

Johnston Street A “Building Shells: Building Community” Walking Tour



Today we're in Newburgh's East End Historic District, a collection of over two thousand buildings encompassing 445 acres—one of the largest in New York State. The district was formed in the 1980s to encompass and dramatically expand the Montgomery–Grand–Liberty Streets Historic District formed in 1973, whose landmarks—by the likes of A. J. Davis and Calvert Vaux—represented the city's elite rather than the middle and working class population whose architecture surrounds us.

We'll talk about stages of the street's progression and its beginnings as Newburgh's first major housing development, fueled by a pressure to urbanize and create new urban corridors. Along our walk, we'll stand before

the oldest and most recently-restored buildings, and take in some building shells—all while exploring the social history and stories behind what we encounter.

We're looking to gather more contemporary histories, so if you have some, please share along the walk!

Tour theme: Urbanization and real estate development

Start at the Gate of St. George's Cemetery

Overview of the Street

The building boom on Johnston Street and completion of its current length happened as a result of Newburgh's incorporation as a city in 1865—the last year of the Civil War. With tremendous pride and energy, the city undertook massive infrastructure improvements. This included finally developing the Mace-Butterworth land, the oldest part of the street laid out in 1852, which we'll explore later. In Johnston Street's infancy, the 1850s—early 1860s, the *Village* of Newburgh had over 12,000 people, and its population was increasing. There was a major housing crisis brewing in this period, and in 1865 Newburghers demanded something be done.

As a city newspaper printed in 1866, “When we were a village...we acted like one; but now that we are a city we must put off the things of a village and build not like a city of ‘magnificent distances,’ but of magnificent streets.” “Magnificent distances” describes the area we stand in today, chosen by St. George's Episcopal Church in 1838 as a rural cemetery. As we'll learn at the tour's end, people even considered the walk to Johnston Street a hike from the waterfront. Neighborhoods and houses in the Village of Newburgh were far apart. By opening new streets, the city council aimed to encourage construction to link these places and format a proper, dense urban environment. They were successful.

We notice a small clearing here, left of the gate, once the site of a cottage for the cemetery's gravedigger, Irish immigrant David Perrott. Perrott watched the opening of South Johnston Street in the late 1860s, the final section of the street to be completed, extending it across Broadway, a major thoroughfare.

While the main length of the street we'll see opened in 1852 and 1861, this sliver was part of the new city's infrastructure plan, and took time to finish. For a while it remained "horrible and impassable," but that didn't stop Perrott from acquiring a large lot on the new northeast street corner of Johnston and Washington here.

Cross Washington to South Johnston.

13-15 S. Johnston Street

Perrott eventually granted this lot to his son-in-law, architect and builder David H. Flansburgh, in the 1880s. Flansburgh conceived these masonry structures here at 13–15 S. Johnston Street, now building shells, as a carpentry workshop.

To define a building shell, which we'll encounter more of on this tour, New York State sets two property tax classification codes: 351 for residential, and 352 for commercial, defined as "vacant land with a building envelope...without any interior finish." This is one of the city's 29 shells, down from 32 shells in 2021.

The larger mass of this shell, the northern, three-bay building and storefront, was completed by early 1888 to replace an earlier complex of shingled wooden work sheds. With his brother Alvah, Flansburgh intended to make this his office and workshop in 1887, uncommon for many professional architects here, but typical for builders.¹ Alvah Flansburgh left Newburgh for Massachusetts in 1888, leaving his brother to complete projects in the new Washington Heights neighborhood under development. The most bizarre of these, 63 Liberty Street, employed an onion domed-tower and terra-cotta blocks in the Queen Anne style.² Two more of his vivacious Queen Anne designs used terracotta extensively: the Philadelphia brick Weed & Bagshaw Building (1890) at 100 Broadway and Temple Beth Jacob (1890–91) on South Street, described as an "Oriental mosque."³ Half-way into construction of the synagogue, Flansburgh's poor financial management became public. With his debts and inability to manage workers and purchase materials, he relinquished control of his business in 1891.⁴ By September 1891, Flansburgh fled to Poughkeepsie and leased the shop.⁵

New tenants and patrons of the shop necessitated its expansion in the 1890s, creating 13 S. Johnston Street, an extension west of Flansburgh's workshop that repeated its stone sills and segmental brick lintels. For several decades it was used for storage. A fraternal organization purchased it in 1937, renaming it "Patriotic Hall." They used the buildings for meetings and rented out for dances and worker's unions into the late 1950s. One of the final events held at Patriotic Hall was the wedding reception of a Puerto Rican couple from St. Patrick's Church in April 1960.⁶ It became known as "Church Hall" in the mid 1960s, when it served as a polling station and home to the Mt. Carmel Christ Disciples Church, a Black congregation which vacated in favor of a larger facility in the Town of Newburgh. In the late 20th century to about 2008, it was used as Cobbs Barbershop.

147 Ann Street

Here at the corner is an abandoned pre-Civil War house converted later into a commercial building with residence above. The corner entry came with this later modification, popular in Newburgh's commercial architecture of the late 19th century. Neighborhood lore claims laundry from the Ritz Theater down the street was carted here. Notice the lintels and sills are cast iron, and much of the historic paint remains.

Cross Broadway to Johnston Street.

Johnston Street

Now that we've crossed, the entrance to Johnston Street as opened in 1861 is flanked by massive grass lots, completely different from its appearance even fifty years ago. On our left, within this fence, stood a grocery store from the mid-1860s designed in the Second Empire style. This particular model was replicated several times for commercial venues at corners—we'll see one still standing later. North of it was the Baldwin Tenements, with a building for white tenants on the street and Black tenants behind. Adjoining the tenement plot was a German Lutheran Church from the early 1860s, also demolished.

Regarded as the “tenement section” of Johnston in 1912, this block to First Street was once a canyon of dense housing. Most of these people probably worked on Broadway, becoming a business district alternative to the waterfront.

There were still more modest family homes, like 14 Johnston Street in the brush here. Though a building shell, the house still has dormers and a mansard roof that enable us to see it’s designed in the Second Empire style and must date to the 1860s.

Just past this, in 1872, the carpentry firm Thomas Shaw & Sons and masons Malcolm & Brown built ten four-story brick houses for developer Patrick McGuire, giving the street a monumentality when entering from Broadway.⁷

31–33 Johnston Street

These Italianate brick houses were once triplets. They were built by the Wilson Brothers, a firm of builders, in 1888 on lots purchased from the Tartiss family.⁸ At some point, the house closest to the Tartiss mansion was demolished; we can see the residue of it on 31’s north wall. In these houses, which were built late compared with the rest of the street, we see the reverberations of the state government’s Tenement House Act of 1879. The legislation was aimed at immigrant housing in Manhattan, where clean air and light had become a luxury for most. In domestic architecture, builders reached a solution by adding buffers to create air wells between buildings, fenestrating them as a guarantee of light to most rooms.

39 Johnston Street

A rarity on the street, this mansion was built for John C. Tartiss and his wife Harriet at the close of the Civil War. It is a 3-bay house in the Second Empire style, being French-influenced with a slate mansard roof and diamond patterns replicated in its restoration. Brick quoining around the windows and edges gives an intense impression, and is unseen anywhere else in the city. The Second Empire style was a revival of Renaissance and Baroque architecture instituted under French emperor Napoleon III during his reign, called the Second Empire, which saw Paris remodeled with these steep roofs—mansards. The mansard roof became wildly popular in the United

States from about 1855–80, but very few can be found west of Liberty Street. John and Harriet Tartiss, the first owners, came here from England in about the 1830s. John, who was born in London about 1812, worked as a baker near the intersection of Fourth and Water Streets. After a brief attempt at farming in the town of Newburgh, he and Harriet returned to the village and purchased lots on this newly-opened tract of Johnston connecting it with Broadway. Tartiss was recalled in 1912 as having “bushy gray whiskers” with a deep voice and “hearty manner,” one of the last surviving members of the Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1.⁹

43, 45, and 47 Johnston Street

Here are two more linked houses built by the Wilson Brothers for a client, Frank Venus, begun fall 1874 and finished the next spring. Specified as being two stories, someone later after 1890 added the third story, identifiable by the darker tone of its brick.¹⁰ Pre-Tenement House Act, they directly about this 3-story brick house, 43 Johnston, from the late 1860s. All three are sparsely decorated in the Italianate style, with a flat roof and bracketed cornice. This variation of the cornice, with raised rectangular panels between each bracket, we see in use in Newburgh from the 1850s to early 70s. We note brownstone is used on the individual window sills and segmental lintels of 43; 45 and 47 use a continuous sill, painted, with segmental lintels of brick headers. Their most blatant difference however is this 3-story bay, absent from earlier urban dwellings of this height, which for decades were limited to flush surfaces. The 3-story bay in Newburgh appears about 1870 and becomes standard; it likely came from Boston. Builders here rapidly discovered its ability to make buildings less monotonous and experiment with depth in facades.

Cross First Street

66 and 68 Johnston Street

This looming 3-story mass of brick with a raised basement is the street’s earliest duplex, completed about 1865. It is very likely a speculation house, built at the order of a developer with the anticipation of securing renters or buyers by the end of construction. In this section of the city after the Civil War, rental properties became common, and remain so. The mason set double doors for each family at either end, opening onto shared parlors in the center

of the structure, evidenced by internal chimneys up above dividing the two distinct houses. An expression of this on the facade is the use of brownstone sills on the left, and a thinner, chalkier-colored stone on the right. Windows here are segmental arches topped by dentil brickwork, which we will return to further down the street. The choice gives texture to the even exterior and proved to be cost effective. At the second story, each window head is connected by a steady belt course of brick, adding further embellishment inexpensively.

Cross Campbell Street

82–100 Johnston Street

On the right side of the street stand ten gable-ended cottages, built in the early 1860s on land once belonging to U. S. Representative and lawyer Thomas McKissock. McKissock made a large number of land transfers from 1861–66, just before his death; it is probable a developer got this slice of the parcel once Johnston and Third Street had been laid out. Notice how overtime their followers have individualized and added to each cottage. At least two added a cornice and all replaced their porches. House no. 98 is an example of their initial appearance, with clapboard siding, corner boards, and pointed arch door and window casings. The cottages are an important cluster of wooden working class domestic architecture, which has been eradicated or fully covered by vinyl siding on streets like Washington.

Corner of Third and Johnston Street

Now that we've reached Third Street, we're entering the section of the street first opened in 1852, which warrants an introduction of the Smith family. We passed First Street earlier, and are now at Third. These numbered streets ran westwards uphill from the river, and were preserved by Benjamin Smith from a 1740s surveyed plan of Newburgh. Smith's father purchased most of Newburgh's current waterfront, then a massive farm, in 1741 when he came from England. The numbered streets once connected these neighborhoods with the water, giving residents access to markets, coal, and transportation, a relationship completely severed by urban renewal's faulty reorganization of the city.

Before the neighborhood was here, however, if we traveled up Third Street by horse from the waterfront, we'd still be on Smith-owned land. In 1777, Benjamin Smith was arrested for his Loyalist behavior and later sold and lost possession of some land closer to the water. His family kept this massive tract to the west, part of it preserved today as Downing Park, where a farmhouse was built for a Smith descendant. The Smiths' primary residences were on Liberty Street, near the house of fierce Presbyterian minister Rev. John Johnston, namesake of this street.

112 and 116 Johnston Street

Here and conspicuous in their uniqueness, these two Gothic Revival cottages are the oldest buildings on Johnston Street. They are frame cottages with a central internal chimney, scalloped bargeboards, and pointed arch window in the gable wall, planned the year Rev. John Johnston died. First advertised around August 7, 1856 by agent J. W. Wells as speculative houses, the one on the right was purchased in 1857 by William S. Parmlee, a bank clerk, for him and his wife Mary.

Corner of Farrington and Johnston Street

Coming to the corner, from here to South Street, with the streets east of us, was a large tract of land William P. C. Smith, then the primary heir of the Smith property, had sold it to politician and grape horticulturist Benjamin H. Mace partnered with Samuel F. Butterworth, a relative of Smith's wife Glorianna and William S. Parmlee, who purchased one of the Gothic cottages from Butterworth. William P. C. Smith and Glorianna conveyed the land to Mace and Butterworth on September 21, 1852 from Dubois Street at the foot of the present Downing Park, to Liberty Street (show map). Mace and Butterworth hired the city surveyor Stephen Parmenter to immediately draw up a map, creating Chambers, Lander, Johnston, and Miller Streets and over a hundred building lots.

Cross Farrington Street

As a fitting entrance to this limit of the street, to the right we see a store that was identical to the grocery that once opened Johnston Street from

Broadway. Notice the 1880s store with cast iron columns on the left, and the Queen Anne style house with a textured gable adjoining.

Continue

Almost all of the buildings we're seeing on the left date to the 1860s and 70s; they were all single family homes. Note how flush some are with the street, a typical way of building here since the 18th century. There's also an infill duplex here by Habitat for Humanity, on track to be finished this year. On the right here is a Gothic townhouse with a gable, pierced bargeboards, and brick panels. Remember the panels; we'll see them again in a moment.

156 and 158 Johnston Street

These two houses are quite different, both from the 1860s. In the one painted blue, take in the unique rope molding around the door, and those brick panels, popularized by Calvert Vaux in 1854 in his design for the rectory of St. Patrick's Church. This more modest cottage uses the same brackets, making it somewhat Italianate, though both are at contrasting scales. One of these was most likely home to the Irish Foley family. Thomas Foley, jr. was killed during the Civil War at the Battle of Chancellorsville aged 23. His brother John, a year younger, fought alongside him but sustained wounds enabling his discharge back home, where he died eight months later. Both were part of Company C in the 124th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed the Orange Blossoms, as all the companies enlisted from here in Orange County.

161 Johnston Street

The James R. Bayne House was designed in 1892 by Newburgh architect Frank Estabrook for an Irish-American interior decorator, his wife Jennie, and their children. Estabrook's carpenters were William Tweed and Caleb Woodruff, who had an office at 31 Lutheran Street. They had worked with Estabrook before, and in return Estabrook designed Woodruff's terracotta house at 39 Lutheran Street and Tweed's frame house on City Terrace near Third Street. The brick house uses bold and wide lintels of light-colored stone and rounded arches in the Richardsonian Romanesque style. This house is the only designed by a professional architect on the street, and Bayne's

patronage of Estabrook was probably because he respected the practice of a fellow designer rather than a common builder.

Iron Fence of South Street School

This side of Johnston is dominated by a senior housing complex, the Fogarty Apartments, built in the 1970s on the site of a grammar school. The South Street School was designed in 1866 by the firm Thomas Shaw & Sons in the Italianate style, and later added to at its rear so that it extended to this remaining tree and iron fence here.

169 Johnston Street

Here is the most prominent building shell on the street, once a single-family home built in 1882 for Professor John W. Doughty, principal of Newburgh Free Academy, and his family. Before Mace and Butterworth claimed this land from the Smiths, early baseball players made their field on this undeveloped corner of Johnston and South Streets, facing the Fowler family villa, which on one occasion was almost smashed with a rogue ball. Newburghers trekked to the remote site for Independence Day celebrations and fireworks on the hill. After the Civil War, the expansive site's vastness was obscured as worker housing rapidly sprang up on Lander Street and single-family dwellings went up on Johnston.

Many believed in the city's growth northwards, envisioning South Street as a major artery to fashionable neighborhoods. The belief explains 169 Johnston's situation: desperately close to the corner and a departure from the cheaply-built dwellings lately finished on Johnston. A more animated approach through carpentry and dimensionality of the bay make 169 Johnston Street a trendsetter for similar construction in the next three decades. Though the area never became as affluent or popular as predicted near the Civil War, it was home to middle and working class families for the early 20th century; subdivision of older houses into apartments began after World War II, shifting property ownership to landlords rather than single families. The house became vacant after the owner's death in the early 1970s and a subsequent fire brutally destroyed the interior floors and staircases.

179 South Street

We'll close the tour with a building whose appearance and history make it a worthy entrance point to Johnston from South Street. Now home to the Pentacostal congregation of Holy Temple Church, this house of worship was built as the Unitarian Church of Our Father from 1869–70, designed by George E. Harney, an admirer of Newburgh native Andrew Jackson Downing, whose in-laws, John Peter and Caroline Smith DeWint, founded this congregation. Caroline was the granddaughter of founding father and mother John and Abigail Adams, Unitarians. Once a Unitarian group had been established in Newburgh, retired merchant Warren Delano, grandfather of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, led a building committee to purchase this former ballfield and hire a like-minded architect.

To express the religious liberality of the congregation, Harney's church is a cathedral abstracted, using many geometric forms with Swiss and French-influenced half-timbered elements from the vernacular architecture of Central Europe. The slate is from Vermont, the stone from Ohio, and the interior used about five kinds of wood. FDR's mother Sara was raised here, and it's highly likely the young president attended services and events at the church on many occasions.

Tour Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

1. "Common Council," *Newburgh Daily News*, 5 October 1887, 2 (Wed. Eve.).
2. "The Lead Pipe Robbers," *Newburgh Daily Journal*, 25 March 1892, 4.
3. "Broadway's Newest Acquisition," *Newburgh Daily News*, 25 November 1890, 3 (Tues. Eve.); "Hebrew Synagogue," *Newburgh Daily Register*, 8 September 1891.
4. "The Flansburgh Failure," *Newburgh Daily Register*, 16 May 1891; "Brief and Pointed." *Newburgh Daily News*. May 19, 1891, 3 (Tues. Eve).
5. "Brief and Pointed." *Newburgh Daily News*, 13 September 1891, 3 (Tues. Eve).
6. "Couple Wed at Church Rite." *Newburgh-Beacon News*, 1 April 1960, 9A.
7. "Buildings Erected in Newburgh During the Past Season," *Newburgh Telegraph*, 16 July 1873.
8. "Brief and Pointed," *Newburgh Daily News*, 10 August 1888, 3 (Fri. Eve.).
9. "Old Newburgh: Men and Events of Thirty Years Ago," *Newburgh Telegram*, 19 October 1912, 4.
10. "Real Estate Improvements," *Newburgh [Morning] Telegraph*, 12 November 1872, 3; 45 and 47 Johnston are marked as being 2 stories in the 1884 and 1890 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps.