

There have been many comments and questions concerning the history of The Neck and Urban Renewal on social media sites about Independence over the last few months. As if the story about The Neck and McCoy Park area isn't sad enough, very little documentation or photos exists concerning the evolution of this area. I am hopeful individuals and others with related materials may come forward and donate them to the Jackson County Historical Society for preservation and access by future generations. This way, we can learn the truth of our past and hopefully make better decisions now and for the future. The following paragraphs reflect my own study, research, and interviews.

The Neck area and Urban Renewal

The Neck which includes McCoy and Slover Parks and areas roughly bounded by both sides of 24 Hwy, West and East Farmer, east of Delaware, west of Osage, all of Ridgeway, parts of College and Pleasant Streets, St. Charles, Nettleton, and McCoy Streets, has a tremendous and complex history. It was primarily an African-American neighborhood that developed in the middle of a segregated community. This area today is the front yard of a world-class Presidential Library, connected to five National Historic Trails, surrounded by a National Historic Landmark District, witness to two Civil War battles, host of one of the first operating animal drawn railroads west of the Mississippi, and target of an aggressive, locally-led, federally-funded Urban Renewal program during the late 1960's and early 1970's.

To find the history of "The Neck," a person can talk to a few former residents and I would encourage and suggest reading '*The Truman Neighborhood – From Elegant Mansions to the Neck*' by Bill & Annette Curtis and '*Memories of a Neck Child*' by Alversia Pettigrew. Early on, The Neck area was called the McCoy Homestead and McCoy Place, named after William McCoy, the first Mayor of Independence whose property and family estate encompassed the southern part of this area. This part of Independence was developed very early as a residential area and provided housing for many families. Many of those families had always been here for generations with some arriving before 1827, when Independence was established as the County Seat, others arriving during the trails period 1830-1840 and before the Civil War, some were slaves, and some were free African-Americans.

The Neck became one of the largest African-American neighborhoods in Independence, but the neighborhood also included some working class whites, descendants with Hispanic roots from Mexico during the trails period, various ethnic groups, and many people of color all living with extended family members close by in a safe and vibrant community. By the 1960's, many Independence leaders and the RLDS Church had a vision for this area and believed that The Neck was an eyesore, especially with its proximity to the newly constructed Presidential Library. Urban Renewal was the vehicle by which the eradication of The Neck was planned. White inspectors labeled the condition of many of the homes as "substandard" and marked entire neighborhood blocks for demolition. However, in many instances, this designation was not accurate and similar to a lot of housing here in the area that is still in use today. Most homes were owner-occupied, well-maintained, smaller bungalows or cottages, built from 1840-1920, antebellum brick and frame dwellings, numerous log cabins encased between additions and coved with asbestos siding tiles. Many homes came with garages or carriage houses, barns, shaded by century old trees with gardens, sidewalks and street curbs. Records indicated that as many as 80+ homes would be affected in just the McCoy Park valley area alone; all were bulldozed with the demolition debris used

as fill to level out the many large ditches. Because of this, reports indicated the land was not suitable for residential use for “environmental” reasons. In fact, when they recently moved dirt for the new inclusive playground and ball field at McCoy Park the summer of 2013, the ground was covered with broken glass, numerous nails, sharp metal rubbish, and other potential hazardous debris (potential Native American artifacts, large hand chiseled limestone foundation blocks, dry stacked rock wall. All was hauled away without documentation).

After the death of Harry S. Truman in 1972, the RLDS Church built Heritage House Apartment Complex with HUD financing and formed a not-for-profit tax-exempt entity (based on religious exemptions) to own and manage the business as landlord while eventually taking advantage of Section 8 housing subsidies from the federal government for 1/5 of the units. Heritage House apartment building was constructed directly over one of the largest natural springs in the area; the head water for Mill Creek, that once created a 25 foot waterfall which drained down through The Neck area. This creek was wide with swift current, and called “the branch” by the African-Americans community. Urban Renewal studies indicated that redevelopment on this site would be problematic, but that didn’t stop the RLDS Church in constructing one of the tallest, most architecturally obtrusive structures in Independence in this historic residential setting, with front and center view from the front steps of the Truman Library. The Owens-McCoy House (owensmccoyhouse.com), our home, was one of 18 homes on Ridgeway listed to be destroyed for what would have likely been more parking lot for the RLDS’s redevelopment project. If not for the heroic efforts of Forest & Martha Ingram in 1970, this historic landmark would have been bulldozed along with all the homes on the north side of the 400 block West Farmer (which were just recently included in the US Department of the Interior’s expansion of the Truman National Historic Landmark District). Many large Victorian and antebellum homes were demolished on Delaware Street, St. Charles, Nettleton, Spring, and White Oak as a part of the Urban Renewal project. A white single school teacher, Josephine Choplin, fought the City and government and others to keep her beautiful childhood 2-story Victorian home from being destroyed during this ordeal. This residence today sits prominently on the northwest corner of Delaware and College Street and is the lone survivor of historic Victorian and antebellum homes on that block of North Delaware from College to 24 Hwy and now a contributing structure to the National Landmark District and the city’s Truman Heritage District.

In the 1960’s, utility services to this area was listed as poor and inadequate. And in some cases, sewer services were not provided by the City. Instead raw sewerage from residences on Ridgeway and possibly beyond were carried by two pipes emptying in the creek toward the McCoy Park valley and carried away by the spring that still runs today along Bess Wallace Parkway. Interestingly, residences in this area today are still connected to these 1884 water mains and sanitary sewer lines dating as far back as 1900 or earlier.

During Urban Renewal most of the land was condemned and taken with the determination of fair market values questionable. Almost all the families in the Neck area lived in owner-occupied homes, many without mortgages. There were lawsuits from the families living in The Neck who lost their homes. It is our understanding that these lawsuits were collectively dismissed. Many people of color could not find housing because of segregation here and in the surrounding areas. African-Americans owned small business, worked for famous and affluent families, which including the Truman family, worked at

businesses on The Square, worked blue-collar jobs, and served in the military. These neighborhoods supported the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, Second Baptist Church, several other churches, and Young School on East Farmer Street. A majority of the African-Americans living in The Neck made too much money to qualify for public housing assistance, basically making them homeless in their hometown and unwelcome in white neighborhoods. Resulting relocations fractured the neighborhood economically, socially, and culturally, much to the distress of many families, neighbors, and schoolmates. Few alternative housing options were available in Independence; alternative unattractive housing was offered in another Independence Urban Renewal Development at the time called Hocker Heights and similar low-income housing projects in Kansas City.

Another phase of Urban Renewal was going on concurrently around the east and north side of Independence Square which also eradicated African-American residences, businesses, churches, and schools. Once bulldozed (to remove blight), Noland Road was rerouted, a new City Hall and Police station were built (also on top of a natural spring), large non-landscaped asphalt parking lots were created (that are just now ironically considered eyesores and blight). St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church (St. Paul AME Church) was spared and fundraised to build a new building during Urban Renewal at 200 E. Lexington Ave. Second Baptist Church was spared on White Oak Street. Both congregations originated around the time of the Civil War and are still maintaining their ministries today.

Today we are still suffering from the effects of events that happen in 1960's here in the Truman-McCoy Neighborhood and around the Independence Square. I have compiled the following paragraphs to shed light where there have been historic and deliberate efforts to hide this chapter in the story of our community and the Truman-McCoy Neighborhood. This is an attempt for awareness, understanding, healing, and the possibility that history will not be repeated. I appreciate the assistance I received from many in the community and beyond for the information in these paragraphs.