

# UPSTAIRS, DOWNTOWN

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An upstairs view of downtown landmarks in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, USA

Photographs by Bill Rogers

December 2008 — January 2009

## **ARTIST'S STATEMENT**

I think of myself as a photographer, not an artist. I use a digital camera to take photographs, and I edit them in a computer. If you enjoy looking at my photos, that's good enough for me.

## **MISSION**

Downtown Johnstown has many beautiful, historic buildings. Indeed, in 1992, all of downtown Johnstown was designated a historic district by the National Register of Historic Places. This beauty is difficult to appreciate at street level, however, because many first floor exteriors have been covered with commercial façades.

The original beauty of these buildings can be seen by looking above the first floor. But, while going about their daily activities, most Johnstownners take little notice of the "graceful designs in brick and stone" above their heads.

By calling attention to the upstairs beauty in downtown Johnstown, I hope to increase knowledge and appreciation of the history of Johnstown and the beauty of its architecture. I also hope this increased awareness will lead to more interest and involvement in the preservation of historic structures.

## **DOWNTOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT**

Johnstown's downtown historic district is noteworthy as a cross-section of mid-19<sup>th</sup>- and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century architectural styles. These styles are represented in commercial, public, religious, and residential buildings. Concentrated in the district are the City's most important flood-surviving buildings and memorials to the disastrous 1889 flood.

## TECHNIQUE

The photographs in this exhibition were captured from street level using a digital single-lens-reflex camera. Photos were taken on cloudy days to minimize harsh shadows. After capture, each digital image file was processed in Adobe© Photoshop©. The photos were “squared up” to correct keystone distortion caused by shooting from street level. To the extent possible, lens distortion also was corrected. Overhead wires and other obstructions were removed. Finally, I separated each building from its background, and inserted partly-cloudy sky backgrounds that I captured in various Cambria County locations.

Editing and printing these images would have been extremely expensive and difficult, if not impossible, using traditional film capture and processing.

## LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Alma Hall
2. Cambria County Central Park Complex
3. Central Park Commons
4. David Dibert Building
5. Fend Building
6. G. A. R. Building
7. J. T. Kelly Building
8. Park Building
9. State Theater

## OTHER IMPORTANT STUFF

I am grateful for the assistance of Ben Policicchio, A.I.A., who wrote descriptions of the architecture of the buildings I photographed, and for the support and encouragement of Rosemary Pawlowski.

Prints of these photographs were exhibited at the Bottle Works Ethnic Arts Center in December 2008 and January 2009. The Bottle Works, located at 411 Third Avenue in the historic Cambria City section of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, USA, is a wonderful community resource. Their website is <http://www.bottleworks.org>. Please make a donation if you can.

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## AN EXCERPT FROM BLUE HIGHWAYS

*“Had it not been for the last 30 years, Frankfort (Kentucky) would be an architecturally distinguished capital city with streets of forcefully simple, aesthetically honest houses and shops. But the impulse to “modernize” nineteenth-century commercial buildings, an impulse that has blasted the business districts of almost every town in the country, defaced Frankfort. The harmonious, proportioned, historic lines of the buildings now wore veneers of ceramic tile, cedar siding, imitation marble, extruded aluminum, textured stucco, precast concrete; and the street level had become a jumble of meretricious, tawdry fronts. But at the second- and third-story levels, graceful designs in brick and stone remained; disregarding the plywood over the upper-story windows, you had unrenovated history”.* – From Blue Highways: A Journey Into America by William Least Heat Moon (William Trogon), 1982

## Alma Hall

Alma Hall, at 442–444 Main Street, was constructed in 1883 by the International Order of Odd Fellows. The four-story brick structure is a historical monument on the perimeter of Johnstown's Central Park.

Alma Hall is one of the few remaining examples of the Queen Anne Commercial style of architecture in this area. Its symmetrical façade takes advantage of an essential three-bay arrangement, with the center bay consisting of a single window, and either side bay consisting of a triple-window arrangement. A decorative characteristic of this structure includes carved stone lintels on each floor, supporting arched brick areas. Corbelled brick elements at the cornice level, along with decorative brick elements at the lower floors and a skillful use of horizontal and vertical elements, successfully unite the variety of features into a harmonious composition.

On May 31, 1889, Alma Hall escaped destruction from Johnstown's great flood, although its first two stories were under water. Through the night, 264 survivors reached the safety of its upper floors. Attorney James Walters, clinging to a piece of wreckage, was swept through a window into his own office in the Hall. Dr. W. E. Matthews delivered two babies in the Hall, despite his own injuries.



## Cambria County Central Park Complex

The four-story Cambria County Central Park Complex building at the corner of Franklin and Locust Streets served Johnstown for many years as Glosser Brothers' Department Store. It was built in 1905 as the Ellis Building and purchased by Louis and Nathan Glosser in 1926.

The overall composition and use of architectural details indicates a strong Italianate style. Use of multi-story bay windows, arcaded windows at the fourth-floor area, and the use of decorative brick elements are hallmarks of this structure. Essentially intact since its construction, the building makes use of arched and oculus windows within the arcaded fourth floor area, and also includes the use of modulated brick surfaces with brick faces and ends exposed.

Carved stone elements appear at all floors as part of the overall window treatment. At the cornice level, one sees the use of intertwined arched forms. Corner brick quoins have been used to add a sense of massiveness, and recessed brick panels at several levels of the structure's façades add variety to the composition.



## Central Park Commons

Central Park Commons, at 426-432 Main Street, was originally built as Nathan's Department Store. Family-owned and operated, Nathan's had been successful in Johnstown since the late 1880s, and decided to update their image by building a bigger, more modern store. Designed by Pittsburgh architect Charles Bickel, and built between 1905 and 1908, Central Park Commons is the only Johnstown-area example of Early Modern architecture with influences from late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chicago architecture, and is one of the few remaining examples of glazed architectural terra cotta work on a large scale in the Johnstown area. This architectural style uses steel for light structural and open interior areas, combined with the simplified, classical forms of glazed terra cotta.

Nathan's Department Store went out of business in the 1920s, and the building was leased to the S. S. Kresge Company, which operated the property as a variety store for many years. This building was a significant retail location in the City through World Wars I and II, the floods of 1936 and 1977, and the great depression of the 1930s.

The Central Park Commons building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



## David Dibert Building

The large, four-story David Dibert building, completed in 1889, is located at 500 Main Street on the corner of Franklin and Main Streets. The Dibert family was a leading Johnstown mercantile family since the canal era; over the years various family members owned dry-goods and hardware stores, and founded banks. The building originally housed the John Dibert & Co. Bank. John Dibert died in the 1889 flood, but the building survived, and Scott Dibert operated a shoe store in the building for 20 years.

Architecturally, the Dibert building is a Romanesque multiple-story commercial building, featuring engaged pilasters with a two-bay Main Street façade. Each bay is topped with an arch that encompasses three, smaller, vertical, round-topped windows. The large arches also frame a basket-weave brick infill above the windows. Other masonry features include: carved, engaged capitals with acanthus leaves; incised brick pilasters; corbelled arches; and rusticated stone at the corner. Prominent on the Main Street façade is the cast-iron cornice. The cornice is classically inspired with the use of brackets in the upper part of the cornice, and there is an obvious diminutive Romanesque-influenced turret at the corner. Prominently displayed in the middle of the cornice are the name of the building's owner and its date of construction.



## Fend Building

The Fend Building is located at 542 Main Street. Constructed in 1893, it is a three-story, seven-bay, Romanesque-inspired symmetrical structure. The windows at the second level are topped with elliptical arches separated by cast terra cotta elements. Engaged pilasters run the height of the structure and separate the windows. The elongated upper level windows are topped with brick arches and use decorative horizontal copper bands to separate the lower sashes from the rounded topped windows.

The design includes many decorative brick elements, including incised brick panels above the lower arches and an elaborate cornice with a faux arch-topped colonnade. The cornice is topped by the name of the building's owner, and the date of construction is centered between the second and third level windows.

A German-language newspaper, *Freie Presse*, was published from the Fend Building in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## G. A. R. Hall

The Grand Army of the Republic Hall, 132 Park Place, is located at the corner of Locust Street and Park Place. It was built in 1893 by the Emery Fisher Post 30 of the Grand Army of the Republic, a Civil War organization for Union veterans. The interior was damaged by fire in 1965 and was rebuilt through the efforts of community leaders. The building served as a meeting hall for the Grand Army of the Republic, and was a depository of Civil War relics. This building served as a meeting place for veterans of the Civil War who, in post-war years, were instrumental in the development of the community. The G.A.R. Hall is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

From an architectural standpoint, the G.A.R. Hall is a symmetrical multi-story brick structure that reflects the military character of its original owners. This is clearly seen in the inset stone panels that show civil war cannon and crossed swords. In addition, a stone replica of a civil war bullet is found on the upper left corner of the building, while a brick and stone replica of a mortar shell is found on the upper right corner of the building. The windows are topped by stone lintels. The corbelled brickwork at the cornice level is of special interest.



## J. T. Kelly Building

The J. T. Kelly Building at 502-504 Main Street is a three-story structure that was constructed in 1913. It was built by Joseph T. Kelly, who operated Kelly's Café and Bar on the first floor, and rented out the upper floors to various businesses.

This building is a symmetrical Richardson Romanesque structure using rusticated sandstone throughout the façade. Of interest are the larger, triple window in the center of the façade and the stained glass panels topping the upper level windows. A massive protruding stone panel, made of corbelled stone and featuring the name of the building's original owner, is centered above the windows. The corbelled elements on either upper corner that frame the façade are also noteworthy.



## Park Building

The Park Building is a four-story structure at 423 Main Street, located on the corner of Main Street and Park Place.

This building was designed by architect George Wild for the Knights of Pythias, and completed in 1914. Its first-floor theater was first named the Garden, and then the Park. The theater was operated by the Panagotacos family.

The Park Building features tapestry brick and stone with intricate pattern designs, emphasized by the use of the light mortar, dark brick and light stone. These designs include herringbone infill of brick panels and glazed terra cotta tiles at the cornice level. Of special interest is the circular terra cotta tile medallion at the center. The building also features engaged brick pilasters with simplified, carved stone capitals, and originally, windows would have filled the third-floor openings between the pilasters.



## State Theater

Located at 336 Main Street, the State was one of the last theaters built in Johnstown, and perhaps the most opulent. Known as the “Million Dollar State,” it was built by the Panagotacos family and opened on July 4, 1926. The building featured an elaborate crystal chandelier in the lobby, made up of 62,000 separate pieces of glass and 164 lights. Three kinds of marble were used for the lobby and the sweeping stairway up to the balcony — cream-colored travertine for the columns, black onyx for the stairway base, and tan tavernelle for the steps. Another distinction was the four-manual Wurlitzer theater organ, which was rumored to have cost \$35,000.

The exterior of this building is almost as extravagant as its original interior. This symmetrical, five-bay, classically-inspired design features a façade constructed entirely of glazed terra cotta. The façade features multi-story pilasters topped with composite capitals. The top level of windows features projecting moldings, visually supported by brackets and medallions. Above the top level of windows there is a projecting classical cornice supported by dentils and medallions. The façade is topped by a full, classical, five-bay entablature. The entablature has five panels, and each panel features a swag of acanthus leaves. The panels are separated by engaged pilasters decorated with a medallion.



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## INFORMATION ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Photos of Alma Hall, Central Park Commons, Dibert, Fend, GAR Hall, Kelly, and Park Buildings were captured on February 26, 2007. The State Theater photo was captured on February 28, 2007, and the Cambria County Complex (Glosser Bros. Bldg.) was captured on March 13, 2007.

I used a Nikon D200 camera with the Nikkor 18-200 f/3.5–5.6 VR lens. The camera was set to ISO 200. Shutter speeds ranged from 1/125 second to 1/250 second, and apertures ranged from f/5.6 to f/8. Focal lengths ranged from 18 to 50 mm. Photos were taken handheld from sidewalk level and captured in raw format.

Adobe Photoshop CS2 and CS3 were used to edit the raw files. With the exception of the Cambria County Complex (Glosser Bros.) building, all images were captured in one exposure. The Cambria County Complex (Glosser Bros.) building was captured in two frames which I stitched together in Photoshop.

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