

Urban Renewal in Cincinnati's Lower West End

A DEEPLY ROOTED HERITAGE STORY MAP

By Deqah Hussein-Wetzel June 17, 2020

Above photograph Citation: 701-703 Richmond Street. SC#115-1414. Cincinnati Museum Center.

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Urban Renewal

is a planning initiative that has been impacting U.S. cities since the 1930s. Terminology such as, “urban blight” and “slum clearance” were used to identify areas city officials deemed an eye-sore, where physical buildings were degrading and infrastructure was wanting.

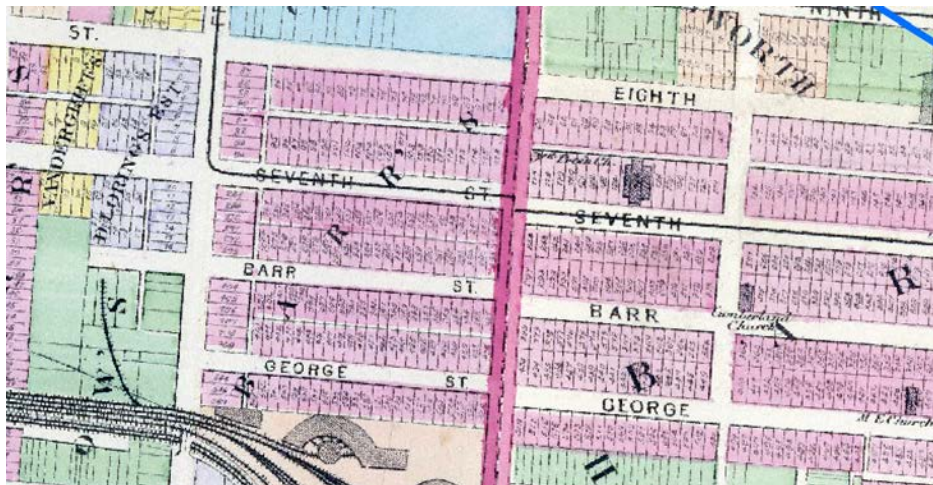
The social culture

in these areas was by large African American. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, serious opposition arose due to the seamless demolition of significant historic resources, an action which hindered minorities and low-income residents

By the late 1960s and early 1970s,

serious opposition arose due to the seamless demolition of significant historic resources, an action which hindered minorities and low-income residents throughout the country. Jane Jacobs, an activist and author who is famous for her 1961 book, “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”, identified serious social welfare concerns and advocated for historic preservation in New York City, which triggered the movement to save historic structures nationwide.

Background Image Citation: PWA Housing Poster. New York Housing Authority. New York: Federal Art Project, 1936.



City of Cincinnati, LINK-GIS/PDS, Esri, HERE, Garmin, INCREMENT P, USGS, EPA, USDA | Ruth

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During the early 20th Century,

Cincinnati's West End neighborhood was a dense urban area comprising of multiple thousands of buildings that housed almost 5% of the city's entire population. This was over 25,000 residents spread out over tens of thousands of dwelling units. However, housing conditions were less than optimal for these residents. Entire families were cramped in one-bedroom apartments with no indoor toilet. It was not uncommon for a unit occupied by a single family to comprise of six relatives, some combination of children and adults, who had to share an outhouse with the entire apartment complex. The federal government noticed that overcrowding and sanitary issues in cities like Cincinnati were beginning to compromise downtown corridors as early as the 1930s.

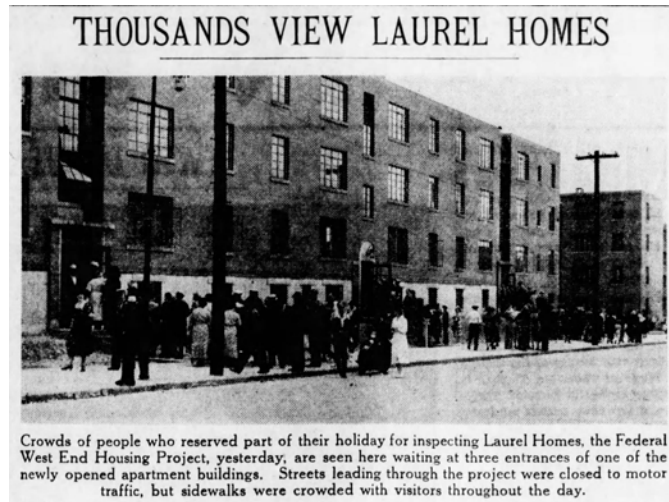
Urban renewal impacted the existing landscape of the lower West

End through two separate projects:

- **Late 1930s and early 1940** -- Laurel Homes and Lincoln Court public housing projects were constructed on Ezzard Charles Drive.
- **1960s** -- The Kenyon Barr Urban Redevelopment Project resulted in the formation of the industrial neighborhood of Queensgate and facilitated the expansion of the Millcreek Expressway (present-day I-75).

Background Map Citation: *Cincinnati Titus Atlas Map, 1869.*

Note: You can pan around the neighborhood by clicking on the map and using your mouse to move around.



Let's unpack that...

Laurel Homes and Lincoln Court

were modern public housing buildings constructed in 1938 and 1942, respectively. At this time, the physical and social environment was densely packed with buildings and people. Quite a bit of tenement housing in the West End was demolished and replaced by these public housing projects.

Laurel Homes was the first public housing project in Cincinnati. It was constructed by the Federal government under the Public Works Administration as a slum clearance project, which meant that the existing land was occupied and razed to complete the project.

Public Housing as we know it today, was first introduced in Federal Housing Act of 1937. From it, birthed the United States Housing Authority, a public entity that provided money to local housing agencies in order to build public housing. Low-income city-dwellers who, for decades, lacked adequate public infrastructure and suitable housing accommodations were told their communities were blighted and their homes would be slated for demolition. Even though new public housing buildings would be constructed in their place the urban renewal projects that occurred in the West End

during the late 1930s, ended up permanently displacing many low-income, primarily African American families.

Background Newspaper Citation: Cincinnati Enquirer June 13, 1938.



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But just how dense was the West End during the 1890s...?

These geo-referenced Sanborn Maps show just how many buildings there were in West End prior to the construction of Laurel Homes in the 1930s.

Background Map Citation: Cincinnati, West End Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1891.

Note: You can pan around the neighborhood by clicking on the map and using your mouse to move around.

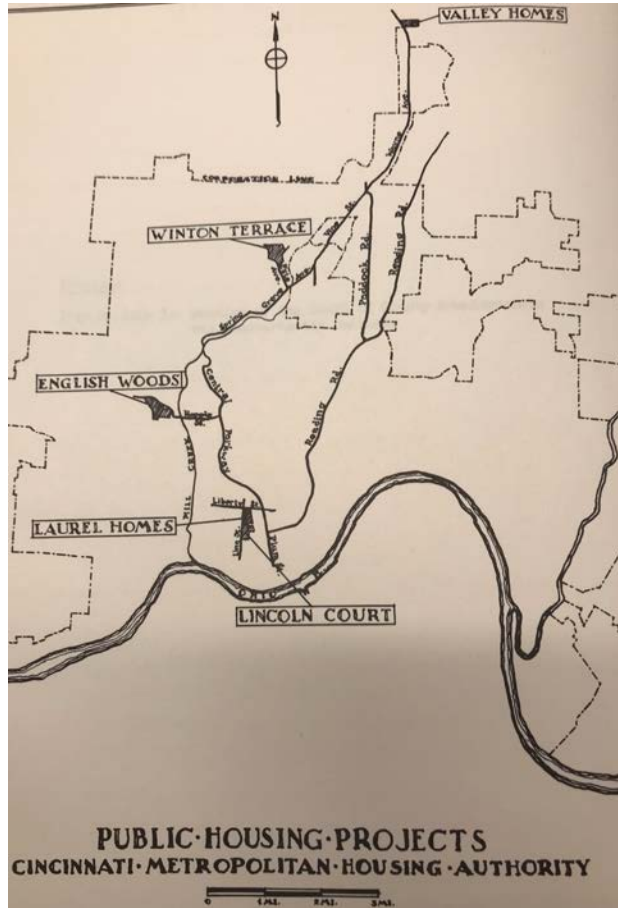


Public Housing in Cincinnati's West End

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, the social, economic, and physical landscapes throughout the country had become transmuted and new goals were afoot.

Sanitation and safety became top priority for cities because their urban areas had become overcrowded and the onset of WWII set the country's workforce in overdrive. In the West End, two public housing projects were implemented through urban renewal, Laurel Homes and Lincoln Court.

Photo: Laurel Homes Public Housing Aerial



Map courtesy of Cincinnati Museum Center from the original publication: Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority. Ninth Annual Report, 1942. (General f352.75 C574a 1942)



This is Laurel Homes...

When it was constructed, the buildings accommodated 1,039 apartments...737 units were allocated to white families and 302 units went to black families...until Lincoln Court was constructed in 1942. At that time, Laurel Homes was dedicated to serving white tenants, while Lincoln Court was for African Americans.



This is Lincoln Court...

the second public housing project to be built in the West End. The complex provided 1015 additional dwellings to "Negro families".

As a slum clearance project, 1,346 families were forced to relocate while the new building was constructed. Eighty percent (80%) of those previous occupants were black. Finding new housing for the black population was exceedingly more difficult than finding temporary homes for white families due to racism, segregation, and the oppressive nature of America's social climate during the 1940s.



What did these new public housing units look like?



Laurel Homes, unit interior, ca. 1942



Laurel Homes, unit kitchen, ca. 1942



Laurel Homes, unit bathroom, ca. 1942



Laurel Homes, interior staircase, ca. 1942.



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What did the West End urban landscape look like before the Kenyon Barr Urban Redevelopment Project?

This map shows just how extensive the building stock was in the lower West End during the 1890s.

Note: You can pan around the neighborhood by clicking on the map and using your mouse to move around.

Industrial 'Super Blocks' Envisioned In Kenyon-Barr Urban Renewal Plan

By Tom Blakshorn
Engineer Reporter

A new concept in the development of industrial areas is being introduced in Cincinnati's West End. It features "super blocks" composed of large parking compounds surrounded by light industrial plants.

This was the heart of a preliminary design report on the Kenyon-Barr urban renewal area delivered before the City Planning Commission yesterday. "It completely reverses the idea of parking on the street," commented Herbert Hoover, director of planning.

"In this scheme we can make more efficient use of the land."

The Kenyon-Barr plan consists of two main parts, both hinging on the Millcreek Expressway.

The light industrial renewal west of the expressway.

The residential renewal area in the northeast corner of the project.

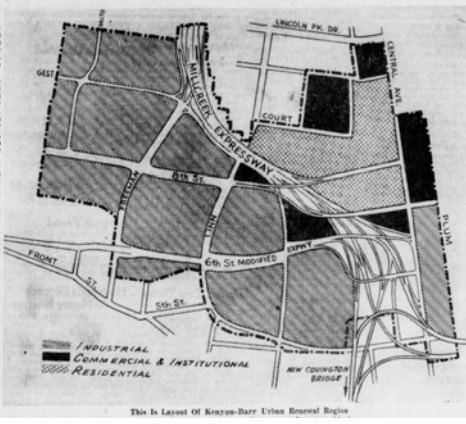
In the area south and west of the Millcreek Expressway, an industrial district of some 200 acres is proposed. This area will be divided into industrial courts by broad, landscaped, one-way streets.

Light industry, according to planners, would include transportation equipment, food, electrical machinery, textile mill products, rubber products, soap and paper products (except newsprint) and printing firms.

High priority will be given to rebuilding, widening, and extending streets which serve the Central Business District.

A recent survey shows that about 200 light firms have vacated a street in the area of Kenyon Barr.

The industrial area will consist of approximately 13 super



This is Layout Of Kenyon-Barr Urban Renewal Region

Queensgate I ~ Kenyon Barr

Queensgate I (or otherwise known as the *Kenyon Barr Urban Redevelopment Project*) aided in the expansion of the Millcreek Expressway (I-75) razed much of the lower West End during the 1960s to create an industrial "super-block" haven in the lower West End.

When the post-WWII housing boom surfaced, it was fueled by the affordability of mortgages for returning servicemen and the popularization of the automobile. Unfortunately, the trendy suburban lifestyle was not attainable for everyone, particularly African Americans who were legally hindered by racist housing policies and wage-gap disparities as a result of segregation in America.

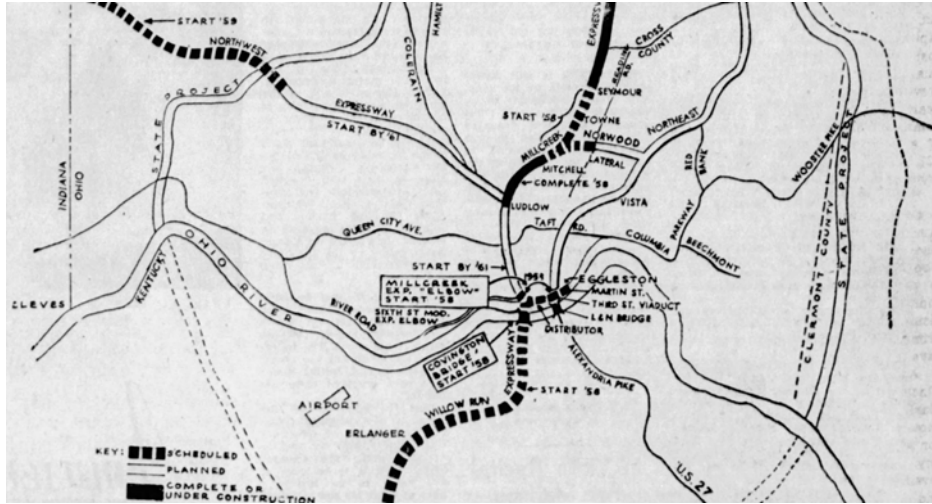
By the late-1950s, city planners saw an opportunity to develop the lower West End into an industrial haven called Queensgate I. All they had to do was declare it a blighted community and federal funds would be provided for slum clearance. To them, the deteriorating conditions of tenements in the neighborhood were an eye sore, inducing crime and poverty. City planners decided that getting rid of these decrepit buildings was worth almost any cost, including the displacement of thousands of families who called the West End home.

Renewing Inequality Cincinnati Map

Soon after the development was approved, planners dubbed the project Kenyon Barr, referring to two streets in the lower West End, so the project seemed more amiable, compared to Queensgate I.

The Kenyon Barr Urban Redevelopment Project called for all blighted buildings in the lower West End to be demolished and replaced by 13 *super-blocks* for manufacturing and light industry. Each block was to have an individual parking area *spanning 8-10 acres* for a total of *10,000 parking spaces* throughout the entire area. Most of the land had been cleared for the project by 1962, and by 1965, the Millcreek Expressway, which bisected the neighborhood, had been fully constructed.

Background Newspaper Citation: Cincinnati Enquirer November 5, 1957.



Although City of Cincinnati's

1925 and 1948 Master Plans called for a system of thoroughfares to be constructed for easier automobile access between downtown area and surrounding suburbs, the real push to construct a fully functioning inter-state highway system was not realized until President Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act of 1956. Eisenhower's plan substantially increased public funding from the Federal Highway Act of 1944, allocating nearly \$25-million to the project.



Newspaper Article Citation: Cincinnati Enquirer Newspaper Article, June 20, 1955.

Background Map Citation: Cincinnati Expressway Map. Cincinnati Enquirer. December 1, 1957.



In the first Deeply Rooted Heritage podcast episode,

I spoke with local urban historians, Dr. Eric Jackson and Anne Delano Steinert to recount the past policies and events that led to the wholesale demolition of the lower West End.

Dr. Eric Jackson is an African American studies professor in the Department of History and Geography at Northern Kentucky University who published over 50 articles relating to Africana studies and African American history.

Anne Delano Steinert is an educator and doctoral student with the University of Cincinnati's public history program, board member at the Over-the-Rhine Museum, and curator of the Finding Kenyon Barr: Exploring Photograph of Cincinnati's Lost West End.

Background Photograph Citation: 700-706 W. 6th Street. SC #115-2106. Cincinnati Museum Center.



Beginning in 2017, Anne Delano Steinert presented her curated project, *Finding Kenyon Barr: Exploring Photographs of Cincinnati's Lost West End* displaying the Cincinnati Museum Center's (CMC) extensive collection of archival photographs and exposing the comprehensive documentation of wholesale demolition in the lower West End. These photos were taken in 1959 in an effort to record the buildings slated to be razed by the Kenyon Barr Urban Redevelopment Project.

Anne launched this project to capture the underlying stories hidden within these photographs. One can't help but get a disconcerted feeling when looking at the maps and photos Anne chose to capture this raw history. Although the purpose of the 1959 survey project was to document buildings, the historical value of these photos extends beyond the intended scope of work; they also depicted social life in a community that ceases to exist.

Background Photograph Citation: 662-664 5th Street. SC#115-1978. Cincinnati Museum Center.

[More on the Exhibit](#)



The truth is in the photographs...

These three photos represent an interaction the two individuals encountered over and over again, where a woman was haranguing a surveyor on Clark Street for taking photos in her community because she knew they were documenting for the purpose of renewal.



Photograph Citation: 1053 Clark Street. SC#115-518. Cincinnati Museum Center.



Photograph Citation: 1067 Clark Street. SC#115-523. Cincinnati Museum Center.

Background Photograph Citation: 1065 Clark Street. SC#115-522. Cincinnati Museum Center.



These next two photographs provide visual context, to go along with the conversation I had with Anne's about her Finding Kenyon Barr exhibit.

This photograph at 1041 Espanola Street shows a surveyor in front of a vacant lot, where a building that once existed has been clearly demolished. According to Anne, it was common for the city to demolish buildings with the worst conditions prior to survey photos being taken.

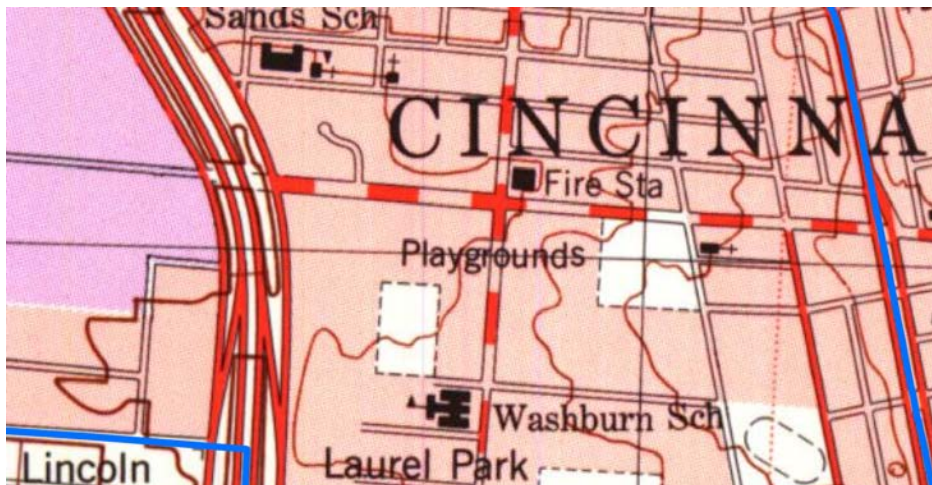
Background Photograph Citation: 1041 Espanola. SC#115-206. Cincinnati Museum Center.



This photograph at 615 Central Avenue highlights the economic activity in the area pre-renewal, depicting multi-use urban buildings with first floor storefronts and residences on the upper stories. Loan shops, clothing stores, and restaurants were just a few businesses located along Central Avenue during the time of the survey.

Background Photograph Citation: 615 Central. SC#115-484. Cincinnati Museum Center.

*"Our lives begin to end the day we become **silent** about things that matter." -- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*



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Overview of the West End Neighborhood, ca. 1970.

Present-day West End boundary on a USGS Topographic Map (1970).

Note: You can pan around the neighborhood by clicking on the map and using your mouse to move around.

Detail of West End Neighborhood, ca. 1970

Cincinnati interchange cutting through the West End USGS

Topographic Map (1970).

Note: You can pan around the neighborhood by clicking on the map and using your mouse to move around.

“We **expect** too much of new buildings, and too little of ourselves.” -- Jane Jacobs.

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