

## Spotlight on a Landmark,

# *The Historic Columbia/ Lafayette Street Neighborhood – Part 2*

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*Immediately west of the Genesee Street CBD lies a district rich in history that reflects the various stages of growth which occurred as the village of Old Fort Schuyler (incorporated in 1798) evolved in to the City of Utica by 1832—at its peak a bustling metropolis with greater than 100,000 inhabitants. Ready access to transportation has always supported the growth of the neighborhood, be it river, stagecoach, canals, railroad, trolley, or highways.*

**1940's** Like most downtowns, city directory neighborhood listings included businesses offering everything from baked goods to billiards, cars to clothing, dentistry to dry cleaning, electronics, flowers to furniture, hotdogs to hotels, shoes to shovels, pianos to paint to plumbing supplies, violin lessons to veterinary care, and everything in between.

**1960's** As part of the urban renewal movement vision's plans were developed but never realized for a SUNY technology institute campus (complete with underground parking garage similar to the NYS Empire State Plaza complex in downtown Albany) and a new governmental center. A downtown mall shopping center was also proposed but not built.



Urban renewal target area



Center City Mall



2016 aerial view looking west

All that remains of those schemes are large holes in the urban fabric, vacant lots awaiting development, two high maintenance deteriorating parking structures that were intended to be built upon and Columbia Street garage storefronts that never fully realized their intended potential and add little to the life and vibrancy of the adjoining neighborhood.

Other fragmented remnants of these uncompleted mega block schemes include Utica City Hall/Hanna Park, Kennedy Plaza Housing and a reoriented Radisson Hotel which includes a Columbia St. ground level facade with mechanical equipment, dumpster, and loading dock. This facade and adjacent unfinished parking garage contribute little to the streetscape or downtown ambience.

**2005** More historic urban fabric was lost when buildings are demolished to accommodate parking for the police station support facilities and new Utica City Courts, which 10 years later may be relocating. Urban design efforts to date do not appear to be part of a larger, coordinated implementation plan.

### Conclusion

Whatever the ultimate decisions are for the location of the new hospital and for this area, there are certain things that must be considered as a matter of course.

- Large-scale, multi-block demolition of a significant segment of the downtown area, unseen since the era of "Urban Renewal" of the 1950s and 60s, destroys the fabric, character and sense of place that defines the uniqueness of what makes Utica what it is. While some of the existing buildings have certainly lost character and charm, many others remain a wonderful testament to the historicity of the city. Infill buildings that erase the gaps between existing structures can be built that complement the size and scale of their neighbors and create a pleasant, cohesive and very livable community.
- As Utica continues to experience the long awaited rebirth, revitalization and Renaissance, the buildings that would be lost represent a lost opportunity for small scale structures where ground floor commercial uses would complement upper floor residential uses in a walkable, urbane setting. This is in keeping with smart growth Principles, and with the tenets of the National Trust of Historic Places that espouses that smaller, older, and more walkable is better. Planners must consider the