



HISTORIC BRIGHTON NEWS

VOLUME 6

FALL 2005

NUMBER 4

Sharon Bloemendaal to speak to Historic Brighton October 2:

“BROWNCROFT—A BEAUTIFUL SECTION OF A BEAUTIFUL CITY”



Left: Architect William G. Kaelber, who designed many Browncroft homes, lived in Browncroft on Dorchester Road. Right: In 1923, 10,000 people drove through Browncroft to admire the Christmas decorations.

Sharon Bloemendaal’s talk will feature “Browncroft and Beyond,” contrasting scenes as they were in the 1920s with the same scenes as they are now. She will compare vintage photographs to more contemporary views of the same Browncroft and beyond areas. Her presentation will include businesses, churches, homes, and schools east of the Genesee River and west of Irondequoit Creek and Bay.

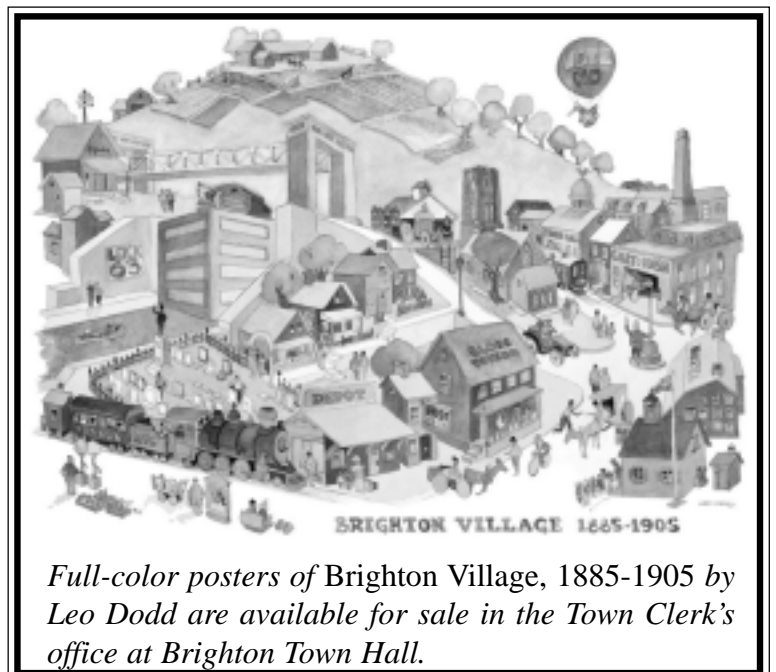
Sharon Bloemendaal is chairman of the Browncroft Neighborhood Historical Committee. She is a former teacher and the former features editor of the *New York-Pennsylvania Collector*. Sharon and her husband, Jack Bloemendaal are account executives for *AntiqueWeek*.

Historic Brighton meets Sunday, October 2

at 2 PM

Main auditorium, Brighton Town Hall

2300 Elmwood Avenue



Full-color posters of Brighton Village, 1885-1905 by Leo Dodd are available for sale in the Town Clerk’s office at Brighton Town Hall.

BROWNCROFT BUILT ON BROWN BROTHERS NURSERY GROUNDS



2

Charles J. (C.J.) Brown learned the nursery business while working as a youth for Glen Brothers Nursery. He operated the Brown Brothers Continental Nursery as a family business with his brother Robert, sister Mary Jane, and later, sons Leland and Donald. The designation “continental” sounds overblown until you realize that the nursery had branches in Chicago and Toronto. It specialized in fruit and ornamental trees and gradually got into the new art and craft of residential landscaping. In 1894, Brown Brothers bought Brighton land from Stephen Corwin, another well-known nurseryman. C. J. Brown and family then lived in the Corwin house at the southeast corner of Winton and Corwin roads.

By 1914, Brown had formed the Browncroft Realty Co. with himself as president and his son-in-law, George J. Kaelber, as secretary-treasurer. He subdivided his nurs-

ery property, allocating 300 acres to the development of residential lots, constructed streets and cement sidewalks, installed sewer and utility lines, and landscaped the parkways. He placed restrictive covenants in deeds that prohibited double houses, apartment buildings, or commercial development of any kind.

Minimum standards of quality and style were set for the residences. The architectural firm of Gordon & Kaelber provided sketches, elevations and plans as suggestions for prospective buyers. (Architect William G. Kaelber was George J. Kaelber’s brother and designed his own house on Dorchester Road..)

Browncroft was known in its early years for its Christmas light displays. In 1923, the outdoor lighting displays attracted 10,000 cars and many pedestrians passing through the neighborhood.

By 1926, the majority of lots in the

A CELEBRATION OF ECLECTICISM



HOUSES IN BROWNCROFT

Gordon & Kaelber, Architects



HOUSES IN BROWNCROFT

Gordon & Kaelber, Architects

Prospective Browncroft customers could choose among a variety of eclectic revival styles of architecture through ink and wash drawings provided by Gordon & Kaelber.

3

Browncroft subdivision had been sold. There was so much demand for additional home sites that Brown developed plans for what became the Browncroft Extension—also known as Brighton-Browncroft. The 200-acre site was divided into 500 lots. Brown built roads and sidewalks similar to those in the original subdivision and a beautiful stone bridge that allowed Corwin Road to traverse the creek.

According to *A History of the Browncroft Area* by the Browncroft Neighborhood Asso-

ciation History Committee in 1984, C. J. Brown, who died in 1933, and his company, which went bankrupt, were casualties of the Great Depression. As with other Brighton neighborhoods such as the Houston Barnard tract, it remained a ghost town with paved streets and sidewalks and few houses until after World War II. When construction did begin again, large ranch and split-level houses joined the Tudor Revival, Colonial Revival and other eclectic styles favored by 1920s architects such as Gordon & Kaelber.

George Eastman's favorite architects:

GORDON & KAELEBER

By Betsy Brayer

The pen and ink renderings of elevations of Browncroft houses are from the 1923 Gordon & Kaelber architectural catalog. That this firm was so heavily involved in the development of Browncroft is not surprising considering that George J. Kaelber, secretary-treasurer of Browncroft, was the brother of William G. Kaelber, architect. Even without the relationship, many would argue that Gordon & Kaelber was the largest, most prolific, and leading Rochester architectural firm of the 1920s, due mainly to the principals being George Eastman's favorite architects. Browncroft was fortunate that they had the time to engage their services.

During the teens and twenties, the firm employed forty plus architects and draftsmen as it frenetically turned out plans for the Eastman Theatre and School of Music (1918-22), the enlargement of Eastman House (1919), Chamber of Commerce addition, Rochester Dental Dispensary (now Eastman Dental Center, 1915-17), Genesee Valley Club addition (1921), University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry (1920-25), Strong Memorial Hospital (1920-25), Kodak Office extension, floors 17 through 19 (1929-30), University of Rochester River Campus (1925-30) and Cutler Union for the Prince Street Campus (1930-33) —Eastman projects all.

Edwin Gordon began his architectural career in 1890 as Claude Bragdon's partner. The tiny firm of Gordon, Bragdon & Orchard survived by producing prize-winning entries in national competitions for the New York City Hall and Chicago Tribune building. Bragdon recorded in his autobiography that Gordon and his bride survived the winters on cold potatoes secure in the belief that he would one day garner all of the Kodak King's business.

Gordon moved to the office of J. Foster Warner, Rochester's leading architect, and met Eastman on a small job that he performed for Warner on 1050 East Avenue where Eastman lived, 1895-1905.

In 1902, Warner offered Gordon a partnership. He accepted, conditional on Warner making his co-worker, William V. Madden, a partner. Warner refused and the firm of Gordon & Madden was born. (Mad-



Enlarging the conservatory of Eastman House, 1919



Edwin S. Gordon and William G. Kaelber



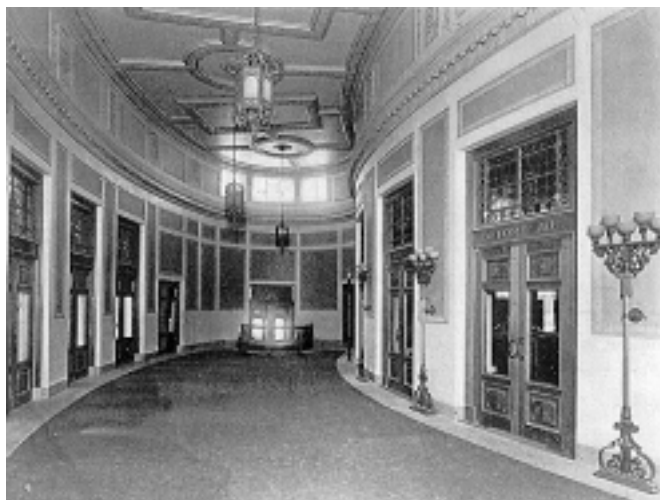
Interior of Eastman Theatre, 1920. Muralist Ezra Winter painted Will Kaelber and other architects and craftsmen of the theatre in his murals.

den was a devout Roman Catholic and would bring much church-building business to the firm.)

Eastman first hired Gordon to design a small shooting box at Horn Point, VA and then a bigger one, Oak Lodge, in North Carolina in 1897. Gordon enlarged Rochester City Hospital (now Rochester General) in 1908 and did interior work at Eastman House in 1910. Eastman once described Gordon as "the architect of the one-story California schoolhouse," thinking of the Ellwanger & Barry school on Meigs Street that in-

More buildings by the area's leading 1920s architectural firm:

GORDON & KAELBER



Interior of First Church of Christ Scientist, 1915,



HOUSE FOR DR. EDWIN S. INGERSOLL, BRIGHTON, N. Y.



The Rundel Building of Rochester Public Library introduced to Rochester such concepts as a courtyard and doors opening to the outside in each classroom.

William G. Kaelber became a partner in 1911 and the firm's name was changed when Madden retired in 1918. The partners rarely touched pencil to paper in creating the firm's designs, although Gordon's pudgy hands belied a rare sketching talent. He would stand over the draftsmen ("draughtsmen" back then), edge one off his stool, and complete the piece himself. Meanwhile, Kaelber kept all office pencils by

his drafting board to observe who took what. "Ed has his peculiarities," the underlings grumbled, "and Will has his peculiarities."

Kaelber would be the Rochester architect for the Eastman Theatre—stressing acoustics, floor plan, and the new concept of a dish-shaped auditorium. His design partner was Lawrence Grant White of associated architects McKim Mead & White, New York who was more concerned with slip-covering the exterior with classical columns and installing beautiful murals and a giant chandelier. One of those murals by Ezra Winter would include caricatures of Kaelber and others who worked on the theatre.

Kaelber was the partner in charge of the University of Rochester River Campus (1925-30), preparing 47 different plans for the trustees after visiting college campuses around the country. He was most impressed with Thomas Jefferson's plan for the red brick University of Virginia with arcades that connected all major buildings, providing shelter from the elements. A final decision was the shape and garb of the library stack tower. A dozen sketches show that everything from Independence Hall to the Pharos (lighthouse) of ancient Alexandria to Jefferson's rotunda was considered. The final design, according to John Wenrich, was a copy of a war memorial in chief designer Phillipp Merz's native Bavaria. Then a wooden model of the library with a hole left where the tower was to go was made. One young architect recalls glimpsing a scene through half-opened doors where members of the building committee circled the model, placing now one and then another tower on the model, knowing that this tower would forever dominate the southwest skyline of Rochester.

One trustee, James G. Cutler, held out for the more elaborate and expensive Collegiate Gothic architecture. When the university used Cutler's bequest to build a women's student union named for Cutler on the university's Prince Street Campus, Kaelber's design team switched to Collegiate Gothic.

Kaelber would also design the Rundel Building for the Rochester Public Library in the 1930s. This unique structure has two facades—one facing street, the other river—and was designed to have a mill race flow underneath that emptied into the Genesee River.

Other designs by the architectural firm: GORDON & KAELBER



ST. PETER AND PAUL'S CHURCH, ROCHESTER, N. Y.



Ellwanger and Barry School



CHURCH OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT



THREE HOUSES ON CLOVER STREET, BRIGHTON, N. Y.



Bathhouse for World War I soldiers. Below, one of many laudatory letters from Eastman to Gordon and Kaelber for their architectural prowess in his behalf.

EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY
ROCHESTER, N. Y.

June 15th, 1933.

Dr. E. S. Gordon,
Messrs. Gordon & Kaelber,
Rochester, N. Y.,

My dear Gordon:-

The accompanying pages from the English "Country Life" show clearly the influence of the Kodak building on the architecture of Kingsway. I have told you what Sir James Barnett said to me about its influence on the big building he is building at London Bridge. Isn't it amazing that these rough pencil sketches which I asked you to make to send to him to show him what kind of a Kodak building he wanted should have had such a tremendous influence?

Please return the above article for our files.

Yours very truly,

W. Eastman



Children's Waiting Room, Eastman Dental Center and Baptist Temple.

JOHN WENRICH, MASTER RENDERER

By Betsy Brayer

John Wenrich (1894-1970) was born in Cumberland, MD, studied at Mechanics Institute (now RIT) in 1914 and the Art Students League, New York. Following combat duty in World War I, he returned to Rochester as chief illustrator for Gordon & Kaelber.

Wenrich went on to a distinguished national career as artist and architectural renderer, probably best known for his exquisite watercolors of New York City skyscrapers, particularly those of Rockefeller Center. Working closely with its chief designers, 1930-34, he was able to translate the architects' plans into visual reality prior to construction. In preparing the detailed, subtly colored renderings reflecting sunlight and shade, he captured the dynamism of the awesome skyscrapers with uncanny accuracy.

The concept of bringing the country to the city was an enthusiasm of 19th-century urban park designers such as Frederick Law Olmsted. Rockefeller Center's more up-to-date version of the idea was to put the country on top of the city. Wenrich's drawings of the proposed roof gardens show this. Browncroft would be a different scenario—nursery grounds landscaped for eclectic but carefully zone-restricted suburban residences.

In 1930, Wenrich illustrated the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition and between 1937 and 1939, the New York World's Fair. He then returned to Rochester, where he made his home until his death in 1970. The Landmark Society named its library for him.

During his spare time, Wenrich painted special landmarks that appealed to him—historic buildings, barns, and steam locomotives.

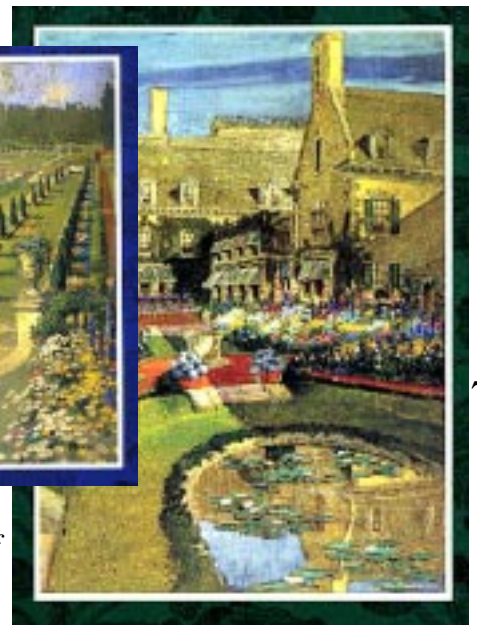
Wenrich once described his technique of harmonizing detail, line and mass with soft



Ink and wash Wenrich rendering of Browncroft house



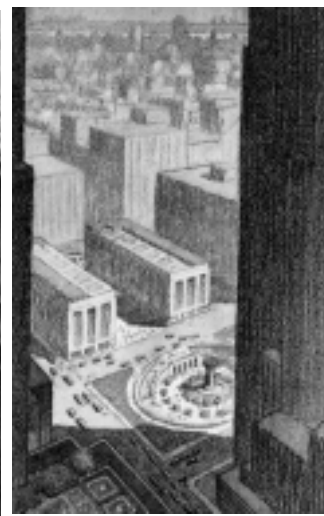
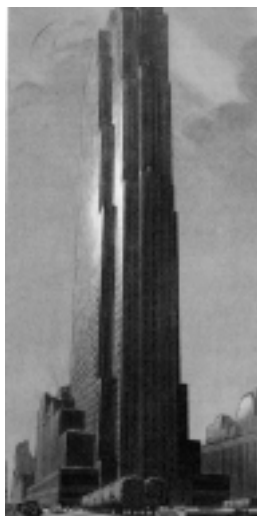
Pastels of the gardens of George Eastman House



colors to achieve a majestic character to his buildings:

“In my forty years of making renderings for architects, I have, of necessity, developed a detailed type of painting. It has always been a challenge for me to show lots of detail without the viewer being conscious of it. I have been partly successful in this by making detail read as pattern, and where possible I use contrasting masses as a foil for these areas. This gives a highly decorative effect, especially if the flat masses have a textured character that can be achieved by flowing washes of color which do not mix thoroughly.”

JOHN WENRICH DELINEATES ROCKEFELLER CENTER AND THE UR RIVER CAMPUS



Rockefeller Center, left to right: Looking due west along 49th Street: John Wenrich's dramatic vision of the RCA building, its thin slabs glowing in sunlight and rising to exhilarating heights, was designed to rekindle the soaring image New York had of itself before the Great Depression.

View down Fifth Avenue with the Empire State Building in the distance.

Rockefeller Plaza and the Promenade leading to it are two of the most famous urban open spaces of the 20th century. In early drawings, an opera house was planned.

As the center's design progressed, the street-level plaza was sunk into the ground to provide a pedestrian entrance to the shopping concourse. In Wenrich's 1931 rendering, the plaza is circular with a monumental fountain at its center.



Three Wenrich renderings of possible treatments of Rush Rhees Library of the University of Rochester.

HISTORIC BRIGHTON

FOUNDED 1999

*Arlene A. Wright, President
Maureen Holtzman, Vice-President
Janet Hopkin, Secretary
Patricia Aslin, Treasurer*

Board of Directors

*Elizabeth Brayer
Sheldon Brayer
Leo Dodd
Richard Dollinger
Suzanne Donahue
Monica Gilligan
Sally Harper
Hannelore Heyer
Josie Leyens
Darrell Norris
Dee Dee Teegarden*

*Betsy Brayer, Historic Brighton News editor
Mary Jo Lanphear, Town of Brighton Historian*