

History of St. Dunstan's

The development of the Saint Dunstan's neighborhood began in the early 1900's when John A. Roebling, II, began procuring land from N.R. Perry on the south side of Asheville, just north of the Swannanoa River and Biltmore Village. Originally from New Jersey, John A. Roebling, II, was a civil engineer of the famed Roebling family of New York. John A. Roebling, Sr., and his son Washington Augustus Roebling (John II's father) designed and completed the Cincinnati and Brooklyn Bridges, and founded a wire rope factory, among other notable achievements.

In February, 1902, while residing at 134 Cumberland Ave, John A. Roebling, II purchased over 15 acres of land for \$26,000. The parcel was located along the western boundary of Hendersonville Road on a hill overlooking the Swannanoa River, opposite the north boundary of George W. Vanderbilt's Biltmore Estate. In combination with land acquired during 1899-1901, John A. Roebling had assembled nearly 25 acres of land south of the city of Asheville. With progressive foresight in infrastructure planning, typical of Asheville at the time, Roebling purchased sewer rights from G.W. Vanderbilt in 1903 for \$1 in anticipation of development.

The 1904 Asheville City Directory first refers to the neighborhood as St. Dunstan's. It is believed that John A. Roebling christened the neighborhood, Saint Dunstan's, in honor of the patron saint of metal workers.

In the fall of 1907, Asheville voted in Prohibition, and an incensed John A. Roebling returned to Barnardsville, New Jersey, ending his plans to build a home on the 25 acre estate. Roebling offered to give the land to the Presbyterian Church, but they refused the gift. Instead, Roebling transferred the land to the Protestant Episcopal Church for \$5, with the condition that the land be used only for erecting and maintaining schools, colleges, churches and other building devoted to educational, charitable, or religious purposes. The area is shown on one early map as the "Mission District". The Protestant Episcopal church found it did not need the land for the designated usage, so in January, 1910, for the sum of \$1, Roebling and the Trustees for the Episcopal Church recorded a new deed for the land, releasing the church from previous restrictions with the "full right and power to freely use, or sell, or discharge...as to them may seem best".

Although Saint Dunstan's Road was documented in city maps and listed in the 1904 Asheville Directory, the first house was not constructed until 1912. It was a Queen Anne structure built for W.E. Johnson and is currently located at 15 Grindstaff Place. Within 10 years of its construction it became a boarding house and was known alternately as "Blithewood", "Intervale", and "Saint Dunstan's Lodge".

In October 1919, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Mission District of Asheville conveyed to Haw Creek Realty Company, the land transferred to them by John A. Roebling in the original deed for the sum of \$15,000. At that time only a handful of homes had been built.

It is believed that the rock wall, which is a signature landmark feature of the neighborhood, was constructed by Haw Creek Realty as it was first referenced as a contingency in the 1920 deed to James Hobart Allport. Early maps of the area indicate that Saint Dunstan's Circle was originally planned to be a terraced section with Saint Dunstan's Circle at the top of the hill, and a second street, Roebling Circle, planned to encompass the middle section of the hill. Roebling Circle was never completed due to the onset of the Great Depression, with only one (1) house being built on the west end of the street, which intersects with Biltmore Ave.

Initially, development was slow, but a direct correlation can be found in the advent of the automobile as a means of transportation and the growth of the neighborhood. There were only 3 listings for automobile related

businesses in the 1907 Asheville Directory. By 1912 there were 8 listings, in 1917, 1 full page, and by 1920 over 3 pages of repair, sales, etc. exhibiting the popularity of the automobile. By 1925 the businesses in Asheville supporting the needs of the auto owner nearly doubled to include over 5 pages within the directory. In direct correlation, only 8 houses are shown on the Sanborn Insurance Map along Saint Dunstan's Circle and Saint Dunstan's Road in 1925. But, by 1930 the families recorded on Saint Dunstan's Road and Saint Dunstan's Circle had tripled to 24. (Census & Asheville City Directory)

The Saint Dunstan's district is an excellent example of middle class housing trends of the era in Asheville. With the exception of 87 and 89 Saint Dunstan's Road, and 46 Saint Dunstan's Circle, the residential buildings are of moderate size, at approximately 2000 square feet. Most of the early property owners from 1906-1940 were surgeons or physicians (Dr. David Kramer, Dr. Bernard Smith, Dr. Lynch, Dr. Silas Filkins, Dr. Ralph Little) due to the close proximity to Mission Hospital. There were also a number of employees of the Southern Railroad System (Lester Buckner, Thomas Siler, George Sigmon, E. Frank Leonard, L. Vernon Shroat, Otis Sherrill, E. Layton Meares), due to the nearness of the Southern Railroad Freight Depot. In the early years St. Dunstan's was also home to a number of government officials, including Charles Bartlett, who was a City Commissioner of Public Safety, W.E. Johnson (first resident) the 1925 County Commissioner of Highways; George A. Digges, Registrar of Deeds, and A.G. White, Captain of Asheville Fire Department Station #5, (Asheville City Directory's 1904-1948).

One of the exceptions to the modest homes in the Saint Dunstan's district is 46 Saint Dunstan's Circle, built by James Hobart Allport who arrived in Asheville in the 1890's from Pennsylvania with his mother.

J. Hobart Allport began his career in Asheville as manager of the Southern Dray Company. By 1930 Allport was owner or part owner of Allport Construction Co. (specializing in road construction), Allport Poultry, Allport Motor Sales/Blue Ridge Motor Sales, Bonnie View Kennels, Allport Storage Warehouse, and the Southern Dray Company. Allport was involved to some degree in the construction of the Grove Park Inn, McCormick Field Ball Park, Beaucatcher Tunnel, Sweeten Creek Road, and the dam creating Beaver Lake.

On October 1920, J. Hobart Allport purchased 3 lots on Saint Dunstan's Circle, with one condition of the deed being that he "agrees to leave standing forever the stone wall supporting Saint Dunstan's Circle opposite lots 11 and 12, and hereby bonds itself never to tear down or destroy any part of said wall." The origin of the wall is unknown, but obviously existed prior to 1920, and may possibly have been built by John A. Roebling, II, in preparation of planning his home (Deed BK 240 PG 349-350). Although the land was purchased in 1920, the Allport family is not shown in the Saint Dunstan's residence until 1923. The house located at 46 Saint Dunstan's Circle originally hosted a swimming pool (evident below the rock wall), and the first paved tennis court in Buncombe County. (Interview with Elise Allport Bennett, 3/3/1992, vertical files, Buncombe Co. Pack Library). J. Hobart Allport's success in Asheville was directly related to Asheville's economic health. As Asheville's prosperity disappeared, so did that of the Allport family. In 1932 they are living in rented apartments on Avondale Rd. and the properties at 46 & 25 Saint Dunstan's Circle were sold separately for taxes. Francis Dufour Allport died in 1976 and is buried at Riverside Cemetery in Asheville. Nothing is known of J. Hobart Allport after 1937.

One of the most unusual residences in the Saint Dunstan's District is 16 Saint Dunstan's Circle, a highly developed example of the Mission Revival Style. With its basically symmetrical form, stucco finish, elaborately curved Mission-shaped parapets on dormers and the top porch balcony, this property is unique to the district and to Asheville. This home is most probably a copy of the Sears, Roebuck, Co., house The Alhambra.

Although it is not known whether any other houses in the district are mail order designs, several designs are similar to houses shown in Houses by Mail and 500 Small Houses of the Twenties.

Per a survey conducted by the NCDOT, the Saint Dunstan's Historic District is considered to be potentially eligible for the National Register under Criterion C. The district comprises a largely intact collection of domestic architecture varying in size and style. As a group, the residences in the district represent most of the types of homes being constructed for middle - to upper-middle-class residents in Asheville in the 1920s. The Saint Dunstan's District includes portions of Saint Dunstan's Road, Saint Dunstan's Circle, Grindstaff Road, and Roebling Circle. The boundary includes the greatest concentration of contributing properties while excluding adjacent noncontributing properties. The Saint Dunstan's residential area is essentially an enclave unto itself with few buildings intruding on its early twentieth century residential nature.