

Our story of the Youngstown Cold Storage begins in the early 19th Century when apple orchards were first planted in the Town of Porter. The unique microclimate from the Lake to the escarpment, and soil just right for the fruits and vegetables, have resulted in quality products. Thru-out the 19th Century the farming community continued to grow, as peaches, pears and cherries were planted.

In these times the harvest was transported in horse-drawn wagons to Niagara Falls, where the containers were loaded on railcars and shipped across the country and to Europe. In 1825 the Erie Canal opened from Buffalo to Albany and shipping from Lockport offered an alternative method and route.

As the volume of produce continued to increase the issues involved in transportation began to become a deterrent to the farm to market process. There was a shortage of refrigerated freight cars, wagons waited in lines for hours often settling for unrefrigerated cars and risk spoilage and the farmers were often able to haul only 1 load a day.

As the 20th Century arrived the fruit growers began to meet to formulate plans to deal effectively and profitably with the growth in product and the transportation issues. The consensus was that a fruit processing and storage facility, and closer access to the railroad lines were necessary.

In 1909, the Lewiston Youngstown Frontier Railroad which had been carrying passengers since 1895 began adding spurs to the farms along the River Road Line. The farmers were now able to load the box cars closer to their land without greatly interrupting regular trolley traffic.

The fruit growers plans, which were incorporated as the Western Niagara Fruit Growers Cold Storage Co., progressed very quickly thru 1913 and resulted in the 1st building opening in the fall of 1914, at the corner of Third and Elliott Streets in Youngstown. A spur of the LYFR was run to the loading dock of the cold storage and shipping of the stored fruits began. The first winter a total of 30,000 bushels were stored, and a profit of \$9,189.00 was made.

The operation, which included fruit sorting and packing in addition to storage in a cool environment, began to expand in 1918 with the construction of an ice making building to the south of the Main Building. In 1923 the name of the Corporation was changed to Youngstown Cold Storage, and an addition was added on the west side that increased capacity to 135-140,000 bushels. In the later half of the 1920's the Lewiston Youngstown Frontier Railroad curtailed service, finally closing down and eventually being purchased by The Cold Storage Co. in 1929 for \$27,000. Using a diesel engine, the shipping of the freight cars continued to the docks at Lewiston Landing and connecting with the New York Central RR in Lewiston, reaching its' peak during WWII.

After the war, and with a nationwide highway system developing, the trucking industry began to take over the shipping of fruit. In 1950 the Railway between Lewiston and Youngstown was abandoned; the tracks were taken up and sold for scrap and the right of ways sold to adjoining property owners.

Moving into the 2nd half of the 20th Century some of the storage rooms were converted to the Controlled Atmosphere concept. This is accomplished by regulating the oxygen, carbon dioxide and nitrogen concentrations, as well as the temperature and humidity in the rooms. This process all but stops the oxidation, or breathing, so that the fruit remains in its tree-ripened condition, or essentially, is put to sleep. In 1987 the CA storage expanded by building 2 new rooms on the East side of the plant, each with a 10,000-bushel capacity.

The Cold Storage continued to be operated by the fruit grower's co-op until 2001, when it was closed due to lack of business. The future of the site, buildings and property was played out over several years with plenty of questions and few actionable answers. In 2003 the building was put under an order of security by the Village Building Inspector due to a rash of vandalism and a leak in the ammonia system. In 2006 a study by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) found contaminants at the site such as lead, arsenic, asbestos and PCBs.

Among the conversations held concerning the site were ones between preservationists, who sought to save and develop what they could and an active group (mostly neighbors) who were concerned with the continued deterioration of the buildings, the vandalism and the 2006 study by the DEC. In 2009 sufficient grants were received to cover the environmental cleanup, with the ultimate goal being to return the property to tax rolls. In 2008 the building and property had been deeded to the Village by Niagara County, which had taken possession after the former co-op stopped paying taxes for several years.

The saga of private sector development, impacted by the "use vs demolition" discussions, resulted in a variety of proposals over the intervening years – Dollar General, Senior citizens apartments, architectural salvage business, and a community theater. In 2023 the decision was made to demolish the building and Creative Structure Services was named the preferred developer. Approval by the Village Board in October 2024 for a contract with C.S.S for demolition and construction of the 2.13 acres. Eventually a plan calling for 17 units in 3 buildings was approved. Demolition was completed in March 2025 and construction is planned to start Summer 2025, and take about 1 year.

The Youngstown Cold Storage continued to be a busy and reliable operation which met the needs of local farmers for nearly 90 years. The average consumer, many of them neighbors and local residents, knew little about the issues that faced the growers in marketing their products from farm to table. We addressed some of them earlier in this article. The true legacy of the Western Niagara Fruit Growers Cold Storage Co. is highlighted in the processes that were utilized to receive, clean, sort, package and ship the "fruits" of the Farmer's labor.

Sources

Town of Porter Historical Museum & Staff

Niagara Gazette

Buffalo News

Niagara Frontier Publications Sentinel

Niagara County Historian