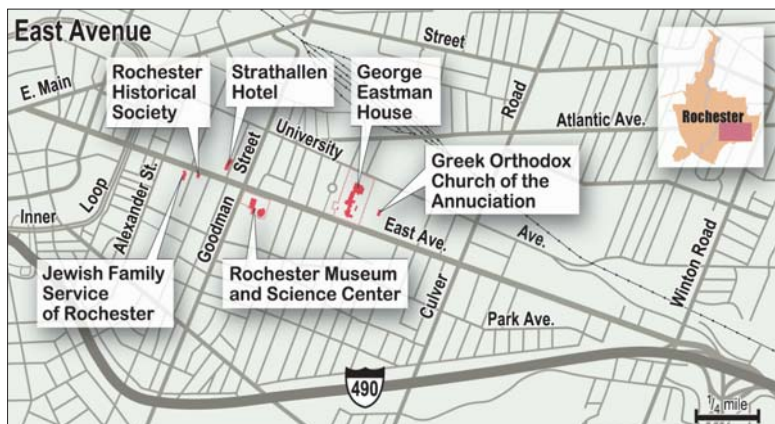


THE DAILY RECORD

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Clockwise from bottom left: The most famous house on East Avenue, the George Eastman House; a giraffe outside Rochester Wealth Management Group LLC; a nighttime view of St. Paul's Episcopal Church; the steeple of the Asbury First United Methodist Church; Katie Alfieri, who lives just off of East Avenue walks her dogs Little and Cooper; Dylan Henson walks along the East Avenue and Oxford Street intersection.

NEIGHBORHOOD FOCUS

East Avenue

BY COLLEEN M. FARRELL

Arguably Rochester's swankiest neighborhood — the East Avenue corridor — had much more humble beginnings. Originally an old Native American trail,

East Avenue once was merely the dirt path that led to Pittsford until one of its residents, nurseryman Josiah Bissell, suggested it be renamed East Avenue. The

city's administration, at the time, wasn't particularly fond of the idea, but Bissell christened the street, anyway, tacking up signs along the route from his property to the present-day Liberty Pole area. Cynthia Howk, architectural research coordinator at the Landmark Society of Western New York, said East Avenue was very rural throughout much of the 1800s. By the 1840s, East Avenue boasted three homes, one of which now houses the

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Rochester Historical Society. The neighborhood's residents "were basically living out in the country," Howk said.

Oliver Culver built his Federal style home in 1816, when East Avenue was still surrounded by woods. His homestead, on the northeast corner of East Avenue and Culver Road, is the oldest house in the neighborhood. The house was moved to 70 East Boulevard in 1905. The house also was used as a tavern and includes a ball-room.

Hiram Sibley, who helped form Western Union, in 1862 made East Avenue the grand thoroughfare it is today after building his home at number 400. The construction of the

Italianate-style abode led to more business owners commissioning architects to build their homes on either side.

And what homes they were: Italianate mansions and Georgian Revivals with towering cupolas and carriage houses out back. Their well-manicured lawns stretched to Park Avenue, providing much open space compared to Rochester's other wealthy neighborhood, Corn Hill, Howk said.

As the children of the Corn Hill residents made their own ways in the world — many made their wealth here — East Avenue and its side streets became a premier destination for building.

Its development heyday was between the pre-income tax late-1860s and early 1920s, when local "captains of industry," including the presidents of the Gleason Works, Bausch & Lomb and other companies, built "trophy houses," Howk said.

Across the country, "you have this phenomena," Howk said, "of major boulevards with spectacular mansions on lots that may extend a whole block."

The invention of the lawn mower, as well as the influx of immigrants, spurred further development as owners had the means to care for their sprawling properties, she said.

George Eastman, the founder of Eastman Kodak Co., arguably was the street's most notable resident. His stately home has been turned into a museum and also houses the Dryden Theatre. Eastman, a legendary

entrepreneur in his own right, became even more famous locally for his New Year's Eve parties, Howk said.

Abraham J. Katz, treasurer of the Stein-Bloch Clothing Co., was another industry giant who called East Avenue home. John Bernunzio, proprietor of Bernunzio Vintage Instruments, and his wife, Julie Schnepf, now own 875 East Ave.

The couple had lived in other older houses in the area before purchasing number 875; and the move was "absolutely a lark," Bernunzio said. "I just opened up the paper, saw it for sale, and told my wife, 'Want to buy a house on East Avenue?'"

The couple since has learned that they share similarities with Abraham Katz and his wife, Theresa. Both couples married on the same day, 99 years apart. The couple was a fierce supporter of arts and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. Bernunzio is a collector of turn-of-the-century instruments.

Since moving in 13 years ago, the couple has restored the house from a three-family renovation to its original single-family luster. They also added on to the 8,000-sq. ft. home and installed a swimming pool. Bernunzio and his wife have stayed true to the home's character, he said, and even put their stove in the spot where the Katz stove once stood.

"It's incredible what Rochester has" with East Avenue," Bernunzio said. "It's best described as stepping back to another place and time."

Mary Nicosia and her family moved to East Avenue 11 years ago. Their Georgian Revival home includes 10 bedrooms, eight and a half bathrooms and 12,000 square feet of living space on three levels. With more than an acre of land, close-knit neighbors and close proximity to amenities, "we have the best of city living," she said.

Nicosia, a Realtor with RE/MAX Realty Group, said her neighbors share an appreciation for restoration and preservation, and "just taking care of the house in the right way. ... People who are passionate about it don't do it for an investment. You can't."

The importance of preservation in the neighborhood also rang true more than 100 years ago: Those who lived on East Avenue

had clout in Rochester, according to Howk. Its residents, for instance, fought the proposed installation of a street trolley.

"The only thing they allowed was this sort of quaint, old-fashioned horse-drawn car," Howk said. "That was mass transit until the automobile."

Neighbors also fought further development, which they saw creeping along East Avenue from Main Street. Hiram Sibley's son constructed the building at the corner of East Avenue and Alexander Street as an "unsubtle statement" that commercial expansion ended there, Howk said.

Inevitably, some houses were torn down to make way for churches, apartment high-rises and the Rochester Museum & Science Center, but Sibley's statement seems to be a success, as most of the homes from Alexander Street to Winton Road have been preserved.

Neighbors banded together in the 1960s to fight the demolition of several houses for new apartment buildings.

"In 1969, the City of Rochester became the first municipality in New York State to adopt a historic preservation ordinance," Howk said, and the first neighborhood to benefit was East Avenue.

"The East Avenue preservation district contains among the most distinctive late-19th and early-20th century residential architecture in New York State," she said. "It's one of the most important collections of that era of residential architecture. It's like an outdoor museum. You could teach an architectural history course."

The area also is known for its landscaping, according to Howk. After tacking up East Avenue street signs, Bissell planted a double row of horse-chestnut trees from his property to the Liberty Pole in 1846. In 1852, the East Avenue Shade Tree Association replaced them with elm trees.

"We just feel fortunate to have it and I can't imagine ever letting it go," Nicosia said.

The Landmark Society of Western New York will feature East Avenue and its side streets on its annual house and garden tour this summer, June 6 and 7.

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