

Old Webster Historic District - Statement of Significance
Becky L. Snider, September 20, 2003

The Old Webster Historic District represents the nucleus of the community of Webster Groves, a commuter suburb of St. Louis which developed in the late nineteenth century as a result of the establishment of railroad and street car lines from the city of St. Louis into St. Louis county. The Old Webster Historic District is significant under National Register Criteria A and C. Under Criterion A, it is significant in the areas of Commerce, Community Planning and Development, and Government. Under Criterion C, the district is significant in the area of Architecture.

The Old Webster Historic District extends from the Missouri Pacific Railroad tracks to Lockwood on Gore and from Elm Street to Gray Street along Lockwood. Contributing buildings in the district date from ca. 1860 to 1930. In addition to one and two story commercial buildings, a depot, a church and three nineteenth century residences are included in the district boundaries. Of the 33 buildings in the district, 26 are contributing. Two of the contributing buildings in the district are already individually listed on the National Register and one building in the district is already included as contributing building in a historic district. The period of significance for the district extends from ca. 1860, the date of construction of the earliest building in the district, to 1930, the year the most recent contributing building in the district was constructed.

In the area of Commerce, the Old Webster Historic District is significant as the core of the original commercial center of Webster Groves. The buildings in the district are some of the earliest extant commercial buildings in the city and many of the city's most prominent early businesses were located along Gore and Lockwood in the district boundaries.

The district is also significant in the area of Community Planning and Development as a representative example of the development of commuter suburbs in St. Louis County. Webster Groves developed in St. Louis County's early phase of suburban growth as railroad and street car lines were built between these satellite communities and the city of St. Louis thereby making living in the country and working in the city possible. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many of St. Louis' most prominent businessmen built large new homes and moved their families to Webster Groves, "the Queen of the Suburbs" to escape the unhealthy conditions in the city. The Old Webster Historic District, with its variety of buildings is a microcosm of the community of Webster Groves. Along with commercial and governmental buildings, two of the large nineteenth century mansions built by the city's early residents, Webster Grove's second depot, a handsome Mission Revival building which sheltered these early commuters, and one of the area's earliest churches are located in the district.

In the area of Government, the Old Webster Historic District is significant as the original governmental center of Webster Groves. The Webster Groves City Hall was housed in several different locations in the district until the current building was constructed in 1931; the city's original post office was located in the

Gorlock Building at the corner of Gore and Lockwood, and the city's first fire station, located at 130 W. Lockwood Groves, was in use by the fire department until 1972. Webster Groves was the first community in St. Louis County to have a professional fire department.

The Old Webster Historic District is also significant under Criterion C in the area of Architecture. Many of the most notable buildings in Webster Groves, including several high-style, architect-designed buildings, are located within the district boundaries. The buildings in the district are a cohesive grouping of intact commercial buildings which reflect the building types and architectural styles prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Despite its close proximity to St. Louis, the area which present-day Webster Groves encompasses was not settled until the late-1840s. The land which had been surveyed in 1818 and granted to Frenchman Gregoire Sarpy was embroiled in litigation until 1842. The area takes its name from the Webster College for Boys, which was established by the Reverend Artemus Bullard, a minister at the First Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. Bullard, who served as a visiting clergyman for the Rock Hill Presbyterian Church, conceived of the idea of a school for boys in the bucolic setting outside the city. The Webster College for Boys, named for Senator Daniel Webster of Boston, opened in 1854. Many of the area's earliest inhabitants were teachers at the school. At the same time the school was being planned and built, the first tracks in Missouri for the Pacific Railroad were being laid. By 1853, the railroad extended out to Kirkwood and "made stops at Rock Springs, Cheltenham, River des Peres, Laclede and Webster College." The Webster College stop was located at Church Street, now known as North Gore.

The Webster College for Boys struggled to survive after its founder Reverend Bullard was killed in 1855 along with many other local dignitaries when the bridge over the Gasconade River collapsed on the train's inaugural run from St. Louis to Jefferson City. However, the area around the school and around the Webster railroad depot began to be developed in the 1850s. In 1859, sixty-five lots ranging from 1/2 to 1 1/4 acres in the original town of Webster Groves were auctioned off. Many of the buyers were prominent businessmen who wanted to move their families out of the city, which was plagued by cholera outbreaks each summer, into more healthy surroundings. The development of the railroad permitted them to live in the country and commute into St. Louis to work. The development of Webster Groves was hindered in the 1860s and 1870s by the Civil War and by disputes with the railroad which saw commuters as a nuisance. However, by the 1880s, numerous subdivisions had been platted around the original town of Webster Groves and businesses of all types had been established.

The first petition to incorporate Webster Groves was presented in 1883, but it failed. Many of the area residents initially resisted incorporation because they had moved to the country to get away from city restrictions. However, increasing crime and the need for public improvements prompted a favorable vote for incorporation in 1896. The boundaries of this new town included more than just the area around the Webster Station. Four other previously

independent communities, each with its own railroad station joined with Webster to form the community of Webster Groves. Webster, Tuxedo Park and Webster Park were all suburban communities along the Missouri Pacific and Old Orchard and Selma were communities that developed along the Frisco railroad. Soon after incorporation, Webster Groves elected a mayor and hired a policeman,

In the early twentieth century, substantial brick buildings replaced many of the early wooden buildings along Gore and Lockwood. A new brick Missouri Pacific depot was constructed across the tracks from the original depot in 1909 and the Gorlock Building, the largest and most impressive historic commercial building in the district, was built in 1911. In 1923, the City of Webster Groves passed the first zoning ordinance in the St. Louis area. This ordinance restricted future commercial development to areas already established as commercial. By the early 1930s, the Old Webster Historic District had been almost completely developed and only a few new buildings have been built in the district since that time. As a result, the Old Webster Historic District looks much as it did during the period of significance.