

Village Changed House Numbers in 1926

Post Office Requirement Still Causes Confusion for Researchers

by Robert Lowell Goller

Town & Village Historian

Copyright 2015 Robert Lowell Goller

(This column was originally published in the East Aurora Advertiser in January 2015).

Walnut Street isn't a dead end, but that's exactly where one woman recently ran into a roadblock while conducting research into her family's history. An ancestor's obituary had offered a goldmine of information about her family's past, including the exact street address of the family home. She drove down Walnut Street, watching in excitement as the numbers inched closer and closer to the one cited in the obituary. However, she came to the end of the street before the number arrived.

Perplexed and frustrated, she called the Town Historian's Office for some sort of explanation: Had the house been torn down? Is there more than one Walnut Street in East Aurora? Were there ever more houses—and more numbers—beyond Linden Avenue?

The woman was happy to learn that her family's house is still there, in the same spot it had always been. It simply has a new number.

In the earliest days, house numbers were not required. The Post Office had no trouble delivering letters without them. Some houses had numbers; others did not. Even after numbers became mandatory, each street seemed to come up with its own system.

That all changed in 1925, when the U.S. Postal Service required a uniform numbering system. The village government instituted the new plan in January 1926, nearly a year after the Post Office's deadline.

"We should have had it in operation a year ago, but have been unable to complete it until now," then-Mayor Elbert Hubbard II said at the time. The village engineer was charged with developing the new numbering scheme. "A complete map of the village has been made and every house and piece of property given a number," Hubbard wrote in a message to village residents, published in the *East Aurora Advertiser* on Jan. 28, 1926. "It is a very simple plan, but one that makes it very easy to locate a property once having the number."

The numbering of east-west streets started from an imaginary line at the west end of the village. The numbering of north-south streets began from both directions at Main Street. The new system created a grid, so "houses on parallel streets equally distant from the imaginary line will all be numbered the same." The Village Board voted to purchase number plates for the entire community. "This will mean that all the houses will be numbered in a uniform style," Mayor Hubbard noted.

Over the course of a few weeks, village crews installed more than 1,400 sets of numbers. All the homes in the village were re-numbered as of mid-March 1926. Not only did it help the U.S. Postal Service more efficiently deliver the mail, it helped volunteer firefighters and first responders more quickly respond to emergencies. Although nearly all the 1,400 sets of numbers installed by the village are long gone, the official numbering system survives nearly a century later.

The new system, however, continues to cause confusion for researchers, such as the woman attempting to find her ancestor's home on Walnut Street. The number on an old house in the village today was different prior to 1926. However, this dilemma is not unique to East Aurora. Nearly all communities changed their numbering systems at one point or another. Anyone researching the history of a house should see if—and when—the numbering system in the community ever changed.

How can a researcher match the old numbers with the new? It would be a rather difficult task, be it not for Sanborn insurance maps from the late 1800s through the 1950s, which include the house numbers assigned at any given point. A map published in 1927 by the Sanborn Map Co. includes both the pre- and post-1926 numbers for the homes in the Village of East Aurora. Several copies of the large maps are in the archives of the Aurora Town Historian's Office as well as on various archival websites.

Robert Lowell Goller is the eighth Aurora town and East Aurora village historian since the office was created in 1919. The Historian's Office is open for research Wednesdays and Thursdays from 1-4 p.m., and by appointment. Visit www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian for more information. The Office of the Historian can also be found on Facebook at "Aurora Town Historian" and on Instagram at "auroratownhistorian."