

# Preserving Cincy's Black History

The Queen City has a wealth of sites important to black history — but some are disappearing fast

BY NICK SWARTSELL

Cincinnati has made a national name for itself when it comes to its historic architecture.

But buildings that have housed a multitude of people and stories significant to the city's African-American community often still languish, tucked away on the side streets on the city's hillsides or hidden in plain sight among more celebrated structures in the urban basin.

Some historians and community members are working to change that, though, striving to identify and protect significant black historic sites.

On a recent Saturday, retired University of Cincinnati History professor Fritz Casey-Leininger and Rory Krupp of Owens and Eastlake, Ltd., a historic preservation consulting firm, held a discussion at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center about civil rights sites in Cincinnati that would make good nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.

That designation makes it much harder legally for a building to be torn down. It also opens up possibilities for funds needed to do expensive restoration and rehabilitation work.

"Part of what we want to do is, by identifying places that are still here, prevent them from becoming vacant lots," Casey-Leininger says of the effort.

They define the civil rights era broadly — between 1900 and 1970 — and draw a similar wide frame around what is significant.

"The movement wasn't just the famous people," Krupp told the group of about a dozen who came to offer suggestions for historic sites. "It's if your neighbor was the first to break the color line in moving to her neighborhood. We're trying to push the envelope."

A bevy of locations in the West End, Mount Auburn, Avondale, Walnut Hills, downtown and elsewhere, including Cincinnati's suburbs, came up in that conversation.

One attendee, Bill Parrish, is a fourth-generation resident of Glendale who has been fighting to get funding to rehabilitate the village's Eckstein School, which was built in 1915 for African-American students and remained as such until integration in 1958.

Some of Glendale's black historic sites have already been razed, Parrish notes.

To him, identifying important sites is just the beginning. The community around those sites also has to be empowered to find its way through the long, often expensive process of winning state and national historic designations and finding funding to preserve properties. That means wielding money and political power.

"There are complications in the process," he says. "I've come up against all those barriers. Unless we get past those, this is going to continue to happen — historic things getting torn down."

That's a lesson that reaches well beyond Glendale.

"I'm watching it happen in the West End, too," Parrish, who volunteers in that neighborhood, says. "Somehow, we have to address the barriers so people will share these things before they finish tearing down the black history of Cincinnati."

Elsewhere, other groups are racing against time to preserve African-American landmarks.

Walnut Hills, long a home to black Cincinnatians, has a wealth of sites notable for their contributions to local black history. Some, like the home of the Cincinnati Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, are already on the National Register of Historic Places, but need renovations. The grand mansion has housed the federation since 1925, when members chipped in \$15 apiece to buy it. Generations of African-American women, and now men, have come here to discuss racial progress and other important issues.

"There used to be one in every city," Krupp says of the federations. "Now there are just a few left."

Cincinnati's is the only remaining one in Ohio.

There are also all the churches in Walnut Hills serving predominantly black congregations, many of them in historic buildings.



A former Masonic lodge on May Street facing demolition once hosted sermons by civil rights legend Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth.

PHOTO: NICK SWARTSELL

And other potential landmarks exist in isolated pockets of the neighborhood.

There is little left of the small enclave that once ran along Washington Terrace in the northwest corner of Walnut Hills, but at one time, neat row houses there were home to almost 190 families, a co-op grocery store, a community center, black-owned businesses and more.

The rowhouses were built in 1914 by Jacob C. Schmidlapp, a wealthy Cincinnati businessman who was interested in providing decent housing for black and white working class families — albeit separately. Schmidlapp, under the auspices of his Cincinnati Model Homes Company, built several developments like Washington Terrace.

At the time, Schmidlapp said he segregated his housing due to the wishes of white working class tenants. Whatever the reason, his efforts established a distinct enclave within Walnut Hills' black community.

African-American rights leader W.E.B. DuBois even toured the community and wrote favorably about it, despite its segregation.

"It would have been difficult to find a more suitable location than this little spot nestling among the hills," DuBois wrote of the project in *The Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP.

The U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development found the structures historically significant, but last year deemed many of them unlivable due to noise from the new I-71 on-ramp completed nearby.

Today, just a couple sections of the sturdy red brick rowhouses farther back from the highway remain, occupied by residents who may or may not know the buildings' unique history.

Many more historic touchstones sit nearby. That's no surprise — the area around Gilbert and Lincoln avenues in Walnut Hills was once a thriving black business district. Sue Plummer, a member of the Walnut Hills Historical Society,

Plummer says the historical society is working on identifying historic black-owned businesses in the neighborhood they do, she says, the Walnut Hills Foundation, the neighborhood community development group, is to save some of the structures those things once inhabited.

"They may or may not be able to save them all, but they all housed African-American businesses and residents the majority of the 20th century," says. "Lincoln (Avenue) was wall-to-wall businesses back in the day and the now mostly empty lots on the str

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