

Volume 51

Spring 2022

Number 2

# DECONSTRUCTING PITTSBURGH'S BIG REFRIGERATOR BUILDING

n 1930, Pittsburgh newspapers reported on plans for a new seven-story cold storage building next to the Pennsylvania RR's sprawling produce terminal and railyards along the Allegheny River. Completed in less than a year, the new building became a familiar visual landmark in the industrial city's Strip District. A new owner in the 1980s installed a giant illuminated smiling fish, enhancing both the building's visibility and the city's residents' attachment to the site. Though the property is a contributing building in the Strip Historic District (listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2014), in 2021, demolition began on the former Federal Cold Storage Co. building. The solidly built structure's slow, sophisticated deconstruction and trip to an area landfill began. This article documents the building's history and its demolition.

Advances in refrigeration technology during the 1920s, aggressive business practices by Cleveland and Pittsburgh ice industry entrepreneurs, and Pennsylvania RR produce yards improvements converged on a lot at the foot of Pittsburgh's Sixteenth St. Bridge a little more than a mile from where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers meet to form the Ohio River. A subsidiary of the Cleveland-based City Ice & Fuel Co., the Federal Cold Storage Co., was formed to operate the corporation's Pittsburgh warehouse. Each city's ice-making and distribution business history has its roots in the 1890s.

John Winslow Hubbard (1865–1947) inherited his family's

(continued on page 2)

 In This Issue:
Summer 1952 in an Idaho Lumber Camp

 Industrial Artifacts Rescued from a Pa. Landfill
L. Trottier

> Appointed to Order of Canada



Former Federal Cold Storage Co. building, Sept. 2019. The truck loading dock is visible beneath the shed roof to the right.

#### **PITTSBURGH** (continued from page 1)

Pittsburgh tool foundry in the early 1890s. Known locally as the "Shovel King," Hubbard also owned substantial stakes in riverboats and breweries. In 1899, Hubbard and four partners formed the Pittsburgh Ice Co. By the late 1920s, Hubbard had bought or founded four additional ice companies: the Wilkinsburg Ice Co., the Union Ice Co., the Hilltop Ice Co., and the Hubbard Ice Co. The entities consolidated and merged in 1931 as the City Ice & Fuel Co. Hubbard became the operating company's new vice president.

Harry D. Norvell (1859–1931) was born on a farm in Chester County, Pa. As a teenager, he began driving an ice wagon in Philadelphia. He moved to Cleveland where he built up enough capital to form the Independent Ice Co. in 1894. In 1908, Norvell changed the company's name to the City Ice Delivery Co. and in 1921, the company reorganized as the City Ice & Fuel Co. Over the next eight years, the company went on a buying spree acquiring ice companies throughout the U.S. and Canada. When in 1929 newspapers

The SIA Newsletter is published quarterly by the Society for Industrial Archeology. It is sent to SIA members, who also receive the Society's journal, IA, published biannually. The SIA through its publications, conferences, tours, and projects encourages the study, interpretation, and preservation of historically significant industrial sites, structures, artifacts, and technology. By providing a forum for the discussion and exchange of information, the Society advances an awareness and appreciation of the value of preserving our industrial heritage. Annual membership: individual \$50; household (joint) \$55; full-time student \$20; institutional \$75; contributing \$100; sustaining \$150; corporate \$500. For members outside of North America, add \$10 surface-mailing fee. Send check or money order payable in U.S. funds to the Society for Industrial Archeology to SIA-HQ, Dept. of Social Sciences, Michigan Technological University, 1400 Townsend Drive, Houghton, MI 49931-1295; (906) 487-1889; email: sia@siahq.org; website: www.sia-web.org.

Mailing date for Vol. 51, No. 2 (Spring 2022), June 2022. ISSN 0160-1067. If you have not received an issue, apply to SIA-HQ (address above) for a replacement copy.

The *SIA Newsletter* welcomes material and correspondence from members, especially in the form of copy already digested and written! The usefulness and timeliness of the newsletter depends on you, the reader, as an important source of information and opinion.

**TO CONTACT THE EDITOR:** Marni Blake Walter, Editor, SIA Newsletter, 11 Esty Rd., Westmoreland, NH 03467; *sianeditor@siahq.org*. reported that it was buying six Pittsburgh companies, the firm already owned more than 120 facilities. It was the largest ice company in North America.

The Federal Cold Storage Co. applied for a City of Pittsburgh building permit on July 11, 1930. According to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the Chicago-based Blome-Sinek Contracting Co. designed the new building. Its projected cost was \$2.5 million and with four million cubic ft., it was projected to be the thirdlargest cold storage building in the U.S.

The Depression that struck in 1929 likely impacted design decisions for the new Pittsburgh cold storage building. Though it included pilasters that broke up the sheer fenestration-free seven-story facades, unlike its counterparts in other cities built during the 1920s, the Pittsburgh building lacked terra cotta coping and ornamental parapets. It included docks adjacent to a rail siding on the building's north side leading from a railyard where workers offloaded produce for storage inside. Trucks arriving to remove stock pulled up to docks on the building's western Fifteenth St. side. Freight elevators inside moved stock between the first floor and storage floors above.

Plans for the new facility included the seven-story cold storage building and a two-story concrete annex where the ice plant would be housed. James Wholey, a later owner, said that the original design included a deep well that tapped into Pittsburgh's aquifer. That well supplied abundant cold fresh water that was used to manufacture ice and to cool the building's interior. A Duquesne Light Co. substation was built into the annex's south side.

The cold storage building's design included double walls, each one-ft. thick, separated by a foot of powdered cork insulation obtained from the nearby Armstrong Cork Co. factory. Cork insulation also was added to the interior partition walls, and the floors were constructed of reinforced concrete. "There's panels of cork on the inner walls as well. They were in big giant rectangles as the insulation to keep it cool in there," one demolition worker reported in Feb. 2022.

Construction on the two-story ice plant began first. Once it was well underway, construction workers began driving piles for the cold storage building. By mid-Aug. of 1930, construction was well underway on the outer walls. The *Pittsburgh Press* newspaper reported that workers were rapidly raising the walls using a "slip-form method" in which concrete was poured into wood forms that were regularly raised above completed sections.

Pittsburgh's Federal Cold Storage Co. building opened for business in early 1931, less than a year after it was first announced. The facility, the businesses renting space there, and the many local markets and restaurants that relied on easy access to stored foodstuffs were critical parts of the city's economy. City Ice & Fuel continued distributing ice throughout the city and the company sponsored several radio programs in the 1930s, according to ads published in Pittsburgh newspapers. As technology evolved in the 1940s and 1950s with motor trucks supplanting rail for freight transportation and household refrigerators permeating the



Federal Cold Storage Co. building in 1955. Left, showing the railroad siding and downtown Pittsburgh in the background; right, showing the Penn Ave. facade.

consumer market, the Federal Cold Storage Co. changed its name to reflect the changing times. In 1949, the City Ice & Fuel Co. became the City Products Corp.

During its lifetime, the Federal Cold Storage Co. building made local headlines for extraordinary events not related to the daily arrival and removal of produce. In 1936, when massive floods inundated Pittsburgh on St. Patrick's Day, floodwaters entered the ice plant. The water melted the edges of large ice cakes, which then refroze after the waters receded forming what the *Pittsburgh Press* described as a "1,000 ton iceberg" inside the building.

Pittsburgh newspapers and congressional documents recount some of the important labor activities that occurred at the site. Though there were several actions that took place during the building's active life as a cold storage warehouse, the most impactful occurred during the last months of World War II, starting in the spring of 1945. Union warehousemen struck, leaving food already stored inside the building inaccessible to its owners. This affected civilian and military supply chains and it spurred one McKeesport, Pa., market owner to go to court to get an injunction that would allow him to remove his produce.

City Products Corp. sold the building in 1980 to the Regional Industrial Development Corp. The non-profit then sold it to Robert Wholey & Co. Locally known as Wholey's, the business dates to 1912 as a poultry market founded in nearby McKee's Rocks. The business moved to the Strip District in 1959 after a decade in downtown Pittsburgh's Diamond Market and began specializing in fish.

After owner Robert Wholey returned from visiting Hong Kong, he told people about the spectacular lighted animals projected on buildings at night. "The engineers were present when he told that story and they thought as a nice Christmas gift they would put a light-up fish on the side of the building,"

(continued on page 16)



Giant illuminated smiling fish, Sept. 2019.



Holes drilled into the south and east facades, Sept. 2021.

### **PITTSBURGH** (continued from page 3)

said Jim Wholey, Robert's son, in a March 2022 interview. "So they built it on the roof and they used pipes to make the shape and then they took Christmas lights and attached it to the pipes."

The first light installation quickly succumbed to strong winds. A more permanent one involving LEDs attached to bolts mounted in the building's concrete walls became an enduring and beloved accidental work of public art. For more than 35 years, the giant smiling fish with its blinking eye was part of the Strip District's cultural landscape. "People used to tell us stories that their children would fight over the window side when they went across the Veterans Bridge to [see] who got to see the fish," Wholey said.

Wholey's moved some of its operations into the former Federal Cold Storage Co. building and it became the market's distribution center. The food retailer and wholesaler also chartered a new cold storage entity—the New Federal Cold Storage Co.—to continue leasing space to other businesses. Robert Wholey & Co. sold the property in 2008 for \$2 million. The smiling fish continued to light up the wall for another 13 years. Talk about selling and redeveloping the cold storage building began soon after the 2008 sale. Developers floated multiple adaptive use and demolition proposals. All of them failed to move forward until 2020 when New York-based owners successfully presented redevelopment plans to the Pittsburgh Planning Commission that included demolition.

The City of Pittsburgh issued a demolition permit in April 2021. Exterior evidence that demolition had begun appeared a few months later, in the summer. Contractors drilled holes in two facades closest to a neighboring building that houses a historic gay bar, Lucky's, whose owner refused to sell. Leaving Lucky's intact meant a higher demolition price tag: approximately \$1.3 million. The cold storage building's new owner defrayed some of those costs by getting a \$1 million state Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) grant.

As workers gutted the former Federal Cold Storage Co. building's interior, the contractor drilled holes in the



Demolition of the two-story ice plant annex, Nov. 2021.



A worker reaches a hand through one of the holes to draw a choker through for attachment to the crane.

![](_page_3_Picture_11.jpeg)

Cold storage building demolition, Feb. 2022. This photo shows the insulated double walls and workers on the seventh floor connecting chokers to a wall segment being prepared for removal by crane.

![](_page_3_Picture_13.jpeg)

A crane removes a segment of insulated double wall. Cork insulation is visible between the inner and outer walls.

![](_page_4_Picture_0.jpeg)

A crane removes one of the large concrete wall segments from the north Penn Ave. façade. Note the wooden platforms constructed above the sidewalk and adjacent to the bar next to the former cold storage building.

![](_page_4_Picture_2.jpeg)

Interior of cold storage building showing lettered, reinforced concrete "mushroom" columns.

![](_page_4_Picture_4.jpeg)

Concrete pulverizer begins to demolish the east side of the building, Mar. 2022.

building's eastern and southern facades. The holes had three bore sizes. Large holes enabled the contractor to anchor wooden platforms that could catch falling debris. Smaller holes allowed chokers to be attached so that a crane could carefully remove large wall panels. A third set of holes was drilled to thread a diamond rope saw through to cut the concrete double walls.

In Dec. 2021, the contractor demolished the two-story ice manufacturing annex and Duquesne Light Co. substation. The cleared space became a staging area with the large crane used to remove concrete wall segments from the main building and where workers reduced the wall segments to rubble for removal from the site.

It took two months to cut through and remove the exterior walls and concrete floors adjacent to Lucky's. The work exposed the powdered cork insulation and the interior mushroom columns—bold lettering on them left over from the building's days as a warehouse was visible from the street near the demolition site.

In March 2022, a massive concrete pulverizer arrived on site to "munch" the remaining structural concrete in a process that will reduce the remaining portion of the sevenstory building to rubble that will be carted away to a landfill. Plans for the converted site include a 23-story mixed-use building with street-level commercial space, parking decks, and a glass-walled office tower.

David S. Rotenstein

## **CHAPTER NEWS**

The New England Chapters (NNEC, SNEC) held their 33rd New England Conference on Industrial Archeology, hosted this year by NNEC, on Mar. 12, 2022 at the Planetarium at McAuliffe-Shepard Discovery Center, Concord, N.H. Presentations included Robert Timmerman, *Power to the Mills* 1810–1860; the NH Preservation Alliance, *Rescue and Revitalization of the Concord Gasholder*; Sky Bartlett, *The Dole Mill Restoration: From the Brink of Collapse to the Verge of Profitability*; Rick Ashton, Ashton Valve Company; Nelson Lawry, *The Miller's Tale: Mysteries of the Raid on the Cochecho Garrisons, June* 1689; and Dave Coughlin, Sawmills and Gristmills of Hillsboro County, N.H. in 1858.

## **NOTES & QUERIES**

Christopher Gillis, editor and publisher of *Windmillers' Gazette*, and Michael Werst of *wincharger.com* are preparing a scholarly *Guide to American Wind Generators: 1900–1950* for Texas A&M Univ. Pr., and welcome reader insights on the era of these wind-electric generators. Contact Gillis at *wind-millersgazette@gmail.com* and Werst at m.werst@utexas.edu.