

LOCAL & STATE

ON WISCONSIN | WATERTOWN

Historic powerhouse full of potential

WATERTOWN — Mention a spiral staircase in this city and the first thought is the Octagon House.

Built on a hill in 1854 by John Richards as a promise to his bride-to-be, the home's three stories and its cupola are accessed via a staircase that winds through the center of the building.



**BARRY
ADAMS**

Richards, who arrived here on foot in 1837 as one of the city's first settlers and who would become the first lawyer in Jefferson County, designed the home to include central heating, running water and ventilating systems, something nearly unheard of at the time. The bricks

used to build the house were hauled from Milwaukee over the Plank Road, which had been completed a few years earlier.

But just down the hill from the Octagon House and the nation's first Kindergarten building is a spiral staircase that for more than 100 years has been largely obscured from the public eye.

It's located in the brick and concrete powerhouse building that towers along the west bank of the Rock River and is adjacent to the dam. Unlike the Octagon House, the powerhouse's spiral staircase is in the southwest corner of the rectangular building and connects the basement to the second floor. Accessing the third floor is an arduous adventure up a steep metal staircase that more resembles a ladder, one that would never meet

modern building codes.

But the powerhouse, which no longer generates electricity, is up for sale and could be an ideal structure for condominiums, a restaurant, brewpub or maybe all three, since this city of more than 24,000 people has glaring need for all of the above.

"It's just really well built. It's a bunker," said Art Lenius, who has owned the property for the past 20 years. "And it's nice because your neighbor is Tivoli Island, so you're never going to have neighbors anywhere. It's a beautiful fit."

The powerhouse building is nowhere near among the oldest buildings in the city but its prominence along the river has made it one of the more identifiable.



JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

Art Lenius, owner of a historic hydroelectric powerhouse on the Rock River in Watertown, walks past the building he is trying to sell, which he believes may be best used for condominiums. The powerhouse, constructed in 1909, is no longer used to generate electricity.

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The facility was constructed in 1909 just to the north of the original dam that was made of dirt and timbers in the 1840s by settling Bohemians. In 1847, the Rough & Ready Mill opened and could grind 80 barrels of flour a day, while on the opposite side of the 300-foot-long dam on the east side of the river stood a sawmill, according to Watertown Historical Society documents. The grist mill burned in 1888 and ultimately was replaced with a powerhouse owned by the Watertown Electric Company.

The existing powerhouse, now owned by Lenius, was constructed in 1909 by the Watertown Gas & Electric Company at the same time that the dam was moved just to the north of the original dam site of the 1840s. The project included an 11.5-foot-high dam, with the 38-foot-wide and 94-foot-long powerhouse rising 85 feet from the river bottom and holding two large water wheels, a generator and transformer connected to the Kilbourn Dam in what is now Wisconsin Dells. Electricity from both dams was used to power the Inter-Urban electric railway line from Milwaukee to Watertown that began operating in 1908.

“The entrance of the Inter-Urban railway marks another period in Watertown’s prosperity, and it means much to our city’s advancement,” the Watertown Gazette newspaper wrote at the time.

The powerhouse has had a number of owners over the years but hasn’t produced power for decades.

The asking price on the powerhouse building is \$449,000 but should not be confused with an adjacent smaller brick building owned by Tom Reiss. For years, the local businessman, who owns power generating stations around the country, has been generating power at the dam and at the city’s other dam, located downstream along South Water Street. The sale of the powerhouse by Lenius includes land and the large, dormant and empty powerhouse but does not include the smaller powerhouse building, owned by Reiss, or the dam, which is owned by the city.

Lenius put the powerhouse up for sale in 2023. There have been several lookers but so far, no takers. Ryan Wagner, the listing agent for the property, says it would be difficult to find a similar property anywhere.

“The history of it is amazing. It’d be so cool if somebody did something,” Wagner said. “As a broker, every chance Watertown has to create a development to bring housing is good. Housing brings people, and the more things we can do to attract developers to the community, the better.”

Pieces of history

Lenius is no stranger to old buildings. Over the past 41 years, the Watertown native has built his business, Restoration Specialists, working on scores of historic structures including homes, commercial buildings and churches. He owns a former lumberyard on South Water Street that was converted years ago into retail market spaces and just recently purchased a four-story brick building constructed in 1902 along the railroad tracks. Lenius has an industrial park filled with warehouses next to his home north of the city, collects cuckoo clocks and has more than 60 vintage cars and pickup trucks.

When the Highway 26 bypass was constructed around the city, it was Lenius who bought the clubhouse of the displaced Watertown Outboarders. Lenius moved the structure to his property north of Watertown



JOHN HART PHOTOS, STATE JOURNAL

Realtor Ryan Wagner, left, and Art Lenius, owner of the former hydroelectric powerhouse on the Rock River, stand outside the third floor. The property is listed for \$449,000 and is one of the most recognizable buildings in Watertown.



An original metal spiral staircase is the primary means of access between floors of the historic hydroelectric powerhouse in Watertown. This view is looking down into the basement.



All of the generating and other equipment has been removed from the powerhouse, located next to the upper dam in Watertown. This view of the second floor shows the steep staircase to the third floor.



The former powerhouse in Watertown offers up scenic views of the Rock River.



WATCH: A tour of the historic Watertown powerhouse [NEWSVU](#)

and continues to eye historic buildings.

“They’re well built. They can be neglected, but it doesn’t take much to bring them back,” Lenius said. “The catch is knowing how to do it, which I learned from a lot of old guys that did

this kind of work. That was my Ph.D. I made it through high school. That was it.”

Lenius had grand ideas when he purchased the powerhouse about 20 years ago, cleaned out the junk, fixed the roof and added some retaining walls to shore up the driveway. He spent \$35,000 on architectural plans to convert the building into 10 condominium units, two of which would be located on the

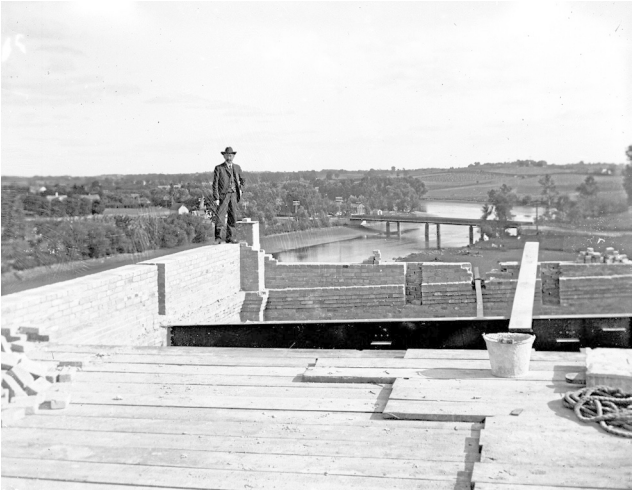
third floor. The plans also called for underground parking and 12 parking spaces outside. He and his wife had visions of living in one of the top floor condos, but time got away from him.

Lenius spends his winters at his oceanfront home in South America and says it’s time for someone else to preserve the history of the powerhouse.

“It’s a neat old building and it’s got a lot of potential,” he

said. “I ended up doing other big projects and now I’m 62, so something’s got to give. I’m never going to get to this now. I’ve been trying to do it for 20 years, but it’s time for someone else to do it.”

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WATERTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY PHOTOS

Left: A crowd gathers along the Rock River in 1909, the same year the powerhouse on the Rock River was completed. **Middle:** In this undated aerial photo, the Octagon House can be seen in the foreground with the powerhouse located down the hill along the Rock River. **Right:** The top of the powerhouse in Watertown continues to offer up stunning views. This image was taken in 1909.