

The Case of the Missing Vitrolite

A cautionary tale of historic preservation

In 2012, the enhanced Allentown Historic District nomination was approved by the Keeper of the National Register at the National Park Service in Washington, D.C. Allentown was made a local Buffalo, New York historic district in 1978 and a portion of it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. The 2012 Allentown boundaries contain approximately 1,300 structures, including approximately 320 newly added to the National Register. The vast majority of the newly-listed structures are located on Delaware Avenue and other streets between Delaware and Main Street.

Among other benefits, these properties may be eligible for the NYS Historic Homeownership Rehabilitation Tax Credit. Owner occupied residential structures in Allentown may qualify for a tax incentive for rehabilitation work performed on them. The credit will cover 20% of qualified rehabilitation costs, up to a credit value of \$50,000. At least \$5,000 must be expended on qualifying work and at least 5% of the total project must be spent on the building's exterior. A commercial historic tax credit is also available.

Allentown's period of historic significance begins in 1829 (the construction year of the first building on its original site) and ends in 1963 (the last construction year of a contributing structure). All structures within the Allentown Historic District are designated as either "contributing" or "noncontributing." The distinction is an important one.

Contributing structures are those which add to the district's historic integrity or possess architectural qualities that make the historic district significant. The contributing properties are key to a historic district's historic associations, historic architectural qualities, or archaeological qualities. Historic buildings identified as contributing structures can be designated noncontributing within historic districts if major alterations have taken place. In some cases, damage to the historic architectural integrity of a structure is reversible, while other times the building has been so severely compromised as to be irreversible. Only contributing structures are qualified to receive tax credits.

An example of a building within Allentown that has been compromised is 19 Allen Street. Located on the north side of Allen Street between North Pearl and Main Streets, 19 Allen Street was constructed circa 1870 by Wrilson Tiff. He was the nephew of prominent Buffalonian George W. Tiff, who built Buffalo's famous Tiff House Hotel and is the namesake of Tiff Farm. Wrilson Tiff began purchasing property on Allen Street in 1867 and built houses as a hedge against inflation. Wrilson built the well-known "Tiff Houses" on the north side of Allen on the entire block located between Irving Place and Park Street. No. 19 Allen Street was designed in the Italianate style and constructed in brick. Its architectural features included a gable roof, brackets in the eaves, three-bay arched windows on the second floor and segmental windows on the first floor.



Figure 1. 23 Allen Street, circa 1904. No. 19 Allen Street can be seen on the right with arched windows on second floor and segmental windows on first floor. It is very similar to 149-151 Allen Street, also built by Wrlison Tiftt at the same time as 19 Allen. *Buffalo History Museum*.

1888 - 1893

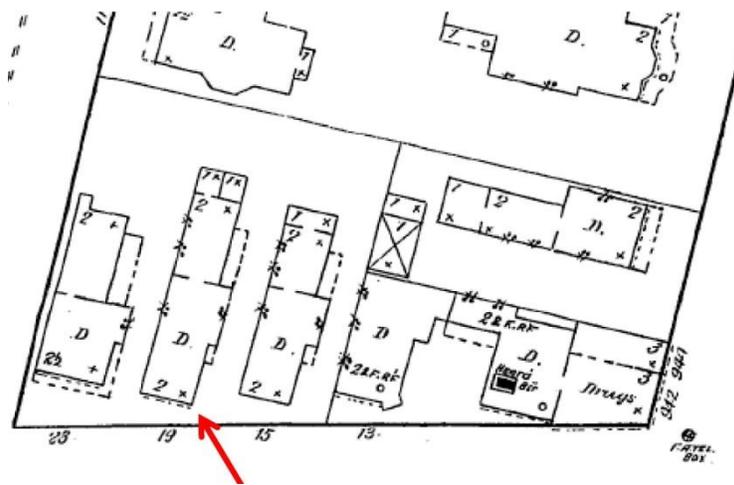


Figure 2. 1888 Sanborn atlas showing residential character of 15-23 Allen Street.

Tiftt rented 19 Allen through the 1870s to prominent Buffalonians such as bridge builder Henry C. Brundage and furniture manufacturer Homer H. Hendee. As Allen Street became increasingly commercialized, the house began to be used for businesses. For example, in 1925, was home to the International Radio Co. By the late 1920s through 1935, it housed Thomas James Quinlan Men's Furnishings.

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Both parcels adjacent to 19 Allen Street, were converted to commercial use in the late 1920s. No. 15 Allen Street, also a circa 1870 residential property, was faced with a two-story commercial brick storefront in 1926. The Italianate villa at 23 Allen was demolished and a three-story apartment building constructed in 1929.

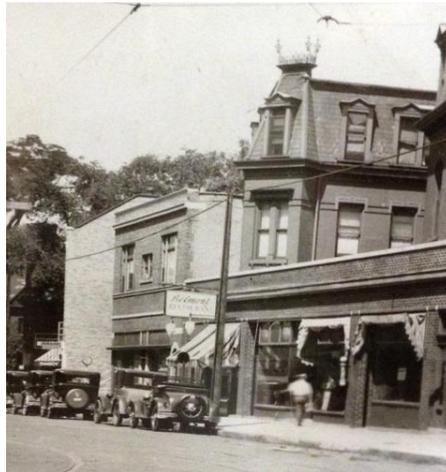


Figure 3. Allen Street, circa 1930. Nos. 15 and 23 Allen were converted for commercial use and 19 Allen sits behind the face of the two buildings. *Allentown Association.*

A one-story brick commercial storefront was constructed on the front of 19 Allen housing two retail establishments in 1936 and designed by local architect Albert A. Rumschik. The circa 1870 house was adapted to be part of the commercial storefronts as well as an apartment. The building remains one of several on Allen Street that vividly displays the street's evolution from residential to commercial with the use of storefront additions to the front of Victorian homes.

Albert A. Rumschik 236 Oxford Ave			
CLASS	SECTS	SPCL	EXPOSITION
III	4	1	Encl. 1 s. Bl. & tele. store & 2 fam. dwly
I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE WITHIN PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS HAVE BEEN EXAMINED AND I SO NOW APPROVE THE SAME		BASED ON THE ABOVE CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL I HEREBY ISSUE BUILDING PERMIT No. _____ FOR THE ABOVE BUILDING.	
S. Conwell STRUCTURAL ENGINEER		[Signature] DIRECTOR OF BUILDINGS	
DATE 9/5/36		PERMIT CLERK	
NAME OF OWNER Citic Co. Savings Bank			
LOCATION 19 Allen St			
CASE D	PLAN FILED AUG 1 1936	PERMIT ISSUED	PERMIT NUMBER RR 2B 205 19 12-21-36
OPENING NUMBER 147			

Figure 4. Building permit for storefront, 1936. City of Buffalo.

1925 - 1951

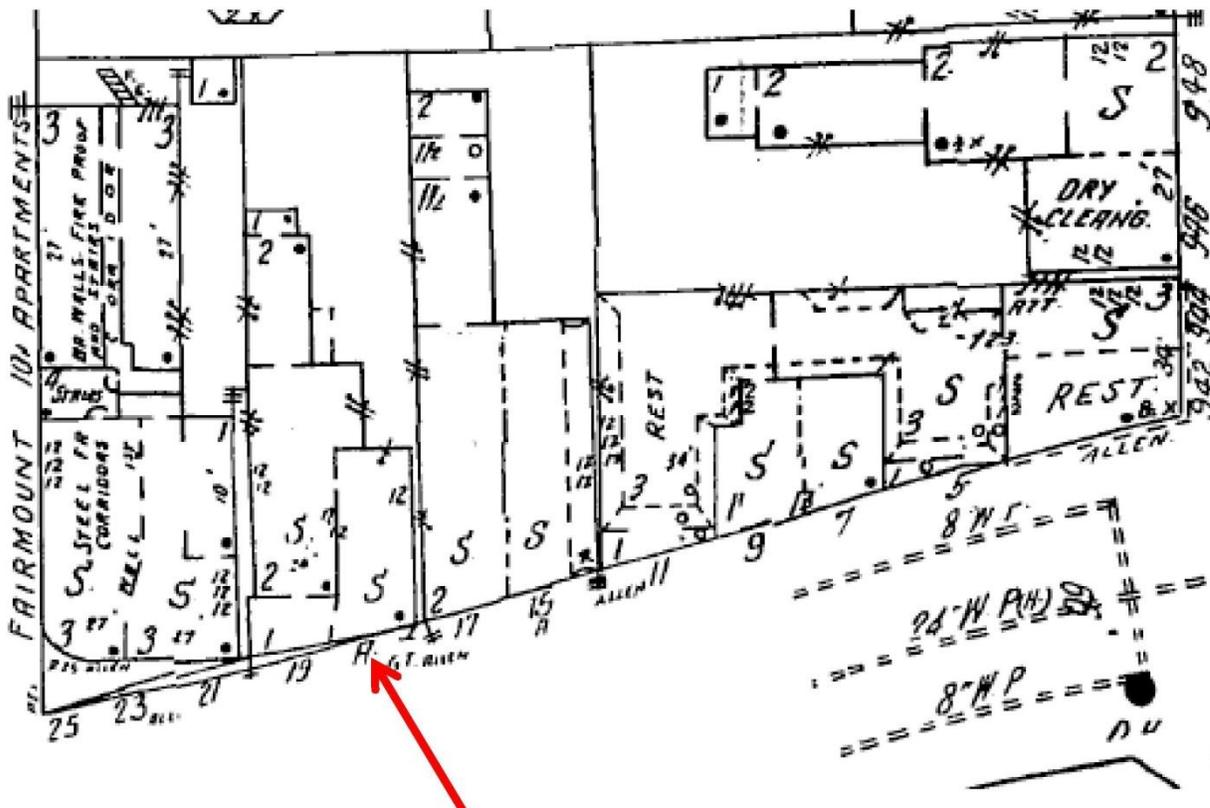


Figure 5. By 1936, 15-23 Allen Street's conversion to commercial was complete as shown on this Sanborn Atlas.

The commercial storefront's façade Rumschik designed for 19 Allen Street was in the Art Deco style faced with pigmented structural glass, known commercially as Vitrolite or Carrara Glass. In 1900, the Marietta Manufacturing Company was the first U.S. producer of the glass, touted as a substitute for marble and called Sani-Onyx. The glass could be manufactured in custom sizes up to 54 inches wide and 120 inches long, and in thicknesses of 11/32 or 7/16 of an inch.

Because of the versatility of the glass, other manufacturers quickly introduced similar competing products. In 1906, Penn-American Plate Glass Company of Alexandria, Indiana began the manufacture of white and black structural glass which it called Carrara Glass. In 1908, the Meyercord-Carter Company in West Virginia began production of their version of structural glass called Vitrolite. Reorganized as The Vitrolite Company, it was purchased in 1935 by Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Company of Tolodeo, Ohio. Pittsburgh Plate Glass also began manufacturing structural glass under the brand name Carrara.

Initially, structural glass was produced for utilitarian purposes such as refrigerator linings. However, by the 1920s, structural glass was widely used an inexpensive substitute for marble counter tops, wainscoting, and restroom partitions. By the 1930s, architects began to substitute structural glass for traditional building materials in new construction. Large expanses of architectural detailing such as sleek door surrounds, polished interior lobbies, and striking commercial storefronts were common during the 1920s and 1930s. Among the early structural glass manufacturers, Pittsburgh Plate Glass and Libby-Owens-Ford emerged as the industry giants by the 1930s and they sold their products under the brand names Carrara Glass and Vitrolite, respectively.

Structural glass became increasingly popular with designers who utilized it as a basis to modernize turn-of-the-century storefronts. New Deal programs, including low-rate insured Federal Housing Administration loans in combination with a 1935 "Modernize Main Street" competition sponsored by the *Architectural Record* and Libby-Owens-Ford Glass stimulated remodeling fervor.

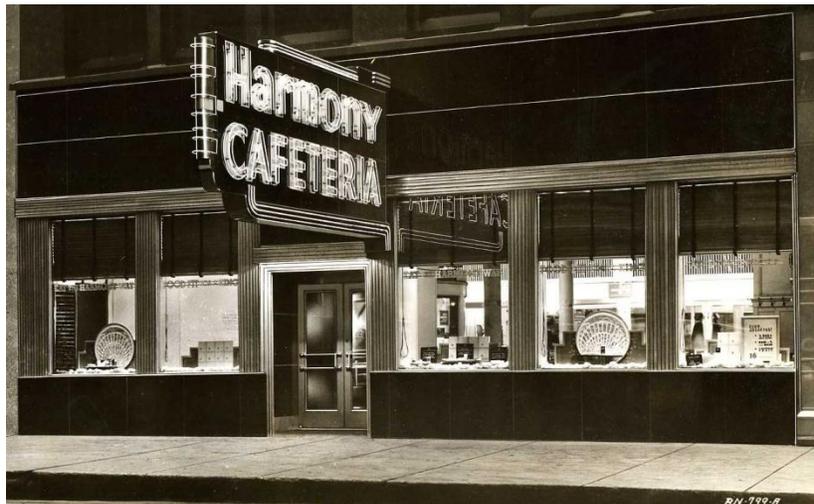


Figure 6. Helped by the federal government's "Modernize Main Street" campaign, 15 cities were selected to receive loans to update storefronts with structural glass, like this cafeteria in Dallas, Texas.

Created just a year after the Modernize Main Street campaign, the new structural glass storefront at 19 Allen Street added to the street's beauty and renown as a neighborhood of high-end specialty shops. The new storefront was a modern, artistic design that successfully

integrated with the Victorian house behind it. From 1937 through about 1954, the westernmost storefront of 19 Allen housed the Poinsettia Beauty Shop. In 1946, the property was purchased by Arthur E. Bausenbach and was described as “a mess.” The building provided a home and office for Bausenbach, his wife Helene, and their two children Ardith and Dr. Karin Bausenbach. Helene Bausenbach (1910-1991) was an employee of the company and married Arthur Bausenbach in 1949. Her mother, Sue Herington, lived in apartment in the circa 1870 house (Smith, 1950).

Arthur Bausenbach was an engineer who used the building for the offices of the Buffalo Metal Container Company, which made containers for jet propulsion engines. In 1949, the home and office combination of 19 Allen Street was featured in a *Buffalo Evening News* article that highlighted the modern interior of the Victorian house.



Figure 7. Interior staircase from 19 Allen Street that led from office to living quarters above. The character of the integration of the office with the family’s living space is shown with the peacefully slumbering family dog in this photo from 1949. *Ardie Bausenbach*.

To shut out the noise of the exterior, the house was air-conditioned and papered with spun-glass wallpaper. The second floor office opened to a roof-top balcony. The office and living room were used when the Bausenbachs gave large parties. During social events, twin desks in the office were covered with special cloths and were used as buffets.



Figure 8. As part of the design of the 1936 storefront, the circa-1870 house at 19 Allen was modified to open to the flat roof of the storefront which created a balcony. Photo from about 1950. *Ardie Bausenbach.*

The living room had a corner fireplace with benches following the radiating lines of the wall on both sides. Indirect cove lighting of low wattage made the room cozy and intimate for conversation. The living room was carpeted with a dove gray cotton chenille.

The bedroom, located three steps down from the living room, was covered in a rich burgundy wallpaper. A walk-in dressing closet with cedar-lined, built in drawers completed the bedroom configuration.

The kitchen was designed to be compact and was red and white in color. Arthur Basenbach designed a special door for the lower cupboards. To eliminate a corner that was difficult to access, he hinged two doors so they opened together and exposed the shelves which were at right angles to each other (Hoffman, 1949).



Figure 9. Helene Bausenbach in the interior of her modern apartment at 19 Allen in 1949. *Ardie Bausenbach.*



Figure 10. Birch desks in the Bausenbach office which doubled as a dining room. *Ardie Bausenbach.*

During the Bausenbachs' ownership of 19 Allen Street, from 1946 through the end of the Allentown Historic District period of significance (1963), the structural glass exterior was intact. In 2013, a member of the Bausenbach family shared: "the building had a black glass tile front with a white linear horizontal decorative stripe. The front of the building was unchanged when [Arthur Bausenbach] sold the building." The large expanse at the top of the storefront was covered with white structural glass framed by two thin black bands and a thick black band. Sometime after 1963, the structural glass was removed. In its place, a cement covering was applied and pressed to resemble brick. On the circa 1870 house, the Italianate gable brackets were removed and arched gable window was bricked in.



Figure 11. Vitrolite glass exterior at 19 Allen Street, photo from about 1949. *Ardie Bausenbach.*



Figure 12. The black Vitrolite glass with white band can be seen on ground level.
Photo from 1951. Ardie Bausenbach.



Figure 13. Circa 1950 photo shows black Vitrolite on storefront of 19 Allen. **Ardie Bausenbach.**

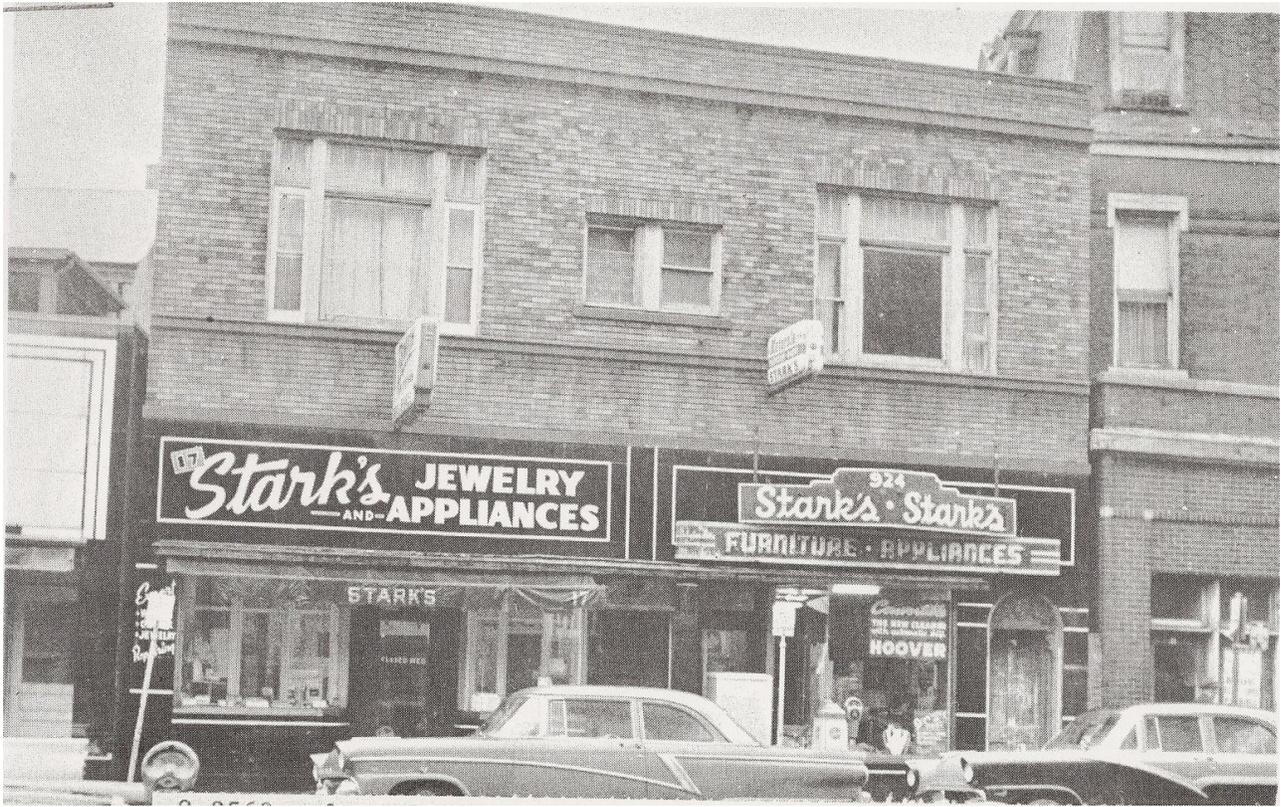


Figure 14. Photo of 15 Allen Street, circa 1955. The Vitrolite storefront of 19 Allen Street can be seen on the left of the image. *Buffalo History Museum.*



Figure 15. After 1963, the structural glass exterior of the 1936 storefront of 19 Allen was removed. *Allentown Association.*



Figure 16. The structural glass facade of 19 Allen's storefront was removed and cement installed pressed to resemble brick. *David F. Granville.*

The removal of the structural glass from 19 Allen Street may have caused irreversible damage to the structure's significance within the Allentown Historic Preservation District. Vitrolite stopped being manufactured in the U.S. in 1947. According to the National Park Service's preservation standards, when structural glass panels are missing, "a compatible substitute material may be considered if it conveys the same visual appearance as the historic material, i.e., color, size, and reflectivity" (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1984).

After 19 Allen Street was added to the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Allentown Historic Preservation District, the building's owner applied for tax credits since the building was designated as a contributing structure in the 2012 approved district nomination. As part of the process of evaluating a building's eligibility for tax credits, the National Register and National Historic Landmarks division considers the building's merits and makes a determination of its status as either a contributing or non-contributing structure before any work is performed.

With the loss of the building's Vitrolite, the National Register said "what a sad loss in regard to the architectural and historical evolution of the neighborhood." In the opinion of the National Register, the loss of the Vitrolite has resulted in the building being "too compromised," and hence the building's status is "noncontributing" to the district.



Figure 17. The circa 1870 brick house at 19 Allen Street once resembled 149-151 Allen, also built by W. Tifft. *Allentown Association.*

While the building has been architecturally compromised to the point where it may never again be considered a contributing structure within the Allentown Historic District, the basic structure of the 1870 building and 1936 storefront remains intact. Even so, the house possesses a significant architectural and historical importance to the Allentown community. Not only is it a remnant of the original residential character of Allen Street, but visually depicts the progress of Allen Street's evolution from a residential to a commercial district. The circa 1870 house remains as one of a dozen or so brick Italianate structures constructed by Wilson Tifft on or near Allen Street.

The Bausenbachs' well-documented ownership of the building during Allentown's resurgence as an arts and historic preservation district during the 1950s and early 1960s is historically significant. Through the media, their business and the many society clubs in which Mrs. Bausenbach was a member, the family contributed to public perception of Allentown as a resurgent urban neighborhood to invest, work, and live in during Allentown's fragile critical period of the 1950s and 1960s. The attractive characteristics of the Allentown community extolled by the Bausenbachs continue to serve as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization.

Despite the National Register's determination of 19 Allen Street as being a noncontributing structure, that should not deter current or future owners from restoring as much as possible the defining exterior characteristics of the circa 1870 Tifft-built house or the 1936 Rumschik-designed Art Deco storefront. A recommended long term objective, with the appropriate preservation organization approvals, would be to accomplish the following to mitigate specific concerns raised by the National Register:

- 1.) Visually restore the façade of the 1936 storefront with a material that would mimic structural glass, or use salvaged structural glass;
- 2.) Restore the Italianate gable brackets of the circa 1870 Tifft house, based on photographic documentation and study of similar Tifft houses at 149-151 Allen Street; and
- 3.) Restore the gable garret window.

While there is no guarantee these steps would return the building to contributing status within the historic district, it would certainly add to the beauty and integrity of the street. In any event, the historic preservation lesson learned at 19 Allen Street is clear: do not destroy significant historic elements of landmark buildings or buildings with a historic district. Who, when, and why the structural glass was removed from 19 Allen Street remains a mystery to be solved for another day. Yet the answers to those questions remain an academic exercise. The result of the action of the removal of the historic defining material has compromised the architectural historic integrity of the building.

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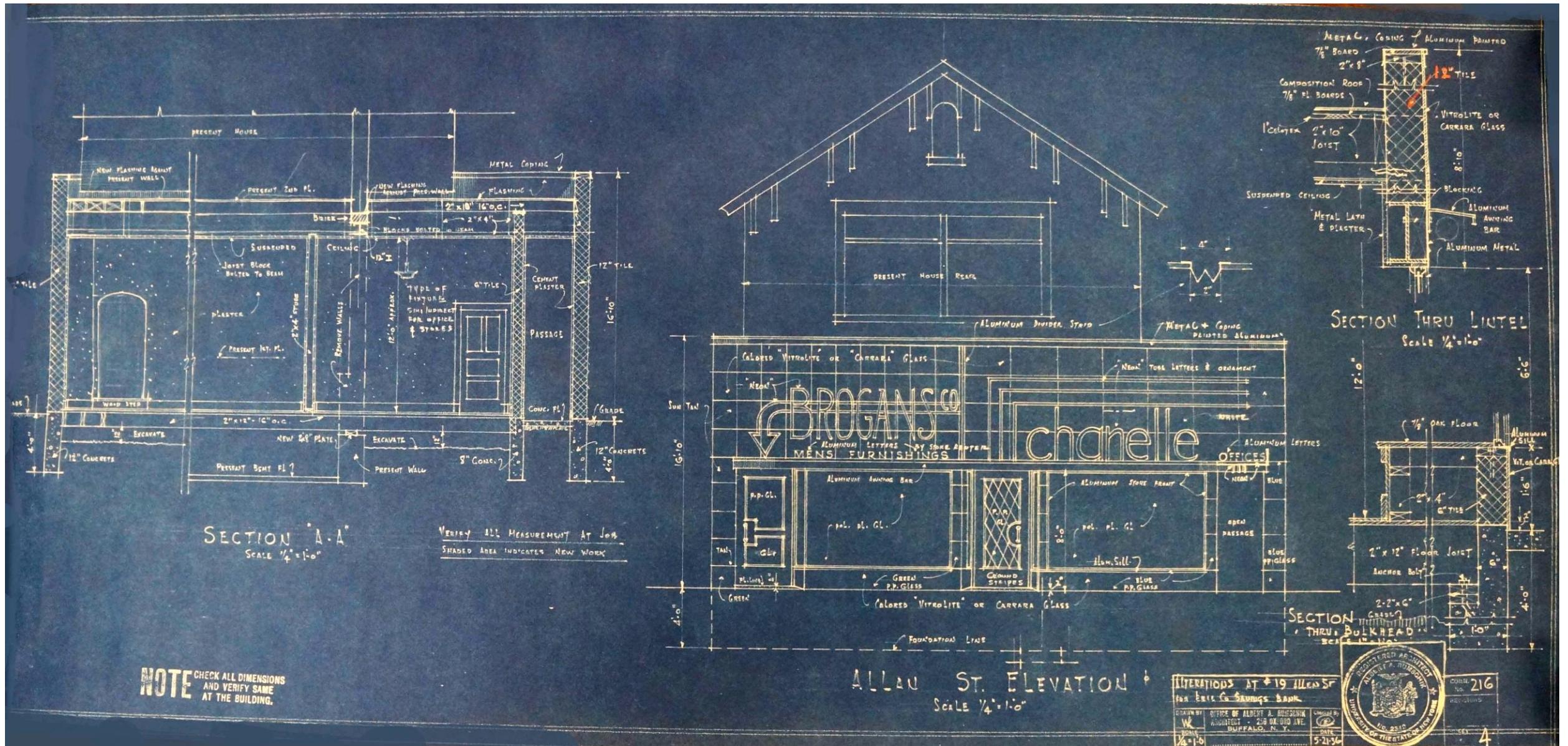


Figure 18. 19 Allen Street facade elevation, 1936. City of Buffalo.

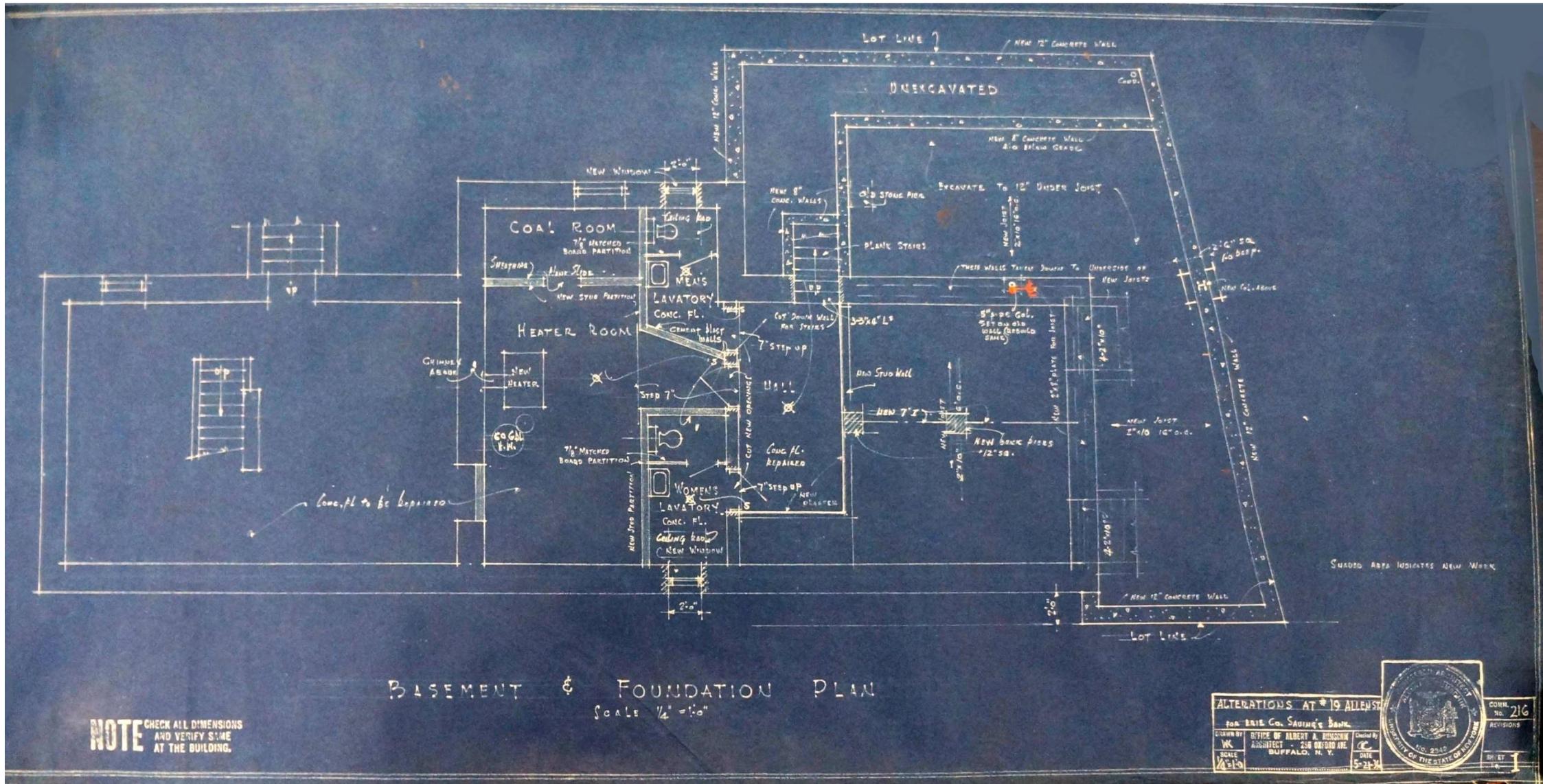


Figure 19. 19 Allen Street, foundation plan, 1936. City of Buffalo.

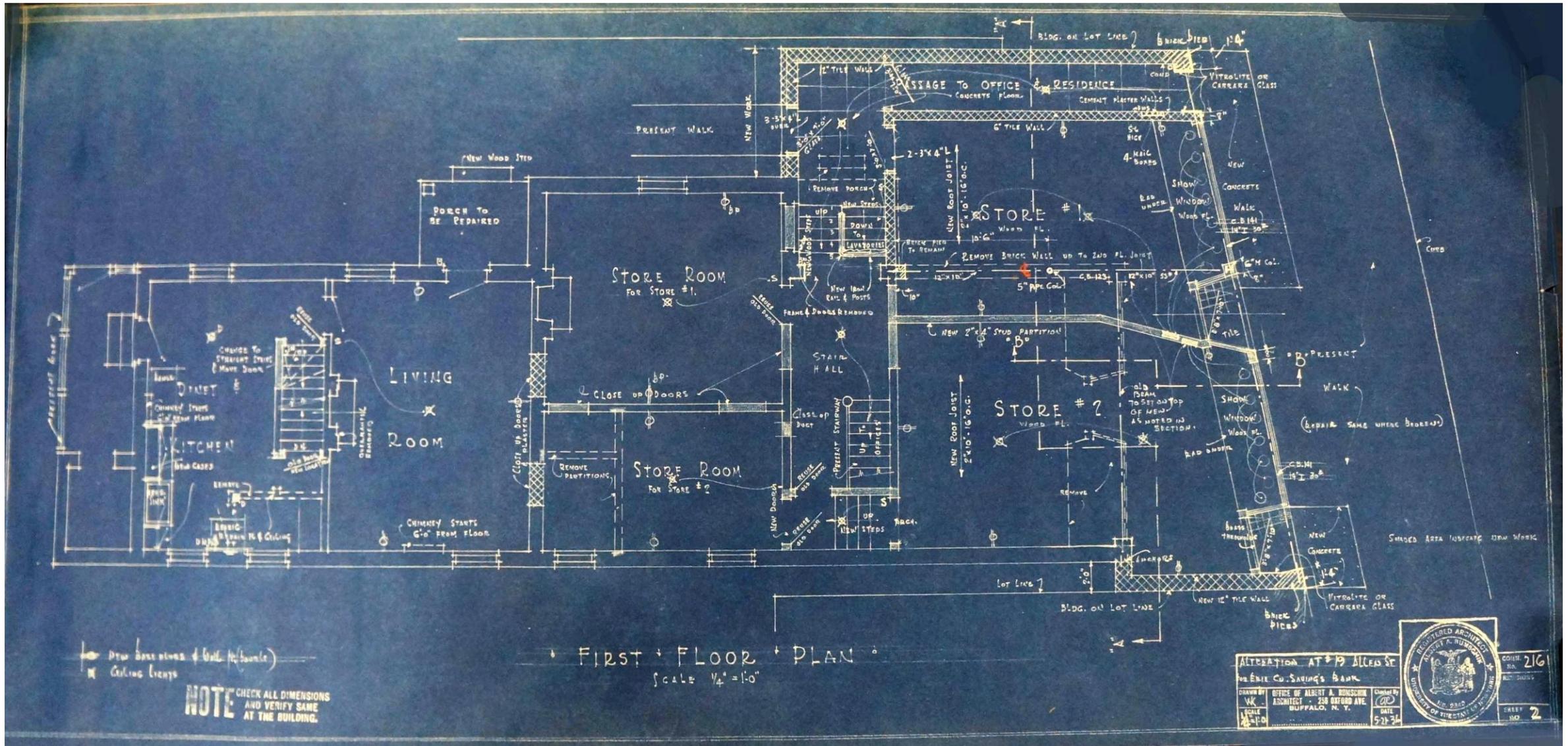


Figure 20. 19 Allen, 1936 first floor plan. City of Buffalo.

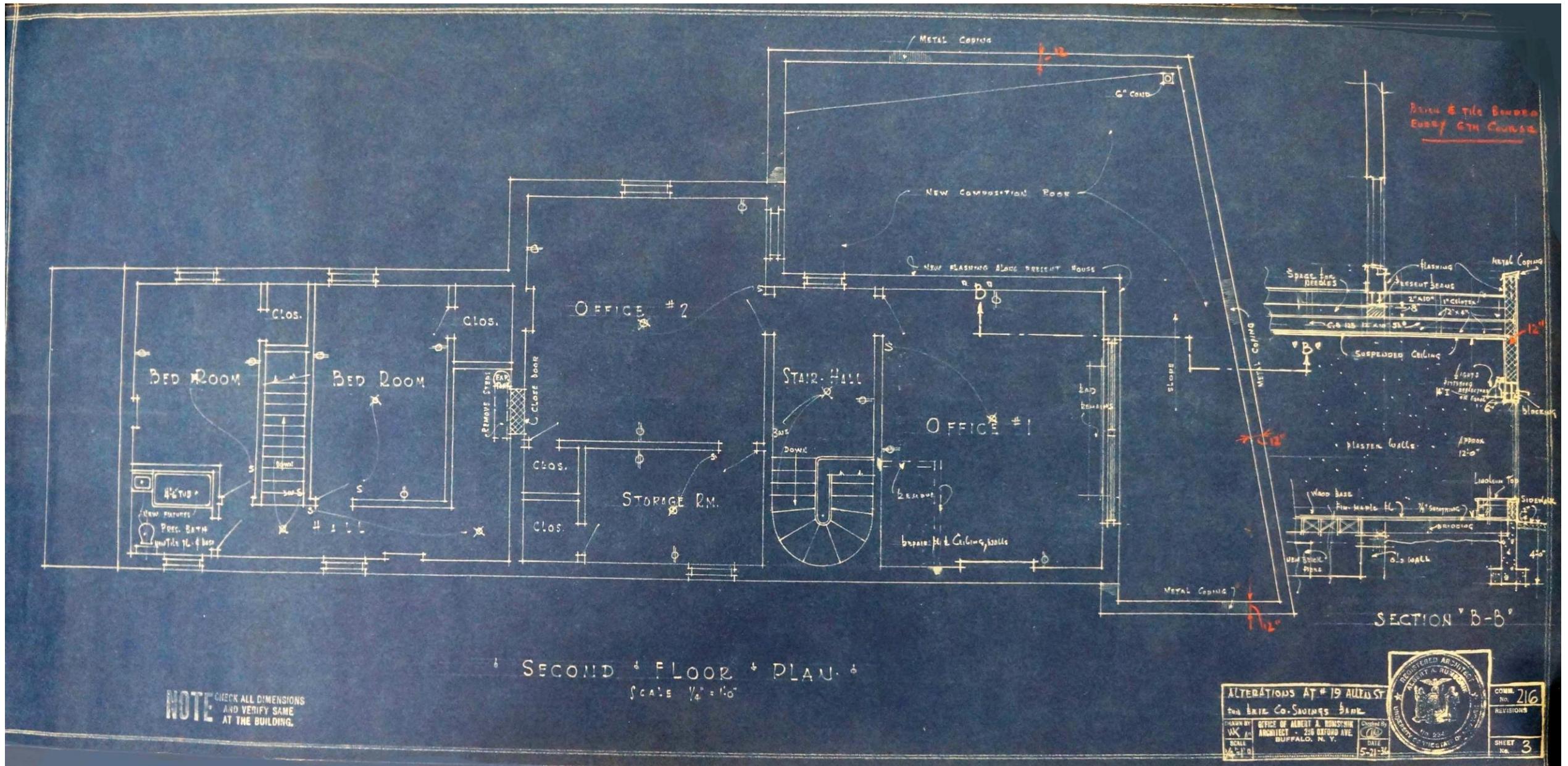


Figure 21. 19 Allen 1936 plan of second floor. City of Buffalo.