



August 30, 1991

FINAL REPORT - CLIFTON HEIGHTS SURVEY, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

OBJECTIVES

Clifton Heights is a somewhat isolated subdivision located immediately west of Hampton at the edge of I-44. That the character of the area in general is different from most of St. Louis (hilly; winding, romantic streets around a small lake; the largest concentration of frame dwellings in the city; no real through streets) becomes obvious immediately upon entering. The quiet, small-town atmosphere that pervades the area is in striking contrast with the busy thoroughfares and highways that border it. The purpose of this survey was twofold: to conduct an intensive architectural/historic survey for documentation within this unique subdivision, and to identify potential National Register candidates, both single site and district. Each building should be photographed and descriptively documented on an accompanying survey sheet.

It is expected that larger lot size and more desirable locations around the small Clifton Heights lake result in lower density of dwellings and generally larger building size. The perimeter streets tend to have smaller lot size and generally newer buildings, resulting in a tighter density. Relatively little demolition is expected to have occurred, and where it has, the sites will have been quickly infilled, leaving the fabric of the cultural landscape with about the same density, if somewhat less rich visually. Houses immediately in the vicinity of the park are expected to have been maintained very well and demolitions in sight of the park are expected to be almost nonexistent. Because these houses tend to be larger and often more elaborately designed, they seem to be associated today with a more prosperous group of people than those newer and usually smaller houses away from the park. One objective is to get an idea of the general economic health of the area through the years by selectively scanning occupations of those living here. Information from Heritage/St. Louis, a group of early 1970s volunteer researchers, should prove valuable in this regard. It is expected that a relatively high number of buildings will have had additions or alterations, many of them extensive.

AREA SURVEYED

The survey area is as follows: beginning at the point of intersection of the west line of the north-south alley of City Block 4648 and the south line of Elizabeth, continuing south along the alley to its point of intersection with the north line of the east-west alley of City Block 4648; thence east along the alley line to its point of intersection with the west line of Hampton; thence south along Hampton, crossing Columbia, to its point of intersection with the north line of the east-west alley of City

Block 5892; thence west along the alley, crossing Sulphur and Clifton, to its point of intersection with the east line of the north-south alley of City Block 4800; thence north, crossing Southwest and Tamm, to its point of intersection with the west property line of 6265 Columbia; thence north along the west property lines of the lot owners of the west side of Clifton to its point of intersection with the west property line of 2187 Clifton; thence north and then east along the property line of 2187 Clifton to its point of intersection with the west property line of 2185 Clifton; thence north along said property line and its projection, crossing Clifton to its point of intersection with the west property line of 2182 Clifton; thence north along the property line to its point of intersection with the northwest property line of 2123 Gregg Place; thence northeastwardly along the property line and its projection, crossing Gregg Place to its point of intersection with the east line of Gregg Place (including 2162 and 2166 Gregg Place); thence east along the north line of Argus Place (and then the north line of the east-west alleys of City Blocks 5471, 5472 and 5473), crossing Knox and Esther to its point of intersection with the east line of Sulphur; thence south along Sulphur to its point of intersection with the south line of Elizabeth; thence east along Elizabeth to its point of intersection with the point of beginning. It includes all or part of Gregg Place, Elizabeth, Sulphur, Columbia, Clifton, Bowman, Simpson, Esther, Eitman, Simpson Terrace, and Clifton Park Terrace and comprises approximately 650 acres. It is west and slightly north of Tower Grove Park and due south of Forest Park.

The survey area is primarily residential and includes two churches, fewer than ten commercial businesses and no industries. Of the residential buildings, very few are apartments or multifamily dwellings.

The scope and outline of this survey was presented to the Clifton Heights Neighborhood Association meeting at Fry Methodist Church on April 22, 1991. Response was generally favorable and interest in information on individual homes was high.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS USED

This study began with a windshield survey, noting demolitions, new construction, and alterations. The archives at City Hall, Market and Tucker Streets, were then consulted to obtain information available on microfilmed building permits. The permits are arranged by city block number, basically chronologically. Usually the primary difficulty encountered in doing early building permit searches in St. Louis is that many pre-1900 permits give no specific address. The processes of deduction and elimination are then put to use to match permits with existing buildings, not always a successful technique.

For the city blocks in the Clifton Heights subdivision, research is not that simple. More than half of the city blocks in the survey area did not have available inactive building permits. The original permits were

transferred onto typed index cards in the 1930s by WPA workers; these cards were more recently microfilmed, then boxed up and stored in a facility not accessible to the public. The microfilm is the only access currently available to this information. For some reason, the microfilming process skipped over the inactive permits (the dates vary, but inactives usually end in the 1920s) for eleven of the city blocks here in question. Even worse, of the remaining few blocks with available inactives, the active permits were not filmed for three, leaving only two with both types of permits available. This is a highly unusual situation for St. Louis never before encountered to this degree by this researcher.

Fortunately, in 1970-71, research in Clifton Heights was conducted by a group called Heritage/St. Louis. At that time, the WPA cards were apparently still largely available, and Heritage/St. Louis recorded a number of them. Unfortunately (since that information is now lost to us) they did not do a systematic, block-by-block search of permits; instead, they chose only to seek information on specific buildings randomly chosen by virtue of supposed architectural or historical merit. It is interesting to note that in a few cases, this surveyor turned up some permits on microfilm that the earlier researchers had not been able to find in the WPA cards - usually due to filing errors.

Once the building permits were recorded, they were checked against the Daily Record, available on microfilm at the St. Louis Public Library. Details not recorded on the WPA cards were printed at the time the permit was issued as a matter of public record. In this way, dimensions, architect, and details of the transaction otherwise lost can be picked up. Even with the help of the Daily Record, however, many dwellings simply had no architect as such. This is especially true of a middle-income area such as Clifton Heights, where builders often used stock designs, varying them only slightly. There is also the problem of exactly who was an architect, since builders often called themselves architects and certification was not required until well into this century. In the case of Clifton Heights, in fact, the Heritage/St. Louis files have information given by the daughter of R. Dawson, who built some of the surveyed buildings. She evidently felt that her father designed the buildings and was an architect. Another local resident they interviewed complained that the man was "only a builder," stressing that he was not an architect. In fact, the formal training of many of the "real" architects was fairly sketchy even after the turn of the century. The builder vs. architect dilemma is addressed specifically on the map, in which the builder's name is shown parenthetically to differentiate it from a person particularly designated on the permit or elsewhere as an architect.

A 5 x 7" photograph was made of each building in the survey area that was either not obviously new or completely devoid of integrity. This last assessment proved to be a difficult matter in Clifton Heights, where a man's home is his castle and additions and aluminum siding abound. It often comes down to a value judgement, really, and the judgement was not always easy to make, particularly in cases where the alteration was well-intentioned. It is also made a bit more difficult in houses that were more modestly styled to begin with. If a house had few architectural clues to

its intended style when it was new, and those few have been wiped out by aluminum or other siding or a new porch - the decision can be tough. Suffice it to say that the buildings left out of the inventory were generally fairly egregious examples of remodeling. In a few cases, usually larger houses (particularly the two or three that have been stuccoed) the choice was made to err on the side of documentation rather than to leave it off the inventory.

Buildings were next assigned survey numbers, beginning in the northwest corner and moving around the perimeter clockwise and then around the interior blocks clockwise (one house, survey #224, is out of order). Those buildings on the map designated with an asterisk are either newer than 1941 or are devoid of integrity in the researcher's estimation; this should not be confused with the "non-contributing" status asterisk used on Landmarks' National Register district maps. The survey yielded 272 total buildings assessed, with 224 numbered inventory sheets (and one non-numbered sheet for an altered but interesting police station).

Heritage/St. Louis

Additional information was gained through city directories and the Heritage/St. Louis information. A note about their material: much of the information they obtained was from the two churches in the survey area and Episcopal archives (for a former nearby church). This information has to do with church membership and trusteeship and is much beyond the scope of this survey. They did do some valuable correlation work that is often included on sheets, in which they listed addresses of church members and the earliest dates they appeared. This information was sometimes tracked down even further in directories, and it appears that as the research went on, they became more focused on discovering when houses were built; at the outset of their project, that seems not to have been their goal, as pages of church records were tediously transcribed into a chart.

Heritage/St. Louis researchers also did quite a bit of interviewing and correspondence with present and former residents of the area. Because of the feeling of isolation and community within the subdivision, people have a possessive attitude about the area even today. At the time Heritage/St. Louis did their research, many residents who had witnessed a good portion of the earlier history of the area were still living and quite eager to discuss the histories of construction as they knew them, as well as the personal relationships that were interwoven in the community. This kind of reminiscing can be dangerous, of course, and we see in the files comments such as, "the house is over a hundred years old," - contradictions about houses that cannot possibly be that old. Contradictions abound within the information the researchers compiled. No information is used in this survey that was in any way in doubt in either my opinion or theirs, unless it is clearly presented as such (as in information about 6002 Eitman, survey #206). The material from Heritage/St. Louis is always indicated as theirs when used on the survey sheets.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks the group encountered was the fact that the house numbers changed on Clifton (and evidently part of Elizabeth) in 1908, apparently by the Post Office. The numbers before the change were

seemingly designated almost by the owners' fancy, skipping numbers and sometimes having evens and odds both on the same side of the street. In subsequent years, some large lots were divided and infilled with more than one house, adding further to the confusion. The "improved" number sequencing is still confusing in several places. Heritage/St. Louis researchers attempted to make a key to the old/new correlation, but had difficulty making headway because they could only find one person on a 1901 church list who still lived in the same house on Clifton after the numbering change was made. He became their Rosetta stone to figuring out which new number was which old number; this was important because of both building permits and directory information. It was a very difficult task, and their records show that even they weren't always sure when they had it right. If they expressed doubt about a correlation, that information was not used in this inventory.

Ultimately, Heritage/St. Louis selected 20 - 25 houses "for further study," and recorded the information they found on HABS inventory sheets (no physical descriptions, stylistic assessment, condition - just historical data). Their criteria are not always clear to this researcher; for example, they chose survey #203, 2504 Clifton Park Terrace. This is the design of several Clifton Heights houses, all done by the same local builder. It is neither historically nor architecturally significant to Clifton Heights, except that it is a good representative example of much of the housing stock in the area. 2351 Sulphur (survey #188) is another of their choices, insignificant historically and of little architectural interest. Nevertheless, this survey benefited from their research, which is stored at the Landmarks Association of St. Louis.

RESULTS

History

The seemingly remote area, which in 1885 was surveyed by Julius Pitzman and became Clifton Heights, had well-established connections to the city of St. Louis. The historical St. Louis San Francisco Railroad ran close to the River Des Peres forming the northern boundary of the area while the early suburban roads Watson and Old Manchester (which became Clifton Avenue in this vicinity) meandered around the hills. Until 1885 the central high part of the undeveloped area was listed by the Recorder of Deeds as "D. W. Graham's Sulphur Springs Tract." In 1885 the land in Graham's tract was surveyed and subdivided. The area to the north, owned by Willis H. Plunkett and wife (which became Frisco Park - lost to I-44), and the section next to Arsenal, owned by Angus Kennedy and wife, were also obtained as part of the new residential subdivision. The ownership of the new development rested with a group of St. Louis Methodists¹ who, led by minister Dr. Benjamin Fry, promoted a Methodist migration to the outlying area. Oddly, none of these trustees felt the urge to move to Clifton Heights themselves. At the time of his death in 1892, Dr. Fry was honored by the construction of the Fry Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church in Clifton Heights (this building burned down several years later and was rebuilt in 1905 - survey #136). According to Heritage/St. Louis files, a 1901 list of the membership of Fry Church shows that almost the entire membership lived in the Clifton Heights subdivision. The general plan was

for each owner to buy a double lot (120 feet), building his house on one half to leave room for another house on the other side, explaining why some houses seem crowded together while others are isolated.²

Pitzman, an eminent surveyor, probably made this his first experiment with romantic street patterns designed for a syndicate (his plan for Arcadia dates from 1887 and Compton Heights from 1888). Unlike the rigid parallel pattern of most of St. Louis' streets, the streets in Clifton Heights follow the contours of the land in gentle meanders, not unlike those of Forest Park, designed to present rural vistas at each turn and to ease the eye from the rigid regularity of the urban environment. The streets and park were privately owned but were given to the city c. 1925. Streets were not paved until well after the turn of the century³ and sidewalks were made of boards. The trustees drained and cleared the area now known as Clifton Park, which initially was a swampy wilderness.

The area, with its wild hills and ravines, was graced by two parks in the immediate vicinity: the present one up at the heart of the subdivision, and Frisco Park, near the river. The rural atmosphere must have been attractive to the hard-working middle-class urbanites used to the heat, smoke and dirt of the city in pre-EPA days. Probably only one house stood in the area before 1885: survey #206, located on the heights near the park at 6002 Eitman (see 1883 Hopkins map and survey sheet). The Methodists drawn to the area to live were soon joined by a group of Presbyterians and Episcopalians, and as the slope between the ridge of Elizabeth and the kidney-shaped lake became dotted with Victorian country houses, picnicking by the river became a favorite pastime.⁴ The Episcopalians built a church (now razed) across from Frisco Park; the Presbyterians built theirs at Columbia and Clifton, survey #121) about 1891.

Early residents, most of whom were working-class people, were well served by public transportation; many of the men commuted to work by train, using the Frisco railroad's Clifton Heights stop; the "dinky" was in early service to the area, and the Tower Grove Street car was extended to Columbia Avenue not long after.⁵ Private vehicular travel was a different thing altogether:

The nearest carriage crossing was at Kingshighway as Hampton Avenue was not built until 1930. There was a swinging bridge in the area which pedestrians used to reach Manchester Road, as well as a wagon bridge at Knox Avenue. (The World's Fair Fire Company used the latter crossing to reach the Fry Memorial Church fire in 1905. . . .The Arsenal Street fire company arrived promptly but had to wait to double team horses brought over from the World's Fair grounds in order to make it up the steep and slippery incline at Clifton Avenue.)⁶

Unfortunately, the pastoral beauty of this rustic/romantic retreat was dealt a heavy blow in 1900 when a smelting plant began operation along the River Des Peres. Pollution from the plant soon killed trees in low-lying Frisco Park, severely damaging the potential for further residential development. With the pollution came a (coincidental?) high rate of turnover in residents. As mentioned earlier, only one 1901 resident of Clifton Avenue was still living there in 1907-08. The more physically-

protected area on the opposite side of the park, already a popular place for home sites, became even more desirable and a number of homes were built (e.g., survey #189, 207, 208, 209-15, 220, 222, 223) near the upper park.

With the attention of the embryonic city plan profession turning from the grandiose public buildings and miles of parkways to the prosaic problems of land use, housing and transportation, the Clifton Heights vicinity became more urbanized. The Scullin Industrial area was firmly established by 1907, and by 1925 Watson Road was being widened from 60 to 80 feet. The southern portion of the subdivision bounded by Southwest and Arsenal was still only lightly built up, with many blocks not yet cut through. This area, formerly part of the Watson neighborhood, was developed from the mid-1920s through the early 1930s, mostly by small speculative builders like Harry C. Vollmar, who built all the houses on the east side of Sulphur in 1926-27. The new lots were very small, particularly by contrast with the earlier lots, and many of these houses were tiny brick bungalows - quite a departure from the large-scale Victorians on their generous lots around the lake. With this development, much of the peripheral area lost its country feeling almost overnight and began to gain the appearance that much of the rest of southwest St. Louis eventually took on.

During the Depression, it became difficult for many St. Louisans to maintain the large old houses, and a great many were abandoned to neglect or turned into boarding houses. The people of Clifton Heights were not immune to economic developments. In fact, a surprising number of the original owners for whom we have occupations had jobs like bookkeeper and clerk; one of the most striking examples of this is survey #183, one of the largest and most grand houses on the park, owned by a clerk for a mail service. No doubt many of the occupants of the drafty old homes looked longingly down the hill at people living in their cozy little bungalows. Fortunately for us, not many of the homes around the park got to the point of demolition.

Nevertheless, by the time of the Comprehensive Plan of 1947, the area was rundown. The 1947 proposed zoning of the neighborhood, however, was unrealistic and ignored the established land use. Additionally, the outdated 1935 map used for the study indicated a large section of undeveloped land in the northwest while in fact tract housing (Clifton Hills) had been built there in the early 1940s. The proposed expressway is outlined here, planned to stay along the northern boundary of Scullin Industrial District. It ultimately turned instead, following the old path of the river and the railroad, taking a substantial number of dwelling units and cutting off the northern and eastern edges. The highway served to effectively isolate the Clifton Heights area even more than before, both physically and perceptively. The truncation of north-south streets and the subsequent isolation of the perhaps 50 houses left in the "no-man's land" between the railroad and the highway are testimony still to the mistake of not following the original plan.

The neighborhood showed a major population loss between 1960 and 1970, more than were lost to the highway. Some population decline can be attributed to people moving away from the highway and its associated noise

and pollution and visual ugliness. The southside trend to a more elderly population dominated by widows is a more likely reason for the loss. During this time a few houses were built in Clifton Heights: small, undistinguished one-story cottages of lower-middle and middle class people.

From documentation written in 1970-73 on the neighborhood, it appears to have been mostly lower-middle and middle class whites, with few professional people. Twenty years later, the neighborhood appears to be on the upswing, with a neighborhood association and newsletter and a general pride in the area and in one's property. A protectiveness exists in the neighborhood; many feel it is St. Louis' "best-kept secret" and eschew the house tours and drum-beating of other city neighborhoods. Others welcome the infusion of interest, energy and money resulting from the home ownership of young professionals in the area, hoping to see restoration and renovation throughout the subdivision. Clifton Heights still appears to be almost totally white. The ethnic mix is not immediately evident - although their location "at the foot of The Hill" (St. Louis' Italian-American community) assures a good representation of those of Italian descent. Although not the trendy yuppie neighborhood of Lafayette Square, Clifton Heights does appear to have experienced a slow influx of young professionals, to make a casual and undocumented observation. It could be characterized as mostly solid middle class, with some upper-middle and some lower-middle (usually on the geographical perimeters). The area is isolated by its geography more than ever; this researcher found during the course of this survey that many longtime St. Louisans were unaware of the existence of Clifton Heights.

Architecture

Much of the Clifton Heights survey area is characterized by large, frame Victorian and early-twentieth century single-family dwellings. Many are difficult to identify in terms of one "high style" or another. This is at least partially because very few were designed by architects. Vernacular traditions like the Upright-and-Wing, Open Gable and the American Foursquare are often expressed with modest detailing to indicate a style. Tiny brackets and 3-over-1 windows become enough to designate a house "Craftsman," and to that extent, this surveyor is uncomfortable with strictly categorizing every building in either one compartment or another. Particularly during the 1890-1920 era, which is strongly represented in Clifton Heights, styles evolved and borrowed from and blended into one another - especially as builders picked favorite ways to express certain idioms (e.g., see survey #97, #122, #123, #198 - all are essentially square houses with hipped roofs). Craftsman is often only a hair away from Colonial Revival and Prairie School; Queen Anne and Shingle are often very similar. Vernacular architecture likewise crosses economic and social lines: even many of the larger, more expensive, homes in the subdivision have minimal stylistic features (survey #127, #155, #171, #223) and we sometimes find ourselves labeling a building on the basis of intuition: the designer's intent. Nevertheless, a concerted effort was made to address the problems of style consistently throughout this survey.

In terms of potential National Register single sites on just historical basis: it would probably be very difficult. No one site would appear to qualify on that basis alone.

Single sites on the basis of architecture: there are several that have the potential, including survey #136 (with history), #143, #144, #184 (based on followup documentation), #183, #216 and #218; this is not meant to be a definitive list - just a guideline.

District potential: definite. Historically: the parts of Clifton Heights into which the biggest concentration of Methodists moved first (this would eliminate the 1920s houses). The history of the trustees and the promotion of this very specific area would probably come under Community Planning. Architecturally: the areas facing the park have the highest concentration of non-remodeled, high-style houses, although there is throughout the survey area an odd mix of sizes, eras, styles, and remodeling disasters. The most likely areas architecturally would include Simpson and Bowman; parts of Clifton Avenue and Columbia might also qualify. [The unusually high concentration of bungalows might even eventually make a potential district.] While few of the surveyed houses would qualify as the "work of a master," they tend to be unusual for St. Louis and many are fine examples of vernacular expressions of high style. The combination of history and architecture is a promising one in terms of National Register listing.

The integrity level for most of the surveyed buildings was fairly high, but none appeared to be totally untouched. Particularly with frame dwellings, maintenance becomes a problem. Porches are especially vulnerable and are, along with windows, the most-replaced/altered elements in this survey - and sometimes integrity is destroyed. Any district boundaries would necessarily include a number of non-contributing buildings; this survey has been somewhat generous in assessing integrity, and a very hard look would have to be taken at some specimens.

PHOTOGRAPHS:

Photographs were taken by Cynthia H. Longwisch March - April, 1991. Negative in possession of Missouri Department of Natural Resources, Division of Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 176, Jefferson City, MO 65102.

Camera angles on corresponding survey map.

NOTES

1. The five trustees were: Dr. Benjamin St. James Fry, 2933 Lucas, Methodist minister and leader of the group; Samuel H. Pye, 2915 Lucas Avenue, manager of Western Methodist Book Concern, 1101 Olive St.; Lewis B. Tebbetts, 3024 Bell Avenue, of Deere, Mansur & Co. (farm machinery), 515 N. Main; Simeon W. Croy, 2918 Thomas St., manager of D. M. Osborne & Co. (agricultural equipment), 22nd & Gratiot; and Fletcher M. Doan, 3912 N. 11th St., secretary of Farmer's & Mechanical Mutual Aid Assn., 1210 Olive.
2. Heritage/St. Louis files.
3. When paving finally came, local residents were charged a "bricking" fee, according to Heritage/St. Louis files.
4. Heritage/St. Louis, preliminary report, 1971, p. 2.
5. Mrs. Katherine Rhoads Harkness, in a 1971 letter to Ann Spivy, Heritage/St. Louis researcher.
6. Heritage/St. Louis, preliminary report, 1971, p. 2.
7. Carolyn Toft, 1973 research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Annual Report of the City Plan Commission, 1921-1925, Harland Bartholomew engineer, St. Louis, 1922.
- Annual Report of the City Plan Commission, 1933-34, Harland Bartholomew engineer, St. Louis, 1934.
- Clifton Heights, Preliminary Neighborhood Historical Research Report, Heritage/St. Louis, 1971.
- City Plan for Saint Louis, A, Civic League of St. Louis, 1907.
- Comprehensive City Plan, St. Louis, Mo., Harland Bartholomew engineer, 1947.
- Gould's City Directories, 1900-1940. St. Louis: Gould, 1900-1940.
- Heritage/St. Louis, files, 1970-71.
- Hopkins' Map of St. Louis, Missouri, St. Louis: 1883.
- Leonard, John W., ed. Book of St. Louisans. St. Louis: St. Louis Republic, 1906 and 1912.
- Saint Louis After World War II, Harland Bartholomew engineer, St. Louis City Plan Commission, 1942.
- Pitzman, Julius, surveys of St. Louis, 1878, 1885.
- Polk's St. Louis, Missouri Directory, 1875-1910. St. Louis: Polk Directory Co., 1875-1910.
- Toft, Carolyn H., St. Louis, personal research 1973.
- Urban Land Policy, Harland Bartholomew engineer, St. Louis City Plan Commission. 1936.