III. Industry and Institutions

The Railroad Era

By 1840, the population exploded to more than 40,000. In 1841, the Little Miami Railroad began operating between Cincinnati and Milford, and others followed. The railroads first served the river trade as canals had done before them, and their terminals were located near the river. Over the next two decades, railroads began to challenge rivers and canals as the primary means of commercial transportation.

Charles Cut, one of the city’s early chroniclers, noted that in addition to the homes of the wealthy “many frame cottages surrounded by rose and shrubbery make this an attractive residence quarter for people of moderate means.” The West End was a “port of entry” for newcomers, and its population became increasingly diverse, ethnically as well as economically.

As Cincinnati’s black population rose from a few hundred in the 1820s to more than 1,000 by 1850, many of these people congregated in a part of the West End near the river. By the 1840s, the West End’s black community had its own churches, businesses, and a hotel, the Duval. This trend was to intensify as time passed.

In the mid-1850s, Western Row (Central Avenue) was a desirable residential street. Mixed in with these homes were shops, churches and small industrial establishments. Larger factories and warehouses, along with most of the area’s low exposure housing were generally located on the outer edges.

By the 1860s various institutions had penetrated the neighborhood, including a number of churches and schools. In 1869, a handsome new Cincinnati Hospital was completed, spreading over an entire block on Ann Street between Western Row and the canal. Designed by architect A.C. Nash, the hospital was a state-of-the-art complex of pavilions surrounding a courtyard allowing for maximum light and air.

In 1870, an industrial exposition was presented by the Board of Trade, Chamber of Commerce and the Ohio Mechanics’ Institute to display the Queen City’s developing technology and products. Washington Park was selected as the site because the city already owned the land, previously used for an orphan asylum and cemetery, and it was accessible by canal and streetcar. The present-day Music Hall was built on the exposition grounds for the 1888 Centennial Exposition at the behest of the city’s industrialists.

The Robinson Atlas of 1883-1884, shows signs of industrialization in what had been the city’s eleven Jewish congregations were in the city in 1845, but over the next fifteen years, greater numbers of Jews moved in. Although Cincinnati’s first Jewish congregations were located downtown, the Jewish Hospital was built on Central Avenue, the first site of Hebrew Union College, now in the West End, and its location, one of the changing neighborhood’s most important. The mixed character of these areas prevailed for several decades. In the 1870s and 1880s, an increasing number of the suburbs’ affluent residents began migrating to hilltop suburbs, motivated by concerns about disease and crime in the increasingly dirty, crowded and noisy basins. The Betts family, for example, found themselves in what had heretofore been a “walking city.”