

The National Yeast Company Building

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on behalf of the Seneca Falls Historical Society

Seneca Falls boasts that just about every product imaginable had once been manufactured here. Foundries, factories, mills, plants, and shops made all manner of things, from pumps to tissue paper; clocks to socks; lathes to fire engines; toys to bronze architectural letters; globes of the world to furniture; flour to rulers, and more.

When Wilhelmus Mynderse built the first grist mill here in 1795 he began an industry that soon boomed. In 1835 alone the seven local flouring mills produced 85,000 barrels of flour. A great deal of that flour was used to bake bread, the bread that fed the nation's rich, poor and everyone in between. All that bread baking created another need essential to the process: yeast.

In July 1870, Henry Seymour, one of Seneca Falls' early industrialists and a signer of the Declaration of Sentiments, organized a new company named The National Yeast Company. Seneca Falls had a new product. The company began producing yeast cakes in a wooden building behind Daniel's Hall on Fall Street, what is now the King Block currently occupied by the Home Necessities furniture store.

The business quickly out-grew its modest wood-frame works. Construction of a new, bigger, brick building commenced further west at what was then 233 Fall Street, and the business relocated there in January 1871. The new building, with a simple floor plan of three large rooms, was sixty-five by thirty-two feet and five stories high, greatly increasing the company's capacity for production. According to the 1876 Seneca County History, after the move, "fifty tons of meal were used in a month, and five thousand boxes, containing over one hundred and fifty thousand packages of a dozen cakes each, were filled during the same time." That's over one million, eight hundred thousand cakes of yeast in just a one-month period. And yet, business rapidly continued to grow, necessitating expansion of the still-new factory. Late that fall, an extension was added on the Fall Street frontage. The five-story extension measured fifty-eight by thirty-six feet and included a mansard roof and tower.

The 1876 History includes a description of a tour of the factory. It begins as...

“...one enters the engine-/boiler-room, where is the hop-vat and the mash-tub. Thence into the rolling-room, whence the yeast is brought after a sojourn in the fermenting tubs. Here lying in troughs, it is thoroughly mixed with the meal to the proper consistency. It is then placed upon metal rolling-tables and thoroughly rolled to the desired thickness under the pressure of eighty-five pound metal rollers. Skill and strength are requisite in the employees of this room. When properly rolled, the sheet is cut in squares, and elevated by car-loads to the drying-rooms above. Thence downward to the packing-room, wrapped, packed, and ready for shipping. With increased facilities have come greater manufacture and an ever-ready demand for a staple article.”

The National Yeast Company was so successful, so well known, producing a product familiar to practically every household, that the company began publishing a promotional cookbook. The cookbook provided useful recipes, especially those requiring yeast, and household tips. The front cover boasted of the company’s daily production of twelve tons, with distribution depots in New York, Boston, Troy, Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis!

While the National Yeast Company helped formulate and improve the use of dry hop yeast, new easier-to-handle methods of manufacturing, packaging and using yeast eventually became popular and the Seneca Falls company did not keep up with the times. By 1902 the company had vacated the Fall Street building after a prosperous thirty-year occupation.

Soon, adaptation of the building to a new use began. The property became the home of the Iroquois Motor Car Company, manufacturers of a luxury automobile. The company occupied the 90,000 square foot building, which it purchased for \$75,000, by 1904.

The company’s philosophy for building the Iroquois Motor Car was that each car must be a gem of durability. They believed a car represented a significant investment, and therefore should last twenty years or more before needing replacement. Built using the slow, careful handcrafted techniques of carriage makers instead of a “modern” high-production assembly line, the Iroquois Motor Car was considered “the Rolls Royce” among cars of its day.

In 1905, the first car, a roomy five-passenger vehicle featuring a 35 horsepower four-cylinder gasoline engine capable of achieving 50 mph, rolled out of the factory. In 1906 the company sent two cars to New York City for an exhibition. The next year, a newly completed car was sent to California. By 1907, the company offered three models (C, D, & E). The seven-passenger touring car D model featured what was referred to as “a King of Belgium” type body, a divided front seat (bucket seats), and side entrance, upholstered with fine hand-buffed leather in a diamond point pattern. A 1905 description of the model D stated:

“The body was all wood and was finished in olive green with black moldings and wine colored frame and running gear. The equipment on the car came standard and consisted of two oil side lamps, two gas headlights, an oil tail lamp, French horn with long tube, automobile clock on the dashboard, water gauge and full set of tools.”

Optional features included a canopy, or folding top, and a windshield. The C model could be ordered configured as a roadster or a touring car. The least expensive Iroquois was priced at \$2,500, and the most expensive model was priced at \$3,000. Consider that the average working man of the day grossed \$500 annually, and the average cost of a house of the time was \$600 to \$1,000. Owning an Iroquois was a luxury.

However, in six years only thirteen cars were built. It was, at least in part, those high prices and the slow production time that caused the company to fail by 1910. They simply weren’t producing cars at a fast enough pace to establish a sufficient market demand, nor at an affordable price for the general market. After the company’s rather short stay on Fall Street, it reorganized and relocated to Syracuse as an auto repair concern.

According to Seneca County records, later in 1910 the Fall Street property, with 197.5’ street frontage and 170’ rear space, and including an elevator, operating apparatus, pulleys and shaftings powered by a gasoline engine, was transferred to the Seneca Falls Folding Box Company, manufacturers of folding paper-board boxes and cartons.

The 1911 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map indicates that the factory was still laid out in three rooms, just as the yeast and automobile factories had been. The rooms were used respectively for glue, printing, and stock, and were connected to a rear brick structure.

There was also a detached, L-shaped brick structure to the rear that was used for sign painting.

In 1914 the company President was William Breese; B. H. Delevan served as Vice-President and Secretary; and Norman Becker was Treasurer, and the company did well. By 1921, however, additional companies shared space at this address with the Folding Box Company. According to the 1921-22 Seneca Falls Directory they were: Seneca Fibre Products Company; Seneca Knitting Company; and the Wagner Rug Works.

The building again changed hands in 1928 when Fred L. Huntington purchased the property and converted it into the auto-garage and dealership he relocated from the corner of Fall and Mynderse Streets. Over the years Huntington's dealership evolved into a staple in the Seneca Falls business community. After Huntington's closed, Peter Koch assumed the mantle, opening a dealership in the first floor of the building in 1982. He subsequently purchased the property in 1983 for his dealership, a use the building employed until just recently as Finger Lakes Chrysler-Dodge-Jeep.

The most obvious change in the building's physical evolution since its construction has been the removal of the building's Second Empire-style mansard roof. By 1955 the structure was again enlarged. Another brick addition was attached to the rear of the main building, part of the vacant L-shaped structure was removed, and a large cinder-block structure was attached to the remaining portion. Between this new cinder-block and the initial rectangular structure facing Fall Street, a brick infill structure was constructed. A wooden staircase was added to the west façade and a small frame structure was added to the east façade.

But the building still retains notable details of its original design, such as a brick curbed table at the cornice. Many of the first-story windows have been replaced with storefront style showroom windows. But, the original pattern of elongated windows capped with brick hood moldings, spaced singly or in pairs between projective vertical brick strip pilasters, is still evident in the upper two stories. Some of these windows retain their multi-paned configuration. The old sign painting shop was converted to Zona's Dry Cleaning Shop (now gone) and is no longer readily evident.

All in all, this large brick structure remains the dominant building in the small stretch of commercial development that proceeds east from Powell Place. In spite of its industrial

history and recent commercial use it still lends a sense of historic integrity to the various styles of 19th century residential structures it faces across Fall Street.

The National Yeast Company building serves as a physical reminder of the diversity of Seneca Falls' industrial past, and a good example of architectural adaptive re-use, demonstrating our long history of recognizing the value in what is old by giving it new purpose.