

KNOXVILLE HISTORY PROJECT

The 200 Block of Gay Street in Knoxville History:

A few points of interest

The 200 block of Gay Street originally lay between Reservoir (later Commerce) and Vine Streets. For a century it served as a transitional block between the traditional business district and the newer railroad district. It could be considered a linchpin, or a coupling, between these two distinct parts of Knoxville, sometimes referred to as Uptown and Downtown. To the south was the original city atop the bluff, the nucleus that was once a state capital, and still includes the courthouse, Market Square, and most of the city's banks and older churches. To the north, at a much lower elevation, was the newer railroad-oriented district, with passenger station, freight yards, wholesale warehouses, flour mills and packing houses.

The 200 block was becoming attractive to business soon after the Civil War, and developed early compared to most blocks on the north side, but for historical reasons it was probably always a less expensive and less fashionable block than those parts of Gay, Market, and Walnut just a quarter mile to the south. Although a few people lived on the 200 block over the years, mostly shopkeepers, it never had a residential density and was always a mostly commercial block.

It was formally considered part of Knoxville during the very end of the state-capital era, when the city was formally incorporated in 1815. It was considered part of the northern fringe of town until another north-side annexation in 1852 took in the new railroad district. It would take further research to learn much about what if anything existed on this block before that. The construction of the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad between 1850 and 1858 raised new interest in the northern part of the suddenly growing city. Gay Street led directly to the railroad station on Depot Street, as well as the railroad hotel, the Atkin House. Beginning in 1855, anyone in the central business district taking a passenger train would be most likely to walk by the 200 block. For a century, we might be safe in assuming, a significant portion of the business enjoyed by businesses based on the 200 block was from railroad passers by, ranging from newcomers here for a layover or Knoxvilleans on their way to the station or to the wholesale houses that sprang up around the freight yards.

When the block first had numbered addresses, its numbers conformed with the prevailing Knoxville habit to number everything in regard to its distance north of the river. Hence numbers on this block were relatively high, from 229 at Commerce to 249 at Vine. In the early 1890s, it was renumbered in accordance with the city's new plan to lay the city out on a grid with the axes along Jackson and Central, dividing Gay Street into North and South segments. At that time it became the 200 block of South Gay.

It appears in a detailed 1867 map, without notable buildings, but with narrowly drawn property lines, as if in anticipation of high-density development, which may have been already underway at that time.

An 1871 bird's eye view shows several commercial-style buildings on the west side of the block (and at least one large building on the other side), in contrast to the 100 block to its north, which shows little construction. (Part of the 100 block was taken up by the Post Carriage Co.'s industrial yards.)

Knoxville's first "streetcar," a mule-drawn carriage, served the block and most of the rest of Gay Street beginning in 1876.

Perhaps the earliest long-term tenant on the block was the remarkable Cal Johnson, the former slave who through real-estate investments and his own business enterprises, became a wealthy man. He opened his famous Lone Tree Saloon on the 200 block near Vine in the mid-1880s. It was a sizeable two-story building, probably at least partly of wood, with a gabled roof, a style more common on Gay Street at that time than it would be soon afterward. The building changed little for 30 years, a comfortable, almost rustic looking place, its image enhanced by a single tree in front.

Johnson owned several saloons, serving both black and white clientele, but the Lone Tree, named for the ash tree on the sidewalk, said to be the only tree on Gay Street, was his best known. Johnson, who claimed he grew up with the tree, and that it was a sapling when he was a little boy, considered it his "pet." Customers would often tie their horses to it before entering his saloon. (According to an unsigned but quotable article in the *News-Sentinel*, June 18, 1929, when it was still standing, it was an ash tree.)

In an era when many saloonkeepers flirted with small-time crime, Johnson was known to be especially above-board and honest, respected by blacks and whites. In 1883 and 1884, about the time he was opening this saloon, Johnson was elected to Knoxville's Board of Aldermen, which met just around the corner on Market Square near Asylum Street (now Wall).

He had competition on the same block; a popular saloon called the Climax was at the other end of the block, as was one of G.H. Mankel's early saloons.

It was a dense block, often with 25 different businesses, cheek to jowl, some of them upstairs, along its two sides. In days when few were striving to be "diverse," the 200 block was diverse, anyway, both in terms of types of businesses--bakers, jewelers, grocers, clothiers, a saddlery--and ethnic origin of the proprietors. By the 1889 City Directory, for example, Johnson wasn't the only black man doing business on the block; two others were competing barbers. It may have felt some influence from Vine Street, which to the east of here, and especially to the east of State Street, was known as the Black Broadway.

Among Irish, Jewish, and German names of proprietors on the 200 block in 1889 is that of Raf Marmora, the fruitseller who was one of Knoxville's earliest Italian immigrants--as well as Wall Lee, who ran a laundry and was likely Chinese. Very few city blocks in East Tennessee ever had that kind of diversity.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, there were also recognizable stalwarts from Knoxville's mainstream on the same block. The Shields Brothers, grocery wholesalers soon to be better known for their larger operation on Jackson Avenue, had an early presence here. (Incidentally, two Shields brothers who were

probably not involved with this business were future Sen. John K. Shields and Col. W.S. Shields, the prominent banker and athletics fan whose donation would make Shields-Watkins Field possible. Those two Shieldses are not known to have joined their mercantile brothers in their business.)

Also, Chapman, White, and Lyons, here in 1889, were on their way to becoming one of Knoxville's two best-known drug wholesalers. In a pun on the names of two of Chapman's original partners, the drugstore, on the eastern side of the 200 block, was known for a life-sized statue of a white lion. David Chapman was a young man when he began working at the business his father started around 1900. He was a conservationist who would much later become known as the Father of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Chapman Drugs remained here until 1923, when it moved to a new place on State at Union.)

At various times, the 200 block, though known for small businesses, also hosted a couple of banks. Although the city's banking center was arguably three or four blocks to the south, the State National Bank was near Commerce in 1890.

In days when Gay Street presented an unbroken series of urban blocks from the train station to the courthouse, it's safe to assume tens of thousands of people walked past the 200 block on a daily basis, providing clientele for saloons, barber shops, cigar shops, cobblers, watch-repair shops, sandwich shops.

In 1904, after decades of making room for fire trucks in City Hall on Market Square, the city built its first freestanding Fire Department Headquarters, the Commerce Street Firehall, just half a block from the 200 block. That may have affected the character of the block, and the 24-hour institution perhaps made it one of Knoxville's safest blocks, in an era when fires were often ruinous and fatal.

A city referendum in late 1907 banned saloons, putting Johnson's famous Lone Tree out of business, though the tree, and the name, remained for some years to come.

A Polish immigrant named Louis Tobe originally rented Johnson's saloon building for his shoe sales and repair shop. According to newspaper reports, after signing a 99-year lease with the now-elderly Johnson, Tobe built a new, three-story building on the site in 1918. It's not known whether he saved any of the saloon building in his new structure, but in photographs after 1918, it looks markedly different, a conventional early 20th century commercial building with a flat roof, unlike the somewhat rustic look of Johnson's two-story gabled building.

The new building was built at about the same time the city was planning a massive improvement one block to the south; before 1918, Gay Street descended sharply just north of the 200 block, into what was known as the "Death Dip" before a 1919 viaduct project raised the level of the street, affecting mainly the 100 block.

But Tobe kept the Lone Tree name--and the tree itself. He remarked in 1925, at the time of Johnson's death, that the former saloonkeeper "wouldn't have that tree cut down for a million dollars. I wouldn't touch it because I like and respect Johnson."

However, after Johnson's death, the ash tree seemed to wither. It lasted only four more years. By the summer of 1929, a reporter noted that it was dead, or close to it. As a result of a combination of the

pavement laid over its roots and "the smothering smoke and gas fumes in the air, Gay Street's last remaining tree is dead." Some sources say it was cut down in 1929, but it may have lasted into 1930.

The 200 block had more interesting tenants to come. One was Ben Kwok, a published poet from China who enjoyed a reputation as the local expert on Asian culture and politics. In the late 1930s he opened an unusual bookstore called Norris Books at 209 S. Gay--presumably named for the new dam, or the Nebraska senator whose brainchild, the Tennessee Valley Authority, was transforming the region. He ran it, briefly experimenting with a Chinese restaurant in the same space, until his sudden death in 1951.

The 200 block declined some, known in its later years for beer joints, like the 205 Club, some of them fondly remembered, and pornography shops, including the Gay Theater, which by the early 1970s meant South Gay Street was bookended by two porno theaters--at the other end was the Bijou. Some city leaders may have viewed demolition as a positive good.

The block was threatened and partly destroyed by the construction of Summit Hill Drive, which apparently flattened the eastern half of the block, and nicked the southern end of the western half.

In 1974, as dozens of downtown buildings were being demolished for Summit Hill and other projects, the brand-new preservationist nonprofit then known as Knoxville Heritage recruited Charles Warterfield, an architectural historian well-known in Nashville, to come to Knoxville to identify architecturally valuable buildings in the downtown area. Basing his inventory purely on appearance--he didn't consider historical people and events associated with the buildings--he identified 149 buildings downtown of architectural interest. Four of them were late-Victorian buildings on the 200 block of Gay: 204, 213, 215-17, and 219. His phrases include "tastefully detailed"; "tasteful elegance"; "a feeling of grace and lightness."

His photographs, though, showed a 25-cent "peep show" business and the "Adults Only" cinema.

The southern end of the block, by Commerce, was apparently removed about that year.

Most of the west side of the block survived the Summit Hill project, however. It was just before the World's Fair, when the new Quality Inn (later Radisson, Crowne Plaza) expressed interest in widening an alley by their parking garage that the buildings were proposed to be demolished.

In early 1982, architect Ron Childress of Knoxville Heritage, who had been vigorously working on the still little-known Old City project, made a plea to save what remained of the 200 block: "while not landmarks, definitely possess urban-design characteristics important to maintain the last vestiges of a link between the northern historic portion of downtown [Jackson Avenue and the Old City] and the remaining areas. A number of rehabilitation projects are underway in this area; the loss of this visual link could adversely affect the projects."

However, KCDC approved the proposal to demolish the remaining buildings, including Mr. Tobe's Lone Tree building, in 1982. Childress, the block's last defender, died at age 34 later that year, of meningitis, and has since been remembered in the name of the Knoxville Heritage's highest honor, the Ronald Childress Memorial Award for Preservationist of the Year.

As if in response to Childress's concerns, the city and the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* sponsored, on the east side of the 200 block, an East Tennessee Tribute to Country Music Park, in the triangle left by Summit Hill Drive's construction. It was seen as the perfect place for such a commemoration, being just one block from the longtime site of WNOX studios, home of the daily live radio show the "Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round," famous in country-music circles from 1936 to 1954.

At the center of the new park was a tall bronze statue of a treble clef, a sculpture by Los Angeles modernist Paul Betouliere.

It was the focus of a great deal of celebration in 1986, considered an ideal location for commemorating Knoxville's country-music history. A Civic Coliseum concert on behalf of the park project drew country-music legends Chet Atkins, Pee Wee King, Charlie Louvin, and the elderly Roy Acuff himself--as well as Roots author Alex Haley. Comedian-singer Archie Campbell chaired much of the festivity, both at the Coliseum and at the site of the park. The 200 block had never been the focus of so much attention in its history, regardless of its lack of actual buildings.

It was seen as an invitation to cross Summit Hill Drive, but it perhaps was never as popular as a park as anticipated. In 1999, Chet Atkins returned to it to dedicate his own plaque, part of the Cradle of Country Music tour, on the day of what would turn out to be his final concert, at the Tennessee.

By then, the sculpture was showing cracks and signs of wear, and by the early 2000s it was coming apart. It was quietly removed in 2009. (A new-looking color photograph of it is still prominent in Betouliere's website portfolio.)

Throughout that time, the western side of the block has hosted a parking lot, and has been a perennial subject of regret, much as Childress warned, often cited as a reason pedestrians rarely venture from the Market Square area and 300 block of Gay Street to the 100 block. Again, for somewhat different reasons than in the days of the passenger station, it seems a linchpin for downtown's further development.

By Jack Neely, *Knoxville History Project*