

BAIRD ROAD HISTORIC DISTRICT

A quintessential community would combine homes with a local store, public transportation, farms for produce and seasonal work, and a viable community center like a church or a school. All this was found in one self-contained area in Perinton: Baird Road. It is also a reason why Baird Road is one of Perinton's Historic Districts. The district extends along Baird Road from the New York Central underpass south to Fairport Road. Included are a schoolhouse near the Old Rochester Road (Fairport Road) which was established in 1815; the site of one of Perinton's first mills, built in 1810; a federal-style house built in the 1860's; a stone railroad underpass built in the 1850's; the site of Rochester, Syracuse, and Eastern trolley stop #11; and a number of small middle class homes, all over 50 years of age. The history of the Baird Road area parallels that of Perinton itself, first as a pioneer community, then as a rural, farming community, and finally as a residential area, a "trolley subdivision." The area is a landmark in the town's evolution from a farming to a "bedroom" community, hence its designation as an Historic District in 1989.



Early mill probably built by Isaiah Northrup on Thomas Creek in the Baird Road area

The Northrup family was the first to settle in the area. Isaiah Northrup built a sawmill on Thomas Creek in 1810. Peter Ripley and Joseph Richardson followed suit. The Northrup site can be found on the present Penner property, at number 2729. Northrup's mill was sold several times and was used as a grist mill, a plaster mill and a flour mill well into the 1880's. Another sawmill was built by Ebenezer Lewis in 1817 on the east side of the road. A group of properties formed around this mill in the 1830's and was referred to as the "Northrup Settlement."

Farms provided produce and part time work for area residents. In 1866, the Northrup lands were sold to Alonzo Cook, who farmed and sold produce for a living. The land was subsequently sold to J.J. Richards, who operated it as Sunnyridge Fruit and Berry Farm. The family ran the farm until 1906. The Wilbur and Hawkins farms bordered Thomas Creek. Herman Steffen owned the farm house at number 2783 and built greenhouses there in 1912. Herman's son George expanded the farm and grew squash, which he sold to a baby food manufacturer. He also grew tomatoes, raised bees, and grew chrysanthemums, which were sold at Hart's Flower Shop in Rochester. During World War II George employed German POW's from Clyde. When field work was slow, he had them painting his house. However, when a neighbor, who had been supposed to do the painting, complained that the POW's could not do work which could be done by available Americans, the work stopped. The Steffen land was sold in 1960 and became Island Valley Golf Course. The greenhouses were demolished in 1968. The Dannenburgs at number 2758 grew cherries, pears, and apples. They also raised annuals in their greenhouses. Their house was torn down in 1970.

The New York Central R.R. underpass which marks the north end of the historic district was built in the 1850's. It is, of itself, an historic structure, as it indicates the importance of the railroad to the development of the area. It also has the distinction of being one of the last narrow,

one lane underpasses in the county. Mass transit, however, in the form of an interurban electric trolley line, the Rochester, Syracuse, and Eastern, significantly changed the nature of the community. In 1906 this line opened from Macedon to Rochester, and the era of suburban development began. Stop #11 was located just south of the N.Y. Central line, convenient to the new Midvale subdivision, and really established Baird Road as a residential area.

Carl Patterson, who purchased the Sunnyridge Farm in 1906, and George Higbie, who owned a substantial piece of property adjacent to the trolley line, were responsible for starting suburban development in the area. Within 10 years, Patterson had subdivided and sold his land to new homeowners, and also to the two small farms owned by the Steffens and Dannenburgs. The six houses that he built on the ridge were relatively small, averaging around 1500 square feet, but were on two acre lots. Most were in the bungalow style popular between 1930 and 1950 with porches, dormers, clapboards or shingles, and large yards which dropped off toward Thomas Creek. The houses appear today much as they did then, except that the trees are bigger. George Higbie advertised his Midvale subdivision in a flyer with the question "Why not live in a park?" A prospective buyer could choose from several price lists, and for only \$10 down be guaranteed a site with running water, graded streets, side walks, and more.

Many of the people who settled in the area were of German ancestry, and many held jobs in the East Rochester car shops or the piano works. Because of the new Rochester, Syracuse, and Eastern trolley line, the commute was easy, and residents could enjoy "country living" after a long day at the factory. A former resident recalls, "Papa would be up early, sometimes 5 o'clock, to work in his garden. He could tell by the change in the water pressure from his hose that Mama had started his breakfast, and would come in to eat before catching the trolley to work. He had a wonderful garden." The local store at the north end of the district, Fish's store, provided groceries and other goods. The farms provided seasonal work for the children and women who needed it. The Midvale School, located at the south end of the district was not only the educational center, but also the community center

The Midvale School was built in 1883 as a two-room school. All the children from Baird Road and Midvale Drive attended. The maintenance and support of the school involved the entire community, as did the various school functions. The annual Harvest Dinner would draw all the families in the area who would each contribute a dish to pass. The school was enlarged in 1926 with the addition of three new classrooms and a new front entrance. In the 1940's a basement lunchroom was built and hot lunches were provided. Classrooms in the school were used until 1955. Today the schoolhouse is an office building.

The house at #2677 is different from the others on the street. It is an Italianate structure built in 1869, making it the oldest house on the street. It was also first located on the east side of the road. When it was threatened with demolition by the construction of the trolley, it was moved across the street. Since it was impossible to then turn the house around, the back of the house is now the front and the original front facade faces the creek.

The Rochester, Syracuse, and Eastern trolley shut down in 1936, finished off by the Depression, the automobile and the bus. The earthen abutments, however, can still be seen just south of the railroad overpass. Between the 1960's and the 1980's, the road was rerouted and a number of structures on the street were demolished. The one hundred and ten year old Osburn house at number 2698 was torn down as well as the former Steffen house at #2783. In 1970, the Dannenburg house and barns were torn down and the fill was used to modify the course of Thomas Creek to facilitate the building of the BOCES center.

Today Baird Road still preserves a sense of community. Mature trees shade the homes and buffer the noise of traffic. The large yards sloping down to Thomas Creek maintain a sense

of openness and a reminder of the early mill era. The buildings are anchored on the south by the brick schoolhouse and on the north by the oldest house in the district. This cluster of homes surrounded by open spaces is a microcosm of Perinton history. Preservation does not mean there can be no change; homeowners continue to update their properties and vacant land is there for development. Under the eye of the Planning Board and the Historic Architecture Commission that was established by the Historic Preservation Ordinance, the changes on Baird Road will be compatible with its past, and in the future will no doubt add another chapter to the history of the area.



Midvale School. the early decades of the 20th century before the building was enlarged to its present size.