

HAMILTON HEIGHTS (78)

LOCATION

The neighborhood is bounded by Dr. Martin Luther King Drive on the Northeast, the City limits on the Northwest, Page Avenue on the South, and Union Boulevard on the East. Hamilton Heights is a rectangular-shaped neighborhood, lying between the Wells/ Goodfellow and West End neighborhoods on the western edge of the City.

HISTORY

The area was once part of a Spanish land grant, that became known as Survey 3033 and was originally the property of Baptiste La Fleur. During colonial times, many passed through the area as they traveled between St. Louis and St. Charles along St. Charles Road (now Martin Luther King Boulevard). By the mid-1850's, the land was subdivided and sold as smaller tracts. One such tract became the property and estate of Hamilton R. Gamble, governor of Missouri during the Civil War and namesake for the area. Rinkelville, an early settlement on the St. Charles Road, grew up around the Six Mile House operated by George Rinkel, Jr. In 1868, Erastus Wells, a St. Louis transit magnate, purchased a tract to the west of Rinkelville, and developed a fine country estate. In a move to provide access to the area and consequently aid in its development, Wells and others constructed and opened the West End Narrow Gauge Railway in 1878. A station was established at the line's intersection with St. Charles Road near the Well's estate and bore the name of Wellston. During the same period, the Citizen's Railway Company operated a horse car line along St. Charles Road.



Such improvements in public transit proved essential to the development of the area. During the 1890's, these lines became electrified streetcar lines and by the early 1900s, had been incorporated into a citywide transit system. During this same period, the Wellston Loop grew into a commercial district and much of the residential area was established. With the access provided by public transit residents of moderate and middle incomes were able to live further away from the central business districts. In the period of the 1904 World's Fair, the area saw a dramatic increase in population and the establishment of many central institutions. During the early part of the 20th century, the area remained a predominately white middle-class community.

The 1950's and 1960's marked a period of transition for the area, as white residents moved out of the area and African American residents moved into the neighborhood. The majority of these newcomers were part of a large wave of African Americans into St. Louis from rural areas of the South following World War II. Many moved directly from these areas into the neighborhood. Long-time residents remember the area during this time as a close-knit community of African American families, its devoted residents and the vitality of the Wellston shopping district. Nonetheless, as many of the children in these families became adults, they moved elsewhere. This trend and the decline of the Wellston shopping district, beginning in the early 1970's, signaled hard times for the neighborhood. As the housing market fell apart, lower-income residents moved into the neighborhood and homes lay vacant. In the 1980's, problems of abandoned buildings, crime, drugs and teenage pregnancy arose. In response, a group concerned residents

came together in 1987 to begin an effort to stabilize and improve the neighborhood, forming what is now Union West Community Corporation.

CHARACTERISTICS

Today, the Hamilton Heights neighborhood is characterized both by the long-term commitment of this established community and by the challenges it has faced. A large portion of the neighborhoods residents are part of a long-term stable population, some of whom have live in the area for thirty years or more. Many of these older residents moved directly into the neighborhood from Arkansas, Mississippi or Louisiana and maintain the same sense of investment in the neighborhood.



The housing stock of this residential neighborhood also reflects this mixture of forces. Most homes in the neighborhood are of brick construction built between 1890 and 1920. Although two-family particularly and some four-family homes predominate, a large number of single-family homes are also present. The condition of these homes varies greatly from well-maintained to boarded-up. Abandoned buildings and vacant lots are a significant problem in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, of occupied units, owner-occupied homes make up close to half. This striking number of homeowners contrasts greatly to the abundance of vacant buildings and characterizes the long-term investment of residents in the neighborhood in the face of recent decline. Likewise, both vacant properties and owner-occupied homes tend to be scattered evenly throughout the area rather than following hard geographic boundaries.

The condition of commercial districts in the area is more clear-cut. The 5900 block of Martin Luther King Boulevard is remembered by residents as the once-thriving Wellston shopping district, complete with hardware store, boutiques, JC Penny and Woolworths, but now lies almost completely vacant. The commercial area along Union Boulevard has fared better. The neighborhood's economy received a boost from the recent opening of both a Schnucks grocery store and a Walgreens drug store along this

portion of Union.

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Another striking feature of the Hamilton Heights neighborhood is the large number of religious institutions. Within this relatively small area, there are more than 20 churches, ranging from tiny store-front churches to very large congregations. Williams Temple, Friendly Temple Baptist and Solomon's Temple are the latter and draw many of their parishioners from outside the neighborhood. In general, of the neighborhood's various congregations, most consist of both older residents that have stayed in the neighborhood

and people who now live elsewhere, but continue to attend the churches where they grew up. Friendly Temple Baptist is a particularly active force in the area. The church has acquired a considerable amount of adjacent land on Dr. Martin L. King Dr. and is in the process of developing a youth outreach center on the north portion of this site. Completion of this project will allow the church to expand its current youth program, limited to members of the congregation, to a program available to all youngsters in the community. Friendly Temple was also instrumental in bringing a public art installation to the area. The church worked with an artist from the Arts in Transit organization to design a bus shelter symbolic of the community. The resulting shelter, at the intersection of Dr. Martin L. King Dr. and Belt Ave., has Gothic-arched windows and speaks of both its link with Friendly Temple and the importance of churches within the community.

Since youth are recognized as important to the future of the area, many of the services and agencies within Hamilton Heights are geared to their growth and development. Children in the area have access to Emerson Elementary, Hempstead Elementary and Ford Elementary(C.E.C) within the neighborhood as well as two middle schools in nearby Wells/Goodfellow. Ford Elementary serves as a Community Education Center and thus, provides a range of services, including: computer classes, Caring Community's tutoring and latchkey programs, youth athletic teams and adult basic education. Although there are no parks within the neighborhood's boundaries, a very special greenspace exists near the school, known by students as "Miss Ellen's Garden". The lot, directly across from Ford, was donated by long-time resident Miss Ellen McKinney. After she acquired the property adjacent to her house, what had been a drug house was cleared away to make space for a community garden. Miss McKinney recently celebrated her one hundred and first birthday and continues to tend the garden and help children learn about its cultivation.

In 1996, a "caring collaboration" between community members, the Union West Community Corp., BREM Catholic Social Service Ministry and Ford C.E.C resulted in the opening of the Martin Luther King Community Center. An unused school building was transformed into a site for residents of all ages. The center's youth programs include athletic teams, cultural enrichment and LOV-A-NARY, a back-to-basics family values program. In addition to offering computer classes, the center is in the process of developing a "Wisdom Room", which will serve as a space for seniors to meet and a small gym for exercise.

Residents also have access to recreation at the YMCA-Monsanto Family Center. The YMCA offers a variety of activities and is currently in the process of expanding its facilities. In addition to improving its current athletic facilities, which include weight room, swimming pool and gymnasium, the construction will also make room for a computer lab and a family interactive center.

Since its inception in 1987, Union West Community Corporation has won numerous awards in recognition of its contribution to the neighborhood. UWCC is committed to stabilizing and improving the neighborhood through rehabilitating homes, providing technical assistance to residents, building community participation, and creating and fostering job opportunities. The organization has rehabbed 10 homes, assisted over 200 residents with home repairs, facilitated the installation of playground equipment at the neighborhood's three elementary schools and established the Martin Luther King West Business Association.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

A major issue in the neighborhood is the abundance of vacant lots and abandoned homes. Thirty of the later were condemned just this year and 20 of those have already been demolished. Nevertheless, such underutilized property in the neighborhood also creates potential for new residential development.

Habitat for Humanity has responded to this opportunity by embarking on a major single-family development in the neighborhood, the first of its kind in the Twenty-Second Ward. Over the course of 1998, Habitat has completed Phase I of the project, the construction of 10 single-story frame homes with brick facades along the 1400 blocks of Montclair and Burd Avenues. In 1999, Phase II consisted of the scattered-site development of new homes on Granville Avenue and infill construction of homes on the above-mentioned blocks of Montclair and Burd. These homes are constructed by volunteer workers and are being occupied mostly by first time homeowners. The proposed Phase III plan for the year 2000 includes 15 new homes along the 1400 blocks of Clara, Temple and Blackstone Avenues. At its completion, the project is expected to add 45 new homes to the area and will make up the largest single housing development yet undertaken by Habitat for Humanity within the City of St. Louis.

Union West Community Corporation (UWCC) has received a grant from the St. Louis Cardinals' Donovan Osborn Fund to build a baseball diamond in Hamilton Heights. The new field will be built on the corner northwest of Wells and Clara, where row houses were recently demolished, and will provide much-needed outdoor recreation space for the neighborhood.

The addition of the new Schnucks and Walgreens stores has significantly enhanced the commercial district along Union. Nevertheless, the future remains questionable for the old Wellston shopping district along Dr. Martin Luther King Drive. The long-abandoned JC Penney building on the 5900 block of Dr. Martin Luther King Drive, along with the other empty commercial spaces on that block, present a major planning/development challenge in the neighborhood. The MLK–West Business Association plans to develop an economic plan for the area that will tackle these issues.