

BOULDER HISTORIC CONTEXT PROJECT

The Development of Boulder's University Hill Neighborhood  
in Relation to Economic Factors  
(E. Merle Adams)

Introduction

This preliminary paper presents some suggestions for ways of relating the historic context of economic activities to the ways in which a particular neighborhood developed in the early days of Boulder. We do not provide any new survey data but rather try to place already existing information in a way that contributes new insights. Areas like the University Hill Neighborhood, unless they are developed by a single authority or builder, seldom show a single consistent pattern of change through time. Instead there are usually fluctuations in the process with spurts of building interspersed with relatively "dead" periods. Although the Denver and Boulder Land and Investment Company played an important part in University Hill's development starting in June 1890 through investment, subdivision platting, and sale of land, the development of the University Place addition was anything but continuous. For example, as early as 1894 no lots were sold within the area in that entire year.

Sudden changes in economic conditions, both national and local, made a large difference in how University Hill would develop. Most people would agree with this statement, even regard it as an unnecessary truism. However, an orderly comparison of economic fluctuations with building on the hill may yield better understanding than has been available up to now.

University Hill Neighborhood

The definition of the area of the University Hill Neighborhood is the one developed by Boulder's Landmarks Advisory Board and reflected in the 1990 and 1991 surveys, "Boulder Surveys of Historic Places" conducted by Front Range Associates, Inc. That neighborhood is bounded on the north by the north side of Pleasant St. between 9th St. and Broadway, on the east by 13th St. between Pleasant St. and College Ave. and 12th St. between College Avenue and Aurora, on the south by Aurora Ave., and on the west by 9th St. between Pleasant St. and Aurora.

Front Range Associates' surveys show the growth of building in University Hill by decades from 1880 to 1940. They also provide useful accounts of factors, many of them economic, contributing to the growth of the neighborhood. The preliminary table included here draws on their discussion and expands the consideration of "economic conditions".



## Economic Conditions

The term "economic conditions" as used here refers to a wide variety of factors: price levels, bankruptcies, unemployment, government actions, etc. It is hard to define the limits of what is "economic" and what is not. For example, the Red Scare of 1919-1920 could be termed "political" rather than "economic" yet it is reasonable to regard the brief recession after World War I as one of the major factors promoting the Red Scare which in turn helped the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) to rise to prominence in Colorado and elsewhere. The KKK mounted an attack on the University of Colorado (Clarence J. Morely, backed by the KKK, was elected governor in 1924) and this had a brief negative effect on the University funding.

It seems wise to pay close attention to the fortunes of the University since, in turn, the University Hill area was strongly influenced throughout the decades we are examining.

A major distinction is made here between "local" and "national" conditions although again it is not easy to draw the line. An example of a local change would be the expansion at the University of Colorado in the first decade of the 20th century. The effect on University Hill is seen in the numbers of University faculty settling in the area. An example of a national change would be the McKinley Tariff Act of 1890 which triggered a sharp rise in the cost of living nationally.

The effects of national policy on the University and, in turn, the local economy can be seen even more clearly in the period of the Great Depression. President George Norlin and others made vigorous and creative use of opportunities offered by the New Deal's Public Works Administration (PWA). Between 1933 and 1939 the PWA provided the major financing for fifteen building projects in Boulder and the Medical School in Denver. These include the Field House (1935), the Natural History Museum (1937), the Women's Club (1937), new wings for the College of Arts and Sciences building (1938), the Library (1939), the Faculty Club (1939). Mention should also be made of the financing of women's dormitories to the extent of more than half a million dollars by the New Deal's Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC).

Yet, while this great building expansion was going on, the state support for the University was in serious danger. Two things contributed to the difficulties: the deficits of the Medical School and the State of Colorado's financial crisis resulting from the state old age pension plan. In 1939 the state treasurer impounded the funds intended for the University. "...the University came within a few days of having to close:, (Allen, et al, p. 109). This shows the complexity of the effects of "internal" and "external" factors rather dramatically.

From the very preliminary listings in the table it can be seen that in any given decade some economic factors promoted and some depressed the development of University Hill. We have not yet attempted an explanation of the influence of each listed factor. We have only begun to think about these things. Also it is likely that summary by decades is too rough a method. Within a given decade a complete "turn-around" may happen but that change may be masked by the simplification of ten year periods.



Further, it will be necessary to examine in some detail the exact dates when the pre-1940 residences were built and the probable influence of "economic conditions" on the people who built and inhabited those residences.

In view of the complexity of factors involved, factors which are only hinted at here, it is doubtful that we can expect to develop a nice neat model of how these processes work. Above all we must avoid the danger of imputing pure economic rationality to the persons establishing residences in the University Hill area. It is likely that many residential decisions were made in the face of adverse economic conditions that proved those decisions unwise. Nevertheless, this kind of exploration promises to give us some interesting insights even if not simple explanations of the "historical context".

Year	Event	Percentage
1900's	U. of Colorado Expands	33.0%
1900's	Revival of prosperity (mineral processing, sugar beets, etc.)	32.8%
1920's	U. of Colorado building expansion--PWA projects and RFC financing	34.0%
1930's	U. of Colorado building expansion--PWA projects and RFC financing	3.2%
1940's	U. of Colorado building expansion--PWA projects and RFC financing	1.8%

Adapted from a bar graph in "1980 Survey of Historic Places", August 1980. Percentages are approximate.



UNIVERSITY HILL AREA  
BOULDER, COLORADO

Period of Construction	% of buildings (before 1941)	Economic Conditions	
		Local	National
1880's	.4%	Univ. of Colo. opened 1877 Caribou silver exhausted 1885	Railroad Expansion
1890's	5.6%	Silver Panic 1893 U. of Colorado Expands Chatauqua 1898 Street Car Line 1899 Mt. St. Gertrude 1892 Cripple Creek Strike 1893-97 Real property valuation declined 20% 1897 local economy recovers	Silver Panic 1893 1898 Recovery McKinley Tariff 1890
1900's	33.0%	U. of Colorado Expands Miner's Strikes Revival of prosperity (mineral processing, sugar beets, etc.)	1904-07 prosperity Panic of 1907 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act
1910's	22.9%	Industrial Conflicts  Ludlow Massacre 1914	Tungsten Boom 1913 Fed. Res. Act WW I, Post WWI recession 1919-1921 Red Scare
1920's	34.0%	KKK--Attack on CU Decline of Colorado mining and agriculture	1929 Stock Market Crash
1930's	3.5%	U. of Colorado building expansion--PWA projects and RFC financing Colorado old age pension crisis 1939 CU financial crisis	Great Depression New Deal--PWA Abandonment of gold standard Price of gold increases
1940's	.6%	- - -	- - -

\*Adapted from a bar graph in "1990 Survey of Historic Places", August 1990. Percentages are approximate.



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