

Every Building Tells a Story: Architecture in Geneva



With a basic knowledge of styles and dates you can tell when a neighborhood was developed and its original nature.

Buildings are boxes to keep us warm, dry, and safe. They often represent wealth, class, and style choices. As groups of buildings, neighborhoods tell a story of when they developed, who lived there, and how they have changed over time.

Geneva's earliest houses date to 1802. The oldest downtown buildings date to the 1830s with many from the last quarter of the 1800s. The city embraced adaptive reuse, i.e. turning a church into a library, in the early 20th century. While some significant buildings have been lost, individual and group efforts have preserved much of Geneva's architecture.



In 1835 the Universalist Church was built on the northwest corner of Main and Castle Streets. After the congregation disbanded in 1910, the public library moved in and has expanded several times. The sanctuary is now a reading room.



Geneva has an example of almost every architectural style since the early 1800s, from the Trinity Episcopal Church Rectory (1810) to Barton Laboratory (1968) at the Agricultural Experiment Station.

Built to Sell: Commercial Architecture

Commercial architecture follows business trends. In the early 1800s shops were in residential buildings on South Main Street until the canal system drew businesses to the waterfront. Wooden buildings, both houses and stores, comprised downtown in the mid-1800s. Fires and changes in retail ushered in larger brick buildings designed to better display goods. By the 1950s those structures faced competition from modern stores in shopping plazas that had wide aisles, open floor plans, and fluorescent lighting. Local developers have restored downtown buildings as people show renewed interest in the character and attributes of 19th-century architecture.



Built by local contractor William Dove in the 1870s, the Dove Block had shops on the first floor, offices on the second, and a public hall on the top floor.



Constructed for the Dorchester & Rose hardware store in 1902, this building was later occupied by Montgomery Ward. In the 1970s investors partitioned the building into a mini-mall.

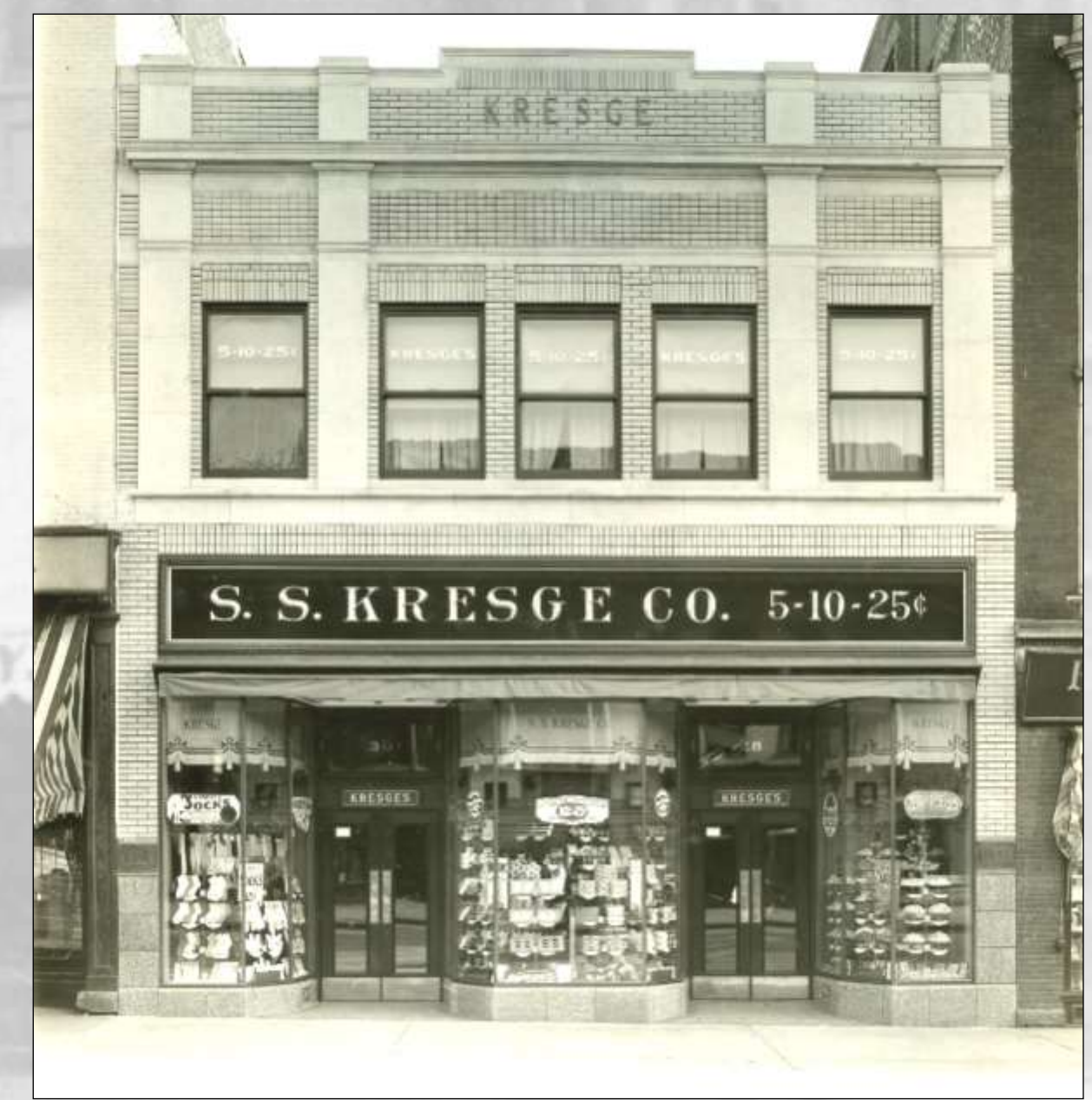


The 1899 Schnirel Building was Geneva's first steel frame building. Its five stories were home to many doctors, lawyers, and businesses until the late 1940s.



In the 1870s Exchange Street still had a number of wooden commercial buildings.

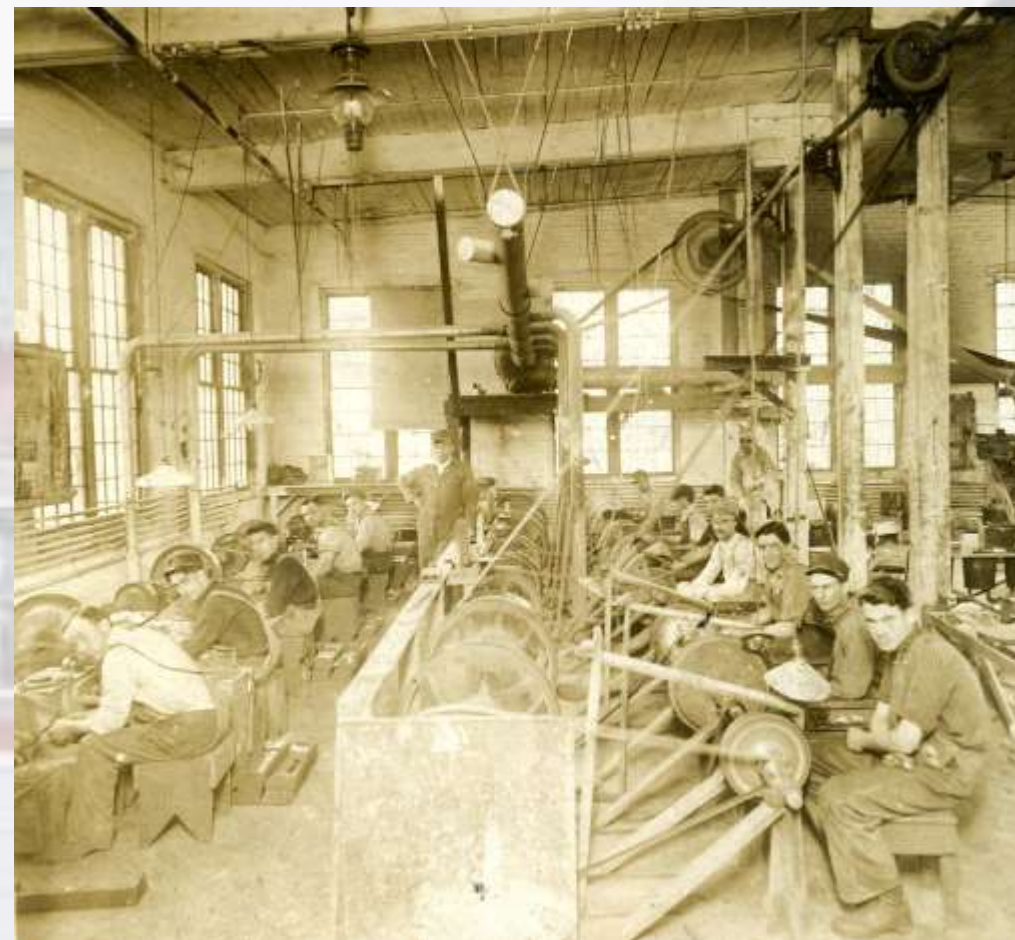
In 1928 SS Kresge (now Kmart) tore down 28-30 Seneca Street to build a modern "five and dime" store to its own specifications. The second story was covered with aluminum panels in the 1960s to make the building look more modern.



Old Bottle, New Wine: Adaptive Reuse



After 100 years the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester closed DeSales High School in 2012. How should the building be re-used and what would make the new use successful?



Brandon and Amy Phillips bought the Geneva Cutlery factory for their company, Miles and May Furniture Works. With 6,000 square feet, the second floor has hosted weddings, art shows, and concerts by bands like Geneva's Ra Ra Riot.



For over 100 years the former Methodist Episcopal Church, built in 1840, has been adapted to the needs of the city. It has been an auto garage, a USO during World War II and the Korean War, a civic center, and an extension campus for Finger Lakes Community College. Today it has offices and apartments.



Using the upper floors of older downtown buildings is a challenge. In 2000 Providence Housing purchased the former YMCA building on Castle Street and created accessible housing for people with disabilities.



Made by Design: National and Local Architects



I. Edgar Hill (1874 – 1933) worked in Geneva from 1912 until his death. His regional designs included banks, parish houses and rectories (St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church, above), schools, commercial buildings, and residences.



In the 1860s Richard Upjohn (1802 – 1878) designed three Gothic Revival buildings in Geneva: the Douglas House on the hill to the west of Pulteney Street (above), the Hobart College chapel, and St. Peter's Episcopal Church.



During the early 1900s Claude Bragdon (1866 – 1946) worked in Rochester, New York designing homes and public buildings in a progressive Classical Revival style. In 1907 he designed a home for local attorney L.G. Hoskins at 527 South Main Street.

Architect-designed houses became more common in the 19th century. Richard Upjohn and Calvert Vaux were two national architects whose designs included St. Peter's Episcopal Church and Ashcroft, respectively. It was a measure of wealth to employ these men. The Elmira firm Pierce and Bickford designed several prominent downtown buildings including the Smith Opera House and the old YMCA. Local architect I. Edgar Hill made his mark with dozens of designs, many of which still stand today.

“There are the buildings, but where is the architecture? There is the matter, but where is the manner? There is the opportunity, but where is the agreeable result?”

Calvert Vaux, 1857



Born in England, Calvert Vaux (1824 – 1895) came to America in 1850. Before gaining fame as the landscape architect of Central Park he designed villas and cottages in the Hudson Valley. In 1862 Amon Langdon commissioned Vaux to renovate his country cottage at 112 Jay Street into a Gothic Revival villa.



The Elmira architectural firm of Pierce and Bickford (1891 – 1932) designed public buildings throughout the Southern Tier and northern Pennsylvania, including the original YMCA building on Castle Street and the Smith Opera House on Seneca Street. Arched windows and doorways, rustic stone, and terra cotta ornament were common in their work.