

The 1875 Pictorial St. Louis map provides an excellent view of the South Grand area prior to major development. Grand & Arsenal, c. 1875. (Image: Pictorial St. Louis, Plate 65)

A stroll through the South Grand business district today-from Grand and Arsenal south to Grand and Utah–requires some imagination to conjure the area's history, but the buildings will speak if you know how to listen. The neighborhood still offers abundant amenities housed in the multistory commercial buildings that line the street for blocks. While some newer buildings from the end of the twentieth century intrude, the historic commercial corridor is largely intact and the surrounding residential areas remain a showplace of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century homes. Evenings along South Grand are particularly vibrant as people from the surrounding neighborhoods (among the city's most densely populated and diverse) and from across the region flock to the district's one-of-a-kind restaurants and specialty stores. While the streetcars that once formed the backbone of neighborhood transit are

gone, the Metro Bus route through the district is the city's busiest. Public transit, pedestrian traffic, and even automobiles in the South Grand business district have maintained a constant presence for well over a century.

But while the South Grand area in many ways has shown remarkable consistency over the last century, in its early years it was the scene of very rapid change. A streetcar approaching the business district in 1915 neared a bustling shopping center. That same streetcar fifteen years earlier was pulling into a remote outpost where real estate speculators and farmers still eyed each other over split-rail fences. Indeed, prior to the large-scale electrification of the city's streetcar system in the 1890s, if you came to the area at all you were probably arriving in a horse-drawn omnibus and bound for a destination like the rural campus of St. Elizabeth's Academy,

Left-Leonard Priester's summer garden, shown here in 1907, is a good example of a South Grand business that served both tourists and residents. Priester occupied the space at 3106 South Grand as early as 1903. (Image: South Grand Avenue Review)

Christopher Schiller's vineyard, the Old Picotte (Pickers) Cemetery where Roosevelt High School is today, or the isolated retreat of Tower Grove Park.

An omnibus line had run along Arsenal to the area since the 1860s, mostly to serve recreational visitors to Tower Grove Park.1 Grand Avenue had been surveyed by the middle of the nineteenth century, though for decades it remained a dirt track running along an isolated ridge. Proposed in the early 1850s, Grand Avenue as a formal thoroughfare was intended to divide several Colonial Era common fields while essentially ringing the new city limits from north to south. In the area of the South Grand business district, the street divided the St. Louis Common on the east from the Prairie des Novers on the west.² Originally lands that were set aside for communal use, the city began sales of the property in the 1830s, though it was still mostly used for agricultural purposes and as country estates until the late nineteenth century.³

The neighborhoods surrounding Tower Grove and what would become the South Grand Business District remained largely undeveloped throughout the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, owing primarily to the area's distance from downtown. The city limits were expanded to the south with the annexation of Carondelet in 1870, and then to their current boundaries far to the west in 1876. Still, the current South Grand area remained largely undeveloped aside from some country estates and mining activities like Oak Hill to the west, where James Russell ran coal and clay mining operations.⁴

St. Louis was growing rapidly in the last third of the nineteenth century. The population increased by more than 150,000 residents between 1860 and 1870 alone, and it was becoming apparent that more space would soon be needed. Looking into the near future, real estate companies and developers began to see great opportunities along South Grand. One developer, William Switzer, borrowed more than \$500,000 (an enormous sum at the time) from the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company to purchase lands in the area, but he passed away before he had the chance to realize his plans to create a new residential district. The land reverted to Connecticut Mutual in 1878, which then created a subsidiary known as the Connecticut Realty Company to pursue Switzer's vision.5

In 1889, the Grand Avenue Viaduct cleared the way for the route to become the major north-south artery of transit it remains today.⁶ Prior to its completion, the difficulty of crossing the busy rail yards in the Mill Creek Valley north of Chouteau hampered movement between north and south St.

Louis along Grand.⁷ With this problem solved, municipal authorities and developers who stood to profit from road improvements made concerted efforts to pave the route and its collector streets.

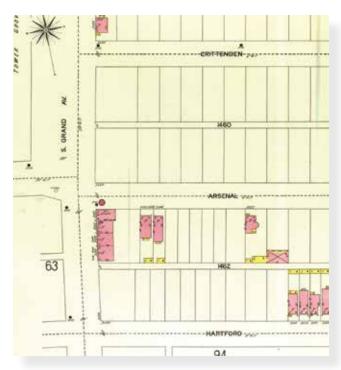
With the arrival of the electric streetcar, the area received the last piece of the development puzzle. Across the United States, the introduction of the electric streetcar after 1887 revolutionized intraurban travel. The convenience and relative speed of the streetcar changed everything, from the areas where people could live and shop to how space was organized.⁹

As noted by the president of the Southwestern Mercantile Association in a 1908 promotional booklet, "[t]he rapid growth of this section is latterly due, of course, in no small measure, to the extension of our splendid street railway system." He continued, "[A]nd when it is remembered that the horse and mule held sway until the year of 1887, and that the speed of the cable line then opened was limited to eight miles per hour west of Garrison Avenue, this extension and improvement in the system itself is an achievement of which any city might well be proud."10 Because of the streetcar's affordability and efficiency, development began to expand throughout the city as never before. 11 Some entrepreneurs in the South Grand area catered to tourists and residents alike.

Interestingly, in the heart of today's South Grand business district, residences and not commercial buildings were the earliest properties to be developed. While commercial infrastructure later replaced most of these early buildings, some evidence of the early days can be found on the west side of Grand between Juniata and Connecticut. A two-flat residence (3159-61 South Grand) constructed in 1894 was later turned into commercial storefronts on the ground floor. Two other residences were constructed in 1896 and 1897, at 3169 and 3167 South Grand, respectively. All three of these buildings stand today. The next earliest extant building in the business district is 3157 South Grand, which was constructed in 1901.

At the turn of the century, development was poised to begin in earnest. Connecticut Realty held successful lot auctions in the early 1900s, which were then followed by the rapid construction of entire blocks of new homes between 1904 and 1909.¹²

The change wrought by the activities of this one company was dramatic, as noted in 1908 in the promotional book, *Southwest Saint Louis*. James M. Rollins, president of the Tower Grove Heights Improvement Association, noted: "[F]our years ago when the Connecticut Realty Company placed upon the market the property which had been sub-divided,



Little development had occurred along South Grand by 1903, with just a few buildings present. (Image: Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, #65 and #63. University of Missouri Digital Collections)

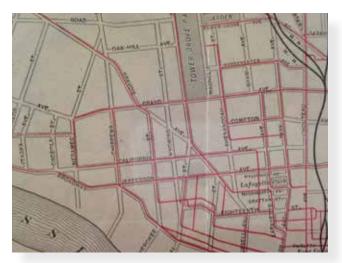
at a public auction, it was an uncertain problem as to what would be the outcome. No one could have imagined the results that immediately followed. Within this short period of time, thousands of homes and business houses have been erected, millions of dollars have been invested, and more than five thousand citizens, most of whom own their own homes, now live within the district."¹²

Commercial businesses soon followed the construction of homes and the large influx of new middle-class residents. One of the earliest commercial buildings constructed in the area was a drug store run by pharmacist Francis Hemm at the southwest corner of Grand and Arsenal in October 1902. Boosters noted, "When this corner was first opened at that time it was practically the only business house in 'Tower Grove' District and was on the part of the proprietor of the business an apparently risky venture." Then, "Hardly two years after the opening of the business, the great World's Fair came along . . . and in another year there followed a boom in this district like none ever was witnessed in St. Louis. Today, where four years ago was prairie for fourteen square blocks, now stands solidly built up, beautiful streets with fine and artistic residences."14

Patrons need not head to downtown anymore, boosters claimed. "Rows upon rows of fine stores of every description, thoroughly equipped with first-class, up-to-date goods and pertaining to every line of trade, are now in evidence; and every day new enterprises are being started," the president of the Southwest Mercantile Association proclaimed. "Some of these enterprises are of an astonishing magnitude, and ... compare favorably with many of the more pretentious up-town establishments; so that shoppers are now no longer compelled to waste time and car-fare because of the necessity to patronize these last." 15

Bergstermann Floral in 1908 (both one- and two story buildings). Note open land to the west (behind the buildings) and Kleekamp Bros. Piano Co. to the south. The two Bergstermann buildings are where the Dickmann Building is today. (Image: Southwest Saint Louis)





Streetcar lines (in red) radiate from downtown in 1904. Note lines on Arsenal Street and Grand Avenue, which quickly became a prominent intersection as the terminus for multiple streetcar routes, including the Grand Avenue line, the Fourth Street line, and the Tower Grove line. Source: Portion of Map of St. Louis with Complete Streetcar System, Official Guide Company, c. 1904. (Image: Missouri History Museum Library Map Collection.)

Otto Karbe, the first vice president of the Southwestern Mercantile Association, noted, "Today, one finds in these outlying districts splendid marts of every description, conducted by wideawake [sic], up-to-date proprietors, where is to be had any class of goods of as fine a quality, and as cheap in price as those that appear in the display windows of a Broadway or Washington Avenue merchant."16

The majority of the district's commercial buildings were constructed between 1905 and 1911.¹⁷ Most rose two or three stories tall, typically with a business on the first floor and physicians, dentists, or other professional offices occupying the second and third floors. Many of the earliest businesses were promoted using common watchwords of the time and traded on the modernity of the area. Advertisements espoused the "progressive" nature of the merchants, "pure food" quality of groceries and drugs, and the "newness" of a proprietor's approach to business. Still, older practices continued. For instance, a number of commercial properties on South Grand had residences on the second or third floors where shopkeepers and local workers lived.

In addition to previously established businesses, the area attracted entrepreneurs who were ready to start businesses of their own. After working for his

South Grand and Arsenal Street in the 1910s, looking southeast. (Image: Missouri History Museum)



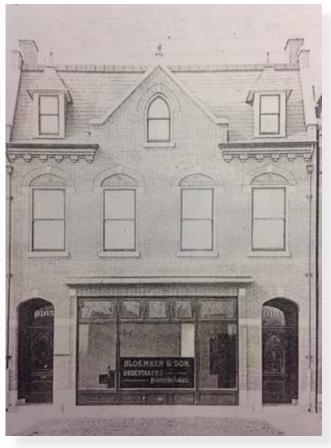


Umbrella merchant Louis Onimus and his family lived above his umbrella shop at 3127 South Grand with a residence for his family above. For many years Onimus had owned a shop at 2214 South Broadway, but then his customers started moving westward, a common migration pattern of the time. (Image: Southwest St. Louis)

father, 24-year-old graduate pharmacist Henry F. Sum opened a drug store in 1907 at Grand and Wyoming.¹⁸ E.J. Fuess had worked in the dry goods business in Milwaukee as well as three different dry goods stores in St. Louis before opening his own shop at 3122 S. Grand. 19 Alex Stengel left his family's grocery business, Stengel Bros., and opened his own shop on South Grand.

By the end of World War I, the district was packed with establishments offering every imaginable kind of good and service. With the opening of the 600-plus seat Grand-Arsenal Theater, local residents had the opportunity to view the same motion pictures that played in the downtown nickelodeons. Within a year, the Juniata Theater opened down the street, and following a brief closure of the Grand-Arsenal, the two operated simultaneously for many years.²⁰

Reflecting an age when music was largely "homemade," a number of music-related businesses, including the Louis Retter Conservatory of Music, the aforementioned Kleekamp Brothers Piano Co.,



Frank Bloemker & Son Undertakers in 1908. Note the address is listed at 3105, pointing to the original address of the block. The address was later changed to 3163. (Image: Southwest St. Louis)

and Kleekamp's Hall, a performance and meeting space, along with several music teachers operated in the business district. The larger landscape of music-related halls and societies located nearby on Grand included the Strassberger Conservatory (southeast corner of Grand and Shenandoah) and the Liederkranz Club (formerly at 2700 S. Grand) which centered around a German choral society.²¹ Residents of German extraction represented the largest single ethnic group in the area, which explains why the Tower Grove Turnverein (a German athletic club) was constructed in 1906 at the southeast corner of South Grand and Juniata Street (today the parking lot north of Jay International Foods).²²

The 1920s along South Grand reflected the economic prosperity and optimism that characterized the country at large, despite the restrictions imposed by Prohibition. During this time, national chain stores began to make their appearance in the district, including the Great A&P Tea Co., Piggly Wiggly, Kroger, and Woolworth's.



Hesselberg's Drug Store

3137 South Grand

Grand 4179 for Immediate Service First Place You Should Think of When in Need of DRUG STORE SERVICE





The Grand Meat Co. served South Grand for about 30 years. A number of South Grand's longtime businesses catered to neighboring Roosevelt High School students and staff. (Image: Roosevelt High School, Bwana, January 1926)

In reaction to increasing demand for commercial space, and an absence of available land, the Dickmann Realty Co. tore down several smaller buildings to construct the six-story Dickmann Building in 1926. With South Grand already known as a destination for health-related services, the Dickmann Building became a focal point of this industry, housing the offices of at least 26 physicians, dentists, or chiropractors, and the C.F. Knight Drug Store by the end of the decade.

Real estate and loan offices also thrived in the district, reflecting the fact that builders were still constructing homes in the surrounding neighborhoods. As the area matured, affluent residents and businessmen formed the Tower Grove Heights Improvement Association. The association tasked itself with positive neighborhood development and protection against "undesirable" outside influences.

Wanting to keep pace with changing times, some buildings in the district updated their appearance as the 20th century progressed. In keeping with the "Modernize Mainstreet" movement of the 1930s, Hesselberg Drugs at the southwest corner of Grand and Hartford updated their storefront with the addition of Art Deco-inspired round windows and maroon-colored Vitrolite glass.

The construction of the Dickmann Building, with its grand white glaze terra cotta façade, served as the culmination of development and optimism in the South Grand business district, even if it was not apparent at the time. The building's scale was larger than any existing building in the district, though it was considered a logical step in the evolution toward ever-higher density. The neighborhood was thriving and space was at a premium. To accommodate large numbers of residents efficiently, large apartment buildings, like those at Grand and Connecticut and at Grand and Utah, were becoming more common. Farther north, enormous new residential hotels like the Saum and the Marmaduke arose. Demand was such that it wasn't unusual for relatively new buildings to be demolished to make way for larger replacements. In the case of the Dickmann Building, low-rise commercial buildings that were barely twenty years old were razed.²³ If the economy of the "roaring twenties" had continued, it is likely that the South Grand business district of today would be characterized by much larger buildings.

Of course, the move toward ever higher density along Grand came to an abrupt halt when the stock market crashed in 1929. As the Depression deepened, city directories record a growing rate of vacancy in the area's commercial spaces. The overall picture was mixed, however, with a strong business community still evident. Ads of the era may have emphasized thrift and value at times, but the availability of radios, new clothing, and other goods indicate a



WE carry a complete stock of bathing suits for boys and girls. California Styles. Separate trunks and shirts, belts, water wings and a large supply of bathing caps and shoes.

We also carry boys athletic shirts and track pants; athletic supporters. If you are interested in bathing, in fact most any sport, you surely will be interested in our "QUALITY MER-CHANDISE" at lowest prices.

HOELL'S

3143 S. Grand Blvd.

This advertisement on the left from 1925, displays leisure in the years before the Great Depression. (Image: Roosevelt High School, Bwana, 1925)

middle-class community that was holding on at least enough to keep local stores from closing. During the Depression, a branch store of the local chain Worth's sold women's clothing at 3103 South Grand, and Ida Wetzel sold hosiery across the street at 3106. Eugene Ganz operated a women's clothing shop, and William Huning even managed to sell jewelry. Werner Boot Shop, Senst Restaurant, Hoell Dry Goods, and Florene Shoppe all remained open, as did the offices of doctors and dentists, whose services remained critical regardless of economic conditions.

Following the end of Prohibition in 1933, liquor stores and taverns reappeared, although in some cases they had managed to stay in business throughout the "Dry Times." Laurence Meyer constructed his saloon in 1911 at 3232 S. Grand. During Prohibition, the business remained open selling non-alcoholic drinks, before returning to liquor sales in the 1930s. The space remained a tavern or lounge into the 1970s. Of note considering South Grand's reputation today as a destination for ethnic restaurants, the district's first Chinese restaurant, "Oriental Kitchen," opened at 3189 ½ South Grand in 1934. Followed shortly thereafter by Hing's Café, by the 1940s South Grand had an established Asian food scene!

Despite the Depression, in 1935 the buildings that had been demolished in the 1920s between Juniata and Connecticut (3172-76 South Grand) were replaced with the much larger, extant building that today houses Jay Asian Grocery. Reflecting the rising popularity and accessibility of the automobile in American society, Weber Implement & Automobile Company (an ancestor of today's Weber Chevrolet) opened a dealership in the large space.

Facilitated by the automobile, St. Louis' population shifted ever westward in the 1930s, though South Grand remained a strong center of commerce at the start of World War II, and the area remained a destination for healthcare. Of the approximately 60 health-related offices located within the business district, 36 were housed in the Dickmann Building alone. Many more were located across the street in the (now demolished) Tamm Building. Despite a few storefront vacancies, the district was dense with business activity. Ice cream and candy shops, hat stores, restaurants, dress shops, and even a pet shop lined the street.

At the outset of the war, a Selective Service office opened at 3165 South Grand. The office was

in a building that also housed the offices of doctors and dentists, presumably in an effort to streamline the medical component of the registration process. In an ugly and perhaps largely forgotten chapter in St. Louis' history, the Oriental Kitchen was among other Asian-owned businesses across the city that were closed and guarded by the police for a time due to misplaced xenophobic paranoia following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor.²⁴

Following the end of the war, South Grand was home to companies that reflected the growth of the real estate market as new federal housing programs for returning G.I.s were implemented. While Tower Grove Bank had been in the district since 1911, financial institutions like savings and loan associations (which provided building and home loans to stock members) became more prevalent in the postwar period. Among these were the Tower Grove Savings & Loan Association at 3539 Arsenal and the Hamiltonian Federal Savings & Loan Association at 3142 South Grand. Realty companies also had a strong presence in the area. The combination of the Baby Boom and federal housing insurance enabled these companies to do a brisk business, putting soldiers and their families into homes both old and new. At least seven of these companies were located in the business district in the years following the war.

By the 1950s, the age of the automobile had fully arrived. With the Grand-Gravois business district, the growing Kingshighway business district, the emerging Hampton Avenue business district, and the numerous growing centers of population and commercial activity in St. Louis County, South Grand faced strong competition. From the old days, Plotz Flowers and Hoell's Dry Goods remained. Both a pharmacy and a baker remained at the southwest corner of Grand and Hartford. Now run by different proprietors, the uses of the storefronts hadn't changed since the building was constructed. La Merite Bridal Shop was still a popular destination. New businesses Tevis Radio & Appliance Co. (3191 South Grand), Spector's Bootery (3104 South Grand), and Grace Yaeger Dresses (3171 South Grand) had opened in recent years, as had a number of branch or chain locations, including St. Louis' own Mavrakos Candy, Nine-O-Five Liquors, and Dixie Cream Donuts.

Despite the fact that the Hamiltonian Federal Savings & Loan Association invested in the area with the construction of an International Style modern branch in 1961 (today's Rooster), the 1960s were a decade of decline on South Grand. St. Louisans were leaving the city in droves for the new suburbs in St. Louis County, and the age of the neighborhood

Oriental Kitchen Chinese Caterers Chop Suey (Serves 4), 90c Chow Mein (Serves 4), \$1.40 Telephone 3189 Address LAclede South Grand 6631 Delmar 5927 Easton CAbany 6635 EVergreen 6300 FREE DELIVERY SERVICE (Minimum Charge 90c)

Oriental Kitchen advertisement. (Image: Roosevelt High School, Bwana, 1936)

shopping district was giving way to the age of the strip center and self-contained shopping mall. The combination of vacancy, disinvestment, and an increased need for parking in the second half of the twentieth century resulted in the demolition of some buildings, including the original home of Francis Hemm's pharmacy, the longtime home of La Merite Bridal Shop (the business moved to the suburbs), a few buildings on Arsenal (including Albrecht Hall, a fraternal meeting place in the 1940s and 1950s), the New Tower Grove Bank Building at 3143 South Grove (the original building at 3157 remains), and the Ritz Theater. Later, even the Tower Grove Turnverein succumbed after a fire.

Of course, both change and continuity have defined the area. For example, a barber shop is still at 3192 South Grand as it was a century ago, and a person transported from 1915 to today could still find a pharmacy at the corner of Grand and Hartford. The Orpheum Cleaners has been around since the 1940s, and establishments like Jay International Foods, the King & I Restaurant, CBGB, Mangia Italiano, and New Dawn Natural Foods are becoming institutions in their own right, with each having been in operation for 25 years or more.

Today a destination neighborhood known for ethnic food, nightlife, and eclectic shopping. South Grand has recovered its vibrancy from the downturn of the late twentieth century but retains its historic character. Its surrounding turn-of-the-century housing stock is once again highly desirable, as is its proximity to Tower Grove Park. The business district and neighborhoods boast many buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, including the Dickmann Building and the Hamiltonian Federal Savings & Loan Building. Recent improvements to the sidewalks and streets have made the area more

accommodating to pedestrians, and amenities like rain gardens and the Ritz "pocket park" improve the appearance and functionality of formerly debilitated spaces. As modern populations increasingly seek out mixed-use, walkable environments defined by unique buildings, they are recognizing those qualities in the South Grand business district. Of course, to fully appreciate South Grand, modern residents should have some sense of its history. By looking back at how South Grand came to be, it becomes easier to see ourselves as part of the story. Today, we are simply writing a new chapter in the history of one of St. Louis' greatest streets.

Like many business, Tower Grove Bank & Trust used advertisements to aid the war effort. (Image: South Side Journal, September 8, 1943)



t'll cost you an extra \$100 Bond to look him in the eye !



GRAND BOULEVARD AT HARTFORD ST.

Parking Plaza for Your Convenience

Open Friday Evenings 5 to 8 P.M.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ NiNi Harris, A Grand Heritage: A History of the Southside Neighborhoods and Citizens (St. Louis: DeSoles Community Housing Corporation, 1984), 21.
- ² Eric Sandweiss, St. Louis: The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 71–72; Norbury L. Wayman, History of St. Louis Neighborhoods: Shaw (St. Louis: St. Louis Development Agency, 1980).
- Sandweiss, St. Louis, 73-74.
- Norbury L. Wayman, History of St. Louis Neighborhoods: Oak Hill. (St. Louis: St. Louis Community Development Agency, 1981).
- Richard Compton and Emile Dry, Pictorial St. Louis (St. Louis: Compton and Company, 1876), Plates 62 and 65.
- Lynn Josse, Tower Grove Heights Historic District, Sec.
- Sally E. Schwenk, Cathy Ambler, and Kerry Davis, South St. Louis Historic Working- and Middle-Class Streetcar Suburbs, Sec. E, 24.
- Ibid., Sec. E, 20.
- Sandweiss, St. Louis, 176–77.
- ¹⁰ Schwenk, South St. Louis Historic Working- and Middle-Class Streetcar Suburbs, Sec. E, 4-5.
- ¹¹ Southwest Saint Louis, 1.
- ¹² Kenneth Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbinazition of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 112.
- ¹³ Josse, *Tower Grove Heights Historic District*, Sec. 7, 5.
- ¹⁴ Southwest Saint Louis, 7.
- 15 Ibid, 49.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 1.
- Josse, Tower Grove Heights Historic District, Sec. 7, 6.
- Southwest Saint Louis, 54.
- ²⁰ Ibid. 52.
- ²¹ A. H. Glebler, "Grand Avenue Houses: Arsenal Theater To Open," The Moving Picture World, Vol. 27, February 12, 1916, 997; G. H. Glebler, "Our Correspondent Makes More St. Louis Calls," The Moving Picture World, Vol. 27, March 11, 1916, 1686.
- ²² Harris, *A Grand Heritage*, 51–54; 56–57.
- ²³ Stacy Stone, Lynn Josse, and Carolyn Hewes Toft, Tower Grove Heights Historic District (Boundary Increase). Section 8, 163.
- ²⁴ Mark Abbott, *Tower Grove* (St. Louis: Reedy Press, 2009), 66.
- ²⁵ Huping Ling, Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community, 124–125.