

CLIFTON: THE WAY IT WAS

Excerpted from the history of St. Frances of Rome Catholic Church published in 1962, the 75th anniversary of the founding of the parish, researched and written by Charles W. Beckman, Sr.

Only twenty-two years after the Civil War, the Clifton neighborhood has settled down. The children still play around the old Civil War Fort Elstner, which was located between Frankfort Avenue and Brownsboro Road, at the north end of Vernon Avenue. One account of the Fort says that its guns looked down on Brownsboro Road. A person standing at the top of the cliff at Vernon can see that a cannon placed there would have had an excellent command of the road. A branch of Beargrass Creek flowed beside the Brownsboro Turnpike, but now it is mostly filled in with sewers for surface water.

By the end of the war, eleven forts, including Fort Elstner, and twelve batteries were built by the Union Army to fortify the City of Louisville, but the guns of these forts never fired a shot, for the tide of the war bypassed Louisville.

Crescent Hill was known in the late 1880's as but a point east of Louisville, best known as the site of The Reservoir, a pleasure place for the city people.

Facing the old Shelbyville Turnpike, with its historic tollgates, from Clifton to St. Matthews, were numerous stately country homes interspersed with long stretches of Market Gardens. The Brownsboro and Workhouse (Lexington Road) Roads were hardly more than country lanes upon which were located other handsome estates, with their broad lawns and fine old trees. Intersecting the roads at long distances apart were a few cross lanes, very sparsely settled. Dust in the summer and mud in the winter characterized the roads, and the horse and buggy were the deluxe mode of getting about.

Trips to town were most often made by train or on the infrequent and diminutive mule cars, the delight of every small boy. At night neighbors called upon each other, picking their way over rough cinder paths or plank walks by the light of swinging lanterns.

The years passed swiftly by. Other homes were erected by those who were impressed by the numerous advantages and natural beauties of this high and healthful locality, which soon grew into a thriving village bearing its own corporate name.

During the year 1875, or thereabouts, a Crescent Hill Company completed a streetcar line, which ran along Hamilton Avenue and up Payne Street, via Billy Goat Hill, past where St. Frances of Rome School now stands. The property owners donated a right-of-way, fifteen feet wide, on the south side of what is now Frankfort Avenue. This road was operated by the Crescent Hill Company until 1888, when it was taken over by the Louisville Railway Company. It was not electrified until 1902.

The first schoolhouse in this neighborhood was situated on Vernon Lane, north of Frankfort Pike. It was the Vernon Lane School, and was known as the schoolhouse back in The Lane.

Payne Street, east of Spring Street, is the section called "Billy Goat Hill", named for Whalen's Goat Farm, where several hundred goats climbed about the rocky cliffs below the old Osborne Place. This section is now Payne Street, as it ascends from the lowland of downtown to the plateau of which are located Clifton, Crescent Hill and St. Matthews. Many years ago when this area was being developed someone named the subdivision "Angora Heights" because so many goats were in the neighborhood. It was changed in short order, by tacit consent to the nickname of "Billy Goat Hill".

A toll house was located on Shelbyville Turnpike, approximately two blocks from St. Frances of Rome. Today, this old building, at 2311 Frankfort Avenue, is [Sweet Surrender: Editor's note]. In 1915 it was listed in the City Directory as the Clifton Police Station.

In 1887, many of Louisville's streets were paved, either with brick or stone and many of the sidewalks were made of brick. During this time, the main "highways" serving Louisville were toll turnpikes. The average speed, including stop gates, over the hard-surfaced roads was 8.2 miles an hour from Louisville to Lexington. Toll gates or toll houses were set up every five miles on all privately-owned turnpikes.

In an effort to combat the mud, road builders made so-called corduroy roads of logs and later plank roads of rough-finished timber. Cobblestones, granite cubes and even wood blocks have been used to pave Louisville streets of the past. The wood blocks were a crashing failure. Rain caused them to swell and as a result whole sections pushed up like arches.

Mrs. George Oeswein relates how her grandfather, Mr. Lauer, was at one time in charge of the toll gate on Frankfort Avenue: this location is between what is now Jane and Keats Avenue. The toll charge was five cents for five miles.

The Kentucky School for the Blind is located at 1867 Frankfort Avenue. Established on First Street in 1843, it was moved to its present location in Clifton in 1855. At the time architect Francis Costigan designed the building it was said that it was to rest on the highest point in Louisville. The main section was built in 1855, and two four-story wings were added in 1898. The three-domed building was used for many months as a hospital for wounded soldiers by the Union Army forces during the Civil War.

Adjoining the blind school is the American Printing House for the Blind. It is known throughout the United States, and was chartered in 1858. Here books in braille and braille maps are printed for the sightless. In addition, the printing house now records various magazines on long-playing records. Each 33 1/3 rpm record carries forty full minutes of news.

In 1958, the printing house embarked on the biggest printing job in braille history. The task was the publication of the World Book Encyclopedia in braille. In print it runs to nineteen volumes. In braille it will fill 156 volumes that will take up 37 feet of shelf space.

Legend traces the name "Beargrass" to the early French settlers of Louisville, who called the stream "La Barre Grosse Crique", which means the Big Bar Creek, because of the big stony bars in the stream. Those not knowing the French language soon corrupted the name into Beargrass.

At the time of the parish founding in 1887, Beargrass Creek was a clear, limpid stream where families gathered for picnics on its shady banks. Beargrass Creek played an extremely important part in the birth of Louisville. Most authorities agree that the former mouth of Beargrass, which lay between 3rd and 4th Streets, determined the location of the original settlement that became Louisville. In 1954, the present channel of the Beargrass Cut Off was created, moving the stream to its present position opposite Towhead Island, some two miles from the Falls.

In the earlier days, The Louisville, Cincinnati & Lexington Railway Company carried many Louisvillians to the races at Woodland Park in St. Matthews, Ky. This race track was located in the now sixth-class city of Woodlawn Park, off Westport Road and Hubbards Lane. Speeches and political rallies were held there and it was used as a mustering-out station for Civil War soldiers.

In 1864, Louisville's city railway system was powered by mules. Many of the mule cars had stoves in the center, where the drivers were able to build fires. The mules wore bells around their necks for the driver to let passengers know he was coming.

The Louisville, Cincinnati & Lexington Railroad was constructed in 1867. For years Crescent Hill residents rode the old L.C. & L. to Louisville. The Louisville depot was then at Brook and Jefferson. The line became a part of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad system and the depot was then shifted to First Street, north of Main Street. In the 1880's the "Suburban Club" was made up of young Crescent Hill matrons who commuted on the same train.

A later generation of Crescent Hill folks did their commuting, in warm weather, on the old "summer cars" of the Louisville Railway Co. They bounced and jaunted along Billy Goat Hill on Payne Street on the way to and from town. The conductor would swing with easy assurance along the narrow walkways on the outside of the open cars as he collected fares.

For years before the turn of the century, residents from other sections of Louisville made Sunday visits to Crescent Hill to see the waterworks. The mule cars would pull up on turn tables at the end of the line and go back the other way.

About the year 1880, the old Lexington to Louisville Railroad System was taken over by the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company. In 1895, the latter and the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad reached an agreement whereby the two companies used the track jointly.

In the 1880's, three major companies provided mule car service on a dozen or more lines about the city. In 1886, Louisvillians could proudly boast that no other city of similar size in the world had half as many lines of Street railway. Two thousand mules (found to be more economical than horses) were needed to run these lines.

For only a nickel, the rickety little cars gave the local riding public all sorts of thrills and chills. In wintertime, the cars were hardly more than igloos on wheels. No stoves were provided on the first cars and straw on the floor, frequently inhabited by mice, did little to warm the feet. Mule car drivers, bundled in heavy coats, braved wind and rain from their perch on the front platforms.

Always there was the unpredictable -- the mules, always stubborn, would kick out of the tracks or balk at passing carriages. When a car derailed, as they frequently did, passengers helped put them back on the tracks. Nevertheless, mule cars served Louisville well and dominated the street railway system for more than thirty years.

The horse and mule car systems were becoming inadequate, speeds more slow, an average five miles per hour. For every car in service, five to eight animals were needed. At best, the mules could average only four or five hours of work a day and consumed thirty pounds of hay and grain. Thus an era ended when the last of the old mule cars on the Crescent Hill-Reservoir Line disappeared in 1901.

The L.C. & L. Railroad came by St. Frances of Rome at the corner of what is now Clifton and Frankfort Avenue. The station was known as "The Bowles Station". There were two large frame buildings, one on each side of the tracks. The Clifton post office was in part of one of these buildings. The mail bag was placed on a hook each day, as time for the local mail train drew near, and picked off the hook by the trainmaster on the moving train. Mrs. Weisenberger was the "postmistress". Her husband ran a bakery in the far end of the train station, and their children were among the first pupils of St. Frances of Rome School.

How often as we walk down one of our streets in Clifton, do we ask "How did this street get to be called this?" Of the many streets in St Frances of Rome Parish, we give here the names and origins.

Letterle Avenue - formerly known as Brownsboro Road. It was named for John M. Letterle, a pork packer and the first president of the Butcher's Union No. 1.

Mellwood Avenue - named for the Mellwood Distillery.

Frankfort Avenue - named for Frankfort, Kentucky, the State Capital. It was formerly called

Shelbyville Turnpike, with its first toll gate at Frankfort and Jane Streets.

William Street - Pope Street - H Street (now Embry) - named for William H. Pope, who laid out this section of the city. These three streets form the letter 'H' between Frankfort and Letterle Avenue.

Payne Street - named for W. B. Payne, a member of the Louisville Charter Committee for the year 1828.

Stoll Avenue - named for Albert A. Stoll, president of the school board in 1895.

Spring Street - named for a never failing spring in a bed of watercress situated near Spring Street, east of the L & N R.R. tracks.

Vernon Avenue - named for W. S. Vernon.

Keats Avenue - named for George Keats, a brother of John Keats, the Poet. Payne, Vernon and Keats were members of the Louisville Charter Committee of 1828. Vernon Avenue, however, was formerly known as Bowles Lane.

Ewing Avenue - Jane Avenue - named for Ewing and Jane Speed, children of George K. Speed, whose ancestral home at what is now Ewing and Frankfort Avenue was called "Chatsworth".

Haldeman Avenue - named for W. N. Haldeman, publisher of the Courier-Journal.

Clifton Avenue - formerly called Cavewood, because it led to a cave at the fringe of the woods to the rear of the Taylor-Rudd Home, Payne Street.

Franck and Rastetter - named for property owners where these families resided.

Thus with the pages we have read, we have a picture of what life was like, of how our early members worked and went to Louisville when St. Frances of Rome parish was established.