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Clifton

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RESIDENTS KNOCKED 'ANGORA HEIGHTS' DOWN TO EARTH; BREWERIES OFFERED 'COMMON BEER'

By Rob Cunningham
The Courier-Journal

Legend has it that the steep bluff overlooking the old Brownsboro Turnpike is what inspired Joshua Bowles, a prosperous riverboat captain, to give Clifton its name.

Bowles reportedly fled to the hills to escape the smoky, sooty air of downtown Louisville, and in 1842 he built a 26-room estate near what is now the corner of Vernon and Sycamore avenues. But Bowles' haven, with its long, level pathways atop the bluff, eventually turned into a bustling outpost on Louisville's developing road and rail links to St. Matthews, Shelbyville and points east.

Ever since, Clifton has blended the peace of a residential retreat with the bustle of the city. Commerce and industry still hum along Frankfort Avenue just around the corner from quiet, leafy streets lined with unpretentious old houses.

"I think pretty much the original houses that were there are still there," said Raymond Burkholder, now of St. Matthews, who was born in 1908 and grew up in Clifton during its heyday.

Sandwiched between Butchertown and Crescent Hill, Clifton is bounded by Interstate 64 to the south, Brownsboro Road to the north, Mellwood Avenue on the west and Ewing Avenue on the east.

The area has maintained the ungentrified character of its early history. The short story of Angora Heights is a good example.

According to a local history published in 1962 by St. Frances of Rome Catholic Church, that's the original name of a 19th-century subdivision on a hillside near Payne and Spring streets.

Apparently, the fashionable-sounding name was intended to honor the most distinctive feature of the area, Ed Whalen's Goat Farm. But it didn't wash with the neighbors, who promptly re-christened the tract Billy Goat Hill and left high-toned Angora Heights to oblivion.

According to this excerpt from a church history, one of Whalen's goats also left its imprint in the lore of St. Frances of Rome, which was founded in 1887 at Payne and Clifton Avenue.

"It was on a Sunday morning and of all times during the 7:30 a.m. Mass that a goat had escaped the confines of his domain; several boys were chasing it. . . . The goat, about three paces in front of the boys, galloped . . . into the church and up the stairs into the choir. . . . The parishioners started out of the pews toward the altar, thinking the goat would jump over the choir railing into the pews below. The boys finally caught the goat, held his hind legs and pulled him backwards all the way down the choir steps. . . ."

Goats were not the only celebrated animals of the neighborhood. After the Civil War -- during which a Union fort was built on the bluff near Bowles' mansion -- Louisville's growing

network of mule-powered rail cars reached Clifton, most of which had been annexed by the city in 1856.

Despite the stoves installed in some of the open-air trams, they were icy cold in winter and "frequently inhabited by mice," according to the historians at St. Frances. Passengers had to get out and help put the cars back on the rails when the unpredictable mules jerked them awry. The system folded in 1901.

By then, the old Louisville, Cincinnati & Lexington Railway had become part of the Louisville & Nashville system and the train conductor picked the daily mail off a hook as the train rolled past Bowles Station on the Shelbyville Pike at Clifton Avenue.

Later, young boys like Burkholder delighted in riding the interurban trolley as it clanged through the neighborhood and went on to exciting destinations such as Shawnee and Fontaine Ferry parks.

Meanwhile, the Kentucky School for the Blind was continuing to build its reputation as the nation's first and foremost educational center for the visually impaired -- and as Clifton's most distinguished institution.

The school was created by the General Assembly in 1842 and first located downtown on Sixth Street between Walnut and Chestnut streets. When the school went looking for elbow room in the 1850s, the cliffs of Clifton beckoned, just as they had for river captain Bowles.

It was said that the white dome atop the monumental, five-story Greek Revival structure built to house the school on Frankfort Avenue could be seen from passing boats on the Ohio River.

The school, and three industries for the blind at the same location, lend a unique quality to the neighborhood. Crossing signals are equipped with buzzers to help students and visually impaired neighborhood residents cross safely.

Bill Roby's convenience store at Frankfort and Haldeman Avenue helps students learn to shop for food. Parents in the neighborhood advise their children to avoid creating unseen hazards by leaving their bikes in the middle of the sidewalk -- although the youngsters often forget the advice.

"They have a great care in their hearts for these children, people around here," Roby said.

"It's a neighborhood of people that are involved. They care," Roby said. "I think it's unique . . . an area where houses have personalities, houses that have seen the evolve-ment of life and of death. People that move away will come back within five years."

Most of Clifton's residential development occurred between 1880 and 1910, according to Joanne Weeter, research coordinator for the city Historic Landmarks and Preservation Districts Commission and a board member of the Clifton Community Council. Shotgun houses are common on the sloping ground nearest to downtown. Farther east, the dwellings are generally larger and mostly of wood, with Victorian, Queen Anne, Carpenter's Gothic and American Four-square among the most-favored styles.

Seventy-five years ago, Frankfort Avenue was lined with groceries, drugstores and dry-goods stores where a family could buy whatever it needed within a short walk from home, Burkholder said.

Saloons also dotted the neighborhood, offering a dark brew called "common beer" that was concocted in breweries also in Clifton and cooled with ice cut from Edwards Pond near Brownsboro Road, Weeter has learned.

Among the new streets that sprouted off Frankfort Avenue during the boom years was Keats Avenue, named for George Keats, the brother of the great English poet, John Keats. Louisville's Keats, along with W. S. Vernon and W. B. Payne, earned the honor of having streets named after them in Clifton by serving on the city charter committee in 1828.

Burkholder and his friends were especially fond of broad, smoothly paved Bellaire Avenue, an ideal place to roller skate because of its roller-coaster hill and a dead end overlooking Brownsboro Road that kept the street relatively free of traffic. The children also used their skates for the long, daily trek to the George Rogers Clark School on Galt Avenue, he said.

The narrow, 4.3-acre Bingham Park was created in about 1915 by the sons of famed urban-greenspace champion Frederick Law Olmsted. It was originally called Clifton Park.

While the blind school's dome and the Bowles mansion are gone many of the old buildings are still standing. The former Shelbyville Turnpike tollhouse -- which became a police station at about the time of World War I -- now sits vacant and for sale at 2311 Frankfort, according to Weeter's research.

A short distance away at 2317 is a pre-Civil War structure that housed Widman's Saloon and Grocery for nearly 75 years, then became a statuary business and recently has been home to a sandwich shop.

The Albert A. Stoll firehouse at Frankfort and Pope Street, an architectural gem in the Gothic Revival style, was built in 1890 and probably served as a hub of community life. It was named after the city's 1895 school board president.

But the goats, the mule trains, the streetcars, the dry-goods stores and the common beer are gone.

"Frankfort Avenue has changed quite a bit," Burkholder said.

Rob Cunningham has lived in Clifton since 1985.

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