

BY DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



## Leo Roth: Exercise your mind and your body

LEO ROTH – Staff writer

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So I'm standing on West Main Street, across from the corner of Canal, where a historic marker lets me know that on this very spot on Nov. 5, 1872, inside an 8th Ward general store long demolished, Susan B. Anthony and 14 other area women voted in the United State's presidential election.

Two weeks later, Anthony was arrested a few blocks away at her home at 17 Madison, thus kicking off a near 50-year struggle to win women the right to vote. I knew of all this, in a vague sort of way. But standing here makes it real, walking in the footprints of history.

And how did I get here? Well, I followed the yellow brick road.

Actually, it's the newly completed 1.25-mile Rochester Heritage Trail and it's an eight-inch wide line made with blue paint and gray bricks that lead the intrepid walker past 27 points of historical interest. It starts at the Erie Canal Second Aqueduct Bridge near the Blue Cross Arena and ends at Susan B's doorstep.

Just like Boston's Freedom Trail "red line," Rochester's blue line takes you back in time ... to the days of the Senecas, the city's original 100-acre tract, packet boat captains, railroad barons, Corn Hill socialites, fugitives from slavery, and activists for social change.

But what the blue line also does is draw visitors from downtown, under the 490 overpass, and into a once-forgotten section of West Main Street that is undergoing an amazing transformation.

Once dubbed "no man's land" by a former mayor, the Cascade District and Susan B. Anthony Preservation District are now a land of opportunity once more for business owners and residents.

Buildings dating to the late 1800s are being turned into loft apartments, office and retail space while the ornate ironwork on storefront facades is getting a facelift. This follows projects that repaved roads, erected 19th century style streetlamps and replaced crumbling sidewalks with attractive red bricks and pebbled concrete.

Despite the physical improvements, city planners could probably bribe tourists and workers on lunch break with free drinks and shrimp and still not get them to enter this section of the city. But paint a simple blue line on the sidewalk? The power of what symbolizes water flowing along the Erie Canal is almost hypnotic.

“We’re living in the midst of this significant center of history for the whole country and we have remaining buildings here that tell the story,” says JoAnn Beck, senior landscape architect for the City of Rochester. “These are gifts from the past. As a landscape architect, people hunger for a sense of place, to know where it is they live their lives and how that place is special and distinguished.”

The Heritage Trail accomplishes that mission while providing an interesting east-west spur for walkers, joggers, cyclists and geocaching enthusiasts using the north-south Riverway and Genesee Valley Greenway trails.

Doing any of those activities will slow down the aging process. Learning about our past will speed up the appreciation process of our city.

Starting in 2007 with West Main Street upgrades and concluding this year with the Broad Street Tunnel Project, the resulting Heritage Trail is a shining example of public-private collaboration and — in the spirit of Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony — citizen activism.

Neighborhood residents have worked with city officials, including group leader Jeff Mroczek, from the very beginning.

Avid cyclist, trail advocate and history buff John Curran, archivist for the former Saints Peter and Paul Church, produced a map of historic sites along the “Heritage Corridor” that was used to secure the first grant.

“The process was most definitely a team effort,” says Curran, 63, a retired special education teacher.

And Curran is far from done. A member of the Rochester Cycling Alliance, he’s currently raising support for a heritage-themed route that would follow the path of the long-forgotten Genesee Valley Canal (1840-1878) through Southwest Rochester. In addition to bringing attention to pioneer settlements, Civil War training camps and Underground Railroad activity along the Genesee River, the trail would transport travelers into the historical environs of West Main.

Curran and likeminded friends can even envision a bicycle museum at the former Cunningham Carriage Manufacturing site where automobiles, ambulances and hearses prized by celebrities were once built.

“It’s a once-in-a-century chance to improve things, reinvent ourselves and have a fresh start,” Curran says. “We can be a major heritage tourism route and make it a destination you want to go to rather than a

place you want to avoid.”

Simply put, trails work especially when they take people back in time.

“We’re sitting on a gold mine,” Curran says.

It merely took historical research and the creative talents of designers and concrete artisans to unlock the gold along the Rochester Heritage Trail. Designated “history rooms” along the trail feature granite curbing, interpretive panels, the trail’s circular emblem embedded in the concrete and my favorite — stamped “mule” tracks.

Banners bearing the pictures of Anthony, Douglas and city father Nathaniel Rochester will soon adorn lampposts.

In 1825, Child’s Basin near Broad and Exchange was the busiest hub on the Erie Canal, making Rochester the “Young Lion of the West.” The cornerstone of the elegant Times Square Building was laid just before the great stock market crash of 1929, but it still got built, reflecting the hope of a city.

St. Luke’s Church, circa 1824, is where Col. Rochester attended services. The seeds of RIT and the University of Rochester were planted near Washington and Broad.

Two canals, two railroads and elevated highways make Main, Ford and Broad streets the crossroads of transportation. The Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railway Depot is best known as Nick Tahou’s restaurant. The area behind Morse Lumber was the Ohio Basin widewaters where canal boats turned. The sidewalk is stamped “Footprint of the former Genesee Valley Canal.”

Handsome brick columns bear plaques recognizing the Susan B. neighborhood as part of the National Register of Historic Places. City Hospital, which became Rochester General, also got its start near here, treating the wounded from the Civil War. Buffalo Bill Cody of “Wild West Show” fame lived for a time at 10 New York Street. His children are buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery.

And at the site where Susan B. Anthony illegally voted, she is quoted to say, “We’re in for a fine agitation in Rochester.”

Paint often hides what history has wrought. In this case, a blue painted line reveals it.

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#### TO LEARN MORE

Rochester Heritage Trail advocates will meet at 4:30 p.m. Monday at Gleason Auditorium in the Central Library, 115 South Ave., to share ideas on how to promote the new W. Broad/W. Main street history corridor. The public is welcome. Call (585) 428-6601 or 428-6852. Go to <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/article.aspx?id=8589951966>

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