

Historic Archer Avenue

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Address:	Archer Avenue (2700 South - 3100 South), located in the Bridgeport neighborhood
Date:	1866 - 1899
Architects:	Various
Style:	Various styles, including Italianate, Queen Anne, Romanesque, and Workman's Cottage
CHRS Rating:	8 Orange-Rated buildings including 2727 S. Archer (1886), 2731 S. Archer, 2815 S. Archer, 2904 S. Archer (1883) (D.E. Healy building), 2918 S. Archer (1887), 2971 S. Archer (1892), 3012 S. Archer (1896)
National Register:	No

Overview:

Traveling down Archer Avenue is like taking a trip back to the golden age of an early Chicago commercial district. The oldest part of Bridgeport, it is a neighborhood with its own distinct identity that hosts a mix of architectural styles. To this day, the architecture of the late 1800's remains. Even though some of it is in disrepair, the composite of buildings tells an important story that should be preserved.

History:

There is perhaps no more colorful area in our city's early history than historic Archer Avenue. This stretch of road was once a planked-over roadway along the route of an old Indian trail called the "Road to Willow Brown's." This route saw a sudden burst of activity when construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal was begun in the 1830's. A new town was formed named Bridgeport, the only part of our city that is diagonally oriented.

Archer Avenue continued to boom in the 1840's, with many Irish and German immigrants arriving. These immigrants worked on the canal construction as well as in the stockyards that lined the South Branch prior to the creation of the Union Stockyards. Archer Avenue was named in honor of Colonel William Archer, who was one of the three original Illinois and Michigan Canal commissioners overseeing its construction.

Archer Avenue thrived over the next several decades, with nearby lumberyards, steel mills, and the new Union Stockyards as key places of employment. The labor unrest of 1877 saw police chase labor rioters across the Halsted Street bridge and into Bridgeport, where the protesters rallied again on Archer Avenue.

In the 1880's and 1890's, when the largest of the surviving buildings were constructed, the street featured union halls, boot stores, funeral parlors, livery businesses, grocery stores, bakeries, and everything else to serve a booming residential community. At the western end of the stretch, the billowing smoke from steel-making at the Union Rolling Mills laid a shadow across the neighborhood.

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Disinvestment, neglect, and the construction of the Stevenson Expressway in the 1950's all took their toll on Archer Avenue. To that end, there has been very little new construction along Archer Avenue from c.1905 until the present. However, there have been some demolitions as well as a few unfortunate façade alterations. Most notably was the demolition of the early Irish community's historic St. Bridget's Church, where Mayor Richard J. Daley married Eleanor (Sis) Guilfoyle Daley.

Threat:

Since 2000, Bridgeport has become the focus of much new residential and commercial development. Demolitions, partial demolitions ("remodelings"), the destruction of historic façades and the construction of buildings incompatible with the historic streetscape are slowly, but methodically, ruining its character.

Recommendation:

Preservation Chicago recommends that this stretch of Archer Avenue be immediately studied by the City of Chicago to determine if the district could meet preliminary landmark status. We ask that Alderman James Balcer support this designation. We encourage the city to work with current property owners to inform them of the substantial tax incentives available for properties within landmark districts.

Future construction should also be compatible with the historic character of the district. Missing cornices and missing ornament is an unfortunate consequence of deferred maintenance along Archer Avenue. However, these ornamental details can be repaired and reconstructed.

Historic Archer Avenue can serve as a tourist destination and as an educational resource, but only if it is handled properly. The recently-completed "Canal Origins Park" highlights the historical importance of this area. This park, located nearby on Ashland Avenue just north of Archer Avenue marks the location where the early residents of Bridgeport began work on the Illinois and Michigan Canal in the early 1840's. Historic Archer Avenue can tell people of all ages the colorful story of early Bridgeport, and in so doing tell the story of early Chicago.

Historic Archer Avenue is a tremendous asset that other cities would love to have. We need to nurture it, bring it back to life, and pass it on to future generations of Chicagoans.



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