

LAFAYETTE SQUARE (32)

LOCATION

Located just south of the St. Louis Central Business District (CBD), Lafayette Square is bounded on the north by Chouteau Avenue, on the south by Interstate 44, on the east by Dolman Street and on the west by South Jefferson Avenue..

HISTORY

Shortly after the sale of the St. Louis Commons was authorized in 1836, an area on the north edge of the common field, was set aside to become the site of the city's first public park. The area around the park soon became the object of real estate activity with sales initially taking place on the north and south sides of the park. The north side was particularly desirable because of the broad vistas across Mill Creek valley toward the river. Some early homes and mansions were constructed in the area, such as the country home of William Page, built in 1838; but for the most part, real estate activity in the park's vicinity remained dormant until the late 1850s.



The park was dedicated as Lafayette Square in 1851 and renamed Lafayette Park in 1854. With the dedication ordinance, funds were raised to build a wood fence around the park and to plant trees and shrubs. During the years leading up to the Civil War, the city created a six-acre military parade ground and an ornamental pond amid extensive landscaping. The War halted development of the park until 1865, but shortly thereafter, a permanent park superintendent was appointed and the park was gradually turned into the city's finest recreation ground. Through the work of landscaper, Maximillian Kern, the park was redesigned according to new ideas about park landscaping. With the changes and improvements made in the years that followed, the park came to include a large lake, a rocky grotto, an iron fence surrounding the park with decorative entrance gates, a bandstand and pavilions, lush foliage and scores of trees. The park became a popular recreation area complete with boating and musical performances.

Residential development of areas around the park had begun in years before the Civil War, but gained substantial momentum in the decades that followed. On the north side of the park, Benton Place was platted by Montgomery Blair in 1866. Designed by Julius Pitzman, it remains one of the earliest private streets in the nation. The east and west sides of the park began to build up in the 1870s and 1880s. As the neighborhood grew, it became home to some of St. Louis's most prominent citizens, including several majors, congressmen, cabinet members, a Supreme Court Justice and the president of the American Bar Association.

By 1890, Lafayette Square had reached the zenith of its development as an exclusive residential district, but on May 27, 1896, suffered significantly from an unexpected event, a tornado that ripped through the near south side of the city. Lafayette Park sustained irreversible damage. Most of the trees were uprooted and all of the ornamental

structures destroyed. Considerable reconstruction took place in the residential area and the neighborhood retained some of its former glory until after World War I.



The city's first zoning ordinance in 1918 classified the property on the park's perimeter as residential. When the zoning law was declared unconstitutional by the State Supreme Court in 1923, commercial interests began to impinge on the park's surroundings. This speeded the exodus of most of the remaining families from the Victorian town houses. Beginning during the Depression, many of these large old homes were converted into rooming houses. The neighborhood began a slow steady decline over the following decades, including the destruction of homes along the south with the construction of Interstate 44 years later.

Nevertheless, beginning in the late 1960's, this changed as a restoration movement took root in the area. Many young couples moved into the neighborhood, buying old houses and renovating them in a manner similar to their original appearance. Local and national publicity, strong neighborhood organizations and city cooperation in planning

aided this movement. In 1972, Lafayette Square was declared a historic district by the city. These restoration efforts have continued dramatically transforming the neighborhood back into one of the most stunning in the city. These efforts have not been limited to residences in the area, but have also included improvements made to Lafayette Park. More recently, funds were raised to restore the entire length of wrought iron fence surrounding the park.

CHARACTERISTICS

Today, Lafayette Square is known one the city's most beautifully restored historic neighborhoods. Centered around the park, the observer is presented with a view of large Victorian homes of every shade. The area gained national recognition in 1998 as winner of the Prettiest Painted Places in America. The park itself has also reclaimed some of its former grandeur, adorned with bridges, a bandstand, historic buildings and landscaping. Homes in the area include examples designed by some of St. Louis's best-known architects from last century such as George Ingham Barnett, Theodore Link and Otto Wilhelmi. Most of the homes were built of brick before 1900 and can be divided into three main periods of architecture. The earliest homes date back to the 1850's, the period of activity before the Civil War, and reflect the Federal style. These homes are grand but of a more simple style than the later Victorian counterparts and often have the entranceway placed on the side of the building. The period of greatest construction activity for the Second Empire style Victorian town houses were the two decades beginning in 1865. These homes tend to be two stories topped by a third floor mansard roof with dormer windows. Typical design features include limestone



or sandstone facades, arched doorways and windows, bay windows and ornate cornices. Homes built after 1890 exhibit the change in architectural mode towards Germanic influences. These homes are built entirely of red brick and are characterized by wide arches, turrets, classical columned porches and iron balconies.

The neighborhood contains a variety of types of residences, including large mansions surrounding the park, town houses, row houses and a few apartment buildings south of the park. Of the 1,159 total housing units, single and two-family residences make up the largest proportion, 64percent. This in addition to the historic architectural features and the large scale of some of these homes has attracted a stable base of homeowners and middle-income residents. Support by this economic base, a small business district has flourished along Park Avenue north east of Lafayette Park, providing a variety of goods and services. The row of small shops include restaurants, a café, a gallery, dry cleaners, a florist and vintage clothing store.

One might easily miss Lafayette Square with its elegantly maintained residential area due to the less flattering appearance of many of the neighborhood's edges. The area now extending from Jefferson to Mississippi between Chouteau and Hickory, has a history of such uses going back to the 19th century due to its proximity to railroads in Mill Creek Valley. One of the principle industries in this section was Schnaider's Brewery at Mississippi and Chouteau Avenues, and his nearby Summer Garden featuring theatrical performances while patrons sampled his brews. Today, the area contains a mixture of light industry, trucking activity and vacant properties. The section of Chouteau east of Mississippi Avenue, as well as a few other sites near the boundaries of the neighborhood, contain a number of boarded up properties.

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Although there are no public schools in the neighborhood, there are a number schools in the surrounding neighborhoods which provide area residents with convenient access to public education. To the south, within the McKinley Heights neighborhood, Sigel Elementary acts as a Community Education Center and McKinley Classical Jr. Academy serves middle school students as part of the Magnet program. There are also several schools located in the Gate District as well as Peabody Elementary which is located on Fourteenth Street, across from the Peabody public housing complex.. Within Lafayette Square itself, Living Word Ministries directs the Gateway Christian Schools. These private Christian schools serve the full spectrum of ages, from infants to 12th grade students, and are made up of a day nursery, an elementary school and a high school.

Lafayette Park United Methodist Church and Lafayette Park Baptist Church have roots in the community going back over 100 years. Both congregations have persevered through difficult times, such as the 1896 tornado that badly each of their churches and the loss of residents during the 20th century. Lafayette Park United Methodist continues to play a key role in the community, providing a food pantry for the needy and a site for neighborhood meeting. Other churches in the neighborhood, including some new arrivals, are the Full Gospel Assembly, Apostolic Church of Christ, St. Mary's Assumption and the House of Living Bread. St. Mary's Assumption Roman Catholic Church, on the neighborhoods eastern border, was recently restored by a group from St. Louis County.

The Barr Branch Library is located on the western border of Lafayette Square on South Jefferson. It was the first branch of the St. Louis Public Library and was designed by Theodore Link, who also designed Union Station.

Also located on South Jefferson, Provident Counseling offers a range of social services to young people and families in the area. These include parenting education and support, immigrant services, such as advocacy for non-English speaking youth and their families, and mediation/arbitration.

One of the neighborhood's greatest strengths continues to be the commitment of its community organizations. The Lafayette Square Restoration Committee (LSRC) is a non-for-profit organization whose mission is to preserve and redevelop Lafayette Square by respecting its historic character and improving its overall livability. The LSRC also actively promotes the neighborhood's accomplishments by sponsoring an annual house tour that has become a major St. Louis event, as well as providing interested persons with information about the area. Other organizations work to improve specific aspects of the community such as the Lafayette Square Business Association and the Arts Council of Lafayette Park-LaSalle Park. Similar community efforts have made possible the Lafayette Square Community Gardens located at Park and Dolman.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Much of the areas short- and long-term planning is developed by the Lafayette Square Restoration Committee. In November, 1993, the LSRC's *Long Range Plan for the Continued Development of the Lafayette Square Historic District* suggested the following goals for ongoing development:

- Create neighborhood identifiers such as landscaped edges and entry markers.
- Develop thematic streetscapes using period lighting fixtures and street furniture.
- Encourage appropriate commercial development in designated areas.
- Continue restoration efforts in Lafayette Park and create additional park-related events and activities to encourage use.
- Increase single-family ownership opportunities for both long-term and new residents.
- Improve safety and security measures throughout Lafayette Square.
- Support strong public and private school options.

In addition to these goals, the LSRC has continued a development strategy of preserving the historic building stock of the neighborhood through spot rehabilitation at scattered sites. In collaboration with the St. Louis Community Development Agency, the organization works to acquire properties in need of restoration, readies them for redevelopment and finds private developers for the sites. Recently completed projects include 1207 and 1213 Missouri, and 2110 Lafayette. Future projects include the several row houses in need of restoration on the 2300 block of Rutger and on the 1700 block of Lafayette.

Another concern of the Lafayette Square Restoration Committee has been the sometimes inappropriate mix of commercial and industrial uses within the residential areas. One such use was an auto salvage yard located for many years across from the row of shops along Park Avenue. The neighborhood organization was able to acquire the property and then used funds raised through house tours to pay for an environmental study of the lot. Adjacent to this property is a large warehouse previously used by Western Wire that was

recently purchased by private developers. The developers plan, under the name “WireWorks”, to convert the building to commercial and residential loft space. Encouraged by the environmental study undertaken by the LSRC, these developers have expanded their project to include the adjacent lot on Park.

To the north, the Mississippi Building is another industrial building in need of redevelopment.

Like the Western Wire building, with its proximity to attractive residential areas, the building may also be a good candidate for conversion to residential/work space.

Also, with regard to traffic and circulation within the neighborhood, it is noteworthy that both I-55 and I-44 have exit ramps that terminate at Lafayette Avenue. As such, 18th Street, which connects to the western portion of the CBD, has functioned as a major rush-hour roadway. Since 18th Street traverses the eastern side of the District, these high traffic volumes have been a point of contention for many years. Working with the Missouri Department of Transportation, the City and the LSRC developed a plan that would move the traffic from 18th Street to Gratten Street, which is located one block east of the eastern limits of the District. Construction of the needed roadway improvements is scheduled to begin in 2000.

Finally, East-West Gateway Coordinating Council is currently examining a variety of transportation alternatives that will extend along a corridor that is generally bounded by the CBD on the north, the Mississippi River on the east, the Meramec River in St. Louis County on the south, and Hampton and Gravois Avenues on the west. The most significant of the alternatives being examined is a light rail transit improvement that would likely run along Chouteau Avenue, the northern boarder of the Lafayette Square Neighborhood. Although these improvements are still more than a decade away, if at all, the City and the LSRC need to be aware of the possible impacts, both positive and negative, that such improvements will have on surrounding neighborhoods.