

The Phoenix of Ypsilanti

The Resurrection of Depot Town

BY EVAN C. MILAN

Leaving the Station

The story of Ypsilanti has never been one of a single distinct community. The settlement of Woodruff's Grove in 1823 stood a mile from the future center of Ypsilanti. In 1849, when the Michigan State Normal School was founded, a uniquely different neighborhood began to develop; the industrial atmosphere that hovered over the Michigan Avenue corridor yielded to the genteel air that wafted over from the growing educational institution. And previously, in 1838, when the emerging industry of rail travel ran into Ypsilanti, Depot Town was born.

The ebbs and flows of social and commercial life in Ypsilanti, likewise, were not experienced uniformly across its strata of neighborhoods. During the nineteenth century, Depot Town prospered. On July 4, 1859, the Huron Hotel opened. Later renamed the Follett House, the lodging was known to be among the finest between Detroit and Chicago. Five years later, a three-story depot was built that was also considered to be one of the finest on the Michigan Central Line.

Even before Depot Town boasted of numerous opulent edifices, the spirits of the neighborhood's residents ran high. In 1857, Depot Town split from the town to the west and became East Ypsilanti. East and West would only become reunited when the State of Michigan refused to grant a city charter while the two remained divided.

Depot Town's renown would remain for nearly a century. On September 5, 1866, Andrew Johnson's Swing Around the Circle brought the president, along with Ulysses S. Grant, David Farragut, and George Armstrong Custer, to the depot. In July 1900, forty-six cars full of animals and performers pulled into Depot Town for an exhibition of Buffalo Bill Cody's *Wild West Show*. Ypsilanti's depot was, in fact, receiving twenty-six passenger trains a day in 1910, and can even be heard as a stop announced over a P.A. speaker at Chicago's LaSalle Station in the 1959 Alfred Hitchcock film *North by*

Northwest.

On the Wrong Track

The advancements of the twentieth century tipped the scales against Depot Town. The prominence of railroads waned as new modes of transportation overtook them. By 1978, only one passenger train per day stopped in Ypsilanti, and in 1984, the depot was shuttered.

The Depot Town of the late 1960s was not the Depot Town of the 1860s. Most of the buildings along Cross Street were boarded up, and incoming freshman to Eastern Michigan University were told not to go down to the tracks. The businessmen who had built Depot Town into a bustling commercial center had long since passed, and the residents who remained were a cross section of citizens rejected by the more affluent parts of town.

Motorcycle gangs shared, with a tumultuous relationship, the district with migrants of the southern states. The latter community were largely Appalachians who moved northward to find better living conditions, though were met with a degree of prejudice. At a certain point, the presence of the motorcycle gangs became irreconcilable with the other residents of Depot Town. Depending on the source, either dynamite or hand grenades were dropped into the chimney of a known motorcycle hangout; the intended damage was, to the chagrin of the combatants, mitigated by a blockage in the chimney, causing the detonation to reach only the third floor of the Follett House.

But Ypsilanti had not turned entirely away from Depot Town. Carl Miller continued to maintain a successful auto dealership he had opened with Alex Longnecker in 1933. The Thompson Block continued to house a number of businesses, and the Central and Alibi Bars served as popular, if notoriously rough, watering holes.

Thoughts of turning attention to that deteriorating corner of the community were discussed in 1965, when plans began to take shape for the forthcoming sesquicentennial; efforts to address Depot Town, however, came slowly, and nothing substantial materialized until a collection of young artists and adventurous entrepreneurs saw potential in the cheap real estate.

A New Head of Steam

In 1972, Bill and Sandee French bought the Alibi Bar from Bill's father, Aubrey L. French. The Alibi Bar was a rough hangout that had been fully absorbed by the culture of local motorcycle gangs. Linda French, daughter of Aubrey, recalled an instance at the Alibi when a patron received a few blows from a nightstick in return for his unwelcomed demeanor toward the young waitress. The bartender who had wielded the blows sent the ne'er-do-well out of the bar with a complement of blood running down his face.

Though in the 1950s and 1960s it had witnessed a downturn, Depot Town experienced a renaissance in the 1970s. In 1973, John Kornilakis opened the Old Town Restaurant, which remained a staple for years.

That same year, Depot Town became part of the Historic District. Redesignating the neighborhood was a marked point in the shifting tone toward Depot Town. Prior to the renewed interest in the business center, plans were being discussed to scrap what was deemed already lost. In the 1960s, there was a prevalent thought that the most economical solution to blight was to demolish existing structures and erect modern shopping and industrial centers.

Unfortunately, even as some interest in the business center rekindled, there remained an overwhelmingly low opinion of Depot Town's worth. In 1971, a furniture store stood at what is now an alley way. Sometimes misattributed to a bombing that punched a hole into the block, the gap between 29 and 33 East Cross Street resulted from a fire that ignited at 31 East Cross Street.

Like its neighbors, the doomed building was in some degree of disrepair. According to Ypsilanti historian James Mann, the crew that extinguished the flames simply pushed all of the charred debris into the burned-out basement; the property owner was alerted to the damage only after the fact. Never reconstructed, the site at 31 East Cross was converted into a pedestrian walkway lined with benches and markers denoting the history of Ypsilanti.



Cross Street in Depot Town

The circumstances that prevailed in Depot Town at the time, however, can attest to the creditworthiness of Mann's story. Steve Gross, one of the early Depot Town entrepreneurs, recalls that rent was only around \$60 a month, and a building could be purchased along Cross Street for \$14,000. In the 1970s, \$60 rents were a bargain; averages around the United States stood closer to \$100 per month, and home prices stood above \$25,000.

Such low rents and cheap real estate encouraged the neighborhood's renaissance. In 1976, Linda French opened the Depot Exchange, an antiques store next to the Central Bar on the south side of Cross Street. Steve Gross remembers the ideology of opening antique stores in Depot Town: "If you opened an ice cream parlor, and someone else opened another ice cream parlor across the street, it would be a disaster. An antique store, on the other hand...the more antique stores that open, the more the area becomes a destination."

The reestablishment of Depot Town was not just a project of opening new businesses. In 1975, Bill and Jerry French, along with EMU Professor of Art Beverly Shankwiler, came together to form the Depot Town Association. The association has been credited with solidifying the effort to turn the district around from where it had been.

The Depot Town Association brought together business owners, property owners, and residents to focus on the issues at stake. Of the members and leaders, Tom Dodd is among the most fondly remembered. In addition to his tireless work with the association, Dodd also published articles of local interest in his Depot Town Rag. Additionally, Dodd was instrumental in obtaining a pre-1900 caboose to stand as representation for the neighborhood's heritage as a railroad hub. Purchased for \$2500 and moved to Ypsilanti in 1979, Depot Town's caboose was put to use as the office for the Depot Town Association.

Light at the End of the Tunnel

The focal point of Depot Town is undoubtedly the railroad. An opulent three-story gothic depot was built in 1864. While the ground level served as a station for the public, the upper stories were dedicated to the use of living quarters for the station master.

After a fire in 1910 and a train derailment that further damaged the building in 1939, the station took on a greatly altered functionalist appearance. The depot was shuttered in 1984 and sold by Amtrak in 1987. Plans to redevelop the station as a restaurant have never materialized. Since it landed in the hopeful hands of private owners Carol and Jim Kovalak, various ideas have been explored but have gone unrealized. Ypsilanti has not received a public passenger train since its shuttering, despite attempts to change this in 2002 and again in subsequent years.

The Freight House, which stands just to the west of the depot, was built in 1878 to aid the increasing amount of freight handling activity in the growing industrial city. The need for a freight office in Ypsilanti waned in the 1950s, and the building became a ware-



The Railroad Depot

house for a furniture store. Like many of its neighbors, the building fell into disrepair until the dedicated Depot Towners devoted their efforts toward redeveloping the space into a community center.

The Freight House was purchased by the city in 1979 and, according to the *Eastern Echo*, has been host to the Ypsilanti Farmer's Market since 1978. The building was added to the State Register of Historic Places in 1997; however, financial cutbacks and a growing list of required maintenance forced the city to close the Freight House in 2004. The Friends of the Ypsilanti Freight House quickly mobilized and began to work tirelessly to raise funds to reopen what had become a central community meeting point. After refurbishments that totaled more than \$1 million, the Freight House returned as a hub for community events in May 2013.

Perhaps the keystone to bringing Depot Town back from its low state was the push to have the district rezoned. At the time of the neighborhood's rebirth, the area was zoned as M-1, a classification that allows for the establishment of light industry. But by 1988, the character of Depot Town had shifted; the area had developed into a close-knit community inside the greater city. Linda French reflects: "Depot Town has always been about the people; it has been like a family." B2C zoning, a designation that would promote commercial and residential growth, became much more appropriate for further development in the neighborhood where industry would stand as a detriment.

The small-town atmosphere and close-knit feeling of Depot Town continues into the bicentennial year. Though the neighborhood has suffered some losses throughout the years, the positive march forward continues to prevail. In September 2009, the historically significant Thompson Block suffered a catastrophic fire that left a brick shell



The Freight House

of the building that had been used as a barracks during the American Civil War. Today, however, the Thompson Block stands as a triumph over the severe neglect it received. John Carlson and Greg Lobdell acquired the building in 2017 with an aim to restore the challenging piece of real estate. Though the conditions were considerably worse than initially thought, the contractors of 3MISSION Design & Development persevered to revive a key piece of Depot Town. Today the monument to the community's past appears much like it did in the 1890s, with the name Thompson stretched across its southern wall. With the complement of Thompson & Co., offering Southern-inspired cuisine, and its neighbor Mash, serving cocktails and live music, the eastern end of Depot Town is once again a thriving piece of the community.

A number of businesses have passed through Depot Town: Woodruff's stood at 36 East Cross Street from 2010 to 2014, and the Cheeky Monkey Bears and Gifts stood at 33 East Cross Street until 2009. The Sidetrack stands at the corner of River and Cross, as it has since Linda French and Steve Gross opened its doors in 1980; the Depot Town icon offers a long list of beer and exceptional hamburgers. Aubree's, on the north side of Cross street, stands in place of the former Alibi Bar. With some changes made to the establishment in 1979, Bill and Sandee French were able to maintain the Alibi's legacy while providing a softer atmosphere; today families can enjoy a quality pizza where biker gangs once caroused.

The new generation of Depot Town entrepreneurs continue to build on the fifty-year trajectory of renewal. Wax Bar and 734 Brewing Company provide unique gathering

points where cocktails can be shared, and memories can be made. Maiz, once standing far from Depot Town, now takes the place of John Kornilakis' Old Town Restaurant. And still, as business booms in Depot Town, it is the people that remain at the heart of the neighborhood.

A Note on Sources

A number of sources have been consulted to piece together a clear narrative of Depot Town's history since 1973. Sources consulted include the *Ann Arbor News*, *AAA Magazine*, and *On the Ground Ypsilanti*. Additionally, historian James T. Mann, Ypsilanti Historical Society President Bill Nickels, business owners Linda French and Steve Gross, architectural consultant Hannah M. Fajnor, and Ward 3-City Council Woman Annie Somerville all offered great insight into the neighborhood's history. All images were taken by the author.

About the Author

Evan Milan is a graduate of Eastern Michigan University with a Bachelor of Science in History. Beginning with the commencement of his first semester at the university in 2012, Evan has lived in and around Ypsilanti. Joining the Ypsilanti Historical Society in 2018, he has served on the Board of Advisors since 2021. Evan served as Chairman of the Bicentennial Commission in 2022.