

The Mansions on Asylum Avenue Part 2

Following up on last month's article, we'll try to lay out why this particular development is important to Asylum Hill, how it came to be, and what can be done going forward. Of the three, what can be done going forward is clearly the most important. It seems highly unlikely that this project won't go through to completion. When it does Asylum Hill will have 32 more units of restricted/supportive housing. Deciding what can be done going forward requires a clear understanding both of why it's important and how it came to be, so this month we'll start with why it's important.



This month's *Then & Now* column sheds some light on this topic as do many of those past columns. Much of the architecture in Asylum Hill today comes from the period between the Civil War and the Great War, roughly from 1865 to 1920. The earliest important development was of course the American Asylum of Education for Deaf and Dumb as it was called in 1885. In fact, in the 1885 Sanborn map of Hartford, it is the only section of Asylum Ave shown. It is also the namesake of Asylum Hill. Even Nook Farm west of Imlay was not included in 1885.

By 1900, much had changed. There were single-family homes as well as show mansions on Asylum and the streets north, especially Collins and Ashley. Hartford was one of the most prosperous cities in the Country, and beautiful Victorian homes were very common.

Within a decade the Nation was in the Great Depression followed by World War II and not a lot of new construction was happening until after the war.

The effect of health insurance as an alternative to wage increases, and the pent-up demand from the previous two decades put economic pressure on what were then 50-60 year old "old fashion" homes at a time when apartments were in demand for the rapidly expanding insurance industry workforce. This was on top of the move of

Aetna from downtown Hartford to their current headquarters on Farmington Ave in 1930. Also the I-84 construction in the early 1960's caused the demolition of many classic Victorian buildings, most notably, Hartford Public High School. And when technology replaced many of the insurance companies lower paid employees and the better paid moved to the suburbs the glut of efficiency and 1 bedroom units caused real estate values to fall hard.

What remains today are fewer than 75 brick, owner occupied Victorian homes. More on this next month.