

THE HILL (12)

LOCATION

The Hill neighborhood is generally defined by Manchester on the north, Southwest Avenue and Columbia to the south, Kingshighway on the east, and Hampton on the west.

HISTORY

In pre-Civil War years, immigrants of German and Irish origin flocked to the Hill to mine the clay deposits so prevalent in the area. African Americans eventually joined the ranks of the Hill community. After the Evens and Howard Fire Brick Company and clay mines opened in 1854–55, more than a dozen brick and tile factories sprang up along the banks of the River Des Peres to support the new industry. Between the 1880s and 1924, Italian immigrants laid claim to the Hill by outnumbering the other groups. In the days when the Hill was nothing but a mining camp, most of the Italians were men who lived in boarding houses. Eventually they arranged for their families to join them and the area grew into an Italian immigrant neighborhood. The neighborhood became self-supporting with opportunities for work, shopping, socializing, church, and school—all within the neighborhood.

Some of the traditional Italian community icons have faded over the years in the neighborhood. For example, the once popular “Big Club,” a social club where Italian men would play cards and bocce (similar to lawn bowling) and drink beer fought the evolution of the neighborhood by first becoming a neighborhood-wide community center. Eventually, though, the club didn’t even survive its new role. Having bought the building at the southwest corner of Shaw and Marconi in 1929, the members sold it in 1994 to a photographer, who now uses it as a studio.

With some loss of traditions within the community comes some gain in investment from outside the community. For example, in 1987 an architect/artist from outside the neighborhood bought the old Columbia Show site, then gutted and renovated it for a living quarters and studio.

One of the most traumatic times for the neighborhood came in the early 1970s with the decision to pave Interstate 44 right through the Hill. The building of the highway eventually forced the destruction of 98 of the Hill’s homes and the isolation of 450 residents from the heart of the neighborhood. The only real concession the Hill received in exchange for this great sacrifice was an overpass connecting the two sides of the neighborhood.

CHARACTERISTICS

The Hill is both one of the city’s purest ethnic neighborhoods and its most stable, tightly woven community. Although it is not as ethnically pure as it once was, the Italian population is still just under 70 percent of the residents.

The majority of housing on the Hill was constructed prior to 1930, and the area was completed by the mid 60s. This well-maintained neighborhood consists of traditional brick bungalows, interspersed with “shotgun” houses, apartments, and larger single-family homes. St. Ambrose Place, located south of Hereford Street and Bischoff Avenue, is a modern subdivision of single-family, two-story homes built in the late 1980s in response to the neighborhood’s housing shortage.

The Hill has a very strong retail business community, including many of St. Louis' favorite restaurants and import stores.

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

The Italian community finally got its own church in 1903, St. Ambrose Church. St. Ambrose's parish is composed of third- to fifth-generation Hill residents, as well as many who no longer live on the Hill but still consider it their home.

Sacred Heart Villa—a convent, kindergarten, and day nursery—was built in 1940 to serve the needs of the Hill's families whose mothers had recently joined the work force. A very popular institution with a long waiting list, Sacred Heart Villa continues to care for the Hill's children today.

Located in the northern portion of the Hill, Berra Park is a favorite among residents for recreational activity. The park is home to well-known Hill events such as the Taste of the Hill.

Educational assets to the community include St. Ambrose Parish School, Shaw Community School, Visual and Performing Arts Magnet School, and O'Fallon Technical High School.

The Hill 2000 Neighborhood Association has won numerous community awards for neighborhood betterment and charitable activities. Since its inception in 1970, the organization has promoted area rehabilitation as well as community pride. The group of volunteers' most noted program is the Sick and Elderly Program, which provides service to the elderly such as medical equipment and supplies that are not covered by Medicaid and relief sitters for families who serve as caregivers for their elderly relatives.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The greatest challenges on the Hill are the growing elderly population and the preservation of the strong community that Hill residents have worked hard to maintain for many years. In addition, the housing need on the Hill is such that many families need larger houses than what is available, but the neighborhood also wants to preserve the heritage in the current housing stock. In an effort to face these challenges, a group of active Hill community members, called "Pride Builds," has been concentrating their efforts on drafting a comprehensive strategic plan. Also, they are currently working on a project to build 12 units of senior housing on a piece of land near I-44 that is owned by Hill 2000, in addition to four units already built at Shaw and Hereford. Union labor organizations located on the western edge of the neighborhood have agreed to supply the labor for the new senior housing.

The Hill residents are helping to stabilize their neighborhood by buying vacant buildings for community purposes or for personal renovation. For example, the Hill 2000 organization recently acquired and restored 1927 Marconi as a new location of their operations. One recent project, the Fair-Mercantile redevelopment project, was recently completed at Shaw and Edwards. This project included the development of both loft and retail space. At Edwards and Bischoff, the previous site of a restaurant, the new Rose of the Hall banquet hall has been completed. A well-established neighborhood business, Vitale's bakery, recently expanded at 2130 Marconi.