

CONNECTICUT WEEKLY DESK

CONNECTICUT/BRIDGEPORT; Trying to Put One Over the Fence for a Famous Hitter

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TO anyone who has driven on Interstate 95 through Bridgeport and looked south, it is impossible to miss: a single house standing in a rocky weed-filled field, its windows boarded up or broken, its siding stripped. This is the face Bridgeport presents to the world every day.

No wonder the mayor, John Fabrizi, has made it a priority to turn the 55-acre field, known as Steel Point, into a profitable development, with housing, stores and office space and a 2,200-foot promenade that will guide visitors along the shore of Long Island Sound. The developer plans to start work on the site by the end of August.

But what will become of the house? And what is it doing there in the first place?

Long before I-95 even existed, James Henry O'Rourke built a Queen Anne Victorian house in a middle-class community on the east side of Bridgeport between the railroad tracks and the Sound. Mr. O'Rourke, a Bridgeport native, had an interesting double career: He was a major league baseball player and a lawyer. He had such a natural talent for making speeches, his nickname on the field was Orator Jim.

Mr. O'Rourke was special in other ways. On April 22, 1876, in Philadelphia, while playing for the Boston Red Caps, he had the first hit in the National League -- a single to left field. He also was the oldest person to play in a National League game; he was 54 when he took to the field for the New York Giants on Sept. 22, 1904, a record that still stands. All this, along with his more than 2,000 hits and a reputation for graceful catches in left field, made Mr. O'Rourke one of the best-known players of his era. He was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1945.

When he died in 1919, the house passed from family to family, eventually serving as a shelter for battered women. In the 1990's, the city decided Steel Point needed to be revitalized. Wielding its power of eminent domain, the city bought and demolished the neighborhood, but the Bridgeport Community Historical Society argued that the house should be saved.

So the house has remained, but despite big promises from previous developers, little has grown on the rest of Steel Point except weeds. The effort to preserve the house has similarly gone nowhere. A group of history buffs and baseball enthusiasts formed The

First Hit in an effort to move the house, but the nonprofit group has not found a new site for it. If they don't, the house will be razed. As it is, the house continues to fall apart. Daniel Pfeffer, the president of Midtown Equities, the lead developer on the site, said his company had determined that the house was structurally unsound. Nonetheless, Mr. Pfeffer said his company had agreed to move it, as long as The First Hit could find a spot.

Michael J. Bielawa and Bernie Crowley, two of the leaders of The First Hit, said they still hadn't found a site and time was running out. They visited the house recently and found the door bashed in and fresh graffiti on the walls.

"It's kind of sad what happens," Mr. Bielawa said.

Mr. Crowley said the house could be a museum.

"This is part of what Bridgeport has been," he said. "There's a place for history, too."

Photos: The former residence of James Henry O'Rourke in Bridgeport. O'Rourke, at left, a major league baseball player and lawyer given to speechmaking, was also known as Orator Jim. (Photo by Thomas McDonald for The New York Times)