

Farewell to the Bucklin Bldg.

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How does one write an obituary for a building? Does one concentrate on its architecture and long history, or does one single out the actors and forces which killed it? The current razing of the Bucklin Building can only bring sadness to the heart and the need to express, in a few, final words, a tribute to a fine and familiar structure.

The Bucklin (also called the Blackstone Block) was one of several commercial buildings constructed during the mid-1800's, a time of significant growth in Rhode Island's capital city. The Arcade in 1828, Custom House in 1857, Bucklin in 1861, and Wilcox in 1875 are some of the more notable structures located in the Custom House Historic District, an area now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

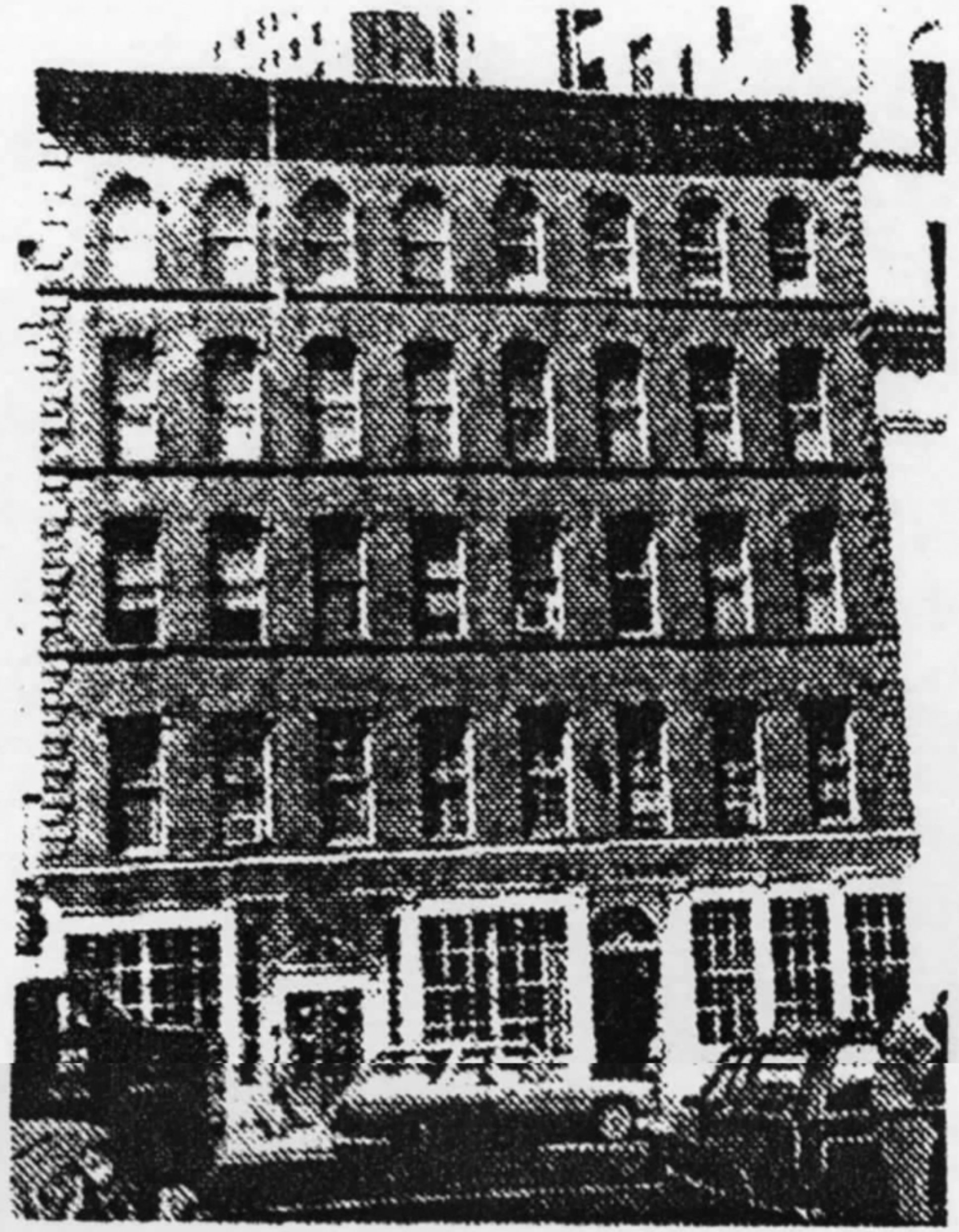
The building was designed by James Bucklin, one of the foremost architects of his day and co-designer of the Arcade. It is claimed to be one of the finest examples in Providence of the Italian palazzo form, a style adopted in 19th century America from that of the merchant bankers of Renaissance Italy. Although not an architectural gem, the Bucklin was an integral part of that crescent building complex of lower Weybosset Street, somewhat comparable to Boston's Sears Crescent. Sadly, what may have been the city's oldest existing office building is no more. Why was it destroyed?

The concurrent razing of the Hoppin Homestead might be explained in terms of economics. An individual owner, faced with a burned-out and vacant building in a part of the downtown which has not provided and does not appear to offer strong financial returns, might so rationalize his destruction of a historic building. Not so the Columbus National Bank, owner and last occupant of the Bucklin.

A 44-page booklet, prepared by Providence Citizens' Lobby specifically on the re-use of the Bucklin, contains a financial analysis of the building. The figures for the 20,000 square feet of rentable space in this five-story structure indicate that "the rehabilitation and re-use of the Bucklin Building as commercial office space is a financially advantageous plan."

It is important to note that the PCL figures in this analysis reflect private investments only. Additional money for rehabilitation is also available from city and state agencies. The federal Tax Act of 1976 also provides considerable tax benefits to parties restoring such old buildings.

The point here is that Columbus destroyed an historic building that was financially viable, contrary to a dated study done for the bank 10 years earlier, a time when restoration was more difficult to accomplish. Offers for the building by



several potential buyers also indicate that others felt that rehabilitation was a distinct option.

If economics is not the answer for the Bucklin destruction, then what is? Admittedly, there were questions of structural defects, and space for vaults and parking, all of which could have been resolved if there were a commitment to save the building. But the commitment was not there!

The Arcade, Wilcox, 20 Weybosset and other historic buildings in the most important financial district of the state are being restored, yet a corporate entity which derives its sustenance from the community chooses, rather, to destroy an historic, community asset within the same area. And the site of the Bucklin is destined to be a landscaped plaza, with granite veneer columns joined by aluminum wall panels in support of a series of acrylic domed skylights.

It is unfortunate that the bank did not pay heed to a study done by the New England Field Service Office on the preservation and recycling of buildings for banks. The study concludes by stating, "Those banks which display sensitivity to the needs of the communities which support them in their actions and their buildings benefit both themselves and the community."

By its lack of commitment and community sensitivity, Columbus has missed a golden opportunity to provide leadership to local historic preservation, a mood sweeping the country, and to get some excellent public relations as a bank concerned with the historic past of its community.

Goodby, Bucklin Building. You served us well for more than 100 years. Your death makes us aware that our city leaders must devise the means to prevent the destruction of other such community assets. If that were to happen, then one could say that your death served a useful purpose.

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