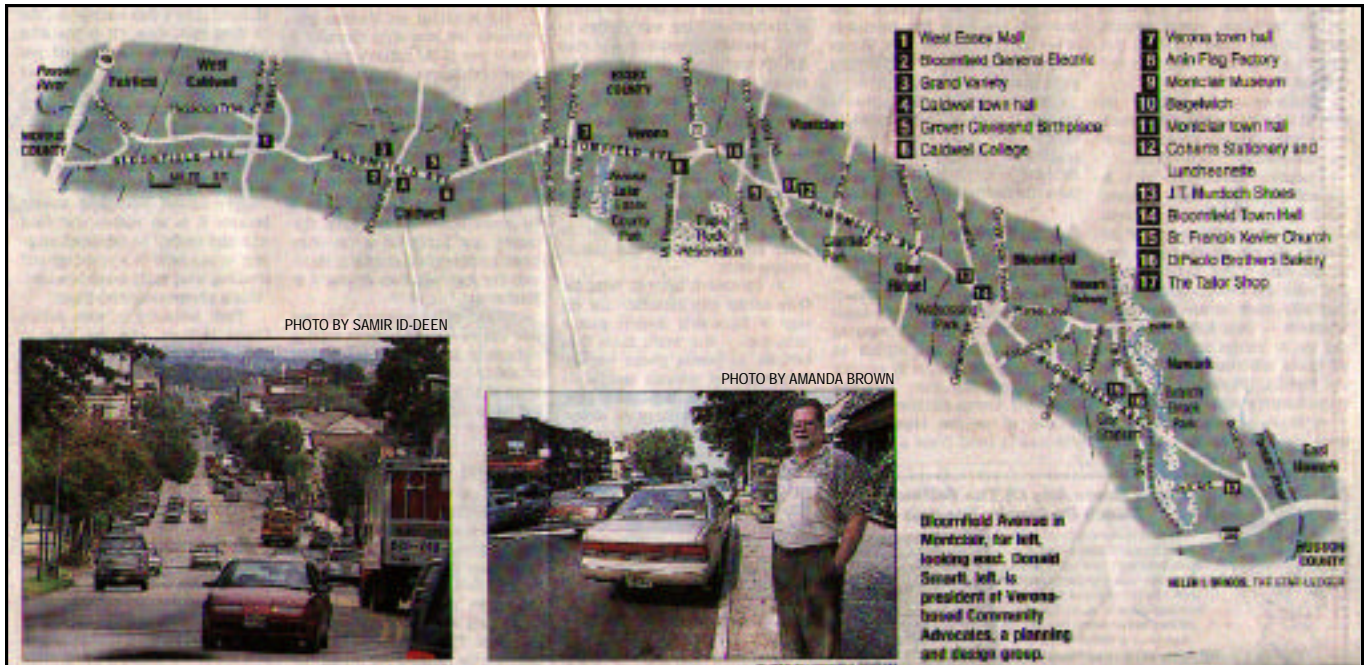


# Sunday Star-Ledger

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## Bloomfield Avenue Paved with vibrant cultures



### History, commerce and camaraderie alive on 'Main Street,' Essex County

By Kate Coscarelli, STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The small white signs offering tailoring services at Marco Perez's shop on Bloomfield Avenue are printed in English and Spanish.

Most of the people who visit the Newark store are native to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, like Perez, Guatemala, or a casting call of other Latin American countries. Perez's store is a relatively recent addition to the bustle of business along the avenue. The Tailor Shop opened nine years ago, his American dream.

Except for the two years he spent in the Army, Steve Macanga, 67, has spent his whole life working along the avenue. He

is the third generation of men in his family to run Bloomfield General Electric on the avenue in Caldwell, a throwback business that sells only one brand of appliance. Eventually his son will take over.

At nearly opposite ends of the 11-mile avenue, these men live in separate worlds. But they share a faith in the enduring vitality of Bloomfield Avenue.

Certainly, they are examples of the diversity that defines the street as a patchwork of neighborhoods as it extends from Newark to Fairfield. But they also are examples of people who invested in their community, people who live and make a

living along what is in fact Essex County's Main Street.

"It is one of the most important roads in the county, there is no question," said Charles Cummings, Newark city historian. "It is the main street to a lot of towns and had just about everything going for it."

On the east end of the road, 31,000 cars and 12,400 bus passengers each day travel the winding stretch of asphalt that rises out of Broadway in Newark's north end. There, six lanes of traffic and a jumble of storefronts consume the horizon. It is a gritty neighborhood now lined with bars restaurants, video stores and bodegas that



Don Smartt and The Community Advocates

offer goods in two languages to serve the recent waves of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants who settled here.

"There are a lot of different people here," said Ana Peres as she smoked a cigarette on the sidewalk on her way home from the store. "Puerto Ricans, Americans, Ecuadorians, everything."

A decade ago, the 44-year-old moved to an apartment on Bloomfield Avenue from Puerto Rico. Peres came to Newark for the same reasons many others have come: a friend was here.

More than 30 years ago, the signs were in Italian, and 40 years before that, this part of Bloomfield Avenue was an enclave for German and Irish immigrants. Before them came the Dutch and English. Before them, Lenape Indians blazed the trail looking for a faster way to get from the ocean to the Delaware Water Gap more than 300 years ago.



PHOTO BY SAMIR ID-DEEN

Cohen's Stationery and Luncheonette in Montclair is about to undergo a construction project that will add three stories to the 100 year-old building.

The continuous overlap of cultures is very much a part of the avenue's past, present and probably future.

"We get to know each other. In a way, we all look after each other," said Perez as he took a moment from reading a biography of Louis Pasteur to look out the open front door of his tailor shop at the passing traffic.

As principal at St. Francis Xavier School the past 15 years, Clare Riccardelli, 67, has witnessed some of these cultural overlaps.

"There is a change of culture and ethnic groups. It is different but you have to blend

with it. It keeps things alive and moving... No place is like it used to be," she said.

The glass cases of pastries and racks of bread at DiPaolo Brothers Bakery, down the street from the church, are testimony to a subtle evolution. When it opened in 1961 only bread was for sale. Now, in addition to the traditional round peasant loaves of pane casareccio and rich pastries, chewy Portuguese rolls and silky flan are for sale.

"Whatever people ask for we have. It is better business," said manager Franco DiPaolo, whose customers come from as far as the Shore.

Downtown Bloomfield, too, is in the midst of change. Once a vibrant business center full of big department stores and office buildings with all the benefits of a suburb, Bloomfield center lost some of that luster to shopping malls and western development. Decidedly more urban than some neighbors—Glen Ridge, Montclair and out to Verona and Caldwell—but more suburban than Belleville and Newark, Bloomfield center is both a transition and in transition.

A 30-year-old sneaker store altered its stock to favor hip-hop clothes, and a check-cashing place and go-go bar are relatively recent additions. But the art-deco office building at the center of town, which sat mostly empty for years, recently secured tenants for most of the space.

There are some, like J.T. Murdoch Shoes, the weight-lifting store and electrical supply shop, that say they don't want to be anywhere but downtown Bloomfield, and are holding out hope that the budding momentum in the office rentals will flourish around them.

And yet some things in Bloomfield never change. It always has been and remains a transportation hub. Mary Murdoch's great-grandfather opened his specialty shoe store in 1888 in Newark. It later moved to East Orange and eventually Bloomfield 20 years ago to capitalize on the access to bus routes.

"We needed that. The location is easily accessible to everything," said Murdoch, who is the fifth generation of her family to run the store. Things might have changed, "but we are going to stay".

Bloomfield Avenue passes through 11 towns in Essex County. In eight of them, it is a major presence. It also is the boundary between Essex Fells and North Caldwell, and it nicks the southwest corner of Belleville.

#### **A transit artery**

The technology of transportation has been largely responsible for development along the road, noted Donald Smartt, president of Verona-based Community Advocates. His planning and design group has worked on making improvements in 30 communities across the state including Bloomfield, Verona and

Montclair.

One of the first improvements was done by Israel Crane, a Montclair businessman, who took the bumpy old Indian trail and incorporated the Newark-Pompton Turnpike in 1806. Crane built the "modern" road for \$4,000 a mile and had an exit installed that brought traffic right to his front door. It became the state's first county road (No. 506) when Essex County paid \$22,000 for it in 1871.

First horses, then carriages and later trolleys brought commerce and customers west from Newark. Now many Bloomfield store owners look for customers as each bus pulls up. Looking ahead, the same business owners, like Alan Rappaport, owner of Economy Shoes, are pinning hopes for new business on NJ Transit's Montclair Connection with a stop in Bloomfield that will afford residents a straight shot to New York City. It is expected to open in 2002.

The train is central to many lives along Bloomfield Avenue. At dawn, Glen Ridge residents in blue suits hustle down the avenue for the trains to Manhattan. Most won't return to their beautifully restored Victorian and tudor homes until night falls again.

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At the revamped Lackawanna train station turned shopping center in Montclair, the old turnpike crouches down and springs forward toward the first rise of the Watchung Mountains. Cars angle for parking spaces; parking is an ongoing problem as town planners struggle to make accommodations and talk of parking decks. In the time it takes to cross the town border into Montclair, the energy of Bloomfield Avenue gets a jump-start—one worth more than \$300,000 in federal grants for new lampposts and sidewalk and facade improvements. In fact, since 1994, Essex County has funneled almost \$1.5 million in federal grant money for aesthetic projects along the avenue, according to Al Restaino, acting director of the county's Division of Housing and Community Development.

"It is our image of the entire township. There are thousands of people a day who know Montclair through Bloomfield Avenue," said Michael Zichelli, Montclair's assistant planner.

Lampposts tell a lot about a town.

The black cast-iron posts with simple detailing and frosted glass bulbs that line Bloomfield Avenue were designed especially for the town as part of an effort to revamp the business district several years ago. Other towns can use them, but they always will be known as Montclair lamps.

In the past five years there has been a concerted effort to distinguish the Bloomfield Avenue district in Montclair. Facade improvements and business recruitment still are priorities, but past labors have certainly borne fruit.

### A cultural hub

There are two movie theaters, one that shows mostly art films, expensive galleries of African art, restaurants that advertise their dotcoms along with their braised breast of lamb specials. The high-end antique shops co-habitate with lawyers, real estate developers and hardware stores.

The Montclair Art Museum that overlooks the busy strip currently is host to one of the nation's most ambitious exhibitions.

"Paris 1900: 'The American School' at the Universal Exposition" recreates the United States' display at the Paris World's Fair from that year, when for the first time American art was taken on a level with European work.

Resident Janet Donofrio is like a lot of new homeowners in town. She moved her family to a two-story house on Bloomfield Avenue in Montclair five years ago from Avenue Ain Manhattan.

"When we were looking, this was nice and we wanted to be in walking distance to downtown," she said. The proximity to the market, shops, museum and train were important, said the Montclair State University graduate student.

### Changing with the times

Business owners and officials understand this new kind of resident and have worked to adapt the avenue accordingly. Scott Sirkin is among those

merchants trying to stay relevant. In fact, his store is one of the few places people can get French Vogue and Sedona or The Sunday New York Times on Saturday night just like the newsstands across the Hudson River where he lives. In Montclair, Bloomfield Avenue is cosmopolitan.

Sirkin is about to begin a \$81.5 million project that will add three stories to Cohen's Stationery and Luncheonette. The work will revamp the building to look its 100 years, but have all the benefits of a modern office building.

When his family took over the shop 20 years ago, things weren't so flush, he said. Now businesses are booming as some people start thinking of Montclair's Bloomfield Avenue as viable in a way more like trendy New York neighborhoods than frozen-in-time Caldwell.

"That is what Main Street is—everything is here," Sirkin said.

But everything can mean such different things.

Little in the stout buildings lining Bloomfield Avenue in Verona, home to Annin Flag Factory since 1847, says that

this is the most heavily traveled stretch of the road. Here Bloomfield Avenue is a conduit to Route 280 to the south and Routes 23, 46, 3 and 80 to the east. And yet, despite the commuter traffic, the road retains a Main Street feel. On a recent afternoon sullied by skies heavy with drizzle, nothing was going to keep Verona High School freshman Craig Felcher from visiting Bagelwich a few blocks up from school.

"These are pretty good bagels," said the 14 year-old who stopped by with a crowd of his friends who could all stand in for a Gap commercial, like he does most days. "It is like after school you need a snack and you come here. You can stop on the way home."

Frank Oldewurtel first opened the store in 1982, when there were only a handful of bagel shops up and down the avenue. His count now puts that number closer to 20 stores.

"We figured Bloomfield Avenue because it is an east-to-west road with high traffic," he explained, stopping to say hello to a customer and revealing what really keeps him here. "This is a home away from home."

That familiarity is what brings Cheryl Molinari, who has lived in town most of her life, and at least two of her three children to the store practically every day. Waiting for his snack, her 8-year-old son, Anthony, announces why he prefers visits to the avenue.

"The guys across the street know me," he said, before climbing into the car to head home.

Even so, the avenue is not immune to modern development. Settled and built predominantly in the last 50 years, farms at the western-most end of the old turnpike have given way to strip malls.

West Caldwell's suburban sprawl gave rise to one of the first strip malls in the state—if not the first. Here the speed limit bumps up 10 mph, there is virtually no on-street parking, and for the first time along its length grassy medians divide the road in a strict east-west divide. Here, too, are vast car dealerships: Buick, Toyota, Mercedes-Benz and Honda. Here, you can buy a shiny new car with a high-tech global positioning system. But you also can find places to get a horse saddle fixed, a reminder of West Essex's rural past.

"Bloomfield Avenue is really critical"



PHOTO BY AMANDA BROWN

At Bloomfield Avenue's eastern end stands 81 Broadway in Newark, a structure built in the 1790's.

said Angela Segal, president of The West Essex Chamber of Commerce. "It just pulls the county together."

#### **A stable center**

That is the job of any Main Street—to pull a town or region together. Downtown Caldwell has been doing just that for decades. Things change little in Caldwell. Most of the signs aren't neon, but have thin, stiff lettering that beckon another era.

From the back of the Grand Variety—a relic of the genuine five-and-dime stores—a customer calls the owner by name in a search for smaller-sized work gloves. In another aisle Barbara Tabachnick peruses the stock of phone jacks, carpet swatches, World Wrestling Federation action figures, elephant-shaped watering cans, knitting needles and melon ballers.

"Where else can you get needles and thread and toys?" she wants to know. This is not like the mall, she says. "There I can't find anybody to take my money"—another way of saying "no service."

Tabachnick is like a lot of people who shop Bloomfield Avenue in Caldwell. She's been doing it for 41 years. The drive

is short. Things are easy to find. Everybody knows one another. This is what she knows and what she likes.

"It is our town. It's like home," she said. "I don't go shopping anywhere else."

Steve Macanga understands this. At a time when most people's appliances come from a mall or a big box store, Macanga's one-brand store is an anomaly. Bloomfield General Electric opened its doors in 1948 on the avenue in Bloomfield, and business was so good that seven years later another store was opened in Caldwell. Today the single store in Caldwell is left.

"They are very reliable," said Karen Zaretsky, who figures all but one appliance in her West Caldwell home came from Macanga's shop. "It is the service they give you."

Buy a dishwasher from the store and you can expect that the plumber will be called in, the delivery made on time and questions answered patiently and in person at the store just a few minutes away.

"You make a living. It is hard work but you like dealing with the public. It is a nice community," said Macanga. "I have made a lot of nice friends here."

## **BY THE NUMBERS**

### **31,000**

the average number of cars that use Bloomfield Avenue in Verona each day.

### **12,400**

the number of people who ride the bus along Bloomfield Avenue every day.

### **1806**

the year the Newark-Pompton Turnpike, which eventually became the avenue was incorporated.

### **11.2**

length in miles of the avenue.

### **11**

the number of towns in Essex County through which the street passes.

### **4**

the number of towns in the county that have their town hall on or adjacent to the avenue.

### **1/2**

cost in cents of toll for a single pig to use the Newark-Pompton Turnpike in the early 1800s.

### **22,000**

the amount in dollars Essex County paid to take over the Newark-Pompton Turnpike and turn it into Bloomfield Avenue in 1871.

### **29**

Route number of the NJ Transit bus that travels from Newark to West Caldwell along the street.

### **23**

the number of places to get pizza along the avenue

### **1**

the number of U.S. presidents born of Bloomfield Avenue. Steven Grover Cleveland, born in 1837, in a Presbyterian pastor's residence in Caldwell. The only president born in New Jersey.

**"We're proud to play a part in improving Bloomfield Avenue."**