

# The New Circular

Showcasing historic writings and photographs of the Oneida Community and its legacy.

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Issue 5

## In this issue:

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## The Historic Sales Office of Oneida Ltd.

by Tony Wonderley



*The Sales Office, photo by Albert Noyes about 1930s.*

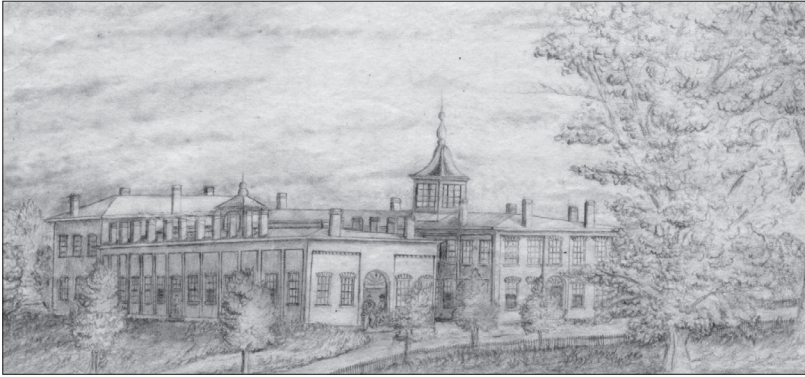
AS THE FORTUNES OF ONEIDA LTD. plummeted a decade ago, one visiting reporter was struck by the company's "gothic stone administration building" that seemed to him more suited to the Ivy League than to a small upstate town (Charley Hannagan, "Why Oneida closed the last U.S. factory," *Syracuse Post-Standard*, September 12, 2004). This issue is devoted to that notable architectural presence—usually called the Sales Office—fronting Kenwood Avenue. I will speak to its historical importance by outlining the background of the building and explaining how it came to be commissioned in 1926.

The story of the Sales Office begins with the Oneida Community (1848-1880), one of the most successful utopias in American history. The Oneida Community, a commune numbering about 250, was dedicated to living selflessly together as one family and to the sharing of all property, work, and love. Oneida was unusual among utopias of its day

for being financially successful. Almost every other communal group depended on agriculture and craft production that never advanced, technologically speaking, beyond the level of the Middle Ages. Oneida in contrast, was committed to manufacture.

Their major industry was metal animal traps which had been brought into the commune by the blacksmith of Oneida Castle, Sewell Newhouse. The Community's innovation was to design and build machinery that mechanized the manufacture of Newhouse's contraptions. By the early 1860s, the Oneida Perfectionists were making over 200,000 traps a year and had become the biggest trap-makers in the country. Large-scale production led them into building a factory dedicated to trap-making (1864) and to the hiring of scores of employees to work in it. It was the largest trap plant in the nation and, in it, they doubled their output.

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*The Oneida Community trap works, drawing by Jane Seymour about 1870 (gift of Rhoda Rich Vanderwall and Robin Vanderwall).*

Money from traps funded a second factory industry, one devoted to making silk thread for the sewing machine, just coming into widespread household use. Traps and thread, together, placed the OC in the mainstream of American industrial development after the Civil War. That focus left its mark on them. "They made the traps," one visitor said, "and then the traps made them" (*Circular*, March 18, 1867). The Community took on an industrial character, setting the stage for what was to

come (A. Wonderley, "The Most Utopian Industry: Making Oneida's Animal Traps, 1852-1925," *New York History*, Summer 2010).

The Oneida Community disbanded on January 1, 1881 when, by vote, they changed themselves into a joint

stock-holding company called Oneida Community, Ltd. Former members of the Oneida Community became the stockholders and the company was to continue the lucrative industries of the Oneida Community to provide its shareholders with an income.

The company, however, barely survived its first fifteen years and the onset of the Gilded Age, the 1890s, with its unprecedented industrial mass production and cut-throat marketing competition. Oneida Community, Ltd. was saved by the return of the Oneida Community's now-grown children who refocused the company on manufacturing silverware, the

only product they had which offered growth possibilities. The Oneida Community had started cutlery, including silver-plated flatware, but it was of indifferent quality. Needing to improve the product, the company now began to electroplate about three times as much silver to the base as was commonly done. That created a new high-end category of silverware they called Community Plate.

The Oneida firm then invested heavily in advertising and marketing. They claimed to be the first to hire the big name graphic artists of their day—Coles Phillips, Maxfield Parrish—to design full-page color ads of their products to run in such national weekly magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. Committing to silverware was a big gamble but it paid off. Oneida became renowned for its quality silverware.

As the young people refocused the company on silverware, they embarked on a risky program of social experimentation. The first rule instituted around 1900 was to cap executive salaries at a low level. Everyone's pay, it was further mandated, would be cut in hard times but the cuts would start at the top where they would be proportionately greater.

Long before any federal legislation in the interests of workers, Oneida administrators provided their employees with generous pensions, health-welfare benefits, a share of the profit, and a share of company ownership. Then they built a workers' community, insisting that it be politically independent of the company. Without publicity, the company sank enormous amounts of money into creating a new city, Sherrill, as a place in which everyone could own their own home and enjoy a high standard of living.

Every year the company doubled the city's education fund which had been raised from taxes. The company paid half the salary of every district teacher. The company donated lots for schools to the city, then paid at least half the cost of constructing the buildings. For \$1.00, the company allowed every teacher to become eligible for all the company's fringe benefits. Teachers, initially, were offered free room and board in the Mansion House.

What the younger people did was to recast the old Oneida Community family along the principle that everyone sharing in production should share in the benefits of production. It was not philanthropy, they insisted, it was just



*The Ark, about 1865 (gift of Rhoda Rich Vanderwall and Robin Vanderwall).*



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good business. Sherrill, then, was a company creation. As an enterprise focused on quality of life, it was one of the great successes of American business.

The parcel of land on which the Sales Office sits was much utilized by the Oneida Community, beginning with a dairy barn (1863) oriented diagonally to the road and to the later main axis of the Sales Office. This building, the "Ark," became the "Arcade" when it was remodeled in 1873 to serve as a factory for a relatively minor industry of the Oneida Community—the canning of fruits and vegetables.

While it remained the Arcade or Fruit House in post-Community days, it also became something of a neighborhood center with a general store, a barber shop, and a post office. In 1912, the company converted the ground floor into what they called their "Sales Office"—a term retained ever since. In 1923, all the internal space was redesigned by architect Theodore Skinner to become, formally, the company's administrative center.

But the old Sales Office complex always looked accidental and pasted together. Company officials disparaged it as "the world's worst office building," an "old pile of rubbish and antique whatnots" (Ray Noyes, "Our New Office Building," *Quadrangle*, June 1926, 15). They wanted something more dignified, and more in tune with their financial success and social accomplishments.

They found that in a factory building they themselves had constructed on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls in January 1926. Commissioned from Syracuse architect Albert L. Brockway in the English Gothic style, it seemed to them the finest factory building in the world (*Quadrangle*, April 1926, 19). Thirty-five years later, Corinna Noyes still vividly recalled that it was "a joy to behold, on its terraced hill, surrounded by flowering shrubs and gardens with the breath-taking grandeur of the falls always in view; a place for inspiration, a place to dream dreams" (Corinna Ackley Noyes, *The Days of My Youth*, 2011, 157-58).

"They were so impressed by the beauty of the thing," Constance Robertson recorded early that year, "that they are planning now to build another like it here in Kenwood for a Sales Office." A little later she wrote: "Surprise! A New Modern Office Building—to be the show place of Central N. Y.—on the site of



*The Arcade, about 1875.*

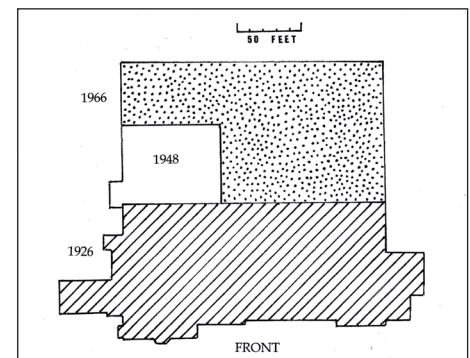


*The Fruit House, about 1908.*

the present one. Gothic architecture, beautiful, by the same architect who designed the new Canadian factory" (*Quadrangle*, April 1926, 14, 11).

Week by week in 1926, the construction sequence was thoroughly documented in the largest photographic record of any building in company history. When completed, the camera was pulled back to the front. Several buildings facing the street had remained standing and—now, Voila! They could be shown with the new rising above in the background.

Its facade was composed of variably colored limestone from Credit Valley, Canada, the same material used in the Canadian structure. Its second floor was basically one open room of 14,000 square feet, every part of which was said to receive perfect daylight. Construction costs came to about \$325,000 (*Quadrangle*, June 1926, 15, 17).



*Plan of the Sales Office.*



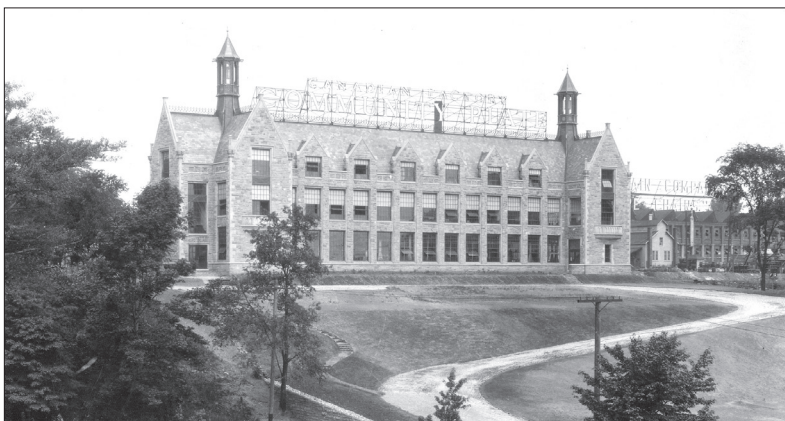
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*Southwest corner of the old Sales Office,  
photo by LaVerne Cross, about 1923.*



*Northwest corner of the old Sales Office,  
photo by LaVerne Cross, about 1923.*



*The Canadian factory, about 1926.*

Two expansions occurred, both in the back of the building. The first was a rectangular unit constructed in 1948; the second an extensive one-story module added in 1966. On that occasion, Oneida Creek was moved east about 80 yards and straightened.

To President Pierrepont Noyes, the building reflected Oneida industrial artistry. He called it "a visual monument to those ideals, which, during twenty-five years, have made lovers of beauty seek our ware for their tables" (*Quadrangle*, October 1926, 6). One can see that in materials deposited in the cornerstone, which included a teaspoon from each of the fourteen patterns of Community Plate then in existence (*Quadrangle*, October 1926, 28).

Further, the building bore material testimony to the company's progressive labor relations, as illustrated by the inclusion in the cornerstone of the name of every employee and the constitution of the Community Associated Clubs—an organization that consolidated all worker-formed associations in such a way that the company could double their funds, provide a roof over their heads, and add a host of medical and recreational benefits.



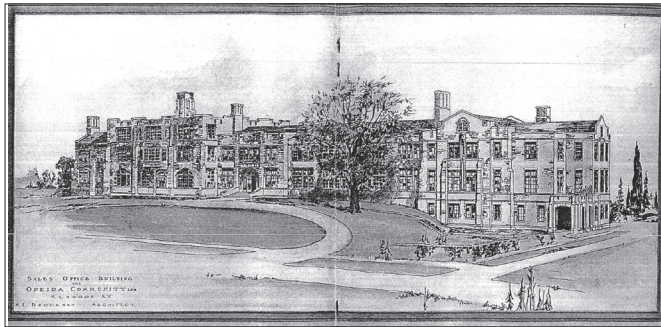
*The Canadian factory under  
construction, 1925.*



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Finally, the building spoke to Oneida Community heritage. Almost all of those running the company were children of the Oneida Community or children of Oneida Community parents. Their parents' architecture, the Mansion House, had dominated their upbringing as it continued to dominate their neighborhood. So with the new edifice, the youngsters said, in effect, "We also live serious lives reflected in architecture, architecture complementing yours and worthy of yours." The ties of young to old also were affirmed by depositing Oneida Community artifacts in the cornerstone of the Oneida Community, Ltd. building.

The Sales Office, Noyes flatly asserted, is "the most beautiful building of its kind in the country" (*Quadrangle*, October 1926, 6). We have a memorable portrait of the company's sales agents in 1927 in which they radiate collective pride in the new corporate center. In future years, there would be any number of artistic black-and-white photos trying to capture the building's distinctive Gothic gravitas.



*Drawing of proposed Sales Office in Kenwood, by Albert Brockway, 1926 (Quadrangle, August 1926).*



*Under construction, 1926.*



*The old and the new, 1926.*



*The Administration Building, about 1927.*



*Original course of Oneida Creek, about 1940.*

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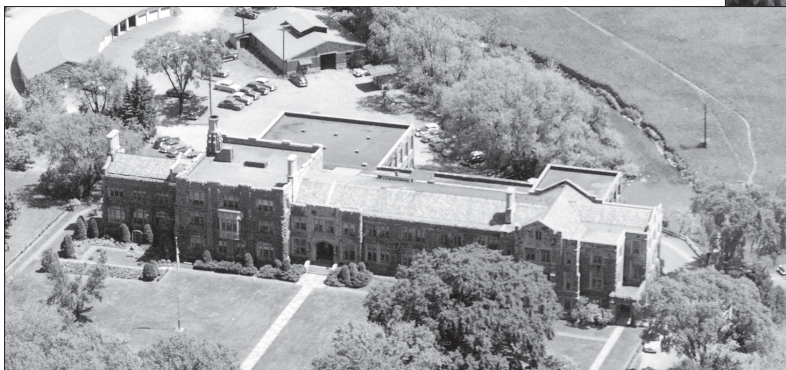


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### *List Of Articles Deposited In The Corner Stone Box Of The New Administration Building*

Memorandum by P. B. Noyes, President, Oneida Community.  
 Memorandum by G. W. Noyes, including a small piece of wood from the original Mansion House, and a copy of the ONEIDA CIRCULAR, dated July 3rd, 1871.  
 Copy of the By-Laws of The Oneida Community, Limited.  
 Copy of the Statement of The Oneida Community, Limited, Jan. 30, 1926.  
 Copy of the Constitution and By-Laws of The Community Associated Clubs.  
 List of the Employees of The Oneida Community, Limited, 9-1-1926.  
 Copy of The Community Quadrangle, August, 1926.  
 Memorandum by M. E. Kinsley, including copies of Directors' Meeting Minutes covering the erection of the Building, Picture of the Old Sales Office Building, Picture of the New Building in course of Construction, Cut of the New Building being built, Picture of the New Canada Building, Picture of the New Canada Building (At Night). First Report from Austin Company and First Report from Austin Company showing ground broken.  
 Picture of the present Board of Directors of The Oneida Community.  
 Picture of The Austin Company Organization.  
 Picture of A. L. Brockway, Architect of the Building.  
 Sample Teaspoon of each of the Fourteen Community Plate patterns sold, with date marked on each when first put on the market.  
 Copy of the Latest Catalogue of COMMUNITY PLATE & TUDOR PLATE.  
 Copy of the 1926 Price Schedule.

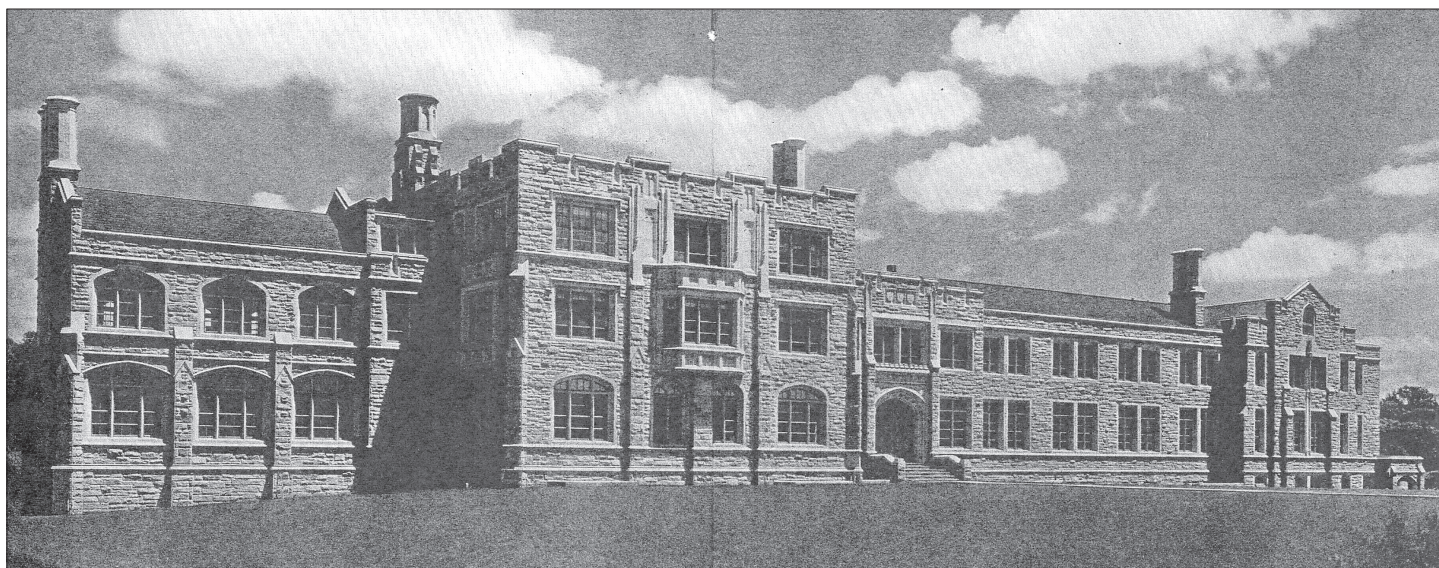
*Contents of the Sales Office cornerstone  
(Quadrangle, October 1926).*



*Aerial view of the Sales Office, about 1960.*



*Aerial view of the Sales Office, about 1940.*



*The Sales Office newly completed (Quadrangle, August 1927).*





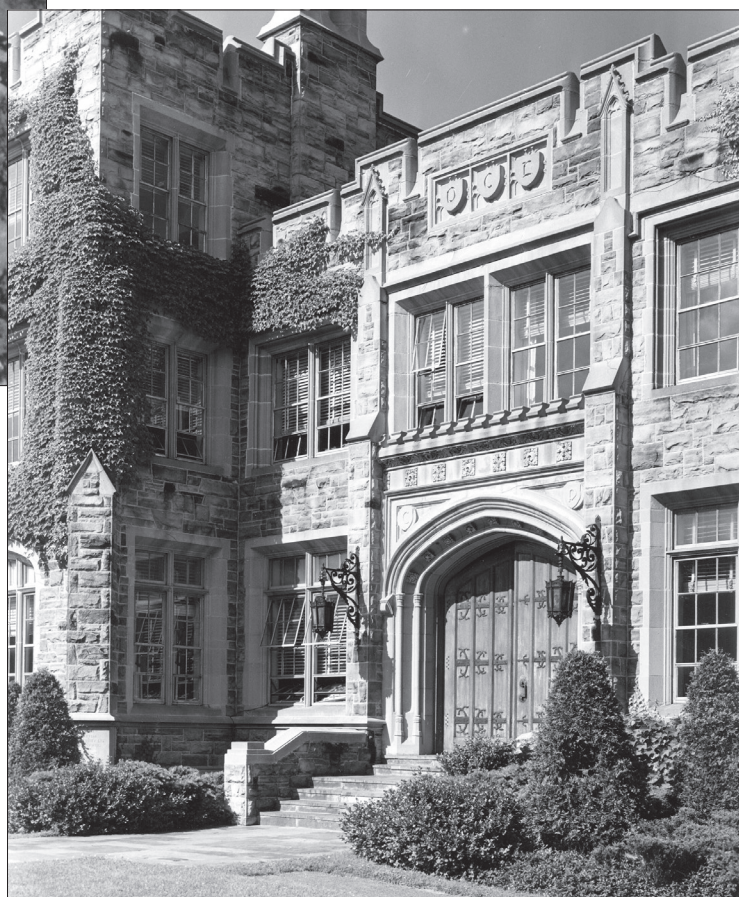
*Aerial view of the Sales Office and the Mansion House, about 1940.*



*West side of the Sales Office, by Samuel Chamberlain, 1947.*



*The Board of Directors in the future location of their boardroom, 1926.*



*Main door of the Sales Office, by Samuel Chamberlain, 1947. "Visitors walk past an immaculately cut lawn," Charley Hannagan noted, "up the steps to massive oak and wrought iron doors reminiscent of a medieval castle" (Syracuse Post-Standard, September 19, 2004).*





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*Agents meeting, 1927 (Quadrangle, October 1927).*