IV. A NEW CENTURY

By 1900, most middle-income families had left the West End. New immigrants, often impoverished and from backgrounds that did not prepare them for life in a crowded urban setting, further contributed to congestion. While a few working-class families remained, the area was quickly evolving into the largest and poorest slum in the city.

During World War I, the black community in the West End grew considerably. The wartime shortage of labor encouraged blacks to move to Northern cities to take factory jobs. The West End, with plenty of cheap housing, became home to large numbers of these migrants. By 1921, almost 80% of the city’s 18,000 blacks lived here, while most residents of other ethnic backgrounds, including East European Jews, had moved out. As population density increased and housing deteriorated, conditions in the area worsened. Buildings were crowded onto lots as narrow as sixteen feet; many homes were literally falling down. By one account, some single-family dwellings housed as many as a dozen families. In most places 80% of the land was built over. Often the only open spaces were the streets.

Nevertheless, the black community in the West End had a strong sense of identity developed and expressed through its institutions. There was a multitude of churches, some located in the ornate buildings of earlier, more affluent Christian and Jewish congregations, and some in storefronts. Nor were all the residents of the West End poor. The neighborhood was home to numerous black tradesmen, entrepreneurs, and professionals. The Cotton Club, modeled on its Harlem namesake, brought jazz greats and other celebrities to Cincinnati in the 1920s and 1930s.

Crosley Field

From 1912 to 1970 Crosley Field, at 1200 Findlay Street and Western Avenue, was the home of the Cincinnati Reds. Originally known as Redland Field, it was renamed Crosley Field in 1934 when the Reds were owned by Cincinnati businessman and inventor Powel Crosley, Jr. Baseball devotees count the first night game in 1935 as one of the most notable events to take place in this ball park.

By the late 1930s, both the city and the club were dissatisfied with the old stadium. The West End was by then a slum, and driving and parking there were difficult. The 1940 Metropolitan Master Plan called for a multi-sports park. Consulting landscape architect George E. Kessler laid out a grand scheme of hilltop parks and parkways in 1907. Kessler also acknowledged the need for relief in the districts of greatest congestion in the basin.

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Crosley Field, from historic South Park Hill area, photograph by Archie Tolan, Hamilton County Historical Society, 1925.

The 1925 City Plan

Cincinnati’s 1925 City Plan, the first of its kind in the nation, was an attempt to bring order to urban chaos. To shape growth, the plan proposed new zoning regulations and specific solutions to traffic snarls, including new thoroughfares through city neighborhoods, new traffic patterns through downtown and more public transit.

The plan showed a cluster of civic institutions and squares in the vicinity of Central Parkway, stretching from City Hall to Music Hall, and wide boulevards to a redesigned Lincoln Park and along Court Street.

Lincoln Park

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According to The Bicentennial Guide to Greater Cincinnati, “By 1900, Lincoln Park was one of the most harmonious parts of the city. In winter, as many as 5,000 people skated on the frozen pond, and during the summer an estimated 1500 tenant dwellers slept there each night to escape the heat, migrant air of their homes. By the 1920s, the area had become a vast slum, and to clear the park and nearby buildings seemed a civic improvement.”

What Can You Learn from a Map?

The shift in demographics and land use around the B born House in the early 20th century can be seen by comparing maps from different periods. The 1932 map shows there was still an empty lot on the west side of the B orn House.

The 1904 map updated in 1910 and 1910 updates shows that a Jewish synagogue had moved into 422 Clark Street and built an addition on the vacant lot for it by 1910.

The 1934 map, updated in 1947, shows the synagogue had become the “New St. Paul AME Church (Colored).” The 1934 map, updated in 1947, shows the synagogue had become the “New St. Paul AME Church (Colored).” The 1934 map, updated in 1947, shows the synagogue had become the “New St. Paul AME Church (Colored).” The 1934 map, updated in 1947, shows the synagogue had become the “New St. Paul AME Church (Colored).”