

Welcome!

This site presents the historic significance of 89 Niagara Street, Buffalo New York

Background: 89 Niagara Street, located in Buffalo, New York, is the last example of a residential building in what was Buffalo's preeminent residential square during the 19th century. In the 20th century, the square has become the site of civic buildings. The site of 89 Niagara Street is proposed to be the site of a new federal courthouse. 89 Niagara Street is threatened with demolition. This site intends to document the historic significance of the building.

The building is part of a local historic district known as the Joseph Ellicott District. However, the building may be eligible individually to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. One of its early owners, Henry Chandler was a prominent engineer, inventor, businessman and artist. He had a business located in the same building that the *Buffalo Morning Express* was located, edited by Mark Twain. The building is potentially eligible for National Historic Register status for being an exemplary building of the Italian villa style of architecture and is the sole surviving structure of residential architecture that marked the period of its initial development.

What Can be Done: The house can be moved and/or documented in an effort to mitigate the loss of this important historic resource to the citizens of Western New York.

89 Niagara Street, Buffalo's last remaining residential structure on Niagara Square

Endangered with Demolition



Photo 1: Beams of sunlight cascade radiantly on 89 Niagara Street, the last residential structure left remaining on Niagara Square in Buffalo, New York, the City of Homes. The house has graced Niagara Square for over 150 years.



Photo 2: Early view of Niagara Street Baptist Church. 89 Niagara Street is visible on left side.

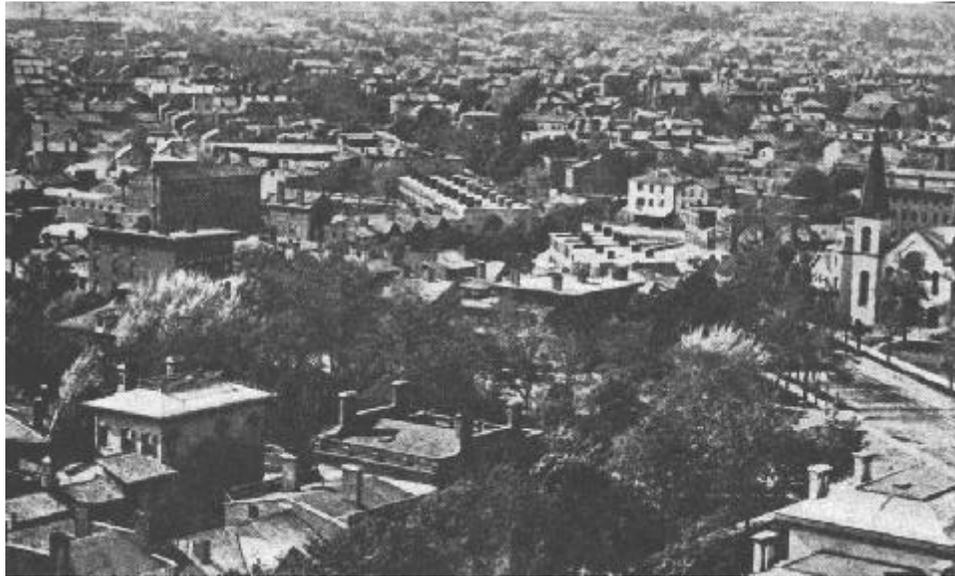


Photo 3: 19th Century aerial view of Niagara Street Baptist Church. 89 Niagara Street is visible on left side of church, (on the right side of the photograph).

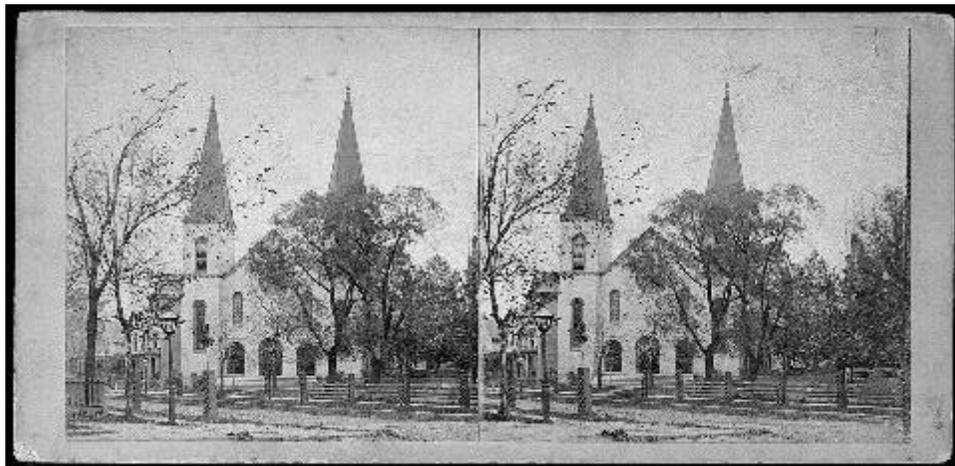


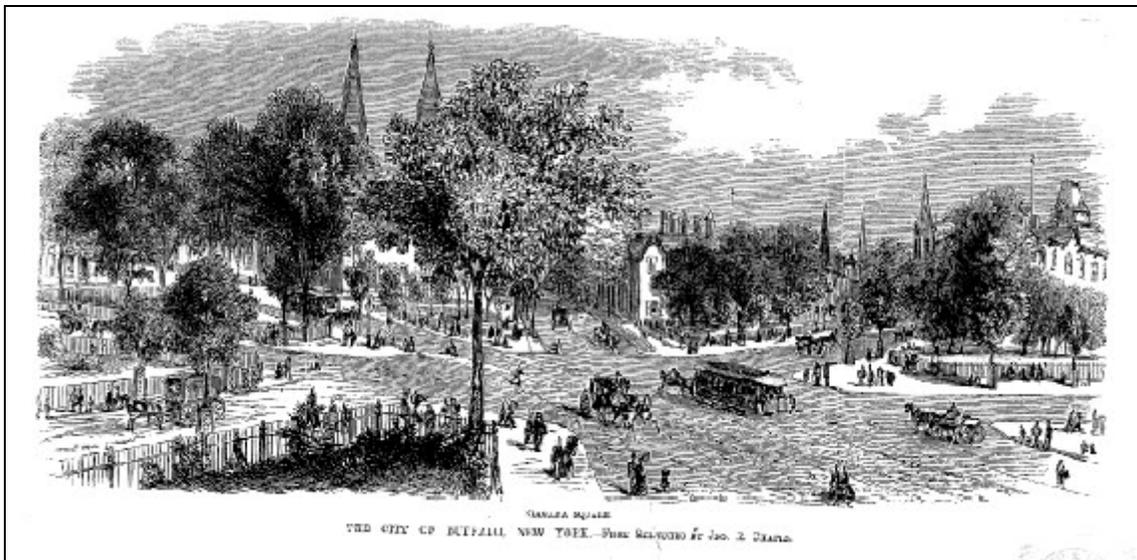
Photo 4: Early stereo scope image of Niagara Street Baptist Church. 89 Niagara Street is visible on left side.

I. Niagara Square Site History

Before [Niagara Square](#) was the home of government buildings, it was the site of many prominent homes built during the City of Buffalo's early development. Niagara square was part of the original plan of the Village of New Amsterdam as surveyed for the Holland Land Company by Joseph Ellicott in the first decade of the 19th Century.

Niagara Square contained eight small fenced-in triangular parks entered by turnstiles and was admired for its shade trees. It soon became the location of the finest houses in Buffalo and the most fashionable part of the town.¹ The two chief landowners of Niagara Square at the time of its creation were Ebenezer Johnson and Samuel Wilkeson, men who would later become mayors of the

¹ Ball, Charles H. "Older Buffalo."



Drawing 1: Lithograph of Niagara Square when it was a residential district. The site of 89 Niagara Street is to the left of the Niagara Square Baptist Church, distinguished with the twin towers. Source - *Niagara Square, The City of Buffalo, New York, from Sketches by Jno. R. Chapin.*

II. Notable Homes Built on Niagara Square

The first notable home built on the site of City Hall was [the mansion of Judge Samuel Wilkeson](#) constructed in 1824.² Wilkeson, a trendsetter, led other prominent Buffalonians to construct notable homes on Niagara Square. Wilkeson is best remembered as the builder of the Buffalo Harbor and as the man who secured the terminus of the Erie Canal at Buffalo. In 1836, Wilkeson also served as Mayor of the City of Buffalo. His life can be summed up by the Latin words inscribed on his tombstone, *urbem condidit* - “he built the City.”

There can be no mistaking that Niagara Square was originally the showplace of Buffalo homes. The Wilkeson house, perhaps the best documented house was noted as being “magnificently furnished,” and housing collections of rare “small Barye bronzes and bibelots.”³ The house was surrounded by a stone wall on three sides. Boxwood bordered walks and sentinel trees flanked the home’s wide lawn. The home was remembered by many for the fabulous parties given there. Only the most exclusive set of Buffalonians were in attendance at these events. Kate Burr, a writer for the *Buffalo Times*, documented the home in 1931 as a testament to one of the best homes in the City of Buffalo and Niagara Square, noting that Buffalo is “a city of beautiful homes.”⁴

² *Buffalo Express*, January 22, 1888.

³ Wall, Carl B. “The Wilkeson House Stood for Race of Fighting Men, Charming Women,” *Buffalo Times*, Jan. 8, 1937.

⁴ Burr, Kate. “Vision and Labor of Pioneer Stemmed Black Rock’s Rivalry and Made Queen City Harbor Possible.” *Buffalo Times*, May 27, 1931.

The Wilkeson family home was lived in by members of the family until it was razed in 1915 (stipulated in the terms of a will). From 1915 until 1929 when the present City Hall was built, it became the site of a gas station.

It is interesting to note that when the Wilkeson house was first proposed for demolition for the construction of municipal buildings in 1908, the site was supposed to be ideal as it was far enough away from the business district to be “quiet,” and yet not too far from Main Street and Court Street. It appears as though the residential character of Niagara Square was the first reason of choice for becoming the site of future government buildings.⁵

Because the homes on Niagara Square were built during the early to mid-19th Century, they represented the diverse architectural styles popular during the early Victorian period. Homes in the Federal, Greek Revival Gothic Revival and Italianate styles were built in the most opulent examples of their respective styles. The Wilkeson home (built in 1824) was designed in the Greek Revival style, while 89 Niagara Street (built about 1850) is designed in the Italianate style. Also notable on the square was the [Gothic Revival mansion that served as home to U.S. President Millard Fillmore](#) after he completed his U.S. Presidency in 1858.

Fillmore was sensitive to Gothic Revival architecture as he was a follower of the architectural principles of Andrew Jackson Downing, even employing Downing to design the park mall in Washington, D.C. Although forever associated with Fillmore, the mansion was actually built for James Hollister. Hollister lived in the home from 1848 to 1858 at which time Fillmore bought it. Fillmore lived there until his death in 1874.

It is interesting to note that in 1848 when this Gothic Revival castle at the northeast corner of Niagara Square and Delaware Avenue was built, an earlier home was already on the site, built for Albert H. Tracy. ***Rather than demolishing the house, it was moved down Niagara Street.***⁶ The house was moved to 83 Niagara Street where it became the parsonage for the First Unitarian Church.

To the left of the Fillmore mansion was the home of Smith Salisbury, first editor and publisher of a Buffalo newspaper and later the home and studio of artist Lars Sellstedt.⁷ Both the Fillmore and Sellstedt home were demolished for the Statler Hotel currently on the site.

It is notable that when Niagara Square began to be built with governmental buildings, Buffalonians began to lament the demise of its beloved residential square. One resident noted that Niagara Square was not a “civic center,” but a “social center of brilliant entertainers and famous houses.”⁸

Other famous residents of Niagara Square included Stephen G. Austin. [Austin’ s home on the southeast corner of Delaware Avenue and Niagara Square](#) stayed in the Austin family until Mrs. Truman G. Avery, daughter of Stephen Austin moved into her new mansion on Symphony Circle in the 1890s.

Opposite the Austin house on the southwest corner of Delaware Avenue and Niagara Square

⁵ “Homestead on the Square,” *Buffalo Express*, March 8, 1908.

⁶ Ball, Charles H. “Older Buffalo.” *Buffalo News*, May 18, 1921.

⁷ Burr, Kate. “Changing Town,” *Buffalo Times*, Nov. 12, 193_.

⁸ Cook, Anna Hoxsie. “When Buffalo Was Young - Long Before It Became a Civic Center, Niagara Square Was a Social Center.” *Buffalo Evening News*, February 29, 1936.

was the [mansion of Judge Herman B. Potter](#) (and later son-in-law George R. Babcock) which stood until it was replaced by the Women's Union in 1892 designed by architect Richard A. Waite (present site of City Court building). The Potter house was built about 1836 and designed by the prominent New York City architectural firm of Ithiel Town and Alexander J. Davis in the Federal style. The house is the first Buffalo building believed to have been designed by a nationally known architectural firm.⁹ The house was demolished and replaced by the Women's Union in the 1890s, which was in turn replaced by the City Court building in 1974.

Closer to 89 Niagara Street was the [Sizer Mansion on the northwest corner of Delaware Avenue and Niagara Square](#), erected in 1836 and built by Benjamin Rathbun. When first built it was considered to be the most elegant mansion in Buffalo and the first house in Buffalo to use manufactured gas introduced in the city in 1848. Niagara Square was noted as being brilliant in the 1850s and early 1860s with dancing parties and lively gatherings of various kinds held at the Sizer Mansion. Mrs. Sizer is said to have brought the custom of afternoon tea to Buffalo. In a well-documented wedding held at the Sizer mansion held during the day, the rooms were darkened and illuminated by two bronze chandeliers ornamented with acanthus leaves. Guests were in awe of the artificial gas light. The Sizer Mansion was enlarged and used as the office building of Spencer Kellogg & Sons (an oil company) before being demolished in the 20th Century.

Another important house on Niagara Square was the [home of General David Burt](#), Indian agent. His house was one of the most conspicuous buildings in Buffalo and once had John Quincy Adams as a guest. The house is now the site of Walter Mahoney State Office Building at the southeast corner of Niagara Square at Court Street

III. 89 Niagara Street House History

The house at 89 Niagara Street is significant as it is the last house from period when it was a residential site. The site itself of 89 Niagara Street is very historic. It was at the intersection of Mohawk, Niagara and Morgan streets that Margaret St. John defied a British general when Buffalo was burning in December 1813. She demanded and received protection for her Main Street home (now demolished but formerly located at 460-470 Main St.).

By the late 1840s, the Niagara Square Baptist Church owned the land 89 Niagara Street was built on and sold for residential use. [The church itself was built next to the site of 89 Niagara Street in 1848 and demolished in 1902.](#)¹⁰

In 1850, Philo Balcom, who owned a brick business at the corner of Main and Ferry purchased land adjacent to the church from the Niagara Square Baptist Society in the amount of \$1,000. It was an irregularly sized lot, that had 42 feet frontage on Niagara Street, (with other sides measuring 33 feet by 63 feet by 95.5 feet in size). It appears the property backed up to another separate lot which fronted on Flint Alley. The alley was first named as Best Alley in 1857 and renamed to Flint Alley in 1871. (This street will be eradicated under the GSA plan for the new Federal courthouse planned for the site.)

⁹ Kowsky, Francis R., "Delaware Avenue," *The Grand American Avenue 1850-1920*, Jan Cigliano and Sarah Bradford Landau, editors. Pomegranate Artbooks, San Francisco, 1994.

¹⁰ Ball, Charles H. "Older Buffalo"

The house was constructed circa 1852 of bricks made by Philo Balcom on speculation. It should also be noted that Balcom was a trustee of the Baptist church next door on Niagara Street. Balcom and his wife Mary sold the house on January 15, 1855 to Fidelia and Alden Barker, a land and insurance agent for \$4,500, a price which indicates a house existed at the time of sale at 89 Niagara Street.

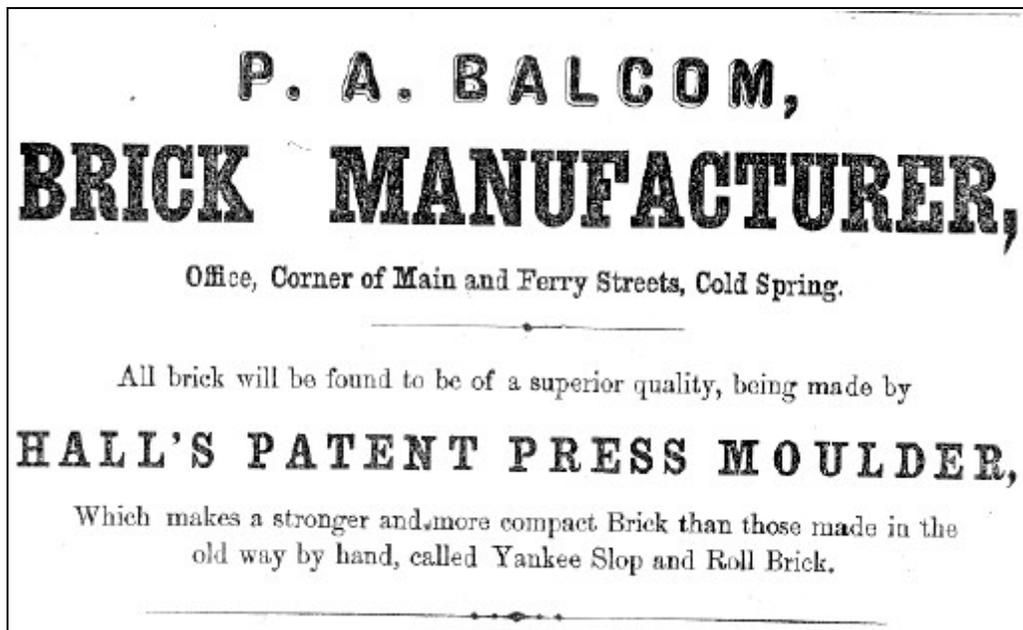


Exhibit 1: Advertisement from 19th Century Buffalo City Directory.

The Barkers owned the house for about 10 years, at which time they sold it to Henry Chandler on 8/29/1864 for the amount of \$5,200. It was probably during Chandler's ownership that the Second Empire style tower was erected (late 1860s or early 1870s) or the tower received its mansard treatment.

Henry Chandler

Henry Chandler (born February 23, 1830 - died December 21, 1896), 89 Niagara Street's most famous resident, was a poet and artist and partner in the firm Jewett and Chandler. Chandler was one of Buffalo's best known printers and engravers.¹¹ He came to Buffalo about 1850 and worked at the *Commercial Advertiser* as a typesetter. In 1853 he originated relief line or wax engraving and made many experiments in electrotyping. In 1859, Henry Chandler originated the relife line or wax process of engraving and played an important part in its subsequent development.¹² Mr. Elam R. Jewett of the *Commercial Advertiser* formed a company based on the invention called Jewett and Chandler. They secured the Patent Office illustrations every year until 1872.¹³ The firm dissolved in

¹¹ Bailey, George M. *Illustrated Buffalo. The Queen City of the Lakes. Its Past, Present and Future.* Acme Publishing and Engraving Co., 1896. Page 215.

¹² "Well-Known Engraver Dead" *Buffalo Morning Express*

¹³ "Henry Chandler Dead," *Buffalo News*, December 27, 1896.

the late 1870s and Chandler was later identified with the firm of Matthews and Northrup. For many years, Mr. Chandler's engraving and the *Buffalo Express* came from the same building.

Chandler was a poet and author, and several of his poems were published in an 1890s volume of Buffalo poetry called the *Poets and Poetry of Buffalo*. A copy of the volume is located in the Rare Book Room of the Central Branch of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library. Chandler had a reversal of fortune in the 1880s which forced him to sell the property at 89 Niagara Street and move to York Street.

In 1939, "Chandler Street" in Buffalo, which runs from 235 Military Road to the New York Central Railroad tracks was named for Henry Chandler.

IV. Architectural Assessment

The house at 89 Niagara Street is a 2 ½ story brick Italianate gabled house with a three story tower in the Second Empire/mansard roofed style. The porch, which is not original, has cast iron supports.

The house originally had a long veranda with an iron rail that was just wide enough for one chair. Rooms in the house were called "interesting" by descendants of Henry Chandler. The favorite room in the house was the library, where Henry Chandler maintained a large collection of books. The house also had a bathroom (off the library) that was considered an unusual luxury back in the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁴

The main house has segmental arched windows, two over two lights, and a relieving arch. The gable has paired round arched windows and paired brackets under the eave.

The tower has a first floor bay window with segmental arched windows with slender engaged columns flanking. Dentil molding and modillions are located under cornice. Second floor has a segmental arched window. Third floor has round arched windows and semi-circular pedimented dormer.

¹⁴ "Chandler Street Perpetuates Name of Engraver-Inventor," *Courier Express*, Dec. 10, 1939.



Photograph 5: 89 Niagara Street gable detail.



Photograph 6: 89 Niagara Street tower detail.

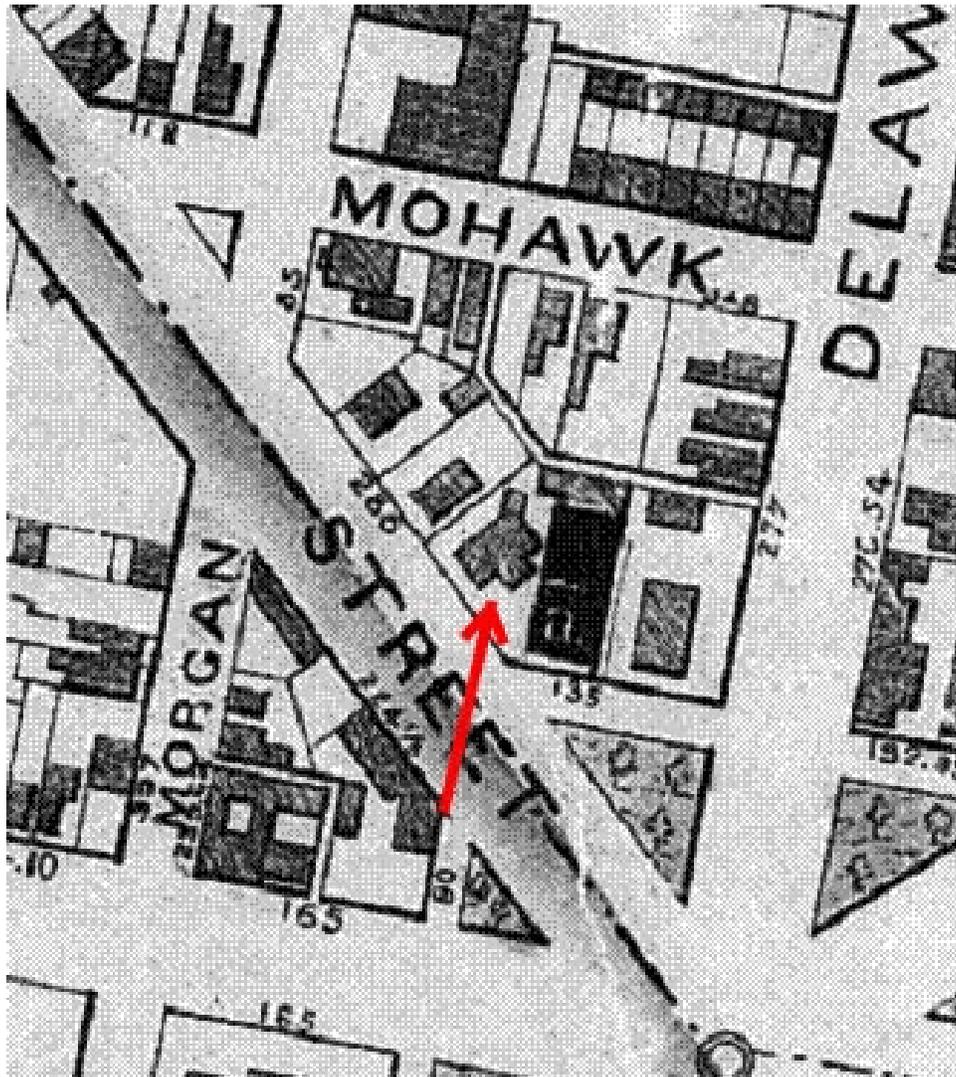


Photograph 7: 89 Niagara Street. Depth of tower can be viewed.

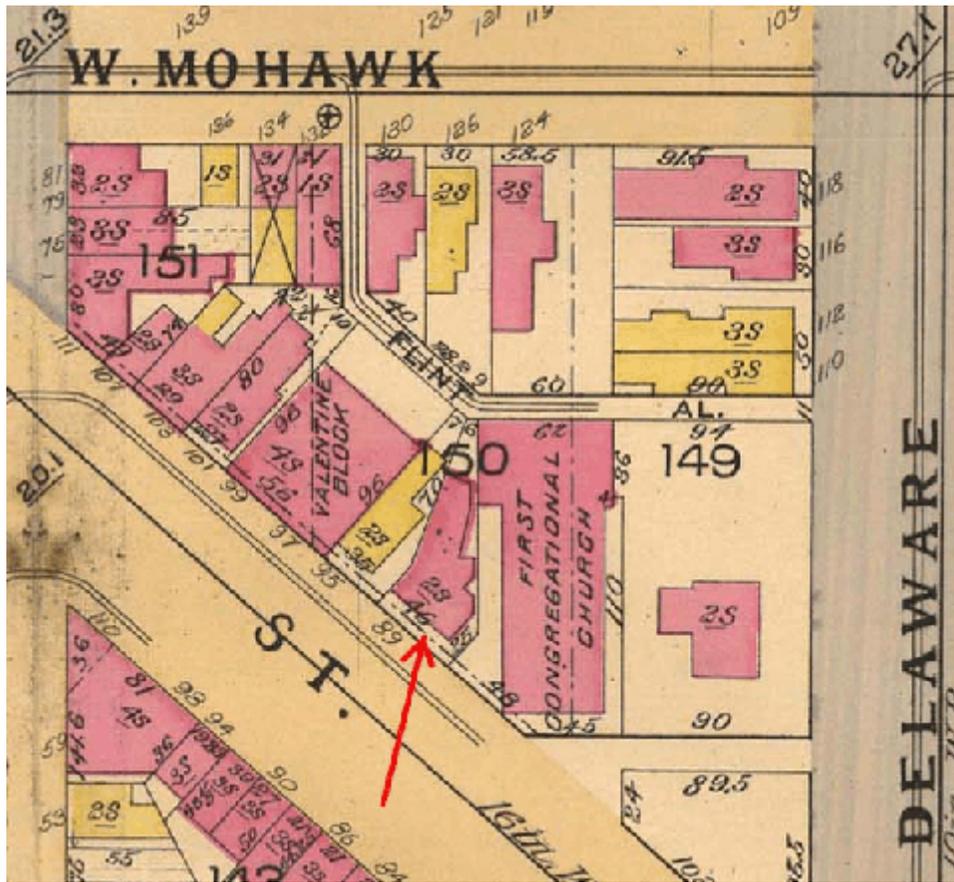


Photograph 8: 89 Niagara Street is an imposing structure on Niagara Square.

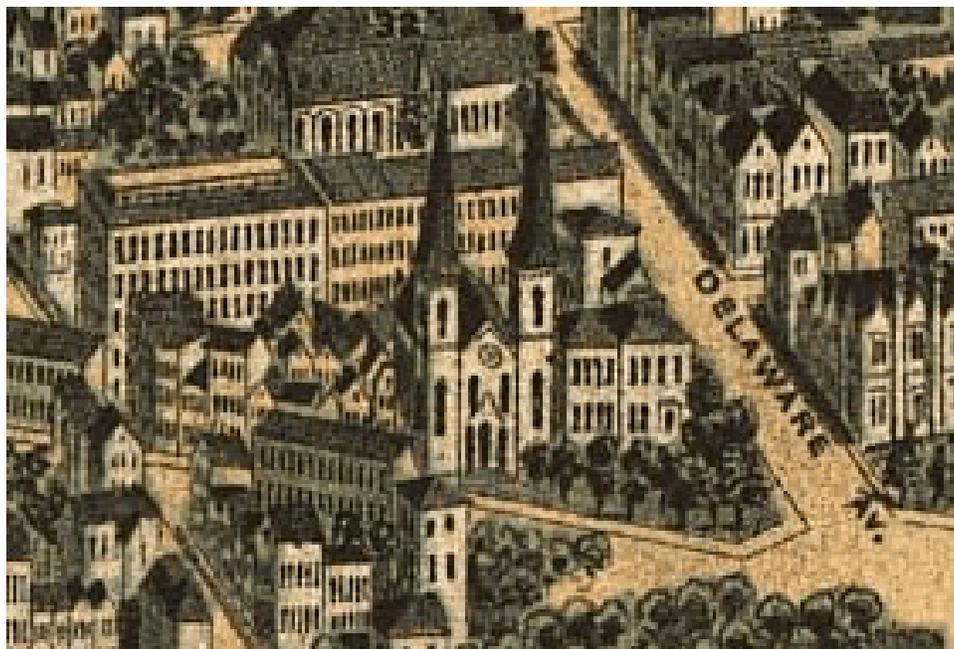
V. Site Maps



Drawing 2: Map Circa 1850 showing foundation of structure.



Drawing 3: 1894 Map showing structure of 89 Niagara Street.



Drawing 4: 1880 Three Dimensional Site Map. 89 Niagara Street is to the left of the church.

VI. References

Deed: Niagara Square Baptist Society to Philo Balcom, Liber 112, Page 196, 4/4/1850.

Deed: Philo and Mary Balcom to Fidelia Barker, Liber 153, Page 579, 1/15/1855

Deed: Alden Barker and One to Henry Chandler, Liber 236, Page 102, 8/29/1864
Map, 1856

[Chris Brown](#)

[Kleinhans Community Association](#)

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