

# Landmark Award For The Academic Building

by Lynne Belluscio

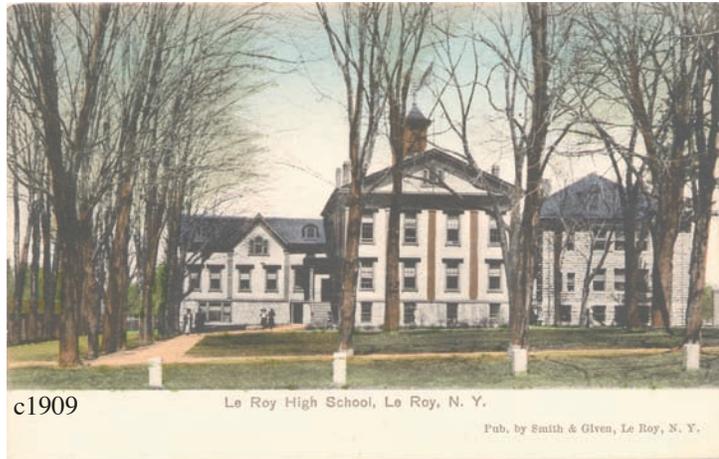
I remember a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Historical Society about 20 years ago, and the discussion was about what to do with “the back building.” It was boarded up, filled with too much stuff and was a security problem. For fifty years, every time some one would bring large things to the LeRoy House that no one knew what to do with -- it was sent to “the back building.”

In the 70s an architectural plan was drawn that would gut the entire inside and put in a small auditorium, exhibit space and offices. But the Historical Society didn't have any money to proceed with the plan. Someone suggested that we get estimates to have the

In 1911, the new high school opened and Allen Olmsted purchased the old academic buildings as well as the historic LeRoy House. Olmsted converted the academic buildings into a factory and offices for Allen's Foot-Ease. In 1943, the Allen's Foot-Ease Company was acquired by Foster-Milbourn, a pharmaceutical manufacturer in Buffalo. Foot-Ease was manufactured in LeRoy until 1945, when operations moved to Buffalo. At that



Notice the red and white awnings. c1920



building torn down. Well luckily that didn't happen and now “the back building” is known as the Academic Building. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. It has been refurbished, restored and renovated. It houses the Jell-O Gallery, the Dr. Burton Spiller Archives, the Transportation Exhibit, the offices of the Historical Society, the textile collection and the Blaisdale Boyd Library. And on November 14, “the back building” is receiving an award from the Landmark Society in Rochester.

The grey limestone building was built in 1898 as an addition to the old LeRoy Academic Institute, which had been purchased by the LeRoy Union Free School in 1891. The building cost \$8,000. By 1904, the building was known as the LeRoy Union High School, but plans were soon drawn to begin construction of a new high school across the street on Trigon Park.

time, the buildings and the old high school athletic field (now the Little League field) were donated to the Historical Society. After the Union Steel Chest fire in 1949, the building became their temporary office. In 1962, the wooden part of the Academic Institute had become a fire hazard and was torn down.

For nearly 50 years the building was boarded up, accessible only by a ladder. In 1996, with the promise of the opening of the 100th Anniversary Exhibit of Jell-O, work began in earnest. A lot of volunteer labor replaced windows, sanded floors and ceilings, rewired electrical circuits and refinished wainscoting. Architect John Bero submitted plans for a new entrance to be funded by Kraft Foods. Three rooms on the main floor were completed for the opening of the Jell-O Gallery in June 1997. The same year, the Academic Building was placed on the National Register of His-

toric Places.

In 2000, work was completed on the other rooms on the main floor. Bathrooms and heating units were installed, with another grant from Kraft Foods and funds from the Rotary Club. The library and offices were moved into the Academic Building and the Jell-O Gallery was open year round.

In 2002, a structural engineering report determined that the supports for the interior of the building were not sufficient. In the winter of 2003, with a donation from Dr. Burton Spiller and a matching grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, structural I beams and a cement floor in the basement were installed. Gradually, all the archives and textiles were moved to the second floor into refurbished rooms.

In 2006, after an ambitious fund-raising campaign and a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, the transportation exhibit in the basement

opened. In 2007, the wheelchair lift was installed through a grant from New York State Parks and Recreation and in 2009 the last major project on the Academic Building was the repair and painting of the overhanging soffits and the installation of insulation in the attic.

Throughout the renovation of the Academic Building, it had been paramount to preserve its integrity as an example of vernacular institutional architecture. On the interior, the wainscoting, the strip flooring, five-panel doors and molded wood trim have remained intact. Even the ornamented metal floor grates and the cast bronze door hinges remain in place. It is easy to overlook the fine rusticated stone work of the local Italian stone masons, but the Academic Building stands today, a monument to their craft. The Historical Society is proud to accept the Landmark Award for the preservation of this building.

