

The Building of the Original Eugene Hotel in 1925 - Part 1

You may have heard that the former Eugene hotel on the southwest corner of the Monroe Square is currently being renovated. This project is only possible because of owners, Chris and Tyler Soukup, architect and partner, Aaron Holverson, and 10 additional investors. Planning started in October 2021 with actual construction beginning on September 1, 2025. At a cost of more than \$9 million, the hotel is expected to open this summer. The hotel will have 25 guest rooms, many historic photographs of Monroe and the area in the rooms and public areas, as well as room service from Baumgartner Cheese Store and Tavern. This column (and the next three) will explore the building of the original Eugene Hotel, which opened a century ago on August 15, 1925.

Leland White, who built the White Block on the southwest corner of the Square in 1901, purchased the current hotel property across 11th Street in 1920. He contemplated making temporary improvements to the building, but also thought about building “a modern business block for the corner that will be the tallest and most completely equipped building in the city.”

That property already contained the McKey Block, which had been built in 1859 by James McKey, Janesville. It was 59 feet facing the square with three storefronts on that side and was 100 feet on the south. The original building was found not to have settled one-sixteenth of an inch since its original construction. It had 2-foot walls with a “30-inch solid stone construction at the base.”

White purchased the property from the Thomas Wells estate. No price was included in the paper in January; the deed was dated April 22 and gave the price as \$1.00 “and other valuable considerations.” There might have been other property that exchanged hands that were not included in this deed.



This photo, from the collection of Ron and Sandy Brown, shows the McKey Block in the early 1900s. It was built on the southwest corner of the Square in the late 1850s and remained until Leland White starting transforming it into the Eugene Hotel in 1924.

Nothing more was seen in the newspaper about improvements to the block nor any plans for building until August 29, 1924. At that time White announced that “a new business block, the most modern and imposing on the courthouse square, will be ready for complete occupancy within a year.” Work of improving the lower rear part was to begin the following week. Excavation was to be made for a

three story rear portion. "Window locations will be changed and no trace of the old building will be left when the improvement is completed."

The Wells & Devoe pool hall, Mueller tire shop, and the Monroe Shine Parlor were to vacate their respective places immediately. However, the Knight Merchandising company would occupy the space during construction that the pool hall had previously occupied. A modern heating plant was to be installed to heat the entire new block.

The Alvin F. Rote company were the designing architects, with Robert L. Rote directly supervising the construction of the "new 48-room hostelry." The need for a modern hotel had been felt for a number of years in Monroe, "especially with the ever increasing demand for up-to-date rooms with bath."

It was shared on September 16 that the excavation work was to be started before the end of the week. Debris from the lower rear portion that had been torn down was being hauled away. A three-story modern business block, surfaced with new brick, was to open in 1925.

It was shared on September 25, "Several old walls at the rear of the present building are being destroyed, and digging must go several feet below the basement level of the old structure." Construction will follow with the "new rear section to go up three stories and the third story to eventually cover the old two story structure, which will be used as part of the new building."

It was finally shared on November 13 "that the hotel Eugene, a 43-room hostelry of latest design and equipment, will be ready for occupancy" after July 1. Rumors of a new hotel had been floating, but "it was not until today that Mr. White felt sufficiently assured of the realization of the project to make public the information." He shared that it would be an investment of about \$100,000.

Plans had just been approved by the state; exterior brick and stone work was well underway at the time. Construction was to continue through the winter. The plan was to add the third floor and roof in time to allow much of the inside work to be done during the coldest months. Only 22 of the guest rooms would be built with a bath, "a greatly demanded convenience that no hotel in Monroe has been able to offer extensively heretofore." White chose to name the hotel to honor his parents Mr. and Mrs. Eugene A. White. His father, who passed away seven years earlier, had been a pioneer farmer in Clarno township until 1901. A bronze plaque was planned for the south side of the building, and still remains.

All trace of the old building was to be obliterated as the new brick was going up outside the old brick walls. Four inches was to be taken off the old brick wall so that it could be covered. White Bedford cut stone was being used for windowsills and caps on the first two floors; on the third story, the stone would form a continuous sill around the building. This novel trim, together with white stone cornice and coping, will make the third floor an attractive top border in the general design of the building," which "rose higher than its two-story neighbor to the north."

The entrance for the southernmost store was at an angle on the corner. A basement entrance was placed near the center on the south wall. To the west of that was the door to the hotel lobby, recessed 6 feet. At the alley corner was the entrance to the rear space, which would be used as the coffee shop.

More will be shared in the next three columns about the construction of the original Eugene Hotel.