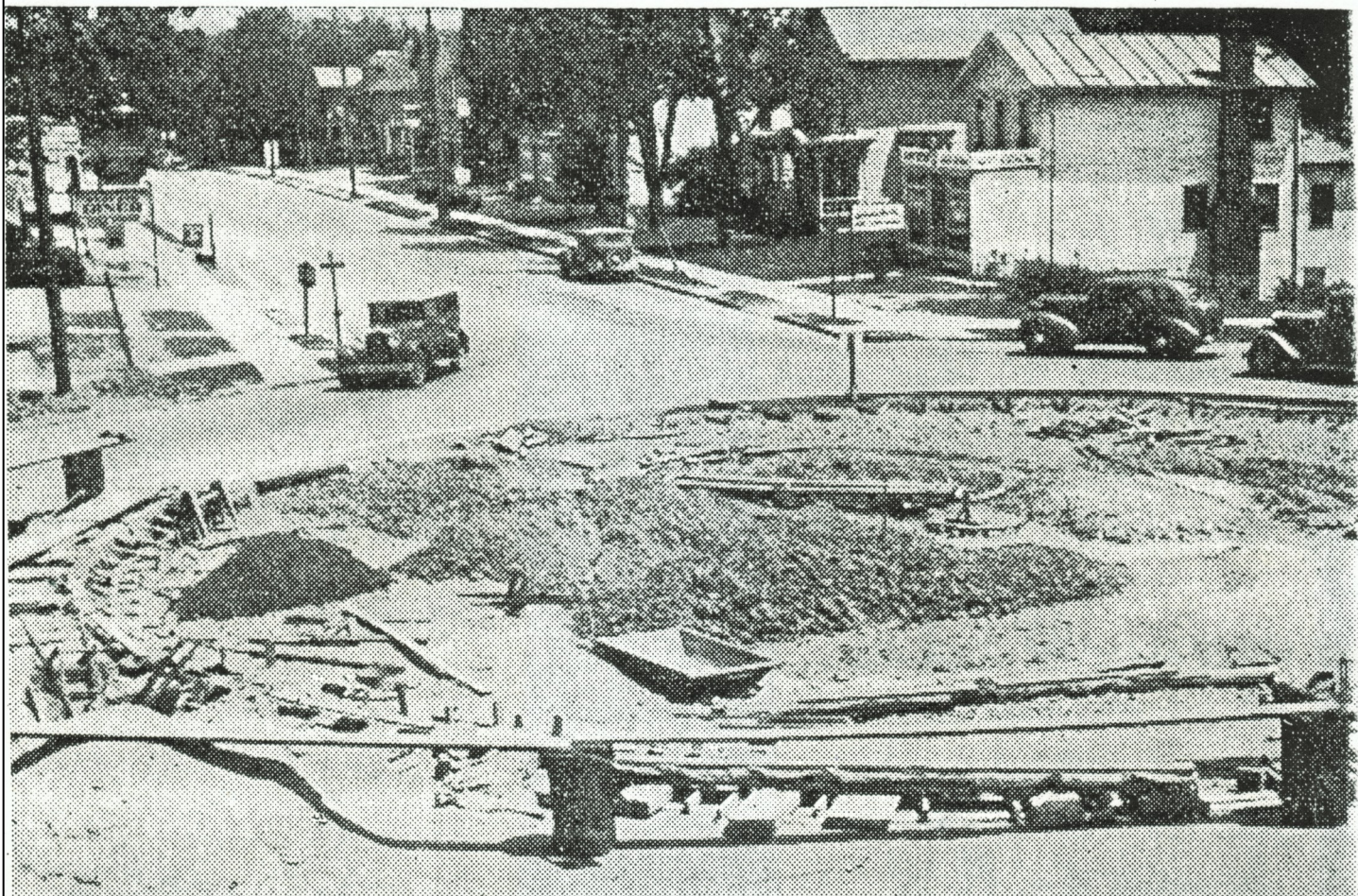


19-36 Circle Replaces Triangles at Willink Square



The geometric irony of the situation was not lost on the editors of local newspapers during the construction of The Circle in 1936. “Circle Replaces Triangles at Willink Square,” noted the headline above this photograph in a Buffalo newspaper. *(From the archives of the Aurora Town Historian’s Office).*

‘The Circle’ Has Taken Many Different Shapes

by Robert Lowell Goller

Town and Village Historian

Copyright 2023 Robert Lowell Goller

To improve transportation safety in recent years, traffic engineers have converted intersections to roundabouts in many communities. Most recently, a new roundabout greets motorists at the southern end of Route 400.

In East Aurora, however, this innovation is nothing new. “The Circle” has been an unofficial landmark at the west end of the village since 1936. However, despite its (albeit unofficial) name, The Circle hasn’t always been a circle. And although it is officially known as Willink Square, named after the village that once surrounded it, the intersection has included an oval, triangles and a circle, but never a square.

Until the early 1900s, “The Circle” was nothing more than the convergence of East Aurora’s Main Street with the dirt roads to Hamburg and Buffalo. The informal “town square” bustled with activity in the late 1800s, with visitors traveling from around the globe to visit the nearby world-famous horse farms of Cicero Hamlin and the Jewett family.

A 1904 Sanborn insurance map shows that by that year, an informal triangular-shaped park with paths running through it had developed at the often-muddy intersection. By 1912, pipe fences had been erected around three small grass islands, one oval surrounded by two irregularly shaped triangles.

When Main Street was paved with bricks in the summer of 1914, a set of two, more formal curbed triangles were constructed. The intersection continued to serve as a town square and hosted community events and concerts. By the mid-1920s, a modest bandstand had been placed in one of the grassed triangles, and a World War I German “prize” cannon was put on display in the other.

In May 1932, the Village Board added formality to the intersection by officially naming it Willink Square.

Village Trustee W. Edward Chandler, a resident of the village’s west end, championed the effort to resurrect the Willink name. Wilhelm Willink was a wealthy merchant in the Netherlands and a principal investor in the Holland Land Co., which controlled land in Western New York in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Until 1874, the western end of the current-day Village of East Aurora was named the Village of Willink, and the same area was served by the Willink Post Office until 1913.

The irony of naming two grass triangles “Willink Square” in 1932 was not lost on the editors of a Buffalo newspaper, who jokingly noted, “Changing a triangle to a square has been done without (physical) alterations.”

The parklike setting at Willink Square soon faced pressure from the automobile. Motorists, who became more numerous in the 1920s and 1930s, found it difficult to navigate the two triangles. One newspaper report called them “confusing traffic hazards.” To alleviate this problem, the triangles were converted to a circle in 1936 as part of larger project to widen East Aurora’s Main Street. The construction was funded through the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), a federal initiative to provide jobs and improve transportation and other infrastructure during the Great Depression.

After approval from the State Highway Department in early January 1936, work on the new traffic circle began within weeks.



Until the early 1900s, “The Circle” was nothing more than the convergence of East Aurora’s Main Street with the dirt roads to Hamburg and Buffalo. By 1912, pipe fences had been erected around three small islands, one oval surrounded by two irregularly shaped triangles. McDonald’s restaurant stands today on the former site of the West End Hotel. (From the archives of the Aurora Town Historian’s Office).

Again, the geometric irony of the situation was not lost on the editors of local newspapers.

“Two Triangles to Equal One Circle, When WPA Finishes,” proclaimed a headline in the April 2, 1936 issue of the *Advertiser*.

“Circle Replaces Triangles at Willink Square,” noted the headline above a photograph of the circle under construction in a May 1936 issue of a Buffalo newspaper.

The project wasn't without its challenges, however.

Village officials soon realized that they would need to find new homes for the concert bandstand, which the *East Aurora Advertiser* deemed “a familiar landmark downtown,” and the World War I cannon. The bandstand was relocated to Hamlin Park; the gun was placed at the entrance to American Legion Post 362 on Center Street until it was scrapped for metal during World War II.

Several business owners supported the Main Street widening, from 30 and 40 feet to 51 feet, because it would provide space for parking and turning lanes, but the project was halted for a few weeks “by objection of property owners and others interested in saving trees along the area affected,” noted an article in the May 21, 1936 issue of the *Advertiser*. W.P.A. officials threatened to move workers to other projects, including construction in Emery Park, if the Main Street construction didn't continue.

According to newspaper reports, the circle construction proceeded after it was separated from the Main Street widening project, which eventually also continued after village officials promised to replace many of the displaced trees.

Although deemed safer than the triangles, The Circle took some time to get used to. According to newspaper reports, several confused motorists failed to yield the right of way, and others drove around it in the wrong direction.

A planned traffic signal in the middle of The Circle, mentioned in an article in the April 2, 1936 issue of the *Advertiser*, never materialized, and within months the Board of Trade was leading an effort to install better signs and pavement markings.



When Main Street was paved with bricks in the summer of 1914, a set of two curbed triangles were constructed. The intersection continued to serve as a “town square” and hosted community events and concerts. A bandstand can be seen in the grassed triangle in the background of this circa 1930 photograph looking toward Hamburg Street, and a World War I German “prize” cannon is in the triangle in the foreground. (From the archives of the Aurora Town Historian’s Office).

“At present, a reflector sign directs traffic approaching from the north to ‘go right’ around the circle,” the *Advertiser* reported on Oct. 15, 1936, “but many, especially strangers, apparently do not see or heed the sign with a resultant confusion and congestion at times...The situation is not a serious one and can probably be regulated with little difficulty.”

The Circle continued to challenge motorists, however. In 1961, a truck driver lost a large load of hay after he rounded the southern side too quickly.

Despite the logistical difficulties, “The Circle” quickly became an unofficial East Aurora landmark.

By Memorial Day 1936, articles and advertisements in the *Advertiser* went from calling the intersection Willink Square to Willink Circle. Over time, East Aurorans began referring to it simply as “The Circle,” although village records still officially consider it Willink Square.

Harrington’s Circle Inn and the Circle Coin Laundry were among the businesses to embrace the “circle” name. The Circle Inn was destroyed by fire in 1963, after it had become Shores’ Circle Inn. Many other west end businesses advertised their location “on the circle.”

Despite a few logical changes and minor geographic shifts during road construction projects over the years, The Circle has remained a circle since 1936, even though there has been pressure to change it from time to time.

When McDonald’s restaurant opened in 1980, there was some discussion of replacing The Circle with a more conventional T intersection.

“We hesitate to call for any radical changes in the configuration of the circle to make it a ‘T’ or ‘teardrop,’ or whatever,” the *Advertiser* publisher noted in an editorial at the time. “After all, traffic has been drawn away from Main Street by Route 400, and the circle has been there for a good 40 years, at least. However, if the restaurant and other businesses cause greater problems than anticipated, the (village) traffic committee would do well to consider a change.”

However, traffic engineers have touted circles, or “roundabouts,” as safer alternatives to traditional T intersections. When the State Department of Transportation reconstructed Main Street in the mid-2000s, small roundabouts were suggested at other village intersections, similar to those added in the Village of Hamburg. However, following local resistance, the plan was abandoned in East Aurora.

As part of the mid-2000s reconstruction, The Circle was reconfigured to include a raised median, crosswalks and an apron for tractor trailers. An early plan from the State Department of Transportation called for a two-lane circle, but many East Aurorans didn’t like that idea and it was abandoned.

East Aurorans also don’t like calling it a “roundabout,” the term preferred by traffic engineers. In this village, the roundabout at Willink Square is still called “The Circle.”

A special exhibit, “The Shapes of the Circle,” is on view outside the Historian’s Office at the Aurora Municipal Center, 575 Oakwood Ave., through May 31. This and other historical exhibits may be viewed during regular Municipal Center hours, Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. The Aurora History Museum is presented by the Aurora Town Historian’s Office in collaboration with the Aurora Historical Society. For more information, visit www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian.