

A WALNUT STREET BUILDING FULL OF MEMORIES, EVEN BEFORE TRUMPETS (HISTORY AND HERITAGE)

What about the other Montclair landmarks that used to be in the same building, Mike Farrelly asks (and answers).

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90-92 Walnut St., when it was the George Strand Tavern. (COURTESY MONTCLAIR PUBLIC LIBRARY)

By MIKE FARRELLY

For Montclair Local

It's hard not to have pleasant memories of Trumpets Restaurant and Jazz Club when traveling along Walnut Street and seeing the changes that are being made to Trumpets'

former home at 90-92 Walnut, and maybe being a little sad that it is no longer with us.

Of course we remember treasures like Trumpets that closed recently. But what about the other Montclair landmarks that used to be in the same building before Trumpets ever came along?

90-92 Walnut St. was built late in 1904. It wasn't built in time to be on the 1904 map, but it is on the 1906 map. It was built by Jacob Rudensey, a newspaper dealer. Rudensey sold papers directly out of the storefront at 90-92 and delivered them to many Montclair families.

His son, William, took over the business when he retired in 1925, enlarged it, and added a confectionery.

Besides newspapers and magazines, William Rudensey sold candy and cigars. His most popular brand of cigar was the Claro "Admiration," which sold for a whopping 10 cents each. He also carried the Goldsmith line of sporting goods and was the agent for the Gardner and Vail laundry in New York.

Customers could drop off collars and cuffs (which were usually removable back then) at the store and pick them up, perfectly cleaned and starched, a few days later. William Rudensey's wife, Lena (Tolkowsky) Rudensey, was his partner.

The newspaper business waned and the confectionery became the main focus. When William Rudensey got sick in the 1930s his wife hired her brother, Samuel Tolkowsky, to help run the store.

Tolkowsky bought the business and the building after William Rudensey died in 1940. He ran ads that proudly announced the sale of Breyer's ice cream at the store, and added paper goods and office supplies.

Around 1950 he became a partner in a small department store on Bloomfield Avenue in Caldwell; the confectionery passed into the hands of William Freed.

At the same time the Rudenseys had their businesses at 90-92 Walnut St. a guy by the name of John Alworth opened up a tavern in the same building. Johnnie's Tavern was one of the first taverns to open up in Montclair at the end of Prohibition in 1933.

Alworth was beloved by his customers. He enjoyed standing behind the bar and serving them himself. He sponsored several athletic teams, as did most of Montclair's bar owners. His bowling team was the best around for 17 straight years.

Alworth loved to make outlandish bets on sporting events, like the time he bet on the Max Baer/Jim Braddock heavyweight fight in 1935. He picked Baer, the loser. Dressed in nothing more than socks and shorts, Alworth had to give a wheelbarrow ride to the winner from Johnnie's Tavern to Tierney's Tavern on Valley Road, a distance of about a mile (uphill).

In 1945 Johnnie's Tavern moved next door to 94 Walnut St., where Alworth installed one of the first-ever TVs in the bar. It was a Dumont television. Television pioneer Allen Dumont lived in Cedar Grove, on the Montclair border. His lab was on Valley Road, and his factory was nearby, in Clifton. In 1952 George and Laretta Strand bought Johnnie's Tavern. They remained at 94 Walnut for a few years.

William Freed worked for Samuel Tolkowsky. He bought Tolkowsky out in 1953. By 1955 Freed moved the confectionery to Bloomfield Avenue and let his wife, Elizabeth, use 90-92 Walnut St. for her insurance agency. By 1957 the confectionery was closed; both Freed and his wife were in the insurance business on Walnut Street.

Meanwhile, Strand's bar outgrew the space next door. Late in 1959 the Freeds moved out of Montclair; Strand, his wife and their son, George, moved the bar back into the space it originally occupied.

Most of us remember Strand's Tavern at 90-92 Walnut St. In 1985 Emily Wingert bought it and opened up a bar called the Velvet Turtle. She had an extension built on the side of the building and moved the entrance around to Depot Square.

Five years later she reinvented the Velvet Turtle as Trumpets. Trumpets became legendary in Montclair. Some of the tremendous acts that appeared there were trumpet players Wynton Marsalis, Doc Cheatham and Red Rodney; singers Betty Carter and Billy Eckstine; guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli; trombonist Steve Turre, and saxophonist Gato Barbieri.

Local trumpeter Ted Cursen presided over jam sessions that were held every second Thursday. Pianist Betty Liste and vocalist Carrie Jackson hosted a singer's jam on every fourth Thursday.

Unfortunately, Wingert wasn't able to keep the club going, and closed it in 1996. A few years later, in 1999, guitarist and chromatic harmonica player Enrico Granafei and his wife, Kristine Marissi, who sings and plays the mandolin, opened the club again. They kept the name; they had both performed at the club.

It is very hard to make ends meet running a jazz club, even when there is a restaurant attached. Granafei and Marissi listed the club in 2019. In June of 2021 the Hanini Group, a Newark development company, bought the building. It did not buy the liquor license.

Hanini has plans to open a restaurant and café with outdoor eating spaces. Let's hope their venture will be remembered favorably in the years to come.

"History & Heritage" is a series on Montclair history, written by representatives of the Montclair History Center and the Montclair Public Library. Mike Farrelly is a trustee of the Montclair History Center and has been the official township historian, a volunteer position, since 2004.

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