

# Fairport tags former telephone building as historic

David Riley, ROC 10:48 a.m. EST March 7, 2014



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FAIRPORT – Preservation officials in Fairport have declared the former Rochester Telephone Exchange building a historic landmark with both architectural value and a past with important ties to the region's optics industry.

The building at 56 West Ave. has been vacant for several years, but its exterior remains in good shape, said Jean Whitney, chairwoman of the Fairport Historic Preservation Commission.

Prominent Rochester architect J. Foster Warner, who also created such landmarks as the George Eastman House and the Sibley Triangle Building, designed the structure. Prominent contractor Gorsline and Swan Construction Company built it in 1929.

The building represents the commercial "prairie" style, the village said in a news release.

Originally, the building housed modern switchboards and a central battery system meant to replace outdated telephones.

When it opened in 1930, about 12 operators there handled about 1,400 calls a year from 1,691 phones.

The phone company moved out in the late 1950s, replaced in 1959 by Tropel Inc.. The company was then a startup that specialized in computerized lens design and went on to become a prominent player in the precision optics industry.

The company's founder, Robert Hopkins, directed the University of Rochester's Institute of Optics from 1954 to 1965. The university's optical design and engineering center is named after him.

Tropel remains in Fairport today, but moved out of the telephone building in 1975, the preservation commission said.

The historic designation means that the owner would have to apply for a certificate of appropriateness to make changes to the exterior of the building if they can be seen from the street, Whitney said. The commission has approved all such certificates to date, she said.

"The people who have come to us felt that any suggestions we might have made have made their plan better," she said.

The preservation commission has designated 26 or so buildings as historic since it formed in late 2007, according to Whitney.

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