

## 158, 160, 162 & 164 Main Street

by: Doris Sherrow

**A narrow patch of what Main Street** used to look like still stands between Dunkin Donuts and the Getty station. Numbers 158, 160, 162 and 164 Main Street characterize what a 19th century commercial district would have looked like before it was taken over by huge 20th-century concrete boxes with a shelf-life of no more than twenty years.

The oldest member of these four 19th-century-style buildings is Café 66, at 164 Main Street, next (south) of the Hess station. It was probably built around 1871 by barber **Christopher Cranmer**. Cranmer may have been an immigrant. Sometime during the 1870s his name switched from Cranmer to Cramer, and the building was sold in later years as the Cramer Building. Native-born Americans would have been unlikely to change their surnames.

Cramer married a local girl, **Leonora Laverty**, in 1871. She was probably a sister or a daughter of **James Laverty**, who was running a very successful tavern at 188 Main Street. Laverty became a local legend in July of 1888, when his tavern burned to the ground, and he was up and running, serving patrons from a shed in the rear of the property, by the end of that terrible week! He was back in business in the two-story brick building still standing at 188 Main, now Portland Restaurant, by November.

The **1874 Beers' Atlas** shows "**Cranmer Store**" at this site by that time. Christopher and Leonora had ten children, and the 1914 City Directory lists a **Charles F. Cramer** as running a barbershop here, though it is not clear what relation he was to them. Now called Café 66, this building was long known as **Mendello's Restaurant**, and before that, **Hulf's Tavern**.

The next oldest building is **Ireland's**, just north of Dunkin' Donuts, at 158 Main. The 1874 map shows "**J.Hall Meat Market**" in this spot. However, it is likely that **John Allen** built this building about 1893. At that time, John and his wife **Emma** mortgaged the building – only the building, not the land, which belonged to the **Brainerd, Shaler, and Hall Quarry Company** – for \$4,635. That was a large amount of money for just a building at that time — I suspect they would only be able to get that much money if they had a brand new building on the site.

Furthermore, the architecture of 158 Main seems likely to be from the 1890s--it is quite similar to the Main Street Cycle building at 184 Main Street – the steep gable roof, the two-story porch. The Main Street Cycle building was built around 1890, also as a residence on top of a commercial building. Unfortunately it is difficult to trace buildings in this area by title search -- most of this side of the street was owned by one or another of the quarry companies. The lots and buildings were leased, rather than sold, to individuals, and leases are rarely filed in the land records.

John Allen had come to Portland around 1870 and married **Mary Emma Edwards**, a Portland girl. He was English. He and Mary had eleven children, though only six of them survived to adulthood. Quite likely Allen had worked in **Hall's Meat Market** before building the newer building, because the birth records, beginning in 1871, list his occupation consistently as "butcher." He died in 1913, and his widow held onto the building for the next five years. From at least 1943 to at least 1975 (based on City Directory listings), this building was **Cannata's Tavern, Restaurant**, and finally, **Café**.

The two buildings between these Victorian classics were built in 1936. However, they were preceded by other buildings, rather similar in style. The 1874 map shows a commercial building in both areas, though the one at 160, now **A.R. Dutting Tire Repair Shop**, was not on the site in 1907 when the Sanborn Insurance map was drawn.

At 162 Main Street stood a neat, white gable-to-street two-story shop with dark wood trim, cornice returns in the gable pointing to a carved-lettered sign: "Hardware, paints, etc." A tiny addition ran along the south side, no more than six feet wide, with a similar carved-lettered sign: "Undertaker." The Portland Historical Society's calendar from 1992 shows it over the January page. It belonged to Arthur Emmons.

A Middletown Press reporter wrote of the shop, "**Mr. Emmons'** place of business was one of the landmarks of Main street, having been conducted as an undertaking parlor and hardware store for many years by him, and previously by **W. G. Spencer**, for a long period."

An "undertaking parlor and hardware store" from this era offers us some food for thought. In

the 1800s, even into the early 1900s, an "undertaking parlor" would not have the same functions as it does today. The deceased would be washed by family members, laid out in his own home, and often buried in a coffin made by a family member. Emmons offered caskets and an elegant black wagon with horses and a driver. He also offered ice to preserve the body.

But the building now at 162 Main is not the building Emmons had, although its lines are similar. Nor is **A.R. Dutting's** shop at #160 the same structure.

At 3:45 A. M. on April 8th, 1936, a fire broke out in a small building behind Emmons' enterprise. A strong wind quickly spread the flames to #160 and #162. Several cars were saved from the garage, but Emmons lost the wagon that was his hearse, a Packard coupe, and over fifty caskets.

Fire companies No.1, No.2 from Gildersleeve, and, finally, No.1 from Middletown struggled to fight the fire. Houses across Main Street, and there were several graceful old homes there at the time, were wet down to avoid igniting from the sparks flying across the road. **Arthur Emmons** and his family lived in the one at #159.

The April 8th Middletown Press said, "Dull booming sounds came from the blazing Emmons building [#162], as cans of paint exploded, and thick tongues of flames kept darting through the broken front windows..."

The two outer buildings, #158 and #164, stood only five or six feet away from the burning buildings. But they were mercifully spared – because both were stuccoed!

The firemen fought the blaze for several hours. They were still spraying areas where flames jumped up from the charred rubble when the paper went to press.

Also by the time the paper went to press, Emmons had received a kindly offer from **W. J. Coughlin Sons** of Middletown (now Coughlin-Lastrina) to use their premises until he was able to rebuild or relocate his undertaking parlor.

Within the next two years, two similar gable-to-street buildings were constructed on the lots.

Emmons rebuilt #162 in 1936. A few years later, he moved his funeral parlor to 231 Main Street, which is now the Portland Memorial Funeral Home, but the hardware business remained on the site even after his death, run by his widow, Nettie.

In 1937, **A. R. Dutting** rebuilt #160, albeit with an "old Western" façade, and they remain on the spot to this day.

These four buildings recreate the type of streetscape you would have seen if you had walked the Main Street of the 1890s. Even if two of the buildings are considerably newer. And with time flying the way it has, they are now both over sixty years old themselves!