

# Underground LeRoy

by Lynne Belluscio

I received an email from Jack Hempling saying that the sidewalk project on Main Street had revealed some unusual doors - - beneath the front wall of the Washington Block. So I headed up to Main Street to see what was happening. I looked into the excavation and sure enough, there were two pair of double doors and a single door - - - beneath the sidewalk.

I had heard that there were coal chutes beneath the sidewalk, but I didn't think that the doors I was looking at were coal chutes, until Andrew Lathan pointed out that there were large metal doors in the sidewalk and a lift could drop down to the lower level with loads of coal or anything else that needed to be put in the basement. (As someone pointed out, these sidewalk entries are still common in large cities.)

When Main Street was rebuilt in 1976, the metal doors in the sidewalk were removed and the sidewalks were built. But a few years ago, the support under the sidewalk began to fail and there were concerns every time the sidewalk plow went down the sidewalk. It was obvious it was going to take some work to put in new sidewalks.

The doors that I could see were nicely made, with moldings and glass panes on top. The glass would allow light into the inside of the basement when the sidewalk doors were open. I also heard that at one time you could walk from one end of the Washington Block to the other, under the sidewalk.

There is some speculation that the underground passage might extend even further. I've stopped a couple of times, but haven't been able to see much more. I have also learned that luckily the excavation uncovered old gas lines that now will be replaced. In order to pour new sidewalks the lower doorways are being filled with cement block and the open spaces will be filled with gravel.

I have written about the Washington Block several times. It was built in 1855 after the Main Street fire that destroyed most of the north side of the street, all the way to Mill Street. The oldest image of the Washington Block appears on an 1856 map. It is called the Washington Block because above the windows are 36 profiles of George Washington, cast in iron. There is a good possibility that the iron was cast in Buffalo at the Washington Foundry although I have not been able to verify that. Buildings across the street have iron fronts cast in Buffalo. I have not been able to find another building in Western New York with the Washington profiles.

Through the years, the front facades of the Washington Block have changed and doorways have moved. Batavia Optical "modernized" the lower windows on the west side of the building. The windows were filled in and plastic clapboard siding was installed. The west side of the building is owned by the LeRoy Living Waters Church. They have wanted to restore the storefront to something similar to what was there before, but it is an ex-



The doors beneath the sidewalk.



Tile floor.

pensive project. The east side of the building is owned by Dennis Melander, This section is home to the Bauer Karate and the former Heaman's Clothing and more recently Java's.

The entrance into the former Java's is paved with intricate tiles. I'm not acquainted with the style or construction of tile floors, so I can't guess when it was installed. Unfortunately, when the work was done for the new sidewalk, some of the tiles were torn out but a lot remain, so perhaps that can be restored.

There is one little detail about the

Washington Block that I like to point out. If you look at the windows, on one of them, on the right hand side, under the image of Washington, is a small cornice bracket. At one time there were seventy-two brackets on the windows. Today, this one is the only survivor.



Damaged tiles.



1856 image of the Washington block.