

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Legacy of the Tannenbaums *From the Ragman to Erie's Skyscrapers to PACA Building*

By David Frew
September 2021

Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.

After the “On the Waterfront” column featured “the Ragman” essay a few months ago, Mark Tannenbaum sent a note explaining that he was the Ragman’s grandson. Mark asked to meet me so that he could fill in some details about his grandfather and provide a tour of Erie’s PACA (Performing Artists Collective Alliance) Building at 15th and State streets, his personal development project. His grandfather, Israel Tannenbaum (Erie’s Ragman), left Europe after having been conscripted into the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. The elder Tannenbaum came to this country by himself, lived on East 17th Street and became an active member of the Erie’s eastside Jewish Community, predecessor of the B’rith Sholom congregation that shares the Jefferson Educational Society building at 32nd and State streets. He worked hard and sent for his wife and two children, who joined him here. He then had eight more surviving children in Erie. Israel’s youngest son, Sam, who was Mark’s father, ran a second-hand shop as well as a scrap business in Erie and was probably most responsible for infecting his son with an entrepreneurial spirit. It was Sam Tannenbaum who gifted Erie with the preserved bow of the Wolverine.



Mark Tannenbaum stands in front of his PACA Building.



The PACA Building represents the leading edge of today's Upper State Street development area.

Mark Tannenbaum exudes excitement as he shares his vision of what Erie's PACA Building is becoming. As he led a building tour, he was pleased to present the new art gallery that is taking shape on the north side as well as the theater that has been in operation for several years on the second floor and large upper spaces that are going to become apartments. There are other exciting venues, including a roof-top recreation area, as well as other current building tenants. It is obvious that he has inherited the entrepreneurial instincts of his father and grandfather.

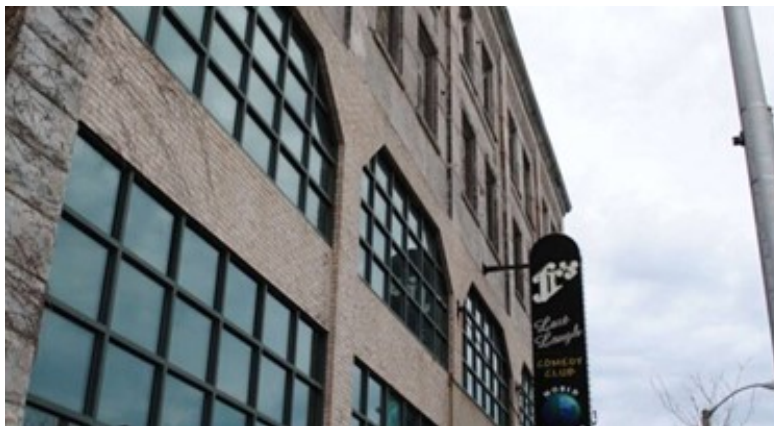
More than his own vision for the PACA Building, however, Tannenbaum seems excited about the history of the local builder who is responsible for his place, Henry Mayer. It was Mayer who built the PACA Building in 1899. His family had been engineers and builders in Erie, providing sheet metal as well as design and construction services since the 1800s. Mayer volunteered for the Civil War, fought bravely, was wounded, and returned to Erie in the 1860s to work in his father's metal fabricating business. Eventually, he went into the construction business, beginning with the creation of Erie's first asphalt paving company in 1893. Street paving was revolutionary at the time and resulted in smoothing out the local roughhewn brick and stone roadways that "paved" the way for modern automobile traffic. Mayer was the first local street paver, which gave him a strategic advantage over out-of-town vendors and up-and-coming local competitors.

Henry Mayer's street-paving work quickly helped him develop a reputation as a hard-working and quality contractor and by the middle of the 1890s he had also

become a highly demanded builder. His State Street projects are still apparent south of 12th Street in the form of the Mercantile Building, Kellar's magic and comedy club, and the PACA Building. But his architectural and commercial "masterpiece" was yet to appear.



The Mercantile Building, which has been restored, now houses a U.S. Post Office branch.



Kellar's magic and comedy club at 14th and State is formerly Jr's Last Laugh Comedy Club.



As was the custom in the late 1800s, Henry Mayer imbedded his mark on the PACA Building.

An inspection of the PACA Building reveals Henry Mayer's predilection for over-engineering. Oversized concrete, stone, and brick exterior walls anchor the building's outside footprint, while enormous steel I-beams support the interior floors, roof and longitudinal beams. The structural I-beams become smaller on the upper floors and eventually support a huge roof that will soon contain solar panels on the south side and public garden space on the more scenic north side. There is a birdcage elevator that was added in 1913 to provide access to an upper floor area that Mayer donated to help with the city's typhoid (cholera) epidemic.

In grade school, we learned about New York City and its amazing skyscrapers. As a special treat, our teacher produced a movie projector, cued up a film, and showed a newsreel featuring the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and several other towering New York structures. Nothing was more exciting than a classroom film in those days. When the film ended, the kids asked about Erie.

"Do we have skyscrapers?"

The answer was that we had two of them and that they were downtown: the G. Daniel Baldwin Building (Renaissance Centre) and the former Commerce Building. Eventually, we all took family trips to Erie's downtown to see and visit them. The Baldwin Building, which was at 10th Street, was the newest, having been built in 1928, but the Commerce Building was the most interesting. It was older, having been built in 1914, and much more of public space, since it had a large food court that was still operating during the 1950s. It was also more visually striking, with its dark brown brick exterior and bright white base. The Commerce Building also had Union Bank on its ground floor and large antennae on its roof, broadcasting towers for the WLEU radio station that was located in its lower floors, making it seem even more exciting in those early days.



The Commerce Building, Erie's first skyscraper.

Erie's senior skyscraper was a Henry Mayer creation. And not only did Mayer build it as his structural "masterpiece," but he also presented the building as central to his commercial vision of the skyscraper as the new epicenter of Downtown Erie. In the early 20th century, with the relatively modern train station at 14th and Peach streets during an era when railroad travel was new and exciting, and years before the Boston Store was to emerge to the north, Mayer imagined that 12th and State could and should be the center of the downtown. He had already built several impressive buildings south of 12th Street and imagined that a large new anchor building would stimulate commercial growth in every direction from the intersection. To help propel his vision he began negotiating with Erie's Chamber of Commerce and promised to name his skyscraper after that organization.

For unknown reasons, Mayer's planning vision aroused the ire of merchants and businessmen who were already established on State, Peach, and French Streets, north of 12th Street. They were apparently concerned that a new building south of them would threaten the economic value of their locations. They also argued that Mayer's plan was self-serving since he already had built three large commercial buildings south of 12th Street. As a response to Mayer's plan, they began to organize around the development of an alternative building and created a plan to build it on 10th Street (today's Renaissance Centre). They also influenced the downtown Chamber of Commerce to abandon its earlier promise to locate at 12th and State. As a result, Mayer's intention to name his new skyscraper the "Chamber of Commerce Building" was abandoned. Instead, he adjusted the project title to "Commerce Building." Mayer's new building opened to great acclaim in 1914 and was an early success, filling with tenants and advertising Erie's first food court in its lower floors. The downtown skyscraper was a general attraction as both locals and tourists regularly visited during the early days since it was so unique. The 10-story beaux arts-style building stood out not only because of its height but also by virtue of its striking, brown brick exterior.

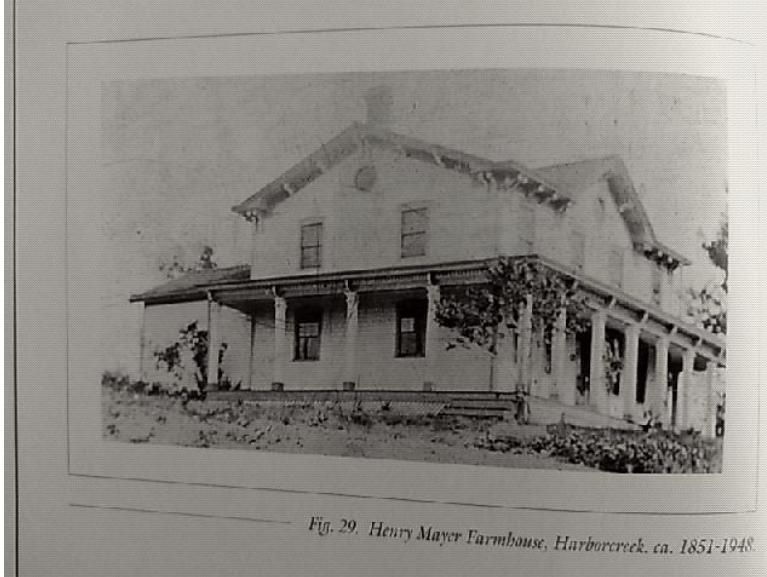
Somehow the new Commerce Building stoked local competition, however, and even before it had opened a second downtown skyscraper was in the planning stages. Originally built as the Erie Trust Company Building, construction began in 1925 and the building opened in 1928. Its primary sponsor, Erie Trust Company, was the region's largest and most profitable bank and took a lead role in financing the building project that had been driven by Erie's Lower State Street merchants. Using a New York City architectural firm as opposed to local builders (Mayer), the original intent for the building was to be taller than its competitor, the Commerce Building. The architects were able to include 14 stories as opposed to the 10 in the Commerce Building, but even though planners had specified a building that was to be taller than the Commerce Building, they advised against making the structure any taller than the final 198-foot because of the sandy soil base. Built-in art deco style, which was popular at the time, the building's lower exterior floors were done in light colored limestone and its upper stories in buff colored brick. The light color contrast was designed to make it look both larger and different from the Commerce Building two blocks away. The final roofline was just a few feet shorter than the 123-foot Commerce Building.



The Erie Trust Building became the Baldwin Building in 1943 and later the Renaissance Centre.

Sadly, within a few years of its opening, Erie's second skyscraper was caught up in the Great Depression. Erie Trust Company Bank went bankrupt and even before the building had filled with tenants, its failed economic destiny seemed to have been determined. Local observers speculated that the downtown office building market had been "overbuilt." Did Erie need two skyscrapers? Had there been a proper feasibility study?

By the late 1930s, it was clear that the building was a financial disaster. In 1943, it was sold at auction and renamed for G. Daniel Baldwin, who was Erie's preeminent builder at the time and Chairman of the Board of the realty company that purchased the building. Thus, for much of its time in Erie, it was known as "the Baldwin Building." New owners lowered the rents to fill the building, which hurt the Commerce Building, and by the early 1950s both of Erie's skyscrapers buildings were in serious financial trouble. Meanwhile, Henry Mayer moved from Erie, settling on 200 acres of farm property in Harborcreek just west of Wintergreen Gorge.



The Mayer Cottage at Wintergreen Farms.



The grave of Henry Mayer (1844 to 1915).

Henry Mayer eventually had his revenge. In 1989, 74 years after his death and two years after his building masterpiece, the Commerce Building, had gone bankrupt and passed to the Erie Redevelopment Authority, it was determined that it should be torn down so that the property at 12th and State could be repurposed. The out-of-town demolition company decided to implode the building by planting explosive charges in the central elevator shaft. After three increasingly more powerful explosions, the structure stood almost intact, seeming to laugh at the meager attempts to bring it to the ground. It was another example of Mayer construction quality. With building owners from blocks away reporting plaster cracks and disturbing vibrations, the demolition company was forced to shift demolition strategies. It brought a huge crane with a wrecking ball and began to take swings at the side of the building. The first ball bounced harmlessly off the exterior several times. They got a bigger one. Finally, after an attempted percussion, the oversized ball swung back, toppling and destroying the crane. When the building had finally been reduced to rubble, the slow and tedious way, the demolition company revealed that it had lost money on the job and asked why

anyone would have torn down such a building.

Renaissance Centre continues in downtown Erie. The last skyscraper. It went bankrupt again in 1987 and was auctioned at a charity event in 1989 to a local developer and businessman, Tom Kennedy. It was re-opened in 1990 under the name "Renaissance Centre" and continues as a multipurpose office building with newly designed retail space on the first floor. As part of Kennedy's \$2.2 million restorations, six beautiful original wall murals were uncovered. The murals had been painted by a famous New York artist but were obliterated during a series of hurried alterations during times when the building was suffering financially. Tom Kennedy restored them (at great expense) so that they can be enjoyed by today's building tenants and guests.



The terrible end of Henry Mayer's Commerce Building.

The Mayer Family maintained the property and farmhouse that Henry had acquired until 1931 when it was donated and became Wintergreen Gorge Cemetery. Mayer Brothers Construction Company continues to operate in Erie.



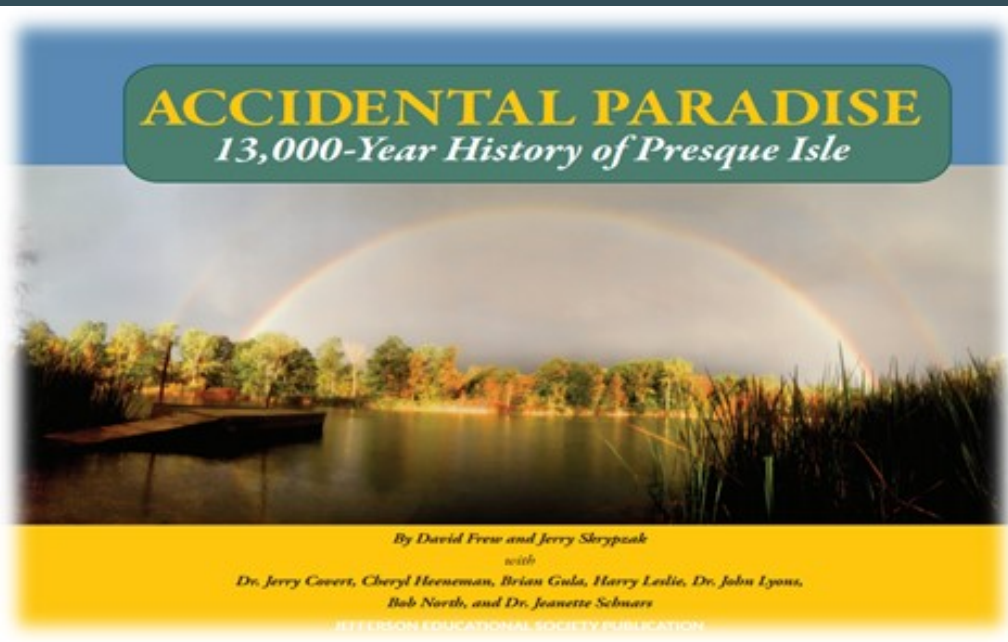
Today's Mayer Brothers Construction Company.



Today's northeast corner of 12th and State streets. Better than a Victorian Era skyscraper?

Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

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Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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