

WALK-UP APARTMENTS

WALK-UP APARTMENTS IN AN URBAN LANDSCAPE: BRIGHTON, N.Y., 1933-1991

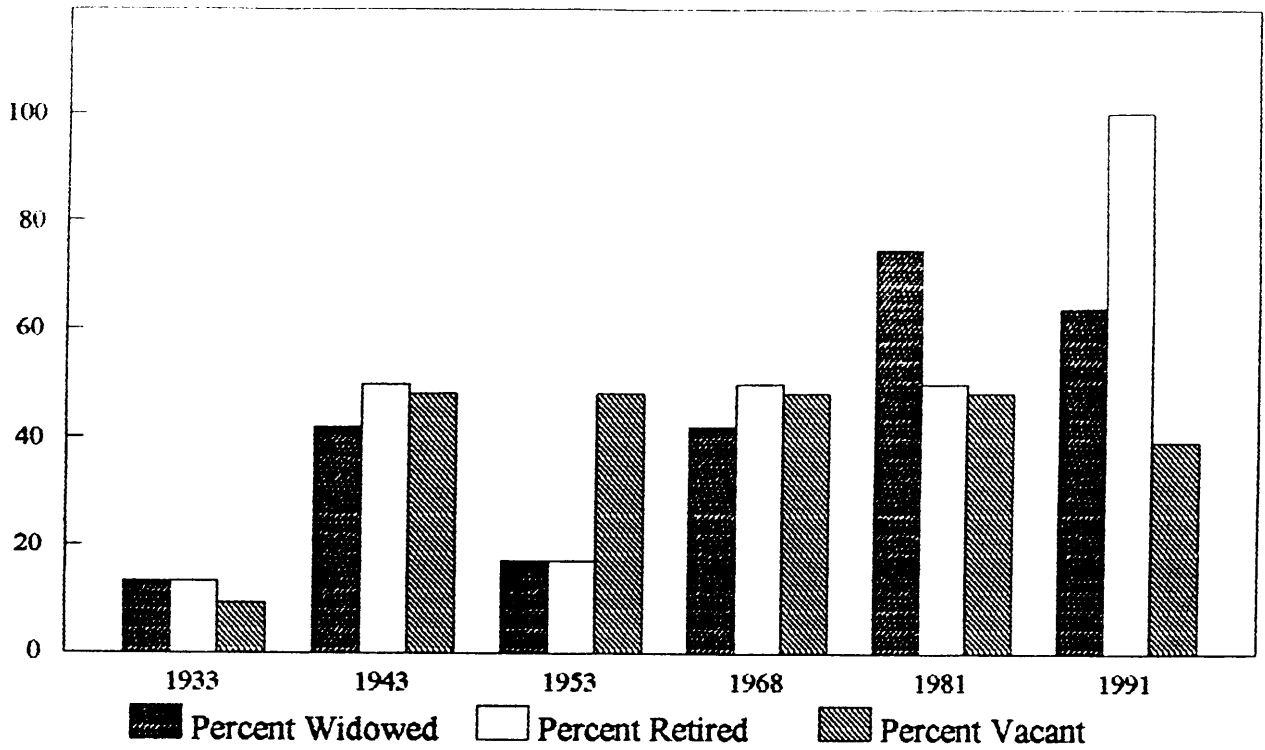
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ABSTRACT: When driving down a typical thoroughfare of a city's older suburbs, one is bound to notice walk-up apartment buildings that were built after the turn of the twentieth century. Many of these buildings are now occupied by retirees and widows who, because of public transportation and shopping within walking distance, find it more convenient to live nearer to the central city. This, though, was not always the case. In the younger days of many of the first suburbs such as Brighton, New York, which was used for this study, the walk-up apartment buildings' residents were professionals and families living in a thriving environment. This paper looks at the changing occupance of two apartment buildings on Monroe Avenue in Brighton, New York, a Rochester suburb, from 1933 until 1991. The information used in this paper was found in the Rochester Suburban Directory. By studying these directories one can see that a drastic change has occurred: convenience and perhaps community have supplanted status as the raison de vivre of the old inner suburban apartment.

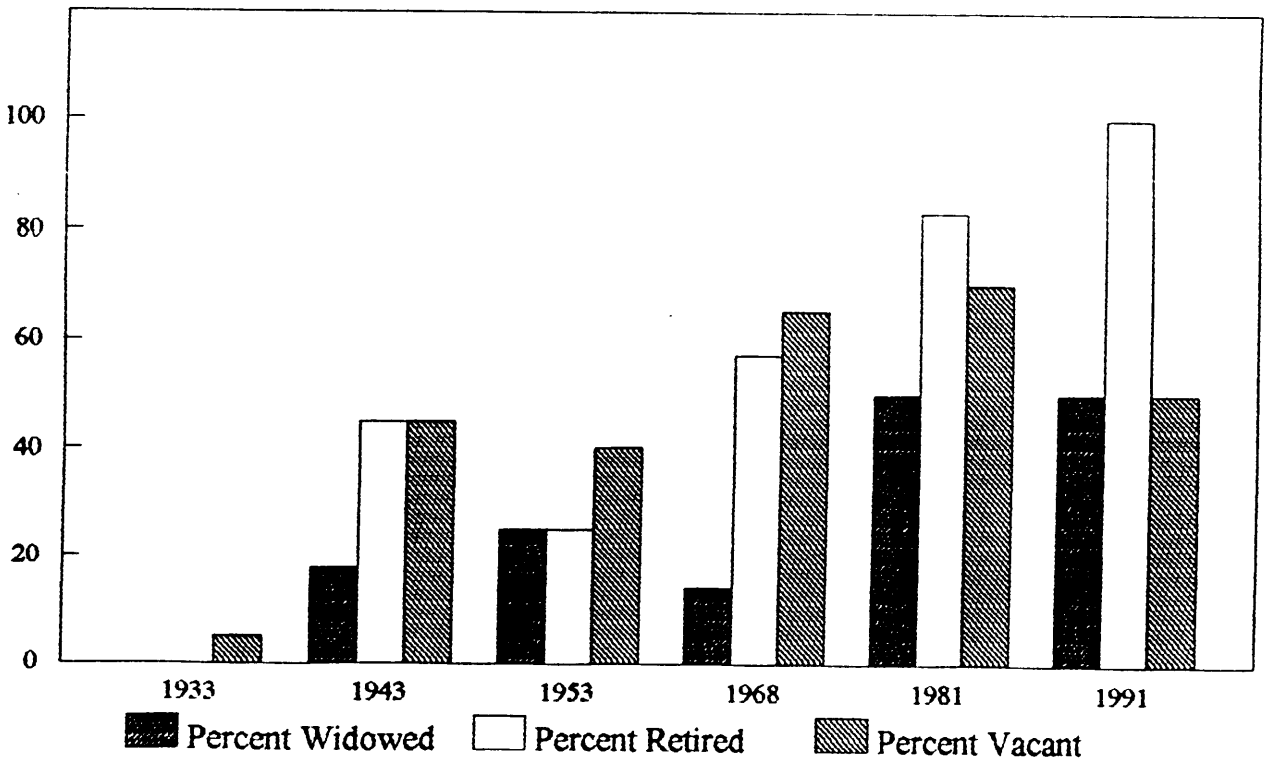
Before the American Civil War, apartment living in the United States was seen to be socially undesirable by the middle and upper classes. Large United States cities were unlike many European cities, such as Paris, where many middle and upper-class citizens lived in apartments or flats. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, though, this began to change. The first upper-class apartment building in the United States was built in Boston in 1855.¹ New York City followed Boston's lead and began designing and building middle and upper-class apartment buildings. Between 1869 and 1876, 200 apartment buildings were built in New York City alone.² They offered elegant secure settings for those who wanted to live close to the city. This new trend spread in the United States, and Rochester, New York was no exception.

When an apartment building is designed and built it is usually aimed at a particular segment of the population. Some are built for the very wealthy while others are built for lower income occupants. With time, though, who the building attracts may change and become more diverse. Sometimes a city neighborhood experiences dramatic social transition. A neighborhood may go through a phase of gentrification, become a singles district or become a retirement district. What causes these changes, though, is hard to pinpoint and beyond the scope of this paper. Indeed, the most compelling social feature of the town of Brighton, New York, Rochester's earliest automobile suburb, is that the status profile of its residents has remained essentially unaltered for six decades. Brighton's social stability affords an opportunity for exploring changing occupancy in apartment structures in a quite stable neighborhood milieu. This paper, in an attempt to detail and illustrate the changing urban scene, is a study of two walk-up apartment buildings in the town of Brighton, New York, a suburb of Rochester.

THE GEORGIAN THROUGH THE YEARS



THE WESTMINSTER THROUGH THE YEARS



WALK-UP APARTMENTS

THE SETTING

Brighton officially became a town on March 25, 1814 by an act of the State Legislature.³ It lies directly south and east of the city of Rochester which, over time, annexed much of Brighton to accommodate suburban expansion. Brighton enjoyed prosperity in the nineteenth century, based on commercial agriculture, some local industry such as a major brickworks, and enterprises close to the Erie Canal. By 1900 suburban development began in earnest, and accelerated greatly during the 1920's. In 1820 the population was 1,972. In 1930 it was 9,065 and by 1970 it had grown to 35,065.⁴ Growth was especially rapid after World War I. From 1920 to 1926 building developments multiplied.⁵ One of the greatest areas of growth in the town was on Monroe Avenue from the city line to the Twelve Corners less than a mile away. Homes, businesses and apartment buildings were all built along this stretch of the road. Two such buildings, built within yards of the city line and Cobbs Hill park, were the Georgian Apartments at 1372 Monroe Avenue and the Westminster Apartments at 1392 Monroe Avenue. These buildings, along with many others, housed the middle and upper class work-force of post-world war I Rochester. They were not huge and formidable buildings like many apartment buildings in cities such as New York and Boston. They were both brick-built and were only two stories tall, fitting in with the single family homes nearby. Both incorporated a central courtyard to provide a small park-like setting for their residents. Both buildings were built with period architectural styles and set back approximately sixty feet from the roadside, adding a self-conscious echo of graceful living in eighteenth century London.

THE PEOPLE - 1933

The earliest records that I could find of the buildings were in the Rochester Suburban Directory For the Year 1933. In this book there is a listing of all the residents, their marital status and occupations. By looking at this we can get some sort of idea of the people that were attracted to the newly erected walk-up apartments.

Coming from the city and heading south on Monroe Avenue, the first walk-up apartment building that one encounters is the Georgian Apartments of 1372 Monroe Avenue. The setting is very attractive. Cobbs Hill park is only a short walk to the north and shopping is also within easy walking distance in both directions. In 1933, twenty-one of the twenty-three apartments in the Georgian were occupied. Of these twenty-one occupants seventeen were married and three were widows. Three were retired while the remainder held, mainly, middle class occupations. These included such occupations as salesmen, investors, a clothing manufacturer, a real estate salesman, and an advertising manager. Along with the middle class majority of the occupants there were a few upper or upper middle class occupants such as a lawyer and an owner of a large construction company.⁶

The next walk-up apartment building found on Monroe Avenue is only a few doors down, the Westminster Apartments at 1392 Monroe Avenue. Out of a total of twenty apartments in 1933 nineteen were occupied. Again, like the Georgian, the majority of the residents were white-collar employees. Unlike the Georgian, though, there were single residents in the Westminster and in 1933 there were no occupants who were widowed or retired. Occupations of the residents included teachers, secretaries, salesmen and a legal assistant. There were again a few upper-middle class occupants such as doctors and a dentist. One interesting exception to note is that there was a sculptor in the building. I was unable to establish whether sculpture, or private means such as an inheritance, paid his rent.⁷

By looking at the occupations of the residents of these two apartments one can see that the majority were white-collar workers. Even though the country was in the midst of the Great Depression

in 1933 these residents were still housed and gainfully employed. One can surmise too that many and perhaps most of the employed residents relied on public transportation, for Monroe was and is a major radial highway affording good bus access to Rochester's commercial core. With time, the residents of the apartments changed and we will look at how they changed in the wider milieu of social change in metropolitan Rochester.

THE PEOPLE - 1943

The next year that I examined in this study was 1943, two years after the United States entered World War II. The Great Depression was mostly a memory but full economic recovery was not realized until well after World War II. This may help to explain why the occupancy was down in the two apartment buildings, compared to 1933. The Georgian had only twelve of its twenty-three available apartments occupied and out of the twelve occupancies six were retired. Four of the six retirees were widows and of the remaining residents only one was unmarried. The six remaining residents that were employed were entirely and broadly middle class, holding such occupations as managers, secretaries, and businessmen. The Westminster, next-door, was also experiencing a low occupancy rate. Only eleven of the twenty apartments were occupied, five by retirees. Two of the retirees were widowed while the other three were single, the remaining residents were married couples. Unlike contemporary Blue Books, the Rochester City and Suburban Directories did not report co-resident children. But, it is likely that these were rare or entirely absent in the Georgian and Westminster. There was one upper-middle class resident in the building, who was president of an advertising agency, while the remainder held middle class positions like those in the Georgian.⁸

THE PEOPLE - 1953

Occupancy of the buildings in 1953 was similar to 1943 in the sense that only just over half of the apartments in each building were rented. The only possible explanation for this is that people corresponding to the apartments' original target market were choosing to live in single family homes instead of apartment buildings. Once again, though, the occupants that did live there were mainly middle class. In the Georgian, which again, as in 1943, had twelve occupants, there were only two occupants who were retired and only two that were widows. The ten that were not retired had middle or lower middle class jobs such as working for insurance companies, Xerox, and retail establishments such as furniture stores. The Westminster also had only twelve of its apartments occupied in 1953. Of the twelve occupants three were widowed and three were retired. There was also one single woman, who happened to be a nurse. Again, the employed residents held positions similar to those held by residents of the Georgian.⁹

THE PEOPLE - 1968

By 1968 the Town of Brighton, underbounded as it was by City of Rochester annexations, had largely completed the long phase of suburban building that had begun at the turn of the century. The population of the town was around 33,000, compared to the 11,000 in 1933.¹⁰ With this boom in population one would assume that the apartments in our two buildings would be full; this was not the case. The Georgian had a total of twelve out of twenty-three apartments occupied while the Westminster had only seven of the twenty apartments rented. It seems that the aura of apartment living had faded further, with many people buying newly constructed houses instead of renting from a landlord. There were, though, people still renting apartments in these two buildings and we will look at who these people were.

WALK-UP APARTMENTS

1968 is the first time that we see half of the residents in the Georgian retired. Also relevant is the fact that only four of the twelve residents were married. Five of them were widowed while the remainder were single. One thing that has not changed in the Georgian, as well as the Westminster, is that those that were still working were broadly middle class, white collar employees. The Westminster in 1968 exhibits an even bleaker picture than that of the Georgian. As already stated, only seven of the available twenty apartments were occupied. Four of the seven were homes for retirees, of which only one was a widow.¹¹

In a span of thirty-five years the residential profile of these two apartment buildings had changed drastically. Not only had the number of residents gone down, with the population of the town going up, but the look of the tenants had changed also. The majority were older than the residents that had lived there thirty-five years earlier. To understand why this change took place one has only to look at the surrounding urban environment and its changes. In effect, the two apartments offered a social and demographic niche that remained largely unfilled as late as 1968. But the niche of comfortable retirement living in an inner suburban apartment setting was an imminent prospect and would restore and readjust the role these buildings could fill in Rochester's urban social fabric.

THE PEOPLE - 1981

By 1981 one can again see the trend of the buildings transforming into retirement settings. The occupancy of the two buildings stayed relatively the same with twelve living in the Georgian and six living in the Westminster. The most drastic change is seen in the Georgian where of the twelve occupants none was married and nine were widowed. Five of the occupants were retired and one was a student, a decided anomaly in the social history of the two buildings, while the rest held middle class jobs. The Westminster did not have as many widowed residents as the Georgian but five of the six residents were retired of which only three were widows.¹²

THE PEOPLE - 1991

By 1991 drastic changes are evident and show that the buildings were becoming living quarters for retirees and widows. In both buildings, the number of occupied apartments went up but one-hundred percent of the occupants of the two buildings were retired. The Georgian had fourteen out of the twenty-five apartments full. The Westminster Apartments, like the Georgian, were home to retirees and widows. Ten of the twenty-one apartments were occupied, three more than in 1968.¹³ The transition process was essentially complete, the niche mostly filled.

It should be added that, since the 1970's, residents have been increasingly reluctant to divulge occupancy information to directory publishers. A 1994 field survey of both apartments indicated an occupancy rate appreciably higher than the picture attained by the 1991 directory.

CONCLUSION

As one can see by the data presented, these two buildings, the Georgian and the Westminster, in a relatively urbane suburb of Rochester, have gone through drastic changes in their occupancy over the past sixty-one years. Unlike many other inner-urban neighborhoods though, central Brighton has sustained the atmosphere and appeal of relatively safe, community oriented living. The age of its residents has changed somewhat because many younger families moved out to the newer suburbs like Fairport and Mendon. One other obvious change from 1933 is that, now, the majority of the residents of the two

buildings and indeed much of central Brighton are Jewish. The regional diaspora of Jewish-American homeowners into Brighton was a mostly post-war phenomenon based partly on the removal of ethnically and racially restrictive covenants on deeds of property, and geographically on the siting of four synagogues within or just outside the Brighton Town limits, within easy walking distance of its 1920's and 1930's built-up area. Thus the niche that evolved for the Georgian and Westminster was one that specifically attracted Jewish-American retirees. That is the niche the two buildings still serve, and will probably continue to serve until the Town's central position loses its distinctive ethnic and social profile, a prospect that, for now, seems very unlikely.

ENDNOTES

¹Gwendolyn Wright, Building The Dream (Boston: The MIT Press, 1981), 136.

²Ibid., 137.

³Mrs. Edward H. Cumpston, The Building of Brighton (Rochester, New York: Privately printed, 1973), 12.

⁴Ibid., 24.

⁵Helen Reynolds Williams, ed., Sesquicentennial History Of The Town Of Brighton (Rochester, New York: Sesquicentennial Committee, 1964), 21.

⁶The Suburban Directory For The Year 1933 (Rochester, New York: R.L. Polk & Co., Inc., 1933), passim.

⁷Ibid.

⁸The Suburban Directory For The Year 1943 (Rochester, New York: R.L. Polk & Co., Inc., 1943), passim.

⁹The Suburban Directory For The Year 1953 (Rochester, New York: R.L. Polk & Co., Inc., 1953), passim.

¹⁰Cumpston, 24.

¹¹The Suburban Directory For The Year 1968 (Rochester, New York: R.L. Polk & Co., Inc., 1968), passim.

¹²The Suburban Directory For The Year 1981 (Rochester, New York: R.L. Polk & Co., Inc., 1981), passim.

¹³The Suburban Directory For The Year 1991 (Rochester, New York: R.L. Polk & Co., Inc., 1991), passim.