

## PENROSE (69)

### LOCATION

The Penrose neighborhood is located on the north side of the city just south of Interstate 70 and west of O’Fallon Park. It is bounded by Florissant Avenue and I-70 on the North, Natural Bridge on the South, North Newstead and Pope Avenue on the East, and Kingshighway Boulevard on the West.

### HISTORY

The Missouri Historical Society summarizes the history of Penrose in *Where We Live: A Guide to St. Louis Communities*, as follows:

In the early nineteenth century, the area that now makes up Penrose was characterized

more by land speculation than by actual settlement. The land took its name from Clement B. Penrose, whom Thomas Jefferson appointed land commissioner in 1805. Penrose lived on a nearby estate and was one of the region’s prime land investors. Another early land owner was statesman Henry Clay, a shaper of the Missouri Compromise. In the late 1880s, Penrose began to take on the contours of a community, when farmers and dairymen, most of German heritage, moved their families into the area. By 1900, the community, though still rural, was sufficiently settled to boast two German churches, St. Engelbert’s Catholic Church and Salem German Evangelical Church. With the 1920s, commercial development and transit lines raised land values around the northern edges of the city. Most of the Penrose subdivisions date from that era, when single family brick homes sprang up along Euclid, Shreve and Lee Avenues.



The early 1960s were years of transition for Penrose. As older residents moved out, African-American families moved in. The well-constructed houses were ideal for moderate-size families, offering many their first opportunity for home ownership. Middle- and upper-income African-Americans, including teachers, nurses and city and government employees, made Penrose their home. A significant number came from the Ville, located to the southeast and long the city’s premier African-American neighborhood. As Penrose’s African-American population increased from 33 percent in 1960 to 95 percent in 1970, African-American institutions helped solidify the neighborhood. St. Peter’s AME Church relocated to the corner of Shreve and Margaretta in 1962. In 1974, the Julia Davis Branch Library, its name honoring the well-known St. Louis educator, opened on Natural Bridge Avenue.

Penrose developed into a stable African-American middle-class neighborhood, but was nevertheless still “redlined.” Residents of the neighborhood were discriminated against by financial institutions because of the neighborhood’s location north of Delmar and were not able to get loans or insurance for their properties. In 1981, a chapter of Neighborhood Housing Services was started with the help of St. Engelbert’s Church. By

1989, this nonprofit partnership of residents, businesses, and government had made nearly \$1 million in home improvement loans, much of it to senior citizens with modest incomes.

### CHARACTERISTICS

Penrose is a neighborhood that traditionally has been seen by members of St. Louis's African-American community as one of the most desirable areas in the city to live. Today, this stable African-American community is characterized by well-maintained homes, neatly trimmed lawns, and tree-lined streets. There are three parks within the neighborhood and along its borders: Eugene "Tink" Bradley Park, Penrose Park, and O'Fallon Park. Nearly two-thirds of residents are homeowners, many of whom are older



residents who have lived in the area since the 1960s. Pride in home ownership and strong community spirit also support investment opportunities for those seeking their own homes. Most of the homes in the area are brick single-family homes built after 1920. These charming residences may remind some of parts of St. Louis Hills.

Visitors traveling along the commercial areas bordering the neighborhood could quite easily miss this well-maintained community. These same perceptions fueled discriminatory practices by banks and insurance companies. Although proud homeowners continued to invest in the properties with or without outside financial support, such practices undermined the vitality of commercial areas and made it particularly hard for people within the area to open businesses. The result is businesses operated by people from outside the neighborhood, often with less vested interest in the community and a general deterioration of the business districts, particularly along Natural Bridge and North Newstead. In recent years, community organizations have begun to address the gap between the condition of the commercial areas and residential areas with façade improvements to businesses, restoration of older properties, and new construction along these thoroughfares.

### INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Penrose is home to many institutions that provide a strong stabilizing force both in the neighborhood and in the larger surrounding community. Although North Newstead is the official dividing line between the O'Fallon and Penrose neighborhoods, institutions in these neighborhoods often serve across both sides of this boundary. Children in Penrose attend Scullin Elementary School but also have access to the nearby Yeatman Community Education Center and the International Studies magnet school in O'Fallon. Some take part in the voluntary desegregation program and attend schools in the County. St. Engelbert's Focus School is located within Penrose and provides private Catholic education for grades K–8.

St. Engelbert Catholic Church, started by early German residents in the area, recently combined with the Holy Rosary Parish in O'Fallon. These parishes, now both housed in the old St. Engelbert's Church as St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church, continue to play an active role in the Penrose neighborhood. St. Engelbert's Focus Day Care is located adjacent to the school and supervises an afterschool program for children in the area, in

addition to providing care for preschoolers. Also with these changes, Girls, Inc., a recreation and education club for girls, moved into the neighborhood to St. Engelbert's School. St. Elizabeth's has two food pantry sites, one in Penrose and one in O'Fallon. St. Peter's AME Church has also remained an active participant in the community since it moved here in the 1960s. Currently, in addition to providing a food pantry and a meeting place for the community, it also serves as the site of A Safe Place at Central Baptist, an after-school program run by Central Baptist Family Services.



Penrose is also home to Mathews-Dickey Boys Club, Wesley House, Prince Hall, and the Julia Davis Branch Library. Mathews-Dickey began as an athletic club for boys in the 1950s but has evolved into nationally recognized organization providing both girls and boys with educational, cultural, and recreational enrichment. Wesley House was started as a settlement house in 1903 and continues to serve the community as part of the Human Development Corporation, with a HeadStart program, senior services and afterschool programs. Earlier this decade, the building that had been the site of Central Medical Center Hospital was donated to the Missouri Department of Social Services for conversion into a family support center. The result is Prince Hall Family Support Center, a mix of both state- and private-sector agencies, giving residents access to range of health and human services at one location. The new building of the Julia Davis Branch Library opened in 1993 and has since become the cultural and intellectual heart of the community. The library features a 120-seat auditorium, computers, and educational software, and houses the Dr. Julia Davis Research Collection, focusing on African-American contributions to literature and culture.

The Penrose Self-Reliant Neighborhood Association grew out of the collaborative efforts between Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) and residents. Today, PS/RNA continues to secure decent, safe and sanitary housing, community facilities and services conducive to the progress and general welfare of the Penrose neighborhood.

### **PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

With the opening of a chapter of NHS in the early 1980s, planning and development got underway in the neighborhood. Efforts focused on improvement and rehab of existing properties, as well as the general stabilization of the area. The Penrose Self Reliant Neighborhood Association and Penrose Housing Corporation, offshoots of this chapter, continue these efforts in the 20th Ward portion of the neighborhood. In this area, the western half of the community, they have reconditioned older structures and have begun construction of new homes along the southern end of Shreve Avenue. The North Newstead Association, begun as a merchant association, has arisen as a key player in revitalization of the 21st Ward portion of this and surrounding neighborhoods. The organization has paid particular attention to revitalizing commercial areas in these neighborhoods. They have assisted existing business owners with façade improvements to properties along Natural Bridge and North Newstead. They have worked to transform these areas by acquiring underutilized or poorly maintained properties for renovation and rental or resale. The group has also collaborated with construction firms on several infill projects for new units in the area.

