became a significant figure in early Buffalo history and was active as a lawyer in addition to his real estate dealings. In 1824 he served as a Presidential elector (one of the popularly elected representatives, or electors, who formally elect the President and Vice President of the United States), and in 1826 began his term as a Trustee for the Village of Buffalo. In 1833, Major Andrews was elected as Buffalo's second mayor, serving a one year term in office. Major Andre Andrews died in Buffalo on August 18, 1834 after a bout of cholera, and is thought to be buried in Forrest Lawn Cemetery.⁷

As the settlement in Buffalo continued to increase and expand in the wake of the burning of Buffalo in 1813 during the War of 1812, the developing Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood began to be settled by primarily German immigrants. While initial German settlers came to Buffalo via Pennsylvania, by the 1820s many Germans became arriving directly from Germany and German regions of France in greater numbers. Aided and encouraged by the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, by 1828 the wide-spread settlement of Germans in Buffalo began. On June 19, 1826 Genesee Street was declared a public highway, marking increasing settlement and growth along this corridor.⁸ As a major route in and out of the village, Genesee Street would have been a natural location for commercial development to occur as it was more highly traveled and visible. It was a midway point between the rural farmland further east and the rapidly growing Buffalo population and this area became a natural location for the transfer of farm produced goods to the growing consumer base. An 1828 map of the Village of Buffalo reflects that the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood, while still being located on the north-east fringe of Buffalo, had notable settlement (image 16). Early settlement of Germans was located primarily along Broadway and on Genesee Street, occupying these peripheral regions. In the 1830s and 1840s, nearly one-third of Buffalo's population was German, becoming a politically, culturally and socially significant group.⁹

By the 1850s, people of German ancestry numbered about 15,000 of the approximately 42,000 total residents in the City of Buffalo. During this period, there began to emerge from the uniformly working-class German population in Buffalo a rising group of merchants who had seemingly become successful and wealthy rather suddenly. This rising class of German businessmen had largely remained in their homeland until they had received an education and had learned a trade, arriving in Buffalo as highly skilled and intelligent workers. Many German immigrants brought their skills as butchers, bakers, millers, brewers, blacksmiths, tanners and grocers to

⁶ On August 18, 1821 Genesee Street (or Busti Avenue at the time) was recorded as being 99 feet wide to Oak Street at the edge of the current Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood, then narrowing to 66 feet to the village line which was at about Locust Street to the east. This change in street width is a good indication of where the settled village area ended and the rural, unpopulated areas began. Bureau of Engineering. *Index of Records of Streets, Public Grounds, Waterways, Railroads, Gas Companies, Waterworks etc. of the City of Buffalo from 1814-1896*. Buffalo: Wenborne Sumner Company, 1896: 285.

⁷ Rizzo, Michael. *Through The Mayor's Eyes: The Only Complete History of the Mayors of Buffalo*. Buffalo: People's History Union, 2001.

⁸ *Index of Records of Streets*, 286.

⁹ James, Isabel Vaughan. *Some Outstanding Germans in Buffalo*. Manuscript, BECHS.

the growing city and were able to forge successful and profitable businesses located in the heart of their ethnic neighborhoods, including along Genesee Street.¹⁰

It is in this climate that the growth and character of the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood developed by the 1840s into a self-sufficient commercial and residential center for many German immigrants. Spurred by the multitude of skilled tradesmen, retailers and producers coupled with the increasing needs of local residents, this neighborhood was a logical location for a public market. In 1856 the Washington Market (also referred to as the Chippewa Market) was established, located on the city block between Ellicott and Washington Streets at Chippewa Street just south of St. Michael's Church (original 1851, present building 1867).¹¹ The market cleared what had been a sparsely-settled block which had contained a few assorted frame structures as well as the one-story Greek Revival-style Public School 13 (1838), which was subsequently relocated about a block south on Oak Street (1891-1915, NR 2005).¹² This neighborhood over the span of two decades transformed from Major Andrews' greenfields to the pre-Civil War era "suburb" of lightly populated settlement into a post-Civil War commercial center for the expanding metropolitan zone of Buffalo. The large market, which covered over 2.5 acres, was known as the largest market west of the Hudson River.

The Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood became a more thriving commercial district based largely on its proximity to the Washington Market. The market was a significant center for life in Buffalo. Owned and operated by the City, it featured hundreds of vendors, selling a wide variety of produce, meats, cheeses, flowers and other products, most produced by the skilled local German community (image 9, 10, 11). The centerpiece of the market was a large brick Romanesque Revival market building which housed the stalls for dozens of Buffalo's finest butchers. Against the exterior walls of the building were housed stalls for poultry, butter, cheese, fruits and vegetable vendors, and stalls for merchants of crockery, tins, knit products, and other assorted products were arranged around the block. Overall, the market was a center of activity, noise and socializing, especially on the primary market days of Tuesdays, Thursdays and especially Saturdays, when the market was so crowded that moving around the more than 400 stalls was especially difficult.

¹⁰ German families in the buildings at 113-125 Genesee Street include the Urbans, the Datts, the Wagner family, and the Korn family, who were all among the early founders of businesses in this neighborhood. Goldman, Mark. *High hopes: the rise and decline of Buffalo, New York*. Albany: State University of New York, 1983: 76-77.

¹¹ St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church was founded in 1851 following a schism in the nearby St. Louis RC Church. Rev. Lucas Caveg and 19 other German-speaking families splintered from that church to form St. Michael's, constructing a small wood-frame church on the church's present site on Washington Street near Chippewa Street. Soon after, the parish founded a grammar school to educate the children of the local German community. Records indicate that the present church building was constructed in 1867. In 1870 the parish established Canisius College, a Jesuit institution, to the north of the church. The college would relocate to its present location on Main Street in 1910. Following a devastating fire resulting from being struck by a lightning bolt in 1962, the parish rebuilt the building utilizing the remaining exterior shell, reconstructing the church's signature domed tower. Refer to Condren, Dave. "St. Michael's Church, Jesuits' original base in area, to mark 150th year with Mass." *Buffalo News*. 29 Sep 2001, A-7.

¹² Refer to the State and National Register of historic Places nomination for School 13 (03NR05199), section 8, page 1.

Because of the significance of the Washington Market as a center for trade, commerce and business, buildings in close proximity to the retail area also reflect the commercial character of the market. A majority of the buildings constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries adjacent to the Washington Market along Ellicott, Genesee and Washington Streets were commercial buildings. One of the most notable buildings in this area is the Market Arcade Building (1892 by E.B. Green) which is a Beaux-Arts Classical style arcaded indoor commercial building which connected Main Street to the west with Washington Street and the Washington Market to the East. This neighborhood also featured streets which were lined by commercial buildings dating from the 1850s to the early twentieth-century, typically featuring additional commercial vendors. Businesses in the immediate Washington Market area include the McClure Bloesser & Eggert Boot and Shoe Factory, P. Messner's Chair Factory, and several saloons and boarding houses on Ellicott Street. In the same area were also located George Urban, Jr.'s Urban Roller Mills (founded in 1881) and his father's retail flour shop on Oak Street. Genesee Street was also lined with commercial buildings and included businesses such as Frank Pfennig, retailer of tobacco products at 95 Genesee Street, cutler Gabriel Giesser at 99 Genesee Street and Henry Urban who ran a successful grocery store located at 123 Genesee Street for many decades. Because of the attraction of the Washington Market, this neighborhood around Genesee, Ellicott and Oak Streets was one of Buffalo's thriving commercial and retail centers throughout the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries.

By the late nineteenth-century, the stretch of Genesee Street between Ellicott and Oak Streets became one of the most recognizable centers for photography in Buffalo. While Main Street had served as Buffalo's earliest hub of photography studios, and remained as such throughout the nineteenth-century, by the late nineteenth-century new buildings constructed along Genesee Street, with primary north-facing facades, were ideally situated for photography studios. The Caulkins Building at 85-87-89 Genesee Street was the earliest constructed in 1886 by master architect, F.W. Caulkins. Combining both utility and function with artistic design, the Caulkins Building's most identifiable feature was the convex "waterfall" skylight at the center of the building which brought additional north light into the upper studio spaces. In 1895 Mrs. Frederike Giesser commissioned Richard A. Waite, one of Buffalo's preeminent architects, to design the elegant Werner Photography Building at 101-103 Genesee Street. Like the Caulkins Building, the Werner Building's signature feature is its expansive curving skylight. No other buildings like these are known to have been constructed elsewhere in Buffalo, and these buildings are the only known currently existing examples of specialized, high-style photography studio in the City of Buffalo. Not only was the neighborhood associated with the thriving market and commercial activity of the day, but it also can be identified as Buffalo's most elegant and sophisticated centers of late-nineteenth-century photography.

Over the past few decades, this neighborhood has declined due to several factors. When the New York State Thruway opened in 1959, many traditional commercial neighborhoods in Buffalo saw the migration of stores and retailers following the population growth to the suburban regions. The opening of the Kensington Expressway (Route 33) in the 1960s which connected downtown Buffalo to the

eastern suburbs also served to channel both residents and businesses out of the crowded urban core. The Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood suffered greatly both economically and culturally as a result of these new highways and with the opening of the Elm-Oak arterial of the Kensington Expressway in 1967/68. The neighborhood saw a dramatic loss of commercial tenants as a result of this trend, and the Washington Market itself closed in 1965, after several failed attempts to boost business and the construction of new, modern market buildings, as business dwindled (image 12, 13).¹³ It was also generally an age which saw the transformation of commercialism, with the separation of manufacturing, sales and corporate headquarters to separate facilities. St. Michael's RC Church, one of the centerpoints of the traditionally German community, blames the "death" of the church directly on the construction of the neighboring Elm-Oak arterial, charging it with the removal of hundreds of houses, and therefore parishioners, from the church neighborhood.¹⁴ During the 1960s and 1970s, this area faced the Urban Renewal wrecking ball, and numerous historic buildings were demolished to make way for "shovel-ready" parking lots which dot this area of the city. The Washington Market itself was razed in 1965 shortly after it closed and now is a large parking area (image 14). As a result of demolitions and the construction of the Elm-Oak arterial, the blocks along the east of the neighborhood at Oak Street have been cleared of all historic fabric, with either vacant lots or new sterile, modern development being constructed. The downturn of commerce in the area as well as the increased vehicular traffic from the Kensington Expressway have also contributed to the general neglect and decay of the architecture of the neighborhood. The buildings along Genesee Street between Ellicott and Oak Streets, along with several key buildings along Ellicott and Oak just to the north on this block, constitute one of Buffalo's last remaining intact nineteenth- and early-twentieth century commercial streetscapes reflecting downtown's prominence when Buffalo was a major American city. Today, this contiguous row of historic commercial buildings marks the point at which the suburban fringe of the city accessed via the highway transforms into Buffalo's Downtown, a region quickly blossoming with new rehabilitation and development. In this capacity, they act as a "gateway" welcoming suburban travelers into Downtown.

In the face of the decline of the neighborhood, the promise of the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood envisioned for the past two decades is now taking shape. Despite a somewhat shabby exterior, the buildings along the south side of Genesee Street between Ellicott and Oak Streets have been considered for rehabilitation projects dating back to the 1980s. Willard A. Genrich purchased the collection of buildings, hoping to transform them into "The Next Great Place" as part of a campaign to locate a new convention center in the neighborhood. In a failed attempt to save and transform the buildings at the eastern end of the block, Genrich replaced the existing structural systems with steel framing, attempting to stabilize and reuse the building and to bring their fire resistance to modern standards which unfortunately did not take the "first, do no harm" stance of current rehabilitation practices. Genrich posed concepts of turning the buildings into housing, offices and restaurants, with no

¹³ "Washington Market to Close July 1, Banas Announces." *Buffalo Evening News*. 11 Jan 1965.

¹⁴ Today, the church has about 200 registered members. Refer to Condren, A-7.

success. Jessie Schnell Fisher of Triangle Development purchased the buildings at the western end of the block at 85-87-89 and 91-95 Genesee Street in an attempt to secure the buildings for a misguided attempt at rehabilitation. However before plans could develop and begin, the buildings were damaged in a November 2002 windstorm, halting any work. At that time, Genrich-owned buildings at the eastern end fared no better, ending up in Buffalo Housing Court in 2006 where he was found guilty of three building code violations and fined after the City of Buffalo threatened to take the buildings by eminent domain in 2004 to demolish them.¹⁵ The vacant buildings stood as reminders of Buffalo's once-great commercial heritage as well as symbols of the unsuccessful attempts at rehabilitation; the only potential future for these dead buildings appeared to be demolition, creating more vacant lots or stark, modern low-rise office buildings in the neighborhood.

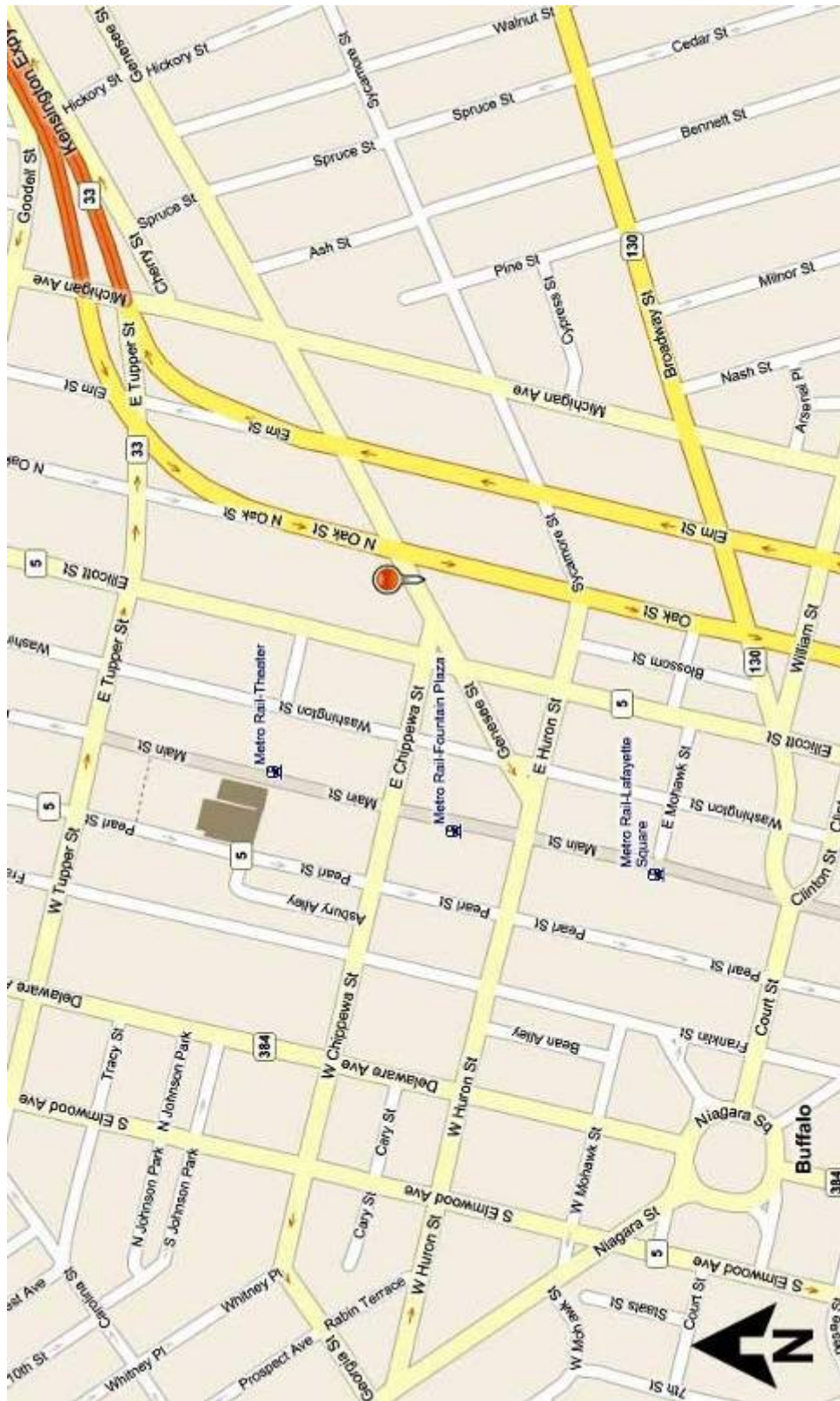
Today, there is one last opportunity for the rehabilitation and revitalization of the once vibrant Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood. Purchased in 2007 by Genesee Gateway LLC, the collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century commercial buildings is being developed into a multi-million dollar commercial and office complex which promises to bring new activity and business to the neglected neighborhood. Unlike previous attempts, the new design based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards gracefully respects the form, footprints and design of the original historic fabric, while once again transforming the buildings into viable new space which functions for today's commercial and spatial needs.

The Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood along Genesee Street and running north on Oak and Ellicott Streets retains numerous significant examples of commercial architecture from a period which spans over 120 years. While this neighborhood features a wide variety of architectural styles from simple, builder-designed utilitarian Italianate examples to elegant architect-designed, highly styled Beaux-Arts examples, the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak area has a period of architectural significance which spans between ca. 1850s and the early 1930s. This period of history for the City of Buffalo reflects dramatic changes in commercial trade and commercial architecture, shifting from small owner-occupied shops built for simple functionality, to larger shops which created ample glitzy showrooms. Several of the buildings, including the Schwinn-Mandel Building and the H. Seeberg Building at 113-125 Genesee Street, also combined manufacturing with the retail shop. The Genesee Gateway Historic District reflects a significant period of Buffalo's history, representing the city at the pinnacle of its international prominence. This district reflects a largely intact and contiguous collection of rare, remaining and highly threatened small-scale commercial buildings; buildings which are disappearing rapidly from Buffalo's urban center.

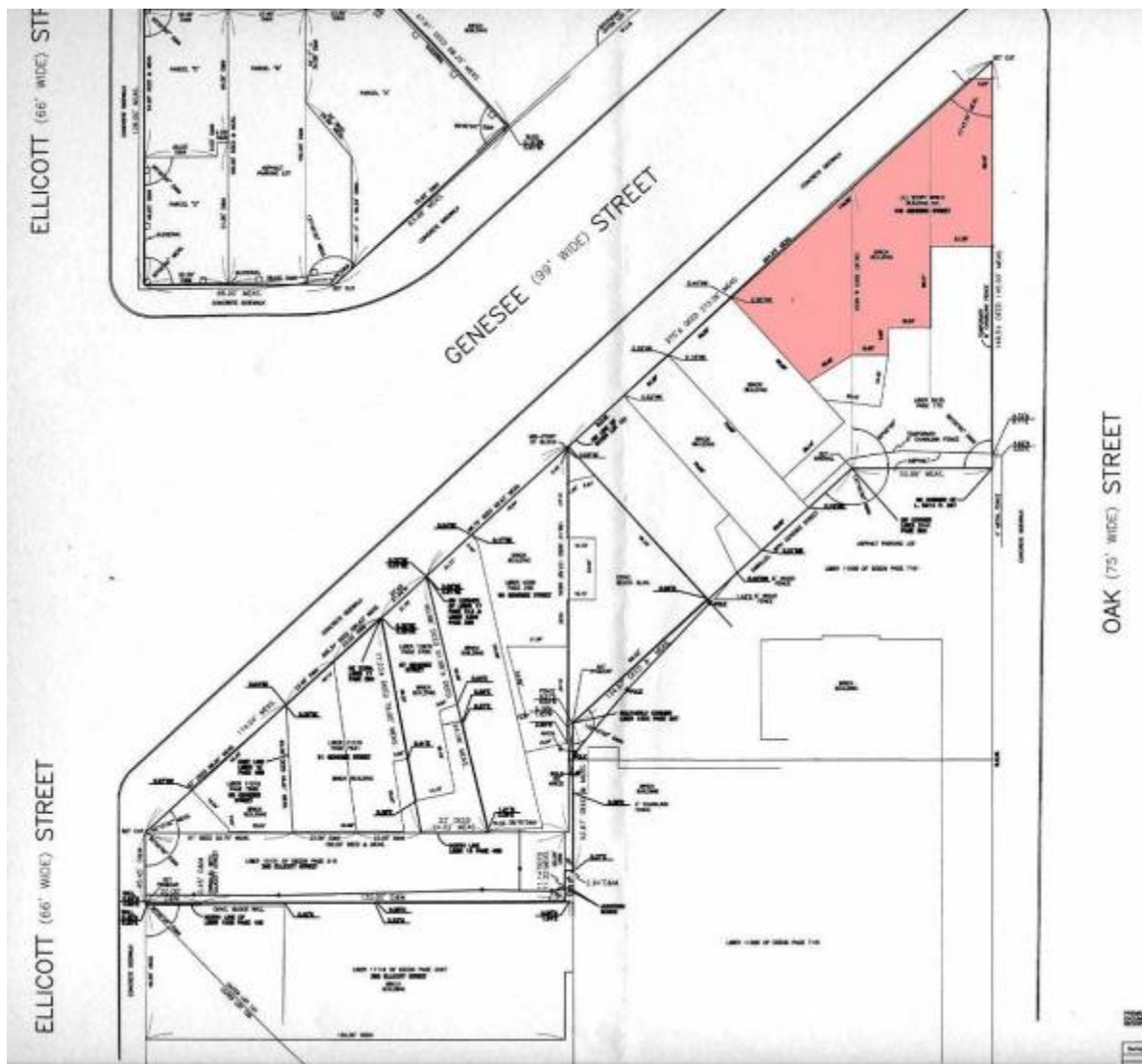
The H. Seeberg Building is an excellent example of the development of commercial architecture within the larger Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood and the local Genesee Gateway Historic District, and it is an increasingly rare example of antebellum architecture in the City of Buffalo. The H. Seeberg Building is a

¹⁵ Linstedt, Sharon. "Historic but vacant Genesee St. strip for sale." *Buffalo News*. 7 July 2006; D-7. Also Linstedt, Sharon. "Purchase of 99 Genesee confirmed." *Buffalo News*. 15 Aug 2007; B-2.

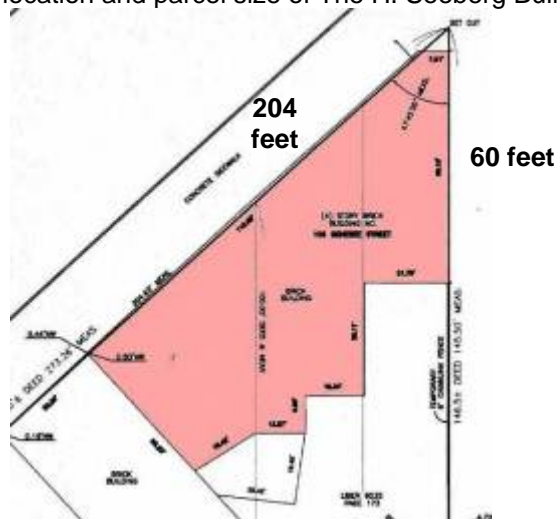
contributing building to the local Genesee Gateway Historic District as an example of nineteenth-century commercial architecture which was transformed in the 1930s into a larger commercial building. The building, likely originally constructed by and occupied by German immigrants, is also an example of the growth and prosperity of the notable German ethnic population in Buffalo in the mid-nineteenth-century.



(1) Location of the H. Seeberg Building, 113-125 Genesee Street, Buffalo, Erie County, NY 14203



(2) Detail, Survey (2008)
 Showing location and parcel size of The H. Seeberg Building





(3) Aerial View, facing south

Note the regular, continuous façade which is plainly surfaced. The continuous line of the façade relates directly to the pedestrian-centered commercial heritage of the ca. 1840s building.



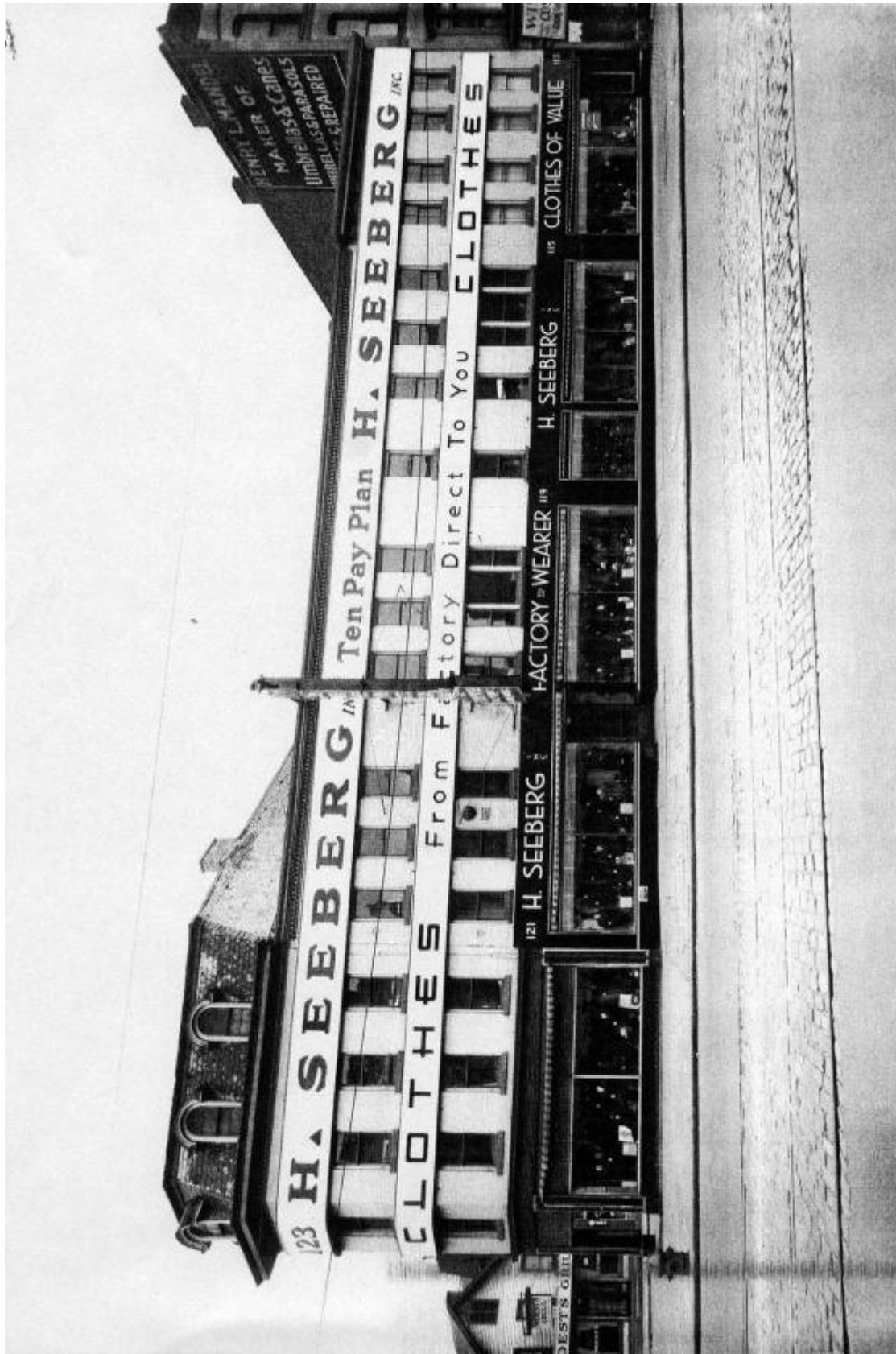
(4) Aerial view, facing north

Note the irregularity of the rear façade which is nearly intact to the original 1840s/50s era individual buildings which once comprised this corner.

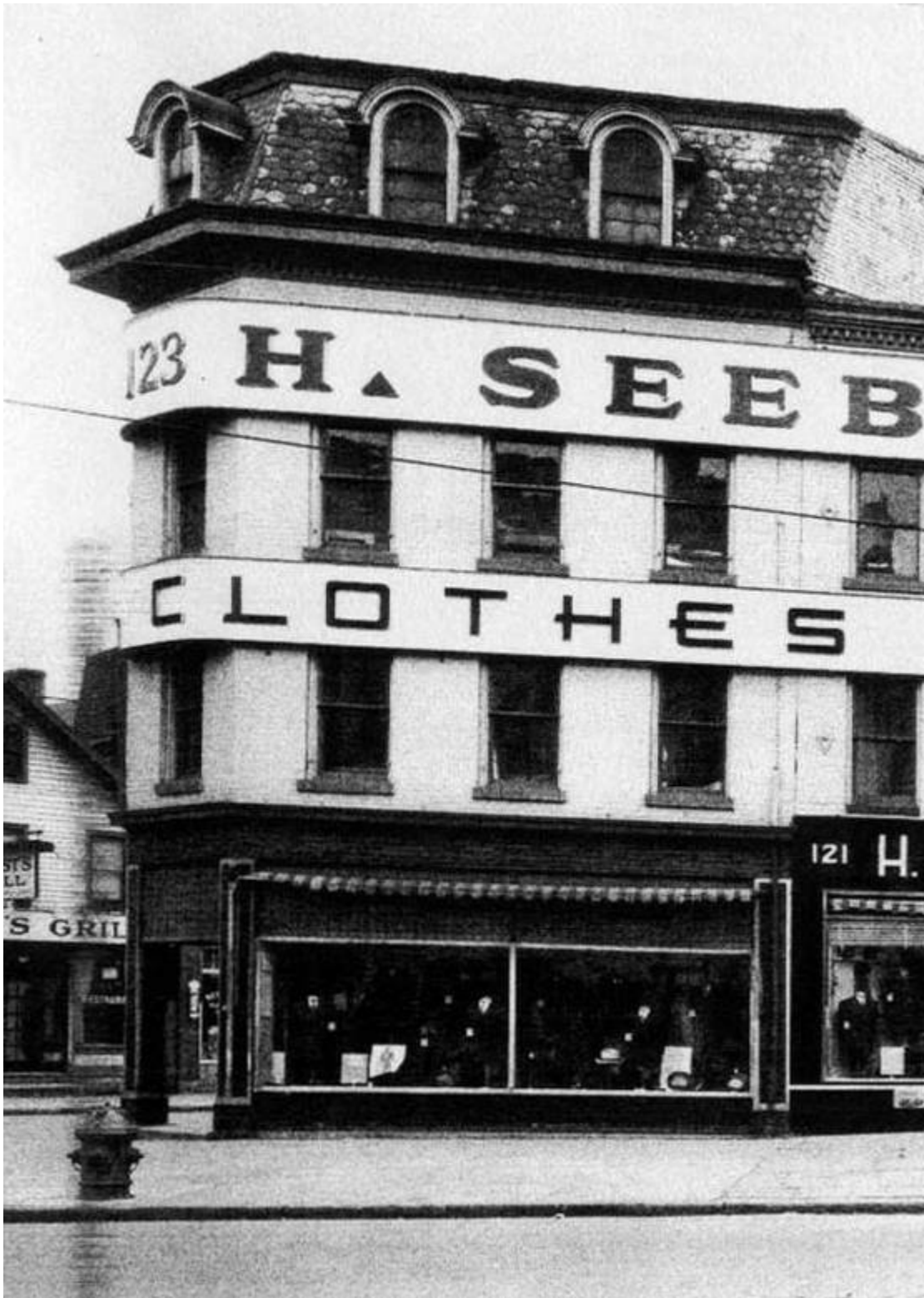


(5) Advertisement, H. Seeberg's Factory Clothing Stores, 1956

By 1962, H. Seeberg's had 6 retail locations, including the one on Genesee Street which served as the company's showroom and factory. The H. Seeberg Building reflects the end of traditional commercial development which brought the goods to the people, rather than making the people go to the goods as is typical of commercial architecture today.



(6) The H. Seeberg Building, ca. early 1940s



Detail, the H. Seeberg Building (123-125 space) ca. early 1940s
Note the slate shingle covered mansard roof is plainly visible, and the storefront may have contained Luxfer prism transoms.



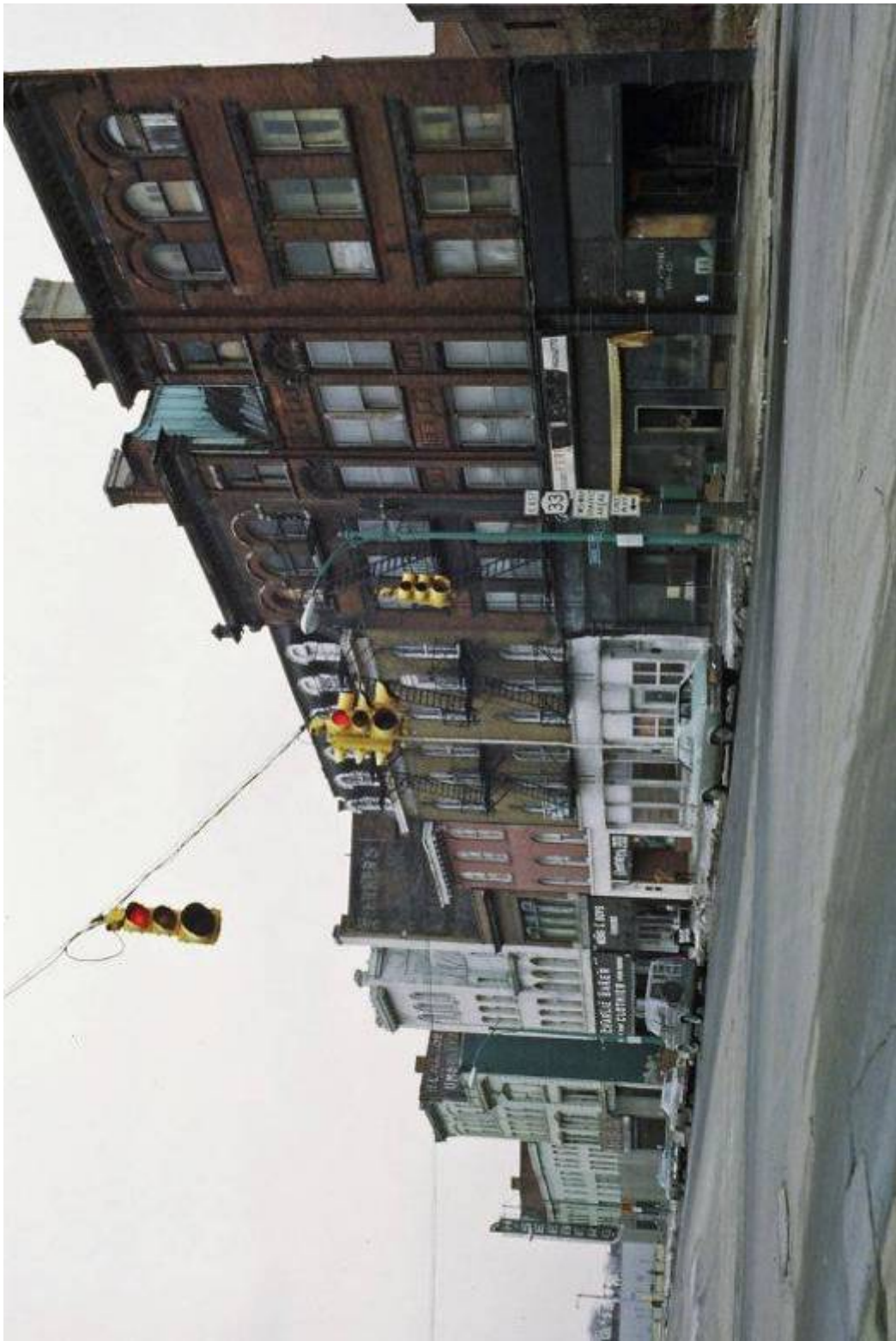
Detail, the H. Seeberg Building (121 and 119 spaces), ca. early 1940s
Note the modest dentilated continuous cornice and the sleek storefronts.



Detail, the H. Seeberg Building (117-115-113 spaces), ca. early 1940s
Note the difference in cornice between the 121-115 buildings and the 113 building which was constructed at a different time. Also note the change in the rhythm of the fenestration. The signage bands and storefronts are intended to superimpose a unified, continuous feel to what was previously a collection of separate buildings.

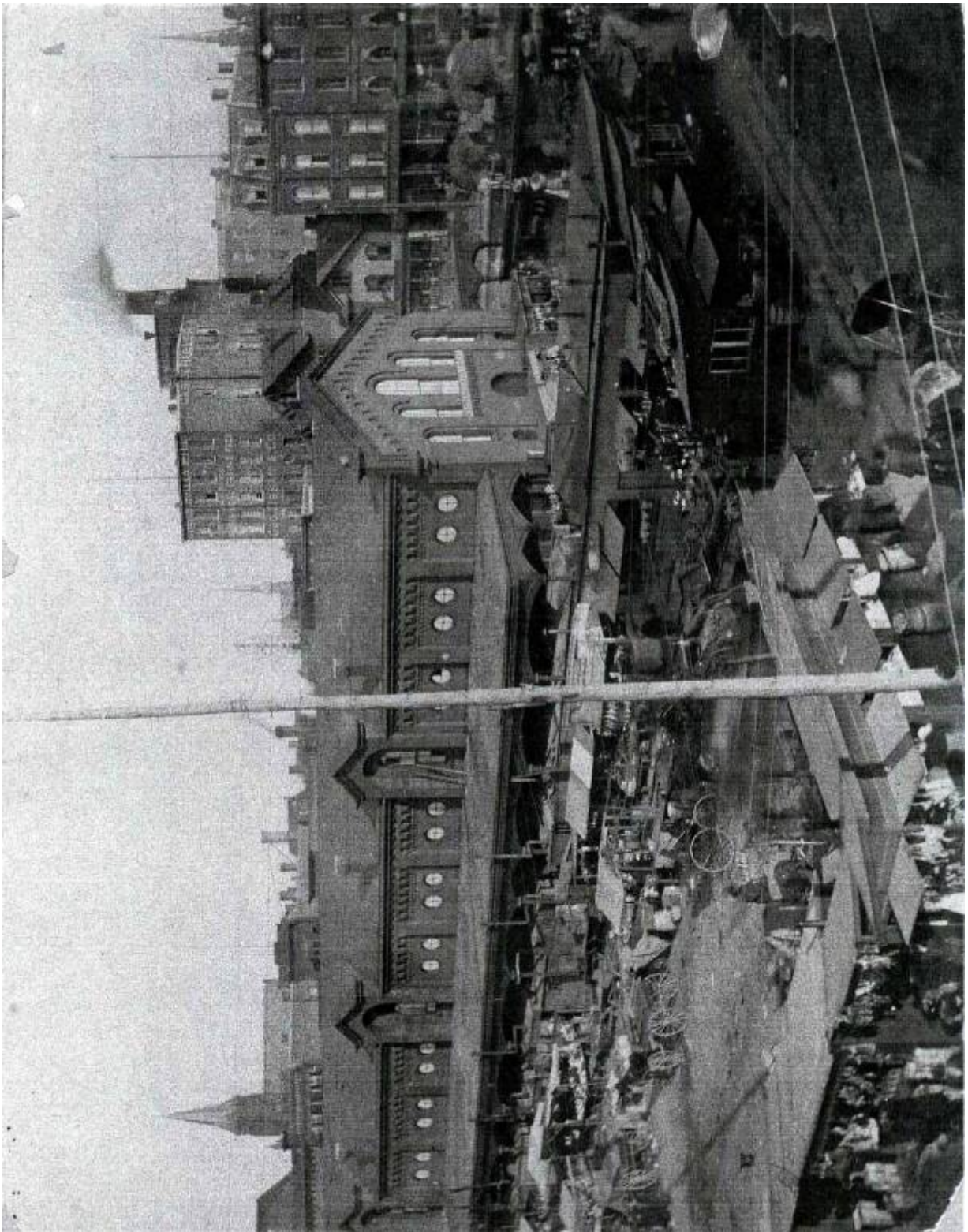


(7) The H. Seeberg Building, 1980

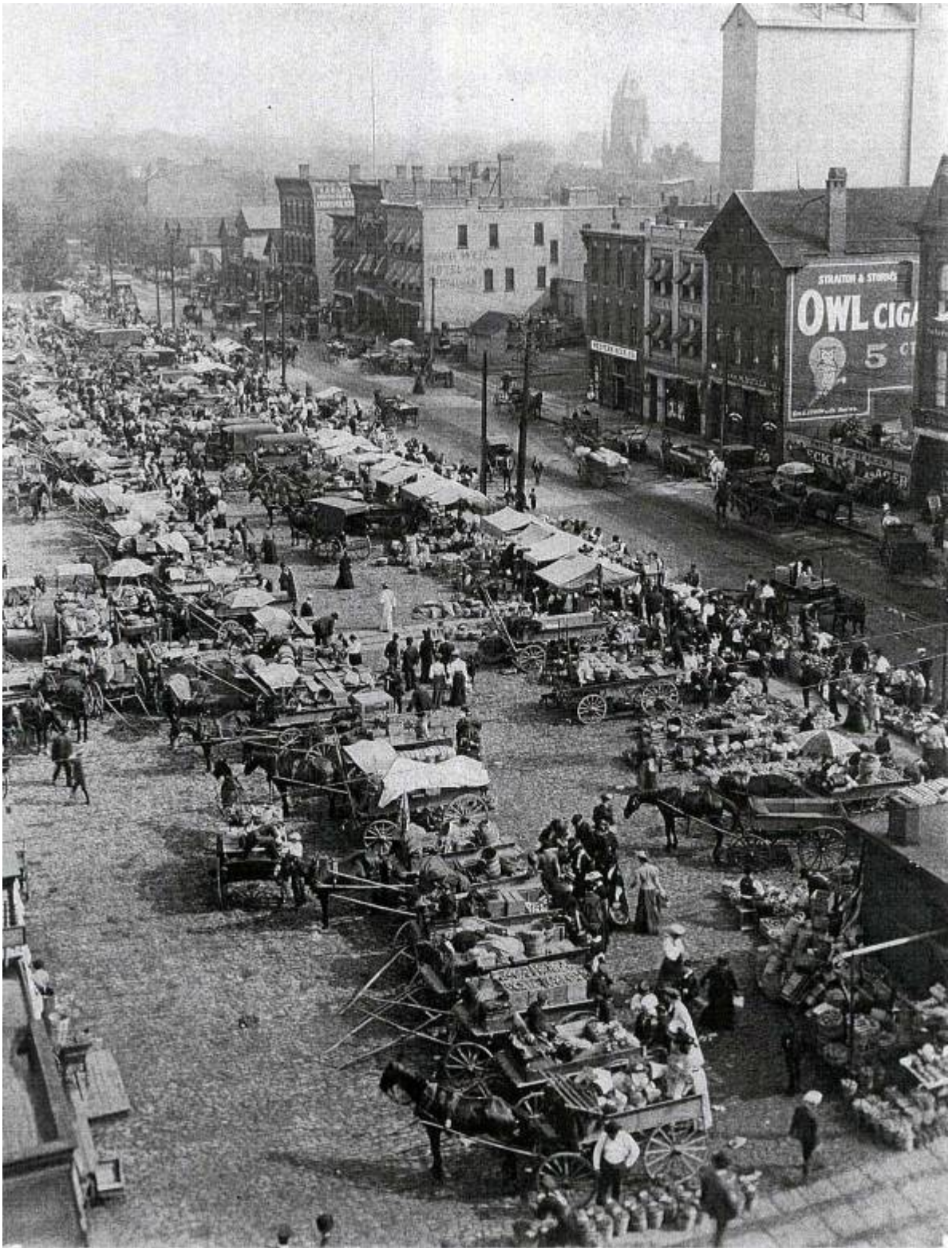


(8) The Genesee Gateway Buildings, ca. 1986

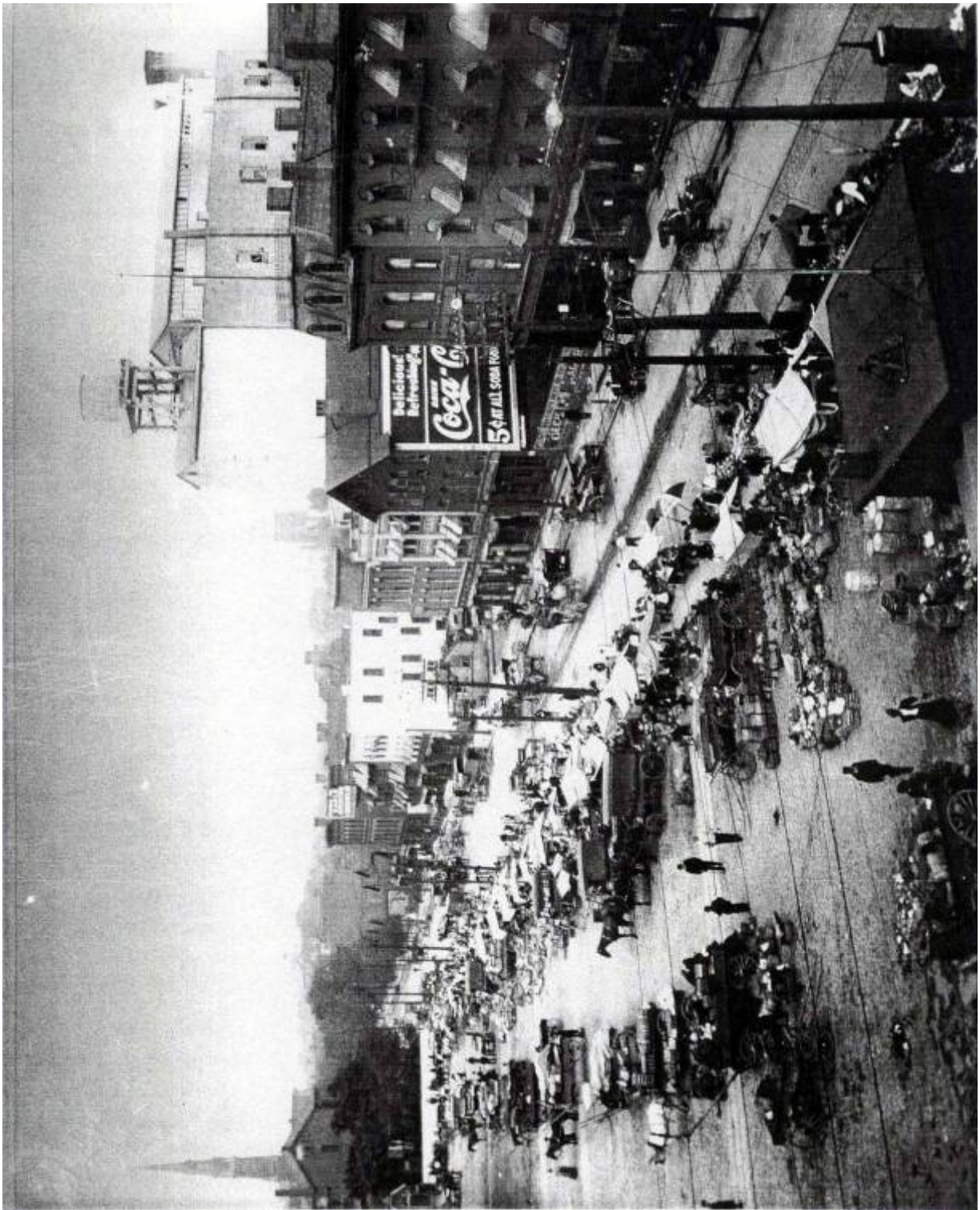
Note the presence of the Caulkins Building and the mansarded Denzinger-Sigwalt Buildings towards the image foreground, which were lost in 2002. The H. Seeberg Building is located at the far left of the row, its projecting signage visible.



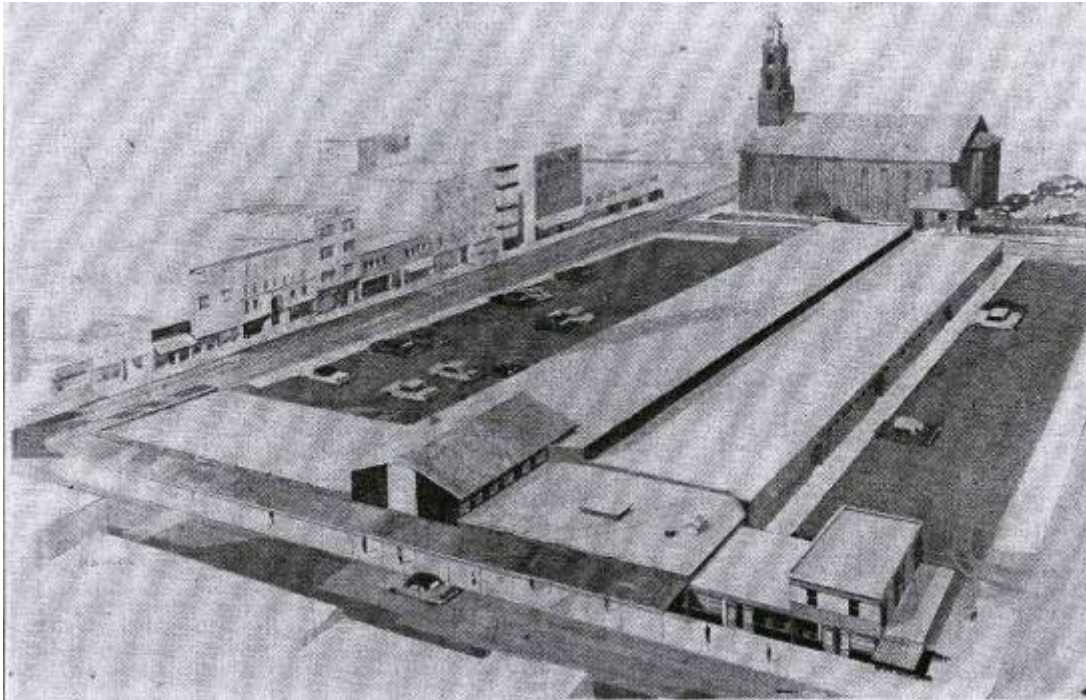
(9) The Washington Market looking east towards Ellicott Street, 1890
Note the growth of other commercial buildings along Ellicott Street which developed as a relationship to the bustling market. The tall structure in the right background behind the market building is the Urban Roller Mills milling building in its original appearance.



(10) The Washington Market looking north-east along Ellicott Street, 1905
This view on a crowded market day shows the type of commercial neighborhood which had grown up around the Washington Market by the turn of the twentieth-century. The tall structure just visible in the upper right corner of the image is the Urban Roller Mills milling building.



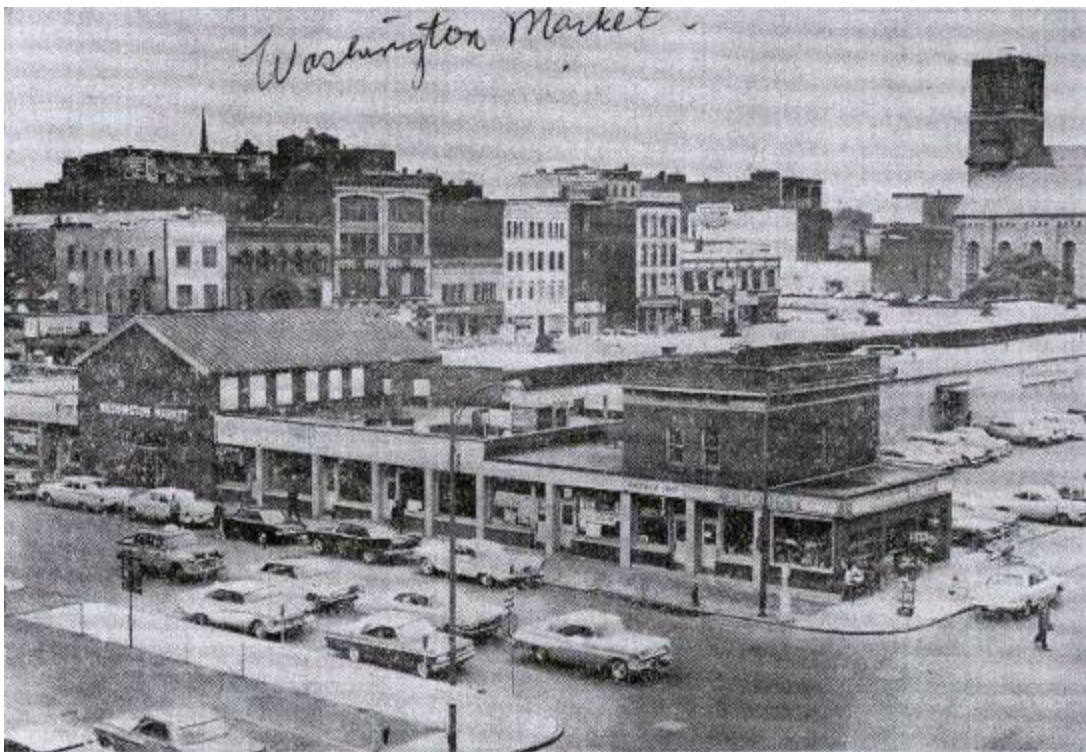
(11) The Washington Market looking north-east along Ellicott Street, 1912
A view of the fine collection of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century commercial architecture
which characterized the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood at this period.



(12) "Architects Sketch of New \$400,000 Washington Market"

This 1955 drawing done by the architecture firm of Backus, Crane and Love shows the new design for a modern, concrete block market which replaced the brick Romanesque market building.

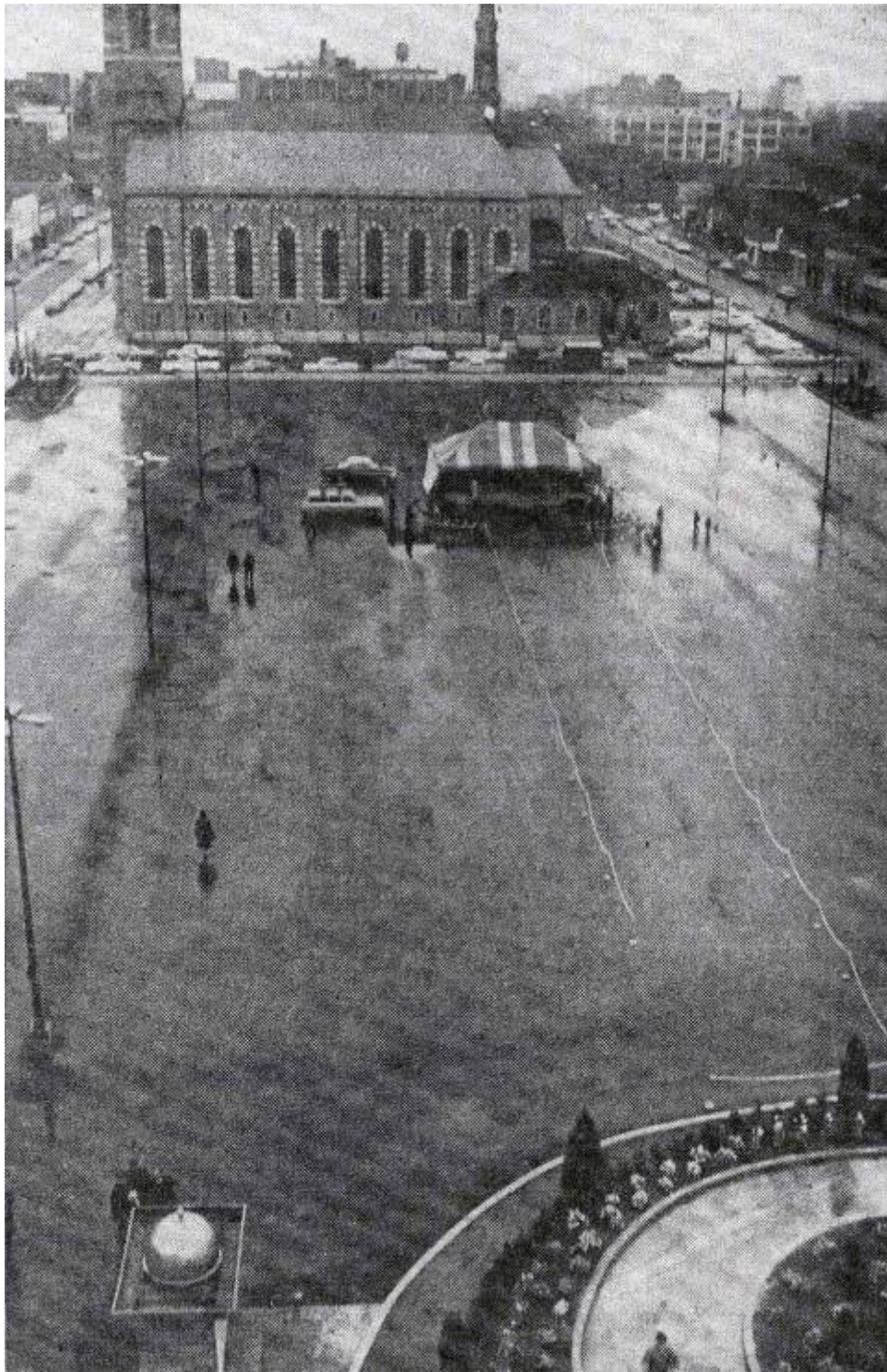
Buffalo Evening News 4 Feb 1955.



(13) The Washington Market in view from Ellicott and Chippewa Streets

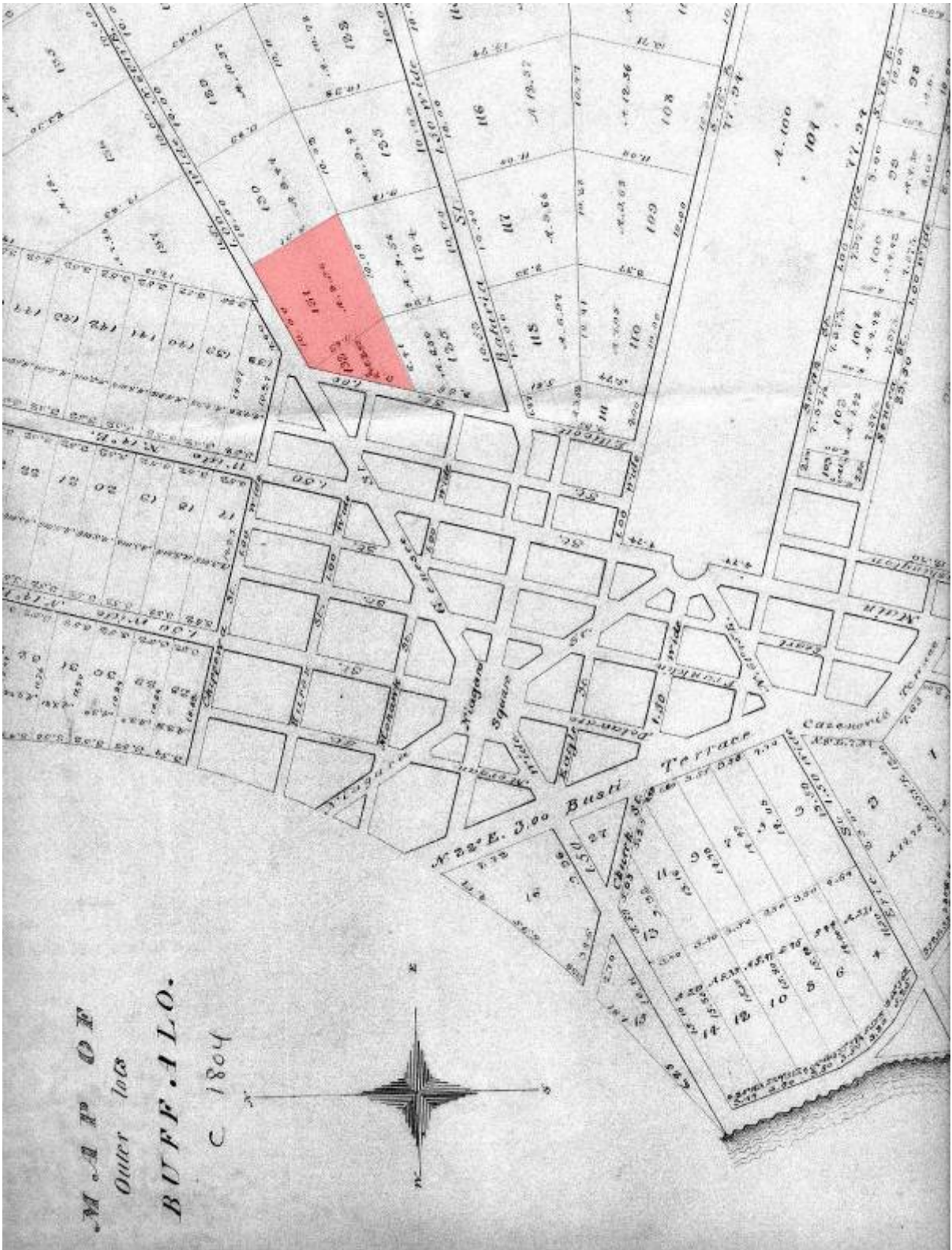
With the neighborhood in decline, and dubbed "a losing proposition with no bright hopes in sight," this 1963 image reflects the appearance of the market during its final days.

Buffalo Courier Express, 22 Sep 1963:1.



(14) "A New Downtown Parking Lot Opened Today."

This 1965 photograph reflects the ultimate fate that has plagued much of the historic architecture in the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood. Here a new surface parking area is opened on the site of the then-recently demolished Washington Market site, marking the end of an era for Buffalo's commercial history. Today this is still a parking lot, and there are no reminders of the once-great market which was once located on this plot. St. Michael's RC Church stands in the center background.



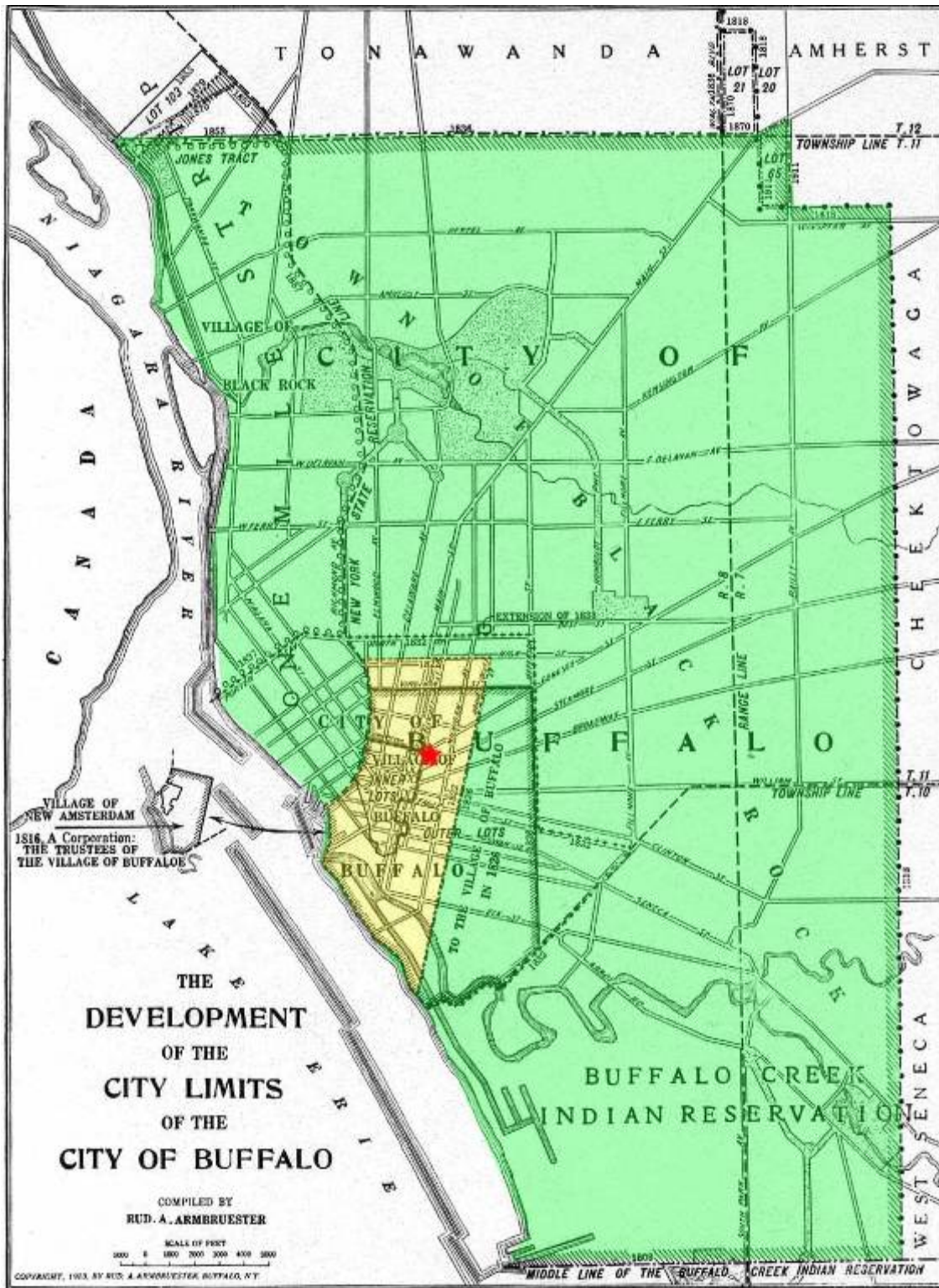
(15) Detail, Map of Buffalo Outer Lots, 1804/05

The red highlight indicates plots 131 and 132, purchased by Major Andre Andrews circa 1821 at the outer edge of Buffalo at the time, and current location of Genesee Gateway buildings. Notice how the road narrows just past the corner of Ellicott and Genesee Street.

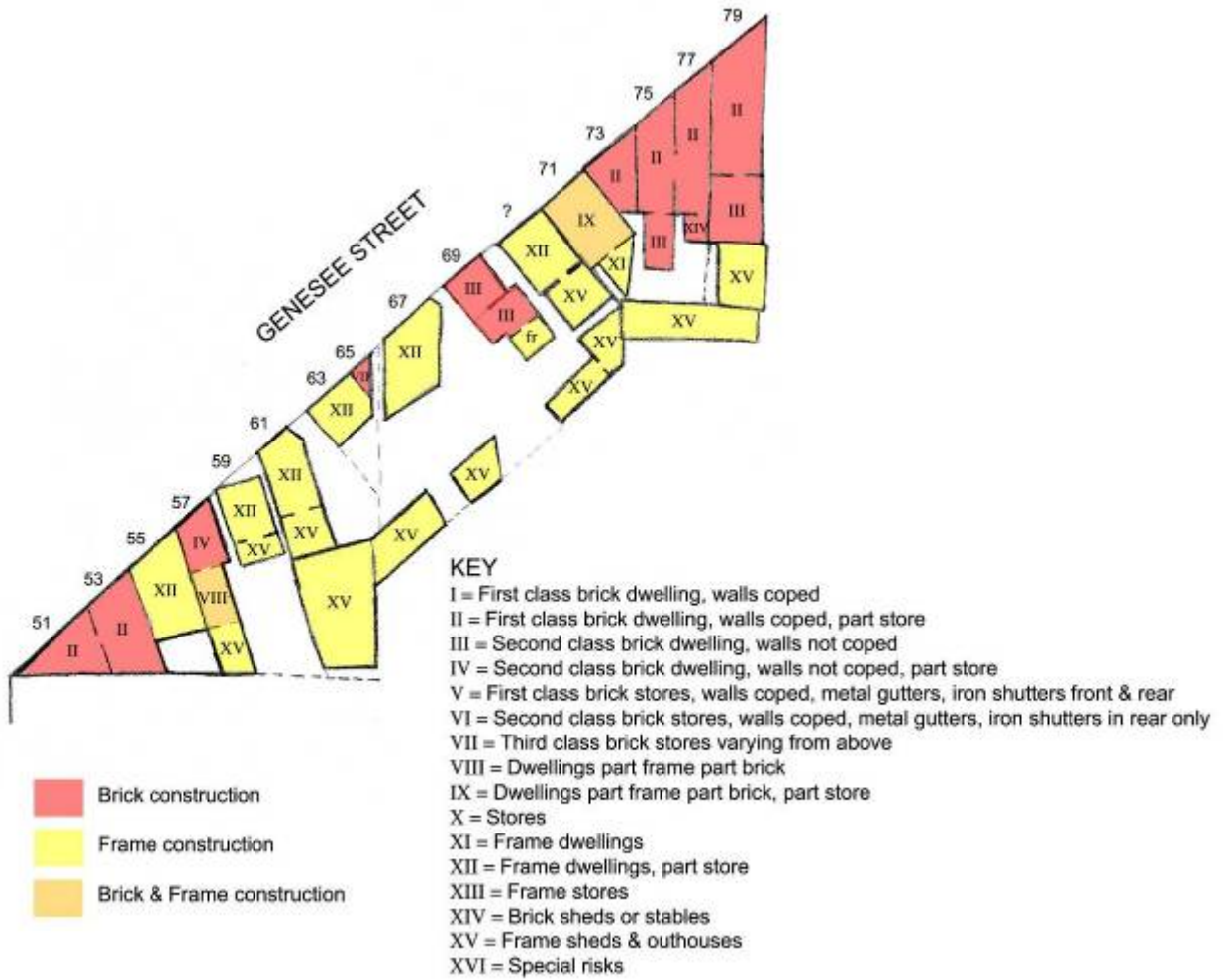


(17) Pocket Map of the City of Buffalo, 1847

Enlarged map detail highlights the Genesee Gateway area as it appeared in the late 1840s. Note what appears to be a small street, called Blossom Street, which bisects the block north to south, possibly the reason why brick buildings aligned in continuous blocks or rows were constructed at the corners of the block and an assortment of oddly shaped frame buildings filled in the center, possibly as later urban development taking over the former right-of-way of the street. This configuration may also account for the configuration of individual lots on this block

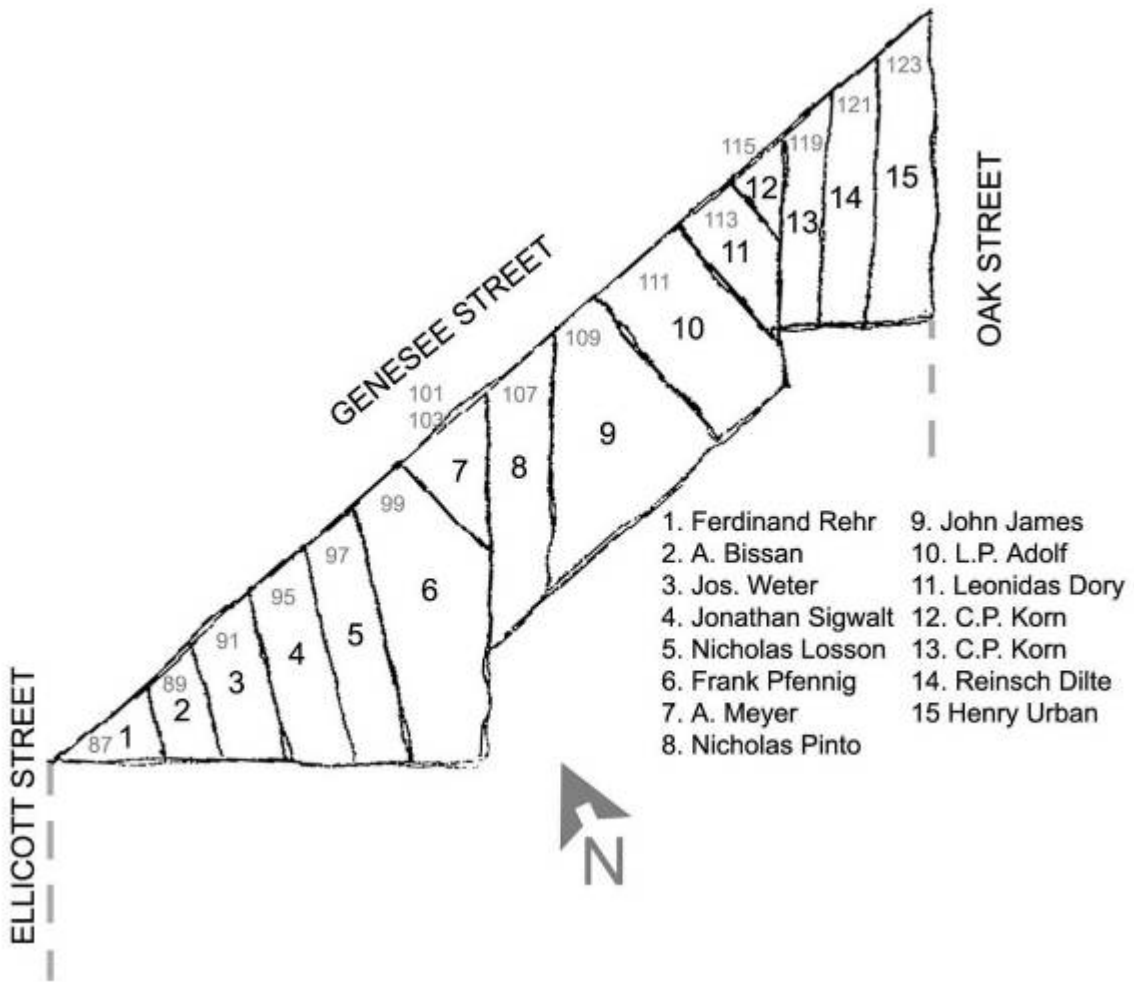


(18) The Development of the City Limits of the City of Buffalo (1923)
 Yellow indicates the boundaries of the then Village of Buffalo in 1822 around the time the Genesee-Ellicott-Oak neighborhood was founded. The red star indicates the location of the Genesee Gateway buildings in relation to the overall size of the city at the time; compare to the green 1923 boundaries of the city.



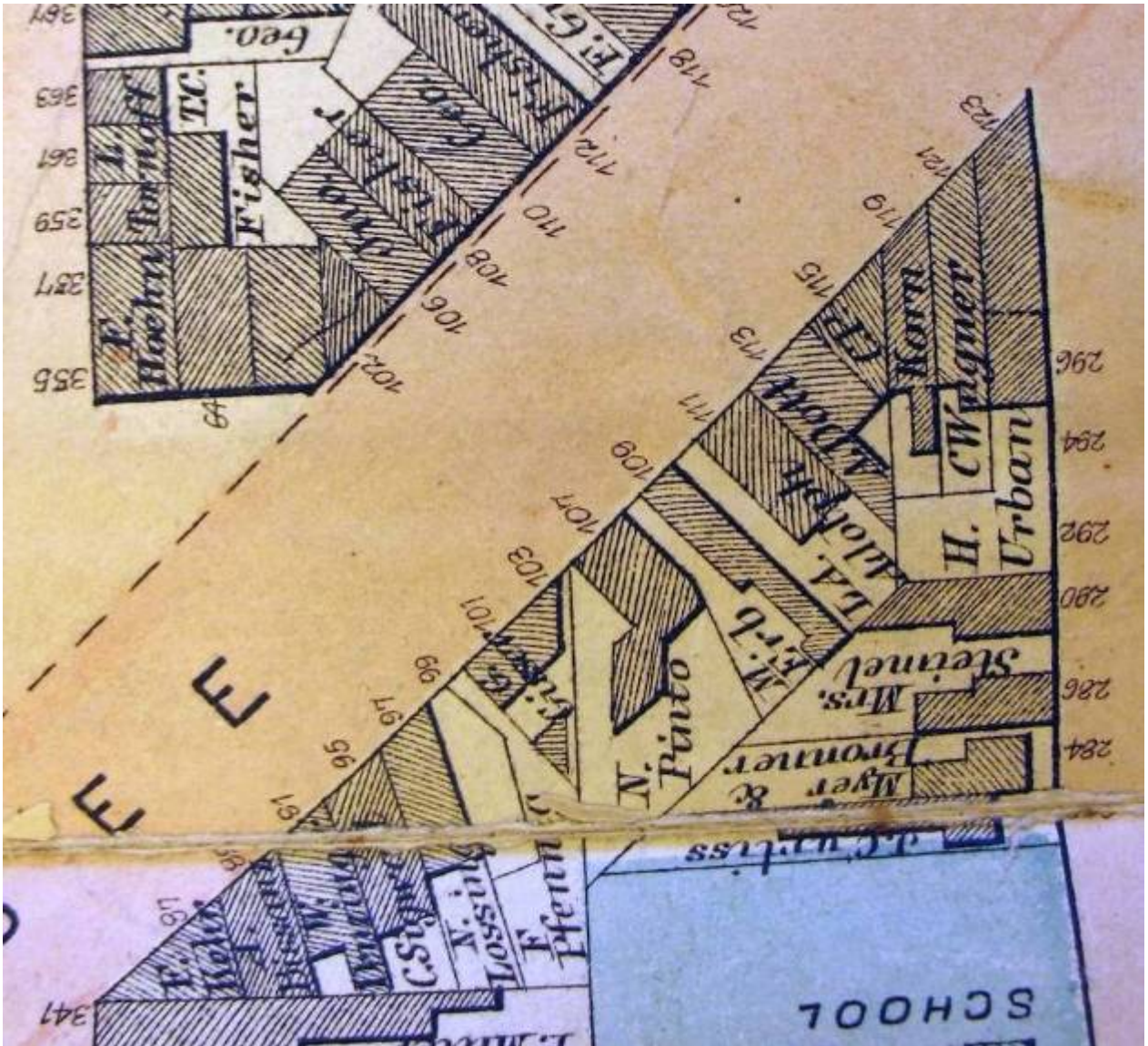
(19) Sketch detail, 1854 Fire Insurance Map of the City of Buffalo

This map represents the earliest record of buildings along Genesee Street. Note that brick construction was used at both corners of the block, but a majority of the building fabric was of frame construction. 113-125 Genesee Street is approximately labeled as 73-79 Genesee Street on this map; note the presence of a series of brick dwellings/ stores at the eastern end of the block.



(20) Sketch detail, 1866 Deed Atlas of the City of Buffalo

While this map does not indicate buildings or structures which were constructed, it does list the owners of the various Genesee Gateway parcels. Note that the present H. Seeberg Building properties were owned by Leonidas Dory (113), Charles P. Korn (113 and 115), Reinsch Dilte (121) and Henry Urban (123).

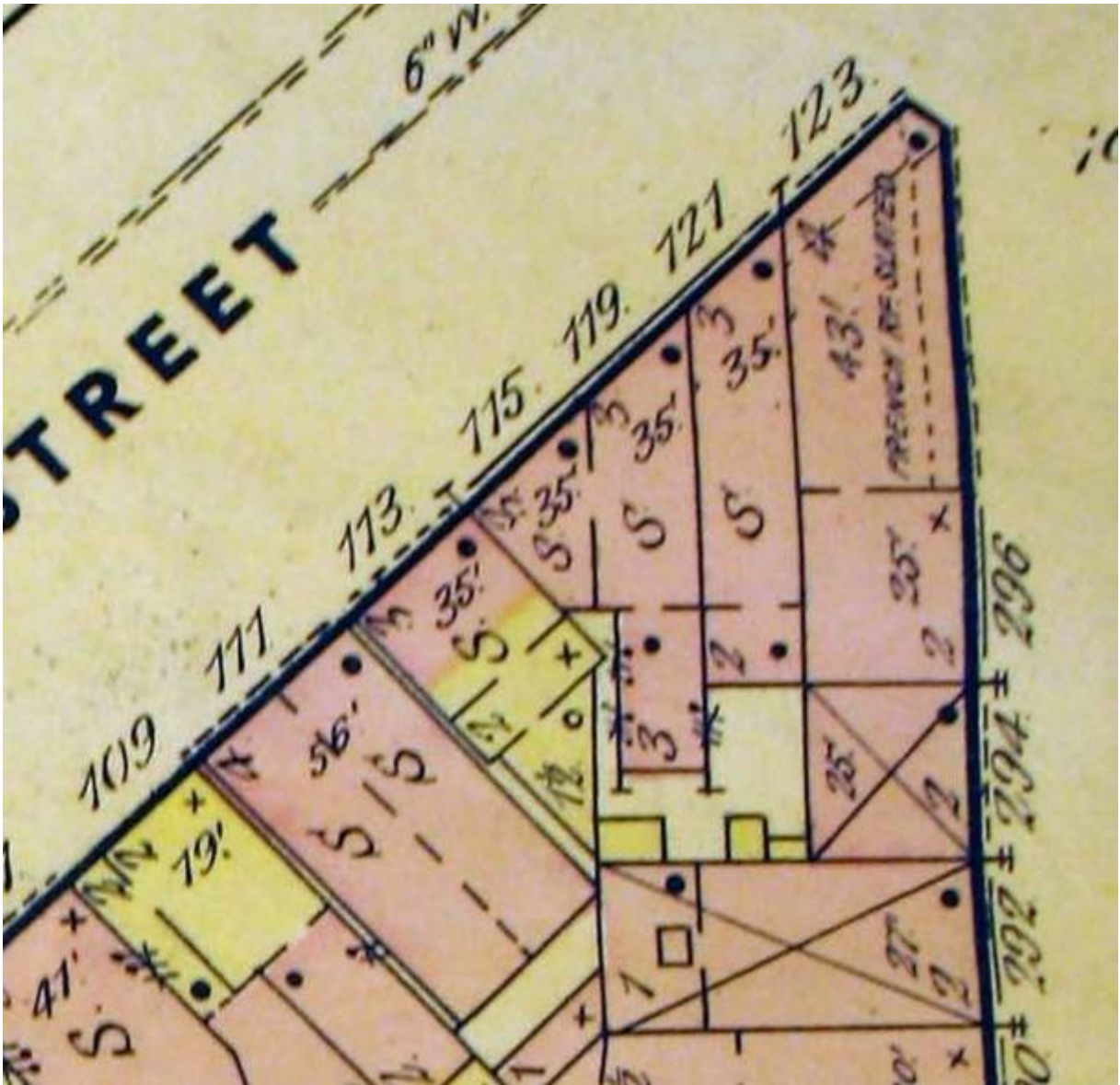


(21) Detail, 1872 Atlas

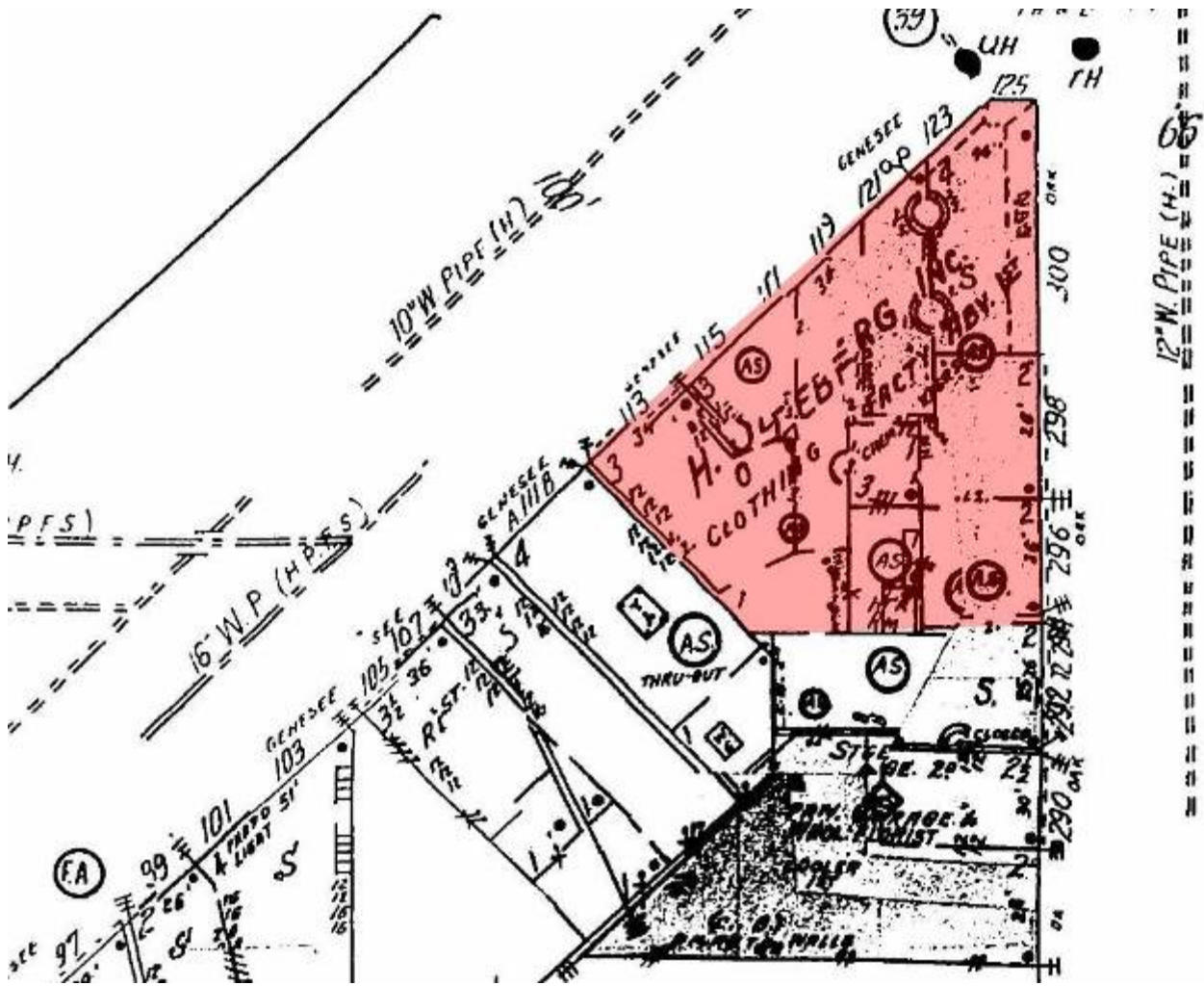
Note individual owners of 113-125 Genesee Street including A. Datt, C.P., Korn, C. Wagner, H. Urban (l-r). Notice how the footprint of the building is comparable to the extant building shape including the continuous street façade countered by the odd, irregular south façade



(22) Detail, 1884 Sanborn Map



(23) Detail, 1881-1888 Sanborn Map
Note mansard roof present on 123-125 Genesee Street and additional commercial space at south of 123 Genesee Street with Oak Street addresses. Also, continuous cornice along 115-118-121 buildings



(25) Detail of 1925-1951 Sanborn Map

Note H. Seeberg is noted as tenant of entire group of buildings and numerous openings in walls are now present. The exterior shell of the building has remained comparable to the 1840s design, and has been adapted to suit the needs of a twentieth-century commercial occupant within.