

Can't Go Home



ONCE A DENSE NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE HEART OF THE CITY, KENYON-BARR WAS WIPED AWAY WITHOUT A TRACE. —Alyssa Konermann

● It all sounded innocuous enough: *Urban Renewal. Plans for redevelopment.* But bureaucratic language can hide all manner of sins. In 1958, when the preliminary plan for its overhaul was completed, Kenyon-Barr was a dense neighborhood, home to 25,737 people—nearly five percent of the city’s population at the time, and the approximate combined population of Oakley, Hyde Park, and East Walnut Hills in the 2010 Census. But no matter. In the name of renewal, every last person was forcefully removed, the buildings and the streets where they lived razed to nothing. The new empty space was renamed Queensgate.

Since the 1920s, the West End—and Kenyon-Barr in particular—had been the heart of the black community in Cincinnati. What remains of Kenyon-Barr today is 2,700 photographs in the Cincinnati Museum Center’s archives, a survey conducted prior to demolition. Each photo is numbered and dated, the same signboard held by a rotating cast of city employees. The photos are, wittingly or not, heartbreaking, even haunting: people and potted plants filling residential windows, corner markets busy with shoppers, billboards and businesses, rowhouses upon rowhouses—a vivid street life, frozen in time address by address, as architecturally significant as any street in Over-the-Rhine. They are imbued with an ominous sense of what’s to come: the willful, wholesale demolition of a 400-acre neighborhood. And not just the structures but the community—the social, political, and cultural network—that filled them.

City documents also remain in the library’s local history stacks. There are two slim planning volumes, plus a thick final report tied up neatly in a red box, a water-stained relic of a fundamentally flawed remake of the city’s urban landscape (those shiny renderings of



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Ken Tankersley

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● Cincinnati is world-class in its archaeological resources. Pre-history here goes back at least 13,500 years, and there's evidence of a continuous occupation. [But] because a lot of the sites aren't spectacular monuments as you see elsewhere in the world, they are virtually forgotten. The paleontology of the area as well: You can go to any natural history museum anywhere in the world and you'll see the word *Cincinnati*. It's because of the Upper Ordovician rocks that are exposed in the Cincinnati area—almost half a billion years old. They are exemplary. It was a time of an ocean when there were no fish on the planet, in terms of evolutionary sequence.

There are remarkable treasures here, but a lot of the sites are underneath the ground. There are so many archaeological sites in the Little Miami River Valley alone, it's comparable to the Valley of the Kings in the Nile River Valley, except there you have visual monuments, and here you don't. In terms of the concentration of sites, it's every bit as dense. Hopefully we're at a turning point where we recognize that these are important locations that need to be preserved.

—as told to Adam Flango

a bustling Queensgate never quite came to be). The phrase “slum clearance” comes up a number of times. As a talking point, it makes sense: Who wouldn't want to clean up unhealthy living conditions? To be sure, a majority of the units were in need of repair: they'd been subdivided and neglected by landlords for years, and structural and sanitation improvements were daunting.

But the term *slum* vastly oversimplifies the neighborhood and falsely suggests there was no alternative. (As far as cost goes, the city estimated \$62 million—in 1958 dollars—to make it a blank slate, and six years to get there. Tearing up roads ain't cheap, or fast.) The photos depict a much more nuanced reality. As does the city's list of “Units of Use,” which included: 10,295 dwelling units, 137 food stores, 118 bars and restaurants, 86 barber shops and beauty parlors, 80 churches and missions, 24 dry cleaners, and 6 funeral homes. Of 11,535 total units, only 171 were vacant lots.

It's hard to read the reports and not get an unsettling feeling about the subtext. Pages upon pages detail proposed traffic patterns, parking, and the promise of industry, but the community—that-was doesn't make much of an appearance until the preliminary report's “Appendix B: Existing Conditions.” It notes the demographics: of the 25,737 residents, 25,155 were non-white, with the first sentence of its occupancy characteristics section stating: “The area is occupied almost entirely by Negroes.” And in the day's political and financial power structure, that meant little chance of protest. There was also the matter of where exactly the displaced were meant to go. Many residents were moved to Avondale. But the existing housing stock could not readily absorb the influx—especially at the price range affordable to African-Americans with such limited job opportunities at the time—and the city acknowledged that proposed residential towers were insufficient.

As far as how the residents of Kenyon-Barr were informed, the notice came in the mail on city letterhead: “The building which you occupy has been purchased by the City of Cincinnati. [...] Now that you have received this letter you should start looking for another place to move immediately. [...] ALL OCCUPANTS OF THIS PROPERTY MUST MOVE.” The message put any hope of a reversal of fortune on ice. It was signed, “Very Sincerely Yours, Wanda W. Dunteman, Supervisor of Relocation and Property Management.”



TANKERSLEY ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM HOWLING

GONE BABY GONE

Five of the 2,700 photographs that document, one panel at a time, the neighborhood that was.