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## A PATCH OF HISTORY

By [Tiffany Dziurman Stozicki](#) | [Email the author](#) | January 25, 2011

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# Historic Elevator Building, Symbol of Days Gone By, Awaits New Purpose

Rochester-Avon Historical Society pleased with the elevator's listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

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*About this column: About this column: Tiffany digs deep into our rich historical roots to uncover the interesting, colorful and sometimes humorous people, places and events that made this community what it is today. You can follow Tiffany as @History Reporter on Twitter and Facebook.*

What does the Rochester Elevator building mean to you? [Tell us in the comments.](#)

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It has been a happy new year for members of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society. Just before Christmas, the National Park Service informed society members that the Rochester Elevator, which stands at the corner of East University and Water streets in downtown Rochester, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

"The Elevator being placed on the National Register of Historic Places is a great accomplishment," said Rod Wilson, president of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society. "This building is an icon in downtown Rochester. Over the years it was the hub of activity in the city as farmers frequented this location."

Created under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register is administered by the National Park Service and is a program that supports "public and private efforts to identify, evaluate and protect historic and archaeological resources." The website for the National Register noted that listings include structures, buildings, districts, sites and objects that are considered "significant to American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture."

The Rochester area's total number of properties listed in the National Register is now four. In addition to the elevator, the Western Knitting Mills at 400 Water St. (home of [Rochester Mills Beer Co.](#)), the Rollin Sprague Building at 300 Main St. (now the [Home Bakery](#)) and the Stoney Creek Village Historic District near the [Rochester Hills Museum](#) are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Much of the credit for the listing goes to Deborah Larsen, assistant director of the Mount Clemens Public Library and author of *Hometown Rochester: A History of Avon Township, Rochester and Rochester Hills, Michigan*, who spent countless hours researching the elevator and preparing the nomination form for the Rochester-Avon Historical Society.

"We are very fortunate that such an icon of our agricultural heritage still stands in Rochester," Larsen said. "I am thrilled that the National Park Service agrees with us that the Rochester Elevator is worthy of recognition for its importance as part of our local historical fabric."

## An agricultural marketplace

The Rochester Elevator was listed on the National Register of Historic Places because of its economic significance to Rochester, the surrounding communities and the state of Michigan.

In the nomination form it's noted that the elevator "provided a crucial transportation mechanism for shipment of crops and allowed farmers to store their

grain until it could be shipped to market at a time when it would command the most advantageous price.”

It's also stated in the nomination form that the “grain elevator was responsible for positioning Rochester as an agricultural marketplace within Oakland County, which led the State of Michigan in wheat production at that time.”

In the 19th century, wooden grain elevators, like the one in Rochester, were important centers of activity in the community, as farmers brought their grain to elevators for storage and eventual shipment. The term “elevator” is associated with the structure’s mechanism for scooping up, cleaning and depositing grain in storage units – such as silos or bins. The mechanism that elevated the grain could be run by steam, horsepower or, in later years, gasoline and electric power.

“These types of buildings started popping up throughout the Midwest after the Civil War,” Larsen said, “as the railroad lines made their way into the interior and started connecting small towns and rural areas with the bigger cities.”

“Elevators were extremely important to the economic success of the towns they served,” Larsen said, “and the Rochester Elevator was no exception.”

### **Going up!**

Brothers Charles and Albert Griggs built the Rochester Elevator in 1880 along the Detroit and Bay City Railroad (later known as the Michigan Central Railroad). Construction of the grain elevator was big news in Rochester. Larsen’s research points to a Nov. 8, 1880, report in the *Rochester Era* that predicted the elevator would make Rochester “one of the most important business points in this portion of the State.”

It wasn't Rochester's first elevator, but it was the most prosperous. In Samuel Durant's *History of Oakland County*, published in 1877, Larsen found that James Newberry built an elevator along Main Street in the early 1870s.

“After the Griggs Brothers elevator opened, the Newberry elevator seems to have declined in importance,” Larsen wrote in the nomination form, “and was rarely mentioned in the local newspapers.”

Ownership of the Rochester Elevator changed over the years and, in 1909, the structure was expanded.

The elevator “comprises three separate buildings that were joined together to form one structure in 1909,” Larsen wrote in the nomination form. “Except for the partial enclosure of an aluminum awning overhanging the scales, which was added in the 1980s, the exterior retains its 1909 appearance.”

The original 1880 elevator makes up the center portion of the structure, while the southern section “was moved to the site in 1909 and mated to the 1880 elevator structure . . .,” Larsen wrote. “The northern portion . . . is believed to have been built in 1909 from a nearby building that was salvaged.”

Despite expansions and changes in ownership, the elevator remained in service until 1962, when Rochester began to change from an agrarian economy to a post-war suburban city.

By the late 1950s, “the surrounding farm lands that supported the elevator operation were being sold for housing development,” Larsen wrote in the nomination form. “Although the elevator continued to ship crops on an occasional basis until 1976, when the railroad line serving it was abandoned, it had converted to its current use . . . in the late 1950s.”

Lawrence Smith purchased the elevator building in 1956 and for over half a century has operated a home and garden supply store from it. Customers shop at the Rochester Elevator for everything from pet food to propane tanks to water softener salt.

As a result, the elevator is Rochester’s “oldest continuously operating business,” according to the Rochester-Avon Historical Society’s blog site, “and has been housed in the same structure for 130 years.”

### **The elevator gets a lift**

News of the elevator’s listing in the National Register of Historic Places comes at a pivotal point in its history.

In 2005, Smith put the building up for sale. Local builder and developer Frank Rewold & Sons planned to purchase the property and raze the elevator building for a new senior citizen condominium complex. Learning it might soon lose the historical building, members of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society urged the developer to save it and keep it on its original property.

Rewold & Sons offered to donate the property to the historical society if it agreed to move it. Hold the Elevator, a group of historical society members and volunteers, was formed to raise money to move the structure to a nearby city-owned lot near the Clinton River and the Clinton River Trail. However, plans to move the building and turn it into a cultural and historical resource for the community fell through in 2006 when Rewold & Sons backed away from purchasing the property, negating the donation offer.

Several ideas were then bandied about, including asking the city of Rochester or the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) to purchase the building and make the elevator part of a town square. The city and DDA declined to purchase the property, citing the recent downturn in the nation’s economy.

Smith and the Rochester-Avon Historical Society agreed to partner in rehabilitating and preserving the building until a buyer could be found.

Wilson was quoted in a May 31, 2009, *Oakland Press* article as saying, “Lawrence Smith owns the elevator, but we (the community) own the heritage.”

On June 6, 2009, historical society members and volunteers (including this *A Patch of History* columnist) gathered on a bright, sunny morning to help repaint the Rochester Elevator. The group of 100 or so volunteers – ranging in age from 5 to over 85 – picked up brushes dipped in barn-red colored paint and took to painting the lower portion of the elevator building. The well-known red and white checkerboard Purina Chow logo was stenciled back onto the elevator by a professional paint crew.

It was then that the Rochester-Avon Historical Society decided to nominate the Rochester Elevator to the National Register of Historic Places, thereby

increasing public awareness of the building's significance and reasons to preserve it.

### **A monument to days gone by**

Today, the elevator building stands freshly painted and awaiting a good twist of fate. Still on the market, the structure remains an iconic agricultural landmark.

Listing in the National Register of Historic Places will assist efforts to preserve the elevator. Once listed, properties are eligible for federal tax credits and federal funds to offset some of the costs associated with historic preservation and rehabilitation. It also raises the property's overall significance to residents and the community at large. As the National Park Service points out, while listing encourages preservation and maintenance of a listed property, it doesn't restrict an owner's "use, treatment, transfer or disposition of their property."

"I hope that anyone who might acquire the property will be interested in finding an adaptive reuse for the building so that it can remain an icon of Rochester's history for generations to come," Larsen said. "I know that won't be easy, but it would be worth the effort. That's what a listing on the National Register means – that the building or property is recognized as historically significant, and worthy of preservation."