

## CLIFTON HEIGHTS (11)

### LOCATION

The Clifton Heights neighborhood is located in southwest St. Louis. It is bounded by Interstate Highway 44 (I-44) to the west and north, Hampton Avenue to the east, and Arsenal Street to the south.

### HISTORY

Portions of Clifton Heights are among the earliest developed areas in southwest St. Louis. Moreover, there is a more varied topography throughout the neighborhood than in adjoining areas to the east and south. Relative to most of the City of St. Louis, there are noteworthy hills and prominent natural valleys. This combination of natural topography and history gives much of Clifton Heights a look and feel that distinguishes it from elsewhere in St. Louis.

The entire area covers a large hill that naturally slopes north and west toward the ancient valley of the River Des Peres, long since channelized, and shared by the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway and I-44. On this hill is a natural “dimple” or mini-valley. This bowl is the setting for Clifton Park and its small lake. It is surrounded by substantial homes to form the area’s focal point. There are also slopes east toward Hampton, as well as along Watson, on either side of Arsenal. Hampton itself dips around Watson.

This vicinity was included in the early colonial land grants. There was some agricultural use of the area both prior and subsequent to the extension of the then Pacific Railroad line along the River Des Peres during the 1850s. The old Frisco Railway added its tracks in the 1880s. Gradually, industrial uses gravitated to sites along the railroads and the River Des Peres during this period.

Residential development ensued above this curving valley. Portions of Clifton Heights were platted as early as the mid 1880s and there was considerable development between 1890 and World War I. The pace accelerated during the 1900s with most of the neighborhood being filled in by World War II, with the exception of the large Clifton Hills subdivision, north of Southwest Avenue and west of Tamm Avenue. This area slopes steeply down to the River Des Peres and was not platted until 1953-1955. Today, its relatively small mid 1950s homes represent the largest concentration of newer housing in the area.

It is significant that Clifton Heights has a much higher percentage, 75.6 percent, of single-family housing units than most St. Louis neighborhoods. Generally, older and larger homes are arranged around Clifton Park. The corridor along Hampton Avenue has evolved into a mix of commercial and institutional uses. Commercial nodes occur along Arsenal, Watson, and Southwest at and near key intersections.

Most of Clifton Heights was developed for middle-income people of the times—with the exception of the area around Clifton Park, which was skewed upward. Some older, more modest “working-class” housing did exist closer to the railroad tracks west of Hampton Avenue, but demolition and construction for I-44, which began service in 1972, destroyed

or isolated most of these homes. In any case, I-44 now constitutes both a physical and psychological border for Clifton Heights.

Public land uses in Clifton Heights are comparatively few, comprising a single public school, some churches, and Clifton Park. This park, a small gem, began life as a private residential development. Its original 4.4 acres were dedicated to St. Louis in 1912 with an additional 1.25 acres being added during the early 1920s. The Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) maintenance yard that abuts I-44 is another public land use. There is practically no industrial land use in Clifton Heights inasmuch as I-44 separates the community from the local railroad and River Des Peres industrial corridor.

Historically, Clifton Heights has been a white middle-class community. Although its population is becoming more diverse, its 1990 population of 4,130 was 98.9 percent white. Younger families are moving to the area, with houses near the park in greatest demand.

Crime is relatively minimal. The primary local concerns are the preservation and improvement of local housing stock, as well as a pending hotel development proposed for the southwest quadrant of the I-44/Hampton interchange, which represents the far northeastern tip of Clifton Heights.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS**

Clifton Heights largely comprises single-family homes. A slight majority of these houses are frame, with the oldest housing stock in and around Clifton Park, and the newest housing, the Clifton Hills subdivision noted above, being almost exclusively frame. Brick was the dominant material for residential construction between World Wars I and II.

Residential land use dominates local development. As previously indicated, commercial, institutional, and public land uses tend to be limited to major corridors or nodes at key intersections, with the exception of Clifton Park. Industrial land uses are few, small, and isolated within Clifton Park.

There is little or no vacant developable ground in Clifton Heights. As a practical matter, new construction must entail the demolition of existing development. Since clearance was completed for I-44 in the 1960s, demolition has almost exclusively been for commercial or institutional purposes along major local thoroughfares.

New construction has been scarce in recent times. The largest construction project in many years is actually the renovation and expansion of Mason School at 6031 Southwest. This 1919 public elementary school will soon have additional classrooms, as well as a new gym and a new cafeteria. The fate of the proposal to build a new hotel near I-44 and Hampton is discussed subsequently.

For the most part, the local housing stock is good but variable. Problem structures dot the community, with the most obvious concentration being at or near the proposed hotel site. Housing styles run the gamut from vernacular bungalows to Victorian Queen Annes to mid-1950s tract housing.

The U. S. Census determined a 1990 vacancy rate of 5.1 percent. As previously indicated, owner occupancy in 1990 was 75.6 percent (1,860 of 2,461 total dwelling units). There were 502 rental units (20.4 percent of all housing stock) in 1990. By statistical coincidence, 75.6 percent of 1990s housing stock was single-family. Most of the balance comprise duplexes and three- or four-family flats, with no structure having more than 49 units. There has been little or no new residential construction since 1990, although many owners are continually improving their properties.

One disturbing Clifton Heights trend has been an apparent increase in the rental of single-family homes. Young families tend to favor buying larger or more appealing houses. When relatives inherit or otherwise assume control of certain properties, they sometimes discover that extensive work needs to be done or that they cannot sell them for what they expect. All too often, the housing is rented and increasingly deteriorates. Notwithstanding the fact that the bulk of Clifton Heights remains attractive to potential young homeowners, the greater numbers of single-family rental units is cause for concern.

#### **INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

The only school of any type, public, private or parochial, in the Clifton Heights neighborhood is the Mason School, previously noted, at 6031 Southwest.

There are several churches in the community. They include the Dr. Fry Memorial Methodist Church at 2501 Clifton Avenue. It was founded in 1888 by Dr. Benjamin St. James Fry, one of the original developers of Clifton Heights. The Clifton Heights Presbyterian Church has occupied its building at 6201 Columbia Avenue since 1900. The Clifton Heights Gospel Hall is at 6420 Marmaduke. Interestingly, Clifton Heights may be one of the only south St. Louis neighborhoods not to have its own Roman Catholic church.

AMVETS Post 6 occupies the former Clifton Heights police station at 2718 Clifton Avenue. This handsome brick structure was built around 1896.

Clifton Heights is a center for both local and regional social services. For years, the Clifton Heights Senior Center has operated out of facilities provided by the Clifton Heights Presbyterian Church at 6201 Columbia. The Hi-Pointe Community Center at 6020 Southwest includes a food pantry, among other services, for those in need. Hampton Avenue has a strong institutional and public service orientation with offices for Operation Brightside (2375), the Lutheran Laymen's League (2185), and the Peregrine Society (2343), among others. Soon, the American Youth Foundation will rehabilitate space previously occupied by a defunct new-truck dealership on Hampton.

The Clifton Heights Neighborhood Association has been active for many years. It promotes the welfare, upkeep, and good name of the neighborhood. In addition, the Linden Heights Housing Corporation, which provides homeowners' assistance and undertakes residential rehabilitation projects, is active in its portion of Clifton Heights (roughly the southern half). In this regard, the Clifton Heights Neighborhood Association maintains a "tool library" and recommended list of contractors.

There are no community development corporations or tenant management associations in Clifton Heights. The Southwest St. Louis Landlord Association does have some members who own properties in the area.

#### **PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

The proposed construction and operation of a Drury Inn on Wilson Avenue west of Hampton at I-44 has generated significant local concerns. As many as twelve single-family homes could be required to be bought and demolished for this purpose. An established local restaurant might also necessarily be acquired for developmental purposes. Many local residents believe that they might be adversely affected by a multiple story 24-hour hotel operation due to traffic, additional noise, parking lot lights, and so forth.

These neighborhood concerns are real. Yet, any residential sites this close to a major freeway interchange may and arguably should yield to more intensive development. (Indeed, there are two hotels on Wilson Avenue east of Hampton Avenue.) Moreover, the presence of the highway itself, with its noise, light, dust, and exhaust, has permanently marginalized the residential appeal of this locale. The highway will not go away, nor will the problems and opportunities that it generates. For now, for various reasons, this project is on hold.

Clifton Heights has not experienced any recent large-scale planning. Insofar as can be determined, there has never been a neighborhood plan written or adopted. The time may be appropriate to critically evaluate the interchange's developmental potential, develop a new housing preservation strategy, and energize commercial corridors and nodes. A neighborhood plan could accomplish all this and more, provided that resources are made available to do the job. There needs to be a shared vision for Clifton Heights that can sustain it well into its second century of existence.