

The Rise and Fall and Rise of Kingston, NY City Hall by Vivian Yess Wadlin

Number 420 Broadway, Kingston, NY, is a large red- and white-brick High Victorian Gothic municipal-style building. Its history often closely mirrored much of the economic and cultural turmoils of its nearly 150-year existence. Completed in 1875, it commanded its hillside heights with three main stories and a five-story tower with a belfry. Typical of the era's architectural fashion, its noted public-building designer, Arthur Crooks, crowned it with steeply pitched intersecting gables topped with cast iron ornamentation at the ridges known as cresting. His inspiration was said to be the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, Italy.

In addition to No. 420's two-toned brickwork, it featured Ashlar stonework, a very fine-cut and dressed stone similar to that used by the Incas. However, Inca structures used no mortar. We can also credit architect Crooks with another nearby institution: Rosendale's St. Peter's Catholic Church and Rectory of 1875, ably described in William B. Rhoads's book, *Ulster County, New York, The Architectural History and Guide*. (Postcard image of St. Peter's appears on page 4). You will note similarities in materials, style, and coloration in the buildings. Crooks ecclesiastical work included design of several other noted churches of the mid to late 1800s.

Fire and Restoration

The tower, belfry, roof, and interior configuration we see today in City Hall result from a restoration repairing the damage from a June 4, 1927 fire. The inserted image above, supplied by the Kingston Firemen's Museum, recorded the fire's fury, providing an idea of the almost complete destruction of the building to come. According to Kingston-NY.gov website, "The current simplified mansard roof approximates the same pitch as the original steep hipped design." The description notes that the building facade also changed when "High stone steps at the main entrance were removed and access was lowered." Additionally, three of the white brick stripes were removed, leaving just six today. More on this restoration later.



The new city hall site had been carefully considered. Its location was said to signify the official melding of three smaller and separately governed districts, the villages of Kingston and Rondout (at one time the busiest port between New York City and Albany), and the hamlet of Wilbur, into one political entity—the City of Kingston. The site chosen (owned in 1872 by the O'Reilly family) was at the intersection of the two villages. Kingston remains the only incorporated city in Ulster County. Just as the choice of site was to signify something "new and improved," the building's stunning design was to herald the city's future—a future of growth, prosperity, and potential success for all residents.

The destructive 1927 blaze seemed to consume the roof and tower first. It had actually begun on the third floor in a carpentry shop,

then spread upward, taking out the structural beams holding up the roof and tower. According to a June 7, 1927 article in *The Kingston Freeman and Journal*, "The woodwork was dry as tinder and the flames when once they gained headway ate their way rapidly up the side walls to the heavy frames that supported the tin roof covering the building." The fire made plain the building's lack of fire protection or mitigation.

When the smoke had cleared the decision, the city decided it was cheaper to rebuild than to raze and build anew. Myron S. Teller, Gerald W. Betz, and George E. Lowe were chosen as architects for the hall's restoration. Some of the team's exterior changes were noted here earlier. The designers also made the interior more fireproof using noncombustible materials (marble, steel, plaster, steel-reinforced concrete, terrazzo) to replace its once beautiful wooden interior and structural elements. Those upgrades included a marble staircase, metal-clad doors, and the replacement of many structural wooden supports with metals. According to a page one article in the *Kingston Daily Freeman* of November 7, 1927, there would be "No Wood in New Building." The article explained,

The plans as completed call for a re-designing of the present structure along the Italian style of architecture, using the present four walls of the old building. No portion of the interior is to be used and the new building will be absolutely fireproof. There will be no wood used in the construction of the building.

The article went on to explain other changes Kingstonians could expect in their new City Hall,

The exterior of the building would be somewhat changed in order to carry out a style of architecture. The front entrance steps will be lowered and redesigned, similar to the entrance steps on the high school opposite. From the entrance will open a vestibule off which the corridors will open. The floor plans have been en-

tirely redesigned so that all portions of the building will be used to advantage.

Many of the departments were moved to new locations within the building, with the police department gym becoming the office of the Board of Health.

With the completed restoration, the city resumed use of the building, and in 1971 it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was noted as a unique example of its era.

Oddly, the following year, the city offices moved to the Rondout waterfront area on Garrigan Drive, leaving 420 Broadway abandoned, eventually vandalized, and considered for demolition. The engrossing book, *Hudson Valley Ruins*, has compelling interior images of what it looked like in 1998 at the height of the building's neglect.

Second Restoration

Perhaps harkening social critic James Felton's words, "Its not what they built. It's what they knocked down," a group of civic- and history-minded people led by the late Mayor T.R. Gallo, pursued old city hall's reclamation. The once proud reminder to the citizens and

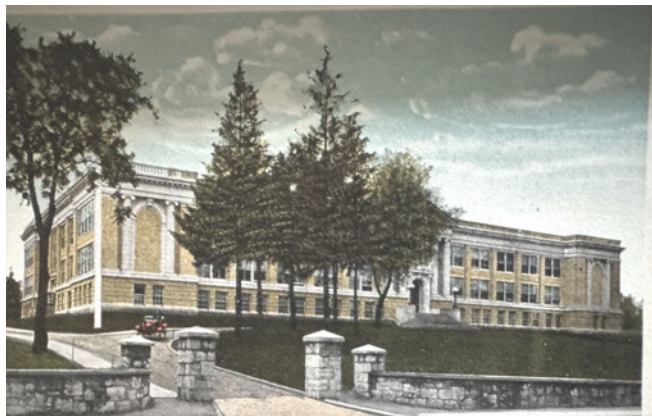
the world that Kingston, as an economic force, was coming back.

This second City Hall restoration was accomplished from 1998 to 2000 by the Albany architectural firm of John G. Waite Associates. To have pulled the hulk of a very large building from the path of a wrecking ball to once again symbolize a city's belief in itself took expertise, dedication to the vision of the 1872 and 1927 designers, and now, the added need for another century's complex governance requirements.

In 2000, the building was again ablaze, but this time from modern lighting, some specifically designed for the building, and in celebration and gratitude—not to mention all taking place amid the most modern conven-



iences and safety features imaginable.



Superficially looking much as it did after the 1929 restoration, 420 Broadway was ready for the city to once again undertake its work. All toiling there now would be reminded by their surroundings of the historic responsibility of their positions, perhaps suggesting history might one day judge their actions.

History was already watching. On May 15, 2000, the *Poughkeepsie Journal* proclaimed, "Kingston city hall wins award."

The prestigious Preservation League of New York State gave the building its seal of approval marking it as one of ten projects in New

York State worthy of note that year.

All city departments except courts and police were moving back into the restored Broadway building from the Rondout's Garrigan Drive. A Preservation League executive noted in the ceremony that their organization liked to see municipal buildings returned to original uses.

City Hall Heroes

In addition to Mayor Gallo and many others to be commended for the restoration, was a group from the Old Dutch Church in Kingston, and the Friends of Historic Kingston. Led by the late Edwin Ford, Kingston Historian for 35 years, the church group is credited with removing the 23 lunettes—halfmoon plaster works of art highlighting the city's history—from the abandoned City Hall. The lunettes were stored in the church basement waiting for their repatriation. Ultimately, the salvaged lunette art pieces were repaired, (some reproduced) by Evergreene Architectural Arts and reinstalled for the grand opening. The lunette work was funded in part by private donations and Friends of Historic Kingston (FOHK.org).

In addition to champions with foresight, the building's 2000 restoration took money—\$6.5 million (today \$11.5 million- Inflation Calculator). Half was raised from city bonds, the rest from state and federal coffers, i.e. taxpayers, i.e. you—thanks). The restoration of 1927

had cost \$200,000 (today \$3.6 million— Inflation Calculator).

Visit City Hall

City Hall, 420 Broadway, Kingston, NY is open weekdays from 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., and in July & August, weekdays 9 a.m.- 4 p.m.

Nearby Buildings

While there, you might mosey the street and look at the Carnegie Library, pictured above. According to a 1936 *Souvenir Program and Historica, Civic & Industrial Survey of the City of Kingston*, (containing information on

the city at a point during the great depression), was a short paragraph on the Kingston Public Library. It was organized in 1899 by a chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. After 1904 the library was housed in this building, shown above, donated by Scottish entrepreneur Andrew Carnegie. It was one of 1,689 public libraries he gave to communities in the United States.

Next to the library, at 403 Broadway, is the Kingston High School, founded in 1915. Today, it educates approximately 1,900 students. Postcard image below.

Sources for This Article

In addition to the newspapers quoted, the following provided information:

- *Ulster County, New York, The Architectural History and Guide.* by William B. Rhoads.

- *Hudson Valley Ruins* by Thomas Rinaldi and Robert J. Yasinsac.

- Kingston Firemen's Museum, 266 Fair St. Kingston. Thurs & Fri 11:00 a.m.—3:00 p.m. Sat 10:00 a.m.—4:00 p.m.

- The *Souvenir Program*, mentioned earlier, was dedicated to the “New York State Conference of Mayors, The New York State Fire Chiefs' Association, And Other Municipal Officials.” The program for the 1936 three-day-conference contains ads for everything of interest to fire departments and government agencies—stone washing, screening, and crushing equipment (Universal Road Machinery Co.); and asphalt (The Lansdell Company)—and others, all located in Kingston, NY. A listing of diverse Kingston-based businesses contains headings including Textiles and Their Products; Forest Products; Iron and

Steel; Stone, Glass, and Clay; Paper and Paper Products; Printing and Publishing; Transportation Equipment, Land and Water; and Miscellaneous, which included Cigars (2), Medicines, and Piano Hardware.

The booklet is a wealth of the city's demographics. It touts wage scale, labor conditions, the number of churches, newspapers, civic organizations, and other signs of the good life. Also shown are full-page maps for inter-urban bus service, another indicates Kingston's "Strategic Position in the Center of the Eastern Industrial Area."

- Inflation Calculator online at usinflation-calculator.com

- Friends of Historic Kingston fohk.org

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