

WALNUT PARK EAST (72)

LOCATION

Walnut Park East is one of several neighborhoods in northwest St. Louis. It is bounded by West Florissant Avenue (Calvary Cemetery) to the northeast, Emerson Avenue to the southeast, Interstate Highway 70 (I-70) to the southwest and west, and Riverview Boulevard to the northwest.

HISTORY

The Walnut Park East neighborhood occupies the central position in the cluster of northwest St. Louis communities found by it and the Mark Twain neighborhood, to the southeast, and Walnut Park West, to the northwest. It was developed as a working-class residential community over the first half of this century. Until the late 1890s it comprised farms interspersed with wooded patches along local creeks. With the coming of streetcars along West Florissant and the newly extended Bernays Avenue (Union Boulevard) to the west, as well as a large rail and industrial corridor to the south, St. Louis's then-burgeoning population had a new place to live. It filled in steadily in a process that was not completed until the 1950s. As late as 1954, a small truck farm operated in the 5800 block of Woodland Avenue east of Riverview Boulevard.



People of German stock spearheaded the early settlement but soon were joined by others with diverse European roots. Until the mid 1960s, the community was white and basically lower-middle class, with a large proportion of Roman Catholics. Particular churches often had specific ethnic roots. The now defunct Nativity parish was founded Christmas 1904. Later-arriving Polish Catholics petitioned for their own parish, St. Adalbert's, in 1913. Recently, four new homes were built in the 5700 block of Woodland on what was once the site of that church.

From the beginning, there was comparatively little commercial land use in Walnut Park East and practically no industrial development. The single greatest concentration of storefronts, between Robin and Wren along West Florissant, originally related to a nearby trolley turnaround. A larger number of stores lined up along Lilian, with most of them clustered from Emerson northwest to Thrush. Walnut Park East's Riverview Boulevard frontage never did develop the integrity of commercial land use that could have been expected for a major thoroughfare. In any case, small grocery stores, taverns, confectioneries, and the like dotted other local intersections.

As the neighborhood developed so did its institutions. In addition to Catholic and Protestant churches, there was a small Jewish synagogue, long-abandoned before its 1960 demolition to build the former Northwest High School. The area's first permanent religious structure was not a church but a Catholic orphanage. St. Mary's Home for Girls was a large copper-domed facility constructed in 1900 on five acres of ground. After extended periods as an orphanage and then as a special school, it assumed its current role as the San Francisco Christian Assembly Multi-Plex Center at 5341 Emerson.

The Walnut Park Elementary School (5814 Thekla) and Cyrus P. Walbridge Elementary School (5000 Davison) replaced older or portable public schools in 1909 and 1922, respectively. The local fire house at 5437 Partridge also dates to 1922. Two now-defunct Catholic elementary schools opened during this same period. Nativity School's 1922 structure remains today, vacant and vandalized, at 5827 Harney. St. Adalbert's parochial school operated in a 1927 building (and 1960 addition), still standing at 5701 Amelia.



One parochial elementary school and related church from a somewhat later time continue to serve the community. St. Matthew Lutheran Church, with a history stretching back to the earliest days of Walnut Park, built its “new” church (5402 Wren) and first school (5403 Wren) in 1950.

The lack of local parks and high schools was an ongoing source of community concern for many years. Laboure High School was an all-girls facility when it opened at 5421 Thekla in 1948. It became a coeducational institution during the mid 1950s but resumed its all-female status before it closed in 1979. Since then, it has functioned as the highly regarded

Cardinal Ritter Preparatory High School, a coeducational institution, that is expected to relocate to a new midtown St. Louis campus in 2001.

Dwight Davis Park is the only park located in Walnut Park East. It was undeveloped except for ballfields until 1962. For several years in the 1970s and 1980s, the Walnut Park Community Center, a municipal facility, operated in some converted buildings and on some cleared parcels at Wren and Lilian. It was subsequently closed and the site largely abandoned except for a “Head Start” center.

Northwest High School began classes in February 1964 at 5140 Riverview after 25 years of discussion and controversy. It was expanded in 1968 but, during the 1970s and 1980s, its student body declined in numbers. It closed in 1992 but reopened as the Northwest Accelerated Middle School in 1993.

By the mid 1960s, Walnut Park East began a population transition from white to black that was largely complete by the mid 1970s. This transition followed, and was related to, the construction and operation of I-70, which opened in 1961. By this time, however, Walnut Park East was basically developed. The last major local institution to be constructed was the “new” Walnut Park Branch Library at 5760 West Florissant. This facility is now closed for a major renovation. It will reopen in early 2000.

CHARACTERISTICS

The vast majority of Walnut Park East is residential in nature, with housing stock as much as 50 to 100 years old. There are frame blocks and brick blocks and mixed frame and brick blocks. Most housing comprises one or two-story single-family units, but there are some duplexes, four-family flats, and larger residential structures as well. A majority of these dwelling units were originally built well, if usually small, but some were not.

(Inside toilets and full basements were being added to homes up to World War II.) Almost all of Walnut Park East’s housing is old enough to require major repairs and renovations, as well as significant ongoing maintenance.

Maintenance levels are highly variable from structure to structure and block to block. Generally, brick or single-family units tend to do better than frame or multifamily units. On balance, most of the community is in fair shape but there are many problem structures (vacant, vandalized, or deteriorated). Recognizing this situation, about 90 percent of Walnut Park East has been designated a conservation area under St. Louis’s Operation ConServ. Among other things, this designation limits residential occupancy numbers, thereby reducing the “wear and tear” on older homes. Beyond physical conditions, residents and business owners are concerned with crime, drugs, alley debris, educational and economic opportunities, increased numbers of single-family rental units, and the accelerating flight of middle-income residents to north St. Louis County and elsewhere.

As previously indicated, most of Walnut Park East is residential in land use. What were once commercial structures or spaces have largely been demolished, boarded up, emptied, or converted to other uses, such as housing or storefront churches. Those businesses that do remain are often marginal operations. Industrial development is minimal. Public land uses include numerous churches as well as several schools, a library, a park, and a library. Significant vacant land is scattered throughout the community but most of it consists of individual parcels. An exception is the former Walnut Park Community Center site, where The Greater Fellowship Complex is expected to be built.

The 1990 U. S. Census determined that 7,353 people resided in Walnut Park East, of whom 7,133, or 97.0 percent, were black. There were 2,428 dwelling units, of which 390, or 16.1 percent, were vacant. Owner-occupied units totaled 1,339 (55.1 percent) and renter-occupied units numbered 699 (28.8 percent). These were surprising numbers for a neighborhood in which 85 percent of the housing stock comprised single-family dwelling units. It suggests that property owners are speculating and renting single-family homes or that single-family homes are rented when they cannot be sold for the seller’s price.

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

The Walnut Park, Walbridge, Northwest Accelerated Middle, and St. Matthew schools have already been described. Each of them serves students from within and beyond Walnut Park East. In addition, the Dwight McDaniels School of Christian Education (Grades 6 through 8) operates as part of the San Francisco Christian Assembly Multi-Plex Center. As noted, the Cardinal Ritter Preparatory School will soon leave Walnut Park East. The future of its building and grounds remains undetermined.

Two to three dozen churches and religious organizations are currently located in Walnut Park East, although most of them draw members from a much larger area. Some of them include:

- Original West End Mt. Carmel Missionary Baptist Church (5501 Oriole)
- Oak Grove Missionary Baptist Church (5700 Woodland)
- St. Matthew Lutheran Church (5402 Wren)
- Angelic Temple of Deliverance (Plover and Thekla)

The San Francisco Christian Assembly Multi-Plex Center has a social as well as religious mission. Its human services include child and adult day care, as well as a food pantry. Walbridge Elementary School is home to the Walbridge Community Education Center, an ongoing adult and young-adult educational resource. It is also the base for the Walbridge Caring Communities program, a nationally recognized effort that takes a holistic approach to educating children. The Mark Twain neighborhood's Saint Simon of Cyrene Catholic Church operates a Head Start facility at Lilian and Thrush.

Local neighborhood organizations include the Lilian Circle Development Corporation that recently was formed. It hopes to rehabilitate existing housing as well as construct new units. There are also several functioning block units as part of "Area F" of the St. Louis Urban League's Federation of Block Units. Another resident-based body, the Walnut Park Citizens Ad-Hoc Group, has voiced its concerns for the area.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Recent development and planning initiatives hold new promise for Walnut Park East. Habitat for Humanity recently constructed ten to twelve new single-family homes along the 5300 block of Oriole and elsewhere, with more such activity contemplated. With City of St. Louis assistance, four new homes were constructed in the 5700 block of Woodland.

Along with the neighboring Mark Twain and Walnut Park West, Walnut Park East has been included in "Greater Walnut Park," one of nine "sustainable neighborhoods" designated for special planning and technical assistance as part of the regional St. Louis 2004 effort. A new neighborhood comprehensive plan will be prepared for the entire area. The Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance (RHCD) has joined Area Resources for Community and Human Services (ARCHS) to do this work. Respectively, they will tackle physical development and social services issues.