

# The Uncle Sam Mall

*The plan to destroy Troy's downtown in order to save it*



Joe Fama

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Joe Fama  
April, 2022

## Acknowledgments

The “Uncle Sam Mall” is the second in a series of articles, which I hope to continue, about projects in Troy, NY. I have always relied on the kindness of family and friends and I am again indebted to people and institutions that have offered information, spoken to me of their experiences, shared files, or helped with editing.

My primary editor is my sister, Arlene. She has the knowledge and standing to speak freely of the deficiencies in my efforts. She helped lift this work closer to the goal of coherence. If it did not quite get there, it is due only to my insistence on including certain items despite their glaring irrelevance to the narrative.

Trudy Hanmer, who has written fifteen books of her own and has a sterling reputation as a reviewer, chose spelling, punctuation and sentence structure as her area of concern. Her contribution to the readability of the paper was enormous. You should have seen it before.

Gary Nelson, like me, has written articles on the Hoosick Street Bridge, and the Uncle Sam Mall, both roughly completed in the same time frame. Gary has been extremely generous with his copious files on both projects. I think our opinions on both subjects are nearly identical, but our points of view come from different vantage points and interests. These have served to broaden the body of available information. I would also like to thank Chuck Porter for opening his files, and lending me items that helped me put information into context.

First person interviews with Jack Waite, Duncan Barrett, Vince Lepera, and David Bryce, added valuable insights that could be found nowhere else. I thank them for their time, candor, and their patience in waiting for the result.

The Troy Public Library and the Hart Cluett Museum were, of course, invaluable. Paul Hicok at the library put both Gary’s and my Hoosick Street Bridge articles online, and offered to do it again with the Mall article. The files in the Hart Cluett Museum include several boxes donated by Dick Devane. These were among the most valuable first person and archival accounts that I have found in pursuing this story. Of particular note, both Kathy Sheehan and Barbara Urban from the Museum staff, were exceptionally helpful and patient with a would-be writer. I am indebted to them and admire the service they provide to the City of Troy.

My brother, Philip, my good friends Nikki Haynes and Steve Rein, Dan Palmer, Kathy Sheehan, and my wife Barbara were all willing to read an early draft of the article when that was not an easy thing to do. Their feedback helped me in my decision to revamp the article. Barbara also had the additional burden of living with an amateur author trying to write, during a pandemic.

All these people have my deepest gratitude, and, if you read this article, they should have yours. The fact that it remains an idiosyncratic work, is not due to any shortcomings on their part, but because I did not always follow their sound advice.

Joe Fama  
April, 2022

# INTRODUCTION

Troy is a small city with a glorious history and in recent years, a brighter future. This story, however, occurs during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, a time when Troy's future was decidedly bleak. Magnificent century-old buildings in various stages of vacancy, disrepair, and decay were constant reminders of Troy's gilded age, but also of the precipitous fall the city's fortunes had taken.

The streets of Troy were populated with a mix of black and white, old and young, college students and "townies." The population was declining, and those who could afford to moved out. Troy's decision makers were of two camps; one group thought that preservation of Troy's elegant architecture and small city charm were the key to its revival, but others felt the past was the problem, and a complete makeover was the answer. The clear-cut contingent dominated during the three decades following World War II; a period of major decline for Troy resulted.

The clear-cutters' attempts to reverse Troy's misfortunes were guided by a vision of widespread suburbanization. Troy would stake its future success on erecting a suburban-style mall to replace the downtown. The Uncle Sam Mall was the panacea by which the city's business center would be saved—or so the decision makers thought.

When the grand plan for the Uncle Sam Mall came to light, I was in my Senior Year at RPI. Over the course of the 1970s, I graduated, married, bought a house in the Lansingburgh neighborhood of Troy, and, a few months after the opening of the Uncle Sam Mall, became a father. In that time, I underwent a transformation from an RPI student with a casual interest in Troy; to a citizen of Troy who cared deeply about what happened to my City.

At the time it was happening, my understanding of the forces that shaped the project was superficial. Although I saw what happened, I had no real understanding of why it was happening. As I write this, the current owner has made proposals for significant changes. For the moment, those efforts are stalled because there are differences between the City of Troy and the Owner on other matters. By the time you have finished reading this saga, you will not find that surprising.

It was a need to more fully understand the forces that shaped the Uncle Sam Mall that motivated me to research and write this article all these many years later. What I discovered was that it was a wilder and crazier ride than I ever imagined.

Joe Fama  
Troy, NY  
April, 2022

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1949 to 1968

## **Prosperity is Passing Us By**

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Post-World War II America was a nation of unprecedented optimism and growth. Sadly, in most of the cities in the northeastern and midwestern United States, hopes for a brighter future faded quickly because the changes to America's way of life which brought prosperity to the rest of the country caused these cities to decline in wealth, population, and power.

After nearly two decades of economic depression and world war, most cities were overdue for infrastructure investments. That investment was not coming. Instead, the money was specifically offered to returning veterans to buy suburban homes. Highways were designed to connect the suburban areas to centers of industry. Shopping malls sprang up amid the newly created suburban communities, luring shoppers and businesses out of downtown. In great numbers the former GI's chose the new suburbs, abandoning their old neighborhoods in the cities.

Within a few years, as suburbs began to change the face of America, the negative effects on cities became obvious. Starting in the mid-1950s, the same thinking and thinkers that enabled suburban development, observing the rapid deterioration of urban areas, concluded that poverty was "a contagion"<sup>1</sup> and that the density was a major contributor. Oblivious or indifferent to the role that highways and suburbs had played in the decline of urban America, government agencies proposed more of the same in the name of saving the cities. Their solution was based on the belief that pre-war cities were outdated and must be removed and replaced. They offered money and guidance to help cities transform themselves into suburbs, not to repair the cities.

New York's Capital District exemplified the damage cities suffered during this period. This article is focused on Troy, but Albany, Schenectady, and cities up and down the Hudson, as well as those out along the Mohawk, like Amsterdam, Gloversville, Utica and Syracuse, and around the Great Lakes; including, Rochester, Niagara Falls, and Buffalo, were visited by the same series of federally funded plagues.

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<sup>1</sup> *Slum Clearance and Urban Renewal in the United States*, William J. Collins, Katharine L. Shester, Working Paper 17458, NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH, September 2011

## “Slum Removal” is rebranded as “Urban Renewal”



**Fig. 1:** Row Houses in Project Area B, Possibly Fulton Street, east of Sixth Ave. (Courtesy of Robert Mitchell)

The earliest projects came shortly after the war ended. The Federal Housing Act of 1949, frankly stating its objective as “slum clearance,” provided Federal money to municipalities to acquire and demolish deteriorated residential buildings. Slum clearance had great political appeal. Congress authorized massive appropriations to clear-cut old neighborhoods. Public housing, which was intended to replace the housing that was removed, was part of the original concept of the program, but was bitterly disputed and ultimately underfunded. The fight against public housing was led by Senator Joseph McCarthy<sup>2</sup> in the years before he turned his attention to Communists in the State Department. Because of the controversy, only a fraction of the units demolished were replaced.

While Troy’s downtown from 1969 to 1979 is the primary subject of this article, to understand the temper of the times, it is illuminating to provide a brief rundown of the philosophy and bureaucracy of the programs that laid waste to urban America in the name of “revitalizing cities.”

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Von Hoffman, A Study in Contradictions: The Origins and Legacy of the Housing Act of 1949, Housing Policy Debate, Vol. 11 Issue 2, Fannie Mae Foundation, 2000

After 1949, frequent changes to the Housing Act steadily increased the scope, authority, and resources of multiple government agencies. Originally created to remove residential slum neighborhoods, a role they never relinquished, ultimately, they became autonomous, and intervened in downtown commercial and economic development projects.

In 1954, “slum removal” became part of a much bigger program called “Urban Renewal.”<sup>3</sup> Between 1954 and 1966, under the umbrella of “Urban Renewal,” municipalities acquired property and the money to cut away wide swaths of iconic central business districts in cities both large and small, and replaced them with watered-down models of suburban shopping malls. Cherished historic buildings, both occupied and vacant were acquired and demolished.

The script played out in Troy just as it did in most communities. By 1950 federal money had been available to Troy for a large amount of clearance and a substantially smaller number of Public Housing Projects. An area along the Hudson River just south of Congress Street became the site of the four Taylor Public Housing towers. Other slum clearance projects from this time period included Troy’s infamous red-light district, the block on which Kennedy Towers was later built, and the removal of Troy’s magnificent railroad station.

Armed with newly expanded powers, the pre-1966 Troy Urban Renewal Agency began its planning for Project A in the early 1960’s. (See TURA project boundaries A, B, and C, Key Map, at the end of the article)

As early as 1962, the Urban Renewal Agency began developing a plan that would be “bounded by Federal Street, Broadway, Sixth Avenue and the Hudson River.” The proposal was large in area, but much more modest in scope than its subsequent incarnations. The initial concept included rehabilitation of salvageable buildings and acquiring and demolishing mostly empty, seriously deteriorated buildings. It was expected that renewal of this area would cost between \$8 and \$10 million (in 1966 dollars).

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<sup>3</sup> Confusion is inevitable in reviewing the history of the Troy Urban Renewal Agency. Title III of The Housing Act of 1954 authorized the creation of “an Urban Renewal Fund”. Between 1954 and 1966, the money Troy received from the Urban Renewal fund was administered by staff from the Troy Planning Department. That group was called the Troy Urban Renewal Agency, although in reality, it was not a self-sufficient agency. That is why TURA work occurred years before the it was authorized by the City Council officially as a separate entity in 1966. After 1966, the fund continued supporting slum clearance, but also authorized expenditures for a broader range of items, intended to help revive the area that had been cleared by slum clearance. From that time on, Urban Renewal became an umbrella term for a coordinated program of activities intended to revitalize the nation’s cities.

Project Area A continued the work started by the slum removal program. It demolished all the residential buildings on the east side of Sixth Avenue between Congress Street and Fulton Streets.

Then, utilizing its newly bestowed power to develop and fund renewal projects, the Urban Renewal Agency turned its attention to the portion west of Sixth Avenue. A proposal was developed for a new Medical Center on the east side of Fifth Avenue, mid-block between Broadway and Congress (Fig. 2 and 3. See also item 7 Key Map). This was not “slum removal”, i.e. demolition of buildings primarily owned and occupied by disenfranchised people. It was removal of significant architecture in the middle of a stable residential district.

TURA’s move from slum clearance to commercial redevelopment created something new: organized opposition. The site was occupied by a row of brownstones much like the row directly across the street which remains standing.



**Fig. 2:** 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Brownstones -east side shortly before demolition. (Courtesy of John Waite)



**Fig. 3:** 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Brownstones – west side (Google Street view, 2019)

When the TURA announced its plans to demolish the brownstones on Fifth Avenue, opposition surfaced. Led by Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Professor Bernd Foerster, a campaign was waged to save the buildings. Professor Foerster had published an influential book titled *Architecture Worth Saving in Rensselaer County* some three years earlier. The public responded, but the timing was just a bit off. The National Historic Preservation Act had been passed in 1966. It should have made a difference, but it was not fully implemented in time to save the day.

By 1968 the new TURA prevailed, and the buildings were demolished. The story was not only an early example of demolition. It also foreshadowed the pointlessness of rushing to condemn buildings. The brownstones on the east side of the street were demolished, but the medical center was never built. A few years later a branch bank with a parking lot was built in its stead.

Project B began in 1966, just as the pre-1966-TURA was about to become an actual Agency. It was less than half the size of either of the other two Project Areas (See TURA project boundaries, Key Map, at the end of the article). When I arrived in Troy in September 1966, the last of the buildings in this area were being demolished. The only thing that had been recently constructed was the bowling alley on the corner of Fulton Street and Sixth Avenue, whose construction began in 1960. Three other buildings constructed years later in this area were large multi-story, residential apartment buildings.

The changes made to Urban Renewal Agencies throughout the country were enabled by the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966. The second part of the act, Title II, was of greater concern to Troy, which had not been chosen to receive Title I funds. Title II stressed greater organization, coordination, participation and cooperation in the creation and implementation of comprehensive metropolitan planning and programming. As an incentive and aid in accomplishing this goal, additional grant monies of up to 20% would be available and a total amount of other federal funding could increase that amount to a maximum of 80% funding.

New York State pushed communities to convert their Urban Renewal Agencies to this newer format to receive the additional funding. In Troy, the Urban Renewal Agency had to comply, or its proposed Plan C, which had just been packaged, would not be approved. The resolution passed with only one councilman, Thomas Loudon, voting no. Two months later, Governor Rockefeller signed the measure into law and a newly autonomous Troy Urban Renewal Agency, (TURA) was established.

Over eighty Urban Renewal Agencies in New York State became Municipal Urban Renewal Units. The change marked another substantial expansion of the powers of Urban Renewal Agencies.

The change enlarged the powers and the appetite of the TURA. Project C was envisioned as a great leap forward for Troy. It was intended to transform the downtown business area. Originally it was bounded by Broadway on the south, the Hudson River on the west, Federal Street on the North and Sixth Avenue on the east. With their newly broadened power as an autonomous agency, TURA now had the power and funding to conceive of and develop a transformational downtown project. TURA, although theoretically independent, had a structure that assured it of interlocking membership with the City Council and the Troy Planning Commission.

## **Preservationists Also Broadened Their Power**

1966 was a big year for Urban Renewal, but it was an even bigger year for historic preservation. That year, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 significantly expanded the mandate of the National Trust for Historic Places.

This “expansion” of the National Register now included recognition of historic places of state and local significance as well as those found to possess national significance—previously consisting only of designated National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) and historical park units of the NPS—now embracing a more far-reaching and inclusive list of historic properties across the country.<sup>4</sup>

With the passage of this Act, America enacted a national policy on the preservation of historic properties. Among the methods provided by the act to implement that policy were two especially important provisions: The National Register of Historic Places, and the Section 106 review process. That same year, Governor Nelson Rockefeller created the New York State Historic Trust. Like most of Governor Rockefeller’s agencies, the State Historic Trust was imbued with powerful tools to advance its objectives.

The controversy over the Fifth Avenue brownstones had taught valuable lessons to the preservation community in Rensselaer County. Three years later, when the TURA rolled out the fully inflated Uncle Sam Mall proposal, the preservationists were better prepared, and the new powers authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act and New York State were fully operational. The proponents of suburbanization still controlled business and governmental decision making, and were well-financed by New York State and federal programs. The defenders of Troy’s heritage, however, had obtained some weapons of their own.

Both sides were now armed and dangerous.

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<sup>4</sup> “Using the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966,” National Park Service, June 18, 2018 [www.nps.gov/articles/using-the-national-historic-preservation-act-of-1966.htm](http://www.nps.gov/articles/using-the-national-historic-preservation-act-of-1966.htm)

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1968 to 1973  
**Make No Small Plans**

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By 1968 it was clear to all that Troy's central business district was in dire straits and in need of a plan to reverse the economic slide. Many of the businesses that remained downtown were on life support, and many aging merchants were hanging on in the hope of a miracle. Politicians, bankers, businesspeople, and other civic minded citizens all were trying to understand why things were going so horribly awry. The demolitions of the 1950s and 60s, which came with the promise of rebirth, had, in fact, exacerbated the situation. In 1968, many of the people who cared deeply about Troy, believed that the measures that had failed thus far were too timid, and something bigger was needed. The political and business establishments, in particular, were unified in their determination to access enough money to completely remake downtown Troy into a suburban style shopping mall.

Many agencies created during this period would fight against each other in the coming conflict over the future of urban America. In 1968 the same Governor Rockefeller who championed the New York State Historic Trust, would push for the creation of the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC), an agency with the stated goal "to provide housing, particularly for low-income families, increase job opportunities and upgrade blighted and deteriorating areas throughout the state."<sup>5</sup> To meet these lofty goals, Rockefeller envisioned the UDC as an agency with unprecedented powers, that would be the most effective urban development agency in the country.

UDC was empowered to issue bonds and notes, grant loans and tax exemptions, and acquire private property. UDC was also granted the power to acquire real property through the provisions of the eminent domain procedure law provided the Authority finds that the acquisition is necessary or convenient to achieve its purpose. In addition, UDC was authorized to create subsidiaries, by resolution, pursuant to business corporation law, not-for-profit corporation law or private housing finance law.

From UDC by-the-numbers, NYS Comptroller's Office, Oct. 2010.

After the charter was passed in 1968, UDC named its first Executive Director, Edward Logue, a man with a national reputation, personally recruited by Governor Rockefeller. Mark Byrnes, in an article about Logue said, "Ed Logue, a figure who had a little bit of (Jane) Jacobs and (Robert) Moses in his soul, centralized political power to rebuild urban centers and create humane,

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<sup>5</sup> "The Big Goals of the UDC", Alan K. Campbell, *New York Times* March 2, 1975

equitable neighborhoods across the Northeast throughout his career.”<sup>6</sup> The capacity of this newly consolidated and fortified agency was the buzz of the planning world in 1969.

In March of 1969 Ed Logue made a quick stop in downtown Troy. He gave a talk at RPI’s School of Architecture, and attended a meeting with Troy officials as he said, “To see if UDC might be interested in taking a hand in Troy’s downtown development plans.” When asked how UDC participation is initiated, he replied, “We will not go into a city unless we’re invited by the mayor or city manager – not the city council. Life’s too short to deal with individual councilmen!”<sup>7</sup>

UDC was the star agency to which the TURA and USM Corp. would hitch their wagon shortly after announcing its plans in October. US Mall Corp. now felt that they had put together a team and a program that could not fail.

The stage was almost set for the grand mall plan, but not quite. As 1968 rolled over into 1969, HUD startled the TURA board of directors and staff with a change of direction. According to Edward P. Dinan, appointed TURA’s Executive Director in 1966, HUD unexpectedly required Troy to put plans for Project C on hold and directed it to apply for the new Neighborhood Development Program. Dinan said, “This further confused the business community and brought all modernization in the area to a halt.”<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, TURA complied with the directive and put together a plan with projects located throughout the city.

Just as TURA was gearing up to apply, President Nixon, threw the program another curve ball. He had placed a freeze on the program, but now he took the freeze off; however, he reduced the number of grants by 75%: from a proposed 312, to 80. The deadline for application was January 15. Troy presented its request to HUD on January 9, 1969, describing it as the “attack to revitalize Troy.” The application included projects downtown, but also included improvements to property on Liberty and Adams Streets in South Troy, demolition on Congress Street for a new City Hall, acquiring property south of Ferry Street for a new police and fire complex, and plans for housing in the area of Project B.

The project met the deadline, but didn’t make the cut. The mandated effort and the distraction from regular business were for naught. One would imagine this left a somewhat bitter taste in the

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<sup>6</sup> *Don’t Forget About Ed Logue*. [www.citylab.com/equity/2017/03/dont-forget-about-ed-logue/519615/](http://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/03/dont-forget-about-ed-logue/519615/) Mark Byrnes Mar 15, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Capital Letter, Fusco, Bob. *Times Record*, March 18, 1969

<sup>8</sup> *Times Record*, 28 Jan. 1972

mouths of the many businesspeople and politicians who were salivating over the possibility of securing enough money to set Troy on the suburban road to prosperity.

Which takes us to the milestone vacation season of 1969, when that bitter taste triggered an appetite for bigger things.

### **It Began as a Dream**

By all accounts, the idea for the Uncle Sam Mall was conceived by Troy business owner Dick Devane as he lay on a beach on Cape Cod. Mr. Devane was the head of a family-owned business, Devane's Floor Coverings, located in downtown Troy. Dick Devane, a graduate of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, had always been active in community affairs and, among many other things, was the President of the Downtown Council. When he returned to Troy, after dreaming up the Uncle Sam Mall in 1969, he began to test the viability of his idea with fellow business owners, city officials and bankers. The reception he got was sufficiently positive to spur him to put together a serious proposal.

He envisioned a plan larger than the proposals of the pre-1966 TURA. It would include an expansion of Project C's boundary to the south. It encompassed the entire Central Business District, and called for the demolition of all but a few of the buildings in that area. Its cost was estimated at ten times the estimated cost of the prior grand plan.

An organization called the Uncle Sam Mall Corporation (USM Corp.) was formed. The choice of a name was telling. The idea was to replace Troy's urban core with a suburban-style mall. The people supporting the idea of the Uncle Sam Mall were presumably well intentioned. They represented a who's who of Troy's civic leaders. They remain respected members of the community, and rightly so. They knew something was needed to reverse an escalating decline, and they knew it would cost money. They were willing to put up money of their own, but that would not be enough to prevent a whole city from unraveling from the effects of state and federal policies. The only place where money was available to them in sufficient quantities was from the federal and New York State governments. The money was intended to turn Troy into a suburb.

In an unprecedented show of good faith, the Uncle Sam Mall Corp. held a \$500-a-plate dinner and raised \$50,000 toward having a feasibility study done. A \$500-a-plate dinner was said to be insane. Yet the money was raised, and the move attracted attention of state officials.

The New York Urban Development Corp. contributed \$50,000 to the USMC money and the economic study was undertaken by a top-notch New York firm. Their findings were that Troy could easily support such a Mall.

- John Swantek and Dennis Nelson, Times Record, 12/5/72

With the support of the local business community and the NYS UDC in hand, Project C of the Troy Urban Renewal Agency was expanded to encompass the area proposed for the Uncle Sam Mall (See “Expansion of Area ‘C’”, Key Map). The TURA intended to purchase the land, and to seek a private developer to build the project.

By October of that same year, Dick Devane’s idea was sufficiently developed and had enough support from the business community to go public with a major announcement.



When the October 18, 1969 headline first appeared, the magnitude and confidence with which the story was reported impressed the city. The lead sentence alone was enough to catch the reader’s attention:

Troy’s entire downtown shopping sector will be reconstructed into a \$96,000,000 ultra-modern mall – larger than the Colonie Shopping Center – if a well-planned proposal instituted through the coordinated efforts of a group of local businessmen and the Urban Renewal Agency is approved by the Federal Government.

Practically every building within the State to Federal Street and Sixth Avenue to the Hudson River area will be razed to make way for the rehabilitation program.

It was no secret that the TURA had been working for years on plans for downtown renewal in Project Area C, but the last time a budget was mentioned, in 1966, it was between \$8 and \$10 million dollars. The concept announced in October, 1969 was overwhelming. The budget had jumped from roughly \$10 million in 1966 to \$96 million in 1969. The new proposal included

500,000 square feet of retail, 300,000 square feet of office space, an unspecified number of new residential units, and 7,300 parking spaces.

At this point, even the small businesses that were to be bought out were cautiously optimistic. Their first reaction was to look at the \$96 million number and see it as their best chance for a lucrative buy-out.

This enormous proposal was a deliberate effort to reverse Troy's fortunes by completely transforming it into a new, modern city. This solution seemed appropriate to many, given the magnitude of the city's problems. The resources needed, stunning though they were, were out there for the asking. The Board of the USM Corp., dazzled by the money, and energized with civic pride, could hardly wait to get started; but they failed to ask themselves the crucial question, "Is this a good idea?"

The mall as proposed would be the largest mall in the Capital Region. "The gigantic rehabilitation project will embrace the downtown section bounded by State and Federal Streets and the new Sixth Avenue and the Hudson River." According to *The Record* article, the mall would have two ten story towers, "one in the vicinity of where the Hendrick Hudson now stands, one west of the Holiday Inn." Initial plans also called for a heliport to be located within the mall area.

The map that follows is my attempt to show the scope of the plan as described in the October 18 newspaper article.

Figure 5

# Original Plan for The Uncle Sam Mall

based on the Times Record Article of 10/18/1969.

-JF



### Key

**DEMO PROPOSED**  
BUT NOT COMMITTED  
Times Record 10/18/69



**"Might be spared"**  
Times Record 10/18/69



**NOT TO BE  
DEVELOPED**  
Times Record 10/18/69



**DEMO PROPOSED**  
Times Record 10/18/69  
**DEVELOPED**  
IN PLACE FOR THE  
Uncle Sam Mall



## **For Some, It Was A Nightmare**

Opponents of the proposal were deeply troubled, but they were in the minority. Although they were appalled by the prospect of losing of so much of the City they loved, they were not immediately moved to rise up and object loudly in the face of the strong initial public support. In fact, vocal public opposition to the mall was quite limited at the outset. It was only later, when a string of setbacks cast substantial doubt on the idea, that opponents spoke out, and even the general public began to grumble.

That does not mean the preservationists sat back wringing their hands. From the very start, several influential Trojans, concerned by the architecturally significant buildings that were threatened by the proposal, chose to act without making a spectacle of the effort. They were determined to avoid the fate that the Fifth Avenue brownstones, between Broadway and Fulton Street had met in 1968. They decided that instead of raising a public outcry, they would work behind the scenes to save what they could. This proved to be an effective strategy. The Fifth Avenue Association worked to save the neighborhood on Fifth Avenue between Fulton and Grand Streets (See Key Map, fig. 7). They organized a walking tour, and invited many civic leaders to tour their homes. Wallace Taylor, Al McCarthy, and Jack and Diane Waite were among those who opened their homes. The tour was eye-opening for many of the officials, who were unaware that these buildings had such quality and had been kept in such good condition. By the time the big headline broke, the rescue mission was on the brink of success as evidenced by this quote from the article.

Not scheduled to be demolished – at this stage of planning – are the Telephone Building, State and Fourth Streets, and the Troy Record newspaper plant. *It is also possible the brownstones on the east side of Fifth Avenue, between Fulton and Grand Streets will be left standing* as will others on First and Second Streets north of State. The Caldwell Apartments may not be disturbed also. (*emphasis added*)

In addition, the preservation community, along with the New York State Historic Trust (forerunner of the NY State Historic Preservation Office) nominated the Cannon, Gurley, Ilium, McCarthy, and National State Bank buildings for addition to the National Trust, using the new powers of the National Historic Preservation Act enacted in 1966. They nominated the 1900 block of Fifth Avenue, (referenced in the quote above) which became New York State's first listed Historic Residential District.

The Mall proponents were not concerned. They thought they had an approved plan that would override such concerns. Jack Waite, who at the time was employed by the New York State Historic Trust, and was instrumental in the listing of many of the condemned buildings to the National

Register, remembers talking to a presenter after a public hearing. Jack suggested that several of those buildings were going to be put on the Register. The confident presenter said that would not make much of a difference because the National Register was an “honorific, without real teeth.” The TURA was about to learn that their plan had been substantially compromised in locations protected by the very real teeth written into The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

### **The Dawn of a New Day**

By mid-year 1970, it seemed clear that Troy’s fortunes were about to change.<sup>9</sup> The Uncle Sam Mall was going to happen. Most of the citizens were jubilant.

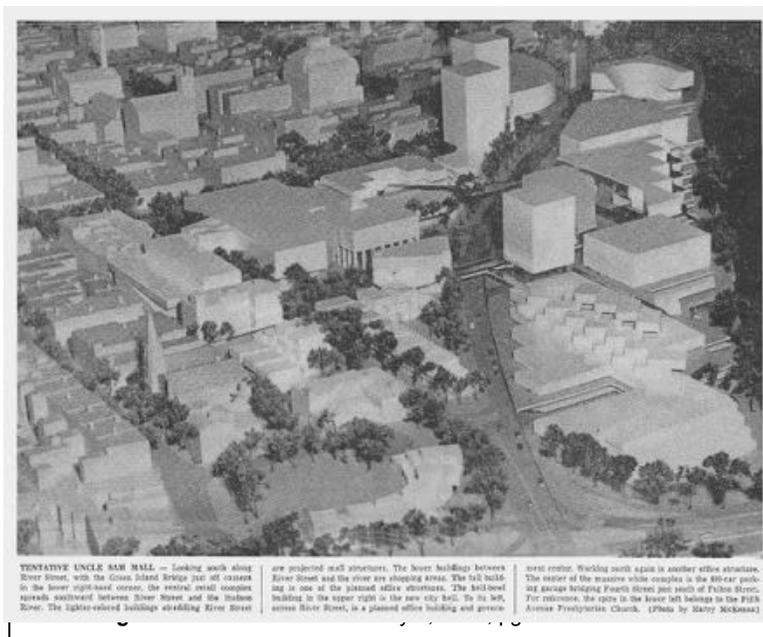
The NYS UDC entered into a “partnership” with the City of Troy on June 17, 1970. A check for \$50,000 from the City was presented to UDC as the basis for a memorandum of agreement.

A \$500 a plate dinner was held at Mario’s Theater Restaurant to celebrate the event. UDC pledged to match that amount. The funds were intended to pay for a detailed study of the proposed project. Eight months later, an even bigger public relations spectacular was staged. Once again, the event was a dinner at Mario’s Theater Restaurant. Dick Devane and NYS UDC President Edward J. Logue unveiled the preliminary plans designed by Troy architects Crozier, Kearns and Philippi. A futuristic model of the City of Troy was presented.

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<sup>9</sup> The voters of Troy opted to change the nature of municipal government in Troy when, in 1964, they approved a charter revision which eliminated the mayor as the directly-elected chief executive of the city. The new system continued with an elected Council which appointed a City-Manager as the chief executive.

John Buckley, Troy’s third City Manager, began his term in 1970. It lasted for 15 years, with a brief interruption in 1977. John Buckley was the chief executive for the City of Troy during nearly all of the years of the Uncle Sam Mall’s development.



“As sparkling and well-ordered as a surgeon’s table, the planning model of Troy’s proposed Uncle Sam Mall unveiled Wednesday represents the start of an architectural transfusion which could revitalize the city’s downtown business district”<sup>10</sup>.

Also on page 1 was an article by Bob Bryer, “*And Now It Is Up To The City Of Troy,*” which reported on Ed Logue’s presentation. Logue was optimistic and congratulatory. He pledged that the UDC would fulfill its obligations to the City of Troy. However, his remarks suggested that some reconsideration was in the works. “I think we (the UDC and the Uncle Sam Mall

Corp.) would have parted company months ago had the decision been made to bulldoze out the center of the city and start from scratch.”

One need only thumb back to fig. 5 of this article to reconfirm that “bulldoze out the center of the city and start from scratch” was precisely the concept behind the Uncle Sam Mall. But even as early as 1971, the funders were beginning to recognize that the original plan was overblown.

Logue went on to list additional buildings that might be spared the wrecking ball in UDC’s opinion. The Ilium Building, the Post Office, the Frear Building, Harmony Hall, and Proctor’s Theater were all mentioned. All those were saved, many because of the prior efforts of the preservation community. (See Key Map. Items 9, 10, 11, and 12, respectively).

There were additions to the threatened list as well. Logue suggested that the Cannon Building on Monument Square (See Key Map, Item 16) be demolished to make room for a new County Courthouse and a ten-story office building.

Four months after the big February celebration, on June 23, 1971, the Troy City Council considered the plan. Several people expressed their concern that night. All the speakers warned that the project would exacerbate the housing shortage. No speakers objected to any other aspects

<sup>10</sup> *Troy Record, It’s Architectural Transfusion* by John Swantek. Troy Record, Feb. 4, 1971, pg. 1.



**Fig. 7:** Phase I from TURA 1973 Annual Report, pg. 4

of the plan. The City Council voted unanimously to approve the plan. With this approval in hand, it was now possible for HUD to approve the contract to begin the first stage of work.

In March of 1972, the USM Corp. received official word that \$14 million of the \$31 million grant applied for in 1969 had been awarded to the Troy Urban Renewal Agency to begin the project. To add to the general sense of well-being, the stock market was reaching record highs, just as the good news arrived from HUD. As the project shifted into a higher gear, a change was made in leadership: Edward Dinan, who had guided the TURA since it was upgraded in 1966, was replaced by Francis E. Yankowski.

Much had been accomplished to bring the project to this point. Nonetheless, the public had heard nearly three years of rosy projections without seeing a bit of actual construction. Yankowski, in response to public questioning, pointed out that the delay was unavoidable, since work could not have begun until the grant money was received. The period of waiting was now over. Yankowski, with money in hand, predicted that in a short time, people would see physical activity begin.

At this point, the initial concept remained largely intact. A significant number of historically significant buildings had been rescued from the demolition list, but the USM was still nearly the same behemoth that was originally proposed.

The project had always been intended to be developed in phases. The initial request for Phase I was \$31 million. Subsequently, an agreement with UDC had been formulated to build two parking garages providing 1,400 new parking spaces and adding \$4 million more to the total. Phase I would contain 220,000 square feet of retail and 100,000 square feet of office and residential. The footprint for Phase I retail and office tower was bounded by Federal Street on the North, Fourth Street on the East, Broadway on the South and the proposed New Third Street on the West.

TURA quickly began work acquiring properties slated for demolition. The Uncle Sam Mall project was the biggest project that the TURA would ever undertake. They spent ten million dollars on acquisition alone. They acquired 122 building, and leveled 63 of them for the first phase of the project. The acquisitions occurred over a six-block area, which was a small part of the originally proposed 18 block demolition. The support being offered was first-step funding; there were millions held in abeyance while Troy was given a chance to prove itself.

The grant arrived just in time to quiet the earliest public murmurs of discontent. The national economic news was excellent. In November of 1972 the Dow broke 1,000 for the first time. By January, 1973, it was still above the 1,000 mark and climbing.

Anticipating the start of work, in December, 1972, *The Times Record* produced a weeklong series of articles by John Swantek and Dennis Nelson, putting a positive spin on the project and explaining the causes of delays and setbacks. In the articles the UDC was referred to as the “principal sponsor.” Although the headlines were unabashedly enthusiastic, the articles themselves covered both the support and some of the difficulties the project had encountered.

The 12/5/72 article contained an extensive and instructive account of the development of the project. It included some interesting financial information. The costs of the mall had been estimated from \$38 million (an early estimate of just the new construction) to \$96 million (for the entire project, as originally announced in 1969).

The \$14 million grant which was awarded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, was intended for the acquisition, relocation and land clearing aspects of the project. The total cost of the preparatory stage was estimated at \$21 million. New York State agreed to finance \$5 million, and the city would provide parking, utilities and the like, as its share. Caldwell Developers, the firm hired to develop the project had, by the time of this article, hiked its estimate for construction up to \$50 million. The City of Troy was looking at a \$20 million expenditure for utilities and parking facilities. The Record article confidently noted, “Once the mall is built, the return to the city would overshadow such expenditures.”

Adding up all the figures in the December 1972 article, which included Caldwell’s new figure for construction, tallied up to a new total of \$108 million. Clearly, when it came to estimates of cost, the numbers appear to have been hopelessly unstable.

Despite the fluctuations in of cost projections, the stars appeared to be in alignment. 1972 was drawing to a close, and work was expected to start early in 1973.

1973 to 1977

## Bad Timing, Bad Decisions, Bad Faith, & Bad Luck

### ELUCIDATING INFORMATION . . . Interesting and Enlightening

The total 1973 Urban Renewal Agency Administrative Budget was \$221,517. Expenditures amounted to \$197,525, leaving a surplus of \$23,992.

The agency has paid to the city, county and school districts \$212,176 in taxes. In addition, a total of \$224,381 has been collected in back taxes by the UR unit.

As a direct result of urban renewal activities, \$11,862,000 has been pumped into the local economy. This money represents salaries, payments to individuals-families-businesses that have been relocated — to contractors who have performed services for the agency — for supplies and in real estate acquisition payments. Practically all of this money was disbursed locally.

Last year the agency purchased 122 properties at a cost of \$9,399,536. Sixty-three buildings were razed to make way for the mall. The demolition cost represented a \$393,000 contract.

During 1973, the agency relocated 99 businesses and 86 families and individuals. Total relocation payments made during the year were \$766,913. For its efficiency, UR's Relocation Office received high praise from the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, citing its professionalism in processing claims and moving people and businesses to new locations.

TURA's Property Management Dept. dealt with 256 units owned by the agency. It handled and resolved 500-plus tenant problems. The department also collected \$86,548 in rents.

The idea for the Uncle Sam Mall was conceived by a group of Troy merchants spearheaded by Richard Devane, which elevates it to unique status with the federal government.

Through a sound fiscal investment program initiated by the agency, TURA realized \$401,661 in interest payments last year. Originally, only \$200,000 in interest earned through investment was budgeted by the agency — for the life of the UR project.

All of the design and architectural work has been performed in an outstanding manner by the firm of Crozier, Kearns, and Phillip, Architects and Planners, of Troy, N.Y.

*With the exception of lower right picture — site of new City Hall at Broadway and River Street — all show various phases of demolition work in area bounded by Fulton, Grand and River Streets.*



Fig. 8: Troy Urban Renewal Agency, 1973 Annual Report, pg. 4

## **Demolition Begins**

The guarantee from the UDC was in hand, the money to cover the expense of the demolitions was committed, and almost all the properties were acquired. Demolition was about to begin. Three and a half blocks of downtown Troy were about to be leveled to make way for the Uncle Sam Mall and Parking Garage. Phase I had fallen into place. On the national level, the economy continued to be robust. The stock market was soaring into uncharted territory. To those who had wished for this very thing, that meant, at last it was time to get to work.

On April 8, 1973, demolition for the Uncle Sam Mall began with the former Western Union Building on River Street at Monument Square.<sup>11</sup> Then the block north of Fulton on the west side of Fourth Street was leveled. The Boardman Building, on the North East Corner of Fulton and Third Streets proved particularly difficult to demolish. Even after the rest of the entire block had been demolished, crews were still hacking away at the Boardman. By September, all the buildings that needed to be demolished to build the Uncle Sam Mall and parking garage were down, with two exceptions (see Figure 11).

As the demolition neared completion, the world economy began to show signs of weakening. The USM Corp. felt the pressure. All the while that the demolitions were occurring, efforts were being made to seal the deal with the developer and contractor in order to begin construction as soon as possible. The hope was to be open for business by Christmas, 1974. In October, TURA announced that agreements had been signed. Construction was about to begin. A target groundbreaking was scheduled for Valentine's Day, 1974.

The public relations department was turning out a constant stream of good news about how well that effort was progressing, and in fact, there was some good news to report.

In May the TURA approved a deal with the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal. Yankowski explained that the state's share would be \$8 million. The City of Troy would put up \$8 or \$9 million, and the federal government would contribute \$14 to \$15 million. The total was \$30 million to build 220,000 square feet of retail mall space. (In some publications and pamphlets issued between April and September, the retail mall was listed as 500,000 square feet. By October, it was back to 220,000 sq. feet.)

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<sup>11</sup> Times Record photo caption, 9 April, 1973.

By August, 1973 it looked like the Uncle Sam Mall would be ready for construction as soon as demolition was completed. On August 1, Dennis Nelson penned, "*Troy's Downtown Mall Begins A New Era*," reporting on plans presented the day before to a joint meeting of the Troy Urban Renewal Corp. and the Troy City Council. The article announced that 70% of the retail area had been leased, "mostly to local merchants."<sup>12</sup> Caldwell Developers announced that Denby's alone was committed to 45,000 square feet.

By the end of the year, the demolition was completed. Acquisition and demolition costs had come to nearly \$10, million. Now, TURA was anxious to get the first phase of the mall under construction, and to begin work on the next phase of the grand plan.

In January, 1974 the Caldwell Corporation was again selected as developer, this time to construct the project. In March, Caldwell's general contractor, Cowper Industries, began construction on Phase I. Excavations were dug for concrete foundation piers. The piers began to rise from the ground. Construction was underway.

### **It's All Downhill From Here**

Many felt that the worst was over. It would be "all downhill from here." In a sense, they were right, because from just about the time Caldwell signed the agreement, almost everything about the Uncle Sam Mall began to go downhill for most of the next six years.

America was about to enter the recession of 1973 -1975. The stock market, which broke the 1,000 mark in November, 1972, peaked at an all-time high of 1,052 in January, 1973, and then it fell. It was the beginning of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Economists vary in their opinion as to the primary culprits but among the frequently named causes are: the Arab Oil Embargo in retaliation for US support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War (October, 1973) and the ensuing failure of US auto-makers to switch to smaller, more fuel efficient vehicles, the financial turmoil before and after the resignation of Richard Nixon (August 8, 1974), the growing

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<sup>12</sup> In a letter to the Times Record on 5/18/73, Gary Nelson, longtime critic of the project, made the point that, as the developer, only Caldwell could sign a lease and that, since all agreements were not signed, Caldwell did not own the property. Therefore, anything currently signed was an informal, non-binding lease option. This later proved to be correct. By May of 1974, almost 2 years after reporting that 70% of the retail area had been leased, the Times Record reported that 15 percent of the leases had been signed.

cost of the Vietnam war (ended April 30, 1975), and stagflation, a phenomenon in which inflationary pricing coincided with slow economic growth and high unemployment (1973-1975).

As a result of economic weakness, money became scarcer and the value of property dropped. A series of reports in the *Times Record* starting in October, 1973, revealed that the project was running into a new set of hurdles. Like the steady tolling of a funeral bell, the news items were short on specifics, but sent a clear message of impending failure.

10/2/73: The sale price of parcels in Phase I in the vicinity of the current Parking Garage was reduced 25% from \$4 to \$3/SF.

10/17/73: The groundbreaking ceremony, originally scheduled for November '73 and then February, 1974, was postponed twice due to financing problems.

11/5/73: Secrecy in financing was reportedly "under fire" (*although who was firing was not revealed in the article.*)

11/12/73: "Texas Firm Backs Out of Troy Mall," (No By-Line). Philip Breland, commercial loan officer for Texas First Mortgage Real Estate Investment Trust, explained, "We just don't have the funds. If we had the money, it would have been a good place to put it."

11/17/73: "The New York State Urban Development Corp., which has a contract with the Troy Urban Renewal Agency to build the mall, has vowed that the mall will be built – with or without Caldwell." 'Officials, Developer Talk About Troy Mall Finances', by Dennis Nelson.

All of this bad news spilled out into the local news against a backdrop of dust and destruction, at the very time when blocks of downtown were being razed.

## The Holes

Four views of the devastation of 1973



**Fig. 9: The North Block**

This was the view from Fulton Street looking north in 1973. This space was later filled by the Uncle Sam Parking garage and the Franklin Square Inn.

The old Green Island Bridge and Cluett Peabody building can be seen on the upper left. The open space was known as the North Block. Everything between Fulton Street and the Green Island Bridge, from 4<sup>th</sup> Street to the river was demolished in 1973, except for the Peerless and Denby's buildings, which were demolished in 1978 after substantial public debate. The buildings on the right side of the photo were later torn down as well. They became the parking lot just north of Grand Street. (Photo courtesy of Pinterest)



**Fig. 10: Peerless & Denby's**

The Peerless and Denby's buildings on the northwest corner of River and Fulton Streets, survived the 1973 demolition. Reportedly, they were left standing until their replacement spaces could be constructed. This enabled opponents of the demolition to continue to question the wisdom of removing them. For five years, they were a bone of contention between those who wanted to adhere to the Mall plan, and those who tried to amend the plan to save those buildings. They were finally demolished in 1978, one year before the Mall opened. (Photo courtesy of Gary Nelson)



**Fig. 11: The Frear Annex & Frear Building**

One of the earliest public outcries against the Mall plans arose in defense of the Frear Building and the Frear Annex. The Frear Building (on the right) was saved and became the saving grace of the US Mall project.

The Frear Annex, (adjacent on the left) was originally scheduled to be demolished in 1973 to make way for a parking structure. The demolition was postponed by opposition, but ultimately, after the building was gutted by a fire, it was demolished in 1975. (Photo courtesy of Pinterest)



**Fig. 12: The South Block**

The photo shows the hole left by the demolition of the east side of 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in 1973. This hole in the center of town remained until the Mall opened six years later. The west side of the street; the buildings on the right, remain standing and are still a vital part of downtown in 2022.

This section of the project was called the South Block, and it extended from Broadway to Fulton St. and from 3<sup>rd</sup> Street to Fourth. Everything on the block was demolished except for the Frear Building, which was saved by the public outcry described above. This is now the site of the Uncle Sam Mall and Atrium. The floor level of the mall is at the sidewalk level of 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. The cavernous volume below the sidewalk exists today as the basement of the building. (Photo courtesy of the Rensselaer County Historical Society).

## **As the Dust Settled**

The contractor, who started in March, 1974, made very little progress, and gradually brought the project to a standstill. By October, the construction was halted, with very little work having been done. By December, state and city officials could no longer avoid the inevitable; they informed the Caldwell Development Corp. that it was no longer the sub-developer of the mall. UDC began looking for a new developer. The Uncle Sam Mall project began to unravel, even as the supporters gamely clung to the belief that construction, which technically had begun, would continue. This even though as late as February 25, a binding contract had not yet been signed. “The contract will be signed when the state receives a \$150,000 letter of credit from Caldwell. The Letter will insure (*sic*) payment for work completed should Caldwell’s financing arrangements fail.”<sup>13</sup>

Compounding the problem were the difficulties that UDC was encountering. Banks were balking at buying UDC’s bonds, since it had already defaulted on several projects. Governor Malcolm Wilson, who had moved up from Lieutenant Governor when Nelson Rockefeller became U.S. Vice-President, ordered UDC not to undertake any new financial obligations. All over New York State, UDC projects that were expecting funding were shut down. Troy appealed to the governor to give them an exception, since Troy had torn down half the downtown with an assurance from the state that it would guarantee to develop the project. In a reply addressed to TURA chairman Louis Anthony, Wilson denied the request. Anthony said the city would have to “bank on our good friend Governor Carey,” who had been elected in November and would take office on January 1, 1975. More on that later.

### **“This Historical Thing Is Becoming a Problem in Troy”**

Troy Urban Renewal Director Frank Yankowski, quoted in the *Troy Times Record*, April 2, 1974

In April, 1974, while the entire plan was falling apart, the federal government announced the release of \$600 million dollars in urban renewal funds. Soon after, the Troy Urban Renewal Agency announced that it would apply for this money for demolition in additional areas. The timing of these announcements could not have been more incendiary. It proved to be too great a provocation for Troy citizens who opposed further expansion of the destruction zone. Troy’s preservation community, which had been working behind the scenes previously, was goaded into public confrontation. Prior to this moment, the concept of suburbanizing downtown Troy was the

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<sup>13</sup> Times Record, February 25, 1974, *Mall Garages Face Council Vote* (no by-line)

official plan of the leadership of the city. Those in opposition had scored many significant successes in snatching important buildings from the condemned list. Now the fight was out in the open.



The John P. Ryan Building Before Wells And Carefully Moved In  
Times Record, 6/22/74

**Fig. 13:** The McCarthy Building

The first provocation was the proposal to tear down the buildings on River Street between Fulton Street and Monument Square. (See Key Map, Item 14). These buildings had been approved for demolition as part of the original Uncle Sam Mall Plan. Since that approval, however, the buildings had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. TURA could not proceed without a waiver from the NY State Office of Historic Preservation (NY SHPO). Opponents of the US Mall strongly objected to the waiver and appealed to the NY SHPO. Of particular concern was the McCarthy Building on Monument Square. At the time it was known as the John P Ryan Building after the furniture store which had just moved out. The TURA Director Frank Yankowski didn't mince words, "Our plans are to knock it down...The battle lines are drawn."<sup>14</sup>

The TURA's next proposal was to demolish 48 buildings on Grand from Fourth to Sixth Avenue, and on Sixth Avenue from Grand to Federal. They had acquired and boarded those buildings a year earlier. Residents from Fifth Avenue, just around the corner, objected. Once again, they successfully nominated the buildings for the National Register of Historic Places. (See Key Map, Item 3).

April 1974 brought a third provocation and it was by far the biggest of the three. TURA requested approval to further expand Project C another block South on River Street. They requested permission to demolish all the buildings on the west side of River Street from State Street to Congress (See Key Map, Item 17). A delegation of TURA officials went to Washington to meet with the federal officials to argue for the expansion. Naturally, local preservationists responded by preparing to add these buildings to the National Register of Historic Places. Father Tom Phelan, one of the leaders of Troy's preservation community, went to Washington to speak in opposition to the TURA. (See Key Map, Item 17).

<sup>14</sup> Times Record, June 22, 1974, *Will Building Be Torn Down?* by Tom McPheeters,

Regarding the confrontation, Yankowski said, "If the property is put on the register it leaves us without options. The only possible route would be rehabilitation of the area." To people on the preservation side of the issue his remark was comical.

In the end, all the buildings listed or proposed for listing were saved when the NY SHPO refused to grant the waivers. The preservationist had scored a huge victory over the mall supporters, who were beginning to realize how significantly public opinion was turning against them.

In July of the same year, a group known as the Urban Design Committee of the Rensselaer County Council on the Arts, formed to offer alternative visions for downtown, suggested that the basic design concept of the Uncle Sam Mall should be reconsidered. They prepared a model showing a renewed River Street with the existing buildings remaining in place. Architects Tom Blandy and Ken Warriner and RCCA director Paul Elisha promoted rehabilitation instead of demolition, and advocated for the new Uncle Sam Mall to recreate a traditional urban street with the store entrances on the street side instead of a suburban mall with the stores facing inward. Warriner said, "We are arguing that there is a real value...to having a place that has a very distinct character."

This went to the very heart of the issue with the proposed Uncle Sam Mall. The Mall was designed to replace the traditional street, small business, and pedestrian oriented commercial downtown with an inward looking, self-contained automobile-dependent shopping mall. The new model was thriving all over America, provided it was placed in the new sprawling suburban landscape. History would show that trying to duplicate that model in a long established urban commercial core was a tactical mistake.

The Urban Design Committee met with a dozen Troy merchants whose stores were located outside the Uncle Sam Mall site. They convinced the merchants that the TURA version of an enclosed mall, designed to keep shoppers inside, would not help them at all. It might even hurt them. The merchants decided to collect petition letters from all downtown merchants outside of the mall and present them to the TURA.

Bennett J. Delle Bovi, then a vice-president of the developer, Caldwell Development Corp., did not deny that "we intend to have shoppers come into our mall, and it's costing us money to get them to do that – but that will not take away from the rest of the downtown shopping area." He did not elaborate.

The year ended on an inconsequential but nonetheless bitter note. On December 9, 1974 *The New Yorker* published an interview with singer/songwriter Randy Newman. At that time, Newman was an up and coming song writer with an acerbic wit. *The New Yorker* interview quoted Newman as saying, "I've heard lots of discussions about the worst city in America. I've heard that the worst city - in fact the worst place of any size-is Troy, New York." Thus ended 1974, a very bad year Troy.

### **When There is Nowhere Else to Turn**

Hugh Carey was elected governor of New York State in November, 1974. In his inaugural address in January, 1975 he said, "This government will begin today the painful, difficult, imperative process of learning to live within its means." His remarks did not bode well for the Uncle Sam Mall. People who had counted on a new administration to honor the UDC commitments were concerned. As it turned out, rightly so.

1975 was the year in which the effects of the 1973-1974 economic slide swooped in like a polar vortex. Across the country projects like the Uncle Sam Atrium, and agencies like the NYS UDC were frozen in place. Work on the Uncle Sam Mall had been stopped after demolition but before any meaningful construction. All eyes now turned to NYS UDC, because it had committed to take over the project if the developer failed to perform. In February, Governor Carey proposed a revamped agency to try to get UDC projects up and running. Banks, however, continued to clamor for UDC to be shut down. They wanted UDC to refrain from starting new projects, and to stop funding some projects that were in the pipeline. In answer to a question specifically about Troy, Governor Carey said, "At this moment, UDC would have no prospect of giving financial assistance or guidance to that – to the Uncle Sam Mall project in Troy."<sup>15</sup>

UDC had until June 1, 1975 to meet its responsibility to find a new developer or take over the job. June 1 came and went, and no new developer had been found. Troy, therefore, had the right to take back title to the now-barren properties from the UDC. This was a right Troy chose not to exercise. The prior agreement was that UDC would pay property tax on the parcels. If Troy had taken back the title, UDC would have been off the hook for the taxes. UDC could continue to pay taxes, but clearly it could not fulfill its commitment to take on the project itself, since it was suffering through a string of defaults of its own, which had begun in February 1975. Troy made the only decision that made sense: do nothing and keep collecting the taxes.

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<sup>15</sup> Times Record, February 6, 1975, pg.1 *State Considers New Role in Uncle Sam Mall* by Peter Slocum,

The local people who put the Uncle Sam Mall project together did not hide from this dreadful turn of events and run for the hills. They not only hung in to face the music, they were determined to build what they could with the resources at hand. It must have been extremely painful to realize their dream of an entirely new and different downtown had evaporated. The road ahead would be haunted by the ghosts of ideas which had proven unachievable. There would be more awkward announcements of what would not be built, and they would get more criticism than credit for hanging in. Nevertheless, they persisted.

So it was that in April, facing the debilitating failures of the professional developers and the once-mighty Urban Development Corporation, the Uncle Sam Mall Corporation decided it must become the developer. In a surprising move, they hired Bennet Delle Bovi, former Vice President of Caldwell Development Corp., as Executive Director. Letters went out to prospective tenants that announced, "After the UDC failure, the Uncle Sam Mall Corporation has decided to build the downtown shopping center itself."

The new plan called for the City of Troy to build the parking garage, a private developer to build the mall on the south parcel, and the USM Corp. to build the retail section on the north parcel. It would contain approximately 200,000 SF of buildings and provide approximately 150,000 SF of gross leasable area.

It was a calamitous retreat from the magnitude of the original concept. Only two blocks of the demolished area would be put back into service. Two more would remain empty until some future use was found. The original eighteen block concept had disappeared from the agenda. The two ten-story towers with stores and apartments at each end would not be built. Neither would the heliport, the nationally known department store, the civic center, the movie theater, the 7,300 parking spots, or the arterial highway along the river; all those things and more were lost over the course of six years since the original concept was made public.

On September 2, 1975, City Manager John Buckley wrote to Gov. Carey. In his letter he briefly explained that two developers had withdrawn from consideration due to their inability to secure financing, and that the board members of the Uncle Sam Mall Corporation had been working as volunteers for the last five months to do the job themselves. "They have undertaken to raise over \$10,000 dollars in small contributions to engage the services of a qualified General Manager..."

He continued with this candid and direct appeal:

It is with this potential disaster that is facing Troy in mind, and your firm assurance that you would help us build our Mall that I am writing you today.

When the lifeblood of a community starts to ebb away in loss of commercial enterprises, then it is not long before the tax burden on the remaining homeowners becomes unbearable and a city dies. Troy is at this critical point now. We recognize that we cannot get a private developer. Our citizens are sincerely willing to carry their share of the burden, but we recognize the obvious fact that we can't do it all without some assistance.

He then listed ten items which would facilitate the local effort, half of which were simple courtesies of little or no cost to the state, such as "The Uncle Sam Mall Corporation be designated as the Preferred Developer..." A few were more financially consequential, including a request for the UDC to continue to pay the taxes for a period not to exceed ten years, and a request that the state move a small state office into 20,000 SF of the Frear Building.

John Buckley was not the only one writing heartfelt letters. Both New York State and the federal government were being beseeched for help from all directions. Troy was caught in the same economic mess that caused New York City to plead for help from the federal government. President Ford's reply to NYC was memorialized in a famous *Daily News* headline late in October, 1975.

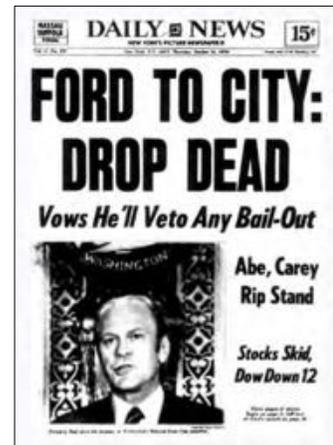


Fig. 14: NY Daily News Headline

In a much more civil exchange, Richard Ravitch, Chairman of the NYS Urban Development Corp. answered John Buckley's letter requesting help. He agreed to the items that were easily given, and sidestepped the more substantive requests. The State would continue to pay taxes provided UDC continued to own the land. He offered to lease the land to the USM Corp. for a "nominal sum." All in all, this moderately successful exchange of letters left open the door to further cooperation with UDC.

The need to compress the Mall to a more manageable size now prompted the TURA staff to embrace several concepts which were previously anathema to them. They proved themselves surprisingly adaptable to the task.

As mentioned earlier, in April, 1974 Executive Director Yankowski actively opposed the listing on the National Register of several Phase II buildings which the TURA wanted to demolish. Just under a year and a half later, Yankowski proposed a plan to study additional rehabilitation-rather

than demolition-of the buildings “It’s a major change in the plans, no doubt about it,” said Yankowski.<sup>16</sup>

UDC, which had been hurt by Malcolm Wilson’s freeze in November, 1974, continued to decline. In December, 1975, the mighty New York State Urban Development Corporation, formed six years earlier as the most powerful urban development agency in the country, was placed on inactive status by Governor Hugh Carey. The agency that had guaranteed the Uncle Sam Mall, was, for the moment, out of business.<sup>17</sup>

### **Retrenching Troy’s Downtown Dream**

From April, 1974, when construction, which had begun a month earlier, began to grind to a halt, through the end of 1975, public opinion swung strongly against the Uncle Sam Mall. Problems that began as an irritating series of delays, escalated into the piece by piece collapse of the basic elements of the plan. The unified group of city leaders that had first announced the idea were beginning to disagree. The Uncle Sam Mall had become a political football. Moreover, the small but effective preservation community was gaining increasing support from disaffected citizens. People who had been displaced by the demolition, businesses that bordered on the giant empty space at the heart of the city, businesses that had been bought out and promised a spot in the new mall, and citizens who were disgusted with the state to which Troy had fallen, all became supporters of a complete reconsideration of the concept.

On January 1, 1976, Republicans took control of the City Council. They had won the November election by a margin of 4 seats to 3. The Democratic council they replaced had worked closely with City Manager John Buckley, and were generally supportive of the Uncle Sam Mall. The new council majority was headed by Republican William O’ Neil, also a staunch supporter of the City Manager, so it looked like things might proceed on an even keel. Barring the unexpected, it should have stayed that way at least through 1978.

The Uncle Sam Mall Corporation had become the official redeveloper of the North Block as of April, 1975. To close out that year, the USM Corp. presented their plan for development of the mall to the outgoing Troy City Council. In five minutes, the Council passed three motions

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<sup>16</sup>) Times Record, (Sept. 29, 1975) *‘Old’ Mall Concept Idea Gaining Wide Support*, by Dennis R. Nelson.

<sup>17</sup> UDC defaulted on \$130 million worth of obligations, and a two-year rescue effort was needed to get the agency back on its feet. **Goodbye Slum Razing; Hello Grand Hyatt**  
*NY Times*, July 15, 1979

unanimously. USM Corp. intended to build the retail space on the North Block, between Grand St. and Fulton. They hoped they would have an opportunity to work with UDC. Their plan was bounded by Fulton St., Fourth St., Grand St., and New Third St. It proposed to locate the parking garage between Broadway and Fulton on Fourth Street. The board members were hopeful of success, and, after that success, they wanted to move on to Phase II.

With a new Council majority, however, most of what was previously settled was now open to reconsideration. The Mall as originally conceived was now an unreachable goal. The plans needed to be downsized. It would be up to the Republicans to set a new course. In March, one decision was made; Francis E. Yankowski, who had been the director of the Urban Renewal Agency since 1971, was replaced by John J. Quinlan.

Would the USM Corp. be up to a challenge at which two professional developers had tried and failed? There was a daunting list of things that still needed to be decided, or were now undergoing reconsideration. Among them:

- The choice of a developer for the South Block was not yet final. It had come down to a contest between Lou Swyer and Carl Grimm. Each had his own ideas and his own supporters. The USM Corp. favored Lou Swyer, a very respected and well-established general contractor in New York's Capital Region. Swyer proposed a one-story building along Third Street from the Frear Building to Broadway. He would build parking along Fourth Street between Broadway and Fulton. His plan included construction of a new bank.

The very idea of a one-story solution was anathema to Carl Grimm. Grimm was the owner of a building supply company in Green Island. He was a good friend of John Buckley's and was active in many Troy civic activities. When asked to consider developing the mall, he stepped in. Like Grimm, City Manager John Buckley also objected to a one-story project. Carl Grimm was chosen to build the retail space on the South Block, an area bounded by Fulton on the north, Church St. Alley on the east, Broadway on the South, and Third Street on the west. It was several months later, in 1977 when the USM Corp. and Carl Grimm reached agreement on adding the entire east side of this block to the project.

While John Buckley and Carl Grimm are often criticized for the uninspiring appearance of the Uncle Sam Mall, they were right to insist on a two-story structure. The big brick box

that resulted was not warmly received, but at least it didn't look like a one-story strip mall uprooted from route 9W and transplanted to the center of Troy.

- A group of local businesspeople headed by Lynn Muller, Garden Way's Director of Community Relations, formed an *ad hoc* group called the Troy Development Council (TDC). The primary funder of this initiative was Garden Way Manufacturing, led by company founder and president Dean Leith. They hired Jack Dollard, a Connecticut architect to review the plans for the Mall. In November, Dollard went public with a report on how the city could "get it together." He said the Uncle Sam Mall plan was "all wrong for Troy," and that the city should "put together a whole new project" around the Frear Building, using existing resources. He called the mall idea "an unrealizable dream," which would have been "totally out of scale with the rest of the city". He suggested, "What is needed is for a group of people to sit down, with confidence in themselves, to make decent honest, rational decisions about what they would like Troy to be." The TDC sought to expand its membership into just such a group.

Those who objected to the TDC initiative were supporters of the plans that were previously in place and did not want the disruption and delay of reconsideration. The Democratic minority of the City Council attacked the TDC initiative for developing its ideas without public input.

- The Urban Design Committee of the RCCA continued to suggest changes to the plans including ideas for parking, and continued to advocate for storefronts on the street rather than a suburban style mall.
- Perhaps no other issue at this time was more contentious or generated more alternatives than the proposed parking on the North Block. Whether or not there would be a parking garage or surface parking was one issue. If there were to be a parking garage, its location was also a topic for debate.
  - In May, there was unanimous approval for a seven-story, 700 car, parking garage which would be owned by the US Mall Corp., and paid for with \$3.1 million in Industrial Authority Bonds.
  - By October, the *Times Record* reported that the question of whether to build the parking garage was wide open. Parking garage proponents were squared off against surface lot advocates. The location of the garage was also debated, with

proposals for it to be located on the waterfront or alternatively, right on Fulton Street.

- The *Times Record* on 10/28/76 published an article by Dennis Nelson titled, *Downtown Troy mall garage appears doomed (sic)*. At the time, the garage proposed would have been seven-stories tall. The Council rejected the motion as out of scale with the realities of the mall project.

On November 30, 1976, a year and a half after taking over the role of developer, the Uncle Sam Mall Corporation announced it would not be able to complete its objectives: “At this time, we must inform you that we can no longer continue our efforts to accomplish the North Block Development. We have not been successful in the time schedule we established, and we do not have the funds to continue our efforts.” The announcement went on to say, it “would not be able to continue with its plans for development of the Fulton, Grand, Third and Fourth Street areas.” (*Times Record* 11/30/76.)

The corporation reported discussions with Carl Grimm whereby they could work together to use the lease prospects the US Mall Corp. had developed to help recruit tenants for the South Block Atrium.

Yet again the program and the footprint of the original plan for the Uncle Sam Mall would be reduced. The concept of retail space at the north end of the cleared area was now off the table. More importantly, the USM Corp., the originator of the idea and, at all points, the most optimistic supporter of the project, was withdrawing from its effort to keep the project alive. The failure of the NYS UDC to meet its obligations was the lowest point in the saga of the Uncle Sam Mall. The withdrawal of the Uncle Sam Mall Corporation as developer, was the runner up.

With the withdrawal of the Uncle Sam Mall Corporation from the role of developer, and the NYS UDC on the verge of bankruptcy, it seemed like another prolonged period of inaction was at hand. Into this breach stepped John Buckley and Carl Grimm, two people with a history of getting things done. Before they could demonstrate their can-do talents, however, a whole new delivery of bad luck arrived on Troy’s doorstep.

## Chaos Ensues



**Fig. 15:** Job sign, 1977  
(courtesy of the Rensselaer County  
Historical Society)

The previous year had not gone smoothly for the Republican majority on the City Council. William O’Neil served as the Mayor, but in those days, “Mayor” was more of an honorary term<sup>18</sup>. The new Republican members of the council, Pat Casale, John Clinton, and Norma Fatone, (the first woman to be elected to Troy’s City Council), along with the new Democratic member, Steven Dworsky, had, on several issues, formed an *ad hoc* majority against the city manager. As the fortunes of the Uncle Sam Mall began to decline, it happened more frequently. In fact, it happened so often that Mayor O’Neil got fed up and, on February 17, 1977, he switched parties, from Republican to Democrat. Halfway through their terms, the Democrats had become the majority party. This was good news for Mr. Buckley.

The switch was accompanied by the wholesale dismissal of non-civil service employees, (often known as political appointees). Those dismissed, all Republicans, were replaced with Democrats.

Then in March, Fate, continuing to have fun at Troy’s expense, decided it was time for the Green Island Bridge to collapse. Even though no one was physically injured, it was yet another blow to Troy’s already-diminished self-esteem and to the economy of downtown Troy.

One month later, in April, just two months after he had switched parties, Mayor O’Neil died. The vagaries of the replacement process gave the Republicans the right to name his successor. They named Paul Done, and the council majority switched back to the Republican side. The Democratic appointees were removed and replaced with Republicans.

This was bad news for Mr. Buckley. Rumors that Buckley would be fired began to be heard around town. Carl Grimm, who had been selected as developer over Lou Swyer, publicly warned that firing John Buckley would threaten the continued construction of the US Mall. Matters went from bad to worse until, on August 5, John Buckley was fired, a move that did not go over well with

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<sup>18</sup> At the time the “Mayor” was not directly elected, but rather elected by the majority of the Council. In that sense, the Mayor was more like a City Council President; he had administrative authority over the City Council, and presided over ceremonial events. The City Manager, appointed by the City Council, was the administrative head of government.

most Trojans. He was replaced by Duncan Barrett, who made clear from the outset, his intention to serve only in an interim capacity.

At this point, the wave of chaos and confusion that threatened to overwhelm the City crested. Perhaps the city was at last too battle-weary to fight with each other any longer. Troy somehow managed to survive the unprecedented level of political instability. Buckley and Grimm had begun to make decisions which created momentum. The momentum continued. Carl Grimm did not bail on the project as he had threatened, and he established a good working relationship with City Manager Barrett. Construction on the retail building on the South Block, which had just gotten underway before the firing, continued. This one block would eventually become the entirety of the commercial space of the Uncle Sam Mall. The construction also included the parking garage built on the block to the north.

Duncan Barrett saw to it that the City of Troy filed a request for an Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) He also prepared and filed a revised Urban Renewal Plan with HUD. The revised plan ended any idea of continued demolition of buildings TURA still owned, and replaced it with the concept of disposition aimed at rehab. The revised plan cited the historic significance of the remaining buildings. The TURA owned much of downtown, which was mostly vacant buildings, and it had the funds in hand to demolish what it owned, so this change of plan was not a small matter. “Most people now agree that tearing down nearly half of downtown Troy for urban renewal was a mistake.”<sup>19</sup> People like Dean Leith and Lynn Mueller from Gardenway, and Richard (Hack) Mooradian, the same people who had brought in Jack Dollard, now successfully incorporated some of his broad suggestions into the revised plan.

In the minds of most voters, however, the credit for the Uncle Sam Mall construction finally getting underway belonged to John Buckley. 1977, was a council election year, and November was only a few months away. The Democrats made “Bring Back Buckley” their campaign slogan. They won in a landslide, and when they returned to office in January of 1978, they brought John Buckley back in with them.

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<sup>19</sup> Times Record 2/9/78. By Maria Bucciferro. *Denby-Peerless plan opposition grows.*

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1978 to 1979

## **The Uncle Sam Mall Opens for Business**

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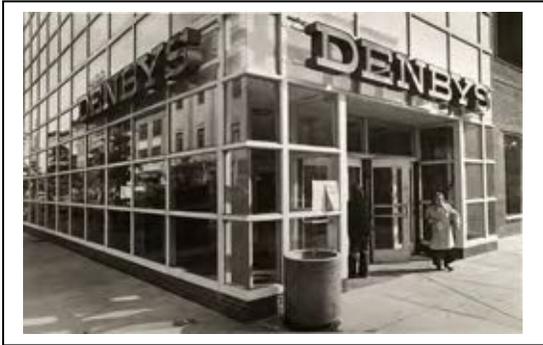
On January 1, 1978, the new City Council was sworn in, and the Democrats took back control of the Council. They won thanks to the “Bring Back Buckley” campaign, and they wasted no time in reinstalling him in office.

With the Democrats firmly in control of both the TURA and the City Council, and working smoothly with City Manager Buckley, things continued to move forward. They lost very little time in restructuring the budget of the TURA to reflect the things they wanted, but given that things had not been disrupted too severely during the Republicans brief time in power, they did not need to undo much of what had been done in the previous five months.

The bitter disputes over Peerless and Denby’s and the location and design of the parking garage were decisively settled by the magnitude of the Democrats’ win in the City Council elections. By February, 1978, it was clear the Peerless and Denby’s buildings were coming down. The Grand Street buildings were again in doubt, even though the north side had been added to the National Register of Historic Places. A pending grant submitted by the Troy Housing Authority (THA) for \$2 million further forestalled their removal. In the end, the grant was received, and the buildings were renovated and still function as one of THA’s best regarded projects. Neither was there any further effort to tear down the east side of River Street between Fulton and Congress Streets, first proposed in 1974.

A \$1.75 million grant request had been submitted to the Urban Development Action Grant program (UDAG) during the brief Barrett administration. UDAG was a federal program, administered by HUD, created by the Carter Administration, intended to inject funds into distressed urban areas in order to leverage private investment. The Troy application had at first been rejected. By the time the rejection was announced, Duncan Barrett was no longer City Manager. It remained for John Buckley and Carl Grimm to fight for the grant. They strenuously objected to the process of the review, the reviewer, and the decision to reject. They made a strong case that the completion of the mall hinged on the receipt of the UDAG. On July 11, 1978, the City of Troy received word that it had been awarded the \$1.75 million-dollar grant. The Troy UDAG was one of the first ever granted. It was used to construct what is known as the “Atrium”, or in its early days “the Public Space of the Mall.” The name was apt, because that one strip of land belonged to the City of Troy. It still does. It was built in part with funds intended for public

thoroughfares, and the current Mall owner leases it from the City. It is the large skylighted entry space with terraces and balconies that was, for twenty years, the winter home of the Troy Farmers' Market. Designed by the ELS Design Group, it is separate from the mall itself, the brick building to the south of the Atrium, which designed by the Troy firm of Harrison and Mero, who had worked previously with developer Carl Grimm.



**Fig. 16:** Corner 3<sup>rd</sup> and Broadway, 1979  
(courtesy of the Rensselaer County Historical Society)

In what we would call today “a soft opening,” the mall opened for business late in 1978. Only three stores opened: Denby’s, Record City, and Addie’s Hallmark Gift Shop. The Public Space, the portion of the mall funded with a \$1.7 million Urban Development Action Grant, was dedicated on March 22, 1979. The community was relieved and pleased at the opening of the Mall. The public area was spacious and impressive. The connection to the Frear Building was

especially welcome. The new brick and glass building surrounding the Atrium was not inspirational, but after a six-years delay, it looked considerably better than the hole in the ground.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was that the event was covered by the New York Times.

## **Troy Gets New Shopping Mall as It Tries to Halt Decline**

The New York Times

By HAROLD FABER MAY 6, 1979

TROY, N.Y. -Ten years after it was first proposed, the Uncle Sam Atrium, a red-brick and glass shopping mall with a large, skylighted, terraced interior, has just opened in the heart of downtown Troy, filling a city-block-size hole that had been there for years.

Only three stores are open, out of about 35 planned for the mall, but city officials and merchants are already saying that downtown Troy is coming back. They cite more people in nearby streets and rising sales tax receipts from stores in and around the mall.

John P. Buckley, the City Manager, says, “It's turned the town around.”

But there are skeptics in this city of 61,000, a few miles north of Albany on the Hudson River, who doubt that one shopping mall can transform a slowly declining industrial city without a major effort to provide inexpensive housing for young people and to diversify its economy.

“It's going to take a great deal more than the development of downtown to turn Troy around,” said Dr. Paul B. Zuber, director of the Center for Urban-Environmental Studies at Troy's prestigious Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

The article then had several paragraphs describing Troy, its history, and its major assets. Among those prominently mentioned: Troy Rototillers, Freihofer's Chocolate Chip Cookies, and Arrow Shirts. Unfortunately, none of those products are still manufactured in Troy.

The article also contained the following information on finances and local reaction:

The Atrium was built at a cost of \$7.4 million, of which \$1.7 million was a grant from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Mr. Grimm built the stores in it with the help of city tax exemptions. In addition the city put up a 530-car connecting garage for \$2.5 million, financed by a \$1 million Federal grant and a \$1.5 million bond issue.

Standing in front of the Atrium the other day, Mr. Buckley, the City Manager, pointed to the north, where two bridges are under construction, as evidence that the city is growing. At the Chamber of Commerce office, Andrew Petruska, its president and the proprietor of Andy's Sporting Goods, cited the impending move of the Barclay Home Products Company into the city with 177 new jobs as another sign of revival.

### **Converting Brownstones**

There are other indications as well. Sandy Gull, a young single woman working at R.P.I., is busy converting a huge old brownstone into apartments at Washington Park, just south of the business district. Other young people are doing the same, she said.

“The Atrium is certainly the cornerstone of the revitalization of downtown,” said Steven Dworsky, the part-time Mayor. “Now we have to go on to develop residential areas and to add to our tax base by bringing in new light commercial industry.”

But Garland Yates, president of Troy's Neighborhood Action Council, which picketed the 'dedication of the Atrium, is dubious about the city's approach.

“They say it's a balanced approach, but it's really not,” he said. “They are squandering millions in the business district, but they have little or no money to develop our neighborhoods. We're not against the Atrium. We're glad it's finished. What we are against is the heavy concentration on the business district.”

Some professors at R.P.I. are also critical of the city's emphasis on downtown renewal. They see a better chance to revive Troy in capitalizing on its past and in its R.P.I. connections.

It took ten years to get from the announcement of the original plan to the opening of the Uncle Sam Mall and Parking Garage. For six of those years the two parcels that became the Mall and the

Parking Garage, the heart of downtown, were nothing more than a vast expanse of depressing vacant lots. This indignity was imposed on a city that had lived through calamitous demolition on a massive scale beginning with slum removal, then highway corridor demolitions, since the early 1950's. Between 1950 and 1980, according to the US Census, Troy's population dropped 22%. Taken together, the carnage of the Era of Urban Self Hatred was more far reaching than even Troy's Great Fire of 1862

It is remarkable that Urban Renewal in the 1960s and '70s repeated the Great Fire of a century earlier by again destroying nearly the same area as the burnt district. But whereas the burnt district was quickly and elegantly rebuilt into a multifaceted Victorian jewel, much of the Urban Renewal area still remains, some 40 years later, as parking lots and weedy vacant land. <sup>20</sup>.

## **Final Thoughts**

After the completion of the Uncle Sam Mall and the parking garage, there was not a shred of interest in discussing additional phases of the mall; not on the part of the mall backers, not on the part of the city, state or federal governments, and certainly not among the citizens of Troy. Collective amnesia set in. The revised urban renewal plan, filed in late 1977, completely changed the scope of the project. It was not challenged. Most people quickly and completely forgot that more phases had been planned. If there were any who held secret hopes of additional phases, they have been wise enough to keep it to themselves.

Looking back on the events described above, the Troy proponents of the mall appear to have been more misled than mistaken. The many heartbreaking setbacks which the proponents endured turned out to have been blessings in disguise; they minimized the damage that was done. The State of New York and the federal government led Troy and many other cities down the garden path. They dangled a feast before the eyes of starving cities. In hindsight, what they offered was not nutritious. It wasn't even edible.

Other cities got all they were promised and, as a result, ended up in worse shape than downtown Troy. The suburban mall was a failure in nearly every downtown in which one was constructed. Today, e Commerce is doing to suburban malls what suburban malls did to urban America in the 1960s and 1970s.

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<sup>20</sup> *Great Fire, Troy, New York*, 2012. Porter, Charles O., Skerritt, William H., LeRoy, Craig A. Published by William H. Skerritt, Troy, NY. Prologue, page 3.

Since those days, Troy has taken the mistakes of the original Uncle Sam Mall to heart. In the forty-two years since the Mall opened, Troy, at least as far as downtown is concerned, has come to value the remarkable architectural heritage of its commercial buildings. It no longer scoffs at visitors who are amazed at the quality of the buildings, and the walkability of the downtown. More and more, Troy is a city which is proud of itself.

The unavoidable question is this: If the Mall was such a mistake, what should have been done instead? Ed Logue and the UDC pushed Troy to scale back on demolitions and consider greater emphasis on rehabilitation. Troy should have been pushing them even further to use their money to enhance what it had, rather than to destroy it. The planning for a project of this size should have been much better grounded by public input and thorough research. After the failure of the original plan, the preservation community, the existing businesses, and the Troy Development Corporation should have been invited to the table. Instead, this was the moment at which finger-pointing and partisan bickering were at their worst. <sup>21</sup>

Would that have reversed the decline of the 1960s and 70s? Certainly not reversed it, but I believe it would have mitigated the impacts of that era rather than amplifying them.

And what of the future of the Uncle Sam Mall? The Mall has managed to survive to this day as viable piece of commercial real estate.

The future success of the Uncle Sam Mall is not certain. The Bryce proposal, mentioned in the Afterward section that follows, is in some doubt at the time of this writing, but I believe it is headed in the right direction, and it augurs well for the future. This is primarily due to the increasing health of the blocks that surround the Mall.

Ironically, it was not the Uncle Sam Mall that saved downtown Troy, but the success of downtown Troy that saved the Mall.

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<sup>21</sup> For an excellent example of how to get lots of money and spend it correctly I heartily recommend [Transforming Providence](#), Rebirth of a Post-Industrial City, by Gene Bunnell. Production and printing by Troy Bookmakers (That's right, our Troy Bookmakers).

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Afterward: 1979 to 2021

## **A Brief Outline of the Forty-Two Years Following**

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### **1979 – 1985: Carl Grimm Years**

The economic problems of the country continued on and off until the early 1980's. There were some interesting stores among the initial renters, but their expectations were not met, and most of the trendier stores left quickly. While not a rousing success, neither was it a dismal failure. People shopped there. The problem was that too few spent lots of money.

### **1985 - 1987: Troy Mall Associates**

The Troy Mall Associates, a subsidiary of McFarland Real Estate, purchased the Atrium mid-year, 1985. Among the principals included in the new ownership was NYS Sen. Howard C. Nolan, an integral part of Albany's Democratic machine. Troy Mall Associates had extensive background in owning and operating several local malls. They put money into the Frear Building.

Lepera & Ward, a Troy architectural firm, was hired to restore the Frear Building façade and convert the upper floors into offices for a steadily changing array of New York State Health Department agencies. This returned one of the most dramatic spaces in Troy to productive use and public view.

### **1987 - 1999: Northeast Properties**

There was some concern when the Uncle Sam Mall was sold to Northeast Properties, a large owner of commercial real estate based in Boston. Northeast Properties did not have deep Capital District roots. Nonetheless, they kept investing steadily in upgrades and conversions. Vince Lepera of Lepera & Ward remembers them as "good partners".

A 9,000 square foot OTB tele theater opened in March, 1987. In August the first two of a planned six movie theatres opened in the mall. Attendance started small and declined. No additional screens were added. By 1993 the original two theaters were closed.

### **1994 to 1999 State Agencies Replace Retail Stores**

In 1994, NYS Senator Joseph Bruno became majority leader of the Senate, a position he held until 2008. During his tenure, New York's entire Capital Region was the beneficiary of increased opportunities from the state government.

Helped by Senator Bruno, the Uncle Sam Atrium benefitted from an influx of state workers. The space formerly occupied by Denby's and then the Carl Company was available, and was converted to office space. New York State continually rented the space until 2020.

### **1999 to the Present - David Bryce, the Current Owner**

In July, 1999 David Bryce bought the Uncle Sam Atrium and the Frear Building, from Northeast Properties for \$2.25 million. At the time of the purchase he already owned several properties in downtown, most in close proximity to the mall.

David is an architect born and raised in Troy, and an RPI graduate. He invested in improvements and recruited interesting tenants.

In 2002, the Atrium space began to serve as a winter home for the very well-regarded Troy Farmers' Market. This benefitted local farms, Capital District consumers, and the well-being and reputation of downtown Troy. The partnership worked well enough that the Atrium also became an active part of the summer market.

In 2020, which will always be known as the year of Covid 19, all retail "brick and mortar" stores suffered major losses. Even before stores began to struggle, owner David Bryce envisioned an ambitious plan to renovate not only the mall, but the entire area demolished in 1973. By the end of 2020, Bryce had virtually emptied the mall building in preparation for the renovation. This included the NYS Department of Labor, which moved to the County Office Building; and the Troy Farmers' Market, which found a winter home at the empty Price Chopper Supermarket at the north end of the City of Troy.

In June of 2021, the plans for renovation of the Mall and the broader plans for reshaping the blocks between Fulton and Federal Streets were presented to the Troy Planning Commission for review. They describe a project that would realign streets, demolish some of what was built in 1978, and retain much of what was constructed subsequently in the areas north of the parking garage.



# Key Map

to locations referenced in the text,  
superimposed on 2019 Google map of downtown Troy

1. Union Train Station - demolished.
2. The Line, Mayne Fay's House. - demolished.
3. Grand Street. - national register, saved, 1973.
4. The 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Association Brownstones.  
between Fulton and Grand Streets - national register, saved, 1970.
5. Garley Building. - national register. - saved, 1970.
6. St. John's Lutheran, proposed demolition - saved.
7. 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Brownstones.  
between Broadway and Fulton Street - demolished.
8. Buildings demolished to realign Federal Street.
9. Hiss Building. - national register, saved, 1970.
10. Troy Post Office - saved.
11. Proctor's Theater - saved.
12. The Frear Building - saved.
13. Peerless and Derby's - demolished.
14. River St. - between Fulton and State Streets  
national register, saved.
  - a. National State Bank Building - national register, saved, 1970.
  - b. McCarthy Building - national register, saved, 1970.
15. Troy City Hall site - built, 1974; demolished, 2011.
16. The Carson Building - national register, saved, 1970.
17. River St. - between State and Congress Streets - national register, saved.
18. Harmony Hall - Central Troy Historic District, saved
19. The Uncle Sam Parking Garage - constructed, 1978.
20. The Uncle Sam Mall & Atrium - constructed, 1978.