

THE GATE DISTRICT (31)

LOCATION

The Gate District is defined as the area between Chouteau Avenue and Interstate 44 on the north and south and between South Jefferson Avenue and South Grand Boulevard on the east and west. This area is just south of the central corridor and west of Lafayette Square.

HISTORY

This area came to be known as The Gate District earlier this decade as a result of planning strategies devised to preserve the separate identities of different areas while at the same time creating a unified district. These areas historically evolved distinctly but were brought together with the construction of I-44 in the late 1960s.

The Compton and Dry's *Pictorial Atlas of 1875* gives us some idea of early development in this area. To the north the Pacific Railroad runs along Mill Creek Valley, surrounded by a mixture of industrial and residential buildings. South of Chouteau towards Park, the same pattern of development continues. It was not as developed as the areas closer to the railroads but far more developed than those to the south. The pictorial fits with the notion that the area north of Park was settled by working class immigrants, predominately Germans and Irish, some of whom had become better established through working in skilled trades or for the railroads. The areas south of Park resemble much of the development surrounding the Compton Hill Reservoir—large homes enclosed by wooded estates and open fields. Both areas north and south of Park suffered from the tornado of 1896. North of Park, the First Church of St. Henry's, organized as a German Catholic parish, was destroyed. To the south, Compton Hill Congregational Church at Compton and Lafayette Avenues experienced periods of great hardship with the removal of families in the vicinity following the tornado.

By early this century, areas both north and south of Park contained mostly two- and four-family flats. Current residents who grew up in the district describe both the areas earlier this century as working-class but the south being slightly more affluent. The community north of Park was a diverse mixture of residents, including Irish, Italian, Polish, and other immigrants; rural migrants; and some African-American residents. Mill Creek Valley, the area north of Chouteau surrounding the railroads, had become a predominately African-American neighborhood. As African Americans moved south of Chouteau, their children continued attending L'Ouverture School at 2612 Papin, to the north, until it moved to its current site on Hickory in 1950. Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis in 1928. Eight years later, she returned from out of state to live with her maternal grandparents at 2714 ½ Caroline Street, in what is now The Gate District. She describes here experiences living in the neighborhood and attending L'Ouverture School in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

The area south of Park also comprised many immigrants (but did not include African-American residents) and was part of a separate political ward. Streetcars serviced a



number of streets in the area, supporting commercial districts along Lafayette, Park, and Jefferson. Along the blocks of Jefferson between Lafayette and Park, there were a cobbler, dry goods stores, clothing stores, five-and-dime stores, shoe stores, a bar, a diner



and a movie theater.

During the late 1960s, a large amount of change took place in the neighborhood. In 1968, the federal government created the 235-subsidy program for home ownership by low-income people. Some unscrupulous real-estate companies took the program as an opportunity for profit. By working on white residents' fears, these companies bought up homes at a low cost, which they in turn sold or rented to low-income African-American families. This practice, known as "block busting," had a huge impact on the area south of Park as widespread panic ensued. Between 1960 and 1970, the area east of Compton lost 62 percent of its population. By the early 1970s, much of the area's housing stock had become derelict or been demolished.

Beginning in the 1970s, a succession of different redevelopment plans for the area arose. The first, "New Town" from 1973, suggested leveling the area east of Compton and creating a large lake, surrounded by expensive homes, enveloped by a stone wall. Residents in the area formed the Southside Forum in reaction to this plan and together managed to strike it down. By 1975, they had joined forces with the HomeBuilders Association to devise a workable plan for the community. The HomeBuilders Association sponsored the New Town in Town Redevelopment Corporation and created a redevelopment plan for what was now being calling "Lafayette Towne." The original plan proposed dramatic restructuring of the street grid into a series of cul-de-sacs, demolition of large amounts of the remaining buildings, construction of single-family homes and apartments, and the creation of communal green spaces connected by walkways. Plans for Lafayette Towne continued over the next decade, but residents' hopes dwindled as construction and redevelopment lagged behind the pace of demolition. By the late '80s, Pantheon, which had development rights in the area, had readied large amounts of land for construction, but only a fraction of the area had been redeveloped. Large amounts of vacant land resulted.

By 1990, there was a new plan for the City to buy the property from Pantheon and redevelop the area as six individual “neighborhoods” making up the Gate District. A highly acclaimed Miami firm was retained by the City to formulate a master plan for the area. The firm’s design incorporated the restoration of older buildings with new construction and created six smaller neighborhoods with distinct entrance gates and tiny parks. Problems of communication and agreement led to revision of the plan, hampering its manifestation.

CHARACTERISTICS

The Gate District today is a residential area still in the process of redevelopment, with institutional and light-industrial land use towards its borders. Hospitals and Saint Louis University’s medical complex dominate the western portion of the Gate District. The campus itself now extends to Theresa Avenue, with parking garages and related buildings continuing further east. The area east of Compton consists of large sections of vacant land that have been purchased by the University, interspersed with single- and two-family homes. Some of the residential area, such as the blocks between Park and Vista Avenues, have remained intact and in relatively good condition. Before the construction of Interstate 44, Compton Hill Reservoir Park extended to Lafayette. Homes along the western segment of Lafayette still reflect the earlier grandeur once associated with residences surrounding the park. Along the northern edge, Chouteau and parts of La Salle—areas historically contiguous with the railroads—include a mixture of light-industrial and commercial uses.



The area east of Compton is now referred to as The Gate District East and reflects the series of planning and redevelopment efforts made since the 1970s. The 1990 Gate District Plan divided this area into four smaller neighborhoods: Buder Park, Eads Park, Saint Vincent Park, and Lafayette Terrace. The largest amount of redevelopment over the years have occurred in Buder Park, the area north of Park, and in Eads Park, east of Nebraska between Park and Lafayette.

Under the earlier plans, Eads Park was created at a cost of \$1 million, complete with amphitheater, tennis courts, walkways and swimming pool. Two-story suburban style homes were built around cul-de-sacs just west of the park. As the momentum and funding for the construction of single family homes faltered, subsidized apartment buildings were constructed to the north. These include Caroline Apartments, Hickory Square Apartments, and apartments for the elderly. Most of the housing built during this time period is in good condition. The park, however, is a different story. The closing of streets made the park only accessible via walkways and, in a sense, cut it off from the surrounding community. Today, the amphitheater is underutilized and littered with trash. The tennis courts are in fair condition but also underutilized. The swimming pool has remained unused for at least the last decade; at this point, bulrushes are beginning to grow through the cover.

A substantial amount of development has occurred in these areas since the 1980s. When the city bought back the redevelopment right to the area from Pantheon, it allowed

SLACO and Pyramid to begin projects in The Gate District East. SLACO formed a partnership with the developer, Vatterott, and has built new single family homes between Park and Hickory west of Buder Park.

In the last three years, Pyramid has constructed new two-story homes in Eads Park. These new developments have brought new residents to the area and have been particularly successful in attracting African-American professionals. Today this area is a mixture of older brick buildings, development that has taken place since the 1970s, vacant land, and newly constructed housing developments. Large portions of vacant land still exist to the west of Eads Park in the St. Vincent Park area and along Lafayette Terrace, the area south of Eads Park.

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Although residential areas of the Gate District have gone through substantial upheaval in recent decades, the area has remained home to a great number of institutions. The section of Grand running from Lafayette to Chouteau has evolved into a center for the practice and study of the health fields. In addition to Saint Louis University's Medical School and South Campus, there are three hospitals—SLU Medical Center, Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital and Compton Heights Hospital—as well as more specialized treatment facilities such as the Life Care Center, which provides care for Alzheimer's patients. "Florists Row," the blocks of LaSalle Avenue just west of Jefferson, is a locus for the wholesale floral trade and includes Baisch & Skinner, Inc., Windler Wholesale Floral Company, and St. Louis Wholesale Plant Company. The first branch of the St. Louis Public Library, the Barr Branch Library, is located in the area and was designed by Theodore Link, who also designed Union Station.

There is a mixture of religious organizations in the area, both old and new, embodying elements of the neighborhood's past as well as seeds for a new community. With the decline in the numbers of Catholic parishioners in the area, St. Henry's and the Church of the Immaculate Conception combined into one church. Together, they provide social services to the community and operate a food pantry. Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church was organized by African-American residents of St. Louis in 1859. First housed in a log cabin just north of Chouteau in Mill Creek Valley, the church moved into the area at La Salle in the 1920s. A new church was built on Park Avenue in 1992, which since that time has been joined by other new places of worship, such as LaSalle United Methodist Church and Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witness. The Caroline Mission was begun in 1913 by the Eden Seminary to serve the growing numbers of poor on the near southside. Today, a member of the United Church of Christ Neighborhood Houses, the organization provides daycare, before- and after-school programs, and tutoring for children in the neighborhood.

In addition to Buder Recreation Center, youth have access to five public schools in The Gate District. Kottmeyer Early Childhood Center is a magnet school for preschool age children. The community includes two elementary schools, Wyman and Hodgen elementary, and one middle school, L'Ouverture Middle School. L'Ouverture originally located in Mill Creek Valley as Colored School No. 4. In 1890, after moving to Papin Street, just north of Chouteau, the school was renamed for Pierre Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture, a Haitian revolutionary. The school moved to its present site in 1950 and continued to serve African-American children in the community until segregation ended in 1955. Gallaudet School for the Deaf is also located in the area.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Buder Park continues to be slowly redeveloped by Affordable City Homes of St. Louis, the joint venture between SLACO and Vatterott. However, finding suitable sites within close proximity of the new homes is becoming increasingly difficult.

The success of Pyramid Construction in redeveloping Eads Park has sparked renewed optimism in the City's ability to attract middle-income homebuyers to new subdivisions. Fortunately, just to the west of Eads Park, the mostly vacant St. Vincent Park portion of The Gate District provides an opportunity to build another high-quality residential development. Vatterott was selected to redevelop the site and has recently broken ground on a new subdivision that will ultimately include about 100 new, market-rate homes.

The Saint Louis University Health Sciences Center continues to expand in the western portion of The Gate District. Additional attention will need to be given to make sure that the medical and residential uses on either side of South Compton Avenue are designed in a manner that will complement each other.

Lastly, The Gate District's locational advantages—proximity to Interstate 44 and Downtown—likely played a strong role in the recent development of a Holiday Inn Express hotel near the intersection of Lafayette and Jefferson Avenues.