

## Adams' Mausert Block Developer Presents Building History

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ADAMS, Mass. — Developer REDPM is renovating a downtown structure that has stood on Park Street for more than 100 year. In getting to know the building's construction, the company also got to know its history.

In fact, Stephen Stenson of REDPM gave the Historical Commission a lesson Wednesday about the former Woolworth's building.

"The Mausert Block has an interesting history," Stenson said. "It was originally building by two gentlemen — George Mausert and Conrad Mausert."



**Stephen Stenson said REDPM likes to research the history of the buildings it develops so designers know where to look for problems.**

The three-story commercial building was constructed in just eight months in 1900 after the Mauserts purchased the land from John Berker for \$25,000.

The Mauserts, who owned an ice cream parlor in North Adams, worked with architect John Fleming and, within a month, the plans were laid.

"On August 30, 1900, they started construction on the foundation of the Mausert Block that you see right now," Stenson said.

Two buildings with timber frames and no basements on the property at the time were moved to Spring Street.

"They literally moved a two-story building across the tracks to Spring Street," said Stenson, who added that the big news wasn't that the buildings were being moved but that Mausert had to travel to Boston to get permission from the railroad company to cross the tracks.

On Sept. 22, 1900, Berker and the Mauserts had an altercation and in the early hours of the next morning, Berker was found in the basement of the building destroying the

foundation. Police didn't arrest Berker but rather just sent him home with a recommendation to see a doctor.

Construction went on and by March 1901, the Mausert Block was mostly filled with five businesses, offices and a top-floor dance hall for a secret society. The tenants on the bottom floor were a jeweler, a milliner, George Appel Dry Goods, a grocery store and one storefront to be rented. The second floor was offices.

"The Mausert built a theater for a secret society. It was the grand lodge for the Odd Fellows secret society," Stenson said. "You had a large hall, open expanse, 250 people on the third floor with one fire escape, all smoking, all drinking, dancing and all sorts of things going on in a building with no sprinklers, one fire exit. So in the history of Adams, buildings, to some extent, went on fire with regularity."

And in 1903, that is exactly what happened to the Mausert Block when a gas pipe burst. The fire caused about \$12,000 worth of damage and since the entire building costing only about \$40,000 to construct, the damage was considered extensive.



**The tiny windows under the eaves mark the old caretaker's apartment.**

changes to the building. Stenson said most of what he found in his research were recaps of holiday and farewell parties. One name that continued to come up was Frank Pytko, who was the custodian.

As viewed from the street, the Mausert Block has two windows that seem out of place at the very top. That's where Pytko and his wife lived in the "trusses" of the building, Stenson said.

In 1906, Clarence Gallup of North Adams bought and renovated the fire-damaged building to reopen it. F.W. Woolworth opened a five-and-dime store there in 1925, so far the most noted business to occupy the structure and the longest, at about 60 years.

In 1914, the law officers of Donovan and O'Connor moved in and, in 1926, Walter Donovan purchased the building.

Donovan owned the building the longest, selling it in 1975. During Donovan's ownership, the only major change to the building was in 1939 when he renovated the former Odd Fellow's hall, which at some point had become home to the Knights of Columbus, and turned it into apartments.

"These were highly modernized. They were the best of the day. They had electricity, refrigerators and even gas stoves. They were advertised as such, high end and the best," Stenson said. "When we went into the building last year, those apartments were basically the same."

For decades, there were very little changes to the building. Stenson said most of what he found in his research were recaps of holiday and farewell parties. One name that continued to come up was Frank Pytko, who was the custodian.

"We thought about having a penthouse apartment but it wasn't happening," he said.

The block avoided urban renewal in the 1970s, when towns throughout the country were tearing down old buildings. Instead, Adams preserved its large blocks of buildings for the most part and built parks instead.

Donovan sold the building to Thomas Hawke in 1975. In the 1980s, the building was condemned because the roof had sunk 18 inches. Hawk owned it until 2007, when it was sold to architect Chiong Lin. In 2011, Braytonville Properties **purchased it after it was again condemned** and hired REDPM, its property management arm, to rejuvenate the property.

REDPM mostly recently received special permits to operate three businesses in the building. In the summer of 2014, Stenson says 11 apartments — a reduction from 18 — will go on the market but a pizza place, hibachi grill and dance studio will be opening this year.

"There is such a strong structure in that building," Stenson said of his experience with the renovation work.

His research led the company to have contractors double-check areas, like the ceiling, where there were problems before. He's hoping the history could be displayed inside the building and he's trying to track down old photos.

"Really what creates a building is the people and stories of people," Stenson said.

*Editor's note: We found an old postcard that appeared to show the Mausert Block but we've been told it's another building that used to be where the Big Y parking lot is now. We've removed the image to prevent confusion (mostly ours).*