A Brief History of Greater Emory Place

In the early 1790s, city fathers laid out the new capital called "Knoxville" on a strict 90-degree grid. When the French duke Louis Philippe visited in 1797, he disdained "the wearying regularity of the streets" here. Today, Knoxville from Jackson Avenue south is on the same grid, as wearyingly regular as they were in 1797. The two streets that define downtown are Henley, which becomes Broadway, on the west; and Central Avenue, on the east. In between are five perfectly parallel streets.

However, north of the railroad tracks, something happens. Seemingly dependable parallel streets converge and diverge in ways that couldn't have been predicted in the right-angle parts of downtown. Central veers to the northwest, abandoning its original defining principle, First Creek. Broadway veers to the northeast to follow the banks of First Creek. Gay Street, the proudest street downtown, is compressed out of existence. This is where downtown's strict grid concedes to the irregular topography of East Tennessee. There are angles here, both acute and obtuse, that are foreign the older part of downtown Knoxville.

This is greater Emory Place. It's one of the most interesting-looking parts of central Knoxville, and it's not surprising that it has a fascinating history.

During Knoxville's first six decades, the area now known as Emory place was not considered part of the city. Knoxville existed only on top of its protective bluff between First and Second Creeks, which ended with a steep slope downward. The area to the north might have seemed especially troublesome, at the bottom of that steep hill was a fetid swamp then known as the Flag Pond.

At mid-century, several events combined to make this northern area, which had been woods and farmland, especially interesting to Knoxvillians. First was the establishment in 1850 of Gray Cemetery, later known as Old Gray. It had been an especially dense forest before city leaders, following the new European plan for garden-style cemeteries decided Knoxville needed a place to bury its dead beyond its overcrowded churchyards. Henrietta Reese, wife of the president of East Tennessee University, proposed it be named for Thomas Gray, the 18th-century English poet famous for his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." The first burial came in the summer of 1850, allegedly a newcomer to Knoxville, an ironworker killed in a Fourth of July explosion.

Some criticized the graveyard's site—a mile from the courthouse which was considered the city's center—as too remote.

When the cholera epidemic of 1854—one of Knoxville's deadliest seasons—hit, many of the victims were buried here, a good number of them by Parson William Brownlow.

The second, and eventually greater, defining factor was the establishment of the railroad. Largely due to difficulties getting across rivers and mountains, the railroad was late arriving in Knoxville; when it did, engineers found it most expeditious to place the depot in the bottomland to the north of the hilly city. The station, originally on the East Tennessee & Virginia & Georgia line, would long be the region's busiest depot for both freight and passengers.

The railroad attracted both businesses and residents. Immigrants, especially Irish, found work with the railroad and settled in this area in such great numbers that part of it would be known as Irish Town. East Tennessee's first Catholic church—and Tennessee's second—was established on the hill, and immigrants settled here to be within walking distance of their church as well as to work on the railroad, as hundreds did.

The city annexed the area in 1855, the largest annexation in Knoxville history up to that point. (The annexation points out the sudden importance of this area to Knoxville; even UT's "Hill" was still beyond the city's western limits then, and would remain so for decades.) For 40 years, what's now the Emory Place area was Knoxville's northernmost neighborhood and long served as a sort of gateway to the city for those traveling by road from the north. Since it was also adjacent to Knoxville's main rail terminal during this period, it's safe to say that during the latter half of the 19th century—the period of Knoxville's most dynamic growth—this area was the first most visitors and immigrants saw of the city.

Naturally, it would be a good place for hotels. The first was probably the Atkin House, a hotel across from the railroad station on the north side of Depot. Built around the time of the Civil War, its history is shadowy, but it seems to have been a small roadhouse with a restaurant and saloon attached. It was in a room at the Atkin House in 1869 that the nationally influential humorist and fiction writer George Washington Harris died suddenly, after uttering the word "poisoned."

The Atkin House was only the first of many hotels just north of the tracks, and was apparently torn down years before a very different establishment, the Hotel Atkin, was built on roughly the same site in 1910.

Knoxville's Northern Outskirts During the Civil War

The area played a brief but strategic role during both the Union and Confederate campaigns for Knoxville during the Civil War. On June 20, 1863, when Knoxville was still held by the Confederates, Union Col. William Sanders threatened Knoxville with his cavalry group of over 1,000 men. Approaching Knoxville after nightfall, he assembled his artillery here along what's now Fifth Avenue between Gay and Broadway and shelled the city.

With the aid of 200 citizen volunteers—among them, Confederate Senator Landon Hayes, former congressman John Crozier, and Presbyterian minister Joseph Martin—Confederates had assembled at vantage points along what's now Summit Hill Drive and returned fire. Most of Sanders' cannonfire struck without effect, but one shell struck near the "asylum"—now called "Old City Hall"—killed two soldiers and wounded a citizen volunteer. Captain Hugh Lawson McClung, son of an old Knoxville family, gallantly declared, "Don't be afraid—there's no danger!" whereupon he was hit himself, and mortally wounded. A well-aimed Confederate shell scattered the Union artillery, and Sanders withdrew. Via a paroled prisoner, Sanders sent a congratulatory message to the Confederate defenders: "I send you my compliments, and say that but for the admirable manner with which you arranged your artillery, I would have taken Knoxville today."

Five months later, of course, it was a very different situation. The Confederates had forfeited Knoxville to fortify Chattanooga. By November, the Union army held Knoxville, and among its defenders was former assailant Sanders, now promoted to general. The man who had shelled the city from Fifth Avenue would die in its defense.

A large number of Confederate forces under Longstreet surrounded Knoxville; Confederate lines went directly through this neighborhood, again roughly along future Fifth Avenue. During the unsuccessful two-week siege, Emory Place proper was just behind rebel lines. After the disastrously unsuccessful assault on Fort Sanders, Longstreet withdrew to the northeast.

When Burnside needed a place to bury several hundred Union dead, he found a vacant area adjacent to Gray Cemetery. In doing so, he took advantage of a recent act of the wartime Congress which provided for something new called "National Cemeteries." The one he established in Knoxville would be among the nation's first—established even before Virginia's Arlington.

According to one story nationally circulated during World War II, the national Memorial-Day tradition of planting small flags on soldiers' graves was born when a widow named Laura Richardson did so at this cemetery in 1874. Flowers were the usual Memorial Day decor, but she was said to be disappointed with the crop that year and found several gross of toy flags in a downtown Knoxville store.

It was only 35 years after the establishment of the cemetery that a group of Union veterans, led by Captain William Rule, longtime editor of the *Knoxville Journal*, campaigned to build a Union monument. Embarrassed by the fact that local Confederate sympathizers had already built a large monument in East Knoxville some years before, the Unionists were careful to assure that theirs would be slightly taller. Finished in 1900, it was built of stone with a huge iron eagle on top. It lasted only four years. During a summer storm in 1904, a bolt of lightning struck the eagle; the monument literally exploded, sending large chunks of marble hurtling out into the street and shattering windows of nearby houses. The shock was felt for miles around. With federal help, they rebuilt the monument, this time with a non-conductive marble statue of a Union soldier on top.

At the time it was built, Knoxville's memorial to the federal dead was believed to be the tallest Union monument in the South.

Postwar Development

Commercial evelopment of this area in earnest began after the Civil War, but slowly. An 1867 map shows the area laid out into individual lots, but only a few are given street numbers. Interestingly, Gay Street north of the railroad tracks was then known as "White Street." Depot was Depot, but the half-block of Depot perpendicular to Broadway was called Coffin Street. Magnolia was then Park, and Fifth was then Montgomery. The only business shown here is the Knoxville Foundry, a growing factory which was then located on the west side of Broadway, just north of Depot.

A probably idealistic "Bird's Eye View" depiction of Knoxville in 1871 shows the entire area north of the railroad tracks as a pastoral residential neighborhood with perhaps 50 houses.

The area became more and more familiar to the majority of Knoxvillians who didn't live here largely because of Old Gray Cemetery, the most popular burial ground in Knox County for the middle and upper classes during the Victorian era. Built to be visited, with trees and flower gardens and elaborate statuary, it became the closest thing Knoxville had to a public park. Many came here just to picnic or birdwatch.

It also witnessed many memorable burials; the largest one of the 19th century was probably that of "Parson" William Brownlow, the controversial editor and reconstruction governor who was both both adored and despised by many Knoxvillians. He died in 1877; among the reporters who covered his funeral here was a former employee, Adolph Ochs, future publisher of the *New York Times*. (Ochs would revisit this graveyard many times, once as late as 1929, to pay his respects at the recent grave of his longtime colleague and mentor, William Rule.) Brownlow's marker is still one of the largest monuments in Old Gray, and in Knoxville. Five years later, all three victim-participants in the Mabry-O'Conner shootout were buried here, on the same day.

1884 Sanborn fire-insurance maps show only a few portions of this large neighborhood, perhaps suggesting there still wasn't much around. One exception in the area is the Knoxville Car Wheel Co., which made wheels for rail cars at its factory on Jacksboro, just across from the cemetery, fairly convenient to both its raw material at the foundry and to the railroad which was its customer. The area's surviving reputation for machine and technical shops may have originated with the railroad and its associated industries.

An 1886 promotional birds-eye-view illustration shows the area full of hundreds of houses and a couple of churches, including the Third Presbyterian Church and a Methodist Episcopal Church. As the area grew, some entrepreneurs saw promise in the idea of a new farmer's market across from Gray Cemetery; the "Central Market," as it would be called, would be decisive in forming the area's unique development patterns. Other factors, however, had a greater long-term impact on the economic vitality of the neighborhood.

In the late 19th century, Irish and German Catholic immigrants were beginning to succeed in Knoxville. As they became more prosperous, they moved out of their crowded downtown apartments in old "Irish Town" to new suburban neighborhoods, especially in and around North Knoxville.

By 1890, enough had relocated to build a second Catholic Church on the 1000 block of North Central, known as Holy Ghost.

As Knoxville expanded, this once-remote area came to seem more like an integral part of downtown. When William Gibbs McAdoo built the first electric streetcar in 1890, it ran down Magnolia to Chilhowee Park. (Knoxville wasn't the very first city in the South to have electric trolley service, but McAdoo's experiment was indeed relatively early.)

Beginning in 1890, the Fountain City Railroad was an especial draw. A small open-air rail line independent of both the electric streetcar system and the inter-city railroads, the "dummy" line, as it was called for reasons now obscure, left from its terminal on Broadway at Emory Place and chugged five miles north through Sharp's Gap to Fountain City. The slow trip usually took half an hour or more, with a dozen stops in between. Its few cars were divided into smoking and non-smoking, which in the 1890s usually translated into Men's and Women's. It dropped its passengers off at Hotel Avenue in Fountain City, a popular destination for Knoxvillians seeking relief from the heat and smoke and noise of the city.

Once in Fountain City, the dummy line turned around and came back, more than 12 hours a day; on special occasions, which were frequent, it ran back and forth well into the night. From 1890 until it was superceded by streetcars in 1905, the dummy line was a Knoxville institution.

For more than a century, transportation would be this commercial district's dominant motive. And the fact that that terminus and the Knoxville terminus of the old Fountain City "dummy line" were both located in this area would seem to indicate that Knoxvillians of the 1890s considered this new north-of-Depot neighborhood every bit as much "downtown" as Market Square. To go to Fountain City or to Chilhowee Park—both very popular attractions in those days—Knoxvillians had to walk to the general Emory Place area. The style of the buildings in the area seem to reflect that character.

A Peculiarly Wide Street

The short street now known as Emory Place may have existed early in the 1870s or '80s as a spur of Fourth Avenue, but it first appears in the City Directors in 1889—by the name Central Market.

The most conspicuous feature on this street was a sizeable market building with 33 stalls, which seems to have opened about that time. It's outlined in 1898 fire insurance maps as a long bent-elbow of a building, a frame structure in the middle of the wide street, with the "City Scales" at the west end and Fire Engine House No. 1, a brick building, at the east end.

The origin of its name is an interesting question; though Knoxville was about to expand its borders, when the Central Market opened, it was near the northern city limits, and hardly "central." It might have been named after Central Avenue, although the urban part of that street, including the part that intersected with Central Market, was still known as Crozier; it was known as Central only north of Broadway. They may have wished to associate themselves with rural Central Avenue, since it was then one of the main routes farmers of North Knox, Anderson, and Union Counties used to drive their wagons into town.

It might have seemed a propitious spot; Knoxville was rapidly expanding north, and this place at the very entrance to the city via Central and Broadway might have seemed hard to beat. The Central Market would have been much more convenient to farmers than 35-year-old Market Square, which was trapped within a dense web of narrow streets and often surrounded by urban traffic.

The Central Market's establishment may have been an ambitious attempt to move Knoxville's main produce market to the north of the city to the edge of the suburbs, ultimately replacing the aging market stalls downtown. (This was a few years before the construction of the mammoth Market House.)

Whatever its motive, the Central Market does not seem to have been as successful as investors might have wished. The Central Market House opened with about a dozen tenants—among them fishmonger Thomas Owen and a merchant named Jacob Croissant (who was, unfortunately, not a baker, but a butcher). But it always had several vacancies, and listed fewer merchants each year.

By 1895, there was only one merchant listed there—produce man Austin Plummer, who lived on Florida Street. By the time the Market House was built on Market Square, the old Central Market was no longer a market house at all; its former building was only occasionally referred to as the Central Market Building.

The street known as Central Market kept that name for another decade, and seemed to do better than its namesake. Most of its businesses didn't last very long, but there were always businesses here. The Knox Candy Co. was here in 1891, though briefly. Grocers Ebenezer Kelley and Strother Lynn kept up a same-street rivalry here for several years.

Probably the longest-term tenant on this little street is also one of the more interesting ones. It arrived on the second floor of #10 Central Market in 1896, and within four years had taken over that building: the Walla Walla Gum Co. The factory that manufactured this regionally popular chewing gum lasted for over half a century; its main offices were here until 1915, when it moved to State Street; the firm suffered under wartime shortages closed it in 1942, at which time the manufacturer tried to switch to manufacturing birdhouses; in 1950, the firm was sold.

The fate of the Central Market House is a little shadowy, but it seems to have vanished early in the century. The building last appears in the city directory in 1905, as the Knoxville Mattress Factory. It last appears in fire insurance maps, on an undated correction sometime after 1898, as a "Hay Warehouse." In either case, its contents were fairly combustible; it may well have burned.

Without the Central Market, some apparently thought the street needed a new name, and one had just presented itself in the form of a tragic folk hero strongly associated with North Knoxville.

That was Rev. Isaac Emory. Born in Fulton, New York, in 1830, he had come to Knoxville as a sort of missionary near the end of the Civil War. A representative of a national organization called the Sunday School Union, Rev. Emory's one goal was to establish Sunday schools in every corner of Tennessee; over the next 40-odd years, Emory lived on a farm north of Knoxville but traveled to all 96 counties in the state, often on foot, establishing Sunday schools in remote areas. Many were incredulous that in all his travels alone he'd never been injured by robbers or suspicious mountain men; to those who offered him a gun for protection, the heavily bearded Rev. Emory was known to hold up his Bible and declare, "Here is my pistol; it is the only firearm I have ever carried."

Most of Rev. Emory's ministry seems to have been ecumenical, but he had some ties to the Catholic Church, and late in life was active in Second Presbyterian Church, serving as moderator of the Knoxville Presbytery.

In September, 1904, the 74-year-old Emory agreed to preside over a funeral in New Market, and boarded an eastbound train with members of the grieving family, along with the coffin. That train slammed into a late-running westbound train, killing at least 66 passengers; the New Market Train Wreck is the deadliest and most celebrated train wreck in East Tennessee history. Among the dead was Rev. Emory. Along with several other victims, he was buried at Old Gray, as were several other victims of that wreck.

However, in spite of the official name change, the area was popularly known as "Central Market" for some years afterward, and appears by that name in the 1917 Fire Insurance maps—when the site of the old Central Market Building itself is listed as a "Park."

Some dependable histories date Emory Park from 1894, when the Central Market was apparently still there. Others have it founded by resolution of City Council in 1905. In either case, the tiny green spot was one of the first parks ever established in Knoxville, and, incredible as it may seem, perhaps the only public park established in a downtown commercial area before Krutch Park in the 1980s. It was once adorned with a fountain and, by 1909, the familiar statue of the fireman holding a child that now stands in front of the fire station on Summit Hill.

Among the surviving buildings on Emory Place proper, among the oldest is the striking brick structure on the inside of the bent elbow. Now 15-17 Emory, it was originally termed as 17-19 Central Market. Built around 1890, it was originally the Whittle & Spence Trunk Company, a role it served for about 15 years. By 1910, it was a post office.

Old Gray In a New Century

In September, 1904, just weeks after the explosion that destroyed the Union monument next door, Old Gray Cemetery had its own most dramatic moment when it received perhaps a dozen of the 70-odd victims of the deadly New Market train wreck, one of the worst railroad accidents in Tennessee history. Among them, of course, was the aforementioned Isaac Emory. His stone is inscribed, "The Children's Friend."

In 1911, the graveyard witnessed the burial of Ebenezer Alexander, the ambassador to Greece who had helped establish the modern Olympic Games in Athens. Several congressmen, authors, diplomats, and military officers are buried here.

However, the attendance record for a funeral at Old Gray—and, according to some, for a funeral in the entire South—was set in 1912, when another Senator and former governor, Robert "Our Bob" Taylor was buried here after his sudden death in Washington. An estimated 40,000 mourners packed Old Gray to witness his burial in 1912; it was described as the best-attended funeral in the history of the South. His horse-drawn hearse arrived escorted by horsemen in plumed helmets. His grandson, Peter Taylor, used the event for crucial scenes in his final novel, *In the Tennessee Country* (1994). With some of the details disguised, the funeral and burial would be the basis for the novel's opening.

Taylor's grave, however, was exhumed and removed in the 1930s, moved nearer to his hometown in the country of upper East Tennessee. The reburial was controversial within the family and is described critically in Peter Taylor's novel. Bob Taylor's original gravesite, however, is preserved at Old Gray, still marked with a step inscribed TAYLOR.

Old Gray's neighborhood was a busy and fairly diverse district at the turn of the century, an idyllic urban setting of grocers, cobblers, barber shops, increasingly dense with residents. Many of those who lived here were immigrants; we can see why part of the area was sometimes known as Irish Town by looking at the names of the area saloons at the turn of the century: Patrick Harrigan had a saloon at 300 North Gay; Dennis Fogarty's saloon was at 317 Broadway; Thomas Meehan's saloon was at 701 Broadway; Jerry Murphy's saloon was at 400 North Central. Not all Irish were saloonkeepers, of course; many worked for the railroad; J. Patrick Rooney ran a fruit stand at 308 North Gay, and Daniel Moriarty was a tinner at 400 East Fifth. Several of the residences in this area belong to people named Shea, Kennedy, Kincaid, and Sullivan. (Patrick Sullivan, famous for the saloon that still bears his name, lived during his retiring years at 213 East Fifth.)

Other immigrants, including Jews, were well represented here, too—Morris Cohen's hattery was at 313 Broadway. Jacob Roos, the tailor, kept his shop at 308 North Gay. David Rosenthal's drug store was at 301 North Gay. Joseph Levy lived at 613 Broadway.

Swiss immigrants—the first wave of non English-speaking immigrants to Knoxville—lived and worked here, as well; Francois Gouffon, a member of the moving-company family, lived at 508 Williams St. Louis Schmid kept his barber shop at 312 North Gay, and lived an easy walk away, at 413 East Park. His family is still prominent in Knoxville.

Raf Marmora, the downtown fruitseller who was probably Knoxville's best-known Italian immigrant at the turn of the century, lived at 413 East Park (Magnolia).

Early in this century, this area wasn't racially segregated; scores of blacks lived or did business in this area. Pinckney Robertson, a black shoemaker, kept his shop at 614 North Gay in 1900. Dock Hoard, a wagon driver, lived at 403 North Central.

At the very end of the saloon era, Knoxville had approximately 100 saloons. Emory Place itself was pretty sober, but the greater Emory Place / North Downtown area was well-supplied with about 15 saloons, ranging from a cluster of five on West Depot (near the train station), to J.W. Siler's place at 317 North Broadway. Several were on North Central, like Hope & Long's, at #219—a quieter echo of South Central's "Bowery" reputation.

It would be after the end of national prohibition in 1933 that the upper part of North Central north of Pearl would be known as "Happy Hollow" for its plenitude of bars catering to millworkers, like the Blue Goose Tavern and Parky's Sports Center.

Most businesses were along the north-south axes of Central, Gay, and Broadway; the cross streets—Park (now Magnolia), Fifth Ave., Hudson, Fourth Ave.—tended to be residential.

Emory Place itself, which has always been mostly commercial, is an exception to that rule.

Emory Place In the Edwardian Era

The year 1910 would prove to be the beginning of a building boon the likes of which the area north of the tracks had not seen before—and has not seen since. The Atkin House was Knoxville's largest hotel when it was built on the block to the north of the Southern station in 1910, with 200 rooms (150 of them with baths). It would be popular with visitors and local high society. President Taft stayed there in 1910 while visiting the first Appalachian Exposition at Chilhowee Park. Bertha Roth Walburn Clark, credited with founding the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra, played violin with her small orchestra at the Hotel Atkin from 1910 to 1920.

The Hotel Atkin was huge, but it wasn't the only large hotel on its block. The Watauga was a five-story hotel just to the north. (Condemned in 1963, Regas acquired the old Watauga and partially saved it, by removing its upper floors and expanding into its first floor. The lower part of the front of the Watauga is still visible on Gay Street between Magnolia and Depot, as Regas's facade. Incidentally, Regas has been on this block since the 1920s, but they weren't the first Greek-owned restaurant here. As far back as 1905, Vasilis Apostolis ran a restaurant at 310 1/2 North Gay. Mr. Apostolis lived just a block or so away, on Park (Magnolia).)

Another major construction project of 1910 was the new Knoxville High School, on Fifth. Knoxville High School had outgrown its original location, downtown on Union Avenue, when prominent architect Albert Baumann designed this neoclassical structure here. It began with only 646 students—Knoxville's entire public high-school population, among whites, anyway. But KHS grew rapidly, more than tripling in size in its first decade.

In 1921, citizens erected the Doughboy Statue as a memorial especially to KHS alumni who had died in the war. It's very similar to many other statues around the country.

In spite of two annexes, by the mid-1920s, Knoxville High was a crowded, disorderly place, as suggested in one of James Agee's first stories, "Knoxton High," a rather snooty satire written by the teenaged Agee long before he came to romanticize his hometown. Having moved with his mother to St. Andrews near Monteagle, Tenn., when he was not quite 10, he moved back to live in Knoxville for another year and a half when he was about 14. When he wrote "Knoxton High," he had already gone on to Exeter School up north, after a little more than a year at KHS. Agee was particularly merciless about describing the Doughboy statue, alleging it was mass-produced somewhere in the Midwest.

KHS remained crowded until it closed in 1951. Among its other alumni were the actress Patricia Neal, who attended in the 1930s while she was just beginning her theatrical career, and future singer and actor John Cullum, who was a student here in the 1940s. (Another influential thespian, MGM director Clarence Brown, had attended KHS shortly before it moved to this building.)

The First Christian Church at the corner of Fifth and Gay was finished 1915, serving a congregation which had been organized some years earlier. The brick-and-mortar facade is interesting for those who have patience for a somewhat convoluted story. It was designed by local architect Charles Barber (son of the somewhat more famous George Barber), who allegedly based his design on the famous Madison Square Presbyterian Church in New York, which was in turn designed by well-known architect Stanford White, who also designed Madison Square Garden. White was shot and killed by a jealous husband named Harry Thaw, perhaps the most celebrated murder of the century's first decade. (By the way, the murderer, a New York socialite, had strong Knoxville-area connections, because his parents were Maryville College's most generous contributors.) The Madison Square Presbyterian Church was torn down not long after this one was finished, so this could be seen as an architectural relic.

St. John's Lutheran Church was organized near here in 1888 as an English-language offshoot of the then-larger German-language Lutheran church located on Asylum Ave., near the L&N. Though most of St. John's parishioners were of German descent, they were second- and third-generation immigrants who felt more comfortable with English than German. This sanctuary was constructed of Tennessee marble in 1913 as a memorial to one of the founding members, shoe tycoon James Henson, who had died in 1909.

The extravagant first decade of the century we recall as the Edwardian era was good for Knoxville, and for this neighborhood. Today, this neighborhood may have Knoxville's best surviving cluster of pre-war middle-class apartment buildings, many of which were built around the same time as Knoxville High and the area's largest hotels and churches.

Sterchi Oaks—then known as Sterchi Flats—were built around 1910, and today may be the oldest continually used apartment building downtown. The Emory Place designation describes it as "a particularly good example of the early apartment-building type." Most of those who lived in this and neighboring apartment buildings were wealthy single people, with a goodly number of widows.

The Fifth Avenue Motel has been known by that name since 1956, but it had a better reputation as the Minvilla Flats when it opened around 1913. It was also sometimes known as the Bondurant Building.

Beaman Apartments was built in the 1920s, not long after the Lucerne was opened, by that name. The Lucerne was known in the neighborhood for its Fifth Avenue Tea Room in the basement; there were several of these downtown in the '20s, places where ladies gathered to talk things over.

Modern Times

By the time of World War I, this area was arguably the most modern part of town. The area's Reconstruction-era, railroad-related industries transmogrified gracefully to suit the 20th century's automotive age. Some of Knoxville's first gas stations were here, and in 1920, one of Knoxville's first two Piggly Wigglys—the pioneering national chain of self-service grocery stores—opened at 535 North Gay.

The area's long association with automobiles and automobile supplies seems to have started around 1914, when the East Tennessee Auto & Machine Co. opened on the 400 block of North Central. Around 1917, long-term neighbor Knoxville Motor Co. had opened (apparently an offshoot of Rowe Transfer & Coal). Though only a minority of Knoxvillians in the 1920s owned cars, by 1921, there were seven car dealerships in this immediate area; other dealerships were scattered around Knoxville, but nowhere else were there so many in so small an area. The big triangle between Broadway and Central became the place to comparison-shop for automobiles in Knoxville. It would remain so for half a century. For most of the 20th century before 1970 or so, most of Knoxville's car dealers were located along Broadway, Gay, and Central, north of the railroad tracks; it was probably East Tennessee's highest concentration of auto dealerships, a very compact motor mile.

Some of the existing architecture reflects the auto showrooms of the '20s and '30s. Especially striking is the 500 block of North Gay, where several automobile showrooms survive as other businesses, recognizable by the garage-style doors, some of which have been converted into windows or conventional doors. The first dealership on this block was the Worsham-Stockton Motor Co., which moved in at 529-31 N. Gay in 1922; by 1927, Knoxville Buick Co. was in the still-recognizable building at 513-15. At that time there were five auto dealerships on this one block alone, all on the west side.

Though it's maybe not quite as striking, the neighborhood was concurrently developing something of a reputation for electrical supplies and repair; relative to Knoxville in the '20s and '30s, maybe you could even call it high-tech.

By 1921, there were several electric supply or service shops in the area, and by 1925, the area had a couple of radio sales and repair shops, among Knoxville's earliest. There would be more as the years went on.

By 1950, there were at least a dozen auto dealerships here, including Knox Motor Co., Buschbaum Motor Co., Kerr Motor Co., Knoxville Buick Co., Britton Motors, Sienknecht Motor Co., Magnolia Motor Co., Tri-State Motors, Perry Motor Co., Mabel Motors, Beaty Chevrolet, Friendly Motor Co., were all within a stone's throw of each other, between Magnolia and Fifth. Several of the larger ones stretched from Broadway to Gay, just north of Magnolia.

Decline and Rebirth

Ironically, innovations in the neighborhood's old mainstay, transportation, were almost its undoing. Probably the worst event in the history of the neighborhood was the construction of the expressway, beginning in 1951. Built just before the national interstate movement, it was called the Magnolia Expressway because it linked West Knoxville to Magnolia Avenue, and was the first urban expressway in Tennessee. Only later was it linked to I-40.

Dozens of businesses were displaced; among them was the original Southern Grill, which was at 307 Magnolia. It became better known at its location on North Broadway; by the time it closed in the early '90s, it had been described in a couple of nationally published books about regional cuisine.

Symbolizing the decline of the neighborhood was the fact that Emory Park itself was abolished in 1955, its 50-year-old trees cut down to make way for a parking lot. Knoxville News-Sentinel columnist Lucille Templeton complained bitterly about its loss and the lack of long-range planning that contributed to it. For the next 30 years, Knoxville had no urban parks at all.

Ill-conceived the destruction of the park may have been, the need for parking showed that neighborhood business was thriving. By that time, the police station and safety building had moved to 409 Broadway, walking distance from what was then City Hall.

Knoxville radio enjoyed regional and even national prominence from about 1925 to 1960, largely thanks to the dynamic musical talent in the area. Despite the technical expertise in the area, Knoxville north-of-the-tracks had little to do with the broadcasting industry. That changed, if briefly, in the mid-1950s, when a new station called WIVK opened its studio on North Gay, just across from Regas. According to some witnesses, the Everly Brothers first performed as a duo here to standing-room-only crowds of teenagers; later, Dolly Parton broadcast here and, according to some sources, made some of her first recordings.

But that was just an interlude, one last gasp of live local radio at the end of more than 30 glory years.

The decline of passenger service brought the post World War II decline of the once-booming railroad service industry here. Several railroad hotels closed and were torn down in the '60s. One relic from Victorian days, the five-story Fairway Hotel at Gay and Depot, was torn down in 1963. The same year, the Watauga was closed and partially demolished. After many years of decline, even the massive Atkin was razed in 1966.

The automobile industry which had brought about the decline of the passenger terminal—as well as the construction of the expressway that destroyed part of the neighborhood and veiled most of the surviving district from downtown—betrayed Greater Emory Place. In the '60s and '70s, most of the automobile dealerships moved to new suburban strips on Clinton Highway, Kingston Pike, Alcoa Highway, leaving only a few token used-car dealers in this area. The north-of-the-tracks area was nearly forgotten even in the older part of downtown, which was itself declining.

Most poignant, perhaps, was the decline of Old Gray Cemetery, which went partly to ruin. Some monuments and graves were moved elsewhere; others were simply stolen or destroyed. By the '70s, Knoxville's Victorian garden spot was often overgrown with weeds, the subject of an occasional editorial-page plea from an elderly reader.

However, in the '80s, several things started looking up. Old Gray had been cleaned up by a consortium of families of those buried there. Downtown was reviving in this direction, with the success of the Old City. The adjacent residential neighborhood of Fourth and Gill improved with scores of successful renovations. New business returned to the North Gay Street area. And, unlikely as it might have seemed, even Emory Park—partially reclaimed as a park—reemerged as downtown's loveliest spots.

Appendix

The Curious Case of Leonidas Houk (R, Tenn.)

Of the many bizarre incidents that happened in this neighborhood over the years, the highest-profile episode commenced in a drugstore called DePue's, at the corner of Central and Park (Magnolia). Rep. Leonidas Houk was the longtime Republican congressman from the second district, and lived nearby, on Fifth Avenue. Feeling poorly, he walked into Depue's one Sunday afternoon in May, 1891, and asked the pharmacist for his prescription nerve powder. For reasons unexplained, there was a glass of an arsenic solution on the counter. The 55-year-old Houk thought it was for him, picked it up and drained it.

The pharmacist called for help. Doctors visited the stricken representative at his house that evening and believed he had cleared the poison. However, the following morning, Rep. Houk died. Since Houk had many enemies, some suspected assassination. However, an inquest alleged that his death came from a heart attack attributed to the excitement of having swallowed poison.

The Battle of Depot Street

The originator of Knoxville's streetcar line sparked a peculiar drama that played out in this neighborhood north of the tracks.

William Gibbs McAdoo, the young lawyer who had introduced streetcars to town, was disappointed that the experiment was a financial failure; he sold his system to another entrepreneur, C.C. Howell, who made it work. He moved to New York where he became a successful attorney, but his hometown failure kept nagging at him. He returned in 1897 intent on regaining his crown as king of Knoxville streetcars, attempting to start an independent line that would rival Howell's. The city and Howell stymied his plans, however, by refusing to allow McAdoo to build a crucial link on West Depot Street. In a daring and frankly bizarre tactic, McAdoo hired 200 workers to build it anyway, beginning work before dawn on Monday morning in February, 1897. By mid-morning, when the men had torn up Depot Street between Gay and Broadway and were already laying rails, the city had discovered his transgression and sent out a squad of policemen to arrest the workers. McAdoo's loyal men outnumbered the policemen, however, and kept working. Reinforcements came in, including the fire department, which used high-power hoses to clear the streets. One worker who attacked the fire chief with a club was shot and killed. However, a large mob had formed, mostly sympathetic to McAdoo, as did the sheriff's department, which was so sympathetic with the laborers they began arresting the policemen for arresting them. By 10:30, nearly everyone on the scene, including Mayor Heiskell, was technically under arrest. A judge's order finally ended the battle, ruling against McAdoo. His dreams of a rival streetcar line unrealized, McAdoo left his hometown forever; less than 20 years later, he was President Wilson's influential Secretary of the Treasury.

The strange riot, perhaps unique in American history, would be recalled as The Battle of Depot Street.

The Rayl School

The Rayl School, sometimes called the Jessie Rayl School, was a two-story brick building located at tk West Magnolia (then Park), and offered instruction only in grades one through three. Its principal, Minnie Lichtenwanger, sounds like a pushover. "Teachers have endeavored to surround pupils with an atmosphere of love, and in consequence the relations between teachers and pupils have been most pleasant," she reported after the 1897-98 year. She and her students celebrated the birthdays of Lincoln, Longfellow, Whittier, and Dickens with special programs. Rayl also sponsored a "bird day," part of the motive of which was to keep little boys from killing birds. In spite of their efforts, which included visiting the homes of kids who didn't show up, Rayl had a chronic problem with absences; Maggie Culliny, one of Miss Lichtenwanger's successors, attributed it to "parents who do not seem to realize the importance of regular attendance...." Sales from a "sandwich day" purchased the school's first piano. The school remained there until the 1920s.

An Atypical Emory Place Story

Emory Place around 1910 may have seemed a perfect time and place to open a business, but maybe not for everybody. One perhaps poignant story is that of Dr. D.W. Hughes, whose name is still legible above the door at 23 Emory Place. Apparently a young man just out of vet school, he opened his office here around 1911, advertising himself as a veterinary surgeon. He put his name in permanent lettering over the door in a showy manner somewhat unusual even for successful surgeons. However, he remained here for only about five years. After that, he made a living for over 30 years as a dealer in junk and waste paper. The D.W. Hughes waste material company was on Frazier Street. He drops out of sight in the early '50s.