

# Savoring Historical Treasures Along E Street

## Walking Guide to Cultural Gems on the Quintessential Old North Street

By John Lofland

E Street between Fifth and Seventh is the geographic center or “backbone” of Davis’ Old North neighborhood. Befitting that location, a treasure trove of historic homes, sites, stories, and streetscapes that express the essence of the district are concentrated into those two face-blocks.

Let’s start at the intersection of Fifth and E and stroll north on E to Seventh, savoring a sample of cultural gems.

My descriptions draw from the 1980 and 1996 cultural resource surveys commissioned by the City of Davis, as well as from my own research.

### The Streetscape

Standing at the intersection of Fifth and E and looking north toward Seventh, the streetscape presents a pronounced contrast with more recent and “suburban” ones:

- The curbs are square-cut and there is a planting strip between the curb and sidewalk. The planting strip contains an arboring line of city-planted and maintained street trees. These features establish a different tone and feel for E and the Old North as a whole, a larger pattern that is called “the traditional neighborhood.”
- Automobile garages tend to be set behind the houses (in the 500 block) or accessed from an alley (in the 600 block). This is, of course, in contrast to standard suburban streets where front-located garages dominate streetscapes.
- Almost all the homes were build before 1950 and were individually contracted one-at-a-time over several decades extending from the early 1910s to the late 1940s.
- The square footage of these homes differ markedly though none is very large by today’s standards, suggesting historically different conceptions of living requirements (and about mixing people of different economic means). Notice in particular the two tiny cottages at 642 and 650 E, both of which were planned and initially occupied by their owners.

These and additional features of traditional neighborhoods are seen on other Old North streets, but E has an especially nice concentration of them that is made all the more appealing by being at the geographic center of the district and by the fact that the street ends at Seventh, thus providing both framing and closure.

Now let’s look at a number of historical homes and places on E.

### 516 E Street: The Pena Home



Mid-block on the right in the 500 block is 516 E, which is one of the first houses built north of Fifth. It is also one of eight such little Craftsman bungalows constructed in Davis by a single builder in the middle and late 1910s.

The 1996 historical surveyors describe this home as “a well crafted, stucco, one story bungalow” with a porch roof gable that is “an echo of the main roof line of the house.” The first occupants were Gavina Pena and his family, who were part of the prominent Valley pioneer Pena family.

The magnificent *Laurus nobilis* (Grecian Laurel) spreading over the roof of 516 E is one of the some one hundred official **Davis Landmark Trees**.

### 615 and 617 Sixth Street: Storybook Primitivism



The twin cottages that are 615 and 617 Sixth, at the north-east corner of E and Sixth, were constructed in the late 1930s and feature siding rounded to imitate logs, thus making them “cabins.”

The 1980 historical surveyors describe them as “wonderful examples of the urge to storybook primitivism, related to the desire to return to nature which recurs cyclically in American culture . . . The mature trees complete the illusion of the forest primeval.”

### 616 E Street



Like the Pena home at 516 E, 616 E—mid-block on the right in the 600 block—is also one of the very earliest houses built north of Fifth Street and is of 1910s vintage.

The kitchen walls were opened during a 1995 remodel and revealed wood imprinted with complex numbers, suggesting that this is a “pattern book” house—a kit of lumber purchased by mail-order and assembled on the site (a rather widespread practice in the early twentieth century). The 1996 historical surveyors comment that this home “adds to the overall character of the neighborhood . . . [and] is one of the finer examples of a pattern book bungalow in the area.”

### 617 E Street: The Lyda Williams Memorial Garden Plaque



For more than twenty years Lyda Williams maintained her front and back yards at 607 E (second on the left in the 600 block) as splendid flower gardens. She was renowned in the neighborhood and people came from around the city to admire her blossoms.

In 1991, at age 88, she was killed by a speeding pick-up truck while crossing at the corner of Sixth and F. Beloved by neighbors and at their initiative, the city well lot at 617 E was established as the Lyda Williams Memorial Garden.

### 521 Seventh Street: Pomegranate Place



From the street, 521 Seventh appears to be only a 1930s vintage abode—and so it is. But there is much more: down the driveway to the house's left are eleven tiny and hidden cottages arrayed along a curving cement footpath.

In the 1930s, these cottages used to be between F and G streets near First, where they were known as Asbill Court. They were relocated here in the 1970s to make way for an office building (a structure fronting G Street that is now rooms of the Hallmark Inn).

In future articles, we will walk the other five Old North Streets—B, C, D, F, and G between Fifth and Seventh—and also savor samples of the district's some one hundred and fifty historic homes and its streetscape delights.

(More information on any and all Old North streets can be found in John Lofland, *Old North Davis*, a publication of the Yolo County Historical Society that is available in local libraries and bookstores.)