

History of Highland Heights Neighborhood

By Fred Morton

The neighborhood of Highland Heights was distinctly different in character from the communities from most of the other neighborhoods which had emerged in Memphis over the prior hundred years. Its unique beginnings in the late 1890s are found as Memphis began to experience population and commercial growth and there was an interest in developing a more hospital private residences for those working in Memphis proper.⁶ The North Carolina tobacco magnate B. L. Duke had constructed a trolley rail line from down town Memphis out to the natural springs in Raleigh near the edge of the Wolf River where he had constructed a Spa Resort. The line, known as the Raleigh Street Railway, remained in operation from 1892 until 1895 when purchased by the Memphis Street Railway. It was powered by a station and service complex erected in the vicinity of now Chickasaw Country Club on Galloway. The line ran from down town out through Overton Park, down Broad Street, then North on National and then crossing the Wolf River to Raleigh. The building complex of the old RSR were converted to community meeting facilities where churches and the first public school was held in Highland Heights.

Residential development sprang up along the line with both more affluent homes but predominantly very modest single family residences as early as 1907. With population growth, Shelby County instituted the Highland Heights grammar school in 1915. Summer Avenue was designated the route for US Highway 70 and sped the development of Summer Avenue as a commercial strip. The Highland Heights Neighborhood has been loosely defined as the area South of Summer Avenue, East of Cyprus Creek and Baltic and Pope Streets on the West, Macon Road on the North and Graham Street on the East. The citizens of Highland Heights celebrated their incorporation into Memphis proper January 2, 1929. Between 1915 to 1920 measures were taken to acquire land and build what became Treadwell

⁶ "Living on The Line", by Paul R. Cappock in the February 17, 1980, The Commercial Appeal. Also "History of Highland Heights" by Judith Johnson, 1993. Both appear in Joe Walk's History of Highland Height, May 1994.

elementary and junior high schools at the North Highland site.⁷ Treadwell was expanded to include high school and graduated its first seniors in 1942. Treadwell would be one of the five twelve year public schools serving Memphis in the 1940s and 50s—Southside, Humes, Messick, East, White Station, then later Frayser. They would have active athletic programs as well as ROTC units. All of these schools were exclusively caucasian. Blacks were schooled separately in both the county and city until the 1960s. Memphis was among the most segregated cities in all the United States generally.⁷ Growing up in Highland Heights I can attest to the fact that it was the case that the only Blacks you ever saw or interacted with were the occasional domestics who worked in the homes or those filling janitorial or similar jobs in schools and businesses. We never interacted with comparable black children in school, scouting or athletic activities at all.

From 1909 to 1930 practically all the major Protestant Churches in the area had established worshipping communities and eventually permanent church facilities. The Church of Christ was organized in 1909, the Methodist in 1911, the Baptist in 1913, the Presbyterian in 1921, the Lutheran in 1924, and Cumberland Presbyterian in 1930. Other churches would emerge on the borders of Highland Heights such as Grimes Methodist, Berclair Baptist, and Presbyterian, Baptist, Church of Christ and Christian Churches, St. Stephens Methodist on Macon Road. St. Michael Catholic School and Church at Summer near Graham would not be established until 1950 reflecting the fact that this area was essentially peopled by the typical Protestant Scotch Irish and Northern British.

Some of the essential characteristics of the Highland Heights community was its ready access to down town via the Memphis Transit system which converted to electronic bus service in the 1950s as well as the Summer Avenue corridor leading to down town. Also Highland was a major artery connecting to the emerging shopping and commercial centers along Poplar Avenue. Supporting the growing population during the 1950s were new school built to the East and North—Kingsbury, Grahamwood, and Wellstation. The thriving industrial plants to the North, Firestone, DuPont, International Harvester and others provided until the 1970s ample employment allowing prosperous growth until the crisis of school desegregation and closing of many of these plant. Both of these trends

⁷ A History of Treadwell School, May 1994, Joe Walk, pp.14 ff.

⁷ Marcus Pohlman, Opportunity Lost, 2008, pp.39-62; 63-70.

signaled a noticeable decline in the prosperity and vitality of the Highland Heights community. More and more of the residents are renter and the incidence of crime have increased adding to a sense of diminished morale in the neighborhood. But deliberate efforts on the part of churches both old and new to the community auger well for the future of the Corners of Highland Heights.