

## Mausert Block had many ups and downs

By Phil Demers, North Adams Transcript North Adams Transcript

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Editor's note: In this final article in a three-part series on the history of the Mausert Block in Adams, the Transcript examines the past three decades of the building's story, concluding with the promise the current development taking place at the building holds for its future on the town's main thoroughfare.

ADAMS -- The supports holding up the Mausert Block's roof had sunk 18 inches by the time Thomas Hawke and Bruce Patenaude bought the structure in 1980, constituting the first of two immediate crises the new owners would face.

A mere two months after the purchase, Building Inspector James Leitch condemned the apartments on the upper two floors, fearing "a collapse" possible. "The resultant pressure is starting to pop bricks from the upper parts of the exterior," reported the Transcript.

"On Christmas Eve we were running around asking [the tenants] to go someplace else," Hawke reflected Friday.

Woolworth's, auto parts shop Schwartz Store and the other downstairs businesses remained open.

The owners undertook repairs and began refilling finished apartments. But before this work was completed, a fire severely damaged the Mausert Block for the second time in its history.

"It was like one bang right after the next," Hawke said.

A two-story woodframe building next door, a homemade candy shop called Sweet Shoppe, went up in flames in April of 1982.

The candy shop was completely destroyed while in the block, "smoke and water damage affected most apartments" and "much of the attic was burned, and two apartments on one floor were destroyed, as was one

on another floor," according to the Transcript. It had "sent [Hawke and Patenaude] nearly back to the beginning."

"[The fire department] filled the place with so much water it was rolling down the stairwells," Hawke said.

All of the building's businesses closed for a period. Woolworth's kept its doors shut longer than the rest, fueling speculation.

A Transcript article of May 7, 1982, notes that "corporate executives have been inspecting damage to the store" and "are weighing a decision whether to reopen."

A day later, Stanley O'Connor, Woolworth's spirited store manager for over 30 years, had his triumphant reply for the papers: The store would reopen.

"I always said we should never leave Adams," he said in the Transcript on May 8. "If [we don't open] Monday then it will be shortly thereafter."

Eight months later -- or, as long as it took the Mauserts to build the place in 1900-01 -- the renovation of 18 upper-floor apartments was complete.

One casualty of the fire, though, was the single fourth-floor apartment, formerly inhabited by 40-year building custodians Frank and Nellie Pytko, which remains closed to this day.

From that point, Hawke -- who'd eventually buy out Patenaude and become the building's sole owner -- said it was a matter of "hanging on" and "keeping things on an even keel."

Businesses came and went for years. In January 1993, against the wishes of Mr. O'Connor, the most notable one went.

Woolworth's closed -- it was the last remaining branch in Berkshire County -- and the shelves were bare within 24 hours, the Transcript reported.

"Generations have grown up in that store," nearby storeowner John Socha said at the time. "... Everything's going to revolve around malls now. I doubt if there are going to be any more real downtowns."

In a show of respect, Woolworth's racks and displays could be found in other Park Street businesses for months and even years to come.

Hawke had the Woolworth's space renovated to house commercial spaces and storage units. Also during Hawke's 27-year ownership, the building's heating system was upgraded from coal, to pellet to gas.

It came to an end in 2007. Hawke sold the building to a Boston architect named Chiong Lin who "[fell] in love" with the building and offered to buy it for \$600,000 before ever setting foot inside.

The deal went through, but not to the benefit of the structure, time proved.

Town Code Enforcement Officer Scott Koczela condemned the building in 2009 due to lack of a safe fire escape. The nationwide economic turmoil of the time had taken its toll locally: Capital investments outside major markets was virtually nonexistent. Lin fell behind on taxes and declared bankruptcy.

The story of an aged icon now reaches its present ownership.

Braytonville Properties LLC, a real estate holding company based in North Adams, bought the building in 2011 for \$60,000. They handed it over to project managers REDPM for a renovation, and the work has seen progress.

Perhaps by fall, new businesses are expected -- a dance studio, a pizza restaurant and an Asian-fusion eatery. The latter will feature a rear section with outdoor seating, catering to the nearby Ashuwillticook Rail Trail's traffic.

"In the past, everything was always Park Street, Park Street, Park Street," Stephen Stenson of REDPM, said. "Now we've opened it up to the rail trail as well."

The renovations of 11 upstairs apartments are reportedly in the works.

As has been demonstrated throughout the building's history, what happens next is subject to time, chance and vision.

To reach Phil Demers, email  
[pdemers@thetranscript.com](mailto:pdemers@thetranscript.com).