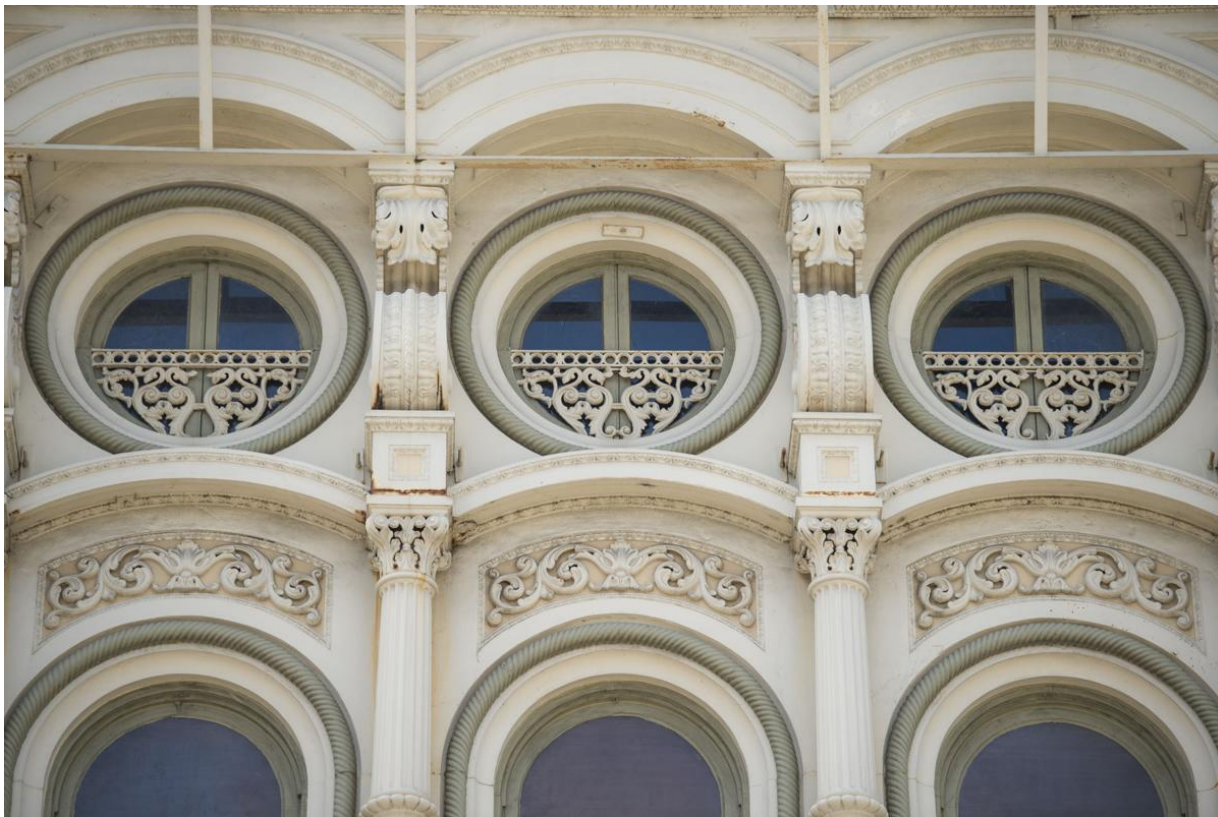


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Cast for beauty and function, Canal Street building finds a new life as a boutique hotel

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER SEP 26, 2019 - 8:00 AM

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The bull's-eye windows on the top floor of 622 Canal Street in New Orleans on Monday, September 23, 2019.

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Canal Street usually isn't a place to stop and savor the sights. But if you take a moment, some architectural gems stand out.

One of those brilliant examples is at 622 Canal St. Sandwiched between the post-modern '80s-style JW Marriott hotel and a 19th-century building, 622 Canal St. catches the eye with its sinuous columns and bull's-eye windows. It soon will be repurposed as a new boutique hotel.



A historic drawing of the block on Canal Street in New Orleans where Rubensteins (the five buildings on the right) is located. 622 Canal St. is fifth from the right.

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The building is also notable as one of the city's best surviving examples of a cast-iron façade on a commercial building. (The other is on the

north side of Exchange Alley, between Canal and Iberville streets.)

Cast-iron architecture was a popular type of building design in the mid-1800s because it was an inexpensive way to reproduce ornate facades inspired by other buildings, elements in nature or commerce. Cast-iron molds could be reused and as such could be reproduced easily, then shipped and assembled quickly on a construction site.

The Merchants' Mutual Insurance Co., founded in 1832, purchased the location at 622 Canal St. in 1853. The company kept the existing building, which previously housed the Merchants and Traders Bank of New Orleans, but added the cast-iron façade in 1859.

According to *New Orleans Architecture Vol. II, the American Sector*, *The Picayune* in 1859 wrote that “the cast-iron front of the three and one-half story Merchants' Mutual Insurance Building was made by Bennett & Lurges local foundry. The builder was C. Crozier Esq. and the architect young W.A. Freret.”

William A. Freret studied engineering and mechanical arts in England, then operated the family's cotton press company, still maintaining an interest in architecture. He was mayor of New Orleans twice: 1840-42 and 1843-44.

The building's style is a mix of Renaissance Revival and Baroque. The pillars, though, don't always conform to traditional classical orders, with each floor's columns composed of different elements. The first floor has traditional Corinthian columns, while the second-floor façade is distinguished by its Solomonic columns with a rope-like element twisting around them. The third-floor Corinthian columns have combined two different types of fluting.



Solomonic columns on the front of 622 Canal St. in New Orleans on Monday, September 23, 2019.

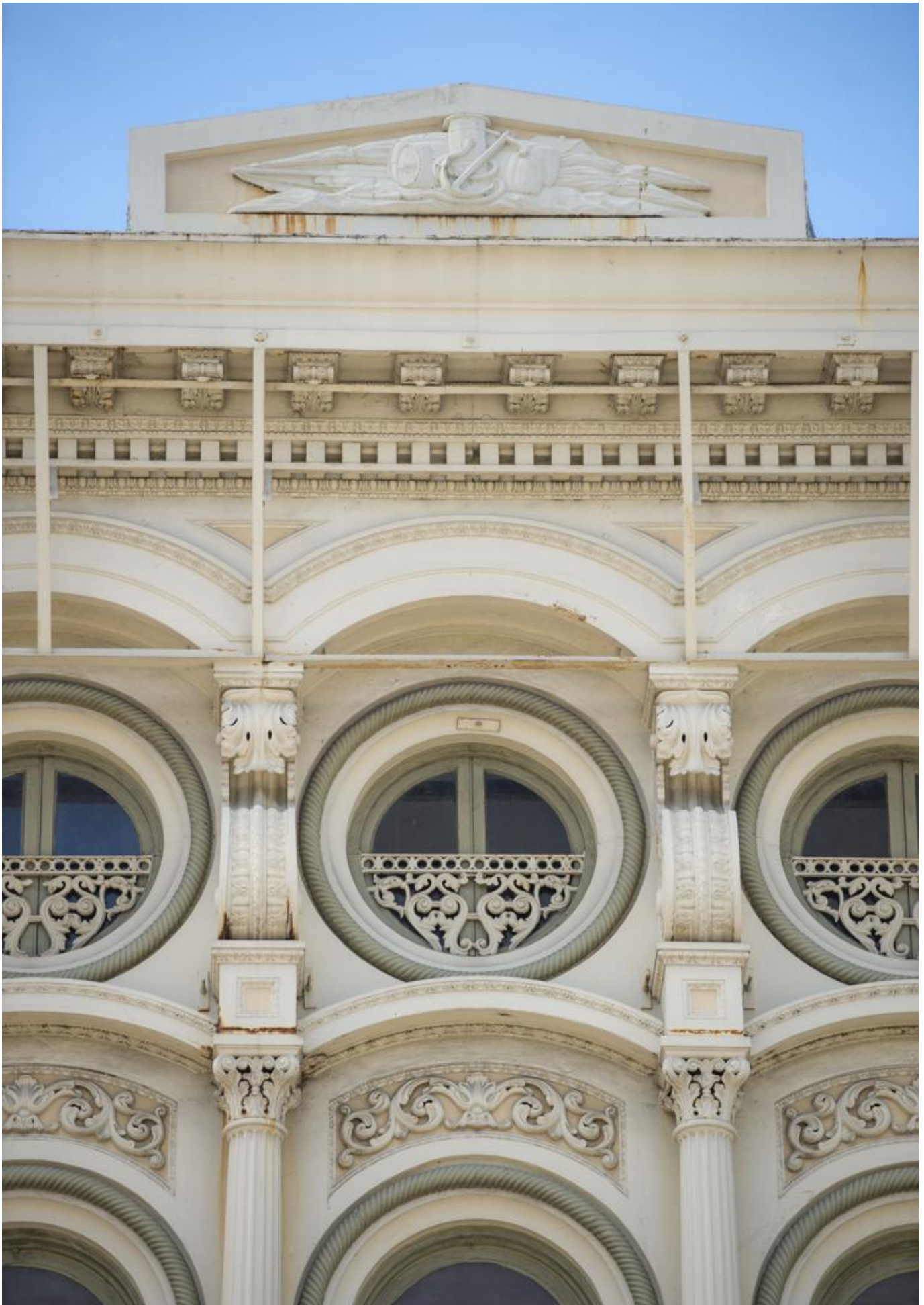
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Other unique elements include the attic's bull's-eye windows, which are divided by decorative brackets, and the blocking course (the finishing course of a wall showing above a cornice) ornamented with elements that could be attributed to an insurance company: anchor, fire plug, hose, pipe, cotton bales, barrels, and a house roof, that today are hard to see from the street.

In 1937 the building was the home to L&L Furs, which received permission to add a large sign to the façade, according to city records. There was a mural on the south side of the building as well, but it is now obscured by JW Marriott hotel next door.

The Rubenstein family purchased the 622 Canal St. building in the early 1960s, David Rubenstein said during a recent tour of the seven buildings the family owns in that area of St. Charles Avenue and Canal Street.





The bull's-eye windows on the top floor. Above it is the blocking course (the finishing course of a wall showing above a cornice) featured items such as an anchor, barrel, hose and more that pertained to an insurance company. The Merchants' Mutual Insurance Co. added the cast-iron facade in 1859.

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The Rubenstein family's presence there began in 1924 when Morris Rubenstein opened a haberdashery at 102 St. Charles Ave.

As the years went by and the business grew, the family would purchase neighboring buildings on St. Charles Avenue and Canal Street: A Preservation in Print May 1985 article by Robert A. Cangelosi, A.I.A, said the buildings at 622 to 636 Canal St. "Provide a visual record of CBD building activity from 1824 to 1900, and forms the most intact group of 19th-century structures still standing on Canal Street."

The buildings are connected by a maze of passageways, staircases and elevators that get off on the third floor of the building, when the elevator says fifth floor — due to their different layouts.

"A lot of people have gotten lost," David Rubenstein said.

Rubensteins (formerly Rubenstein Bros.) eventually used the second and third floors at 622 Canal St. as executive offices and the distribution area.

In 1971, David Rubenstein and his brother Andre Rubenstein opened All American Jeans at 622 Canal St., which replaced the Aquarius shop that had been in the main building since the late '60s. The Aquarius shop sold styles appealing to 20-somethings of that era, while All American Jeans was more focused on jeans.

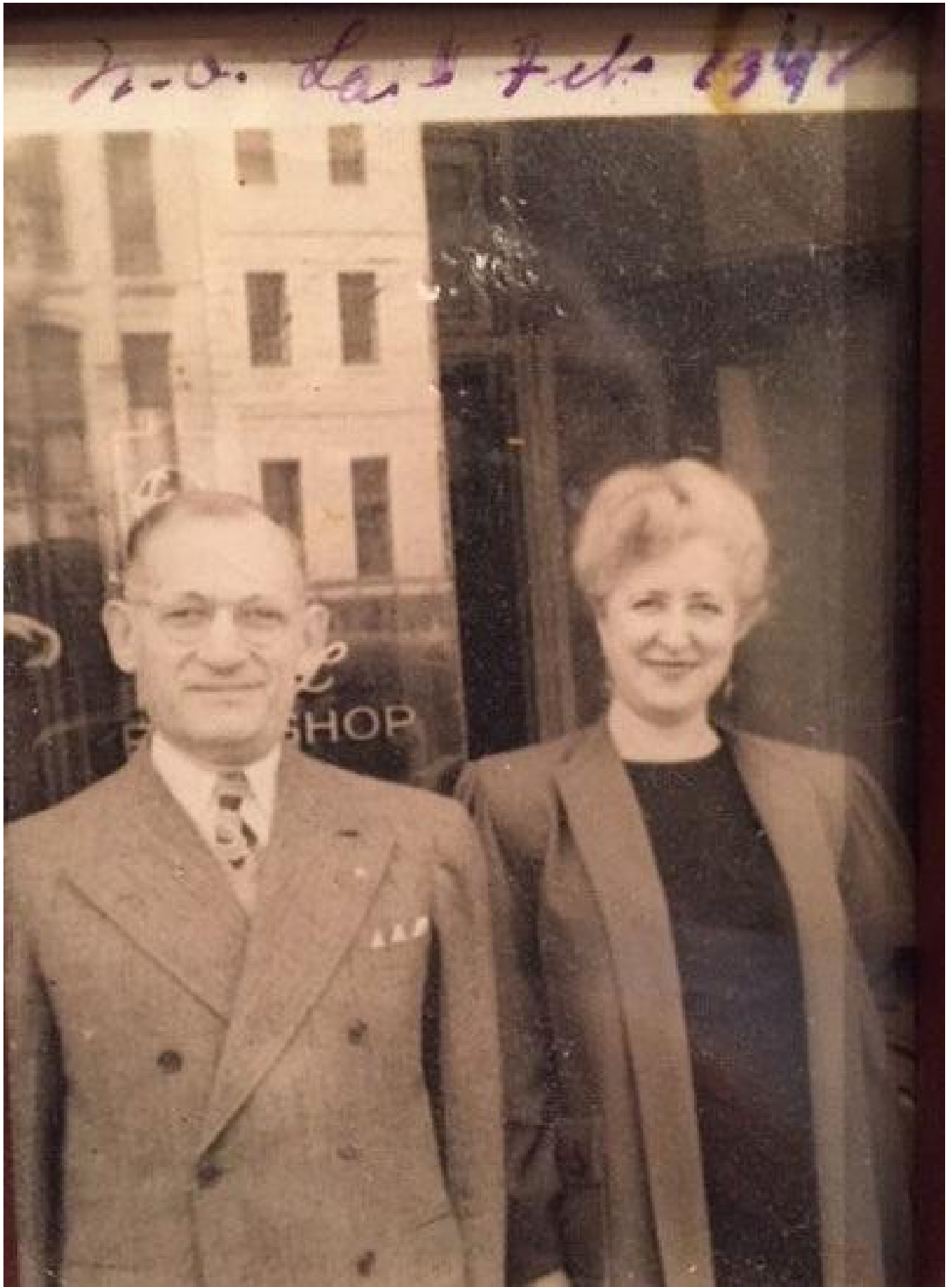
All American Jeans closed in in the early 80s, according to Rubenstein. PJ's Coffee and the Art of Shaving were recently on the first floor of the building but closed and are being replaced by Cafe Beignet, which is scheduled to open in about four months. The upper floors of 622 Canal St. and the adjacent buildings are being developed as a boutique hotel by the Rubenstein brothers with local developer Joe Jaeger and his company MCC Real Estate Group. It is tentatively set to open December 2020.

“I think it is one of the most important buildings in the city,” David Rubenstein said. “That is why we wanted to keep it. And get back to where it was.”

Note from the author:

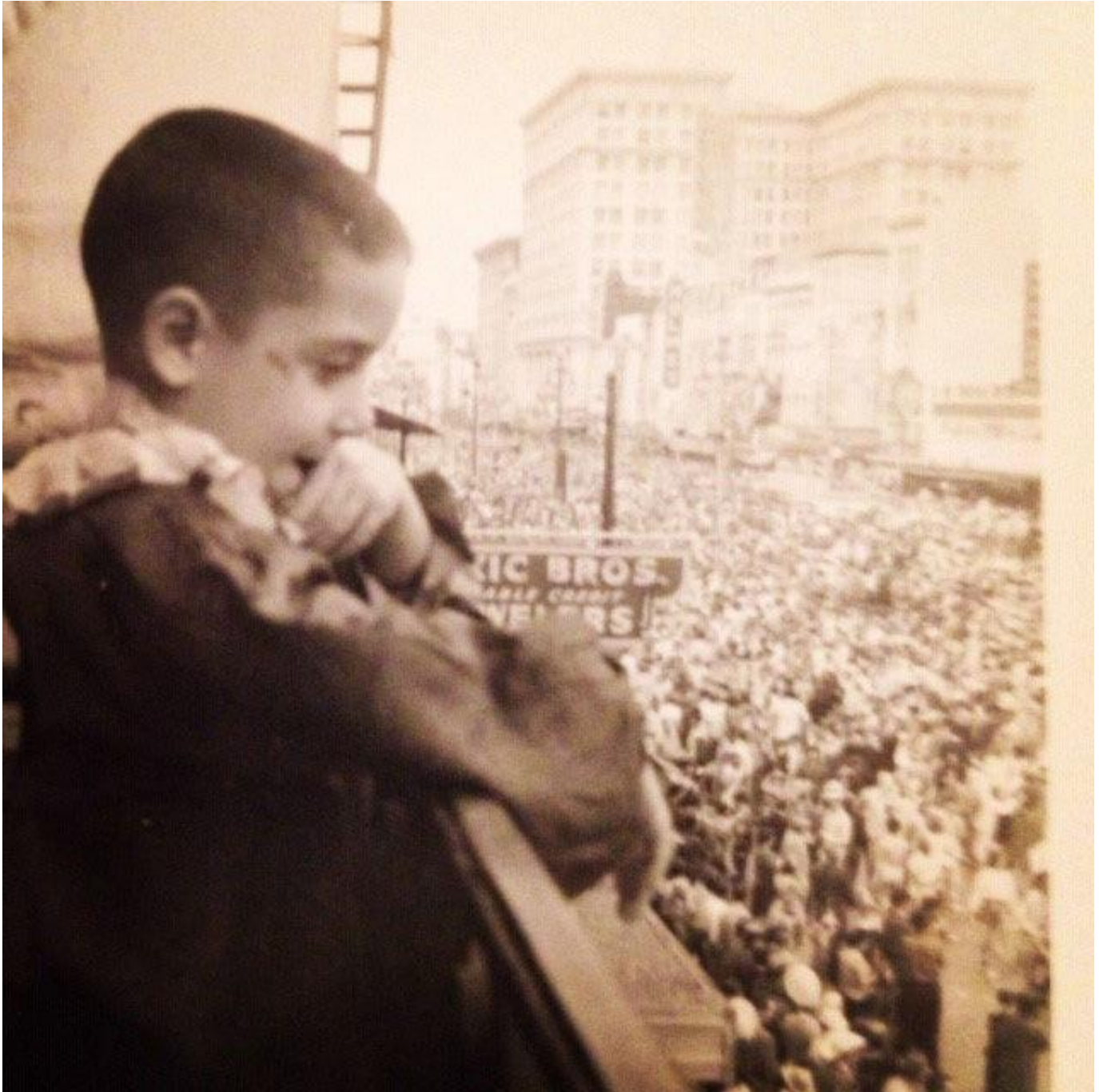
A day after the story was in InsideOut, I got a note from Martin Covert, who wrote: "What a lovely surprise to see your history (and future) of 622 Canal St. detailed in this morning's Inside/Out. My grandparents, Aaron and Sadie Lubritz were the L&L of L&L Furs, from which my siblings and cousins spent time enjoying the wonders of 1950s and 1960s Downtown. We even played hide-and-seek in the cold storage where customers sent their furs for summertime safe-keeping. We had to pass the clean-hands test before they let us in there, I promise.

"First floor was retail. Upper two floors housed the workroom where there were alterations and repairs (the store also sold cocktail dresses and fancy purses) and the cold storage."



Martin Covert sent in this photo of his grandparents, Sadie and Aaron Lubritz, who owned the building, 622 Canal St., at L & L Furs. First floor was retail. Upper two floors housed the workroom where there were alterations and repairs (the store also sold cocktail dresses and fancy purses) and the cold storage. The address is 622 Canal Street, which Rubensteins now owns and is turning into a boutique hotel to open late 2020.

Photo provided by Martin Covert



Martin Covert sent in this photo of him as a child watching the Mardi Gras parades on Canal Street from L & L Furs, which was owned by his grandparents, Sadie and Aaron Lubritz. The address is 622 Canal Street, which Rubensteins now owns and is turning into a boutique hotel to open late 2020.

Provided photo by Martin Covert

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