Builders All: Educational Urbanism in an Elite Minority Enclave of St. Louis

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Abstract

 Builders All: Educational Urbanism in an Elite Minority Enclave of St. Louis

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 Modern St. Louis, Missouri reflects the myriad challenges faced by many American cities in the decades following World War II. Economic and contributed greatly to the radical social and economic transformation of cities like St. Louis across the industrial North and Midwest. In particular, communities of color have been disproportionately affected by the development of urban crisis issues. The Ville neighborhood of St. Louis thrived as a center of black culture for the first half of the twentieth century before feeling the full effects of urban decline. My study seeks to resurrect a few of the potentially beneficial historical lessons from the often told pessimistic narrative of the urban crisis. The primary issues dealt with in my study are: ghettoization, racial hierarchies, black self-reliance, urbanism, and the social implications of the built environment.

 In addition to tracing the history of this exceptional neighborhood, I seek to analyze the specific effect that the neighborhood’s varied educational institutions had on it’s prosperity and eventual decline. Also, I aim to determine the source of the Ville’s uniquely prosperous and civically engaged citizenry. In doing so, I hope to extract the lessons modern urban society can learn from this community in fostering the growth of the twenty-first century’s civic vitality. As modern urban society faces the task of
effective urban renewal, what historically successful institutions and dynamics should it seek to mimic in order to create a dense civic culture? My work is also informed by modern “new urbanist” planning theory and its emphasis on the social implications of the built environment.

The Ville, as a center of black educational opportunity, provided its residents with an unrivaled level of training and the self-contained neighborhood’s culture. The neighborhood’s talented and active residents were well equipped to dismantle the far-reaching system of Jim Crow racism which had confined them to The Ville’s simple housing stock and segregated schools in the first place. Leaders from the various community institutions which led to The Ville’s rise to prominence in St. Louis’s black community ultimately contributed to its decline as well. The very nature of The Ville as an elite minority enclave compounded the negative impact of deindustrialization, decentralization, and suburbanization, which radically transformed St. Louis in the 1960s and 70s. The neighborhood today, with its many abandoned homes and vacant institutional buildings, stands as a monument to its past achievements.
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I. Introduction

I first visited “The Ville” neighborhood, located approximately five miles northwest of downtown St. Louis, in April of 2009. I was scheduled for a job interview at Sumner High School. The neighborhood that I drove through on the way to the school seemed as if it had seen better days; vacant lots and barred storefronts lined Martin Luther King Avenue and many of the neighborhood’s homes had clearly suffered the recent wrath of brick thieves. The commanding Georgian revival facade of Sumner High School appeared quite out of place amidst the boarded up houses lining Kennerly and Billups Avenues.

As I waited for the other candidates to finish their interviews, the school’s vice Principal gave me a tour of the almost hundred year old Sumner building. The front corridor of the school contains an impressive “hall of fame”. Portraits of notable alumni, doctors, lawyers, entertainers, educators, watch over a student body roughly one sixth of what it was fifty years earlier. It was not until several months after my first visit that I learned of the vibrant, African-American neighborhood that once surrounded the high school. The impressive institutional buildings, now mostly abandoned, remain as relics of The Ville’s golden era, decades ago.

Two major forces led to the creation of The Ville as a black cultural enclave: the Great Migration of Southern blacks to the urban north and midwest and racially restrictive municipal policies in housing and education. The vast emigration of Southern black workers and families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dramatically altered the demographic composition of St. Louis. Beckoned by the siren
song of steady employment and greater personal freedom, thousands of enterprising African Americans from across the country flocked to St. Louis’ thriving industries. Like their counterparts across the industrial North and Midwest, St. Louis’ new black population found that many of their expectations would not be met. Housing stock in the city was severely limited and older than in the growing western suburbs, and the jobs available to black workers came with many of the indignities and disadvantages present in Southern markets. Accordingly, the vast majority of black workers in St. Louis were employed in marginal service positions or hard labor. In reaction to such negative conditions, and segregationist municipal policy, the black population of St. Louis was congregated in a few dense pockets. The city’s Carr Square, and Mill Creek Valley neighborhoods developed large black populations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to the earliest waves of in-migration. ¹

A street-car ride away from these increasingly crowded and inhospitable downtown neighborhoods, the area then called Elleardsville offered those African Americans with the means to do so the chance to own a home. The city’s nefarious restrictive covenant system was used for decades by white landowners and real estate agents to limit the neighborhoods in which black citizens could rent or purchase homes. Kept out of most areas of the city by residential racism, the black, and largely middle-class, population of St. Louis was funneled into the area later known to its residents as “The Ville”.²

Traditionally, areas of secluded ethnic populations, “densely packed...plagued by disease and crime”, have languished, decaying on the economic and political margins of society. Interestingly, this was not the case in The Ville. Contrary to expectations, in the roughly sixty years following the rapid influx of African-Americans to St. Louis in the 1920s and 30s, The Ville flourished. Rooted in the neighborhood’s prominent academic and religious institutions, elective fraternal, sororal, religious, social, and business organizations reached critical mass in the close-knit Ville community.

Education, in particular, became a great, concentrated resource in The Ville area. In much the same way as Boston or New York is today, The Ville became a destination for high quality educational opportunities within the black community of the entire St. Louis region. During the period of most vibrant activity in The Ville, roughly 1900-1960, blossoming educational institutions provided local residents with elementary, middle, and high schools, a college of law, a school for the disabled and infirm, an orphanage, a teaching hospital, a teacher’s college, and even Annie Malone’s famous Poro College of Beauty and Culture. Some of these impressive institutions remain active even today.

These vital educational institutions occupied a central place both physically and socially in The Ville community. One can stand in the middle of The Ville’s Tandy Park and see Sumner High School, Turner Middle School, Marshall Elementary School, the Annie Malone Children’s home, and Homer G. Phillips Hospital and Nursing School--all

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4 Toft, *The Ville*: Wright, *The Ville, St. Louis*.
5 Toft, *The Ville*.
less than two blocks away. Students, teachers, doctors, nurses, and nursing students lived side-by-side during the neighborhood’s most socially vibrant period.

The residential restriction imposed on St. Louis’s black population and the subsequent proliferation of educational institutions in The Ville provided an obvious destination for the region’s black intellectual elite. Teachers at Sumner High School were leaders in their respective fields, and talented interns, nurses, and residents came from across the country to train at Homer G. Phillips Hospital. Cut off from many mainstream vocational opportunities, education and the accumulation of credentials provided African Americans an uncommon sense of stability and upward mobility. The intellectually charged environment created by this student population formed the foundation for the “rich community life” characteristic of The Ville during the first half of the twentieth century.6

Sitting at the cross-roads of educational and civic life of black St. Louis, The Ville produced star personalities in a variety of public arenas. The alumni records of Sumner High School read like a who’s who of black society in the mid-twentieth century. Rockers Tina Turner and Chuck Berry, opera diva Grace Bumbry, tennis star Arthur Ashe, and comedian Dick Gregory (among many others) were all products of The Ville during its heyday.7 More specifically, and perhaps more importantly, The Ville was home to a growing population of local civic leaders.8

The neighborhood’s reputation as a center for education and leadership began as early as 1873. School administrators, teachers, minsters, doctors and nurses represented a large portion of the “white collar” professionals who helped cultivate The Ville’s elite

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6 Toft, The Ville 10.
7 Wright, The Ville, St. Louis, 45.
8 Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis”.
reputation. Herman Dreer, a former teacher at Sumner High School, conducted a study of the neighborhood’s civic legacy in 1955, which identified over a third of St. Louis’ recognized black leaders as residents of The Ville area.

The schools reinforced the community’s sense of leadership and civic duty. Sumner High School and Homer G. Phillips Hospital offered a wide variety of academic, athletic, social, and professional organizations to students. Also important was the critical mass of high-level students, many of whom attended several of The Ville’s schools during their academic careers. Sumner High School had an active future nurses club and was used as a reliable recruiting ground for the nursing school down the street throughout the history of the program.

The character and function of The Ville as an elite enclave was fundamentally changed as the tide of civil rights policy swept across the country in the years following World War Two. Many of the central forces responsible for The Ville’s creation, restrictive housing covenants and school segregation, would not last, and the stable, middle class community at its center was undermined by the continued suburbanization of housing and industry. The landmark supreme courts cases like Shelley vs. Kramer and Brown vs. Board of Education, 1948 and 1954 respectively, removed much of the legal framework holding the unique Ville community together. According to prominent St. Louis historian and preservationist Michael Allen, once the opportunity to attain “true symbols of stature, not forced symbols of stature” was available, many of The Ville’s most affluent and well educated residents left to pursue it. Following the pattern of white suburban relocation, many of the black middle class families of The Ville left their homes

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9 Charles Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis”.
for newly accessible areas further west of the city and, eventually, the inner-ring suburbs of St. Louis County.\textsuperscript{11}

In the wake of this exodus, The Ville’s institutions suffered. The enrollment of Sumner High School, which had stood at well over two thousand students in 1952, dropped off dramatically to less than a thousand. In 1968, the Homer G. Phillips School of Nursing merged with the previously all white St. Louis City Hospital School of Nursing. Another major blow to the neighborhood’s pride and vitality came in 1979 with the closure of Homer G. Phillips hospital for general care. Seemingly, the specific function of The Ville’s illustrious institutions, educating and training the region’s black academic elite, was no longer necessary. \textsuperscript{12}

Even though many Ville residents no longer resided there, they took with them the important lessons learned in their neighborhood. It is this scattering of The Ville’s social capital that remains, for many, its greatest legacy. To this day, former Ville residents can be found in leadership roles in astounding numbers throughout the St. Louis area, and the alumni organizations of the various schools remain extremely vocal and active.

In addition to tracing the history of this exceptional neighborhood, I seek to analyze the specific effect that the neighborhood’s varied educational institutions had on its prosperity and eventual decline. Also, I aim to determine the source of The Ville’s uniquely prosperous and civically engaged citizenry and its impact on the greater St. Louis region. In doing so, I hope to extract the lessons modern urban society can learn from this community in fostering the twenty-first century’s civic vitality. As modern

\textsuperscript{11} Michael Allen, (St. Louis Historian and Architectural Preservationist), interview by Davis Acker, Digital Recording Device, November 11, 2011.

\textsuperscript{12} Wright, \textit{The Ville, St. Louis}, 45.
urban society faces the task of effective urban renewal, what historically successful institutions and social dynamics should it seek to create in order to foster a culture replete with what the urbanist Douglas Rae describes as “crystals of civic density”\textsuperscript{13}?

My research design is greatly indebted to the work of influential urban activist Jane Jacobs. Her groundbreaking 1961 study of the cultural fabric of New York City neighborhoods, \textit{The Death and Life of Great American Cities}, provides a solid foundation for the focus and methodology of my project. Like Jacobs, it is my aim to study the success of urban neighborhoods like The Ville instead of decrying their failures. My work is also informed by modern “new urbanist” planning theory and its emphasis on the social implications of the built environment. The specific physical and social dynamics present in The Ville during its most prosperous period seem uniquely illustrative of these effects. In seeking to create “vibrant, connected, and diverse places,” new urbanist thought echoes my interest in The Ville’s cultural environment\textsuperscript{14}.

There is a vast historiographical literature on the topic of American urban communities and race. An overview of that body of work is outlined below. That said, my study, in both its context and thematic underpinnings, is distinctive. There has been much written with regards to the creation and perpetuation of urban ghettos and enclaves. However, little work has been done to examine the cultural fabric of the enclave once created. In particular, more elite ethnic enclaves remain, as historian Thomas Sugrue has noted, “little studied”\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{13} Douglas Rae, \textit{City: Urbanism and Its End}, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 238.
\textsuperscript{15} Sugrue, \textit{Origins of the Urban Crisis}, 37.
A foundational work in the field of African-American urban history and sociology, Du Bois’ *The Philadelphia Negro (1899)* provides a great model for the integration of rigorous quantitative analysis with oral history. His analysis of the history, condition, and social dynamics of the urban African-American community offers great insight into the unique heritage of such communities. Interestingly, Du Bois himself seems a fascinating case-study of the impact of educational divisions amongst members of the African American community. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s exhaustive 1945 study of Chicago’s Bronzeville district, *Black Metropolis*, stands alongside *The Philadelphia Negro* as a seminal work in the field. Their analysis of the socio-economic situation of lower and middle class blacks is notable for its depth and comparative consideration of the status of urban ghettos.¹⁶

Major scholarship on racial relationships and hierarchies, as relating to the elite nature of The Ville, is seen in the works of William Julius Wilson and Douglas Massey. Wilson’s critically acclaimed works, *The Declining Significance of Race*, and *The Truly Disadvantaged*, and Massey’s *American Apartheid* shed light on the interplay of race and class as affecting the place of the black community in larger American society. Wilson’s approach ties much of the division in the black community to larger structural forces. Educated, upwardly mobile African Americans, according to Wilson, followed the larger tide of postwar suburbanization occurring in cities across the country. Massey on the other hand, places greater emphasis on race explicitly. In particular, residential racism is highlighted as a central cause of modern urban ills. Deeply theoretical and broad, these

works provide a breadth of influential knowledge on the topic of urban ethnic and racial communities.\textsuperscript{17}

Douglas Rae’s \textit{City: Urbanism and its End} examines the social and economic ties connecting the urban communities of New Haven in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The fabric of urbanism in New Haven’s neighborhoods was composed of local commerce, vocational and residential proximity, professional, religious, and ethnic organizations, athletic teams, and educational institutions. Rae’s conception of the complex social and cultural dynamics of urban life, as seen in early twentieth century New Haven, provides the basis for my examination of life in The Ville.

The so called “urban crisis” and the decline of urban areas along ethnic and racial lines is a field of urban history with a growing academic discussion. Thomas Sugrue’s \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis} tells the story of Detroit’s fall from industrial grace and its drastic racial division in the decades after WWII. Sugrue’s study briefly addresses the presence of black enclaves and the nature of education as a symbol of a status. Robert Self’s \textit{American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland} complements Sugrue’s work while adding certain insightful discussion on “self-reliance” within the black community.\textsuperscript{18}

Doctoral dissertations by Charles Bailey and Herman Dreer directly address The Ville neighborhood. Bailey’s “The Symbolic Meaning of Community in The Ville” examines the social construction of an “elite” urban community. He addresses a variety

of factors in contributing to the unique cache of The Ville, one of which is the employment and educational status of its residents as compared to other African American communities in St. Louis. His work is additionally useful because it was completed one year before the closure of Homer G. Phillips Hospital, providing an insightful sociological snapshot of the community on the verge of losing one of its most vital institutions. Herman Dreer’s “The Tide That Binds: Negro Leadership in Saint Louis, A Study in Race Relations,” an examination of The Ville’s civic legacy, provides a useful corollary to Bailey’s work. Taken together, Bailey’s social and Dreer’s political analyses provide a well-rounded historical picture of The Ville during its most vibrant period.19

The future of this dynamic urban neighborhood is uncertain. There has been some effort to preserve some of its buildings, both residential and institutional, but recent large scale redevelopment and revitalization plans have stalled. Though the neighborhood has been untouched by large-scale urban renewal projects, it is now physically and culturally a shadow of its former self.

While many of St. Louis’ other neighborhoods now proudly display community signs and historical markers, The Ville has but a single monument. A concrete column about six feet in height stands at the intersection of reads “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and contains a list of several of the community’s most famous residents.

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Despite its present condition, a further consideration of The Ville’s rise and fall reveals a decidedly more nuanced and lasting historic legacy, a testament to the immense creativity and intelligence so closely associated with its now seemingly distant past.

*Image 1: The Ville monument*  

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20 Photo taken by author, 2011.
II. Forces of Creation

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At once a place of opportunity and stagnation, pride and humiliation, pleasure and pain...”\textsuperscript{21}

That the Ville would develop into an elite ethnic enclave replete with civic and educational opportunity was certainly not a forgone historical conclusion. The creation and maintenance of this unique community during the first half of the twentieth century was the result of many specific historical factors: the Great Migration and racially restrictive policies in education and housing. The legal and economic landscape of the nation and of the city of St. Louis specifically contributed to The Ville’s rise and fall as a vital urban neighborhood.

From the time of its founding in 1764, the city St. Louis occupied a strange position, both geographically and culturally, between North and South. As such, historian Joseph Heathcott observed, it served as a “cultural breakpoint...and its social and civic life blended aspects of both regions”.\textsuperscript{22} During the period of my study, roughly 1890-1980, the city of St. Louis underwent great transformation, due in no small part to the influx of African Americans predominately from the rural South. At the time of the national census in 1900, St. Louis contained 575,238 people, ninety-four percent of whom were white. However, even at this early point, nearly 35,000 black citizens lived within city limits, placing St. Louis second among black urban populations, just behind

\textsuperscript{21} Quote refers to the city of St. Louis in general. Quoted from Heathcott, “Black Archipelago,” 710.
\textsuperscript{22} Heathcott, “Black Archipelago,” 708.
Baltimore. In 1917, a bloody race riot in nearby East St. Louis Illinois prompted the relocation of an additional 4,000 African Americans across the river into Missouri. This steady stream of black in-migration continued for decades. In the greatest period of growth, between 1910 and 1930, the African American population of the city increased by over 50,000. In 1950, the city reached its highest population in recorded history, 856,796. Over the course of fifty years, the black population of St. Louis had climbed to over 150,000, roughly eighteen percent of the overall population, triple that of 1900.23

The city into which the thousands of black, Southern migrants entered during the first half of the twentieth century was a place of contradictions. One of these new black residents, Quincy Trouppe, recalls the St. Louis’s racially-charged atmosphere at the time of his arrival: “I liked the old river city from the first moment I saw it. But the old torment of potential and actual conflict between us and whites had not changed much”24.

Stringent policy prohibited inter-racial marriage, integrated public education, and recreational facility use. However, no formal restrictions governed the racial division of public transportation, the library system, or the city’s religious institutions. The policy of the St. Louis’s downtown lunch counters is emblematic of the the city’s awkward and inconsistent racial environment; African Americans were permitted to buy food and drinks at the counters but they were not allowed to sit down and eat them there. Though not evenly articulated in all areas of life, as in the Deep South, segregation structured many aspects of St. Louis’s culture. The city’s housing market, especially with the rapid influx of black residents, became one of the most highly racialized aspects of St. Louis’s society.

The city’s history of residential segregation began, informally, as early as 1911 with the creation of deed restrictions for exclusive, private streets like Vandeventer and Westmoreland Place in the city’s mid-town neighborhood. The push for a more formalized separation of St. Louis’s housing stock came to a head four years later with the creation of the influential “United Welfare Association”. This innocuously named organization was founded to build support for a new racial zoning ordinance for the city. Inflammatory pamphlets released by the U.W.A. preached a gospel of peaceable, “mutual restriction” to St. Louis’s wary, white homeowners. Signature campaigns led by the U.W.A. and the various neighborhood associations it spawned fanned out across the city warning residents of the dangers of impending Negro “invasion”.

Image 2: Postcard distributed by the UWA in anticipation of the 1916 ordinance.

26 Gordon, Mapping Decline, 70.
The efforts of the U.W.A. paid off with the passage of St. Louis’s first racially restrictive municipal zoning ordinance by a large margin, 52,210 to 17,877, on February 29, 1916. According to its proponents, this measure aimed at preventing “ill feeling, conflict and collisions between the white and colored races in the City of St. Louis”. Operating on a strict seventy-five percent rule, the 1916 ordinance barred neighborhoods with a history of white or black residents from being integrated. The ordinance cited specific “negro blocks” across the city, areas where an established African American population was already present, which were to be preserved as racially homogenous. The measure designated the entire Ville, among a few other areas, as places “in which negroes may thereafter take up residence”. Even at this early point in its history, The Ville’s status as a characteristically black neighborhood was firmly established.

Though the 1916 zoning ordinance was short-lived, lasting only a year before being struck down by the Supreme Court, the interests which it represented remained powerful. With the path of municipal legislation as a means for regulating residential racial division blocked, more private and small-scale action was necessary in order for white property owners and real estate developers to maintain their hold on the city’s property base. It was out of this need that the racially restrictive covenant was born. Early restrictive covenants in St. Louis covered relatively small areas, typically no more than a few blocks, but little by little they were “cobbled together like chain letters”, reshaping the racial geography of the city in ways observable even today. A map created by the City Plan Commission in 1930, entitled “Distribution of the Negro

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28 Gordon, Mapping Decline, 71.
29 Gordon, Mapping Decline, 70.
30 Gordon, Mapping Decline, 72.
31 Gordon, Mapping Decline, 77.
“Population,” reflects the city’s developing racial landscape. At the time this study was conducted, The Ville already contained twenty-four percent of St. Louis’s black residents. This number would only increase with continued in-migration of Southern blacks before and during the Second World War.

By the mid 1940s, almost four hundred separate covenants held claim to much of the city’s residential property. The boundaries of The Ville, already recognized as a historically black neighborhood, were fixed in place. This aspect of the neighborhood, as a physically and socially restricted community, accounts for much of its later cultural intensity. The concentration of residential, educational, and vocational opportunities within neighborhood’s boundaries, less than single square mile area, only reinforced the cultural-connectivity among Ville residents.

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34 Wright, *The Ville, St. Louis*, 7.
III. From Elleardsville to The Ville

“There was no doubt about it, we were considered intruders...”³⁵

The area now referred to as “The Ville” was originally owned by entrepreneur Charles M. Elleard. Part equestrian, part horticulturalist, and part farmer, Elleard’s many profitable ventures eventually led to the development of a small town called Elleardsville centered around his farm in the mid 1800s. Initially, the area was home to a group of German and Irish immigrants, with only a small black population. Saint Matthew the Apostle Catholic Church stands today as a monument to this early white ethnic community. In 1876, the previously semi-rural suburb was annexed by St. Louis, in what would be the city’s final boundary expansion.³⁶

Demographically, the Elleardsville changed dramatically in the first three decades of the twentieth century. An examination of census data between 1890 and 1970 reveals the extent to which the population of the area, and indeed St. Louis in general, was transformed. In 1890, African Americans represented only six percent of the neighborhood’s population, but by 1930, that number had jumped to eighty-six percent. In the 1920s alone, the black population of The Ville increased by nearly eight thousand. Early black residents of The Ville were well aware of the complex social dynamics in the neighborhood at this transformative period: "There was no doubt about it, we were

³⁵ Quoted early Ville black resident. From Wright The Ville, St. Louis, 8.
considered intruders by members of the St. Matthew's parish, mostly Irish and Italian."\(^{37}\) Despite protest from the area’s historically white residents, black St. Louisans continued, as dictated by policies like the 1916 ordinance, to pour into Elledwardsville.

The housing stock of the neighborhood was unremarkable both in size and architectural quality. However, given the extremely limited options open to St. Louis’s black residents at the time, to many it represented their best opportunity to own a home. Laura Scales, a teacher and former Ville resident, remembers the great pride residents took in their newly acquired homes: “Those houses were neat, clean...every Saturday you’d see people washing the steps off...mowing lawns, cutting their hedges, every Saturday people were busy on the streets” \(^{38}\).

Relatively small, single-family homes represented the vast majority of residential base in the neighborhood. Older houses, those built before the influx of African Americans into the neighborhood, were simple and affordable enough to allow working and middle class families to move in. Homes built later reflected the neighborhood’s rapid growth. The vast majority of homes constructed after roughly 1920 were multi-family dwellings.\(^{39}\) Mark Harris was born at Homer G. Phillips Hospital in The Ville on January 9th, 1974. He and his parents lived in a simple home on Belle Glade Avenue, one of the neighborhood’s many quaint but busy streets. Even at this relatively late period in the neighborhood’s history, Mr. Harris remembers that “pretty much every


house was occupied”. The influx of upwardly mobile black residents, funneled into The Ville by segregationist housing policies, had served to fill in the street grid of the neighborhood. This density only added to The Ville’s perceived and uniquely urban connectivity. These homes, situated on small lots and small streets, were the threads tying The Ville’s cultural fabric together.

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IV. Institutional Proliferation

“Whatever you needed was in a five block radius...”41

At the center of Ville’s homes stood a growing cluster of community institutions. During the period of most vibrant activity in The Ville, roughly 1900-1950, blossoming educational and civic institutions provided residents with elementary, middle, and high schools, a college of law, a school for the disabled and infirm, an orphanage, a teaching hospital, a teacher’s college, and Annie Malone’s famous Poro College of Beauty and Culture. These early institutions provided a solid foundation on which a thriving African American community would be built over the next sixty years.

Black St. Louisians began to establish a more prominent position in the Elleardsville neighborhood with the founding of two important religious institutions, Antioch Baptist Church and St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1884 and 1885 respectively.42 These churches, both of which are still active today, served as vital meeting spaces for The Ville’s doctors, teachers, nurses and students to interact. Many of the community’s most distinguished leaders were active in there church in addition to their regular jobs.

A turning point in the cultural development of The Ville came in 1872. The first black teacher at the only school serving the neighborhood’s then relatively small black student population, the Elleardsville School for Colored Children, Mr. Richard Cole’s


42 Wright, The Ville, St. Louis, 7.
hiring was an important development in the history of The Ville.\textsuperscript{43} Cole was one of the first African American teachers in the entire St. Louis public school district. Within five years of his hiring, black faculty and administrators had completely replaced the formerly all-white staff of the school. Mr. Cole would go on to serve as the Principal of the Simmons School for fifty years, and the city’s current Cole Elementary School is named in his honor.\textsuperscript{44} The Ville’s contingent of prominent educators was a trademark of the neighborhood throughout its history, helping create and maintain its striking cultural vitality for decades.

In particular, the history of the Simmons School is a useful microcosm through which to observe the larger forces at work in The Ville’s formation and maturation. The stately, brick building on Maffitt Avenue was opened in 1873 with fifty-three students and was designated Colored School Number Eight four years later when the Elleardsville area was annexed by the City of St. Louis. In 1899, the original building was replaced by a much larger brick structure containing ten classrooms, eight more than before. In response to a steadily increasing student population, a third floor, a nine-room addition, and an auditorium were added in 1901 and 1912 respectively. In 1914, nine portables were installed on Pendleton Avenue and in 1936 a new cafeteria was added.\textsuperscript{45} The dramatic expansion and maturation of the Simmons school illustrates the vibrant educational community so long associated with The Ville and the extent to which education played a role the lives of each of the growing neighborhood’s residents.

\textsuperscript{43} Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis,” 36.
\textsuperscript{44} Wright, \textit{The Ville, St. Louis}, 12.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Historical Sketch of the Simmons School}, Julia Davis Papers, Box 1, Folder 8, Mercantile Library University of Missouri-St. Louis, Saint Louis, Missouri.
Following in the footsteps of the Simmons school and Antioch Baptist Church, many other educational and cultural institutions found a home in The Ville during the early years of the twentieth century. In 1900, The John Marshall school opened its doors at 4342 Aldine Avenue, five blocks from the Simmons School. This building was originally a primary school for white students but as a result of the great increase of black students in The Ville, it was reconstituted as an intermediate school for black children in 1908. In 1927, the Marshall school transformed once again, this time back into a primary school, still serving The Ville’s black students. As each school opened, it provided The Ville’s residents with greater opportunity and gave others outside the neighborhood greater reason to visit.

The city’s only black high school, and the first African American High School west of the Mississippi River, Charles E. Sumner High School was relocated to The Ville neighborhood in 1910. Named for the noted abolitionist Senator, Sumner High School represented great progress and opportunity for St. Louis’s black community. Its previous downtown locations, on Eleventh and Spruce and then Fifteenth and Walnut streets, served St. Louis’s earlier African American neighborhoods in the midtown and Mill Creek Valley areas. These older neighborhoods were becoming increasingly industrialized and inhospitable in the years before Sumner’s final relocation to the then pseudo-suburban Ville area.

Nearly the entire Mill Creek Valley area was razed in the 1950s and 60s in the name of urban renewal. The former home to over twenty thousand people, nearly all black, this neighborhood’s schools, businesses, and other institutions were bulldozed and

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47 Wright, *The Ville, St. Louis*, 38.
replaced by industrial and commercial super-blocks beginning in 1959. In fact, the lot on which Sumner was located just before moving to The Ville in 1910 is now part of the site of the Scott Trade Center, home of the St. Louis Blues hockey team.\textsuperscript{48}

In response to the perceived degradation of the area around Sumner, the city’s black leadership called for better accommodations for its high school students. Sumner’s relocation to The Ville was both pragmatic and strategic. In addition to serving a vital purpose for the growing African American population west of downtown, its educational and cultural significance effectively established The Ville as “the center for the social and cultural activities of black people in St. Louis”\textsuperscript{49}. Despite the school’s ultimately positive impact, the group of leaders responsible for Sumner’s final relocation faced many obstacles in doing so.

Moving the city’s only secondary school for African Americans to their neighborhood would logically motivate the city’s other black citizens to relocate with it and this fact worried many local leaders and nearby residents. Initially, the Board of Education planned to simply construct an addition to Sumner’s Walnut Street location. According to Dr. Dreer, white residents of Elleardsville even went so far as to propose the establishment of a public park on the proposed school site.\textsuperscript{50} In response, more than 600 African American educational, business, and religious leaders rallied in support of Sumner’s relocation. Flyers were distributed, meetings were held, and “the day ended with a victory for the Negro citizens”.\textsuperscript{51} Ultimately, the committee was convinced that “the colored people were moving westward” and adding to a school downtown was ill-


\textsuperscript{49} Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis,” 37.

\textsuperscript{50} Dreer, “Negro Leadership in St. Louis,” 121.

\textsuperscript{51} Dreer, “Negro Leadership in St. Louis,” 120.
advised. The two decades following Sumner’s relocation were the greatest period of black population growth in The Ville.  

For more than fifty years, Sumner was the only secondary school serving St. Louis’s black population. Long seen as one of the finest schools for African Americans in the entire country, alongside others like D.C.’s Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School, Sumner’s elite reputation added great cache to The Ville and proved a important cause of its growth in later years, as “observers attributed movement of African Americans west from downtown--and the panic of North-side homeowners--to both in-migration and the building of a new African American high school between Goode and Pendleton.” Only a year after its grand opening in 1910, Sumner was already overcrowded, as black families from across the region moved to The Ville to educate their children. Nine portable classrooms were erected on the school grounds to serve the neighborhood’s

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52 Dreer, “Negro Leadership in St. Louis,” 121.
54 Wayman, History of St. Louis Neighborhoods, 28.
55 Gordon, Mapping Decline, 73.
ever-growing student population. Sumner’s original building was expanded three times over the ensuing decades; the last of these expansions was completed in 1968. The completed structure, still open today, reflects this earlier period’s impressive growth.

Perhaps the most unique of the neighborhood’s institutions, Annie Malone’s Poro College of Beauty and Culture opened its doors in the heart of The Ville, on the corner of St. Ferdinand and Billups Avenues, in 1918. This combination school and business, though short-lived, offered immense opportunity and utility to the residents of The Ville. The building alone was quite impressive. Faced in brilliant stone and brick, it occupied an entire block of The Ville neighborhood. Its ornately tiled lobby with overstuffed armchairs and mahogany writing desks immediately communicated to students, customers, and area residents the cultivated tastes of its famous owner.

Annie Turnbo Pope Malone was one of the wealthiest black women in the country when she moved her company to the St. Louis from her home state of Illinois. Her popular line of women’s hair and beauty products was extremely profitable and, consequently, she decided to open a flagship school and production center to train the agents who were needed to sell her popular system. This facility, located only a block away from Sumner High School, contained classroom space for the school of cosmetology, a beauty parlor, an auditorium, office space, a cafeteria, a dining room, a sewing shop, guest rooms, a dormitory for students, a rooftop garden, and two emergency rooms for first-aid treatment. At its peak operation, around 1920, Poro College employed nearly two hundred people, many of whom were alumni of The Ville’s many

57 Wright, *The Ville, St. Louis*, 68.
58 Wright, *The Ville, St. Louis*, 67.
schools. 59 Emblematic of the synergistic dynamic of The Ville community during this period, Poro College offered reliable employment to the neighborhood’s growing pool of well-trained students.

In 1925, the Turner Open Air School began enrolling African American special needs children from across the St. Louis region. This unique institution provided a vital service for the black community and “attempted to teach the public that the children were human beings, not to be pitied, but given a chance to perform to capacity” 60 . The school was named for accomplished scientist and early Ville resident, Charles H. Turner. In 1907, Mr. Turner earned great acclaim as the first African American ever to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. His expertise and leadership served The Ville community well during his fourteen year stint as science department chair of Sumner High School. 61

The Turner Open Air School served The Ville’s sick and disadvantaged students, free of charge, for nearly forty years. However, in 1962, the building was converted into one of two sites which constituted the new Turner Middle School. The main, building of Turner Middle was completed in 1940 and originally housed another important educational facility in The Ville, Stowe Teacher’s College. 62 This institution began its life as the Normal Department of Sumner High School, founded in 1890. In 1925, the Normal School gained college accreditation and was renamed four years later for the famous author, Harriet Beecher Stowe. 63 Training the city future black educators, Stowe College occupied an important position among The Ville’s growing pantheon educational

59 Toft, *The Ville*, 12.
60 Toft, *The Ville*, 17.
61 Wright, *The Ville, St. Louis*, 84.
62 Wright, *The Ville, St. Louis*, 84.
of institutions. Its development reflects the self-contained and self-sufficient status of The Ville as an elite, educational enclave.

In 1937, Ville residents dedicated one of the neighborhood’s most integral and directly useful institutions. In addition to the much needed service it provided to the neighborhood, and the entire black population of the St. Louis, Homer G. Phillips Hospital, much like Sumner High School, was a great source of pride for the neighborhood and as a staple of its economy. It provided high level care, several hundred jobs for residents, and placed St. Louis among only a handful of American cities that offered training facilities for black medical professionals. The long struggle for black health care parity in St. Louis achieved a great victory with the opening of Homer G. Phillips Hospital.\(^\text{64}\)

Much like other Ville institutions, the hospital’s namesake holds almost as much meaning as the institution itself. Homer Gilliam Phillips was a young attorney who led the fight to establish an independent, African American hospital in St. Louis’s north side during the 1920s. Phillips was born in Sedalia, Missouri, and relocated to St. Louis to practice law after graduating from Howard Law School. He became active in the local Republican party and fought hard for the creation of a separate, African American Hospital, which would offer much needed medical care and training to the city’s marginalized black residents. Alongside many of the city’s other African American leaders, Phillips lobbyed hard for the inclusion of a one million dollar provision in the 1923 municipal bond issue for a negro hospital.

Success came in 1928 and ground was broken on the 30 million dollar, state-of-the-art facility erected on Whittier Avenue in The Ville in 1932. Sadly, Mr. Phillips

\(^{64}\) Wright, The Ville, St. Louis, 30.
would not live to see the realization of his “untiring civic and legal efforts”. He was tragically gunned down by unknown assailants while on his way to work on June 18th, 1931. When the hospital opened for patients six years later, the community applauded Mr. Phillips’ work in his absence with a parade of nearly two thousand people. Fittingly, the impressive new facility was built less than two miles from the former home of its martyred namesake.

One year later, another anchor of The Ville’s social and cultural activity was established in, rounding out the neighborhood’s institutional framework. The Tandy Community Center provided Ville residents an important place to meet and play. The center is named for Captain Charlton H. Tandy, a Civil War military figure and prominent early leader in black education in Missouri. Situated at heart of The Ville’s institutional cluster, directly between the hospital and the high school, the community center still serves area children and adults today.

The remarkable growth and development of The Ville’s institutions reflects the community’s diversity and cultural vitality during its pre-war period. It is truly amazing that “by 1930, a black child could enter kindergarten and continue his education through, college without leaving The Ville”. The parallel social and economic structures that developed in The Ville, and neighborhoods like it across the United States, were the concrete results of years of formal and informal segregation from larger society. Hemmed in by restrictive covenants and cordonned off by a “separate but equal” social structure, The Ville and its institutions became amazingly self-sufficient and varied in the

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years between 1870 and 1940. The neighborhood’s constellation of high-level educational institutions and its densely occupied residential base greatly impacted the ability of this seemingly marginalized neighborhood to thrive.
V. Urbanism

“a tightly woven fabric...”

Underlying The Ville’s impressive vitality in this period is the all important, and often mercurial, environment of urbanism. In his work, *City: Urbanism and Its End*, Douglas Rae examines the cultural fabric of early twentieth century New Haven, Connecticut. Bolstered by its protected harbor, easy access to cheap coal and steam energy, and proximity to the thriving New York City region, New Haven flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. With a steady flow of money coming into the city through such firms as Winchester Repeating Arms and Sargent Hardware, “a tightly woven fabric of enterprise stretched across the city, running from the downtown center of commerce through hundreds of corner stores, saloons, billiard halls and laundries”.

Rae’s focus in *City* is the idea of “urbanism”. He succinctly describes this essential aspect of a city’s health as the combination of economic stability and “useful inefficiency”. Rae’s interpretation of what makes a city is that which on the surface seems least consequential. These “patterns of private decision making that by and large make the successful governance of cities possible” are cultivated in the unique environment of the urban community but are most certainly also present in even the most

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68 Quoted from Rae, *City*, 209.
69 Rae, *City*, 209.
70 Rae, *City*, 367.
far-flung rural towns.\textsuperscript{71} Once again, the dramatic expanse of the modern city is boiled down to the most simplistic stock. Another important term from Rae’s work is “civic density”. This essential and often fleeting aspect of urban life is described as “the impact of living locally, in close proximity to others...the creation of trusting connectedness with others in a community”.\textsuperscript{72} In examining the organizations and institutions of an urban community, these concepts are extremely useful.

Despite the variety of specific differences between the life and history of St. Louis and New Haven, I have found Rae’s key concepts of “urbanism” and “civic density” very helpful in articulating the nature of social interaction in The Ville. New Haven’s tightly-knit, urban communities were maintained by a plethora of civic and social institutions which reinforced lessons of neighborly duty and public cooperation, which, in turn, replenished the social capital of the communities.

The home of Yale University and various other institutions of note, New Haven was, and is, a notable educational center. Rae asserts that during the era of urbanism in New Haven, the close-knit school communities of the city’s working and middle-class neighborhoods “would have had the effect of producing a weave of overlapping school facilities and would very probably have contributed to civic density”.\textsuperscript{73} I see this very process playing out in The Ville. The Ville during its period of urbanism, I would argue, was sustained by a “tightly woven fabric” of educational and civic institutions.

Long before Rae’s work, another noted scholar, Jane Jacobs approached the question of urban identity and prosperity with a decidedly down-to-earth attitude. Her vision of city life is drawn from first-hand experience and focuses more on the specific

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} Rae, \textit{City}, xiii.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Rae, \textit{City}, 182.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Rae, \textit{City}, 176.
\end{itemize}
success of cities instead of dwelling on their failures. Jacobs blasts traditional views of urban planning advocated by figures like Lewis Mumford, Le Corbusier, Daniel Burnham, and Frederick Law Olmstead, stating, “unstudied, unrespected, cities have served as sacrificial lambs”.74 Standing in opposition to the impersonal “Megalopolis, Tyrannopolis, Nekropolis”, as seen in the writing of Lewis Mumford and Louis Wirth, Jacobs’ description of city life is rich with common-place geniality.75

No longer simply the arena of economic exploitation and soul-crushing overstimulation, Jacob’s city is “the scene of an intricate sidewalk ballet”.76 For her, the city is a place characterized by the will and values of its residents instead of a mold for conformity. In one particularly illuminating example, Jacobs cites Boston’s North End neighborhood. This densely population area of Boston was long written off as “a slum” by all manner of bankers, politicians, and real estate developers. Despite statistical evidence of this area’s vibrancy, ideologically entrenched leaders were pessimistic. Jacobs, however, remained convinced of this scrappy neighborhood’s success: “Don’t tell me there are plans to wipe this out. You ought to be down here learning as much as you can from it!”77 Indeed Jacobs’ advocacy for the study urban idiosyncrasy seems refreshingly constructive. In her mind, there is nothing wrong with urban communities that can’t be fixed by what is right about them.

The great importance of this human element of city life is perhaps best seen in Rae’s, and also Jacobs’, description of areas where it has been removed. The great urban renewal projects carried out in the nineteen sixties and seventies served only to quicken

76 Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, 50.
77 Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, 10.
the pace of decay in the targeted areas: “the end of urbanism--the end of trust, the end of tightly woven connections--was evident beyond question”.78 When the factories and railroad stations close, what remains? Despite the beneficial effects of capitalist economic growth, what constitutes the lasting part of a city is its people.

The city is an accumulation of social investments, an interconnected web of casual relationships. Noted University of Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth puts it well in his classic essay, “Urbanism as a Way of Life”: “The city is the product of growth rather than of instantaneous creation...it bears the imprint of an earlier folk society”.79 The city is a continuance, not an alien departure. As shown prominently by Jacobs and Rae, a city’s problems are not solved with the scientific calculation of the soaring housing project or the contrived clearing of green space. Certainly, the modern conveniences of technological innovation are attractive and often useful, but remove the human element from a human institution and what remains can not possibly prosper. What is most important for the maintenance of a city, and indeed what defines a city, is the investment of its residents in its healthy existence. This investment was key to the creation and maintenance of urban neighborhoods like The Ville.

The tremendous accumulation of “social capital” during the period from roughly 1870-1950 is the main focus of my study and arguably The Ville’s most important historical legacy. The growth of civic, religious, social, and athletic organizations, many of which were attached to schools, and the critical mass of high level students and local leaders inside The Ville’s relatively small boundaries created an intense, and uniquely urban, cultural environment.

78 Rae, City, 389.
VI. Elite Reputation

“The most outstanding black neighborhood in St. Louis…” 80

Building on its respectable housing stock and growing number of esteemed institutions, The Ville soon acquired an elite reputation within the city’s black community. One among a handful of other areas of the city in which African Americans were allowed to settle, The Ville soon distinguished itself as an elite enclave. In his 1979 study of The Ville Charles Bailey defines elite by way of access, stating “people who are accorded a degree of differential access to opportunities, tangible or intangible benefits, because of ecological, cultural, or structural determinants, those who receive more benefits are considered elite”. 81 Representing the confluence of civic and cultural leadership within the city’s growing black community, The Ville was able to capitalize on its unique institutional resources, “particularly from 1910 through 1955.” 82

The Ville’s reputation as a desirable neighborhood, or enclave, compared to other areas of the city in which black residents were allowed, stemmed in large part from its institutions and legacy of politically and socially prominent residents. A close examination of the socio-economic and vocational statistics of the neighborhood reveals a conspicuous delegation of black professionals living in The Ville throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In 1940, fifteen percent of The Ville’s workforce was considered “white-collar”. In his study of the neighborhood in 1979, Charles Bailey

determined that within the city’s black population “people who were considered ‘the best people’ lived in The Ville” and that in particular “educationally privileged folk” were widely perceived as responsible for the neighborhood’s exclusive reputation.\textsuperscript{83}

Once established, The Ville’s many prominent institutions attracted some of the country’s greatest African American thinkers and educators and “the cluster of important social institutions in The Ville...seemed to substantiate the idea that institutional networks together created an image of eliteness for the territorial community”.\textsuperscript{84} Sumner High School and Homer G. Phillips teaching hospital, as the preeminent educational institutions in The Ville, attracted a great deal of the neighborhood’s elite residents as students or staff.

Herman Dreer, Ville resident, civic leader, and faculty member at Sumner High School, conducted his doctoral thesis on the history of black leadership in St. Louis. An entire section of his study is devoted to the place of African American educators in the civic life of the city, many of whom found a home in at least one of The Ville’s institutions. The esteemed place of the black educator during this period is clear from Dr. Dreer’s assertion that,“with the many doors of industry and commerce in Saint Louis closed against the Negro, the public school Principalship is the best job he can get from the point of view of salary and prestige”.\textsuperscript{85} The leaders of Sumner, Marshall, Turner, Simmons, and Homer G. Phillips embodied the weight of their positions through involvement in all areas of The Ville’s cultural life.

Bailey and Dreer’s framing of The Ville’s elite status in terms, both qualitatively and chronologically, of the development of its various educational and cultural

\textsuperscript{83} Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis,” xiv.
\textsuperscript{84} Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis,” 77.
\textsuperscript{85} Dreer., “Negro Leadership in St. Louis: A Study in Race Relations,” 151.
institutions is an important point. Even more so than the neighborhood’s relatively desirable residential base, The Ville’s institutions served as essential components to its reputation and ensured its continued growth and vitality.
VII. Educational Urbanism

“It’s where I went to school. It’s my childhood, a happy one, too...” 86

Beginning with the relocation of Sumner High School and ending, less definitively, over the course of the 1950s and 60s as the neighborhood’s segregated institutions were undermined by integration and urban decentralization, the period from 1910-1970 was in many ways The Ville’s most vital era. The neighborhood’s housing stock was densely occupied during this time and the “civic density” of neighborhood was nothing short of immense. Home to a prominent, home-owning black middle class, many of whom were employed by, or enrolled in, the neighborhood’s various educational institutions, The Ville neighborhood supported a unique way of life.

Residents, in large part, lived very near to their places of work and to the schools which their children attended, in some cases, for their entire educational careers. Teachers and administrators lived near The Ville’s cluster of schools and, moreover, were often leaders in one or several of The Ville’s other civic or religious institutions. Former Ville resident Laura Scales realized the uniqueness of her childhood neighborhood only in hindsight:

“We used to see teachers who lived in the neighborhood walk past us going to work every morning. You don’t see that now. See them walking past our house every morning. We thought nothing of it. We look back on it now, and that was something”. 87

86 Former Ville resident, quoted from Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis,” 156.
Connections amongst The Ville’s institutions and between those institutions and the larger neighborhood served to extend the normed, academic culture outside of the physical school buildings to the community at large. The creation, maintenance, and eventual demise of The Ville’s distinctive culture of “educational urbanism” is the focal point of my research.

The rich social and civic activity in The Ville during this period is easily observed through an examination of the culture of its educational institutions. Providing high level education and employment in prestigious fields, Sumner High School and Homer G. Phillips teaching hospital were central to the creation of The Ville’s elite reputation and the maintenance of its “educational urbanist” environment. Within the walls of Sumner High School and Homer G. Phillips Hospital, the real work of community building in The Ville was being done. In addition to the quality education that each student received, the wide variety of academic, artistic, athletic, social, and professional organizations offered to students at both of these acclaimed academic institutions, led by prominent members of the neighborhood, provided the cultural and civic training which were the foundation for the entire community. The high expectations, both academic and social, enforced by The Ville’s various educational institutions underpinned The Ville’s elite status and ensured its continued cultural vitality.

**Sumner High School**

The elite reputation of Sumner High School was based on a long tradition of academic achievement. The school received accreditation from North Central Association one year after moving into The Ville. Thirteen years later, Sumner received
the eighty-first chapter of the National Honor Society, further establishing the school’s 
elite reputation. As the St. Louis’s only black high school for half a century, Sumner 
symbolized a unique combination of exclusion and excellence. In the words of former 
Principal Brantley:

“Sumner has never been a segregated school. We have always had one 
objective, one standard, one yardstick...there are just thirty-six inches in a 
yardstick...not so many inches for white and so many inches for colored. 
Our students have always had to measure up. This is what we have 
emphasized and we don’t accept excuses for mediocrity.”

Throughout its long history, Sumner produced well-rounded students of impressive 
quality.

In 1952, Sumner reached its peak enrollment of 2,400 students, making it the 
largest secondary school in all of Missouri that year. When compared to the five 
hundred students who first attended the newly relocated school in 1910, this jump over 
the ensuing forty years is quite impressive. Anchored in the dense urban fabric of The 
Ville neighborhood, Sumner “attracted the talents of Blacks from the entirety of St. Louis 
and from surrounding states and town for fifty years. Thus, its unique traditions and 
successes were generated and woven into her matrix to be shared by all”.

Sumner’s impressive array of student organizations and clubs further reinforced 
the high standards of both academic and civic development that were a hallmark of The 
Ville community. The Sumner High Student Council encouraged “high standards of 
scholarship...self-government...and a spirit of co-operation” in Sumner students. The

88 90th Anniversary Program, John. D Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 59, University of Missouri St Louis, 
Mercantile Library, Saint Louis Missouri.
89 Diploma Giving Principal, Ebony Magazine 1963, St. Louis Vertical File, University of Missouri St. 
Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
90 Wright, The Ville, St. Louis, 45.
91 Sumner Centennial Program, John D. Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 59, University of Missouri St. 
Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
members of the Come Clean Circle gave speeches, held meetings, and conducted campaigns to “make more wholesome and helpful the life around Sumner”. The Sumner Usher Council was organized for the sole purpose of maintaining discipline of the students during auditorium meetings. These organizations and many others provided Sumner students with essential early lessons in civic engagement.

Leaders in their respective fields, the Sumner faculty were the best and brightest of the nation’s black educators. This “aristocracy of talent and character” supervised and maintained Sumner’s venerable academic and extra-curricular programs, ensuring that the next generation of Ville residents received a truly excellent education. Edward Bouchet, the first African American to receive a doctoral degree from an American University was a prominent early teacher at Sumner, one among many academic “giants” to have served as faculty during its long history. Dr. Kenneth Billups led Sumner’s famous choral groups, who lent their talents to social and civic occasions throughout The Ville and city St. Louis. Today, Billups Avenue in The Ville stands as a memorial to Sumner’s esteemed music instructor.

Complementing the expertise of Sumner’s faculty was their remarkable investment in the school and community. Indicative of The Ville’s self-sufficient culture, in 1963, 35 of Sumner’s 88 faculty members were Sumner alumni. The exceptional school culture at Sumner, according to former Sumner Principal Brantley, “was made

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92 The Maroon and White 1922, Yearbook of Sumner High School, John D. Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 65, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
93 The Maroon and White 1922, Yearbook of Sumner High School, John D. Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 65, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
95 Sumner Centennial Celebration Program, John D. Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 59, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
96 Diploma Giving Principal, Ebony Magazine 1963, St. Louis Vertical File, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
possible only because of the stable community surrounding the institution.”

Sumner’s active Parent-Teacher Association, founded in 1927, represented only the most formal organizations promoting communication and support between the school and the community. Parents and other area residents showed great support to Sumner’s students and staff. In 1962, with the support of the community the PTA raised $6,000 to purchase a new organ for the school’s auditorium. Mrs. Brantley, PTA president and wife of Sumner’s then principal asserted, “when we couldn’t get what we wanted from the board, I went to the parents and teachers or the Band Patrons Association.”

This period of immense civic density, Sumner High School was truly a “bulwark of social capital”.

Sumner’s self-professed dual mission “to teach pupils to do better those desirable things they are likely to do; and to reveal higher activities and to make then desirable to an extent possible” is supported well by its impressive academic and civic legacy. The Charles Sumner High School handbook poses challenge to students: “Sumner’s influence in the community is attested by her exceptional growth and by her alumni...business and professional men and women of national and international fame, and worth citizens in every walk of life. May every student seek to emulate their worthwhile examples!”

Indeed, many Ville residents would heed this call. Sumner Alumni are leaders

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97 *Diploma Giving Principal*, Ebony Magazine 1963, St. Louis Vertical File, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.

98 *Sumner 90th Anniversary Program*, John Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 59, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.

99 *Diploma Giving Principal*, Ebony Magazine 1963, St. Louis Vertical File, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.

100 Rae, *City*, 182.

101 *Maroon and White, Yearbook of Sumner High School 1950*, John Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 72, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis Missouri.

represented in all areas of business and civic life in the St. Louis region and across the country.

**Homer G. Phillips Hospital**

With its auspicious dedication at ten o’clock on the morning of February twenty-second, 1937, Homer G. Phillips Hospital opened its doors to a community much in need of quality healthcare. Nearly five thousand enthusiastic residents and community leaders turned out for the hospital’s opening ceremonies and parade.

*Image 5: Opening ceremonies at the brand new Homer G. Phillips Hospital, 1937.*

Situated just down the street from the almost thirty year old Sumner building, Homer G. Phillips teaching hospital proudly took its place alongside the high school as The Ville’s other leading educational institution.

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Much like Sumner, Homer G. boasted an impressive facade. The hospital complex consisted of five main structures: the service building, the administration building, North and South patient wards, and the nurses’ home and training school. In keeping with its residential setting, the hospital was constructed to a height of seven stories. The exterior is embellished with art-deco, terra cotta detailing and a red-tiled roof. Recently restored and renovated, the current hospital building reflects much of its former glory.

Despite its architectural appeal, what occurred inside Homer G. Phillips Hospital was infinitely more impressive and central to the thriving community that surrounded it. A house staff of forty junior interns, eight assistant residents, one pathologist, a dentist and an anesthetist led the hospitals’ medical team. Also attached to Homer G. were four additional professional schools: a school for x-ray technicians, a school for medical records librarians, a school for laboratory technicians, and a nursing school. The hospital’s wide array of professional schools only increased its impact on the medical community. Over the course of its roughly forty year history, Homer G. Phillips trained more than a third of the nation’s black physicians.

The Homer G. Phillips School of Nursing, originally the St. Louis City Hospital Number Two Training School for Nurses, was officially founded in 1919. Over the course of its fifty year history, it produced over one thousand well-trained nurses. Under the auspices of the municipal hospital system, African American nursing students

104 Homer G. Phillips Hospital Dedicatory Program, Frank O. Richards Papers, Box 1 folder 12, Washington University of St. Louis, Becker Medical Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
106 KDNL-Channel 30 Newscast transcript Friday 2/10/84, Frank O. Richards Papers, Box 2, Folder 15, Washington University of St. Louis, Becker Medical Library, Saint Louis Missouri.
107 The Guardian Yearbook of Homer G. Phillips Nursing School Final Volume, St. Louis City Hospitals, Schools of Nursing Records, Box 5, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
were allowed to attend self-contained classes at the all-white facility, City Hospital Number One, and were assigned to the wards with black patients for practical training.\footnote{108} It was not until Homer G. Phillips Hospital opened its doors on Whittier Avenue in The Ville in 1937 that the nurses and other medical students truly had a place of their own.

The nurses, housed in the dormitory just behind the hospital itself, and directly adjacent to the Annie Malone Children’s Home, were a vital part of the hospital community and, indeed, The Ville community at large. Laura Starks, a childhood resident of The Ville, remembers her cousin excitedly accepting a spot at Homer G. Phillips nursing school in the early 1940s: “she stayed there on the premises but she would come to our house every so often. Mother and dad would always see how she was doing, you know, and that was something to see.”\footnote{109} Living close to their school and place of work and next door to students and employees of The Ville’s various other institutions, these nurses and doctors in training added to neighborhood’s elite and uniquely connected academic environment.

\footnote{108} The Guardian Yearbook of Homer G. Phillips Nursing School Final Volume, St. Louis City Hospitals, Schools of Nursing Records, Box 5, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.  
\footnote{109} Mark Harris, interview by Gwendolyn Moore, Missouri Historical Society, Through the Eyes of a Child: Oral History Project Transcripts. 8 September 1998.
Stephanie Hudson, Ville resident from 1950 to 1968 and wife of another former Ville resident, Michael Hudson, tells of her mother enrolling at Homer G. Phillips just after becoming pregnant with her: “That woman worked hard. She worked and she attended that school. She got her certificates or whatever they did back then and it was much harder...”\textsuperscript{111} Once she finished school, Ms. Starks “went straight into Homer Phillips as a nurse”.\textsuperscript{112} Enjoying the full benefits of the neighborhood’s residential, educational and occupational connectivity, Ms. Starks’ life and career is a wonderful illustration of The Ville’s “educational urbanism”.

Students at Homer G. were held to strict academic and social standards. As listed in the admissions criteria for the Homer G. Phillips School of Nursing, letters of

\textsuperscript{110} The Guardian Yearbook of Homer G. Phillips Nursing School Final Volume, St. Louis City Hospitals, Schools of Nursing Records, Box 5, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.

\textsuperscript{111} Stephanie Starks Hudson, interview by Gwendolyn Moore, Missouri Historical Society, Through the Eyes of a Child: Oral History Project Transcripts. 7 September 1998.

\textsuperscript{112} Stephanie Starks Hudson, interview by Gwendolyn Moore, Missouri Historical Society, Through the Eyes of a Child: Oral History Project Transcripts. 7 September 1998.
reference, physical condition, personal interviews, and family history were all taken into account, in addition to the requisite high school and college academic information, as the committee considered applicants for acceptance.\textsuperscript{113} Students came from across the country, in particular the Jim Crow South, to study at Homer G. in The Ville. Those applicants who were observed to lack dedication to the field of nursing or the academic background necessary for the school’s program were turned away. The admission’s committee at Homer G. even advised one prospective student in 1956 to “tone down her physical appearance for more appropriate professional grooming”.\textsuperscript{114} The school took great pride in the elite academic and social perceptions of its student-body.

Alongside the rigorous academic and practical studies, Homer G. Phillips School of Nursing encouraged it students to “assume their place in the community as an instrument for health, and as a citizen in a dynamic society”.\textsuperscript{115} As one of only a handful of training schools with African American students, Homer G. Phillips and its alumni were uniquely positioned to positively impact their community. Black residents of St. Louis, like those of many other central cities across the country, had limited medical resources at their disposal, which placed even greater importance on the activity of black nurses. The earnest words of the Homer G. Phillips Nursing School song, written by Ms. Aimee Dewey class of ’54, speak volumes about the missions of this dynamic institution: “Homer G. Phillips we love you; proud we are part of you. Since the world must suffer,

\textsuperscript{113} Suggested Criteria for Selection of Students Homer G. Phillips School of Nursing, St. Louis City Hospitals Schools of Nursing Records. Box 3, “Admission 1956-60” Folder, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
\textsuperscript{114} 7/31/56 Admissions Committee Minutes, St. Louis City Hospitals Schools of Nursing Records, Box 3, “Admissions” Folder, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
\textsuperscript{115} Objectives for Homer G. Phillips School of Nursing, St. Louis City Hospitals Schools of Nursing Records, Box 3, “Counselors” Folder, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis Missouri.
teach us to discover all of the best ways of serving; make us be humbly deserving. Help us to nurse the Nightingale way, Homer G. Phillips we pray.”

Accordingly, the school offered its students great opportunity to interact with the city and community around them. In July of 1958, six freshmen students from the nursing school escorted a group of boys and girls from the Annie Malone Children’s Home, located next door the to the nurses’s dormitory, on a riverboat tour. Other organizations like the Moms and Dads Club, Friends of H.G.P., the Dr.s and Wives Club supported the student nurses while offering them very real examples of civic engagement. The hospital’s vast population of intelligent and civicly engaged students would serve The Ville well over its history.

The Homer G. Phillips Hospital Auxiliary represented another strong connection between the facility and The Ville community. This beneficent body’s mission to “lighten some of the duties” of the hospital’s always busy staff illustrates yet another way in which Ville residents engaged their skills of civic action. In addition to its more run-of-the-mill manpower assistance, the auxiliary raised funds for new hospital equipment and worked tirelessly to provide “a better patient atmosphere.”

On March 18th, 1973, the Auxiliary held its second fund-raising dinner. The guest of honor was newly elected California Congresswoman Yvonne Burke, recent chair of the 1972 Democratic

116 The Guardian Yearbook of Homer G. Phillips Nursing School Final Volume, St. Louis City Hospitals, Schools of Nursing Records, Box 5, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
117 Minutes of the Admissions Committee of the Faculty Administrative Organization 7/16/58, St. Louis City Hospitals Schools of Nursing Records. Box 3, “Counselors” Folder, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis Missouri.
118 Homer G. Phillips Hospital Auxiliary Dinner Program, Ivan C. James Papers, Box 1, Folder 30, Washington University of St. Louis, Becker Medical Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
Convention. The goal of this particular fund-raiser was a new master monitor for hospital’s intensive care unit and the civic aptitude it represented was impressive.  

The civic and social connectivity of The Ville’s institutions was only deepened by their physical proximity to each other and to the neighborhood’s residential areas; Sumner and Homer G. are less than a five minute walk from each other. Sumner was home to a vibrant future nurses club and often led students on field trips to the hospital to examine the facilities and observe the respected medical staff. Homer G. maintained a healthy recruitment program at Sumner and often used the high school’s facilities, and those of other Ville schools, for its activities, creating “a network of interdependence developed between the hospital and other institutions in The Ville”.

*Image 7: Group of Sumner Students on a field trip to Homer G. Phillips Hospital.*

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119 February 1, 1973 Support Letter, Ivan C. James Papers, Box 1, Folder 30, Washington University of St. Louis, Becker Medical Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
120 Minutes of the Admissions Committee of the Faculty Administrative Organization 4/14/60, St. Louis City Hospitals Schools of Nursing Records, Box 3, “Admissions” Folder, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
121 Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis” 74.
122 Wright, *The Ville, St. Louis*, 93.
Former Ville resident John Elrod Jr. remembers well the impact of The Ville’s physical compactness from his time as a student there:

“There was no question that the area around Turner Middle, Sumner, Tandy Park, Poro College, and coming back a little bit to Homer Phillips Hospital there on Whittier, that was considered the heart of academia to us. That was where you really had to watch yourself, because teachers, of course, might see you out the window...or someone may have been at Homer Phillips.”

Physically and socially self-contained, the distinctive environment of The Ville during this period was created by the intricate web of normed, school-based relationships that permeated all areas of neighborhood life. The standard codes of conduct and the intense amount of social investment present in The Ville’s institutions combined to create an incredible stable and civically productive urban neighborhood. Former Ville resident and student, Julia Allen remembers her teachers as a constant part of her childhood, in and outside of school:

“Ms. Davis, Julia Davis she stayed right down the street from us. Every Sunday on her way to church she would stop and talk to me...they would always talk to me, and it’s kind of strange to look back now because at different stages of my life, they would always be talking to me...‘Where are you in school now? What are you doing? How are you doing in class?’”

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The Ville’s educational institutions, in particular, provided the essential combination of discipline and training necessary to create and sustain such an exemplary community. Communities so organically vital are uncommon in urban areas today.
VIII. Civic Density

“the inescapability of the neighborhood school...”125

The nefarious forces responsible for The Ville’s creation and maintenance as a distinctly African American enclave are certainly not to be praised. Racially restrictive housing policy, a segregated school system, and widespread cultural racism all contributed to the ghettoization of St. Louis’s black population in a handful of dense pockets, largely on the city’s north side. The “the spatial and life distortions” resulting from such segregationist practices did, however, have some advantageous effects for the black community.126

Emblematic of distinctive effect of The Ville’s unique civic and academic culture is the life and accomplishments of one Mr. William A. McAllister. After moving to St. Louis with his family at a young age, Mr. McAllister entered John Marshall Elementary school and eventually Sumner High School, where he graduated with honors in 1941. Once graduated, he enrolled in the education program at Stowe Teacher’s college, also in The Ville, for two years before being drafted in 1943. After being honorably discharged from the army and earning yet another degree, this time from Tennessee A & I University, Mr. McAllister pursued his “interest in the welfare and problems of youth of his community” through a successful career on the national board of the Y.M.C.A.127

125 Quote refers to New Haven public elementary schools, quoted from from Rae, City, 174.
126 Rae, City, 706.
127 Charles Sumner High School One Hundred and Forty-First Commencement Program, Julia Davis Papers, Box 1, Folder 9, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
Even after he left The Ville in the forties to serve in the military and further his education, Mr. McAllister’s family remained in the community. His sister Elizabeth graduated from Sumner, also with honors, a few years after his departure and his mother, Mrs. Ethel McAllister, remained active in the Sumner community long after her children moved away. Mr. McAllister’s educational and civic connections to The Ville would come full circle on June 9th, 1970, as he took the stage as the key-note speaker at Sumner High School’s one hundred and forty-first commencement.\textsuperscript{128}

Monitoring and extending the web of civic and cultural connectivity in The Ville were the various leaders and administrators who headed its institutions. Sumner Principal Frank Williams was involved in many areas of civic life in the Ville. In addition to his job at Sumner, Williams was the chairman of the board of directors at the nearby Pine Street YMCA, an active member of the Colored Orphan Home board, and President of the New Age Building and Loan Association.\textsuperscript{129} Ville resident Stephanie Hudson remembers well the impact of her ever-present teachers:

“Everybody was scared of Miss Fisher. And Miss Fisher and Miss Tyler actually sometimes would come and visit Antioch [Baptist Church] on a Sunday. And we would really lose our minds...”\textsuperscript{130}

Educational leaders, present in all areas of life in The Ville, created the resulting “inescapability of the neighborhood school” that was central to its cultural vitality.

The 1950s and 60s would be a crucial turning point in the history of St. Louis and black communities like The Ville in cities across the country. The very talent and

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Charles Sumner High School One Hundred and Forty-First Commencement Program}, Julia Davis Papers, Box 1, Folder 9, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.

\textsuperscript{129} Dreer, “Negro Leadership in Saint Louis,” 140.

character that resulted from The Ville’s civic density and educational urbanism went to work dismantling the segregationist framework that created it. Additionally, economic and social policies at the local and national level during this period conspired against the unique way of life in The Ville.
IX. St. Louis’s Decline

“nobody likes city living any longer...”¹³¹

America’s urban areas are much different than they were even thirty years ago. Cities like St. Louis, Detroit, and Chicago, once the industrial backbone of America, had lost much of their luster by the 1960s and 70s. The complex amalgamation of social and economic issues deemed the “urban crisis” greatly transformed the physical and psychological landscape of America’s cities in the period following World War Two. Cities of the industrial North and Midwest, as traditional centers of heavy industry, became during this era “a decaying industrial swath that was no longer that nation’s pride but instead...a national problem”¹³².

Freed from the traditional ties to urban harbors or railroad hubs, businesses sought to escape traditional urban problems like high property costs, racial tension, taxation, and unionized labor and increase their profits by moving to less historically industrialized areas. By the 1990s, many of America’s most profitable businesses were located outside of urban areas, leaving behind concentrated poverty and joblessness in city centers. In decades following World War II, American industry underwent an important transformation.


St. Louis’s decline in the decades following World War Two was certainly not unique; fifteen of the twenty-one largest central cities in the United States reported net population loses in 1960, six of which noted a decline of more than ten percent.\textsuperscript{133} St. Louis, unfortunately, was one of those six, reporting a population decline of over seventeen percent between 1960 and 1970.\textsuperscript{134} This process was only hastened by dramatic advances in transportation and communication technologies. In their essay “The City and the Car”, scholars Mini Sheller and John Urry effects of “automobility” are examined in relation to the culture of modern cities.\textsuperscript{135} A relatively recent addition to city life, the car was as powerful agent of urban decentralization and decline. The rise of the automobile ushered in an extension of freedom previously unknown to the common man. No longer were city-dwellers forced to remain in their small, urban neighborhoods, often so close to work, school, and shops.

This “unbundling” of the urban environment caused a great shift in the dynamic of city life.\textsuperscript{136} Instead of the casually social commute to work or school nearby, one could simply hop into the “semi-privatized” realm of the car, avoiding any non-utilitarian contact with the outside world. Coupled with newly implemented zoning laws, the city was ostensibly “being turned inside out and outside in” by modern technologies like the automobile.\textsuperscript{137} Though often seen as the ultimate form of personal freedom, financial access to a car was not guaranteed to all segments of urban society. The effect of “automobility” in many cases was to divide urban society along ethnic, gender, and class

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\textsuperscript{133} Rand Corporation Report 1973, 6  \\
\textsuperscript{134} Rand Corporation Report 1973, 1  \\
\textsuperscript{136} Sheller and Ury, “The City and the Car,” 744.  \\
\textsuperscript{137} Sheller and Ury, “The City and the Car,” 749.  
\end{flushleft}
lines. By limiting social contact, and undermining the mixed-use urban environment, the car further alienated the urban citizenry. Ravaged by deindustrialization, suburbanization, and both racial and class-based segregation, formerly thriving cities began to lose their prominence in this era.

That said, several factors unique to St. Louis alone contributed in part to its particularly intense decline: a large stock of housing and industrial capital that was expensive to maintain and restore; fixed political boundaries, frozen since 1876; large amounts of flat farmland outside of the central city that was easily developed for residential or commercial use; and great numbers of largely black migrants who entered the city in the 1940s and 50s.138 According to a Rand Corporation report, these diverse factors, present in varying degrees in other cities across the country, “combine[d] in unusual strength” in the St. Louis metropolitan area during the years after 1950.139

A series of editorials, entitled “Progress or Decay: St. Louis Must Choose,” that appeared in St. Louis Post-Dispatch in the spring of 1950 illustrate well the social and civic climate of the city during this pivotal period. In the words of concerned citizen Richard Baumhoff:

“A monumental choice confronts St. Louis. It can make and keep a date with destiny in the second half of the twentieth century. That way lies a great metropolitan community of healthy, satisfied people, pleasant homes, thriving industry and attractive landscape. In the other direction – if St. Louis remains content to jog along without aggressive action – there lurk decay, squalor, the threat of steady decline.”140

138 Rand Corporation Report 1973, vi
139 Rand Corporation Report 1973, 2
Among the topics considered in this hopeful plea are parking and transportation, health and hospitals, public education, problems of the Negro, the downtown business district, and generally decentralization. These issues, though pernicious are believed to be surmountable with the city’s collective civic and economic resources. Baumhoff says confidently: “no utopian dream is involved, if the choice is made for progress. Determination and positive action can turn the trick...”

However hopeful Baumhoff may have been in 1950, the dramatic transformation of St. Louis over the ensuing twenty years reflected many of his greatest fears.

Various policies at both the national and local levels served only to increase central-city decline in St. Louis. Beginning in 1961, the federal government funded the construction of five major interstate highways in metropolitan St. Louis. By 1972, I-70, I-270, I-55, I-244, and I-44 offered former residents and businesses a cheap and easy path of entry to the growing suburbs. Additionally, federal real estate tax incentives and mortgage reinsurance through the FHA and VA promoted investment in newer suburban housing over depreciation-prone inner-city housing. The increased construction of federally funded public housing and its associated social blow-back further incentivized movement from the city. The city of St. Louis is geographically very small, occupying only sixty-one square miles. A 1972 survey of St. Louis-based industrial developers cited an overwhelming call for additional space motivating the move to the sprawling

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141 Baumhoff, "Progress or Decline: St. Louis Must Choose".
142 Rand Corporation Report 1973, 11
suburbs.\textsuperscript{143} Between 1959 and 1967, employment outside of St. Louis’s central city increased eighty-five percent.\textsuperscript{144}

Consistent with the “strong and persistent westward progression” typical of the city’s population even from its earliest years, white residents fled the city in record numbers during the 1960s, following jobs to the suburbs. Between 1960 and 1970, almost forty percent of the city’s white population left.\textsuperscript{145} The city’s black residents, however, followed a slightly delayed time-line of departure.

\textsuperscript{143} Rand Corporation Report 1973, 35
X. Diffusion of Social Capital

“The Ville was a beautiful place years back. But I say when they made it possible that you could move anywhere, they just tore everything apart...”146

St. Louis's history of residential and institutional segregation combined with the various economic and social policy decisions implemented in the city in the period following World War Two has left an indelible mark on the city's cultural geography. Funneled into a few designated neighborhoods by municipal zoning ordinances and racist real estate practices, the African American population of the city remained there, for the most part, until the mid-twentieth century. However, in the years 1948, 1954, and 1968 respectively, the United States Supreme Court, with support from black communities that “stretched in a chain across America, from Harlem to Chicago’s South Side, and from East L.A. to St. Louis”, decided landmark cases providing unprecedented opportunity and freedom to African Americans across the country.147

Dr. Herman Dreer, Ville resident, noted scholar, and Sumner High School instructor, also served as chair of the citizens advisory committee for the Shelley restrictive covenant case in St. Louis. Alongside a group of “citizens...enthusiastically working for the realization of the American ideal”, Dr. Dreer capitalized on the talent and creativity of his community in the fighting for “the Negro to have the same respect and

146 Former Ville Resident, from Bailey, “The Ville: A Study of a Symbolic Community in St. Louis” 83.
opportunities as are available for other citizens”.  However, in many ways The Ville community would be victim of its own success.

Ironically, the same robust human capital responsible for the relocation of Sumner High and the funding of Homer G. Phillips Hospital would ultimately lead to the dissolution of the societal pressure responsible for its specific creation. The neighborhood’s historic group leaders like Dr. Dreer led the fight for racial equality in St. Louis. The institutions in which they taught and worked and the dense, urban neighborhood in which they lived “focused the struggle by black families for dignity, identity, and political power”149 The solid educational and civic training provided by The Ville’s unique cluster of elite institutions armed its alumni with “a keen understanding and ready use of the fulcrums of power”.150 The efforts of black leaders like those from The Ville and neighborhoods like it in Detroit, Atlanta, and New York would ultimately prove successful, as seen in the wave of influential legal developments of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. In 1948, Shelley v. Kraemer deemed racially restrictive real estate covenants illegal throughout the United States. In 1954 Brown v. Board desegregated the nation's public schools, and in 1968 Jones v. Mayer ruled informal, racial discrimination in real estate markets unconstitutional.

The result of these hugely important decisions, in addition to the larger forces working to undermine urban areas across the country that were discussed earlier, was a smaller-scale "black flight" from St. Louis's central city areas. Following the path of their white counterparts, many African American's with the means to do so, “ran straight

148 Citizens Committee-Shelley Restrictive Covenant Case Fund, Herman Dreer Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
to the county” in search for better jobs, schools, and housing.\textsuperscript{151} Between 1950 and 1970 the population of The Ville dropped nearly thirty-eight percent.\textsuperscript{152}

Emblematic of The Ville as a whole, Homer G. Phillips hospital, after the city’s 1955 integration ordinance, became somewhat of a cultural anachronism. However, Homer G’s precarious position in The Ville’s institutional hierarchy was not entirely understood at the time. This excerpt from the Hospital’s Silver Anniversary History Booklet offers poignant insight into the awkward position of The Ville as a segregated societal construct:

“twenty-five years of patient effort and unflagging purpose on the part of all concerned with the hospital’s development have produced a reputation among people everywhere of an institution at which the sick and the injured may be cared for without regard to race or creed—and to which young doctors from any place on earth may come and be helped in their professional growth.”\textsuperscript{153}

Twelve years after this booklet was printed, Homer G. Phillips Hospital closed its doors.

The years leading up to the closure were marked by budget deficits and shrinking intern classes. In 1968, the hospital’s nursing school was merged with with the St. Louis City Hospital School of Nursing, further undermining the hospital’s specific purpose. Community organizers called, unsuccessfully, for the re-opening of Homer G. for years. One impassioned letter entitled “People Before Profit” summarizes well the terrible confluence of social and economic problems facing St. Louis’s African American residents during this tumultuous era: “with the massive cutbacks in education, housing, health-care, the quality of life for the majority of our people continues to deteriorate.


\textsuperscript{152} Wright, The Ville, St. Louis, 45.

\textsuperscript{153} Homer G. Phillips Hospital Silver Anniversary Booklet, John D. Buckner Papers, Box, Folder 44, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
With the closing of Homer G. Phillips Hospital, the massive unemployment and lay-offs of thousands of autoworkers, the dismantling of the Black community continues unabated.\footnote{People Before Profit Ad Hoc Committee to Save Homer G. Phillips Hospital 2/7/1980, St. Louis Vertical File, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.}

\textit{Image 9: Citizens protesting the closure of Homer G. Phillips Hospital}\footnote{Homer G. Phillips: A Legendary Struggle, St. Louis Argus April 26, 1979, Frank O. Richards Papers, Box 3, Folder 10, Washington University in St. Louis, Becker Medical Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.}

During the first half of the twentieth century, The Ville was in many ways a model of urban life. However, the tightly-knit Ville community was not voluntarily created. Noted urban sociologist Gerald Suttles accounts for the strongly self-conscious identity of communities like The Ville, in his analysis of the “contrived neighborhood”.\footnote{Gerald Suttles, \textit{The Social Construction of Communities}, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 240.} In response to forces such as racial segregation “these residential enclaves acquire an identity and a set of boundaries simply because they are left out of others”. Despite all of its cultural vitality, the forces which were responsible for The Ville’s creation were largely outside of the control of its residents, despite their later accomplishments. It is
from this essential understanding that the ultimate downturn of The Ville’s fortunes becomes clear.

For the same reasons that the physical centrality of The Ville’s institutions benefitted the neighborhood during its most vital period, their degradation at the heart of the community in the decades following the second war was equally harmful. Residential vacancy and an almost complete lack of social capital make The Ville neighborhood today a sort of monument to the devastation of America’s post-war, industrial cities. The neighborhood’s once densely inhabited residential base now contains 564 vacant homes out of its total 1417.\(^\text{157}\)

Image 10: Vacant homes along Kennerly Avenue in The Ville, 2011.\(^\text{158}\)

These single and multi-family houses now ring an institutional core of empty buildings, symbolic of the “hollowing out” of the community and the city at large.


\(^\text{158}\) Photo taken by author, 2011.
The effect of urban decline was both physical and psychological, as the inner-city became synonymous with the growing underclass. The well-educated, middle-class community nurtured by The Ville’s “educational urbanism”, tired of the stigma and disenfranchisement associated with their segregated, urban neighborhood, began to seek opportunity elsewhere. Esteemed urban sociologist William Julius Wilson attributes much of this dislocation within African American society largely in terms of economics. The growing black-middle class, bolstered by New Deal employment policy and better qualified for high-paying jobs because of higher rates of education attainment, were more vocationally and residentially mobile than their disadvantaged counterparts.159 As observed by former Ville resident Julia Allen, ”the people who make more money are the professional people. They tend to move out, you know...”160 The Ville’s immense pool of academically elite human capital, long contained by the damn of segregation, finally spilled over.

The Ville, as an elite African American cultural center, was disproportionately affected by the various manifestations of integrationist legislation and policy. While open and vital, The Ville’s schools served as the physical embodiment of the neighborhood’s immense store of social capital and a fundamental part of the process of maintaining and replenishing it. However, once the specific circumstances necessary for the creation and maintenance of its “parallel” systems were removed “the institutional networks, the churches, the schools, the hospital, and the businesses were in an

159 Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged
ambivalent position in terms of community stabilization.”  

John Elrod Jr., who lived and attended school in The Ville from 1954-1969, remembers the degradation of The Ville’s schools as central to the fate of the neighborhood at large:

“my generation was starting to branch out and go to school...there was not a replenishment of that vitality, that youth into the neighborhood...that youth that would pick up in our footsteps the way I picked up from my brother’s footsteps, the way my brother picked up from my mother’s footsteps, et cetera...”

The drain of urban decentralization is evident in modern-day St. Louis. Tax revenue, sapped by consistent population decline and the “the triumph of exit over voice” continues to shrink and the range and quality of municipal services tied to this money with it.  

The geographic racial division of St. Louis remains stark, and those areas of the city long relegated to black residents are becoming increasingly racially homogenous and economically depressed. Areas first designated "Negro blocks" nearly one hundred years ago remain largely thus and access to opportunity and vital social services like education disproportionately favor white residents. Figure 2 illustrates the continued geographic separation of St. Louis's population by race, into a predominately black north side and a predominately white South side.

Along with many other north-side neighborhoods in St. Louis today, The Ville is becoming more racially homogenous and socially marginalized. Of the 1868 current residents of the neighborhood, 1817 are African American. The population of the city of St. Louis continues to decline and with it both the social and fiscal capital necessary for

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163 Rae, City, 394.
164 Figures 1-3 located on final pages of monograph
the vitality of the city and the services it provides to the remaining residents. In 2010, the total municipal population of St. Louis was 319,294, down 8.3% since the 2000 census. Meanwhile, St. Louis inner and outer-ring suburban areas are thriving. In 2010, the county of St. Louis reported a population of nearly one million residents, seventy percent of whom are white.

Emblematic of this city’s population shift, the St. Louis Public School district student population has shrunk dramatically over the past five decades. From its peak enrollment of nearly 115,000 in 1967, the student population of SLPS now measures below 24,000. The closure of dozens of St. Louis Public Schools building sites reflects the city’s specifically academic losses. Thirty-eight of its total one hundred and twenty-one of the district’s school buildings are currently vacant. In 2007, the Missouri State Department of Education revoked the city school district’s accreditation.

Education, a vital resource for all St. Louis residents, is no longer equally accessible to them in 2012. Those residents, largely African American, still living on St. Louis's north side in neighborhoods like The Ville, now find themselves stranded in a landscape littered with abandoned buildings, both institutional and residential. Figure 3 illustrates the current geographic distribution of the city's African-American population and the location of the municipal school district's 38 vacant school-sites. The flight from the city continues in modern-day St. Louis. Figure 1 reflects elements of this

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167 Figures 1-3 located on final pages of monograph
flight. It is important to note that areas included in and surrounding the 1916 zoning ordinance contain a great deal of the city's current residential vacancies, reflecting the intense physical and social loss in these historically repressed areas.

Figures 1-3 located on final pages of monograph
XI. New Urbanism

“a coherent and supportive physical framework...”\(^{169}\)

A recent trend in urban planning seeks to undo much of the damage done to urban space by gated communities, suburbanization, and other symptoms of the urban crisis. The aptly named “new urbanism” seeks to create space which promotes “vibrant, connected, and diverse” communities.\(^{170}\) Though it has taken slightly different forms in different locations, “new urbanism’s” basic tenets encourage “mixed use, mixed housing types, compact form, an attractive public realm, pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, defined centers and edges, and varying transportation options”\(^{171}\). By considering historically successful examples of metropolitan life, New Urbanism seeks to actively promote the casual civic engagement taking place on countless street corners and inside local shops which is so important to Jane Jacobs. Though still regulated, by way of thoughtful design, New Urbanist architecture aims to rehabilitate human conduct not force it into compliance. Even so, the strong community identity of The Ville is largely impossible to recreate.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of The Ville neighborhood, observed even in its current state, is the proximity of its residential and institutional spaces. Viewed through the lens of urban planning and design, this unique dynamic of city living adds important insight into the history and development of The Ville. The physical and social

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\(^{171}\) Grant, *Planning the Good Community*, 8.
centrality of The Ville’s institutions reinforced the intense cultural and civic environment that characterized the neighborhood during its early years.

As outlined in the charter of the Congress for the New Urbanism, this new approach to urban design and planning “draws on historic lessons from the most beautiful and successful cities, to affirm the appeal of compact, mixed use, walkable, and relatively self-contained communities.”172 Informed by influential thinkers like Michel Foucault and John Dewey, new urbanist architects and planners seek to create urban environments in which “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space”173. That said, new urbanists do not see the thoughtful city or neighborhood planning as a panacea for all of the social ills associated with urban crisis areas. In their vision, the built environment serves merely as the “coherent and supportive physical framework” in which vital social, economic, and civic activity occur.174

During its period of vitality, The Ville contained many elements central to new urbanist ideology. That said, many of the reasons for The Ville’s “self-contained” culture are certainly not ones that can be lauded. The racially restrictive housing, education, and vocational policies responsible for the tightly-knit Ville community are, thankfully, no longer in place. However, I would argue that this aspect of life in The Ville was responsible in large part for the intense feelings of community investment so important to its period of greatest success.

Despite its honorable intentions, the realization of New Urbanist design has produced several unforeseen outcomes. Most prominently, the communities created with New Urbanist principles in mind have been exceedingly expensive to create and therefore

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172 Grant, Planning the Good Community, 3.
173 Grant, Planning the Good Community, 11.
174 Gillette, Civitas by Design, 114.
expensive to live in. New Urbanist cities like Celebration, Florida have become bastions of upper-middle class society instead of the varied mini-metropolises originally intended. Therefore, the proposed diversity and civic integrity of the community are inherently undermined. Also, New Urbanist thinking has been accused of being overly nostalgic, seeking to recreate a sort of urban “small town” that never truly existed. That said, there does seem to be some evidence of the veracity New Urbanist ideology in The Ville’s academic sector.
XII. Prospects for the future

“The city of St. Louis would look a lot different...”"^175

Though the physical neighborhood today is but a shadow of its former self, The Ville’s legacy of excellence and leadership lives on. Once educated and trained, alumni of Sumner and Homer G. Phillips left The Ville equipped as “effective workmen in all of the sciences, the arts, and the professions, and also have become worthy citizens in each of the fifty states and in countries throughout the world where they have chosen to reside”.176 Much of the social capital pent up within its walls was released once the nefarious legal and policy framework responsible for its creation were removed. Talented teachers, lawyers, doctors, and students left The Ville behind to pursue greater opportunities in cities and towns more appreciative and accepting of their talents.177

In their sociological survey, *Neighborhoods That Work*, scholars Sandra Schoenberg and Patricia Rosenbaum evaluated the social viability of five St. Louis neighborhoods, including The Ville. Conducted in 1980, the year after Homer G. Phillips Hospital was closed, this work analyzes specific indicators of neighborhood success in the wake of the larger urban crisis. Schoenberg and Rosenbaum critique these distinct neighborhoods and assess their potential for renewal, redevelopment, and resiliency.

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^176 *Sumner Centennial Celebration Program*, John D. Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 59, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis Missouri.

Each of the five neighborhoods examined, The Hill, Hyde Park, Lafayette Square, Soulard, and The Ville, are placed on a continuum between “controlling their social order” and “merely a collection of streets”.  

The success of “organic” urban community development is a central theme in Jane Jacob’s seminal work *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. Schoenberg and Rosenbaum state that, “the most effective networks are the informal channels composed of families and peers”.[179] Schoenberg and Rosenbaum list four criteria as their indicators for neighborhood viability:

1. Established mechanisms to define and enforce shared agreements about public behavior  
2. A formal internal, organizational structure that provides for communication, leader identification, and neighborhood definition  
3. Linkages to public and private resource givers through branch institutions in the neighborhood or through leaders who make linkages to outside institutions  
4. An established context or interest aggregation, whether formal or informal, to create conditions for exchange between conflicting groups for goal definition and goal support over time[180]

This framework helps paint an honest picture of the degradation of The Ville’s cultural fabric by the time of their study.

In 2012, only Sumner High School remains to carry on The Ville’s rich educational legacy. The Marshall, Simmons, and Turner schools are all now vacant. Surrounded by dozens of vacant homes and deserted lots, Sumner seems an island amidst an almost lifeless, urban sea. Reconstituted several times over the past three decades, the school is now called Sumner Mega High School, and is one of St. Louis’s four remaining comprehensive secondary schools. The current enrollment of 586, down from over 2,000

in 1952, lacks much of the social and economic support so essential to the school’s past achievements.

Homer G. Phillips Hospital was renovated and reopened as a senior care facility in 2002. Many former nurses and other Ville residents have returned to live out their remaining years in this rejuvenated symbol of their past. The facility’s 300 units have remained completely full since it opened, and there is currently a waiting list of over one hundred prospective residents. According to current resident Monica Edwards, “for so many, it’s a homecoming”. Edwards, who was born at Homer G., grew up nearby, and graduated from Sumner High School represents a link to The Ville’s past. Older citizens like Edwards offer a glimmer of hope for The Ville, but the neighborhood’s younger residents lack their elder’s sense of historical dedication.

Indicative of their former vitality, the alumni organizations of The Ville’s schools are arguably more active today that the current student body. Organizing meetings in and around their alma maters, alumni of Sumner and Homer G. remain connected, though loosely, to their former neighborhood but, sadly, “the social networks in The Ville operate to maintain a historic past rather than to create a more viable present.”

182 Schoenberg and Rosenbaum, Neighborhoods That Work, 125.
Those residents at the time of Schoenberg and Rosenbaum’s study who were even aware of the history of The Ville, largely an older contingent, spoke of its as a distant memory and according to all indicators most former residents did not show “any intention of moving back there even if the neighborhood became a prosperous and safe enclave.”

Over the course of its tumultuous past, “The Ville, as a community, has been viewed as a neighborhood of choice, of entrapment, and most recently as a community of diminished elite sentiment and symbolism.” Despite the other reasons for its creation, The Ville’s schools were a huge factor in The Ville’s success. The lessons, both academic and civic, taught to students at Sumner, Homer G. Phillips, Marshall, and others, created the uniquely well-rounded individuals for which The Ville is most remembered. Well-trained and instilled with a strong sense of community, many Ville residents had great potential to positively impact their city. This was impossible,

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183 The Guardian Yearbook of Homer G. Phillips Nursing School Final Volume, St. Louis City Hospitals, Schools of Nursing Records, Box 5, Missouri Historical Society Research Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
184 Schoenberg and Rosenbaum, Neighborhoods That Work, 125.
however, as many of the avenues to success and leadership were largely closed to them.

Stephanie Hudson, former Ville resident, expresses her disappointment in the wasted potential of her classmates:

“These people could have been rich...They city of St. Louis would look a lot different. If you’d just look at the class of ’68--Sumner High School--at the abilities, the ways these kids developed, because of those values, and because of the things parents did for the children...but they left...The city of St. Louis would look so much different.”186

A training ground for intelligent and socially invested St. Louis citizens, The Ville represented a great resource for the St. Louis community. However, in so far as the city’s governmental and social systems precluded their active engagement for decades, these highly capable minds were unable to contribute to St. Louis’s government and overall development.

Though The Ville’s schools and other institutions were important the creation and maintenance of its vitality and elite reputation, the social investment which they represented was not created entirely voluntarily and therefore not sustainable. In light of the current state of the neighborhood surrounding it, the creed of the Sumner High School Alumni Association strikes a poignant note: “We are loyal to you Sumner High, We are loyal to you til we die, We’ll back you to stand against the best in the land, for we know you can stand Sumner High!”187


187 Sumner High School Class Reunion Program, April 26th 1980, John D. Buckner Papers, Box 2, Folder 69, University of Missouri St. Louis, Mercantile Library, Saint Louis, Missouri.
XIII. Conclusions

The urban vitality of The Ville in the first half of Twentieth Century gives scholars a glimpse of a fleeting, though informative moment in urban history. The Ville’s unique position as an academic and cultural center contributed immensely to its early success and, for many of the same reasons, to its later decline. By tracing the rich history of this neighborhood, one is able to clearly observe the central place of the educated citizen within the context of urban vitality. The Ville is a particularly useful point of historical reference for the reevaluation of the modern public education system, troubled by plummeting student enrollment and tax funding. Even during the time of his study of Chicago in the late 1960s, Gerald Suttles recognized that “schools, of course, occupy a crucial position in the redevelopment of the area...practically everyone agrees that a high quality program of education is essential to attracting people back into inner-city neighborhoods”. 188

Recent efforts to revive America’s depressed cities have shown mixed results. While places like New York, Chicago, and Boston have recovered in large part, others like Detroit, St. Louis, and Baltimore have had a much more difficult time regaining their former cultural and economic prosperity. According to much recent scholarship, forerunners of revitalization and gentrification movement are the relatively wealthy and well-educated “yuppies” and “hipsters” that Richard Lyloyd and Elizabeth Currid so clearly points out in their studies: “This best-educated generation in the country’s history.

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Whether its members lived in the city or the suburbs, many were looking for sophisticated entertainment and unusual products to buy—and so the success of city centers with performing arts theaters and novel shopping malls. Cities like Boston and New York with rich cultural opportunities were able to reap the greatest benefits of moneyed urban renewal for this very reason.

In her fascinating book, The Warhol Economy, Elizabeth Currid describes the process by which New York lifted itself out of the urban crisis by becoming a “node of creative exchange”. Viewed as a uniquely successful leader in nearly every area of world business throughout its long history, New York City followed a pattern of decline similar to many other cities in the decades after World War II. That said, New York’s “dark ages” would not last as long as that of many other central cities. Currid’s work describes the city’s saving grace as its “skills and ideas, and particularly, its position as a great center of art and culture”.

Echoing many New Urbanist promotions of social and economic diversity, Currid shows how the New York’s impressive mixture of “service economy” jobs, ranging from finance to fashion restored it once again to economic and cultural prominence. Institutions, both formal and informal, that encouraged the interaction of creative and talented people bolstered the city’s rebirth. Universities, night-clubs, museums, and recording studios replaced bustling docks and railroads as the hubs of the city’s economic activity. Rae too emphasizes the importance of Yale University in securing New Haven’s

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future. New York’s tremendous resources of human capital proved to be just as beneficial to the city’s success as its previous industrial might.

Harvard economist Edward Glaeser pursues this aspect of urban life further in his amazingly comprehensive, *Triumph of the City*. Underpinning his wide-reaching analysis of the variety of benefits to urban living, is Glaeser’s well supported assertion that “cities speed innovation by connecting their smart inhabitants to each other”.¹⁹²

Most relevant to my study of The Ville is Glaeser’s discussion of so called “smart cities”. Among others mentioned only in passing, he focuses on three urban intellectual giants: Boston, Minneapolis, and Milan. These historic centers of diverse educational opportunity are shown to be much more resilient than others like Detroit, which he says “lost touch with the essential ingredients of urban reinvention”.¹⁹³ Striking a delicate conceptual balance between the organic urban growth advocated by Jane Jacobs and the deterministic views of New Urbanism, Glaeser’s well-rounded consideration modern urban vitality places central focus on the importance of attracting and maintaining an intelligent and innovative citizenry, reminding readers that “the strength that comes from human collaboration is the central truth behind civilization's success and the primary reason why cities exist”.¹⁹⁴

An overall lack of city agency has characterized much of the scholarly debate and historical analysis of the urban crisis, and indeed of urban history in general. Structural forces and policy originating at the local and national level are depicted again and again to act mercilessly on cities, undermining their ability to affect positive change in economic, political, or social arenas. In seeking to attain a modicum of self-control, it

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seems imperative for modern metropolises to increase their focus on creating a diverse educational opportunities for their residents and, more importantly, to integrate those residents into the life of the city once trained.

Though the reasons for The Ville’s dense concentration of human and social capital were certainly reprehensible, the ensuing historical developments that took place as a result, I would argue, should not go unnoticed. However, there is much work still do be done. As observed by noted historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall: “short circuiting the generational accumulation of wealth and social capital that propelled other ethnic minorities into the expanding post-WWII middle class, those [economic and social] policies left a legacy of racial inequality that has yet to be seriously addressed”. With the example, or perhaps non-example, of The Ville in mind, perhaps society can better address that legacy now.

Concentration of Residential Vacancies in Municipal St. Louis

African American Population of St. Louis with SLPS School Sites

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