

## MARK TWAIN (71)

### LOCATION

The Mark Twain neighborhood is one of several communities that comprise northwest St. Louis. It is bounded by West Florissant Avenue (Bellefontaine and Calvary Cemeteries) to the northeast, Interstate Highway 70 (I-70) to the south and southwest, and Emerson Avenue to the northwest.

### HISTORY

The Mark Twain neighborhood is the innermost (closest to downtown St. Louis) of a cluster of three historically related communities that includes the adjoining Walnut Park East and, in turn, its neighboring Walnut Park West. This portion of what is now northwest St. Louis was not developed when it was incorporated into the City of St. Louis in 1876. At that time, the area included various farms as well as nonagricultural but undeveloped properties. By this time, Baden, to the east, was already an established community, forever separated from what would become the Mark Twain neighborhood by Bellefontaine Cemetery (founded as a nonsectarian burial ground in 1949) and Calvary Cemetery (established in 1853 for Roman Catholic burials). Most of the population of the then City of St. Louis lived east of Grand Avenue.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, a number of factors coalesced to spur local development and urbanization. St. Louis was growing so rapidly that by 1900 it was America's fourth largest city and near the peak of its national prominence. In 1893, the first of several streetcar lines was extended to the area as the Bellefontaine line provided service to the cemeteries from downtown. Around 1892, the Saint Louis Terminal Railroad Association began assembling land for the railroad lines that would eventually give rise to a large industrial corridor extending from beyond the southern end of Bellefontaine Cemetery westward to the city limits. During the mid 1890s, Bernays Avenue (Union Boulevard) was extended through the area. By 1898, the first residential subdivisions were being platted southeast and northwest of Bernays.

The first wave of single-family frame residential structures was built on Bernays (Union) and along parallel streets such as Geraldine, Claxton, and Arlington. By 1911, there were enough children in the vicinity to construct the Mark Twain Elementary School at 5316–26 Ruskin. Subsequently, when North Kingshighway Boulevard and its landscaped median were created, residential development accelerated. This residential development, however, tended to be brick and more dense with duplexes, four-family flats, and some apartment houses. Some of the neighborhood's best single-family homes were constructed along and off Kingshighway.

Union developed as the commercial strip of the area, with commercial nodes scattered along West Florissant, Lilian, and Kingshighway at various intersections. There was



significant industrial development either side of Shreve Avenue, including the Quality Dairy complex on West Florissant.

The Mark Twain neighborhood had a large percentage of German stock initially but soon attracted working-class people with other European roots. The construction of I-70, which began service in 1961, took numerous local homes and businesses and, moreover, sped suburban commutes and accelerated north St. Louis County's residential development. At the same time, north St. Louis's African-American population was growing and seeking more and better housing. By the mid 1960s, the Mark Twain neighborhood was transitioning from a white to a African-American population. This process was largely completed by the early 1970s. Since then, the relative socioeconomic status of Mark Twain has slowly eroded as middle-class African-



American households have relocated to north St. Louis County and elsewhere.

Although much of the neighborhood remains sound, the oldest areas—such as a corridor several City blocks wide along Union Boulevard—is severely distressed. Blight, board-ups, and demolished sites pockmark most of the rest of it, although not to the extremes seen elsewhere in St. Louis. Some blocks are in average condition. Commercial activity is minimal, however, with numerous storefronts vacant, demolished, or occupied by marginal businesses. The industrial portion of the community remains active at reduced levels.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS**

As indicated previously, the Mark Twain neighborhood is primarily a mixture of residential building types with a smattering of commercial uses. Public land uses are similarly scattered in the forms of the Mark Twain School, a firehouse, and numerous churches. The industrial portion of the community is a well-defined swath along railroad tracks and Shreve to the south.

Demolition activity has tended to be small scale—that is, parcel by parcel as a boarded-up structure experiences a fire or otherwise is condemned. Some vacant clusters do exist, such as the northeast corner of Ruskin and Thekla. The former low-rise townhouse complex off Vera, associated with the eight-story Euclid Plaza Elderly Apartments (St. Louis Housing Authority), are completely boarded up. Although some blocks are intact and sound, others—such as long stretches of Union—are severely blighted. Problem parcels, units, and pockets otherwise dot the area.

New housing construction is forthcoming, as discussed subsequently. The largest recent construction project, nearing completion, is a religious institution: The New Sunny Mount Missionary Baptist Church's new complex occupies part of the old Quality Dairy site at Shreve and West Florissant.

Building conditions may vary from parcel to parcel and block to block, but other concerns are more generalized and include crime, litter, education, limited neighborhood shopping and services, lead-paint abatement, economic opportunity, increased numbers of single-family rental units, and derelict cars. In recent years, airport-related noise has

abated as takeoffs and landings over the area have become less noisy with new commercial aviation technologies.

The 1990 U. S. Census determined the Mark Twain neighborhood's population was 6,902 people, of whom 98.3 percent were African-American. There were 2,496 dwelling units in the area, with 2,211 occupied (88.6 percent) and 285 unoccupied (11.4 percent). Of the 2,211 occupied units, 1,270 were owner-occupied. Consequently, among all 2,496 dwelling units, 50.9 percent were owner-occupied. Of the remainder, 941 were renter-occupied (37.8 percent), with the rest unoccupied (11.4 percent). Almost two-thirds of the housing stock (1,580 units, or 63.3 percent) was single-family, but the owner-occupancy rate is much lower. It is doubtful that owner-occupancy has improved this decade. Middle-income households seem to be leaving the area and are often replaced by lower-income households or vacancies.

### **INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

A single public school functions in the Mark Twain neighborhood, the Mark Twain Elementary School at 5316–26 Ruskin. Numerous churches are located in the area. Some of them include the New Sunny Mount Missionary Baptist Church, the Saint Simon of Cyrene Catholic Church (Thekla near Ruskin), the Mt. Nebo Missionary Baptist Church (4981 Theodore), and the El-Bethel Temple (5371 Arlington). The former Ruskin Avenue Police Station is being converted into the G&H Visual and Performing Arts Educational Center. Numerous social service providers are active in the area, including some located in the Mark Twain neighborhood. They include the Imani Family Centre (5079 Queens) and the Caring Communities Program's Teen Drop-In Center (5036 Thekla).



KEBENA (Kingshighway-Union-Bircher-Euclid Neighborhood Association) is one of the local neighborhood organizations focusing on beautification and housing concerns. The Mark Twain Neighborhood Alliance has also been active. The Hamilton Heights Neighborhood Organization is providing valuable redevelopment expertise it gained in its neighborhood. It is leading the development of three-bedroom single-family homes at the vacant Ruskin and Thekla site across from Mark Twain School.

### **PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

Recent events suggest that residents of the Mark Twain neighborhood can expect some large-scale improvements in their community soon. As part of the St. Louis 2004 effort, "Greater Walnut Park," including the Mark Twain neighborhood, has been designated a "sustainable neighborhood." The Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance (RHCD) has been teamed with Area Resources for Community and Human Services (ARCHS) to prepare a comprehensive plan for the cluster of the Mark Twain, Walnut Park East, and Walnut Park West neighborhoods. Both physical development and social services issues will be addressed in this work.

On September 30, 1999, a \$2.6 million anonymous gift was announced for a portion of the Mark Twain neighborhood south and east of West Florissant and Kingshighway. The money will be joined by a \$250,000 City of St. Louis demolition and street paving grant and \$1.5 million bank loan, as well as other assistance to be provided by the bank.

Collectively, these funds are intended to renovate three duplexes, build 20 new homes, and yield up to 110 home improvement loans and grants. Housing Solutions, Inc., a nonprofit developer, will spearhead this program.

As exciting as these initiatives are, much more remains to be done. Union Boulevard needs almost total redevelopment. The St. Louis Housing Authority's Vera Avenue Euclid Plaza townhouses should be renovated or demolished for future residential or, perhaps, light industrial use. It is hoped the Ruskin/Thekla in-fill development will herald the way for more such activity. More people with higher incomes could support better and more diverse commercial activity throughout the area.