



House History: 3325 Illinois Avenue

**Prepared by Andrew B. Weil, MA
Executive Director
Landmarks Association of St. Louis
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***Overview of early Benton Park (page 1), adapted from the Benton Park National Register of Historic Places District nomination**

While the population of St. Louis had been steadily growing throughout the late 18th and early 19th century, unrest in the German states in the mid 19th century and subsequent mass migration to the U.S. resulted in a period of unprecedented population increase for the city. In the 1840s St. Louis grew annually by an average of 6,000 residents and surged to close to 11,000 people yearly in the 1850s. As a result of increasing development pressure and crowding, St. Louis began selling off large tracts of undeveloped pasture land lying outside the boundaries of the city limits known as “the Commons.” Not to be confused with the agricultural “Common Fields” the Commons had been set aside by the early French colonists as land where the public could graze animals, collect firewood, hunt, forage for food and procure building materials. Today’s Benton Park straddles the boundary between the Commons (south of Arsenal) and Common Fields (north of Arsenal to Victor) that once ringed the southwest portion of the city limits. Following the survey of this section of the Commons by the City in 1836, much of the land was offered for sale and speculators began purchasing tracts of ground in the 1840s and platting subdivisions in the 1850s and 1860s.

Benton Park's ample supply of available land offered immigrants the opportunity to build on lots at low cost and escape congested conditions in the inner city. Building materials were produced by numerous small neighborhood brickyards and lumberyards that sprang up in the area in the mid 19th century. Early settlement, dating mostly to the 1840s, was scattered throughout the District, which was pockmarked by sinkholes, quarries, brickyards and, since it had once been located beyond the city limits, three cemeteries. The largest of the cemeteries occupied the site of the present Benton Park itself and had been reserved for public burial by the city in 1842.

Natural limestone caves underlie much of the area, a feature that attracted early brewers. During the 1850s, the ale firm of English and McHose used a cave on the east side of the park. Fronting on Arsenal Street, English Cave was used for beer storage and the surrounding grounds were used as a beer garden called Mammoth Cave and Park. At the northwest corner of Cherokee and DeMenil Place, German-born brewer Adam Lemp filled spacious caverns with ice chopped from the Mississippi River to keep his lager beer at the proper temperature.

By 1865, the neighborhood had grown sufficiently to require the removal of the cemetery from the site of today’s Benton Park. The following year, the land was designated for public use and named for Senator Thomas Hart Benton, a Missouri statesman who had died in 1855. During the next decade, the city began improving the land with trees, a rustic stone bridge and tunnel and an artificial lake which was lined with cement to prevent water from draining into the caves below. Concordia Park (now Cherokee Park) was opened by the mid 1860s on a large tract of land that wealthy English builder and



speculator John Withnell had purchased from the city in 1843. Concerts were offered there in the summer months and the park became a popular neighborhood picnic area. A third public open space, Carnegie Park (straddling both sides of Utah along Indiana) occupies land that had originally been reserved for use as a market when the second subdivision of the City Commons was offered for sale in 1855.

The home at 3325 Illinois was likely constructed after that second subdivision of the commons, but certainly prior to 1875 as it was illustrated in Richard Compton and Camille Dry's "Pictorial St. Louis Map" which had been compiled in that year. As such it represents one of the earlier phases of development in the neighborhood, although its large size and urban form (narrow, tall, and deep with no front door) indicates that its builders were confident that a city neighborhood would quickly fill in surrounding blocks.

The home was constructed prior to the period when the City started issuing building permits, so its original owners and date of construction are not known with absolute certainty. With that said, there is strong evidence that points to a man named Isaac Roseboom as both the builder and original occupant.

Isaac Roseboom was born in Ohio around 1815. He first appears with his wife Sarah (born c. 1835 in Kentucky) in Missouri in the census of 1860. He was listed as a farmer in Elkhorn Township of Warren County. Five years later the couple had moved to St. Louis, where Isaac tried his hand at being a grocer on the city's near north side. This occupation apparently didn't work out and by 1871 he was listed in the city directory as a carpenter living at the corner of Stoddard and Elliott just northwest of present day downtown.

Roseboom apparently saw opportunity in the rapidly growing Benton Park area where he and Sarah were listed for the first time in the home on Illinois Avenue in 1873. Recorded as a "speculator and builder," it makes sense to credit him with the construction of the home. The couple was not recorded by the City Directory in 1872, implying that perhaps they were "between" residences as the new home was under construction. Isaac was variably listed as a carpenter and builder for the rest of his life, so obviously he had the capability to erect the building. Furthermore, while the appearance of the home on the 1876 Pictorial St. Louis Map (Figure 1.) indicates that it was one of the first homes to stand on the block, it was intentionally constructed with an urban form, which aligns with the City Directory's description of Isaac as a "speculator." Finally, the Rosebooms had an enduring relationship with the house, renting it out for much of the 1880s before moving back in at the end of their lives.

By 1883, they had rented the home to Mary H. Wilson (widow of Mathew Wilson) and her son Mathew Jr. (a blacksmith). They appear to have moved there in 1882 from quarters they had previously occupied at 2413 Arsenal (this address no longer exists, but it was at the corner of Arsenal and Jefferson).



By 1888 the Rosebooms were back along with a boarder named William Baxter. Like Roseboom, Baxter was a carpenter. By 1893, Isaac had died and Sarah lived in the home alone. After that point it's unclear if Sarah rented the property or sold it, but by 1895 a book keeper named William J. Kiehne had moved in. The home does appear to have been sold by 1899 when Robert and Eugenia Walter, the building's longest residents, appear for the first time.

Robert and Eugenia were both born in Germany and had immigrated to the United States in the mid 1880s. A cabinet maker by trade, Robert appears to have been pretty useful at home improvement as he took out multiple building permits between 1900 and 1911 for projects such as the construction of a brick retaining wall, "opening" an existing frame porch, and repairing the family's exterior "wash closet." The latter two permits likely pertain to the yellow (indicating frame construction) portion of the building and the outbuildings at the rear of the property as depicted by the 1909 Sanborn Fire Insurance map (Figure 2.).

The Walter's earned extra income by renting rooms to boarders, as did many households at the time. At any given moment there would be both the Walter family in the home along with two or three unrelated people. For example, the 1910 census records Walter and Eugenia along with their 20 year old son Robert P. (a cabinet maker like his father), their 18 year old son William (who may have been blind) along with boarders August Vogelsang (32, packer in a china shop), Ida Vogelsang (his mother), and harness maker Hugo Ulrich (age 52). Like the Walter's, all the boarders were of German extraction.

Surprisingly, the Walter's remained at the residence through the 1950s. Eugenia died in the home of heart disease on August 24, 1951. Robert lived there until 1956, though he died at the St. Louis Chronic Hospital that once stood at 5600 Arsenal. Both are buried at Sts. Peter and Paul cemetery at 6409 Gravois (Figure 3.).

The home itself is an interesting vernacular form that has roots in cultural building traditions rather than with a formal school of architecture and its component materials (brick, limestone, lumber) were all likely produced within a mile of the neighborhood. Its side gable roof is unusual compared with the more common flat roofs of many of its later neighbors. The lack of a front door is indicative of its relatively early date of construction and the fact that its builder anticipated that the surrounding area would become densely packed with other houses. As is seen in many of St. Louis' oldest surviving neighborhoods like Soulard, doors were placed at the side or rear of homes to provide some insulation and privacy from the chaos and filth of a street that was crowded with people, push carts, wagons, horses, commerce, crime, and community. As the city became more orderly and the streets less chaotic through advances like zoning, nuisance ordinances, and public transit, the convenience of the front door became more and more desirable. Overall, it is an interesting home that has witnessed the development of the Benton Park neighborhood from a sink-hole ridden prairie to a dense urban neighborhood

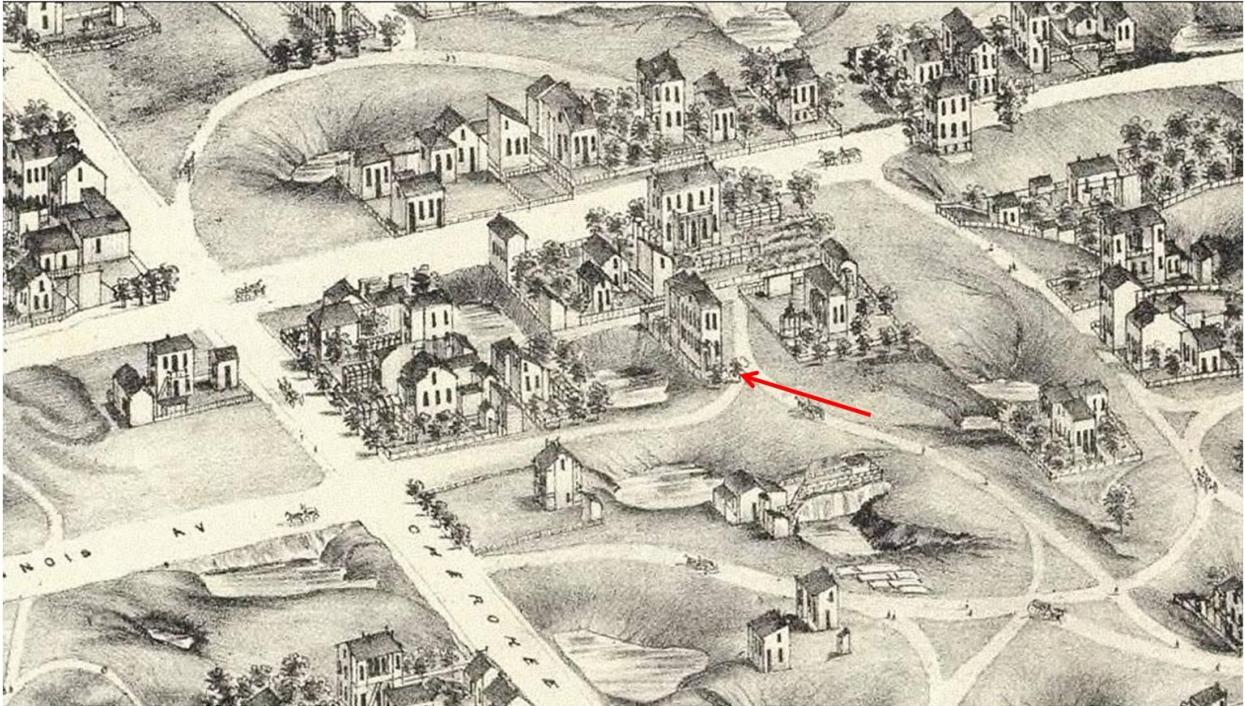


Figure 1: 3325 Illinois in 1875. "Pictorial St. Louis" Richard Compton and Camille Dry

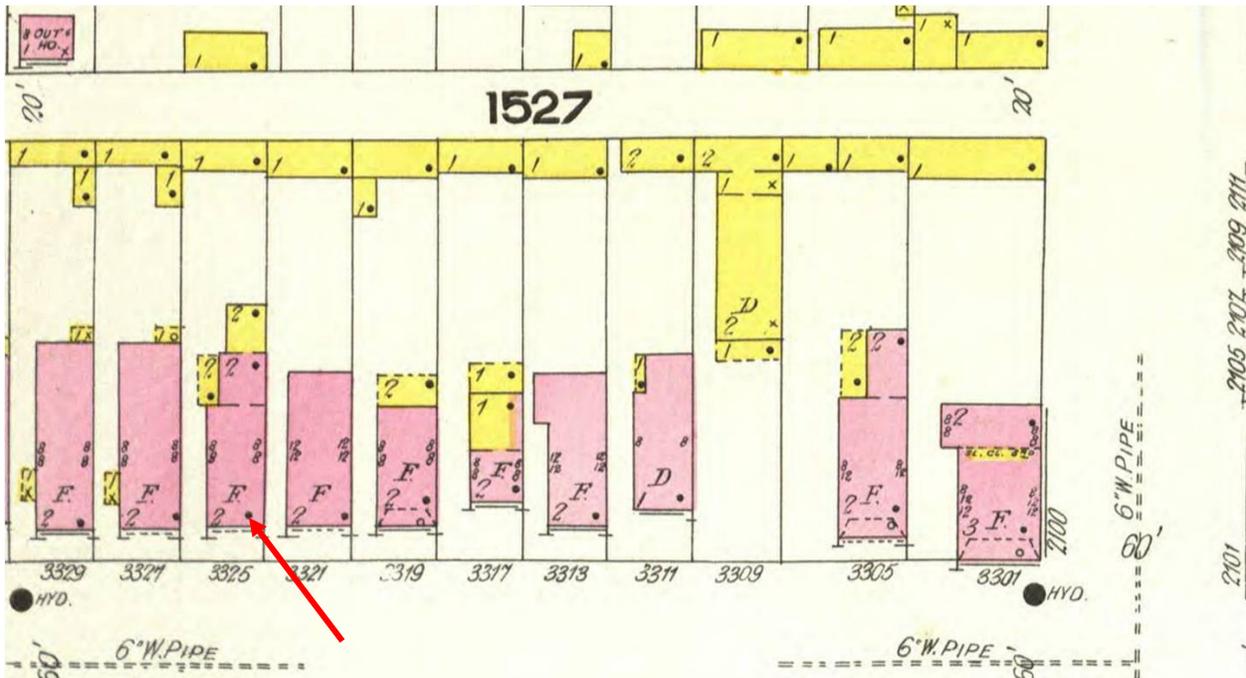


Figure 2: 3325 Illinois in 1909. Sanborn Fire Insurance Company.



Figure 3: Gravestone Eugenia Walter. Sts. Peter and Paul Cemetery, 6409 Gravois, St. Louis.