

Walsh puts Derby's historic locations on Google Maps

By Eddy Martinez



Ned Gerard / Hearst Connecticut Media

Jack Walsh, former head of the Derby Historical Society, stands next to an iron kettle on display next to Derby Public Library on Wednesday. The kettle was used for boiling down whale blubber in the 1800s.

DERBY — A quick scan of Google Maps can show virtually every inch of a city. But in addition to showing all the sights (and sites), it also can show what used to be at various locations.

Jack Walsh, the former head of the Derby Historical Society, recently unveiled a custom Google map that he built featuring historically significant locations around the city.

Walsh said he built it because he wanted to show residents history envelops their daily lives in ways large and small.

The effort, he said, is more urgent as economic redevelopment is set to occur that will once again change the face of Derby. His map will connect the city's past with its future, he said.

“It would help give an identity to all this new development that's going to take place — memorializing the past and planning for the future at the same time,” Walsh said.

The map was first published in November but Walsh announced it in late December as a post to the city's Facebook page. He had formerly posted historical notes about the city in his role as a teacher and with the Historical Society.

The historical map is titled the Historic Birmingham Borough, which was the name of what is now the downtown area in Derby.

The locations include the Post Office, the train station and the library. Users can click on markers where the map will show a photo and a short description of the landmark.

These markers will help residents make sense of some of the names the city is choosing to use for developments, such as the Trolley Pointe apartments project.

“Why are you calling it the Trolley Square? How will people know why you even came up with that name? Well, there's significant history around the trolleys and trains in Derby,” Walsh said.

But it also includes private residences, such as the former home of Henry Shelton Sanford, who was the American ambassador to Belgium during the Civil War. He later became a pivotal figure in the colonization of what would be known as the Congo Free State, which soon became an infamous example of Western imperialism.

He also is credited as the founder of Sanford, Fla., according to Sanford's official website.

The location of his former home is now a parking lot.

The map also has relics from the industrialization of Derby, including the Kraus Corset Factory, which is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The location has since been home to apartments.

While the map is a recent creation, Walsh said he was inspired to create it based on previous maps, including listing nationwide locations of fountains built in the same style as the one that is located on the Derby Greenway.

Other states and municipalities have also created their own custom Google maps over the years, listing locations of historic interest.

Another of Walsh's historical works was the Valley Heritage Driving Tour, which he created in 2000 with the Derby-based Electronic Valley nonprofit agency. It isn't a map, but it served a similar purpose since it itemized historic locations around town.

Walsh said so far people have reacted positively to it. He's still adding locations and said he hopes the public participates.

"The people that have commented on Facebook seem to like the idea. I can't say what the overall (response) is because I haven't gone out and solicited that," he said. "I hope other people will like and I hope the city incorporates it."

The map also itemizes locations that Walsh wants the city to commemorate.

"As projects get approved, the city should ask developers to include a commemorative plaque on their buildings, or I've seen in other places where they've done it embedded into the sidewalk, commemorating either people, places or things that were important to the history," he said.

Development is scheduled to begin next year for the Route 34 widening project, and apartments also are being planned for the downtown area.

The markers are a reminder to residents that future prosperity doesn't occur in a vacuum and that continued development is built on prior achievements, he said.

"Derby had some tough years the last few years, and sometimes we forget what an incredible place this was and will be again," Walsh said.