

OLD NORTH ST. LOUIS (63)

LOCATION

This near Northside neighborhood is bounded by Palm Street on the North, Cass Avenue on the South, Howard Street on the East, and North Florissant on the West.

HISTORY

When Lewis and Clark began their exploration of the Louisiana Territory, mounds built by the indigenous people who had once inhabited the area dotted the river bluffs from Rocky Branch Creek south to the village of St. Louis. A decade later, in 1816, U.S. Army officer William Christy purchased a tract of land bounded by present-day Monroe, Hadley, and Montgomery Streets, and the Mississippi River. Soon thereafter, Christy and his associates, William Chambers and Thomas Wright, incorporated the area as the village of North St. Louis. A unique feature of the village layout was the provision for three circles of land for public use: Clinton Place for education, Jackson Place for recreation, and Marion Place for worship. The village was also to provide sites for mills similar to those in the New England hometowns of the village's first settlers.



In 1841, the village of North St. Louis was absorbed into the City of St. Louis. By mid century, the area was overwhelmingly German-born; with a few Irish and a colony of utopian French Icarians. The latter half of the nineteenth century was an era of unprecedented growth and industry. The mounds were leveled. Rocky Branch Creek was channeled beneath what is now Branch Street. Large numbers of Polish immigrants settled in the near north side, including present day Old North St. Louis. By the turn of the century, 14th Street had become a major commercial district. Furniture and appliances, clothing and hardware, plus groceries and confectioneries attracted shoppers from far beyond the immediate neighborhood.

In the twentieth century, the largest group of new residents have been rural families from within the United States, many migrating from Southeast Missouri, Arkansas, and the Deep South because of hardships wrought by the Depression. The period after the Second World War ushered in another turning point for the neighborhood. Federal policy, private lending policy, and public mindset provided incentive to build new homes rather than stabilize older neighborhoods. Many residents moved to the suburbs, encouraged by new housing developments and high-speed expressways. Highway 70, dedicated in 1971, disconnected the neighborhood from its industrial sector and furthered abandonment. In the midst of this change, and encouraged by War on Poverty legislation, new social service organizations such as Grace Hill, arose supported by public funds. Grace Hill sponsored a number of neighborhood projects and oversaw both construction of new housing and rehab of older buildings. Federal programs in the 1960s renamed the area "Murphy-Blair," honoring two Civil War leaders. Murphy Blair Gardens and Townhouses were built during the same period under Model City Funds. With



the elimination of federal funding in the 1970's, the pace of demolition increased, but little new housing was built, resulting in declines in both population and housing stock. Nevertheless, in the late 1970s and early 1980s a gradual change in attitude occurred with a Federal tax policy that briefly favored rehabilitation of houses and the neighborhood. A group of devoted homeowners formed the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group, and, following that lead, the area was renamed in the 1980s.



CHARACTERISTICS

This near Northside neighborhood is a national historic district and is known by many as home to the oldest soda fountain in St. Louis, Crown Candy Kitchen. With its proximity to downtown and its historic setting and active community members, Old North St. Louis presents a picture of great potential and difficult challenges. Homeowners in Old North St. Louis have worked hard to preserve both the existing homes and the character of the community, particularly in the northern portion of the neighborhood. Resident maintained community gardens and green spaces dot the area. Wingmann Park, a triangle at Blair Avenue between Wright and Dodier Streets, is named in honor of Jeanne Wingmann, a long-time resident, teacher and volunteer and

was one the first projects of Old North St. Louis Restoration Group. Nevertheless, with the strides taken in stabilizing and restoring areas along Wright and Sullivan Streets, vacant buildings and land remain a problem in other parts of the neighborhood. The federal tax credit of the early 1980's that attracted new homeowners to the area also encouraged a certain amount of speculation. As this policy reversed, many of these properties were acquired by absentee landlords. This unfortunate circumstance was followed by physical deterioration, increased vacancy rates and, in some cases, demolition. This is the case in some of the residential areas south of North Market Street. In recent years, these areas have become depopulated leaving many empty buildings and vacant lots. In the blocks between Clinton and Tyler Streets, along North 13th Street, are the two public housing sites within Old North St. Louis-- Murphy Blair Gardens and Murphy Blair Townhouses. Murphy Blair Townhouses provide space for larger families with 3-4 bedrooms in each. The land use of the area south of Tyler Street is predominately light industrial.

INSTITUTIONS

Children in the neighborhood have access to Ames Visual and Performing Arts Elementary, Webster Middle School and Clay Elementary in nearby Hyde Park. Ames is a part of the magnet school program and Clay, as a Community Education Center, provides GED and other programs and classes for residents. With the real danger of losing their accreditation, the St. Louis Public Schools have chosen several schools to put special focus on in an effort to improve education and test score performance. Webster Middle School is one of several such schools that are being termed "21st Century Schools".

There are several churches in Old North St. Louis, including St. Cyril & Methodius, Greater Leonard Missionary Baptist, Fresh Start Bible Church and Fourth Baptist Church. Some have long histories in the neighborhood. St. Cyril & Methodius was established by the Polish immigrants that once resided here. Fourth Baptist Church

became one of the earliest Protestant congregations on the near northside with the dedication of its first church in 1862. Nevertheless, even as they have stayed put, many of their members have moved outside the community. Today, these and other churches serve largely a congregation living outside the neighborhood itself. Many of the neighborhood's residents attend Holy Trinity Catholic Church in adjacent Hyde Park.

Grace Hill serves both as the main social service provider in the Old North St. Louis neighborhood and as a larger umbrella organization for services throughout the city. The organization has taken a particularly visible role in the provision of health services to communities. Grace Hill operates health centers in eleven different neighborhoods and provides health outreach, such as testing for lead poisoning. Neighborhood services focus on self-empowerment by providing the tools necessary for people to help themselves. Some of these services include the "More-time Dollar" program, neighborhood college classes and a Thanksgiving program. Grace Hill played a key role in the construction of the Murphy Blair Gardens and Murphy Blair Townhouses. Although Grace Hill no longer manages these public housing projects, the organization continues to play an active role in development in Old North St. Louis. In addition to revitalizing some of the neighborhood's housing stock, the organization has established the Grace Hill Business Incubator. A building at North Market and North Florissant, that had long been vacant, was renovated and converted into a business center. The Business Incubator supports residents with ideas for small businesses by assessing viability, developing business plans and making micro loans.

The Someone Cares Mission offers a food pantry and clothing. The Sunshine Mission at the southern border with Columbus Square is a shelter for homeless men and also provides a food pantry.

Three years ago, Seeds of Change was started by a Catholic Nun as an inter-denominational women's religious residence. Since that time the group has sponsored neighborhood gardening and a home repair program.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Three major planning efforts have marked this neighborhood in recent years.

The Riverfront Bike Trail, begun by the Community Development Agency under Mayor Vincent Schoemehl, was brought to fruition with the collaboration of Grace Hill, Americorps, and community members. It was dedicated on May 22nd, 1999 by Mayor Harmon. The 12 miles long trail is a way to bring visitors and revenues into the area and to provide employment for young people as "trail managers."

In 1997 and 1998, the **Old North St. Louis Restoration Group** received funding from CDA to conduct planning activities in Old North St. Louis. With the help of the Enterprise Community, the University of Missouri-St. Louis began planning activities, including research, public neighborhood meetings, focus groups, and a design charette. The results, as documented in "Results, A Vision of Our Neighborhood's Future: A Plan For Old North St. Louis" (January, 1999) included the following key recommendations:

- Preserve existing viable properties.
- Create an in-fill housing code and produce affordable new housing.

- Create jobs and economic opportunities by strengthening commercial areas along St. Louis Ave., the 14th Street Shopping District and Florissant Ave.
- Strengthen and support neighborhood services, education and recreation opportunities.
- Foster a people-oriented neighborhood infrastructure by reopening 14th Street and the streets within the Murphy Blair Townhouses and Gardens.

The ONSL Restoration Group has continued with a development strategy of rehab of existing housing through their neighborhood rehab corps and has more recently become involved with 5th Ward planning process.

A new Mississippi River Bridge connecting Illinois and Missouri at Downtown St. Louis is currently being planned in response to increasing demand for a connector, particularly during morning and evening peak periods. The Illinois and Missouri Departments of Transportation began location studies in May 1992, followed by a series of public involvement meetings. While still in the planning stage, the current plan places the Missouri entrance off of I-70 near intersection with Howard. Thus, the largest impact on the southeastern portion of ONSL, a mostly light industrial area. Neighbors continue to be concerned about keeping truck activity away from central residential portion of ONSL.