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FOR RESERVATIONS





# Kings Row

There's a story behind every door along the West End's exclusive Park Row.

BY WILLIAM DAVID BARRY

**H**ORACE MORSE, resident, enlightened landlord, and hands-on restorer of three of **Park Row's** 14 townhouse units during the late 1960s through the early 1980s, always dreamed of writing an operetta about this brick and brownstone structure (planned in 1835, built 1837) and its colorful residents. Few would have been better suited to such a task than the gregarious, contagiously optimistic antiquarian, entrepreneur, and conversationalist. In those heroic early days of architectural preservation, concerned citizens rallied around Greater Portland Landmarks (GPL), and its first director, Pamela Plumb, had begun to restore the Row. Located in

what was then considered a 'blighted area,' it was difficult to arrange home loans for units, but in 1970 they were able to place Maine's largest and finest row-house on the National Register of Historic Places.

Since World War II, when the bottom fell out of the local economy, the prevailing dream of Portland's civic leaders centered on urban renewal (slum clearance), which brought in big federal dollars and construction jobs and made run-down houses disappear. At the dawn of the 1970s, dreams of urban renewal and architectural preservation collided on the virtual doorstep of Park Row. Greater Portland Landmarks was organized in response to earlier losses

such as Union Station, St. Stephen's Church, Munjoy South, and the ongoing destruction and depopulation of the Spring and Pleasant streets neighborhoods. GPL looked to protect buildings for creative reuse and destination tourism. From High Street to the Old Port to Franklin Street, a two-lane arterial was created, splitting the city. Activist Vincent O'Malley noted, "Money talks and everybody walks. The majority of those forced from their homes (on Spring and Pleasant) went into worse housing and higher rent."

A rather nasty war of words grew in the local press. In 1972, the \$13.5-million Maine Way Project—from Spring Street to Stroudwater—was progressing toward the West

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## CITY BEAT

Current owners on the row, according to Portland's online tax database, include restaurant impresario Dana Street, gallerist June Fitzpatrick, and former Portland mayor Pamela Plumb and attorney husband Peter Plumb.

End. In that spring, City Manager John E. Menario told local businessmen that GPL was rushing in to have condemned structures marked historic "not so much for historic interest...but to block renewal."

GPL's president, Charlton S. Smith, emphatically denied any plans to block progress. "We simply wish to have a voice in the redevelopment process at a time when there is still a chance to explore alternatives to the demolition of historically valuable buildings." Here was a firm statement of creative reuse, preserving an irreplaceable destination spot rather than give way to a group of bland new buildings to drive around or through. After years of wrangling, this would subsequently lead to more cooperation of citizens, business, historic preservation, and government.

Today, a dreary intersection between the Little Tap House restaurant and a green-space parking lot marks the end of the cross-peninsula arterial dream and the start of architectural preservation and livability in the West End, the future washing up on the doorstep of Park Row.

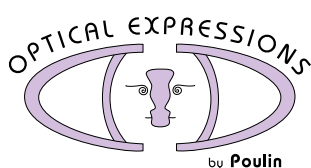
But dreams are curious things. Sometimes they end up deferred.

In the mid-1830s, art critic John Neal brought the notion of townhouses built in rows to Portland. Neal built a duplex on State Street intending to include more units but was preempted by the Ann Street Company (Park Street Proprietary), who snagged his potential investors.

The investors paid \$15,000 for Billy Gray's Rope Walk between Congress and Gray streets and lofted an elegant row of townhouses on newly named Park Street. However, the national panic of 1837 bankrupted the investors and the units were sold at auction. Though interiors and trim were left to individual owners and all were sold by 1838, some were used for storage of hay and other material. The vertical four- and five-story complex never appealed to the



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# 1962

wealthy. As fashion moved west toward Bramhall and the Promenade, citizens of solid, if modest, means took up lodging in the row, but the whole idea of such connected brick homes vanished until our time. Here again is a curious deferral of dreams. As Patricia Anderson observes in the book *Portland* (1972), "It is safe to say that today's renaissance of this handsome row is much closer to the vision of the Park Street Proprietors in 1835 than actuality in 1838." Today, overarching trees line the thoroughfare, which was virtually without shade in the 1970s.

And what of the people in Horace's operetta? Certainly they would include Dr. Alfred Brinkler, music teacher and organist at St. Luke's, who was the second owner of his unit from 1906 to the 1970s. It was he who installed a massive Hope & James pipe organ in the townhouse he sold to Peter and Pam Plumb. The latter was Mayor and saw the city adopt its first historic preservation ordinance. Or renter Bill Frost, who was playing his guitar when Horace knocked on the door saying, "I've come to complain about the music."

"I'll play softer," said the musician. "No, louder," said the landlord. "Either you keep the door open or come down. We can hardly hear you."

In the 1990s, John Preston, author of *Winters' Light*, chosen as one of 100 books that best revealed the history of the State, took up residence. *The New York Times Book Review* noted: "The first hero in the fine collection of essays is Portland, a small city where John Preston finally found a community quirky enough to encompass himself."

Let the Row keep drawing the originals, and may its song be sung. ■

William David Barry is the author of *Maine: The Wilder Half of New England*. He is a reference historian at the Maine Historical Society.

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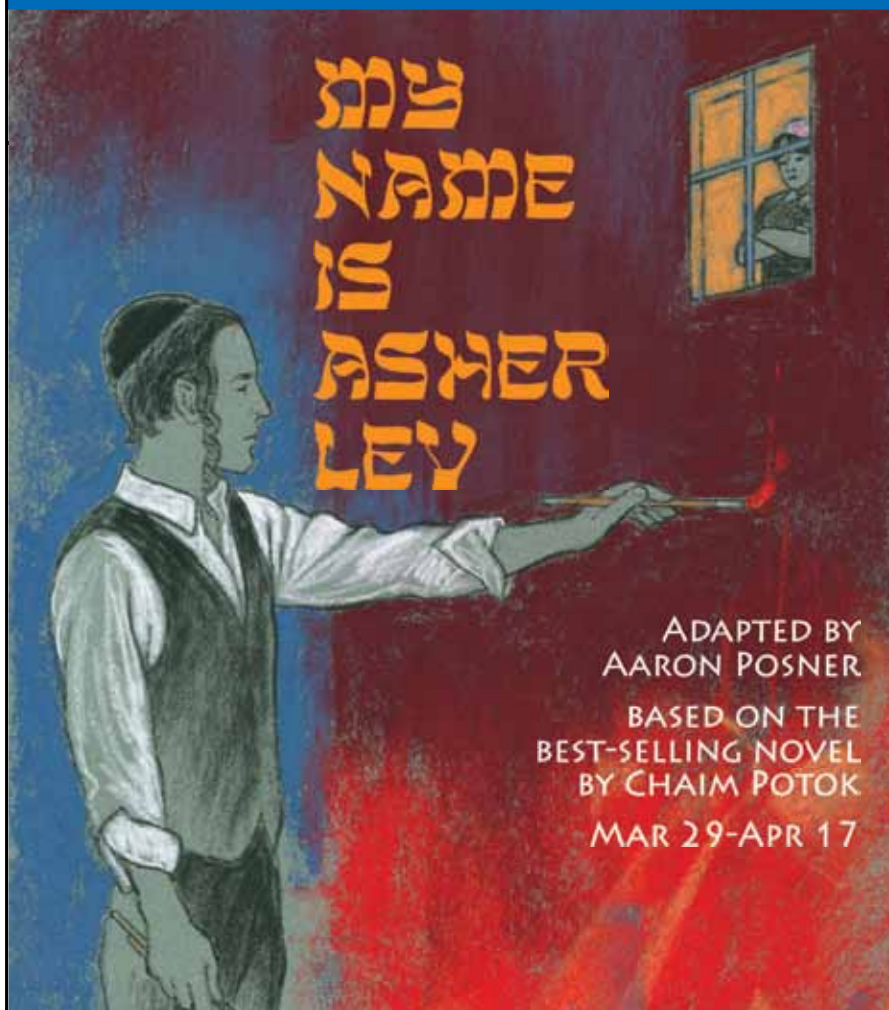
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