

1827 - 1984

Grove Place



*a quiet neighborhood of
renaissance*

In 1827, Josiah Bissell stood at the east end of Rochester's new Main Street, the spot where the Liberty Pole now stands. Looking to the north, he noted a lovely small hill crested by a grove of trees. Soon, that hill was the site of Josiah Bissell's home, the first residence in what was to become known as the neighborhood of Grove Place.

It was the early nineteenth century. Animals outnumbered people in some neighborhoods. And for a time on Josiah Bissell's 100-acre tract, cattle were the primary residents, roaming over the rolling meadows. Before the century progressed very far, however, Grove Place became home to some of Rochester's most prominent and noteworthy citizens.

Dr. Orrin Gibbs, for example. A prominent physician, Dr. Gibbs named the west boundary of his property for his father, establishing today's Gibbs Street, address of the Eastman Theatre and one of Rochester's most attractive residential neighborhoods.

Later in the century, George B. Selden developed the first internal combustion engine in his Uncle Samuel Selden's carriage house located in Grove Place. After a lengthy legal battle, the patents for Mr. Selden's engines were awarded to Henry Ford. But today, the attractive street where Uncle Samuel's carriage house stood is named Selden Street.

And while George B. Selden contributed notably to the family name, it was Uncle Samuel Selden and Levi Ward, Sr., who most dramatically influenced the character of Grove Place during the nineteenth century and beyond.

From 1840, when the two became the primary landowners

in the area, the descendants of the Ward and Selden patriarchs built gracious homes and raised their families in Grove Place for more than a century.

One of these descendants--a Grove Place citizen--was Levi Ward, Jr., first president of the free school system and one of Rochester's first mayors.

The Ward family was represented in Grove Place for nearly 150 years--an era that ended in 1973 with the death of Mrs. Hawley Ward.

In fact, Clayla Werner Ward--one of Rochester's most active and visible citizens--spent most of her life in the home at 18 Grove Place, almost directly behind the MetroCenter YMCA. The house, one of the oldest in the neighborhood, dates to 1850. Along with Levi Ward's former home at 164 Gibbs Street, renovated in 1974, Mrs. Ward's house stands as a tribute to the families that dominated what is now the Grove Place neighborhood.

Religion also played a significant role in the development of Grove Place. In an era when churches were centers of community influence, Grove Place built four in an area encompassing five square blocks.

In 1836, the Mount Hope Nurseries' George Ellwanger was one of the founding members of the Zion Lutheran Church. The church still stands on Grove Street as the Jewish War Veterans David J. Kauffman Post.

In 1852, Levi Ward funded the building of St. Peter's Presbyterian Church on the southwest corner of Gibbs and Grove. Although the congregation dissolved in 1923, the bells that summoned Grovetown parishioners for more than half a century ring today from the Colgate Rochester Divinity School. Temple B'rith Kodesh built its first synagogue in Grove Place at the corner of Gibbs and Grove Streets in 1893.

Sixteen years later, the temple was destroyed by the great Gibbs Street blaze of 1909. Three other Grove Place churches and 70 homes were damaged by the fire

as 40 mile-per-hour winds carried the flames through Grove Place.

Amidst the rebuilding, yet another institution came to Grove Place--the Young Men's Christian Association. The original "Y", built in 1914, still stands behind the new Chester F. Carlson MetroCenter YMCA completed in 1983.

Like many Rochester neighborhoods, Grove Place--temporarily forgotten during the mid-twentieth century--has been rediscovered. The efforts of past and present residents, as well as those of the City and the Downtown Development Corporation, have combined to erase signs of urban wear.

The Grove Place Neighborhood Association, initiated in 1968 by the late Melville C. McQuay, a longtime resident, and the Rev. Walter B. Freed, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Reformation, has been active in preserving the historical ambiance of the neighborhood. Fittingly, Clayla Werner Ward was the association's first president.

The Neighborhood Association was instrumental in forming a development company, Grovetown, Inc., as a vehicle to purchase, restore and sell its nineteenth-century homes to a new generation of downtown living devotees. Since the corporation was formed, more than 13 homes dating from the 1850's have been restored.

Several of Grove Place's most notable residences--the townhouses at #128-#152 Gibbs Street and the carriage house at #3 and #5 Selden Street--have been recognized as historic landmarks. Although not a landmark, the "skinny house" at 137 Gibbs Street remains a local attraction, noted for its 15-foot width.

The new YMCA building and modern townhouses at #173 and #175 Gibbs Street, along with the recently completed townhouse residences on Selden Street, have added a touch of 20th century flair and contemporary urban landscaping to Grove Place.

Combining a rebirth of nineteenth-century stateliness with an eclectic touch of contemporary design, Grove Place celebrates this Sesquicentennial year much as it celebrated the City's first birthdays--as a thriving downtown neighborhood.

(Today, the Grove Place neighborhood is bordered by Main Street on the south, Delevan Street on the north, Scio on the east, and North Street and Liberty Pole Way on the west.)

Neighborhood History Project

