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REAL ESTATE

'Branch one' Pioneer building in Troy has gas-powered past

Built by Troy Gas Company, the four-story Neoclassical building at 21 2nd St. in Troy has evolved from an elegant appliance showroom into a historic banking branch.

By **Shannon Fromma**
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The Troy Pioneer Bank building on Second Street was designed by local architect Louis N. Milliman. Will Waldron/Times Union

Shopping for a new gas stove in Troy in the early 1900s was sort of like browsing for diamond brooch at a swanky jewelry store.

Many gas appliance showrooms of the early 20th century, like the one commissioned to be built in 1914 by the Troy Gas Company, were sophisticated studios where customers could peruse the latest gas-fired residential appliances in an elegant atmosphere.

A neoclassical structure cast with various shades of Vermont marble and gold patina, the Troy Gas Company's headquarters, lobby and showroom at 21 2nd St. was so fancy and refined that the Pioneer Building-Loan and Savings Association — the forerunner of today's Pioneer — purchased the building in 1950, finding it perfectly-suited for an elevated consumer banking experience.

The building was designed by local architect Louis N. Milliman to feature an equally stunning exterior. The first story had granite elements, Diana S. Waite noted in her book "Architecture of Downtown Troy," but the upper floors were faced with an artificial granite. The cast stone closely resembled light pink granite and was entirely hand-finished. The cast stone, notes Waite, was supplied by the Emerson-Norris Co. of New York City, a nationally recognized company led by its president and treasurer (and Troy native) James G. Benedict.

"It has an amazing facade," says Rensselaer County historian Kathy Sheehan. "It made it a very impressive structure."

Located on the same block as the Troy Savings Bank Music hall, around the corner from Monument Square, the building was erected in a predominantly residential neighborhood. In fact, a home owned by John Dean Nickenson, a congressman who represented Rensselaer County in the U.S. House of Representatives and received Marquis de Lafayette during a visit to the city, was razed to make room for the gas company's new facility.

"It was the premier residential neighborhood in the city," says Sheehan, noting that there were already two 19th-century commercial structures on the same block — the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall and the Young Women's Christian Association building. "What is interesting is that you can have commercial and residential buildings that can marry in with each other and still make the block look beautiful."

In 1926, the Troy Gas Company merged with the Mohawk Hudson Power Corporation, which in turn joined with the Niagara-Hudson Power Corporation in 1929. The larger company adopted the name Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation in 1950, the same year they sold the structure on 2nd Street to Pioneer.

Prior to moving into its appliance showroom-turned-banking headquarters, Pioneer, which was incorporated in 1889 after a group of printers employed by the Troy Daily Press established a building loan and savings association to encourage the practice of saving, owned a building at 30 2nd St. it purchased from RPI for \$11,000.

"The old building was originally a home that they converted to, at the time, commercial use," says Schuyler Bull, director of marketing & communications at Pioneer.

As the savings and loans firm expanded, they needed a larger space, so they relocated down the block in 1915, says Bull. In 2016, Pioneer moved its headquarters to its new building on Albany Shaker Road in Colonie. A local developer, Craig Pollock, purchased the building that same year but the first floor continues to operate as Pioneer's Troy branch, one of 22 locations throughout the greater Capital Region.

"When I first came here I was like, 'Whoa, this is something out of Hogwarts'," laughs Melissa Hidalgo, who has worked as the relationship banker in the building for three years. "It's so beautiful. You don't see buildings like this anymore."

Pioneer has preserved most of the building's original features, including the coffered ceilings, arched windows and marble columns. The gold patina paint is still plastered on the building's intricate moldings. Hidalgo jokes that clients often question whether it's real gold.

A lengthy run of teller windows, popular decades ago, has been replaced with a single counter for clients who are greeted by a quirky metal statue of Troy's Uncle Sam cloaked in a money-trimmed suit coat at the entrance. Walls are adorned with historic photographs of the city, including vintage shots of the building that was recently transformed into Lady Nara's Bridal Shop and featured on HBO's period drama, "The Gilded Age."

A part of the city's Second Street Historic District, a National Historic District, building owners are bound to adhere to rules guiding development and design. There is only one entrance and no ATM at the branch to maintain a distinct sense of place.

Branch one, as it's referred to by the company, still carries a bit of a rock star reputation, says branch manager Jill Walsh. Members and clients of the banking and financial services firm will routinely pop in to see the original Pioneer in person.

"In their minds, this was the main branch," says Walsh. "We'll have clients from other branches coming here because of the history of it."

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By **Shannon Fromma**



Shannon Fromma is a life-long Capital Region resident currently residing in Wilton with her husband and two rapidly-growing children. She received her degree in Communications and Journalism from the University at Albany in 1999. Before she had a chance to mount her diploma, she accepted a part-time gig writing obituaries for the Times Union. Her role has transformed over the years. Fromma currently pens Shoppoortunist, a frugal-living column and award-winning blog. As Coordinator for Engagement she also helps conceive and host live journalism programs at the Hearst Media Center. Contact her at sfromma@timesunion.com or 518-454-5340.

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