

What Happened to Oakland's Downtown?

Downtown Oakland.....Well folks, I'm sad to say that this term is a bit of an oxymoron. No, I'm not poking fun at it and I'm not attempting to abuse the priceless memories of those who grew up here. So why is it an oxymoron and what happened to whatever we refer to as downtown Oakland?

In 1872 the wilderness of a farming Oakland had a railroad, a railroad station and large house serving as a ticket agency and as the post office. Then realizing that local citizens needed stuff that the railroad could deliver to them, Mr. Bush built his store in 1877. It ultimately became the beloved Wigwam, the singularly iconic Oakland building of an entire generation. Oakland by 1877 was still a remote outpost of Franklin Township controlled by the pharos of Ridgewood. But, we nonetheless then had the magical and primordial stuff of being a center of commerce (or dare I say town?) unto ourselves. The germ of a town was growing in the wilderness among the farms of the Ramapo Valley. David C. Bush walked and worked the fields of his farm and he had a vision. He also had something secret in his pocket. Let's just call it pixie dust.

Virtually every town in Bergen County, all 70 of them, were founded and developed around their railroad stations and their railroad stations gave rise and impetus to the development of their downtowns as business districts

But not Oakland.

Oaklanders had a different view of the world and what a main street ought to be. We built beautiful Victorian homes along Ramapo Valley Road near the railroad tracks and station. Yes, it is true that there were some businesses around the railroad tracks and station.

Obviously there was the Bush General Store built in 1877. And there were also the Oakland Hotel, the McNomee Store and the Lloyd store. And who can forget gun powder works with its own rail spur. Even the Calder residence was greatly expanded to become the Calderwood Hotel in the early 1900s. And we can still see the original Van Blarcum home which in time became the Van Blarcum Hotel, Annie Meyers house and ultimately the '410' Professional Building across from where the original Oakland RR station was. These were few and a mere core around the railroad tracks. Up and down Ramapo Valley Road within spitting distance of the tracks, Oaklanders built beautiful Victorian homes, not commercial buildings or stores. No one really knows why our founders chose differently from virtually all other communities. Perhaps it was intentional or maybe it was that they didn't know better. Regardless, it was their vision for their town to be.

The point is that beautiful homes actually once dominated what we now consider 'downtown' Oakland. If there were stores and retail establishments instead of homes surrounding the railroad station, Oakland probably would not have suffered its

architectural devastation or at least as much as it has. As Oakland grew, these homes became vulnerable and victims to 'progress'.

THE WASTELAND OF STRIP MALLS

The Valley of Homes was soon to become the Wasteland of Strip Malls.

It was politics and the lack of vision of biblical proportions that did us in. And, I hasten to add the 'times' and apathy of Oakland's citizens.

Up until 1956, Oakland was truly a Mayberry with not even a traffic light. Our population in 1950 was 1,817 souls and in 1960, it had exploded to 9,446, an increase of over 500%. New residents began to flood into Oakland particularly as Route 208 was beginning to approach our borders. It is said that between 1950 and 1960, over 300 new houses were built per year in Oakland. These new residents demanded the services and resources one might expect from a larger community.

Oakland didn't have any shopping to speak of as everyone simply went to Pompton Lakes to purchase everything they needed. But while there was no real shopping, Oakland did have a lot of space (aka empty fields and homes) along Ramapo Valley Road in the center of town. These open spaces were the final remnants of Oakland's agricultural past, ie, abandoned farms. Additionally, the shopping malls along Routes 4 and 17 were opening and causing devastation to local downtown shopping areas throughout the county. This sent a powerful message to the then mayor and politicians of Oakland.

One must add that it was the views and attitudes of the times embraced by the nation and by the citizenry of Oakland that greatly contributed to the destruction of downtown Oakland. The 1950's was the period of post WW II when America ruled the world. Nuclear energy was on the near horizon and America's march into progress was the rally cry of the day. Out with the old, in with the new. If one was to consider that the buildings, homes and hotels in downtown Oakland date to about 1895, they were only 65 years old in 1960. Although they were the stuff of architectural heritage, they weren't antiques. They weren't modern and they were vulnerable to profit and indifference.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

An evil brew and confluence of malfactors in Oakland was emerging to initiate the devastation our downtown: An exploding population in a town with no shopping, the pending arrival of Route 208, a downtown composed mostly of 'old' wooden buildings and a populist attitude of progress at any price. Oh, and did I mention a mayor and council whose lack of vision was of biblical proportions? When the mayor looked at the retail devastation in the county caused by the shopping malls and mixed that view with the growing needs of his electorate, it was clear to him as to what was needed to be done.

We needed stores. But not clustered along narrow streets. We also needed parking and lots of it for the shoppers. We needed a large variety of different types of stores to attract

and keep shoppers. And, all of this had to be centrally located. Our politicians of the mid 1950's gleefully fondled the map of downtown Oakland looking for space to develop. What they found was the answer to the Oakland politicians' dream; the newly minted concept of strip malls. And so it was that in the short space of less than 10 years, Oakland went from no shopping to having no fewer than four large strip malls. And in doing so, our downtown was virtually destroyed.

In 1957 Oakland was to have a supermarket with additional stores. These factors combine to equal Oakland's very first strip mall when we welcomed the Grand Union to town in what was to be later known as the Sears Shopping Center.

Although it's location initially seems odd, consider that the entire 10 acres on the strip mall was once owned by the Ponds Church in 1924. The then mayor on January 30, 1955 in an incredible show of hubris made a presentation to the Elders of the Ponds Church. His agenda was to have the church building demolished and purchase the land because it was in the way of the soon-to-be new strip mall. He offered an alternative site in town as a swap. The Elders listened as politely as they could and after he left, immediately initiated plans to expand the church to its present size. It was the ecclesiastical equivalent of 'Don't let the door hit you in the butt'. Literally, thank God.

But the development of this new strip mall in 1957 consumed the last and only vacant property in the center of Oakland. Future additions to the inventory of retail stores would have to be at the expense of what was already here, ie, our cultural and architectural heritage. Oakland's first new strip mall was a success. More, newer and bigger were the by-words of the day.

TOO MANY IS NOT ENOUGH

The nearest and obvious prime meat for development was the property of the Oakland Military Academy, an Oakland Victorian architectural icon whose core structure dated back to the late 18th or early 19th Century. The Academy was founded by John Sarcka in the 1930's after Mrs. Calder passed away. Due to the success of the Academy, it needed additional space for barracks and for classroom training. As a result it began to successfully acquire almost every building adjacent to the Academy property along Ramapo Valley Road and even a few that weren't.

After purchasing the Calderwood, Sarcka purchased the revered Oakland Inn on the Southeast corner of Ramapo Valley Road and Yawpo Avenue. With only two exceptions he then purchased every Victorian home on the east side of Ramapo Valley Road between Yawpo and Maple Avenue. He then acquired the Sanders property located on the North side of Yawpo Avenue containing two old, 2 story wooden apartment buildings behind the current Bank of America building. The Academy also owned a large house on the West side of Ramapo Valley Road located where the current Oakland Drugs is situated. It was called the Penny House.

Hence the Academy property literally contained everything that a developer and politician could ask for: Massive space, a perfect location, 'old', disposable buildings and potential tenants. Permit me to add profits. Lust and greed know no bounds.

What follows a first hand verbal account of the event that led to the demise of the Oakland Military Academy. And it is from a person who got his information directly from John Sarcka: Sarcka's lips to his ears and his lips to my ears.

It seems that shortly after the development of the first Oakland strip mall behind the Ponds Church, The Oakland Military Academy suddenly began to receive building code violations from the borough for plumbing, safety, fire, electrical, and so forth. Although Sarcka fixed the deficiencies, the repairs never seemed to be satisfactory and further deficiencies were even discovered. The volume of them, the suddenness of their discovery and the frequency of being cited was, let's just say, very highly unusual particularly since Sarcka had great position and stature in Oakland at the time. The cost of the repairs to the many and growing number of code violations became massive and on-going and the costs were becoming prohibitive. Sarcka is quoted as asking why, "why are they doing this to me? What do they want and what do they want me to do?" The probable and obvious answer was simply that 'they' just may have wanted him to sell out and move his academy someplace else. There was money to be made with the Oakland Military Academy property and Sarka was in the way.

I ask the reader to reflect upon the fact that the Oakland Military Academy owned virtually all of downtown Oakland on the East side of Ramapo Valley Road. If the Academy is sold, abandoned and destroyed, so would each of every building that it owned. And that's precisely what happened.

The Oakland Military Academy moved to Orange County, NY. Each building owned by the academy was destroyed, moved or 'accidentally' burned down. And Oakland's downtown was devastated as a result. So much and too much of our architectural history and heritage was sacrificed for a strip mall and a parking lot.

MORE, MORE, MORE

And there were more malls to build, more of paradise to be paved and more parking spaces to create. Yes, there were more sacrificial offerings to the gods of progress.

Immediately adjacent to the brand new Copper Tree Mall were 2 fine Victorian houses coupled with a large expanse of property. They were the Nielsen House and the Kestler House and they impeded the march of progress. And so it was that a new strip mall was built, the A&P came to Oakland and these fine houses on Ramapo Valley Road succumbed in the process. Gone forever.

And then there is one of the unkindest, heritage-destroying cut of all, one inflicted upon Oakland's architectural heritage by one of our own, Art Seele.

In 1957 Mr. Seel was no longer a young man. For many years he owned the iconic and famous Seels Restaurant and Bar, a building whose roots extended back to about 1890 when it was first a private home and then a small hotel. It evolved into a bar and grille and adjacent to it was the locally famous Seele's Confectionary ice cream parlor, a form predecessor to the Wigwam. It was located on the Northeast corner of Yawpo Avenue and Ramapo Valley Road. The destruction that was taking place in our beloved Oakland apparently gave him the idea that it was OK to join sacrificial orgy occurring in our downtown.

At first, he built his strip mall behind his bar but apparently that didn't work. So, he demolished his iconic bar and grill in favor of parking spaces and re-opened his bar where Pete and John's paint store is currently located.

Unfortunately, there's more and most are Victorian houses sacrificed on the alter of commerce.

First there is the 1795 Becker House. Well, it seems that Oakland politicians eagerly approved the destruction of that house in favor of an Exxon gas station on the corner of Courthouse Place and Ramapo Valley Road. Think about it for a moment....A gas station in exchange for a 18th Century home built during a time when America's Constitution was still being debated by a nascent nation. Then there was the Victorian home next to the McNomee house. The front of it was sacrificed to Ralph's Pizza in the 1960's. But that was not enough as the entire house was destroyed in favor of a bank building and parking lot that now stands in its stead. And then there was/is the Victorian house currently next to Oakland Drugs and recessed back almost behind the current Lukoil gas station. At one time it was curb side on Ramapo Valley Road. But, it seems that the then gas station owners needed to expand and also wanted more parking space. So, the house was literally picked up and moved away from the street to the point that it's mostly obscured today.

In the 1980's the ghost of David C. Bush witnessed the destruction of his home on Ramapo Valley Road located immediately across the tracks from his railroad station. Over the years it changed hands several times and served many businesses until finally, it was razed. The property lay fallow until a developer decided that yet another strip mall was needed in Oakland. And so a new Walgreens, Starbucks and yet another bank were built upon the ashes of the farm and homestead of Mr. David C. Bush.

Where there wasn't destruction, there was the frontal modification of our classic homes on Ramapo Valley Road during the late 1950's and early 1960's. Specifically, the ancestral McNomee home, then the Yeoman home and currently the ReMax Real Estate office, had its beautiful front porch torn off to add 2, single story cinder block stores in place of it. But, credit is due as the 'house' of the structure was repurposed, enhanced and beautified. Additionally, there was a small, very quaint butcher shop from the turn of the century on RVR that was moved about 50 feet back to make space for a cinder block box retail store now occupied by a hail salon. One must look very hard to discover it as it is currently part of a tire retailer.

NOTHING IS SACRED

The most severe insult to our most beloved downtown Oakland is saved for last.

The year was 1957 and Oakland definitely needed a larger post office. Oakland's then leading politician looked around to find a suitable location for a new post office and sitting there was the original 1872 Oakland railroad station built by the residents of Oakland on land donated to Oakland.

It fit every criteria for official disposability and destruction: It was 'old', rail service was seriously declining, the station was in serious disrepair, it was owned by Oakland and, best yet, it sat on land owned by Oakland as the land was donated to Oakland by David C. Bush. It just doesn't get any better for the greedy and the apathetic.

And so it was that the original Oakland railroad station of 1872, the edifice that singularly defined Oakland as a geo-political entity, put Oakland on the map and created our downtown area, was doomed to be replaced by a singularly ugly, one story building to serve as both our new post office and as a railroad ticket agency. To add insult to injury, that monstrosity itself lasted only about 25 years before it too was thankfully demolished. Now, the land is vacant and its vacancy stands out in our downtown like a missing front tooth. As a footnote, while our railroad station was literally in the midst of being demolished, a local newspaper reporter asked the then mayor of his thoughts. He responded that "Perhaps this just might be a mistake." Unbelievable but true!

So, there you have it. In the short space of less than 10 years from 1957, the downtown of Oakland went from the valley of homes to the vast wasteland of strip malls: From a Victorian architectural heritage that could challenge the best in America to a disjointed mix of remnants of the former glory combined with faceless, characterless cinder block retail structures. All in the name of progress.

THE FUTURE IS YOUR CHOICE

The reader now knows what happened to our downtown and why it happened. But while no one can deny that we needed stores for our growing population, no alternative locations ever considered as there was no sense of historic preservation for future generations. Also the words of downtown 'charm and character' were seemingly absent in entirety from the Oakland's vocabulary and political lexicon of the day. Equally, it's important to note that downtown Oakland still contains more 19th Century buildings than perhaps any other town in Bergen County in spite of the best efforts of our former politicians.

And in conclusion, I'll say it again: The destruction of downtown Oakland was initiated and caused by a singular lack of vision of biblical proportions by our elected officials, the

silence of our citizens and the greed of developers which combined to sacrifice our architectural heritage upon the altar of 'progress'. Remaining today is just enough to sadly remind us daily of what used to be and the tragedy that ensued to permit what occurred. Is anybody angry yet?

Yet, questions remain. Specifically, what will become of our remaining treasured downtown buildings built during the 19th Century? Will greed and apathy win again or shall there be a collective will to preserve and enhance our treasures and our downtown? Will future generations of Oaklanders have only faded photos to remind themselves of what was and then to ask why? Will there be a downtown 'redevelopment' that obliterates all that remains of our treasures in the name of new progress as currently contained in Oakland's Master Plan? It's your call and your choice. Chose wisely while asking yourself if you care enough to care.