A Changing Cultural Landscape in the West End

I. IN THE BEGINNING

Introduction

With the celebration of the Bicentennial of the Betts House in 2004, came the desire to understand how it came to survive 200 years. As the oldest remaining house in Cincinnati, the Betts House is an important landmark and has a story to tell. Why has it remained while its surroundings have radically changed? How did that process take place? How did it impact this little brick house in the West End? What can this tell us about urban neighborhoods?

This exhibit illustrates the physical and social evolution of the landscape around the house, from pre-history to country homestead to urban “superblocks.” It discusses the social evolution of the area from European settlers to African Americans and the impact of transportation improvements such as the Miami & Erie Canal, Cincinnati Union Terminal and Interstate I-71.

City plans, urban renewal and designation of the surrounding Betts Longworth Historic District have also had a significant impact on the area. This exhibit shows that neighborhoods are not static but ever changing, and that landscapes change, for better and worse, in response to social trends, transportation, economic forces and urban planning.

Before the Founders

Before Europeans settled in Cincinnati, this area and South-Central Ohio was inhabited by Native Americans who are known as the Hopewell. The Hopewell are named after an earthwork complex known as “Hopewell Group,” a collection of mounds and enclosures located northeast of Chillicothe, Ohio on a farm once owned by Captain M. C. Hopewell.

During the period from ca. 100 B.C. to A.D. 500, the Hopewell people built variously shaped mounds, complex enclosures and ceremonial avenues. Hopewell earthworks were found throughout the Cincinnati basin. Dr. Daniel Drake, an early chronicler, identified eleven works that were found throughout the Cincinnati basin. The largest of the mounds, which once stood at Third and Main Streets, was “eight feet high, with a gradual slope to a base of about one hundred and twenty feet by sixty.”

The many artifacts found in it included shells, bits of metal, kodk oes, beads, and copper articles. There were also many human bones. About 500 feet to the west was a large ellipse with an opening on the east about 90 feet wide guarded by two irregular mounds.

There were several mounds near the Betts House, thus the name Mound Street, which runs south from Clark Street to Court Street, but once extended all the way to Fifth Street before being cut off by the interstate. “One mound was near the northeast corner of Seventh and Mound Streets, about nine feet high in a circular shape and nearly flat on top.”

These ancient earthworks endured until development pressure mounted, and when the streets were graded in 1841, most of them were erased from the landscape.

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Fort Washington was erected by the federal government in late 1789, and on January 2, 1790, Arthur St. Clair, governor of the Northwest Territory, came to inspect the military post. He renamed the town Cincinnati, in honor of the Society of the Cincinnati. Named after Cincinnatus, the Roman farmer-soldier, the Society was an association of Revolutionary War officers, of which St. Clair was a founding member.

After Indian warfare finally ended in 1796 with the Treaty of Greenville, Cincinnati thrived on river-borne trade. Houses, stores and taverns appeared and a generous public landing was laid out.

Acknowledgments

This exhibit was made possible in part by the Luther Foundation.

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Rentership map, prepared by Steven Muzik, courtesy of the Community Design Center, University of Cincinnati.

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