

BURLINGTONFREEPRESS.COM » SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 2012 » 1C

'ROUND HERE



VERMONT LIVES

The fall and rise of Randall Street

From the moment the flood waters receded, Vermonters made it clear: Randall Street could not die



DAVID GOODMAN
Free Press Correspondent

Early on August 29, 2011, I peered out across a large lake that lapped calmly over what were Elm and Randall streets in downtown Waterbury. Where once there was a road and a neighborhood bustling with children, there was now a strange watery calm interrupted by houses that seemed to bob on the sea.

Amidst the deluge, a large, yellow house on the corner of Elm and Randall stood proud and defiant. Over the next two hours the muddy lake silently pulled back to reveal the white letters "O.L. Ayers 1892" on the front steps.

It was as if Orlo Ayers himself, a local wheelwright and businessman, was rising from the waters to reassure the neighbors that they would survive this calamity, just as the home that he had built 119 years earlier had withstood floods, blizzards and hurricanes through six generations.

But when I came to help my neighbors start to dig out that morning, I wasn't so sure everyone was going to make it through this one.

Randall Street is the hub of a tidy, compact neighborhood of closely nestled century-old homes that abuts the state office complex in downtown Waterbury. The street is named for George Randall, who made his fortune in the 1849 California gold rush and later was a prosperous local landowner who served in the Vermont Legislature.

In normal times, kids play in the road and neighbors mingle on the sidewalk. The neatly kept street is a throwback to another era.

"It's the '50s version of a neighborhood amped up to the 2000s," says Theresa Wood, whose mother lives on the street.

But Randall Street has a critical vulnerability: A flat corn field and the state complex are all that separate it from the Winooski River.

When Tropical Storm Irene struck, the Randall and

See RANDALL, Page 4C



Jeremy Ayers lives on the corner of Randall and Elm streets in Waterbury. His son Fletcher, 20 months, is a 9th-generation Vermonter. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS



HOT PROPERTIES



Fairfax | \$154,500

Like the day it was built! Crisp, clean unit awaits your personal touch and provides room to grow. Two bed, 1.5 bath unit enjoys a walkout basement that is already sheetrocked and is just waiting to be converted to your rec room, home office or gym; thanks to the pre-plumbed basement, this unit could easily accommodate another bathroom as well.



Colchester | \$162,900

Bright, freshly painted 2 bedroom end unit at River's Bend. This townhouse features very efficient heat, 1.5 baths, patio to pleasant yard with gardening opportunities. Close to schools, park and bike path.



The Condo Guy

CONDOGUY.COM

BILL DESAUTELS • RE/MAX North Professionals • 875 Roosevelt Hwy, Colchester, VT • (802) 655-9100

"The way you get through it is one day at a time. Stop worrying about the future. Take one day and do the best you can on it and you know there's another day coming. That's been my philosophy all my life."

GLEASON AYERS

4C

BURLINGTONFREEPRESS.COM » SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 2012

AFTER IRENE



Gleason Ayers lived for many years in a house at the corner of Randall and Elm streets in Waterbury. He was evacuated from the house during the flood of 1927 and during Tropical Storm Irene. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS



Jeremy Ayers lives on the corner of Randall and Elm streets in Waterbury in the house his grandfather, Gleason Ayers, lived in. Jeremy reminisced about his grandfather's life at home with his wife Georgia and son Weston, 3 months, on Wednesday. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS

Randall

Continued from Page 1

Elm streets neighborhood were transformed into Waterbury's Ground Zero. Dozens of homes that lined the street took in water that crested over kitchen counters. The roads, sidewalks and homes were covered in gray slime. An incongruous sea smell hung in the mountain air. No sooner had the water receded than Randall Street was transformed into a frenzied work zone. Trucks and giant roll-off trash bins lined the street, generators roared and neighbors and assorted volunteers worked 20-hour days to rescue the overwhelmed community. This remarkable volunteer army occupied the street for weeks.

The disaster on Randall Street was a microcosm of what was happening all around downtown Waterbury. The town of 5,000 people took one of the hardest hits in Vermont when the Winooski River rose over its banks. The sprawling State Office Complex and Vermont State Hospital were flooded and closed, displacing 1,500 state workers and more than 50 psychiatric patients. Two mobile home parks were destroyed. All told, 222 homes and businesses in and around Waterbury — one-third of the structures in the village — were seriously damaged.

Randall Street has come to be a touchstone of the patchwork recovery of Waterbury, and of Vermont (full disclosure: my wife Sue Minter is Ver-

mont's Irene recovery officer). The family-oriented neighborhood has long been the go-to Halloween destination for local kids. When it became apparent last fall that Randall Street families would not be back in their homes to host the annual Halloween festivities, the greater Waterbury community — aided by student volunteers from UVM who decorated and distributed candy — rallied and helped the beleaguered homeowners throw a party.

From the moment the flood waters receded, Vermonters made it clear: Randall Street could not die.

The Guardian of Randall Street

The Ayers home was inundated. When I walked through the house a few days after Irene exited, I saw how water had filled the basement and rose nearly three feet into the first floor. Old wood floors peeked out forlornly from beneath dull gray silt. The drawers of handmade century-old cabinets were swollen shut, their contents stewing in river slime.

It seemed that the old house might not recover.

Gleason "Gus" Ayers, 94, had seen worse. When he was 10, the Great Flood of 1927 swept through Waterbury with unprecedented fury, killing 20 of his neighbors. Young Gleason had to be rescued by men in rowboats out a second floor window from his family's Randall Street home.

When Tropical Storm Irene hit last year, Gleason

sat in a rocking chair in the Ayers home, which was now inhabited by four generations of his family.

"Everything will be fine," he reassured his 36-year-old grandson Jeremy, who lives in the house with his wife and son and was frantically carrying things up from the basement.

By 8 p.m., Jeremy made the decision to evacuate the family home. He and neighbor Rick Boyle took Gleason's arms and helped the old man into the dark, chest-deep water. Jeremy's wife Georgia held their 1-year-old son Fletcher high overhead and walked alongside them. The five people waded slowly up the familiar road that was now unrecognizable in the stormy night.

They made their way to the Thatcher Brook Primary School, which had been transformed into a shelter.

It was the same school where Gleason Ayers took refuge after the flood 84 years earlier.

A few days after Tropical Storm Irene laid waste to his beloved family home, I visited Gleason Ayers at a retirement home where he was living temporarily while his family dug out. I asked him how a community recovers from such a trauma.

"The way you get through it is one day at a time," he replied, like a teacher making a point. "Stop worrying about the future. Take one day and do the best you can on it and you know there's an-

other day coming. That's been my philosophy all my life."

Then Gleason made a bold promise: his family would be back home for Thanksgiving.

"All my life, we've had 20 to 30 people for Thanksgiving. There's no question we're gonna be there," he told me. "We'll have some wine and some beer and we'll have a grand time."

The day before Thanksgiving, I stopped by the Ayers house. As soon as I stepped inside, I was astonished: It looked beautiful.

It was just as Gleason Ayers promised — except for one thing: Gleason himself. He had a small stroke a few weeks earlier and was in a nursing home.

Gleason Ayers lived to hear that three dozen family members gathered in his home for a Thanksgiving feast, just as they had done for a century. He smiled as relatives visited his bedside and regaled him with stories.

Two days after Thanksgiving, Gleason Ayers died peacefully in his sleep. His mission — ensuring that his family traditions would endure through one of Vermont's greatest disasters — was complete.

The return

I find Jeremy Ayers on his knees sanding the front porch at the Ayers family home. Above him, workmen are repairing and painting a cupola on the

PUBLIC AUCTION
Saturday, August 25th, 2012 9a.m.

OVER 2500 LOT ITEMS

- Tractors • Lawn Mowers • Industrial Equipment
- Farm Equipment • Antiques • Horse Equipment
- Manlifts • Backhoes • New & Used Trailers

Consignments Taken Until August 22nd, 2012
 YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT WILL SHOW UP

RENE J FOURNIER FARM EQUIPMENT
Auctions Since 1967
 RTE 78 WEST, P.O. BOX 141, SWANTON, VT 05488
 EMAIL:rjf.eg@myfairpoint.net • www.RJFEQ.com
 802-868-4050/3057 FAX 3481

Pay Off Your Bills!
CALL 651-4829 TODAY

CARRIERS NEEDED!

- Essex • Burlington
- South Burlington
- Jericho • Bristol
- Milton • Starksboro
- Underhill • Middlebury
- Cambridge

Burlington Free Press

BURLINGTONFREEPRESS.COM » SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 2012 » 5C

AFTER IRENE



The high water mark from Tropical Storm Irene is seen on Elm Street in Waterbury on Wednesday. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS



Jeremy Ayers (right) gathered with his wife Georgia and sons Fletcher, 20 months (left), and Weston, 3 months, in the kitchen, Wednesday. Ayers lives in the house that his great grandfather, Orlo Ayers, built more than 100 years ago, a house that survived the flood of 1927 and Tropical Storm Irene last August. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS

Continued from Page 4

roof. On Randall Street, the work never stops. "When I work on the house," Jeremy says after greeting me, "is when I feel closest to my grandfather."

Jeremy is a potter and art instructor at St. Michael's College. His pottery studio was in the basement of the house when the Winooski River poured down Randall Street. "I lost everything — my kiln, wheels, tools, raw materials and finished products," he recounts. "There was a moment where I was like, 'I'm just gonna do something else.'"

But aid unexpectedly came from all quarters, including the Craft Emergency Relief Fund, Central Vermont Community Action, ReBuild Waterbury, Frog Hollow and Burlington City Arts.

"I was very touched by it and blown away," he says.

On Feb. 1, after working nonstop on his house for five months, Jeremy reopened his studio and began making pottery again.

Ayers, a trim, soft-spoken man with a shaved head, sits in paint-splattered jeans on a couch in the beautifully restored living room of his family's home. Everything in the house tells a story: the wavy kitchen floor with protruding nail heads was laid in 1892; the smooth maple floor in the living room was put in after the 1927 flood. The refinished floors shine softly in the midday light.

"There's been some conversation in the neighborhood of the benefits of Irene," he tells me. "There was just the humanity of

the situation, the benefit to our homes, and the community building that happened. Everybody's first floor in the neighborhood is so beautiful now. We did in three months in our homes what we would have wanted to do over 20 years."

Jeremy pauses, mulling the implications of what he's saying.

"I can't say it was a positive experience," he adds. "We've had a year of terrible lows and wonderful highs. We had a baby after Irene. We were thankfully able to renovate this six-generation house through my family coming together."

"But if I had to choose, I would not want the flood to have happened."

He believes the stress killed his grandfather. "The flood took it out of him. He chose to let go, and he didn't want to recover."

Before Gleason Ayers died, he transferred ownership of his house to a trust run by his four children, realizing his wish that it continue to be a family gathering place for future generations.

The house, says Jeremy, "is the soul of my family."

A neighborhood recovers

Across the street from the Ayers home I find Rick Boyle at work laying a hardwood floor in his home. Boyle, his wife Amy Chorey, and their 1-year-old daughter Vivian were one of the last families to return to Randall Street, re-occupying their home — a seven-unit apartment building that they own and in which they have tenants — in April.

"I'm anxious to feel

done," says Amy, as she plays with Vivian on the front lawn. Amy notes sadly that one family moved out of Randall Street this week, and she assumes the anxiety about future flooding — which many neighbors confess to feeling — was partly to blame.

"Even if we could have sold, this is where we want to be," declares the 38-year-old woman with a mop of curly brown hair. "This experience has taught me that on any day you could lose everything in your life and still go on."

Her husband notes that he has been deeply humbled by all the assistance that he and the community have received. "We can't repay people for all the help they've given us," says Boyle, taking a break from completing tasks on his endless to-do list, "but

we can pass it on. So we intend to apply ourselves and pay it forward in the things we do for the community."

Next door, Skip Flanders, president of the Waterbury Village Trustees, sits on his half-finished porch. On the outside, his house still appears to be under reconstruction, with vinyl siding peeled back. Flanders wears two hats: He is a "floodie" struggling like others to recover, and a community leader.

"Irene has been a net positive for Waterbury," he asserts. I am surprised by the comment, especially as I survey his half-finished home.

Flanders, an irrepressible optimist, explains, "Waterbury now looks at itself as one community with one vision." He notes

that numerous long-running local problems — such as finding a suitable home for the municipal offices, police and library, to the contentious issue of merging downtown Waterbury with the surrounding town, to the longstanding inadequacies of the state office complex — may now be solved.

"There's a feeling that all of us are working together now," says Flanders.

I wander back over to the Ayers home. A fresh coat of yellow paint makes the iconic home look young. A girl rolls by on a scooter. Across the street, boys kick a soccer ball down the middle of the road.

Jeremy Ayers takes a break from his work and looks around. He takes in a scene that seemed impos-

sible a year ago as he stood in the flooded wreckage of his family home. It was as if his great grandfather Orlo and grandfather Gleason were reaching across the generations, placing a hand in his shoulder and reassuring him that his home and his neighborhood were built to last.

Jeremy observes softly, "Life is normal here again on Randall Street."

THANKING THE VOLUNTEERS

Today Randall Street will be closed to traffic so that residents can throw a block party from 3-7 p.m. to thank all the volunteers who helped in the neighborhood's recovery.

TEMPO DESIGNS SMALL SPACES!

From Student bedrooms to retirement apartments, at Tempo we have solutions for the challenges of smaller spaces.

<p>\$95 \$199 \$59</p> <p>42" Round Drop Leaf Table seats 2-4 Choice of chairs and finish 30" Round Pedestal Table: \$179</p>	<p>\$399</p> <p>48X22 Desk with keyboard and file drawer 26X36 desk / table: \$169 48X24 desk / table: \$199-249</p>
<p>SMALL SOFAS OR SECTIONALS</p> <p>Ask about our 69" loveseater, our 75" sofas, or the size you need. Style pictured is 63" to 84" in your choice of fabric + pillows.</p> <p>\$797</p>	
<p>Open 6 Days 879-2996 51 Center Rd. Rte 15 Essex (Closed Tuesdays)</p>	<p>Open 7 Days 985-8776 3910 Shelburne Rd. Shelburne</p>

Tempo Affordable furnishings for today's lifestyle.

Make it Special...
— Make it —
ECCO

This Weekend Only!!

Take an additional 20% OFF all Sale Items

Ecco Clothes | 81 Church St | Burlington, VT
eccoclothesboutique.com | 802.860.2220