

Powers Building
16 Main Street West
Rochester
Monroe County
New York

HABS No. NY-5649

HABS
NY
28-ROCH
23-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

POWERS BUILDING

Page 1
NY,
28-ROCH, 23-

Location: 16 Main Street West, northwest corner of Main and State Streets, Rochester, Monroe County, New York

Present Owner: Bernard P. Birnbaum, 270 Reynolds Arcade, Rochester, and six other New York City men.

Present Occupant: Several companies

Present Use: Office Building

Statement of Significance: The Powers Building, architecturally innovative for its day due to its scale and metal structural system, has been the keystone of Rochester's downtown commercial area since its construction in 1869-70. It was acclaimed as the first fire-proof structure in Rochester and at the time the only building west of New York City equipped with elevators. The building stands as a monument to the Horatio Alger character of its owner, Daniel Powers. Its multiple mansard roofs and tower raised twice in four years reflect Power's determination to own Rochester's tallest building, the dream of his life.

PART I. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1869-70.
2. Architect: Andrew Jackson Warner. Warner, a prominent upstate New York architect, was also the architect of Buffalo's old City Hall (now Erie County Hall, built 1872-5). The Powers Building and this structure are the most important buildings of Warner's career.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Daniel Powers acquired the land necessary for the building in several parcels.

1861 Deed, November 15, 1861, Book 167, p. 194.
From: Silas D. Walbridge and wife.
To: Daniel Powers.
For: \$35,000.00.
A parcel of land located at Buffalo (now West Main) Street and State Street.

- 1863 Deed, February 3, 1863, Book 174, p. 144.
From: Silas D. Walbridge and wife.
To: Daniel W. Powers.
For: \$29,000.00.
An additional parcel situated generally west of the original parcel.
- 1865 Deed, February 17, 1865, Book 190, p. 315.
From: John Haywood and Prudence, his wife.
To: Daniel W. Powers.
For: \$15,500.00.
A parcel generally on the north of the original parcel.
- 1865 Deed, April 17, 1865, Book 193, p. 162.
From: Union Bank of Rochester.
To: Daniel W. Powers.
For: \$1,000.00.
Permission for the north wall of his building to adjoin the south wall of the bank building. The bank building is located on the west side of State Street.
- 1868 Deed, January 16, 1868, Book 215, p. 465.
From: Alvah Strong and Catherine H., his wife.
Samuel P. Allen and Harriet C., his wife.
Edwin Huntington and Sarah W., his wife.
To: Daniel Powers.
For: \$38,000.00.
Part of the Eagle Tavern premises, located to the west of the parcel purchased in 1863.
- 1868 Deed, February 12, 1868, Book 218, p. 15.
From: Hamlin Stilwell and Lydia, his wife.
To: Daniel Powers.
For: \$12,500.00.
The store located at the corner of Buffalo (now West Main) and State Streets.
- 1869 Deed, February 1, 1869, Book 223, p. 519.
From: Aaron Erickson and Hannah, his wife.
George E. Jennings and Nancy B., his wife.
George E. Mumford and Julia H., his wife.
To: Daniel Powers.
For: \$10,000.00.
Certain strips of land.

Beginning in 1896 Powers sold a portion of the building's first floor and basement to the Powers Bank. The remainder of the structure was sold to the Powers Commercial Fire-

Proof Building Company in 1897. In 1898 the Bank sold its portion to the Powers Commercial Fire-Proof Building Company.

1966 Deed, January 3, 1966, Book 3705, p. 33.
From: Powers Building Company (name changed in 1946).
To: Golden Game, Inc.
For: \$1.00
\$1,100.00 in stamps.

1966 Deed, September 26, 1966, Book 3769, p. 16.
From: Golden Game, Inc.
To: Dworman Building Corporation.
For: \$1.00.
\$607.20 in stamps.

1966 Deed, September 26, 1966, Book 3769, p. 20.
From: Dworman Building Corporation.
To: Zev W. Wolfson, Elliot S. Gross, John D. Bussel,
Lester Dworman, Saul I. Birnbaum, and Bernard
P. Birnbaum.
For: \$10.00.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: W. H. Gorsline, mason; J. C. Wagner, carpenter; Badger's Architectural Iron Works, New York City; Henry S. Hebard, marble; Peter Pitkin, stone front; Whitmore, Carson and Co., Medina stone; John Siddons and Son, plumbing; Sherlock and Sloan, gas and steam; A. Ernisse, painting; M. Briggs and Son, iron vaults; W. G. Frutchey, slating; M. and E. Huntington, plate glass. This list is taken from a commemorative marble plaque located in the stairwell.
5. Original plans: None known.
6. Alterations and additions: The second and third mansard roofs were added in 1872 and 1874, respectively. The three-tiered tower was also added at a later date. Twentieth century commercial advertising intrusions have eliminated much of the original stone and columned entrances of the ground floor. Some interior modernization has been done.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

In 1850, Daniel Powers first opened the Powers Banking Office in the Eagle Block, the same site of the present Powers Building. He was a director of the Industrial School of Rochester, the Rochester City Hospital, and building commissioner for the present City Hall. In his role as patron of

the arts, he accumulated an art collection which was on display in the building for twenty-two years.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Stereoptican corner view (n.d.) shows building as completed in 1870. Another stereoptican view (n.d.) shows main floor access to the cast iron stairwell and adjoining sales counter. Both views have been photocopied for the HABS records. An etching of the building can be found in the History of Monroe County, New York (1876), plate VI.
2. Bibliography:
 - a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deeds, Office of Monroe County Clerk.
 - b. Secondary and published sources:

McIntosh, Prof. W. H. History of Monroe County, New York. Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign and Everts, 1877.

Notable Men of Rochester 1901-1902. n.d. (available from the office of the Monroe County Historian.)

Sturges, W. Knight. The Origins of Cast Iron Architecture in America. New York: DaCapo Press, 1970.
3. Supplementary information: Notes on original plan and construction of the building. (No source given in HABS file.)

"The scope of the building can best be understood by the use of the volume of material that went into it. It measures 155' on Main Street, and 176' on State Street. There is an open court in the center of the building. In 1876 its ten acres of floor space could have held the entire population of Rochester, 80,000. The principal staircase contains 50 tons of iron and cost \$20,000.00. The materials are mostly cast iron, brick, limestone and marble. There are 65,000 square feet of Italian and Vermont marble; 8,000,000 pounds of iron; 8,000 bricks; 80,000 yards of plastering; 12,000 wagon loads of sand were drawn for the mortar; there were originally 1000 tenants; elevators alone cost \$40,000. In addition his private art gallery took up an entire floor."

Prepared by Kevin Patrick Harrington
Society for the Preservation
of Landmarks in
Western New York
December 2, 1966

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Second Empire style of this building can be seen in the elaborate and lively detail of the facade and multiple mansard roofs. The pierced walls are a visual indication of the cast iron framing elements.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is in good repair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 165 feet by 171 feet; eight stories; forty-five bays at the second story; rectangular plan with interior courts.
2. Foundations: The foundations are of dressed stone.
3. Wall construction: The ground floor has a variety of modern entrances to the various businesses. The next four stories have two different treatments of gray stone facing. The eighteen-bay corner is a series of arched windows divided by a vertical element of vermiculated stone quoins. The remaining bays on the State Street (east) and Main Street West (south) facades are a series of flattened arched windows framed by Corinthian columns.
4. Structural system, framing: The basic iron structure is probably composed of wrought iron beams and cast iron columns. Some cast iron Corinthian columns are exposed in the interior. Masonry fill is used for walls and ceilings.
5. Chimneys: Three stone chimneys are visible on the west roof line.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways: Of the original ground floor entrances,

only two remain, one facing each street. A slightly hooded arch in the cornice line between the first and second floors indicates the entrances into the main interior court.

- b. Windows: Most windows are double hung with single light sashes. Some interior windows facing the court are a casement type.
7. Roof: A bracketed and crested metal cornice divides the fifth floor from the upper three floors which are contained within a three-tiered roof arrangement. The sixth floor or first mansard roof is original to the building. The second mansard roof (the seventh floor) was added in 1872. The third roof (the eighth floor) rises vertically from the cornice of the second mansard. The window dormers in each level have metal hoods; the most elaborate is on the sixth floor ascending to the extremely simple, classical projecting molded lintel of the eighth floor, and slightly arched pediments which are used to accentuate the divisions of stone work of the lower levels and to mark the corners. All are constructed with riveted steel plates and faced with light rose colored slate shingles. The three-tiered stone observation tower is located to the west of the center of the south facade. The stepped tower contains balustrades at each level and is topped by a small onion-domed cupola with flag pole.
 8. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: Originally, according to the undated stereopticon photograph, the main corner entrance and two flanking it were approached by steps from the sidewalk. Corinthian columns supported a slightly projecting cornice topped by a false balustrade. This ensemble framed the entrances to the corner banking area. No remnants of these details remain.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: Floors are arranged around a large open stairway with corridors extending from the central space. Offices open off the corridors and large central spaces. Interior courts are utilized.
2. Stairways: The open stairway of two flights per floor has open stringers and ornamental cast iron balusters.
3. Flooring: Main or central areas are tiled with black and white marble squares. Ceramic tile covers the floors

of the corridors. Often three-riser marble steps occur in the hallways to provide access to the elevated office doors.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls and ceilings are painted plaster. Marble wainscoting and baseboards are used in the public areas.
5. Doorways and doors: On floors one through four, all door frames are smooth paneled marble with corner blocks. Upper floors have wood framing; some are symmetrically molded with corner blocks while others are simply molded. Most doors are wood with three solid horizontal panels topped by a single glass panel.
6. Special decorative features: None.
7. Hardware: Nothing of note.
8. Lighting: Original gas fixtures have been replaced with fluorescent lighting.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building is on a prime commercial corner site immediately adjacent to the sidewalk and abutting buildings on north, south and east facades. An air alleyway is located at the rear.

Prepared by Earl J. DiRienzo
Society For the Preservation of Landmarks in
Western New York
August 16, 1968

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This recording project of twenty-six selections of historical and architecturally significant Rochester structures was undertaken in 1966, by the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks in Western New York, Inc., Mrs. Patrick Harrington, Executive Director, in cooperation with the Historic American Buildings Survey, James C. Massey, Chief. The project was under the general direction of John Poppeliers, Senior Historian. Architectural and historical descriptions were contributed by the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks in Western New York, Inc. General photographic documentation

was undertaken by Hans Padelt, Senior Engineer, Graflex, on a contractual basis with the Historic American Buildings Survey. The final documentation and editing was done by Susan R. Slade in 1978, for transmittal to the Library of Congress and the impending publication of the Historic American Buildings Survey New York State catalogue.