

What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been: 500 Block of West Mifflin

In a case-study analysis utilizing Madison City Directories, Sanborn fire insurance maps, local newspaper archives and the Wisconsin Alumni Database, a colorful and collective history of the 500 block of West Mifflin can be inferred. In general, the homes were built from east to west (radiating out from the Capitol), between the years of 1901 and 1947. Over the course of the 20th Century, these homes went through substantial changes, including the addition of stables and porches in 1908 and the conversion of the single-family dwellings into multi-unit flats in 1942, as well as the addition (or stable conversion) of garages along this same timeline. Yet, beyond the stories of the individual homes, the history of 500 block of West Mifflin boasts two prominent features: it's resident variety and it's functionality as a mix-used block with "commercial corners."

In regards to residential patterns, the changing demographic of the block's residents was significant. Madison City Directories between 1919 and 1956 show a consistent base of working-class residents in positions spanning from clerks to carriers to janitors. This proved the 500 block of Mifflin extremely attractive since residents could reside in walking-distance to their employers, such as Madison Gas & Electric, the United States Post Office and the Strand Theatre. Coupling this accessibility with the affordability of housing, the block was (and continues to be) a transient neighborhood, with less than ten percent of residents living on the block for more than a decade.

However, with the advent of the University's expansion in the middle 20th Century, the block's demographic dramatically changed as the student population increased. To give context to this expansion, occupancy trends for the working-class demographic stayed fairly constant from 1919 to 1947, with an average of residents per building ration resting right under three. However, from 1957—when the first students moved to West Mifflin—to 1967, there was a 450% increase in student occupancy, within the highest recorded occupancy of a single building. In fact, within

these homes is where the story lays. In contrast to the block today, which is predominately undergraduate students, the composition 500 West Mifflin in 1966 was composed of 56 percent bachelor's, 33 percent master's and 11 percent doctoral students. Yet, more impressive, is that 60 percent of those who pursued a bachelor's in 1966 went on to attain higher education degrees. This leaves the 1966 student population of 500 West Mifflin with a staggering 77 percent with post-undergraduate degrees—a far transition from blue-collar workers of the past.

Beyond these residential findings, the mixed-used aspect of 500 West Mifflin provides a rich history. The block, which is capped on each end by two commercial buildings (32 North Bassett and 555 West Mifflin), also saw the appearance of mixed-use properties within the block, including the first "vendor" designation appearing on the 1902 Sanborn maps. These mixed-used home businesses did not see the same longevity, however, of the retail focused corners. In particular, 32 North Bassett replaced a dwelling with a commercial front according to comparison of the 1889 and 1902 Sanborn maps. This grocery store, opened by John Reis, would change hands six times in sixty years and be known under two names—Supreme Food Shop and White Front Grocery—before becoming the notorious Mifflin Street Community Co-op in 1969.

Yet, the use of this building, in comparison to its commercial counterpart at 555 West Mifflin, uncovered a deeper meaning for the block through the use of newspaper archives. In comparison to 555 West Mifflin, which was built for strictly commercial use, 32 North Bassett's construction reflected the mixed-use property of the block with an initially incorporated upstairs apartment. This space was predominately occupied by the owners of the store, reverting back to the "walking city" nature of the block in the early 20th Century. What is most notable about this establishment however, is its propagation and reflection of the transient residential demographic, with two apprentices being hired to assist with meats in the 1940s, leaving to pursue other opportunities in the growing metropolis of Madison.



32 N. Bassett Street, 2013 (top), 1984 (bottom)



555 Mifflin, 2013