

Plowed Over: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation Into the "Triangle Lot" in the West Washington District, South Bend, Indiana

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This paper narrates the history through archaeological investigation of one city corner in South Bend, Indiana, and the contribution of the businesses that occupied it in the city's most formative years. Manufacturing successes within South Bend such as the Oliver Plow Works, and Studebaker are well known and researched. What is less well known are the supporting businesses and businessmen that made up a representative sample in the city. This paper exhibits the establishment, growth, and community influence of the businesses it housed, supported by extensive archival research and recovered artifacts. The humble tinsmith became the proprietor of the area's largest hardware and lumberyards. A German immigrant and his friend established one of the area's largest and longest-running grocery stores that propelled both families into more prosperous circles. Elite families blended interests forming a neighborhood. The West Washington neighborhood was one of gaslights and trolley cars, nouveau-rich, and the fruits of American industrial expansion in the early 1900's. Contributions from the wealthy helped build opera houses and churches, but it was the corner businessmen that formed the heart and soul of South Bend.

The "Triangle Lot" had only a brief period of historical significance. Named because of its right-angle shape, it lies in the heart of the West Washington neighborhood, standing out as a rare undeveloped plot of land on the corner of LaPorte Avenue and West Washington Street in South Bend, in an area mixed with nineteenth-century Victorian homes and mansions. The triangle lot, previously owned by the prestigious Oliver Family of South Bend, is today owned by The History Museum. Prior to that, it was occupied by a corner grocery, meat market, and transitory businesses such as a tinsmith. The grocery and other businesses stood on this corner from the initial settlement of the city. A pair of South Bend businessmen, Solomon Fox and Francis M. Baker, started their grocery business here shortly after,

and enjoyed some success until the Olivers built their beautiful mansion "Copshaholm" across the street in 1895-1896. Sometime between April 1903 and October 1904, the Olivers bought the triangle lot across from their new home and had the buildings torn down because they "didn't like the view."²¹⁶ It is there that the story of the triangle lot ended. After the buildings were torn down, the Olivers never improved on the lot, initially intending it to be a garden area for their daughter, Gertrude. In 1987, Gertrude, the last remaining child of industrialist patriarch J.D. Oliver, passed away, and her extended family turned the mansion, as well as the triangle lot property across the street over to the Northern Indiana Historical Society, which later became "The History Museum." The History Museum has been using it intermittently as an overflow parking area for large events, however, nothing has been built upon it. This paper will explore the history of the families and businesses that occupied this lot, as well as demonstrate that the motive behind the Oliver Family's purchase and demolition of this land was due to a personal conflict between the family of grocery owners Solomon Fox and Frank Baker, and the plow manufacturing Olivers.

Humble Beginnings

Neither Solomon Fox nor Frank Baker were born into elite families like the Studebakers or Olivers. Fox was born 25 October 1848 in Nova, Ohio, to German immigrants. He moved to South Bend in 1869 and in 1877 worked as a clerk at the J.C. Knoblock grocery at 116 W. Washington.²¹⁷ Although he remained employed as a grocery clerk, he boarded at various locations.

Knoblock and his family were among the early South Bend elite. Known for being one of the first, and most successful grocers, Knoblock was

"also the president of the Miller-Knoblock Electric Company, which manufactured electrical appliances, and the treasurer of the St. Joseph County Savings Bank as well as an original charter member of the Citizens National Bank. In 1865

²¹⁶ Personal conversation with Kristie Erickson, June 2015.

²¹⁷ *South Bend Tribune*, Tuesday Evening, 28 July 1931.

he started the first wagon delivery service in the city and employed the first cash girl in South Bend. He also had the first gas piped into his residence. He was a county commissioner for four years and volunteer firefighter for twenty-two years.”²¹⁸

J.C. Knoblock started his grocery in 1873, quickly becoming one of the largest and well-known grocers in the area. With his brother William, he later became one of the owners of the South Bend Chilled Plow Works, the largest and only competition to the Oliver Chilled Plow Works. He has been described as “one of the millionaires of the city,” and occupied a beautiful home on the corner of Market and Lafayette Streets, placing him among the wealthiest families who made the West Washington district their home.²¹⁹

In 1881, Knoblock sold his grocery business to William H. Oren. Like the Knoblocks and Solomon Fox, William Oren was born to German immigrants, and was a successful South Bend businessman throughout his life. In 1883, two years after becoming proprietor of the old Knoblock grocery, Oren brought in Arthur D. Baker as a partner. Arthur D. Baker was also the treasurer of Knoblock’s South Bend Chilled Plow Company. His position as treasurer ensured the grocery remained under the influence of the Knoblock family, despite the transfer of the business name to Oren and Baker. The Knoblocks were astute and diversified businessmen, keeping multiple revenue streams spread throughout varied family members and relative associations. At this time, J.C. Knoblock served as vice president of the South Bend Chilled Plow Company, while his brother, William, was the president. A generation later, in 1925, William’s son John served as secretary/treasurer of the South Bend Chilled Plow Company, indicating that familial ties to these businesses were interwoven into early South Bend culture.

This familial/business bond grew when Solomon Fox, clerk at the Oren and Baker grocery, married Liesetta Knoblock, the daughter of William, on 6 June 1877. Soon, Solomon Fox opened “Fox and

²¹⁸ Joyce Woodruff, “The Name’s The Same,” *South Bend Tribune*, Sunday, 19 December 1999.

²¹⁹ Gabrielle Robinson, *German Settlers of South Bend*. (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 48.

Baker” grocery with another local businessman, Francis M. Baker. The timing of the “Fox and Baker” partnership suggests that Fox secured financial support from his millionaire father-in-law.

The other half of “Fox and Baker” was Francis M. Baker, born in Brooklyn, New York, on 13 December 1845, but little is known about his early life, and Baker seemed to have lived a much less public life than Fox. Baker moved to South Bend in 1870, and, like Fox, stayed in boarding homes during the first several years. In 1875, Baker opened a small bakery and confectionary on East Water Street, where he roomed above.²²⁰ City restructuring caused the address at his Water Street storefront to change several times over the years, eventually becoming 428 East Water. This placed his business directly across from the East Race, close to the city center, and Oren and Baker’s grocery. The census records indicate a population of 13,280 in South Bend in 1880 suggesting Baker and Fox would have known of each other in this pioneering, yet expanding town.

The First Presbyterian Church, located then at 101 South Lafayette, was the church for not only Fox, but for Frank Baker and the Oliver family, as well. Church fellowship suggests another networking resource for the men.

West Washington

Washington Street ran just south of Water Street, where Frank Baker’s confectionary overlooked the industrious East Race. In the downtown area, at 116 Washington, stood Oren and Baker’s popular grocery, which, like Frank Baker’s establishment, has been paved over into a large parking lot. If this downtown area served as the heart of the city, the richest blood was flowing west down Washington Street. Magnificent Victorian homes and mansions were being built in this area to support the wealthy families forming their fortunes and legacies.

The Fox and Baker grocery stood at 901 West Washington. It was the easternmost and first building constructed on the “triangle lot” of land that held 901, 903, and 909 West Washington, and stood on the prominent corner lot position. Unfortunately, very little is known of the actual buildings. No tax or property assessment records exist from

²²⁰ “Water Street” is now LaSalle Street.

that time period, having been destroyed by the township assessor's office in the 1950's. There are no known photos, and no physical descriptions of the buildings found in any advertisement or surviving papers. What is known is that depending on the scale accuracy of Sanborn maps, 901 W. Washington was approximately thirty meters long, ten meters wide, and two stories tall. Sanborn maps show that the grocery was built of brick, and archaeological evidence supports this. A large amount of brick and brick remnant was found in an excavation conducted by students from Indiana University South Bend in June 2015. The brick appeared to be "Notre Dame brick," a distinctive yellow brick that made up the first buildings on the University of Notre Dame campus, handmade from sand from the lakes on the campus property just a couple miles north of the triangle lot. These bricks were very popular at the time, and were used in a number of early building projects across South Bend, especially in the West Washington neighborhood. Also from Sanborn maps, we know 901 West Washington was angled with its front door toward the corner, in a style distinctive to Chicago and some New Orleans architecture. Historical research provides no other descriptive information about the building proper, aside that it had an apartment on the upper floor.²²¹ William Fox, Jr., the great-grandson of Solomon Fox, stated that the only thing he knew about his great-grandfather's building was that he

"owned a grocery. My grandfather told me he had this huge safe in the back, where, every night, at the end of the work-day, merchants in the area would come give him their money to keep in his safe. The next morning they would come get it . . . (it seemed) they trusted him more than the banks."²²²

Later business ventures indicate that Solomon Fox had acquired an admirable reputation, and was considered trustworthy. Archaeological evidence to support William Fox's story is inconclusive, however, a large D-shaped handle was found with a large bolt protruding from the bottom of it. A heavy nut was screwed onto the distal aspect of the

²²¹ Sanborn maps consistently show the building angulated across the lot in this fashion. Most show the positioning of the front door, clearly angulated to the street corner. Also, city directories indicate a numerous amount of renters at this address. It was never "halved" with multiple addresses for one building.

²²² Personal conversation with William Fox, Jr., June 2015.

bolt, and if it had been tightened with the bolt running through something, it would have left a large void for a thick timber or support beam for it to have gone through. A small section of chain with thick links was attached to the D-ring, suggesting something very large and valuable was chained and bolted to something else quite large. This D-ring was found in the northwest corner of the store within a unit where we found direct evidence of an incinerator that was well used.

The most successful tenants of the grocery, "Fox and Baker" were not the first. The first proprietor at 901 West Washington was J.W. Taylor, in 1882, and Robert Clement Crawford took over the following year. In 1884 or 1885, Crawford built and opened a butcher shop directly next door to his grocery and this building became 903 West Washington. Sanborn maps show a smokehouse attached to the back end of the grocery, and it is likely that Crawford displayed smoked meats in his storefront before expanding to the new building. It is also likely that the smokehouse either shared duties with, or became the incinerator, as their location on Sanborn maps are approximately the same. Frederick E. Wentzel rented that butcher shop in 1885, and also lived above it, apparently in a second floor, although there is no surviving documentation to support or deny the existence of a second floor. The atmosphere of a late-1800's meat market and ventilation technologies of the time suggest there were floors for living quarters separate from the butcher shop. The boarding rooms above the businesses may or may not have been fully operational or existent at the time of their building. Archaeological evidence indicates multiple series of construction in the form of a massive amount of nails of varying morphology. Many of the nails present with an older, square-headed and shafted type, while others show no corrosion, and are of the framing nail or round-headed and shafted type. While the brick is all of the "Notre Dame brick" variety, the varying nail types suggest that the buildings were markedly retrofitted and remodeled inside after their initial erection. No boarders or roomers are found in city directories at the 901 West Washington site until Fox and Baker took possession in 1889.

The late 1880's saw a very tumultuous time of tenant movement for the 900-block of West Washington Street. Clem Crawford abandoned his grocery in 1886 or 1887, and Charles A. Miller began his

grocery business, but stayed there for only about a year. A new building was built in 1887 that became 909 West Washington, approximately twenty-five meters west from the meat market at 903, becoming the last building placed on the lot. Its first proprietors were E.C. Chapman, a druggist, and Amandus H. Shelt, a barber who also sold cigars and tobacco out of their mutual establishment. They were gone, however, in 1889, when the anchor grocery at 901 West Washington got its final, and most productive proprietors.

Fox and Baker Grocery

Solomon Fox and Frank Baker were two seasoned businessmen, but entrepreneurial newcomers. Fox was forty-one when he heard of the vacancy for a grocer at 901 West Washington, and partnered with Baker at some point in 1888. The next year, they formed "Fox and Baker," the anchor grocery in the 901 West Washington building.

Both Fox and Baker brought strengths and weaknesses to their initial partnership. Fox had been a clerk at "Oren and Baker," and though he lacked ownership experience, he had the financial and social backing of his powerful in-laws. His experience at "Oren and Baker," along with likely capital from his wealthy in-laws, allowed him to leave "Oren and Baker" in 1888 and join with Baker to form their own business. Combining Fox's management skills and experience with Baker's entrepreneurship and ability to provide baked goods and confectionaries suggests that the "Fox and Baker" grocery was one of the city's premier partnerships forming a multiple-resource storefront in the way a "7-11" would today.

Making a great partnership, Fox and Baker hit the South Bend grocery business like entrepreneurs determined for success. Using advertising, the two men quickly made a name for themselves in local publications. Another income stream for them was diversification. In 1889, their first year as owners, the room above 901 West Washington was rented out for the first time, to a local dressmaker. The two businessmen also rented out the meat market next door at 903 West Washington, and the storefront at 909 West Washington to John H. Freehafer and Nelson K. Berger, respectively. Freehafer lived at the meat market.

Continuing the serendipity for Fox and Baker's new business, the electric streetcar service opened down Washington Street in 1890. The trolley enabled a growing public transportation system within South Bend to expand beyond horse-cars and pedestrian traffic, allowed more consumers to reach more businesses, and for consumers to transport a larger amount of goods per trip. The economic advantage this brought to "Fox and Baker" only a year after their grand opening was extremely fortuitous, and played a key role in assisting the expanding West Washington neighborhood. The archaeological excavation on this site provided a five-cent token that may have been used for the trolley system or perhaps a nickelodeon that "Fox and Baker" may have had.

The 1890's were a decade where Fox and Baker solidified both their business and family names within South Bend. Suggesting acceptance into the elite families of the city, Fox's daughter helped add a social aspect within town. The *South Bend Tribune* wrote of Josie Fox and the social events she was attending. Young and beautiful, her trips out of town as well as social visits locally were reported. Also mentioned in the newspaper were Frank Baker's two girls, Grace and Ruth. The gossip and social columns of the two local newspapers printed anecdotes of the girls attending social events.²²³ Meanwhile, Fox and Baker became masters at business networking. The two joined and formed local grocers' associations, as well as developed business and political associations that favored them throughout the years. Trade journals and directories featured the two, often together, but sometimes apart. When not featured together, it was usually Solomon Fox whose name appeared, suggesting that he was the driving force behind the spread of the "Fox and Baker" name.

Plowed Over

Fox and Baker's history was nearly plowed over sometime between April of 1903 and October of 1904. The Oliver Family moved into their gorgeous mansion "Copshaholm" directly across from "Fox and Baker" in 1896. Much has been written about the Olivers and their contributions to South Bend as well as their incredible business success and wealth, and their new home on Washington Street exemplified this,

²²³ *South Bend News-Times* (South Bend, IN), 21 November 1914.

like a castle over the neighborhood marking a cornerstone of financial strength in the area. The Olivers lived in their new home for a few years before, according to Kristie Erickson, the Curator of Copshaholm, they decided that they “didn’t like the view” of the businesses across the street. The Oliver Family bought the land that the businesses were on, then had them torn down to provide a space for their daughter’s garden. However, archaeological evidence and the condition of the debris recovered suggest that the story of the building’s demolition is incorrect.

One theory for the demolition of the “Fox and Baker” grocery is that the buildings were not destroyed, but in fact moved. Moving buildings was very popular in the early 1900’s. It was also decidedly popular for the Oliver Family. When they purchased the land that their home was built upon, a beautiful new Victorian home sat at 902 West Washington, owned since its construction in 1889 by the Buzby family. In the winter of 1905, the Olivers wanted that land, so they had the home moved across the street, just north of where the “Fox and Baker” grocery stood, to 119 LaPorte Avenue.²²⁴ I discovered this while walking through the neighborhood looking at these homes, and noticed that the one at 119 LaPorte had a markedly different foundation. Instead of brick, like other homes, it had the distinctive limestone blocks of the Oliver Mansion, complete with the same cut and joining that is specific to their home. Some research proved that the Olivers built the foundation with the same stone that was used on Copshaholm, and that the house previously sat on their property. Although not a grocery, this shows the Olivers could and did move buildings to provide space for their own growth. Providing the new foundation was also a philanthropic touch. This suggests that the Olivers were cognizant of their presence as the wealthiest family on the block, and were perhaps inclined to get along with their neighbors the best they could, making transitions for their home and property as smooth as possible. In fact, the Olivers were well known throughout town for providing multiple donations and building projects for the people of the city.

²²⁴ The purchase of the additional land and move of the Buzby house was also for their garden, which seems to be the reason of choice for Oliver property expansion. Of note, the sunken gardens that exist at Copshaholm today are sunken because they are growing directly upon the old foundation of the Buzby house that stood there.

Were the Olivers equally amicable with Fox and Baker? We know that Solomon Fox lived next door to the Oliver family in 1880, and that the two families attended the same church, First Presbyterian, where Fox served as a deacon.²²⁵ They certainly knew of one another, and almost certainly had the same, or similar social circles. Fox, however, with his partner Frank Baker, was the successful proprietor and son-in-law of William Knoblock, owner of the South Bend Chilled Plow Company, the largest competitor to the Oliver Family's own plow business. This made him a markedly different neighbor than everyone else in the neighborhood.

The story is that the Olivers "didn't like the view," however if you take that term literally, it is not supported by evidence. Not only did the Olivers not place their garden in their new lot, they never put anything on it at all. Wise and frugal businessmen, the Olivers would have been remiss to purchase a large plot of land, tear down the successful businesses that stood there, and then never improve on it. The West Washington neighborhood was the most desirable area of town, and land directly across from the Oliver Mansion sharply increased in value simply by the Olivers' presence. To not build on it severely affected the Olivers' return-on-investment, which is out of character for a family who used stained wood putty on their crown molding to give the look of real wood without the cost.²²⁶ While the Studebaker family spent money with aplomb, the Olivers managed to build an equally, if not more impressive home at a fraction of the cost. Buying a valuable plot of land, as well as the profitable grocery on it only to tear it down and never rebuild anything, all the while incurring property tax bills on the land was not concomitant with Oliver Family, or any successful business.

It should be noted that the view hardly "improved" for the Olivers. In fact, it opened up a direct line-of-sight to St. Paul's Church on the corner of LaPorte and Colfax. While St. Paul's is certainly a lovely church, it was erected by Clem Studebaker, who had his own likeness painted into the \$40,000 stained-glass window on the east side of the

²²⁵ St. Joseph County, 1880 Census Report. Digital image, Mocavo.com.

²²⁶ Personal conversation with Kristie Erickson, Director and Curator of Copshaholm, June 2015.

building.²²⁷ Visible from Copshaholm, the Oliver Family had a perfect view of the church built by their competitors-in-fortune after having torn down the simple and practical grocery across the street.

When the Oliver Family stated that they “didn’t like the view,” perhaps they resented looking at another successful Knoblock business. There was no rational business explanation for the demolition of the “Fox and Baker” grocery; the Olivers were acting upon emotion. They purchased the land from Fox and Baker, and instead of keeping a grocery there and diversifying, or even renting it out to others, they tore it down.²²⁸ Violently.

The archaeological presence of massive amounts of broken glass and damaged building materials in small pieces spread over a disproportionate area of the lot indicate that not only were the buildings torn down with notable force, but that there was no intent to use the land afterward for gardens, or anything else of a personal nature. Broken glass and bent nails do not lend themselves to a grandiose garden like at Copshaholm today. There is no evidence of re-sodding or dirt cover on top of the field of debris that we excavated, and no stratigraphic evidence to support a cleanup effort or to bury the debris. This runs contrary to all other Oliver building projects around their home, and contrary to *a priori* reasoning. This was a personal decision on the part of the powerful Oliver family to change the “view” from one of taunting Knoblock success to one of Oliver conquest.

Out of the rubble

The Olivers’ conquest didn’t last long, and Fox and Baker displayed the kind of determination necessary to be successful in the post-industrial revolution climate. After the destruction of their grocery at

²²⁷ The window is valued at over \$1,000,000 today; however, as it is the *only* window of its kind in America done by German artists “Mayer and Company,” it is essentially priceless. Personal interview, tour, and informational booklet provided by Pastor Tom Thews, Pastor, June 2015.

²²⁸ Aside from brilliant location, shoppers are notoriously habitual. Another grocery at this location under a different name, or better yet an Oliver name, would have almost certainly brought financial success and created a return-on-investment and diversification. It was lack of diversification in business that ultimately led to the demise of the “Oliver Chilled Plow Company.”

901 West Washington, they rebuilt a block west, at 1001 West Washington. The lack of records from this time makes it impossible to know what the Olivers paid them for their space on the "triangle lot," however, we know that not only was the new "Fox and Baker" store successful, but Fox and Baker almost immediately spent large amounts of money. In 1904 or 1905 Baker moved down the street a few houses to 146 LaPorte, a more grandiose house, where he would remain. Instead of moving into a newer home, Fox chose to invest heavily into the South Bend Wholesale Grocers' Company, and started that business as its vice president in 1905. Located in a large warehouse at 330 Carroll, the South Bend Wholesale Grocers' Company also proved immediately successful. Much larger than his grocery, the South Bend Wholesale Grocers' Company owned a large, three-story building that had multiple addresses for rental use to other companies.²²⁹ Its first meeting was even accompanied by an orchestra and a quartette. In 1905, the new company saw an initial investment of \$40,000, and in 1906 alone saw an increase in stock investment of over \$25,000.²³⁰

Both Frank Baker and Solomon Fox retired from all business projects in 1914; Fox at the age of 66 and Baker 69. Fox died on the morning of 28 July 1931 after a week-long illness and cardiovascular disability.²³¹ Baker became ill around that time, and passed away a year and a half later, around midnight on 19 January 1933.²³² The two of them left their mark on South Bend business in powerful, yet subtle ways. Without expansive mansions or opera halls and hotels named after them, Solomon Fox and Frank Baker rose from pioneer entrepreneurs to savvy businessmen that left behind inspirational stories for their families to follow with pride. Solomon Fox's great-grandchildren remain in South Bend, and continue the Fox family tradition of business success.

²²⁹ 326-330 Carroll Street. This building, street, and entire block was torn out in the early 1970's, and a US Postal Service processing center as well as a large modern office building now occupy that land.

²³⁰ *Annual Report of the Secretary of State of Indiana* (1907), 132.

²³¹ "Solomon Fox, Ex-Grocer, Dies, *South Bend Tribune* (South Bend, IN), 28 July 1931.

²³² "Francis Baker Dies at Age 87," *South Bend Tribune* (South Bend, IN), 21 January 1933.

Conclusion

If Studebakers and Olivers made up the face of South Bend, Indiana, it was every other businessman that made up the spine, holding it all up; each of them were vertebrae with their own nerves stretching out through the entire organism to both feel the input from the city as well as to provide their own touch. Like the Olivers, Studebakers, and Knoblocks, Solomon Fox and Francis M. Baker demonstrated their own influence and prosperity, and while their grocery on the "Triangle Lot" has gone, findings from archaeological and historical evidence remind us of their significance in South Bend history.