

The Coit House Mystique



**The Story of George Coit's Historic Home
414 Virginia Street
Buffalo, New York 14201**

*Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in the United States of America
as a Contributing Structure to the Allentown Historic Preservation District*

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The day will come when Buffalonians will regret the neglect and disregard of remaining homes of the past. - John Kelterhouse
Anderson, architect, referring to the Coit House, 1957.

I. INTRODUCTION

“The two young men procured a stock of drugs in New York. . . and brought them. . . to Buffalo.”¹ So begins a tale of the origins of the City of Buffalo when partners and life-long friends Charles Townsend and George Coit made their storied entrance in Buffalo New York on June 4, 1811. At 25 and 21 years of age, Townsend and Coit were young, handsome and rich. They made a memorable impression on everyone they met. Even though Townsend and Coit arrived in Buffalo nearly two hundred years ago, their influence extends to us today. Allentown, Buffalo’s premier historic preservation district, is home to an important cultural resource and connection to the pioneer era of Buffalo, the longtime home of George Coit, now known as the Coit House.

Heretofore, there has been far more folklore about the Coit House than facts. However, one fact is undeniably true: the house, a lone survivor from Buffalo’s early downtown settlement days, is extant and reasonably intact. It has been enlarged at least twice, moved, remodeled numerous times, neglected, and milked for income when divided into as many as eight apartments. It is prominently sited in Allentown and for decades has called to those that care about Buffalo. The Coit House has served as the inspiration for the formation of several of Buffalo’s historic preservation organizations. Many of Buffalo’s most famous architectural and historical gems built of stone or brick such as the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Larkin Administration Building, the George B. Post & Sons-designed Erie County Savings Bank, or the H. H. Richardson-designed Gratwick House on Delaware Avenue have been lost to fire, neglect or progress. Meanwhile, the stately yet humble wooden Coit House has been a witness to progress and demolition, enduring nearly two centuries of grandeur and decline, maintenance and apathy, and more snow and storms than Buffalonians would care to admit. This document tells the long-overdue story of the Coit House in Buffalo.

With Buffalo’s rich cache of historic architecture it is easy to take the Coit House for granted, yet its cultural significance cannot be overlooked. The Coit House is probably the most historic house in the City of Buffalo, not only because of its age and architectural style, but because of the towering significance of George Coit in the history of Western New York. He was a pioneer who came here before the War of 1812, built the house shortly after the British burned the village, and lived in and expanded the house through the Civil War. He built the last leg of the Erie Canal, including the Commercial Slip. His barge, the *Seneca Chief*, carried Governor Dewitt Clinton from his wharf, the Commercial Wharf, upon which stood the

warehouse of Townsend & Coit. The foundations of this enterprise have recently been uncovered and will be give shape to the new Naval Museum to be built on Commercial Slip.

One can only imagine the parade of historical figures who must have been entertained in the house, which was, until moved to Allentown in the late 1860s, located only a few short blocks from the Canal on Pearl Street.

The fact that there are original interior elements is amazing. You can actually know that Coit, his family, and his famous associates actually trod *that* floor, looked through *that* window, passed *that* door.

Since 2000, the Coit House has been owned by the Allentown Association, Inc. The property is once again at a crossroads because the Coit House will soon be sold to a new owner. Living in an authentic artifact of our earliest days would be a gift to anyone. The Coit House has seen nearly two hundred years of Buffalo's history and yet the oldest house in the city is confronted once again with the need to change.

Cultural Significance of the Coit House

The Coit House is a significant historic, architectural and cultural resource for the City of Buffalo and entire region. The Coit House is the place where plans were laid and deals were made for the commercial growth of the City of Buffalo. This house with all of its changes was, when moved, still *the* home of George Coit. The movers and shakers of the growing city socialized in the Coit House. They observed the amalgam of the Federal and Greek Revival architectural styles. They enjoyed being in the Coit House which reached back to the beginnings of growth after the War of 1812.

The house is essentially architecturally intact. Unlike other house restorations, it is not a matter of finding some lost feature which was removed during the Coit era. The Coit family made the choice to make most of the historic architectural changes that can be observed in the house today. As will be disclosed later in this document, certain interior features have been modified through the years. However, the current Coit House staircase chosen by George Coit as an improvement, is desirable from an historical perspective.

At the time the building was moved from its original downtown site to the Virginia Street site, it represented a unique capsule of Buffalo and Coit family history intertwined. The moving of the Coit House joined that history to the then-emerging history of Allentown. The Coit House is a prize for Allentown to have! Because of the significant history associated with the Coit House, there are at least five distinct reasons why the Coit House is important to the Western New York region (listed in order of importance):

1. **Representative example of Buffalo housing during its pioneer era (soon after the burning of Buffalo)** The Coit House's most important significance is that it is an example of the type of housing that existed in downtown Buffalo from the early 1800s until about 1850. While the earliest examples of architecture and housing were lost in 1813 when the Village of Buffalo was burned to the ground by the British during the War of 1812, the housing that existed before the war was very similar to the housing constructed in 1814 and thereafter.

Construction techniques changed considerably after 1850. The majority of the Coit House as it stands today was constructed prior to 1850. Therefore, the hand-planed woodwork throughout the house is a tangible link to the type of housing that would have existed in pioneer-era Buffalo when the Erie Canal was being envisioned and built. Regardless of the Coit House's exact date of construction, it is one of the earliest homes in Buffalo and was constructed soon after the burning of Buffalo in 1813.

2. **Home of George Coit, one of the “fathers” of Buffalo and associated with the Erie Canal** Buffalo had some extraordinary residents during its early period who laid the foundations for a community that would one day be great. Coit was instrumental in the early formation of Buffalo as the terminus of the Erie Canal. Of the four “fathers” of Buffalo - those that funded the construction of the Buffalo harbor - Charles Townsend, George Coit, Samuel Wilkeson and Oliver Forward, only Coit's house is extant. The Coit House is not only the residence of a great Buffalonian, but the only one extant that has a connection with a founder of the Buffalo Harbor and the Erie Canal. It is possible that many conversations that had a lasting impact on the development of Buffalo and the Erie Canal occurred in the Coit House. Coit so loved his house he lived in it for over 50 years. He was a very wealthy and influential man who could have easily purchased a newer home in a less commercial location than where the Coit House was located at 53 Pearl Street. Besides the canal itself, the Coit House may be Buffalo's last tangible link to the Erie Canal.
3. **Excellent example of residential Federal style architecture as it was built in Buffalo and Erie County** While the Coit House is an excellent example of residential Federal style of architecture, its significance is increased because of its rarity - it is one of only a handful of remaining examples of a very common style during the first half of the 19th century. It is the best example in the City of Buffalo and among the best extant examples in Erie County.
4. **One of the oldest, if not the oldest, houses in Buffalo** The Coit House has traditionally been considered to be “the oldest house in Buffalo.” While this may be true, the exact date of construction cannot be definitely ascertained at this time due to the lack of empirical data. An historic structure report is required to help identify the exact date of construction and changes. Certainly the two floors of the west side of the house, including entry, are the oldest portion of the building. The building is not on its original site and many parts of the building have been modified through the years. This, however, does not diminish the Coit House's historic, cultural and architectural value. The changes in the Coit House are typical of an old house that has been lived in and adapted through the years, meeting the needs of its occupants. There is a significant amount of historic fabric remaining in the house and it is important to document what is there, from each period of its evolution.
5. **Symbol of the historic preservation movement in Buffalo** Most of the histories of

houses in Buffalo and the Coit House in particular, focus on the very early period of its construction. However, the Coit house took on a new life in the mid-20th century. After World War II and the exodus of cities for suburbia occurred, concerned citizens arose and the preservation movement in America's cities began. These movements attempted to save the culture and history of the founders of the community. Buffalo, along with many cities, began losing its history and buildings by the hundreds and instead of being replaced by more beautiful buildings as in previous generations, many were replaced by parking lots. Buffalo suffered its greatest loss in 1950 with the demolition of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Larkin Administration building, only to be replaced by a parking lot. By the mid-1950s, several Buffalonians began efforts to preserve the Coit House as a representative example of Buffalo's pioneer era. By the late-1960s, the effort intensified when the house narrowly escaped demolition. One historic preservation organization, the Landmark Society of the Niagara Frontier, was formed directly because of the efforts involved to save the Coit House. Thus the Coit House became a preservation rallying point in the 20th and 21st centuries, becoming an iconic symbol of the Buffalo historic preservation movement. Moved from its original site rather than being demolished, the house is also an example of conservation and re-use instead of use and disposal as is far too often witnessed in America's consumer-focused society.

Besides the preservation efforts focused on the Coit House, the Coit House's presence in Allentown has helped to make it the premier historic district in Buffalo and one of the finest in the U.S. The Coit House was specifically mentioned in the Allentown Historic Preservation District's listing on the National Register of Historic Places in the U.S. from 1979.

II. COIT HOUSE EARLY OCCUPANTS

The cultural and historic significance of a house cannot be separated from its inhabitants and builders. Indeed, the Coit House's significance is tied to the importance of its builder and first occupant, George Coit, who lived in the house for nearly 50 years.

George Coit (1790-1865) Mr. George Coit, for whom the Coit House is named, was one of Buffalo's most important early citizens and has been called "one of the fathers and founders of Buffalo." Coit built the Coit House and lived there from the time of its construction until his death in 1865.

Early Life of George Coit

George Coit was born in Norwich, Connecticut on June 10, 1790, the son of Benjamin Coit, Jr. (1759-1841), a merchant, shipbuilder and vessel commander in the Revolutionary War. Coit grew up in Norwich and worked as a clerk in a drug store with his partner and life-long friend, Charles Townsend (1786-1847).

Townsend and Coit came to Buffalo in June, 1811 and both invested their savings, married, raised families and remained in their adopted city until their deaths. Townsend and Coit's friendship was truly legendary. During their partnership that lasted over 40 years, they

used and owned everything in common and through marriage, their families later became united. Townsend and Coit each named their first born son for the other: Charles T. Coit (b. 2/14/1819) and George C. Townsend (b. 9/25/1821).

When Townsend and Coit came to Buffalo, they immediately rose to the forefront of the community. Not only did they become important and prominent businessmen, but they arrived in the village with ample supplies and were most certainly the first who arrived possessing capital. They were among the wealthiest residents of the village with a population of about 500. They came with 20 tons of merchandise, a heavy stock for that time and opened a drug store.

In 1812 they bought the property on Swan Street from Main Street to Pearl Street, known as Lot No. 39 from Mr. Pratt, Jr. They paid \$2,020 for the lot - \$2,000 for the property and \$20 to cover the cost of a silk dress for Mrs. Pratt. There was a frame building upon the premises when they purchased it from Mr. Pratt.² Townsend and Coit opened their drug store on the first floor and the two young men lived together in the rooms on the second floor.³

A year later in 1813, Townsend and Coit lost many of their possessions except for the real estate they owned when their drug store was burned to the ground with the rest of the Village of Buffalo during the War of 1812. Townsend and Coit did manage to save some of their goods when they left Buffalo the night before the fire and escaped to Williamsville. While some with less fortitude would have forever abandoned their newly adopted city in its hour of need, Townsend and Coit returned and rebuilt their drug business.

Coit is associated with another incident relating to the War of 1812. During the bloody battle of Lundy's Lane (Niagara Falls, Ontario) on July 25, 1814 in which 860 Americans were killed and General Winfield Scott severely wounded, one of the soldiers who was killed was a young man from Norwich named Joseph Kinney, a Captain of the 25th Infantry. Capt. George Howard wrote a letter on July 27, stating that Lieutenant Seymour arrived at Buffalo with a "boat load of dead and wounded, among the former I found my dear friend and companion, Captain Joseph Kinney, who received a musket ball through the breast near the close of the action which terminated his existence in about 40 minutes. He was a brave soldier, a sincere friend and I believe a pure Christian. On the 27 July 1814 I buried my old friend Jos. Kinney, Captain 25th Infantry and Capt. Goodrich of the 11th Infantry and several others in the burial place on the flats of Buffalo. A few friends attended and we planted the sprig of copia upon the consecrated mound." The location was the Franklin Street cemetery. George Coit must have known Kinney (they came from the same town) and must have been instrumental in his being buried at the cemetery. A monument, now located at Forest Lawn cemetery says: "Memorial tribute to Joseph Kinney, of Norwich, Connecticut, senior captain in the Twenty-fifth Regiment United States Army, shot through the breast at the battle of Bridgewater, July 25, 1814. To the friendship of George Coit, Esq., his relatives are indebted for his burial at this place. Erected by a brother, July 1829.

From 1808 until 1821, Erie and Niagara County were one, until Erie County was created in 1821.⁴ Coit's partner Townsend was appointed Judge of Niagara County in 1813, a position he held until 1826.

George Coit married Charles Townsend's sister, Hannah Townsend on April 4, 1816 and together they had eight children: 1. Sarah Frances (b. 11/11/1816), 2. Charles T. (b. 2/14/1819), 3. George (b. 3/22/1821), 4. John Townsend (b. 5/3/1824), 5. Frances E. (b. 6/4/1826), 6.

Nathaniel T. (b. 10/26/1829), 7. Eliza Ripley (b. 6/23/1832) and 8. William Benjamin (b. 3/2/1835). Sadly, Hannah Townsend died on 3/11/1835, shortly after the birth of her last child. Coit married two times after Hannah's death: Mary Smith Atterbury on July 28, 1837 and Emeline P. Barton in 1841. Coit had no children from these two marriages.

George Coit's Connection to the Erie Canal and Buffalo Harbor

Townsend and Coit were certainly in the right place at the right time to capitalize on the explosive growth that Buffalo was to experience from the construction of the Erie Canal. Although the Erie Canal had been discussed since 1808, it wasn't until 1817 that many people felt the project would become a reality. It was that year that the New York State legislature authorized the construction of the Erie Canal and provided \$7 million in funding towards its construction. From that time, it was hoped that Buffalo would be named the western terminus of the canal.

The need for a commodious harbor at the western terminus of the Erie canal was appreciated as soon as the canal project began. In their report of February 17, 1817, the canal commissioners said: "It would be expedient to connect the west end of the great canal with the waters of Lake Erie, through the mouth of Buffalo Creek... It is important to have, at that end, a safe harbor, capable, without much expense, of sufficient enlargement for the accommodation of all boats and vessels, that a very extensive trade may hereafter require to enter and exchange their lading there."⁵

Townsend and Coit must have been excited by the prospect of the construction of the Erie Canal and passionately believed that Buffalo was going to be the termination of the Erie Canal because they became involved from the very inception with the construction of Buffalo Harbor and the termination of the Erie Canal. 1817 marked a pivotal year for Townsend and Coit. That year, they sold their drug business to Dr. John E. Marshall and entered the shipping business.

As Townsend and Coit became investors in Buffalo's harbor, they wisely changed their business interests and became involved in Buffalo's shipping business. They first got started in the storage business and soon became lake and Erie Canal forwarders. Townsend & Coit received and forwarded goods by wagons between Albany and Buffalo and then onto Lake Erie by their vessels. Their first warehouse was at the foot of Commercial Street at the mouth of the Little Buffalo Creek. Completed about 1818, the warehouse was shown to all visitors as one of the finest buildings, if not *the* finest, in the village.⁶ The foundation of this brick warehouse, known as the Old Red Warehouse, has recently been unearthed at the Erie Canal Harbor Project and it is planned for reconstruction. They also built a dock and frame building that was used for many years. A book that was published in 1825 to commemorate the opening of the Erie Canal shows two images of Buffalo.⁷ In the image entitled "Buffalo Harbor from the Village," the foreground shows the Erie Canal at Erie Street with Little Buffalo Creek flowing into Big Buffalo Creek. The Old Red Warehouse in which Charles Townsend and George Coit started their fortunes is to the right of the Commercial Slip.⁸

Even before the Erie Canal opened, Townsend & Coit owned many of the earlier ships and steamboats that navigated the great lakes. They owned the first ship registered at Buffalo Creek in about 1816 called *Hannah*, named for George Coit's wife and Charles Townsend's sister.

In 1819, New York State authorized a survey of the mouth of the Buffalo Creek paid for by residents of Niagara/Erie County, to determine whether this natural port could support an industrial harbor.⁹ Many people, especially those who lived in the nearby Village of Black Rock, thought that Buffalo would never have a suitable harbor. The State authorized a loan of \$12,000 to build the harbor, but it had to be secured with a bond and mortgage of twice that amount, \$24,000. If the State officials approved of the harbor when finished, they would take it over and cancel the debt. If not, Buffalonians putting up the collateral would have to pay the bond and reimburse themselves out of tolls collected by the use of the harbor. This proposal frightened even those who feverishly hoped Buffalo would have a harbor. Most backed down, but Charles Townsend, George Coit and Oliver Forward did not. Samuel Wilkeson later joined the other three and the State's offer was accepted, each giving bonds for \$8,000. These men knew the harbor was the necessary first step to have Buffalo named as the western terminus of the Erie Canal.

Against all odds and terrible weather, by 1821 under the supervision of Wilkeson, a pier was built, and a channel formed of sufficient depth to allow ordinary sized ships into Buffalo Creek. This success came about in the face of predictions that construction of the harbor would fail. Bob Watson describes the incredible tale:

Wilkeson recruited a work force in the village and the surrounding countryside and, in the summer of 1820, began building a pier that would ultimately extend about 800 feet into the lake and discourage the flow of sand toward the sandbar. This protective pier he sturdily fashioned from timber cribs filled with stone and rock nestled in massive cushions of brush. The breakwater was scarcely finished when it was exposed to a sudden September gale. The villagers cheered as the pier held fast. Proving its seaworthiness, it held fast that winter, too, and for many winters and summers thereafter.

But the pier, although an essential part of the harbor-making enterprise, did not itself create a harbor. The offending sandbar off the mouth of Buffalo Creek still had to be dealt with. Wilkeson daringly proposed to deal with it by moving the mouth of the creek 60 rods to the south, away from the obstruction. And he proposed to move its mouth by forcing the creek itself to dredge its own new channel. His idea was to dam the creek at exactly the right place and let the force of the current gouge its way through the sand and gravel, straight out to the lake.

The orthodontic surgery he was performing on the mouth of the Buffalo Creek was tricky and complex, and Wilkeson could ill afford any distractions. But just when the operation seemed to be going well, Nature dealt him a blow to the midsection that would have discouraged a less resolute man to the point of drowning his sorrow at the nearest tavern. A freak wind and then a torrential rainstorm that did odd things to the water levels in both creek and lake suddenly threatened to undo everything Wilkeson had accomplished so far.

Wilkeson, keeping his head, sent out a hurried call for volunteers, and the villagers, responding, all ran down to the waterfront. Drenched to the skin in the unceasing rain, they labored feverishly through the day and by torchlight through

the night to make the rising floodwaters work to Wilkeson's advantage instead of washing away his handiwork.

Triumphantly, if not miraculously, the raging current in Buffalo Creek was made to gouge the new channel, straight and true, into the lake. The deepened channel, nurtured to permanency, gave Buffalo a navigable harbor. Boats forever after would enter and leave it with splendid ease. The job, from pier to channel, had taken 221 working days.¹⁰

While the harbor was complete, Buffalo's position as an important port was not yet secure. Townsend and Coit came to the rescue again. Buffalo's first Lake Erie steamboat, *Walk in the Water*, had wrecked and a new one had to be built in 1822. The steamboat company was not confident with the harbor that had been built in Buffalo and wanted to construct their new ship, *Superior*, in Black Rock. Townsend and Coit, along with Samuel Wilkeson, Ebenezer Johnson, Elijah Efner and Ebenezer Walden issued a bond to the steamboat company promising to pay them \$150 a day for every day the harbor was unusable after May 1. The steamboat company was impressed and built the *Superior* in Buffalo. It was completed in the spring of 1823 and the ship found a clear, unobstructed channel into the lake. It was a day of great rejoicing and triumph for Buffalo. The successful creation of the harbor at Buffalo Creek was the first step in helping Buffalo secure its crowning glory, as the western terminus of the Erie Canal, which would officially open in October, 1825.

After the Buffalo Harbor was complete, Coit ensured that the Erie Canal would terminate in Buffalo rather than in Black Rock. Oliver Forward became Buffalo's delegate on the Erie Canal project. Forward was Coit's financial partner in the creation of the Buffalo Harbor as well as his Pearl Street neighbor. Like Townsend, Oliver Forward became a Niagara County judge at the courthouse on Washington Street where the Buffalo and Erie County Central Library now stands. In 1819, Forward lobbied the New York Senate, selected as the most competent person to solicit for the termination of the Erie Canal at Buffalo. In 1820 Buffalo was chosen as the terminus. In 1821 Forward was elected to the State Senate and he supported every measure that was for the general good of Buffalo.¹¹

Even though Buffalo had been named as the terminus of the Erie Canal in 1820, by March 1823 it was believed that Peter B. Porter of Black Rock had persuaded the Erie Canal Commissioners to redesignate Black Rock the western terminus of the Erie Canal. In response, Buffalonians cried out loudly to the Canal Commission in Albany. Coit, among others who had staked so much on the improvements to the Buffalo Harbor had significant financial interest in ensuring that Buffalo was to be the terminus of the Erie Canal. In July 1823, a group of citizens led by Louis Le Couteux, Samuel Wilkeson and George Coit had a "monster" meeting to see what could be done to ensure that Buffalo was selected to be the terminus of the Erie Canal. Those at the meeting created a resolution to privately make improvements to the canal and provide uninterrupted canal navigation upon the margin of the Niagara River from Porter's Basin to Squaw Island and to dam the arm of the Niagara River.¹² For these improvements the citizens of Buffalo raised \$11,415 to be paid to Henry B. Lyman (apparently a contractor). Townsend & Coit became the first and highest pledger, donating \$1,000.¹³

Through these actions, along with the intercession of Forward, Coit and other

Buffalonians, the Canal Commissioners were convinced to keep Buffalo as the Canal's western terminus; ground was broken for the Buffalo portion of the Erie Canal on August 9, 1823. Two years later on October 26, 1825 Buffalo celebrated the opening of the Erie Canal and Forward publicly spoke on behalf of the citizens of Buffalo about the Canal in front of the Washington Street Courthouse.¹⁴

Perhaps George Coit's most significant involvement with the Erie Canal came when Townsend and Coit were awarded the final contract to dig the Erie Canal in Buffalo. Coit was responsible for the excavation of the Little Buffalo Creek and its connection with the Erie Canal.¹⁵

To memorialize their contributions to the Erie Canal, George Coit along with Charles Townsend and Samuel Wilkeson are depicted in a frieze with Governor DeWitt Clinton called the "Wedding of the Waters," sculpted on the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society Building, originally built as the New York State Building for the Pan American Exposition.

Before the Erie Canal opened, transporting goods from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean was time consuming, costly and difficult. Businesses were in operation called "forwarders" that moved goods over lake, river and land. The Erie Canal dramatically changed business for forwarders when it opened in 1825, providing a direct water route between Lake Erie and the Hudson River. The Canal superceded the Oswego and Niagara River route of transportation as well as some of the older forwarding firms such as Porter, Barton & Co. who used wagons between Black Rock and Lewiston and Lake Ontario.

On the Hudson River, two towns, rivals for the commerce of the Erie Canal - Troy and Albany - opened the forwarding business. Sheldon Thompson, owner of a forwarding business in Black Rock known as Thompson & Co. along with Townsend & Coit in Buffalo were the chief pioneers of the trade.¹⁶ They both joined forces with the Griffith & Co. of Troy to form the "Troy and Erie Line" of Erie Canal boats, running from Lake Erie to the Hudson River, the first, and for many years, the most extensive line to operate throughout the entire Canal.¹⁷ Townsend & Coit's business expanded into a large and prosperous one. In 1836 S. Thompson & Co. and Townsend & Coit, the two principal forwarding companies in the area, consolidated as Coit, Kimberly & Co.

So successful was Townsend & Coit in the Erie Canal business that Coit even built his own slip associated with the Erie Canal and called appropriately, the Coit Slip. The slip was a cul-de-sac running east from the Erie Basin near the Buffalo River/Buffalo Harbor.¹⁸ Unlike most of the slips and components of the Erie Canal and its Buffalo extensions, the Coit Slip was built privately with Townsend & Coit owning all the land surrounding the Coit Slip. While George Coit retired in the 1840s, he continued to manage and have business dealings with the Erie Canal and Coit Slip for many years thereafter.¹⁹ Most of the Coit Slip was destroyed when the Erie Canal was filled in during the 20th century, but the stub of the Coit Slip survives near the current Shanghai Red's (formerly Crawdaddy's) restaurant.

Coit's Final Days

Townsend & Coit owned a great deal of real estate and were very successful during the active period of their business, from 1811-1844, after which Townsend and Coit retired. Coit was a prominent member of the Buffalo Historical Society, the Buffalo Board of Trade and of the

Water Works Company. Coit died on May 9, 1865, and upon his death, the local press noted that he was the last of the men who built the Buffalo harbor.²⁰ Coit outlived Townsend, who died in 1847, Forward, who died of cholera in 1833 and Wilkeson who died in 1843. George Coit's approach to life is reflected in his burial plot in Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery. Located in Section "X" and Lot 11 in the cemetery, it is one of the largest and most prominently sited lots in Forest Lawn. It is located in an old section on a hill overlooking Delaware Avenue. The lot was purchased by George Coit for his family - besides George, nearly 50 of his descendants are buried on the lot. While one of the largest and costliest sites in Forest Lawn, George Coit's own grave site is marked by a simple marble marker placed on the ground. George Coit's great vision and humility is reflected in many aspects of his life, his home and his grave site.

Besides the Coit Slip and the Coit House, George Coit is also remembered in Coit Street, located off Broadway Street in Buffalo. The street was named for Coit when it was created in 1872, a few years after Coit's death.

III. HISTORY OF THE COIT HOUSE

Swan Street Site (Circa 1820 - 1867)

It is difficult to separate the life of George Coit from the origins of the Coit House. Regardless of the exact date of construction, it was, first and foremost, the Coit family home located in the midst of downtown Buffalo. Its address for half a century was 53 Pearl Street at the south east corner of Swan Street, at the rear of the lot where Townsend and Coit built their original drug store business (burned by the British in 1813). Coit lived there from 1812 until his death with the majority of his time in the Coit House. At some point, Charles Townsend moved to his own house on the east side of Main Street between Chippewa and Tupper Streets.

The Coit House was home to George, his wife Hannah, their 8 children and Coit's two subsequent wives Mary and Emeline. Coit was well known as a man of honor and integrity. He was a long-standing member of the First Presbyterian Church near his home on the corner of Main Street and Niagara Street. Coit's extraordinary love for his children was legendary; he wanted to make sure that they were well taken care of before they left home. All his children stayed in the Coit House until they were married and settled in the world with the exception of his son John who went to Europe for theological studies. The house was enlarged twice to accommodate the large Coit family that by all accounts was remarkably affectionate and extremely attached to each other.²¹

Although Coit had enormous wealth, he never left his house on Pearl Street at Swan Street, even though Buffalo's rapid growth quickly changed the street from a residential district to a business and commercial one. Even in the heart of the business district, George Coit continued to occupy his original homestead for nearly 50 years.

In addition to the family, Coit usually had 3 or 4 servants living in the home. In 1850, Coit had two servants from Ireland, Mary Ann Morgan and Eliza G. Hill and a 25-year old man, Peter Glazier from Germany. In 1860, the Coit family had three female servants: Annie Roach, Margaret Kelly and Catherine Tuff and 26-year old John House, again from Germany. In 1860, there were 11 people in all living in the Coit House.

Most of the Coit family births occurred in the Coit house and there have been several Coit family funerals held in the Coit House. In 1865, George Coit died in the Coit House, after a “painful” illness²² and was later his funeral was held from the residence. Other funerals that were held in the house was Hannah Townsend, the first Mrs. Coit, as well as Nathaniel T. Coit and William Benjamin Coit, who died in 1835-1836. It is also likely that Mary Smith Atterbury’s funeral, the second Mrs. Coit, was also held in the house.

Date of Initial Construction (Circa 1818)

As stated previously, without an historic structure report, it is difficult to date the house’s construction. The best documentation as to the age of the house comes from William Ketchum. He wrote in 1865 that George Coit “preferred to occupy his plain unpretentious residence on Pearl and Swan Streets, where he had first pitched his tent more than 50 years ago.”²³ This implies that Coit lived in the Coit House for 50 years, establishing the date of construction at about 1815. One thing is known - by the 1860s, the house was already considered an old, landmark house. In 1863, Buffalo resident Oliver Steele called the Coit House “well known,” referencing it as a landmark that would be familiar to all Buffalonians.²⁴ Most of the old neighborhood houses had by that time been displaced by commercial buildings, a fate that would befall the Coit House by the late 1860s.

It is quite possible that the oldest portion of the house was built in 1814 or 1815. Construction of houses did occur soon after the burning of Buffalo. Many people built substantial houses, or the best they could, as it was believed that the U.S. government would compensate Buffalo’s citizens for their losses from the burning of Buffalo by the British. (Reportedly, most had to wait almost 10 years.) It is known that by May 17, 1814, the weekly newspaper the *Buffalo Gazette* reported that 23 houses had been built. Architect John Anderson speculated that the oldest section of the Coit House was built by 1816 since Coit was married and started having children frequently after November 1816. It is known that Townsend & Coit built the Old Red Warehouse, a very substantial building at Little Buffalo Creek by 1818, so Coit certainly had the means to build an expensive house by that period. Anderson also speculated that the house was built far prior to 1825 because of an early image of the Village of Buffalo published that year shows houses similar in appearance to the Coit House in a neighborhood densely built where in the vicinity of where Pearl and Swan Streets are located.²⁵ This seems a reasonable argument, because if the house would likely have been constructed much later than that, say in the late 1820s or early 1830s, the house would have been constructed of stone or brick because housing was a favored way of publicly displaying wealth and status. In other words, Coit would not have constructed a frame building in the Federal style in 1830. Furthermore, in 1828, Coit was reported living at the back of Townsend & Coit’s lot on Pearl Street at the corner of Swan Street. Therefore, it seems reasonable that the current house was there prior to 1828.

We know the western portion of the house was constructed prior to 1833 due to fire codes of the time. Anderson further speculated that the Coit House’s eastern addition was built prior to 1833 because of a law that historian Frank Severance referenced stating no new structures could be built of wood after that time. Severance wrote “in the older part of the city the establishment

of fire limits hastened the disappearance of wooden houses. In 1833 it was forbidden to erect frame buildings south of Mohawk between the east side of Pearl and the west side of Washington Streets. Many of the early frame houses, however, of honest and substantial construction, continued as comfortable homes down to comparatively recent times. Among them is the George Coit house, at Pearl and Swan. This last, a substantial and roomy house, had undergone enlargement before its removal to Virginia Street where it may still be seen.²⁶ While the law may have been in effect, it is also possible that the additions to existing frame structures within the district may not have been as scrupulously policed as new construction from the ground up.

The additions to the Coit House were completed before 1850. An atlas of Buffalo from 1850 and a fire insurance map from 1854, the earliest maps that show the sizes of buildings, clearly prove that the front portion of the Coit House was the same size in 1850 as the building on Virginia Street: therefore, all enlargements were made prior to 1850. What is now the eastern portion of the house was built to the edge of the Townsend & Coit lot on Pearl Street.

After George Coit's death, Charles T. Coit was the last family member to live in the Coit House in 1867 and he later moved to 64 Delaware Avenue. In 1949, the obituary of Walter H. Coit stated that the Coit House was built in 1818.²⁷

Virginia Street Site (1867-present)

Perhaps more than just ironic, the land that the Coit House is currently on was owned by Coit's partner, Charles Townsend, and his family until being sold to Anson U. Becker²⁸, a commission merchant who lived next door at 418 Virginia Street (built about 1867 or 1868).

The Coit House was moved to its current site at 414 Virginia Street in the autumn of 1867 by Anson Becker.²⁹ On the original site of the Coit House, in 1868 or 1869, the Coit Block, a three story brick business building, was erected. It was razed in 1906 for an addition to the M&T Bank building. The site is presently a parking lot. If the Coit House wasn't moved to Virginia Street in the late 1860s, it surely would have been lost forever.

From the time that the Coit House was moved to Virginia Street, it appears that the house was leased for income and soon was divided into several apartments. In 1869 Becker sold the house to Lewis Baker³⁰ and later that same year the Coit House sold to Nancy Jones, widow of B. B. Jones³¹. In 1878, Nancy Jones sold the Coit House to Betsey E. Tregilgus and Jennie E. B. Westcott³², who died on 4/26/1879. By 1880, there were 11 people from at least 5 different families renting in the Coit House including Emma Dinwoodie, a dressmaker.

The Westcott family owned the house for about 45 years. Jennie Westcott's husband Byron H. Westcott retained ownership of the Coit House from 1878 until 1923. The house was then sold to the Packard Buffalo Motor Co., Inc.³³ and in 1925 sold to the Virginia-Park Corporation.³⁴

The Coit House has lived somewhat a charmed life, narrowly escaping destruction time and time again. The seemingly insignificant transfer to the Virginia-Park Corporation was indeed important. Since the mid-1920s, there were behind-the-scenes efforts to construct a new music hall in Buffalo for symphonic concerts. Those efforts culminated in the construction of Kleinhans Music Hall on Symphony Circle in 1939-1940. However, there was a desire of many people to build a new music hall on the site of the old Elmwood Music Hall on the northeast

corner of Elmwood at Virginia Street, but it would have to be larger than the existing music hall. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Ansley Wilcox of Delaware Avenue and others he recruited bought up all the land on Virginia Street from DeRutte Alley to Park Street - including the Coit House. This land would be sold, at cost, from the Virginia-Park Corporation to the City of Buffalo for the purposes of a larger music hall. While the Elmwood Music Hall was demolished in 1938 and the Kleinhans Music Hall was built on Symphony Circle instead of this site, certain powerful Buffalonians were plotting the Coit's House demise as early as 1925.³⁵

In 1947, the house was transferred to Virginia Street Properties, Inc. In 1951, the house was sold to Buffalo Realty Corporation³⁶ and finally in 1954 it was sold to Herman A. Schwander.³⁷ The house seemed to slowly decline with each sale. Ironically, the reason why the Coit House is as architecturally intact as it is may be due to the fact that it was essentially leased out for 100 years from about 1870 to 1970. Were it to have been owner-occupied in the late 19th century, it is likely that an owner would have made major remodeling changes to update it to the latest Victorian housing style, perhaps adding a Second Empire-style Mansard roof or Queen Anne-style bay window.

In March 1903, Byron Westcott converted the first floor of the Coit House to a tenement. He also built a one-story brick store attached to the house at the east corner of DeRutte Alley and Virginia Street.³⁸ The retail storefront served many purposes through the years. In 1940 it was operated by Henry Jones and used as a confectioner's store. By 1960, it housed a restaurant.

In 1940, there were 8 apartments located in the Coit House, but by 1960, that number had been reduced to 5 apartments.

The back house dates to the late 1860s or mid-1870s. (*Note: the back house was demolished in Oct. 2006*).

Acknowledgment and Preservation (1957-1970)

The first mention of the Coit House within recent times as an important historic and cultural site occurred in 1949 when the obituary of Walter Coit mentioned that the Coit House was built in 1818. The first champion of the Coit House was a retired architect named John Kelterhouse Anderson (1904-1967) of 257 Highland Avenue who maintained photographic scrapbooks from some of Buffalo's earliest buildings.³⁹ He was an outspoken advocate for preserving the Coit House and wanted the public to be aware of its cultural and historic value.

One of the first articles written about the Coit House was an interview of Anderson in 1957. Anderson stated that when he was a young child, he became very interested in Buffalo's past. One of his favorite houses was the Coit House and he used the article to advocate for its preservation.⁴⁰

In 1961, Anderson's friend and neighbor attorney J.S.N. Sprague of 178 Highland Avenue wrote a paper based on Anderson's research advocating for the preservation of the Coit House and its use as a public resource and museum. Sprague stated that there were 4 houses at the time that should be preserved and be available as public resources: the house of Judge Sears, the Ansley Wilcox home, the Mark Twain house and Coit House. The Mark Twain house on the northwest corner of Delaware Avenue and Virginia Street has since been demolished, as was the beautiful Gothic Revival style mansion of Judge Sears on the east side of Delaware Avenue north

of Barker Street. The Wilcox home on the east side of Delaware Avenue south of North Street is now a National Historic site and museum while the Coit House has had a failed attempt at conversion to a museum. Sprague presented his paper and called for the City of Buffalo to purchase the house. Portions of Sprague's letter were published by the *Buffalo Evening News* in May, 1961.⁴¹ In August 1961, a group of individuals including Sprague, Anderson and Wilbur H. Glover, director of the Buffalo Historical Society, were involved in studying whether the Coit House could be used as a museum.⁴²

In May, 1962, volunteers came to the aid of the Coit House, even while it was in the negligent private ownership of Herman Schwander, to perform repairs. Participating organizations included the Buffalo Area Chamber of Commerce, the City of Buffalo Division of Conservation and rehabilitation and the "Clean-Up, Paint-Up, Fix-Up" drive and the Allen-North rehabilitation program. Repairs included replacement of 200 feet of clapboarding and paint. The city trimmed trees to help expose the house.⁴³

By 1962 Schwander had configured the Coit House to have 5 apartments and that year, six tenants lived in the house: Mr. and Mrs. John Syracuse, who operated the one story brick addition at 412 Virginia Street as a diner, Mrs. Clara Eggleston, Mrs. Alice Albright, Mrs. Loretta Dugan and 94 year old Theodore Simon. Mr. and Mrs. Syracuse moved into the house about 1952 and Mrs. Eggleston stated that she painted and papered the second floor hall in the eight year period between 1954 and 1962 when she lived there.⁴⁴

Anderson wrote a letter to the *Courier Express* editor in July 1962, congratulating the volunteers on the repair work and citing their contributions as a model for the preservation of the Coit House in the future. Anderson wrote in 1962 "It is to be hoped that this old building can be preserved for future generations of Buffalonians as an example of our earliest architecture and as a reminder of that exciting time when the little village of Buffalo was a pioneer settlement, surrounded by dense forests, an enemy fort across the river and an Indian nation of whose friendship they were by no means sure on Buffalo Creek a few miles away."⁴⁵

Anderson never lived to see his dream realized. He died in 1967 while the house continued to deteriorate. By the late 1960s, the Coit House had been scheduled for demolition by the City of Buffalo under the Allentown-Lakeview urban renewal project. This crisis prompted the founding of the Landmark Society of the Niagara Frontier in May 1969. The city threatened to demolish the structure at Schwander's expense for failure to make the repairs necessary to bring it within building code standards. The Landmark Society planned for restoration of the premises and resale to a new owner under a deed that would prohibit modification of the restored architectural design. The plan followed a pattern set by historical groups in other cities where major restoration projects have been undertaken.⁴⁶ The Landmark Society sold the house to Henry and Linda Priebe by 1970 and the brick storefront that Westcott had built in 1903 was demolished by the Priebe's in 1972.⁴⁷

The Dream of a Coit House Museum (1999-present)

After nearly 3 decades of ownership of Henry and Linda Priebe, the Coit House was back on the market in 1999. The Allentown Association purchased the house and proposed a plan to create a house museum. Since that time much work has been accomplished toward's the home's

restoration. Major grants from Margaret L. Wendt Foundation and M&T Bank as well as State Assemblyman Sam Hoyt's office facilitated the purchase of the Coit House. A \$50,000 renovation of the roof and repair of water and other exterior damage has taken place. The project has been a collaborative effort. The Landmark Society and Hamilton Houston Lownie Architects provided invaluable research and structural analysis. Labor has been donated by Roofers Local 74 and Sheet Metal Workers Local 71. Copper for flashing and gutters has been donated by Outokumpu American Brass. Sanders and Sons Company has volunteered management of the roof repairs. B & L Wholesale Supply donated shingles. The City of Buffalo provided additional funding.

IV. COIT HOUSE ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Siting on Virginia Street

The house is prominently sited on the north side of Virginia Street near Derutte Alley. It is easily visible from South Elmwood Avenue. Elmwood Avenue was originally called North William Street and Freemont Place until it was extended past North Street about 1880. It was widened several times just before and after the turn of the 20th century. In 1885, the State of New York built the 74th Regiment Armory designed by R.A. & L. Bethune next to the Coit House at the corner of Virginia Street at Elmwood Avenue and it was in use until the larger Connecticut Street Armory (1898-1900) took its place shortly after the turn of the 20th century. The old 74th Regiment Armory was converted into the Elmwood Music Hall but it was abandoned and demolished in 1938. Kleinhans Music Hall on Symphony Circle took its place when it opened in 1940. In later years, the site has been home to a gas station, a Rite Aid pharmacy and currently, the Family Dollar store.

Exterior Description

When the Coit House was originally built, it was constructed as a 3-bay, 2-story Federal style house. The portion to the right of the entrance (east) is not original, nor is the 3rd floor.

The present appearance of the house is very much like it was when George Coit last occupied it in 1865, as George Coit was responsible for all the additions made to the front portion of the house. It is now a 5-bay 3-story Federal style building with a side-ending gable roof. The side gables are marked by returns, dentilated eaves, and half-circle fanlights. The facade eave is dentilated as well. Flat-capped six-over-six light windows on the facade are crowned by pediments. The Coit House has a simple center entry, a paneled door surmounted by a two-light transom and brackets with sidelights along the full length. Chimney stacks are placed at either end of the house. The roof, replaced within the last several years, is covered with architectural asphalt shingles, but originally would have been covered with cedar shingles.

The house appears to have gone through several major interior and exterior remodeling projects. It is generally accepted that the house was originally a 3-bay Federal style house. The eastern portion of the house to the right of the staircase (where the board room is) does not appear to be original. There is strong evidence in the sill plate in the basement to support this

hypothesis. The wall separating the addition to the right of the door is a one-foot thick wall. In 1961, architect John Anderson speculated that the addition was actually from an older, separate house. Anderson stated that the spacing of the windows on the east side of the house is different from those on the west side, giving the existing house an awkward, unsymmetrical appearance that is never seen in Federal style houses from the period. Anderson believed that when the original house was enlarged, another old house was purchased and moved to form the east portion of the main block of the existing house. The double wall, the dissimilar trim and the beams in the basement as well as the fact that the double wall is not present in the third floor makes it seem probable that when Coit enlarged the house, he moved another house to the original one and added a third floor over both parts. Therefore, the addition may be as old or older than the original portion of the house.

From a documentation perspective, it is fortunate that two excellent photographs of the Coit House were taken while it was on its original site in the 1860s. The photographs show the house essentially as it appears presently. However, there are two significant differences. While on its original site, it had exterior shutters on all windows and there was an elaborate large veranda on the front elevation of the building. It is not known when the veranda was constructed, but it appears to have been built in the late 1850s or early 1860s based on an assessment of its architectural style. There has been one small addition to the exterior after the Coit House was moved to Virginia Street: shallow pediment-style window hoods have been installed over the windows.

Interior Description

General Observations

The majority of the following comments came from interviews from three individuals: Mr. John Anderson, Mr. John Conlin and Ms. Andrea Rebeck. Mr. Anderson, an architect who died in 1967, spent an enormous amount of time studying the Coit House in the 1950s and early 1960s. While his work was incomplete and based on observation only, his recorded thoughts, through his notes, have been preserved. Mr. Conlin, historian and editor of *Western New York Heritage Magazine* has a masters degree in architecture and is widely regarded as the living expert of early Buffalo history and architecture. He has been involved in many hands-on analyses and restorations of early Buffalo and Western New York homes. Ms. Rebeck is a registered architect and Historic Sites Restoration Coordinator with the New York State Historic Preservation Office. Ms. Rebeck is also widely regarded as an expert in homes of this period and is currently engaged in the restoration of her own home built in the late 1820s in Orleans County. The following synopsis represents their observations:

- **Window sashes** The window sashes are not original, but date to the 1850s or 1860s. Prior to the 1840s, windows with 12 over 12 lights would have been used, unlike the 6 over 6 in the Coit House. There is also evidence of a locking mechanism on some frames, which may have supported earlier window sashes.

- **Wood used in building** Wood patterns and cuts on the basement show pre-1850 wood.
- **Chimneys** The original chimneys were not moved from the original Pearl/Swan site.

1st Floor

- **Entrance** The glass “bullseye” transom and sidelights surrounding the door are not original (installed by owner Priebe in the 1970s). John Conlin believes that the entrance design dates to the 1850s. It is not a typical Federal-style entrance, but is Greek Revival, more in keeping with the first floor woodwork.
- **Moldings/woodwork** The woodwork on the 1st floor is Greek Revival and was probably redone when the house was enlarged, possibly during the 1830s or 1840s.
- **Board Room** The large doorway between the alcove and the board room is not original, there was probably a smaller door there at one time.
- **Mantles** The mantles on the 1st floor are not original and are fairly modern, dating from the mid-20th century. The original mantles were of the traditional Federal style. Mr. John Conlin in the early 1960s saw a mantle in an antique dealers shop on Allen Street that the owner claimed came from the Coit House. Mr. Conlin stated that it was a beautiful and stunning example of Federal-carved woodwork and probably was on the west side of the house. There was most likely a prime 1830's Greek Revival style mantle, appropriate to the bold corner block architraves, in the east parlor (now the Allentown Association board room).
- **Staircase** The newel post and railing on the staircase do not date from 1818. These appear to be more from the 1830s. The doorway is ornamented on the interior with a Greek Revival ornamentation. The ornamentation is carried up the stair to the 3rd floor.
- **Doors** Many of the doors are hand-planed and appear to date from the 1830s or earlier.

2nd Floor

- **Moldings/woodwork** Moldings on this floor appear earliest in home and may be original to house's construction. Bead edges typical to pre-1850 construction as found on many of the doors on 2nd floor. **Oldest molding appears to be in SW bedroom (overlooking Family Dollar parking lot). If any molding dates to 1820s or earlier, this is it.**
- **Floorboards** Many of the floorboards are made of "heart pine" and are of short lengths (houses from the period would have had boards that ran the entire length of the room). The boards appear to be much later than date of construction of house. May be reused material from another building.

- **Mantles** Mantle in east bedroom fairly new. Mantle in west bedroom appears to be older and may be original. It is certainly the oldest mantle in the house and may be made up of older salvaged materials. Closest in house to Federal style.

3rd Floor/Attic

- **Date of construction** Ridge board in attic supporting roof indicates post-1850 construction. Mr. Conlin feels that the roof dates to about 1855.
- **Floorboards** Wide floorboards are very old on 3rd floor - possibly came from another house.

General Statistics

- Lot size: 59' (Virginia Street) x 100'
- Width of front portion of house: 43.11'
- Depth of front portion of house: 30.55'
- Width of back addition: 16.41'
- Depth of back addition: 15.70'
- Present zoning: C2 - Community Business District
- Square footage: 4,500
- Post and beam (not balloon frame) construction on front portion of Coit House

V. CHARACTERISTICS OF FEDERAL ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Like much of America's architecture, the Federal (or Federalist) style has its roots in England. Two British brothers named Adam adapted the pragmatic Georgian style, adding swags, garlands, urns, and other delicate details. The most common symbol used in the Federal style is the American eagle. In the American colonies, homes and public buildings also took on graceful airs. Inspired by the work of the Adam brothers and also by the great temples of ancient Greece and Rome, Americans began to build homes with Palladian windows, circular or elliptical windows, recessed wall arches, and oval-shaped rooms.

A number of influential American thinkers of the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries called for the creation of an American style of architecture. They hoped for buildings that would suit American needs, use native materials, and reflect the American character. Government buildings, as the physical manifestation of our republic, were of special interest. The Federal style of architecture, employed in many of the public structures erected between 1780 and 1820 can be seen as an Americanization of the classical architecture which preceded it in Europe and the colonies.

While Federalist architecture is similar to the earlier Georgian Colonial style, the difference is in the details: While Georgian homes are square and angular, a Federal style building is more likely to have curved lines and decorative flourishes. Federalist architecture

was the favored style in the United States from about 1780 until the 1830s.

Aside from log structures, the earliest style of architecture to be found in Erie County and Buffalo is the Federal Style. Unlike some of the examples of the Federal style found around the U.S. in older cities like Philadelphia, the examples found in Erie County are a modest, vernacular form, in most instances they can be identified by a 5-bay opening with a center entrance and chimneys at the gable ends and the roof is usually low-pitched.⁴⁸ The detail is light and delicate with slender proportions. Windows in the Federal period usually have a number of small panes of glass because it was difficult to make large pieces of glass. Exterior paint colors were limited, the most popular being yellow, ochre, or white. Outbuildings and even the nonpublic side of more important buildings often were painted red, the most economical paint color for the period.

There are several fine examples of the Federal style architecture in Erie County, although none exactly like the Coit House. The closest example is found in the Asa Warren house located in Eden New York.

American Federal Exterior House Features

- Low-pitched roof, or flat roof with a balustrade
- Windows arranged symmetrically around a center doorway
- Semicircular fanlight over the front door
- Narrow side windows flanking the front door
- Decorative crown or roof over front door
- Tooth-like dentil moldings in the cornice
- Palladian window
- Circular or elliptical windows
- Shutters
- Decorative swags and garlands
- Smooth facade painting brick and/or covering exterior with stucco
- Window openings with larger panes and louvered shutters
- Exterior detail expressed only at an entrance

American Federal Interior House Features

- Delicate columns and molding
- Circular, oval, or octagonal room shapes, often with arches
- Light airiness both in details and color
- Moldings employed the use of swags, garlands and festoons
- Walls were painted in pastels
- Woodwork was painted white
- Interior innovations included closets, dressing rooms, pantries, French doors, lateral halls and sometimes drawing rooms, ballrooms and music rooms in larger homes.

While examples of Federal style homes found in Erie County did not include the circular, octagonal or bowed-out rooms seen in the more elaborate homes along the Eastern seaboard

cities, they generally were laid out with a center hallway where the stairs were located, with either one or two rooms off to either side.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COIT HOUSE FUTURE

In 2005 the Coit House will be sold and is therefore once again at a critical juncture in its history. Despite nearly 50 years of trying to preserve the house, much work remains to be done. While the Coit House is not threatened with demolition and since the 1960s gentrification has occurred in the surrounding Allentown neighborhood, the house itself in 2005 still requires a large investment necessary for structural and cosmetic repairs.

One thing is certain, regardless of who owns the house. It is high-time that the Coit House has an historic structure report done. It will not only help determine the age, but it will tell exactly what the house is and provide the data necessary to make informed decisions about renovations/restorations and improvements in the future. There are firms as nearby as Rochester, New York that specialize in historic structure reports from the period of the Coit House. Empirical evidence such as a paint analysis would reveal a great deal about the history of the house. The Preserve New York program through the Preservation League of New York State and the New York State Council on the Arts currently has a grant for such a report with amounts up to \$15,000 awarded.

The Coit House has teased and intrigued historians and architects for 50 years. All who examine the house state that the Coit House is a very interesting house and marvel at how much of the house is intact after nearly two centuries.

Most also feel that ownership should stay in the not-for-profit/public sector and that it should not be in private hands because of lack of funding opportunities and a belief that there will be better decisions made regarding interior and exterior renovations of the property in the future. There is a strong sentiment that the transformation from private residence to community asset continue. Ultimately, many would like to see the property open to the community and to visitors in a manner that will honor its builder by telling the story of George Coit and his partners and their significant contribution to the growth and success of Buffalo throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. When transferred to a new entity, restrictive interior preservation easements should be in place.

Coit House Current Legal Protections and Financial Incentives

The house is located in the Allentown Preservation District and is listed as a contributing structure to the District on the National Register of Historic Places in the U.S. It is not a local landmark, nor is the property listed individually on the National Register of Historic Places. Currently, the structure is only protected by local preservation law, controlling exterior changes through the approval of the Buffalo Preservation Board. If not for that, the Coit House could be demolished or altered without regard to the cultural importance of the building. It has no official state or national designation and its local designation is related to the district, not the house itself.

Even so, Claire Ross, of the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) does not recommend placing the house individually on the National Register (because such an action

would be redundant and doing so adds no additional protections) but says that the house may be eligible for National Historic Landmark (NHL) status because of George Coit's connection with the Erie Canal.

Ross also says that if the house is owned by an organization rather than an individual, it will make the property eligible for SHPO, as well as other grants in the future. If the Coit House becomes a NHL, it makes the property eligible for the Save America's Treasures program, a program with significant funding opportunities.

Mr. John Conlin, editor of *Western New York Heritage Magazine*, stated that the Coit House should be restored to what it looked like, inside and out, when it was moved to the Virginia Street site. For example, the window sashes should not be changed. They may not be original to the structure when it was first built, but the current windows are significant because the Coit's made the decision to replace the 12 over 12 sashes with 6 over 6. The Coit House represents an immense educational opportunity for Western New York. With a few minor restorations, it can be used to interpret the entire 19th century history of Buffalo. The Coit House represents a unique opportunity and the house has no peer. The Coit House may be a good structure for an educationally-minded non-profit organization.

Clearly, stewardship of the property is critical. There is much discussion of the condition of the Coit House and what has been done since the Association assumed ownership, but the fact is that if the house had sold at market rate for the neighborhood instead of what the Association paid (\$75,000), it is doubtful that a new owner would have invested the \$50,000 required for the roof systems alone to repair them properly and prevent further water damage. Also, it is doubtful that most private owners would have invested the funds to replace the unobtrusive wall units and re-do the plumbing. It would be far less expensive to break holes in the floor and run forced air throughout the building.

Without appreciation of the cultural significance of this property to Buffalo - and that is the noteworthy differentiation of the Coit House from, say, a house in Black Rock of near-similar age or a grand property like the Coatsworth House - an owner could really do many things to negate the fact that so much of the house remains intact despite the lack of good stewardship in the mid-20th century.

To alleviate these concerns, the Allentown Association may attach preservation easements to the sale of the house, regardless of any historic designation. That is the most powerful protection of all. A preservation easement is a private legal interest conveyed by a property owner to a preservation organization or to a government entity. Once the decision to create a preservation easement is made, it binds both the current owner and future owners to protect the historic character of the property subject to the easement. While some easements are for a set period of years, in most instances easements are created as permanent restrictions.

Preservation easements have become an important component of state and federal policy to encourage public participation in the preservation of America's historic resources. An organization would need to hold the easement and if the Allentown Association does not wish to do so, the Campaign for Greater Buffalo History, Architecture, and Culture would. It is also possible that the Buffalo Preservation Board may be the holder of such an easement.

Immediate Repairs Required

While much renovation work has been done on the Coit House, still more needs to be accomplished. Prior to the desire to sell the house, a number of repair items were identified that need to be completed by the Association or a future owner in order to preserve the Coit House as well as its back out-building. Approximately \$50,000 was budgeted for this additional work. The work is not cosmetic and it is important that these repairs take place in order to ensure that the house will still exist for future generations of Buffalonians. It is important that the new owner has the resources to perform these repairs. The scope of this work is listed below:

Main Building Exterior Restoration

- Excavate for and place concrete footers in crawl space
- Furnish and install steel columns as required
- Raise and level rear center area of structure
- Reconstruct support system (sill, etc) of approximately 120 LF
- Remove and replace approximately 20% of damaged exterior clapboard
- Reconstruct sill structures on ten (10) windows
- Reconstruct damaged rake structure at the west end of the house
- Reconstruct the floor joist and deck structure at the rear entrance door
- Reconstruct the damaged corners of building bottoms
- Prime paint all exterior wood products
- Paint exterior and trim

Outbuilding Restoration

- Repair existing foundation wall on the east side
- Reconstruct existing structural box frame at the entire building
- Remove and replace entire existing roof
- Reconstruct rafter tails
- Install new roof sheathing and the bottom four feet of the roof frame
- Remove and replace the remaining damaged clapboards (approx. 600 sq. ft.)
- Back prime and prime new exterior clapboards and trim lumber
- Paint exterior and trim

A grant has been procured to accomplish this work from the State of New York. The grant is being administered through the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York (DASNY). At this time, it appears as though the proposed work has not yet received the required review by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

Options to Consider for the Future of the Coit House

While there is agreement to sell the house as soon as possible, the Allentown Association is obligated both morally and by its mission statement to take steps to ensure the continued

stewardship of this Buffalo landmark. Should the Association not do its utmost to ensure the continued existence of the house in a high state of preservation, the Association will have undermined its goodwill in the community and forfeited any authority it might have in insisting on high standards in the entire historic district. That would be a blow to preservation efforts across the city. In the 1960's, Allentown was the city's leader in preservation. Where is it today?

The Coit House is not only important as a familiar part of Allentown, and indeed a gateway from downtown, it is important historically and architecturally. That it is the oldest extant house in the city has not been challenged, dating to at least 1818. It is one of the very few Federal period houses left in Buffalo. Its construction and subsequent expansion offer an unrivaled look at important social and economic trends in Buffalo and the nation. It is associated with one of the towering figures of upstate New York, George Coit. It was from his barge, the *Seneca Chief*, and from his wharf, that Gov. Dewitt Clinton declared the Erie Canal open in 1825.

Without Allentown Association board members faithful to the purposes of preservation, Allentown will never progress toward preservation cohesion. Vision needs to prevail. What is done today will be scrutinized by future generations. The Allentown Association's current financial straits are not unique. Indeed, no one person or group anywhere has ever had unlimited resources to achieve a desideratum. We all must deal with scarce resources. In that light, all decisions are tough; not all decisions are good. We must do well by history.

A. Options that the Allentown Association should consider when selling the Coit House:

1. The Allentown Association Board of Directors should give serious consideration to all purchase offers from not-for-profit organizations and/or groups that will purchase the property with the intent to continue the preservation process and create a public asset that serves the community. It is important to remember that funding resources to restore the Coit House will be more readily available to not-for-profit groups.
2. Knowing the full history of the Coit House Preservation Project, if a significant profit above documented out of pocket expenses is realized on the sale, the Allentown Association Board of Directors should consider that there is a moral and social obligation to create an endowment at least equal to the amounts donated from the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation, M&T Bank and the Baird Foundation that were awarded with the specific intent of funding restoration of 414 Virginia Street as a public trust and community asset that would be open to the entire community for the foreseeable future. The endowment will be restricted for preservation use or other suitable project programming to further the mission of the Allentown Association, but not used for operating expenses.
3. The Allentown Association should encourage the new owner to engage in an historic structure report for the Coit House. The Allentown Association should also assist the owner by applying for a grant for the historic structure report.

4. The Allentown Association should encourage the new owner to apply for National Historic Landmark status for the Coit House.

B. Options that the new owner should consider:

1. The Coit House owner should resolve to attach a strong, irrevocable preservation easement to the sale of the property that will prevent the owner from making any inappropriate architectural changes to the interior of the home, which has survived remarkably intact through two centuries of existence. The preservation of the Coit House (compliant with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, 1995) is most easily achieved through preservation easements.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX - COIT HOUSE/FAMILY INTERNET WEB SITES

<http://www.landmark-niagara.org/adopt/coit/coit.html>

<http://ah.bfn.org/h/coit/coit.html>

<http://www.onlinebuffalo.com/html/hoyt.HTM>

<http://www.pbase.com/kjosker/image/33700273>

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<http://www.bickfordpaperinc.com/aboutus.html>

<http://genforum.genealogy.com/coit/>

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, 1995

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/Standards/index.htm>

Interior Treatments

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief18.htm>

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