

## NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

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## Anything but Plain

**Diverse, colorful, and fiercely independent, Jamaica Plain has reached a critical crossroads. How long can it keep out Starbucks, the Gap, and complete homogenization?**

By DOUG MOST, Globe Staff | January 8, 2006

WALK THE LENGTH OF CENTRE STREET, through the guts of Jamaica Plain—it's about a 2-mile stretch in the shape of a giant "S"—and almost every block reveals a different feud between those clinging to all that this gritty neighborhood has been about and those passionately trying to move it forward into what they are convinced is its destiny.

There's the dirt plot across from the Jackson Square T stop, at the corner of Columbus Avenue, where for years developers wanted to build a K Mart store while community activists argued for a youth center to keep kids off the streets. The activists got their way and a complex of apartments, small businesses, and a youth and family center is now planned. Farther up the street, through the part of the neighborhood that caters almost exclusively to JP's huge Dominican population, sits the 115-year-old Blessed Sacrament Church, with its commanding golden dome. Shuttered last year by the Boston Archdiocese, some saw the property as perfect for more affordable housing; others wanted market-rate condos to help boost neighborhood property values even higher. In the end, it will probably be a little bit of both. Around the corner, past Hyde Square, is the red-brick biker bar called Triple D's, with its karaoke poster hanging above the door and the "Budweiser" and "Miller Lite" signs glowing in the windows. Smokers huddle outside into the early morning, and fans pack the inside for the TVs, singing, and cheap pitchers of beer. But the new owners have said that they plan to turn it into a cushy lounge with mood lighting, duck confit, and a hostess instead of a bouncer. And then, of course, there are the tracks, which have not been used since 1985. No discussion about Jamaica Plain gets far without crossing the trolley tracks that follow Centre Street's curves. The only people who fought as hard as the folks who tried to bring the Green Line back were the ones working to keep its E trains out once and for all. The latter group ultimately won, which is why portions of the tracks—a piece of JP's rich history—are slowly being paved over.

From dirt fields to historic churches to crusty bars to transportation wars and woes, Jamaica Plain, maybe more than any other Boston neighborhood, is a community at a crossroads.

It has managed through the years to maintain its identity as one of Boston's most diverse neighborhoods (the 2000 Census put Jamaica Plain's population at 62 percent white, 25 percent Latino, and 16 percent African-American), a place where a night at Bella Luna, the friendly Italian eatery in Hyde Square, might find you surrounded by a young Hispanic family, an older black pair, and a lesbian couple with their baby. As housing prices soared throughout the city, JP has even managed to remain comparatively affordable—if you consider \$400,000 for a two-bedroom condo or \$600,000 for a small house affordable. It has as much green space as any Boston neighborhood, with Jamaica Pond and the Arnold Arboretum as busy on nice weekends as the Big Dig at rush hour (but with strollers playing bumper cars). It has a budding restaurant scene, with enough seafood, curry, pasta, vindaloo, burgers, and ice cream cones to please any palate (though no single, standout restaurant defines JP in the way Ashmont Grill now does Dorchester). It has, after years of surviving with few or no coffee houses or bakeries to lounge in, a cup that suddenly runneth over with them. And JP has its own villagelike strip of friendly stores that is so free of mega-chains that the Dunkin' Donuts and CVS bookends and the Foot Locker midsection all stick out like pinstripes on Lansdowne Street.

And yet, despite its charm and uniqueness, Jamaica Plain still has that feeling of a place that hasn't quite arrived, as if it's still pulling into the station. The most tired complaints are that the public schools are holding it back; it's too far to walk to the main drag from the Orange Line, or it's hard to get to Centre Street from other towns without a car; and that a few small pockets of violence (namely the Bromley-Heath housing project, Egleston Square, and Forest Hills T station) taint the overall community.

But are those complaints or excuses? Centre Street, for all its character, colorful murals, and funky collection of shops, is also cluttered with run-down tchotchke stores, mediocre pizza parlors, an overflow of banks and real estate offices, and old salons and saloons that could use a serious face lift. The nicer restaurants fill up on weekends but are often quiet on weekdays. The streets, sidewalks, and crosswalks are so badly cracked in places that it's hard to bike or walk—never mind push a baby carriage. A few stores—the tiny kitchenware haven Gadgets, the pretty jewelry shop Fire Opal, the toy store Boing, the card and gift shop Pluto, the thrift store Boomerang—are terrific, but the neighborhood is sorely lacking for basics. Need a pair of jeans? Good luck. A cocktail dress? Try the South End. A

dress shirt? See you in the Back Bay. The latest best-selling novels? The small bookstores might have a copy or two, but if you want to browse for hours, check out Brookline's Coolidge Corner. And if you're hungry for a great deli sandwich? Don't look here.

"The store I remember the most was Woolworth's, where the Foot Locker is now," says Karen McCormack, who was born and raised in Jamaica Plain and who says her real estate business is booming with young people, especially young families, eager to come to JP. Her mom would shop there for plants, pants, and paper clips, and when they were done, they'd plop down at the food counter for a hot dog. It was the store that in many ways defined Jamaica Plain in the late '60s and early '70s, a place where families ran their errands, where kids met up at the soda fountain (before the company closed its five-and-dimes and replaced them with its Foot Locker stores). It's exactly the type of business Jamaica Plain is lacking today.

One place like that could be the critical tipping point for a neighborhood. But would it tip it in the right direction or the wrong one?

JAMAICA PLAIN was part of West Roxbury until 1874, when both were annexed into Boston and became their own city neighborhoods. Horse-drawn streetcars were all over JP back then, and in the mid-1880s, Centre Street buzzed with hardware stores, florists, pharmacies, fruit stands, markets, banks, and real estate offices. Those streetcars eventually became trolleys, and those trolleys were the image of Jamaica Plain for nearly a century. Today, the MBTA's number 39 bus runs along Centre Street and South Huntington Avenue, and it is the system's second busiest bus route, behind the Silver Line.

This is why finding people from both sides of the tracks, so to speak, among Jamaica Plain's 36,000 residents is so easy. I live in JP, so I set out one frigid Monday morning a few weeks ago with that mission and two places on my agenda.

First up was Emack & Bolio's. Any ice cream connoisseur worth his weight in chocolate sprinkles knows that some of the finest scoops around these parts are dished out of J.P. Licks, a local chain whose first store opened in Jamaica Plain in 1982. It's had occasional competition for its JP shop through the years, but nobody came close to challenging it as the meeting place for mornings or the stop on summer evenings. But then, two years ago, along came another local chain with ice cream just as good and a prime location a block down from J.P. Licks. Within weeks of opening, a "wi-fi" sign hung in the window and crowds started coming. Today, you'll still find the longest lines at J.P. Licks on a summer night, but the comfy leather couches at Emack & Bolio's are rarely empty in ice cream weather and the tap-tap from computers is a constant drumbeat—as it was the morning I stopped by and met Angelo Volandes. A clean-cut, boyish-looking 39-year-old internist at Brigham and Women's Hospital, he was sitting in his dark suit and finishing his coffee while working on his laptop.

He moved to Jamaica Plain in July after looking in Brookline and the South End, and though he's renting now, he's prowling to buy. "You could have a house here, and there was an edge to the place," he says of what drew him to JP. The new bakeries, the First Thursdays events, where residents stroll in the evenings from business to business checking out local artwork, and the community center for his workout all helped him fall in love with the place (and two new gyms are coming to Jamaica Plain).

But then we started talking about what's missing, and his list was just as long. No big, upscale supermarket. Not enough variety on Centre Street, especially clothing stores. And then he whispered what is nothing less than a dirty word on these streets: "Starbucks," he says. "My girlfriend was visiting last weekend, and I know what she likes, and I had to drive 10 minutes away to get it. There is a real animosity toward mainstream stores like that." But, he says, "It could bring us up to another level."

We both glanced around to see if the gentrification police were going to drag us away. After all, when Davis Square in Somerville got its first Starbucks, it didn't take long for vandals to express their disdain. The idea of bringing a Starbucks or, heaven forbid, the Gap to Centre Street strikes terror in those folks who see national chains as the end of civilization as we know it. A Starbucks, to them, would wipe out places like Fiore's, the wonderful new bakery and coffee shop with homemade fig bars that melt on your tongue, or the tiny Blue Frog Bakery, where the smell of fresh-made bread wafts out to the sidewalk. And the Gap? Well, that's just heresy. The thinking is: If you want boring chains like other communities have, why don't you move there? If you want independent, Mom-and-Pop shops—and character—come to JP.

It was with the words "the Gap" still hanging in the air that I left Emack & Bolio's and walked down to J.P. Licks. It was equally quiet, with a few tables filled with bagel-and-coffee diners, and in the corner sat three gray-haired souls who looked as if the words and wishes of Angelo Volandes would have made them cringe. I took my cranberry scone and joined them.

"Harvard Square is a perfect example of what might happen if a neighborhood sold itself out to corporations and became one big mall," Jane Hudson tells me. An artist and teacher, she's lived all around Boston, the last 20 years in Jamaica Plain. It's the small stores and "village nature," she says, that define JP. "The worst thing you can do to a neighborhood is big-box the thing."

Her friends, Fisher Pearson, a realtor who's lived in Jamaica Plain for more than 30 years, and Dick Lee, formerly of JP and now of Newton, nod their heads. Like Volandes, this group has a wish list. The difference is that they don't rattle off any big chains, only local ones, like an Anna's Taqueria in Brookline, Cambridge, and Somerville, or a sandwich shop, like Temptations in Brookline. Hudson admits to pining for "a nice little clothing shop" but says she doesn't mind going elsewhere to find what she needs. When I bring up the Green Line tracks, the words are barely out of my mouth when they cut me off. "Twenty years ago," Lee says, "a train would stop right there on Centre Street, a second trolley would stop, and traffic would back way up." Needless to say, they did not want the Green Line back.

Of course, there is an alternative. The Orange Line slices through Jamaica Plain, separating its more desirable Jamaica Pond and Centre Street side from the troublesome, but improving, Washington Street and Egleston Square area that abuts Roxbury. It's a 10-minute walk from the Jackson Square T station to Hyde Square, Jamaica Plain's next hottest spot, judging by real estate listings. And the next two stops, Stony Brook and Green Street, are both 10-minute walks to the main part of Centre Street. In truth, the distance from Stony Brook to Centre Street is not much longer than the walk from the Back Bay Orange Line station to Newbury Street. The difference is that the Back Bay walk goes past Copley Square and the Boston Public Library, while the Jamaica Plain stroll takes you through a transitioning residential neighborhood where break-ins, sidewalk stickups, and car thefts are still problems. Add to that the occasional Orange Line brawl or, worse, a shooting, like the one in 2003 in which a pregnant hairdresser lost her baby, and it's no wonder the Orange Line doesn't register with outsiders as the best way to get to JP.

This is familiar turf for owner Vince Petryk, who walks into J.P. Licks just as my conversation with his customers is ending. Petryk, who's wearing a black-and-white scarf and has fogged eyeglasses from the cold, says that of his eight stores scattered around Greater Boston, his "mother ship"—as he calls the JP one, where all the ice cream is made—remains his busiest. And other than a few restaurants, such as Zon's, with its delicious comfort food, from mac and cheese to meatloaf to lamb burgers, and Ten Tables, one of Boston's most romantic spots, which has just landed one of the city's best chefs in Amanda Lydon, J.P. Licks might be the only destination in Jamaica Plain that draws outsiders to the strip.

Just this year, after the tired-looking post office next door was rebuilt, Petryk spruced up his own sidewalk table space, something he wishes more of his neighbors would do. It's hard not to notice the Chinese restaurant across the street with the graffiti-scarred metal grate, or the office building with the drab, worn-down signs.

"I'm hearing from people saying, 'What's wrong with a Starbucks or a Gap to mix in,'" says City Councilor John Tobin, who represents Jamaica Plain. "They are not opposed to affordable housing, but they want it with an opportunity to buy. When people buy, faces become familiar, crime watches get formed; it brings stability." Tobin says he understands those determined to keep JP from changing too much, but he says change doesn't always have to be for the worse. "If someone told me five years ago there would be a Starbucks in West Roxbury, I would have said, 'Lie down and take some medication.' But there is one now, and my wife lives there. I'm a Dunkin' Donuts guy. It creates competition, and it creates choices for people, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

With competition comes pressure to keep a business attractive, and looking out at the street from J.P. Licks, Jamaica Plain hardly feels like a neighborhood where two-bedroom, \$400,000 condos are the norm, small homes routinely go for \$600,000 and up, and million-dollar homes are no longer a rarity but a reality. "The commercial improvements here have lagged behind the residential improvements," Petryk says.

Ultimately, though, no amount of commercial improvements to the main street will make people like Petryk even think about sticking around unless a problem that plagues all of Boston's up-and-coming neighborhoods gets fixed: Boston's public schools are what drove Petryk in 1996 to move his family from JP to Brookline.

**SO WHERE DOES JAMAICA PLAIN** go from here? Can it remain Independent Village forever, a place where the Gap and The Children's Place, Blockbuster and Starbucks, Radio Shack and Barnes & Noble would all be greeted with the same scorn? Or is it only a matter of time before those chains see how many young couples and families are populating its streets and try to fight their way in? (The Gap actually approached Petryk back in 1998 about renting out his J.P. Licks building on Centre Street when he was considering a move, but he stayed put.)

If the chains do come a-knockin', they'll confront Claudio Martinez at the front door. Martinez is executive director of the Hyde Square Task Force, who moved to Jamaica Plain from Argentina as a young man and is now married and still living in the neighborhood. He led the charge for the land in Jackson Square to grow into small businesses, affordable housing, and a youth center, and he was in front of the fight to make sure the Blessed Sacrament Church was not

turned into high-priced condos. He also opposes efforts to make over Centre Street with storefronts that look more consistent.

"I consider myself the old guard," Martinez, 40, says. "Revitalizing the business district, they seem to have a vision of some green-and-brown canopies, and honestly I have a problem with that. Part of the uniqueness of JP is the bright colors. The need to standardize and make things identical I don't like."

He points to Cleveland Circle on the Brookline/Brighton line—home now to an Applebee's—as something he doesn't want to see Jamaica Plain become. "I don't care how much you pay for a house. If you pay for a house, and you didn't see a Starbucks, you should have noticed. I go to Starbucks when I go downtown. But if you need to have a Gap, a Starbucks, and a Blockbuster, and you come here, and you see Video Underground and Miami Restaurant, don't try to get the neighborhood to change to accommodate your goals. We should celebrate a Bella Luna restaurant rather than a 99 Restaurant."

It's noble thinking, of course. But the question is how long can a neighborhood stay free of that sort of chain reaction when it has infiltrated all of its neighbors, when a younger crowd with kids, and money, and everyday needs not yet available in Jamaica Plain starts to make more noise, when the big stores with promises of luring more people to the streets of JP come calling? What happens when quaint and cute and colorful no longer cuts it for people who demand more basic services from their hometown?

"We had a public supermarket where the Store 24 is now, and there was a fruit stand where Wonder Spice is," says Karen McCormack, the Jamaica Plain native now selling real estate. "I feel like we could go right to our little part of JP, get our food shopping, T-shirts, clothes, hot dogs. It felt very central." Now, when she needs jeans, she heads over to Coolidge Corner or the Mall at Chestnut Hill.

"We need what some chains offer, some clothing stores, so people can go shopping for the holidays. Some kind of deli. I don't think services have kept up with the housing prices."

She's right. They haven't. Of course, maybe it will just never feel right, to step out of Boston's coolest independent video store, Video Underground, grab a Cuban sandwich down the block from Miami Restaurant, and then go and order a grande Caramel Macchiato. ■