

PRAATT OPERA FACADE

BY C. W. LATTIN

The next time you are in downtown Albion take a minute to admire the extraordinary facade of the Pratt building. This is located across Main Street from the Albion Visitors Center.

Up on the front of the building between the second and third floors it plainly states: "Pratt 1882." Our photo shown here was taken in 1905. The second and third floors appear the same today as they did then.

This is not a story about the building's history or the fact that the third floor was once a theatre or opera house, as it was called, but rather a notice to observe.

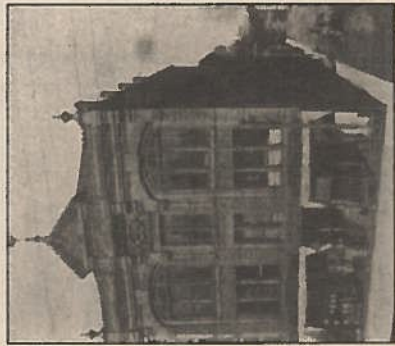
For years and years it has been believed and assumed that this building had a Medina Sandstone facade. It has totally fooled almost everyone because of a superior faux finish on the masonry.

It's a fake!

Sorry if you thought otherwise but that's the truth!

Now for the good part that makes it even more special than if it were the real thing.

Take a look for yourself and you'll see where there is weathering or minor chips off the masonry, the aggregate under the faux finish shows on certain edges of protruding shapes. This facade was all pre-cast blocks employing an early form



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

of cement and colored to emulate Medina Sandstone. It would have been very costly to have stone cutters hand carve all the minute details on this facade.

The aesthetic quality of this building is simply extraordinary for the fact that it represents such an early usage of faux masonry construction. Pressed metal moldings and other decorative metal parts were utilized where masonry did not work well. All these components were originally painted a color to match the masonry so as to give the affect of everything being stone. In other words the present color scheme is historically incorrect.

What style is it?

Basically it is an Eastlake style building which was the first real style representing the industrial age. It was propagated and promoted by an

English architect named Charles Eastlake who published a book on aesthetics in 1868 entitled "Hints On Household Taste."

American architects and designers seized upon this style which became very popular in the early 1880's.

If you have Eastlake style furniture you can certainly note the similarities with this building. It was a rectilinear approach to design with an

emphasis on incised decorations. Rosettes in corner blocks on wood work were common along with bead board paneling.

Contrived appearing roof formations along with turned posts are characteristic. Our County Clerks building erected in 1882-83 is another fine example of this short lived style.

What's more, everything about this Eastlake style expresses the industrial revolution and newly developed

technology at the time. Architectural components, furniture and the decorative arts could all be massed produced.

The Pratt block now owned by Michael Bonafede and Judy Koehler is unique. They are to be applauded for attempting to restore this community

treasure. Research is yet incomplete on many of the historical elements of the building but the aesthetics are evident — take time to admire.