

4 History of Downtown Glen Ellyn

Introduction

The layout of Downtown Glen Ellyn was established in the mid-1800s. The historic buildings are primarily from two eras – the late 1800s and the 1920s. Organizations with a particular interest in the history of Downtown Glen Ellyn include the Historical Society, Citizens for Glen Ellyn Preservation, and the Historic Preservation Commission.

The Downtown consists of mostly commercial and mixed-use structures. The charm, detail, and scale of the Downtown buildings are what attract prospective residents to choose to live in Glen Ellyn. New condominiums have made their way closer to the core of the Downtown, including mixed-use buildings on Crescent Boulevard between Forest Avenue and Park Boulevard, and The Legacy (formerly The Mews) on Pennsylvania Avenue. A handful of single family homes on Duane, Pennsylvania, and Forest have been converted into commercial uses.

A field observation was conducted in March of 2008 to examine the condition of the historic buildings within the Downtown Strategic Plan Study Area. In addition to field observations, interviews were conducted with Village officials, members of the Glen Ellyn Historical Society, members of the Citizens for Glen Ellyn Preservation, and Chairman of the Historic Preservation Commission.

The buildings along Crescent Boulevard are the first glimpse of historic Downtown Glen Ellyn by visitors traveling to Glen Ellyn by train. Main Street – between Pennsylvania Avenue and Crescent Boulevard – is the most dense historic area in the Downtown. Almost all of the buildings on Main Street between the railroad tracks and Hillside Avenue were built in the 1920s, which is a representation of the rapid growth of Downtown's commercial district.

Aside from Main Street, a majority of the historic structures found on the north side of the railroad tracks are located on Crescent Boulevard and Pennsylvania Avenue. In some instances, the Village has recognized buildings that are no longer standing by placing a plaque where they used to stand. Two examples would be the Danby House at 515 Crescent Boulevard and the Mansion House at 520 Crescent Boulevard. Both of these buildings were some of the earliest buildings built in Glen Ellyn and played a significant role in the development of the Downtown.

The Glen Ellyn Post Office is located at the northeast corner of Main Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. The interior of the Post Office has a 1930s mural titled "Settlers" that was designated a Local Landmark. This building has a very important historical value, in that it is one of the few buildings in Glen Ellyn that was built in the 1930s; therefore, it

* *Information contained within this chapter is a general overview of what is contained in Appendix C: Data Collection and Analysis Report. Please reference the appendix for additional information*

should be included as one of the Village's local landmarks. However, if the Post Office closes and no adaptive reuse of the building is pursued, the existing architectural characteristics should be reflected in the new building design, the materials should be reused on-site, and the "Settlers" mural should be incorporated into an interior room of the new building, when the redevelopment of the property occurs.

"Giesche Shoes" is a modern retail store that was built in 1973 at the northwest corner of Main Street and Hillside Avenue. The building is one story and does not fit in with the typical historic character of Downtown Glen Ellyn's commercial district; however, the building represents a specific commercial era with some typical modern details and landscaping, that – if well-maintained – the building can continue to be an asset to the Downtown.

Another historically significant element in the Downtown is the historic cast iron horse trough. It was donated to the Village in 1907 by William C. Newton, son of Glen Ellyn's first doctor, who was also known as Glen Ellyn's first town planner. The trough was moved from its original location near the railroad tracks and is now located at the center of the intersection of Crescent Boulevard and Main Street.

From a historic perspective, the buildings in Downtown Glen Ellyn are in good condition overall and provide an in-depth look at the history of the Village. Since the dates of the buildings range from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, a glimpse of Glen Ellyn's past will always be present as long as the buildings are well-maintained.

Like other communities with historic downtowns, Downtown Glen Ellyn has experienced definable eras over the years. The Downtown has experienced change over the years, from being a "sleepy country village", to a "destination", to a "thriving suburb", to experiencing a "shift in shopping trends". It is now entering a new era.

The following is an excerpt from a presentation to the Downtown Advisory Committee (DAC) on August 4, 2008:

Eras of Change

By Dan Anderson

Historical Society Representative to the Downtown Advisory Committee

At the Historical Society, we believe that it's good to know how you got to where you are, before making decisions about moving forward. A phrase we've heard a lot in our deliberations about Downtown Glen Ellyn is the importance of maintaining its charm and character. It has become our holy grail.

But what's interesting when you systematically review the history of our Downtown is the pattern of change ... the number of changes, the magnitude of the changes, and, in some cases, the swiftness with which change took place.

A Sleepy Country Village

The early years of Downtown Glen Ellyn may not seem terribly relevant to our deliberations, but they are more instructive than you might think. Clarence Kendall, an old time Village resident, described Glen Ellyn prior to 1900 as a "... small sleepy country village, a shopping place for Milton Township farmers." There is a feed store on the left side of the street in the following image:



*Main Street looking north from Duane Street, 1905.
Source: Historical Society.*

From the time it was a sleepy little farm community and its emergence as a thriving suburb of Chicago, there was another phase ... a critical one in our development. This is that relatively brief era – lasting only about 15 or 20 years – when Glen Ellyn became a destination.

A Destination

We tend to give the railroad a lot of credit for our early growth and success. I would describe the railroad as necessary to our growth, but not sufficient. The railroad certainly played a huge role in enabling Glen Ellyn to be a destination. But commuter rail service was here well before that period from roughly 1895 to 1915, and it has been here since that era. We know that Glen Ellyn today is not considered the “destination” that it was in the early 20th Century.

There were a number of other reasons why Glen Ellyn became a destination beyond the fact that the train made it easy to get here. The area was naturally beautiful with its rolling terrain and groves of trees ... a great change of pace from the grit and grind of Chicago. More specifically, there was Lake Ellyn, an artificial lake built in 1889 and the resort hotel, overlooking it, which was finished in 1893.

With these developments came an intense advertising campaign that promoted the lake, the hotel, and the healing powers of the five mineral springs located nearby. The developers who did this also platted and sold many home sites near the lake. Just as an aside, all of these developers were very highly respected and figured prominently in town government during that period.

There is another reason that Glen Ellyn became a destination (albeit for relatively short visits by gentlemen from Chicago). I'm not exactly sure how we can incorporate this piece of history into our recommendations, but it is noteworthy, because Madame Rieck's clientele were wealthy, influential people who were in a good position to promote the town. And promote they did! In just 28 years, from 1900 to 1928, our population increased by 850%.

With this population explosion came a building boom in the Downtown. Photographic evidence tells us that much of the building of what we now consider Downtown Glen Ellyn happened during just a 20-year period between 1908 and 1928.

The Downtown building boom actually came in two waves. The first was a smaller wave in the 1890s after the Great Glen Ellyn fire of 1891, which burned almost half of our Downtown district to the ground. The second and much more dramatic wave of new construction happened after 1906 when Glen Ellyn had become more of a destination and resort community.



*Main Street looking south, across tracks, toward Hillside Avenue, 1906.
Source: Historical Society.*

Look beyond the tracks. The first cross street up the hill is Duane Street. Farther in the background is Hillside Avenue, although it's hard to see. What you can see is the total lack of commercial buildings on Main Street south of the tracks in 1906. From Duane Street to Hillside Avenue there is nothing there except a few homes, a church, and a pasture.



*Main Street looking north from Hillside Avenue, 1928.
Source: Historical Society.*

This next picture is the same piece of geography as the previous photo. It's the same block of Main Street, only looking the other way, north from Hillside Avenue. This picture was taken just 22 years later in 1928.

Today, it is very difficult for us to imagine this much change happening to our Downtown in so short a time frame. It must have seemed almost cataclysmic, bordering on scandalous, to many of the older residents of that era.

A Thriving Suburb

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence to suggest that our retail climate peaked some 50 years ago in the 1960s ... with the 1940s, '50s, and early '60s being a time when businesses in the Downtown were thriving and expanding:

In the 1960s, the winds of change began to blow. New Glen Ellyn businesses moved to Roosevelt Road, not Downtown Glen Ellyn. Even more ominous, but perhaps not so obvious at the time, Oak Brook Shopping Center – a truly regional shopping center – opened its doors in 1962.

A Shift in Shopping Trends

What we have talked about so far has focused mostly on the “built environment” and how it was influenced by major trends such as:

- the arrival of the railroad
- the transition from a farm community ... to a resort destination ... to a suburban bedroom community
- the advent of the automobile
- the explosive growth in population between 1900 and 1928
- and the corresponding explosive growth in the built environment, with many of those buildings still in place today

I'd like to conclude with some information about the history of shopping in Glen Ellyn ... since we tend, rightly or wrongly, to equate revitalizing Downtown Glen Ellyn with revitalizing the retail sales environment.

Around 1966, developers who had witnessed the early success of the Oak Brook Shopping Center were looking to build another major regional shopping center farther west. The south end of Glen Ellyn near Butterfield Road was one of the sites being considered. In a nutshell, the Village Board debated this proposed shopping center at length, and then rejected the idea because they were afraid that it would draw customers away from our Downtown businesses. Of course they were right ... but they also were incredibly unimaginative.

The developers went ahead and built their big regional shopping center, but they built it in Lombard, called it Yorktown Center ... and the rest (as we like to say) is history. At the time of its 1968 opening, with 1.3 million square feet of retail space, Yorktown ranked as the largest shopping center in America.

So what happened? Our Downtown merchants lost their customers anyway, and Glen Ellyn lost a ton of sales tax revenue to the town next door. It didn't take long for the Yorktown effect to be felt. Many Downtown businesses closed over the years, and between 1988 and 1989, the Village saw its sales tax revenues drop by 19% in one year.

Lessons Learned

The lesson I take from all of this is that a community like Glen Ellyn can't buck major trends, those external influences that shape the environment in which we live and operate our businesses.

As a community we have gone through huge periods of change, from being a farm town, to a resort destination, to a suburban bedroom community. In the past, the people in our little town have viewed these changes as opportunities and capitalized on them ... as evidenced by the rapid expansion of our Downtown district in the first half of the last century.

But, for the last 50 years, it appears that we have tended to be more reactive than proactive, trying to hold on to what we've got, (or return to what we used to have), rather than recognizing that we are operating in new environment, a world full of change.

If our focus in these deliberations is on confronting the threat posed by major shopping centers, I think it's safe to say that we've already lost that war. We've been dead in the water for

decades, painfully aware that something is wrong, but finding it difficult to get our arms around the problem. Like the military establishment, we're focusing on the last war ... rather than contemplating what the next war might look like.

I also would like to stick my neck out and predict that the next battle for the consumer's dollar will involve the Internet. In fact, it's happening right now, but I'm not sure it is even on the radar screen for many of us who are contemplating the future of our Downtown.

I wish this review could end on a more upbeat note. But remember this:

After any great battle, it is the victor who gets to update the history books. At the Historical Society we hope that someday we will get to write a chapter on the success of Glen Ellyn's Downtown revitalization.