

Times Herald Record April 15, 2005

Munson Moving to Liberty
Classic Diner was a fixture in Manhattan

By Ramsey Al-Rikabi

NEW YORK – For decades, construction workers rolled into the Munson Diner for eggs and toast as the sun rose over Hell’s Kitchen. Cops popped in for coffee and cabbies grabbed a bagel or burger between fares. Commuters picked up dinner on their way to the Lincoln Tunnel and late-night club kids poured themselves into the black booths for cheeseburgers and onion rings before dawn.

But that was before the diner was bought up, shut down, and nearly scrapped last summer after more than 50 years at 49th Street and 11th Avenue.

So where do you go when you’re priced out of New York City? Upstate, of course.

After almost a year in limbo and several failed suitors, a group of local investors is set to settle the Munson Diner into a new home in downtown Liberty.

Down in the city, the Munson’s red neon sign no longer glows and its large windows set above stainless steel siding the color of grape soda are boarded up. On a cold and sunny day this week, a U.S. Postal Service cart was over-turned by the padlocked front door, spilling torn cardboard and broken mirrors onto the pavement.

A sorry state for a diner so classic that film and TV directors booked it for scenes.

Inside, a stack of July 19 newspapers from last year sits on the counter by the front door – from around the time this 1940’s streamline served its final Philly cheesesteak platter special for \$7 and its last coffee to go. There’s still salt in the shakers and ancient gum stuck under the stacked faux-marble tables. The still air was foul.

“Grease,” said Tony Chianese, explaining the smell.

Chianese is manager of Martin’s Manhattan Volvo next door, which bought the Munson last year because the dealership needed the space.

“It was fully operational until the day it closed,” Chianese said. He tried selling it, but no deal would stick. The American Diner Museum in Rhode Island pitched in to find a buyer.

“We were going to demolish it,” he said. “So I’m happy to see it go in one piece.”

Early next month, the Munson will be loaded – in one piece – onto a flatbed and hauled up to Liberty to be reborn this summer on a vacant lot on Lake Street.

Fifteen investors making up the Munson Diner Corp. want the Hell’s Kitchen landmark to be, “downtown Liberty’s new national tourist attraction,” said Allen Berube, a Village of Liberty councilman.

The Munson move is part of Liberty’s efforts to revamp its downtown into a dining, cultural and shopping hub.

Almost all the new owners, so far, have remained anonymous.

“I don’t know why they are so adamant about keeping it a secret,” said **Jeremy Gorelick**, the president and public face of the Munson Diner Corp.

The group, which has already raised \$250,000 for the diner's rebirth, is looking for someone to run it, and hopes to have burgers on the grill by July 4.

By then, a new crowd of construction crews and commuters, lawyers, artists and late-night kids will have the chance to slide into their favorite booths, order their favorite deluxe platters and see the new home of the seasoned Munson Diner through its big windows, set above its stainless steel siding the color of grape soda.