



CLIFTON

A BRIEF NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY



*The Kentucky School for the Blind and American Printing House for the Blind (inset), circa 1890.
Image Courtesy of the Callahan Museum/American Printing House for the Blind.*

BY MICHAEL ALDERSON, 2006

*With Help From Past and Present Members of the Clifton Community Council
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Introduction

Clifton residents love their neighborhood. For those of us who live, work, and relax here, Clifton is a friendly neighborhood that embraces diversity and doesn't put on airs. It is what it is— a solid middle-class Victorian neighborhood that's enjoying a cultural and architectural renaissance. It's an old-fashioned mix of homes and businesses, where walking to the corner store and waving to the neighbors still matter.

When you look back into Clifton's history, it's easy to see why the best qualities of the neighborhood have flourished. For most of its settled history, the Clifton neighborhood has been a community that embraces flexibility, evolution, and transition. It's a study in Louisville's transition from an agricultural river town to a thriving industrial metropolis. It's a neighborhood that bridges the working-class "shotgun" homes of Butchertown with the classic turn-of-the-century Queen Anne and bungalows of Crescent Hill. Clifton preserves this spirit of transition in a way that few other areas in Louisville can— through a uniquely preserved history, diverse architecture, and a melting pot of local culture. Clifton remains one of the most vibrant neighborhoods in Louisville, with nearly 200 years to its credit.

Today, Clifton encompasses over 400 acres and is fortunate to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The neighborhood is also a Preservation District under Louisville Metro Code of Ordinances. In fact, this neighborhood history is partially adapted from the National Register of Historic Places-Nomination Forms (1983, 1992) and Historic Preservation District Designation Report (2003).

When you walk through Clifton, you can see how the ambience that attracted early residents to this Victorian community is still evident. With its unusual topography and its refreshing blend of people and properties, it remains a haven for artists, professionals, the visually impaired, and families of all types. To all these resident "Cliftonites" (and everyone else)— enjoy this history of our neighborhood!

The Early Years: Wilderness, Farmland, and the Bowles Estate

Long before Louisville was settled, the rise of land now home to Clifton was a wilderness of natural foliage bisected by a buffalo trace, a natural path beaten down by the seasonal migration of native buffalo. These traces made convenient trails for the Native Americans (Shawnees from the north and Cherokees from the south) who hunted in the region.

The area's first brush with colonial settlement was its inclusion in a large land grant issued to various soldiers for their service in the French and Indian War of 1773. Yet even as urban Louisville began to take form in the late 1780s and 1790s, the Clifton area remained undisturbed by agricultural development.

Not surprisingly, its natural landscape was not overlooked for long. Beginning in 1817, the centuries of wild growth began being surveyed with an eye for development. The man principally responsible for settling the area, not to mention giving the neighborhood its name, was Colonel Joshua Bethel Bowles. Bowles was born in Virginia and moved to Louisville in 1816, where he soon sought property in the heights that overlooked Louisville's eastern edge as a retreat from the bustle of urban Louisville. He began clearing portions of the land in 1817, a

process that would continue in phases until 1842, and built a small house on the property sometime around 1820.

At the time of Bowles' 1817 purchase, the land north of his property (now in Butchertown) was already home to several gristmills and the estate of Colonel Frederick Geiger, who had built a sizeable house, "Linden Hill," just off Beargrass Creek at present-day Frankfort Avenue. Only a few years before, Colonel Geiger had overseen the construction of the limestone bridge across Beargrass Creek. The bridge heralded future development by allowing access up the hill to Bowles' property.

When it was finally completed, Bowles' estate was the first and only "gentleman farm" located in the area (i.e., a farm for use by an estate rather than profit from the sale of produce). In 1842 the small Bowles homestead was overshadowed by the completion of an adjoining mansion—a magnificent 26-room Italianate showplace, finished for Bowles, his wife, Grace, and their three young children. Bowles named the house "Clifton" for the natural cliffs that overlooked the Brownsboro turnpike from the wide, level fields of his property. Nettie Oliver, a genealogist with The Filson Historical Society, describes the house and its history:

The house... at 2143 Sycamore Street in the Clifton neighborhood of Louisville... was built in the early 1800's by Joshua Bowles . . . (who) was born in 1795 in Virginia and came to Louisville in 1816. By 1842, Bowles had removed himself from the city and purchased the tract of land between Frankfort Avenue and Brownsboro Road. Joshua Bowles was President of the 1st Bank of Louisville serving from 1840 until his death in 1869. On the 1859 Bergmann map of Jefferson County, Bowles is listed on the large tract of land, which is now Clifton neighborhood. When Bowles died he left in his will the house and property to his daughter Margaretta. In 1883, the house and eighteen acres were sold to the Frantz family. After George W. Frantz bought the property, he began to enlarge the house. He raised the ceilings to twelve feet and added a third floor with a ballroom and more bedrooms.

Frantz kept his home just as it had been for many years. Gas fixtures lighted many of the rooms. The 26-room house contained 19 fireplaces, two of which were made from white marble. A bathroom included a wooden copper-lined tub. There were four pairs of ten feet tall paneled walnut doors adorned with brass ornamental hinges and eighty pairs of paneled walnut shutters and three gold leaf and walnut window cornices.

(After) Frantz died in 1959 . . . a public auction was held. Antique dealers turned out in droves to purchase marble statues, bisque figures, marble top tables, mirrors and hand carved beds. Mr. George W. Frantz, while on trips to Italy, supposedly purchased many of these treasured contents . . . After the auction, the property was sold to Mr. Gilbert Westerfield for \$75,000 and in 1962, the old home was demolished to make way for a nursing home at 2141 Sycamore Ave....

Upon its completion, the estate quickly became the area's defining landmark. Probably thanks to railroad and mail employees, the name of the estate was adopted as a moniker for the whole area, and the neighborhood remains Clifton to this day.

While the Bowles Estate is believed to have been the only gentleman farm sited in what is now the Clifton neighborhood, there are records of at least three other farming families who had homes in Clifton before 1860: the Rastetters, the Westermans, and the Raymonds. Only one of these original homes survives— the Thomas Rastetter House, which is now located off Payne

Street between Payne and Frankfort Avenue. The house sits on a portion of the original fifteen-acre tract of land Rastetter bought south of the Louisville and Shelbyville Turnpike in 1843. The house, which remained in the family until 1923, was built facing Frankfort Avenue around 1844. Forty years later, the main door to the Rastetter house was re-oriented away from Frankfort Avenue to make Payne Street its primary entrance, as it remains to this day.

Roads and Rails

While the wooded acreage of the Bowles Estate was being cleared for farmland, early industry began sweeping outward from Louisville. In the 1830s and 1840s, two transportation-related developments had a major impact on Clifton. The first was the construction of a toll road in the 1830s, the Louisville and Shelbyville (or Lexington) Turnpike—now known as Frankfort Avenue. The toll road replaced and roughly followed the original buffalo trace on its eastward rise from the river valley. Though pioneers had used the old trace since the 1780s, the turnpike straightened and widened its original course to accommodate wagons, buggies, and mule carts bound for local markets.

The construction of this turnpike led to the construction of a number of structures in the next few decades, including a tollhouse, grocery, inn, and tavern. The brick tollhouse at 2311 Frankfort Avenue was a simple federal-style building constructed close to the road, directly beside a tollgate that could be raised and lowered as desired. The tollgate keeper, who lived in the house with his family, was responsible for collecting tolls and maintaining their five-mile stretch of road. The turnpike system was discontinued in 1901, but the tollhouse continued to be used for the public good. In 1908, for example, the building was designated a police substation and jail.

The second major development was the construction of a railway line linking downtown Louisville to the state capital. Begun in the 1840s, this railway, originally known as the Louisville and Frankfort Railroad, later became part of the Louisville & Nashville system. It exists today as the CSX line that bisects Clifton.

Both the toll road and the 1849 completion of the railway heralded rapid development in the area. With traffic constantly stopping at the tollgate, it was not long until commercial buildings were built up around it. One of the biggest was Widman's Saloon and Grocery (now "The Irish Rover" at 2319 Frankfort Avenue), built in 1858. Along with Spect's Saloon (ca. 1887), now "Bourbons Bistro" at 2255 Frankfort Avenue, Widman's was typical of the Clifton commerce that was built up around the turnpike. Located just one block away from each other, the ex-saloons are both two-story brick structures with storefronts on the ground level and living quarters above. Each was constructed in the Italianate style and sited close to the street. Their façade arrangement, style, setback, and massing are quite typical of commercial structures found throughout Louisville in the 1850s. The Widman's building and the tollhouse were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990.

Another significant development was the construction of the Kentucky School for the Blind, originally chartered in 1842. After a fire devastated its Louisville facility in 1851, the school board bought rural acreage near the turnpike and in 1855 a new school opened. Picturesquely set amid landscaped grounds, the school quickly became a Clifton landmark. It eventually expanded to include the main campus, a "colored" school, and the American Printing House for the Blind. In 1967, the original school was demolished and replaced by a modern facility that

serves students to this day at 1867 Frankfort Avenue. Clifton is proud to be home to such an active community of visually impaired residents, and many community features—such as audio crosswalk signals—have been implemented on their behalf.

The Civil War Years

By 1860, Clifton had become a thriving agricultural corridor. Records from the 1860 census, for example, indicate Thomas Rastetter's land was valued at \$4,600. Rastetter also owned two horses, two dairy cows, 10 bushels of peas and beans, 250 bushels of potatoes, 50 bushels of sweet potatoes, truck and garden produce valued at \$600, and 100 pounds of butter. A few pockets of natural woodlands remained, but for the most part, landowners and their tenants toiled amid row crops and pastures, while wagons, buggies, and mule carts passed to and fro on the wide, uneven turnpike.

So passed the last days of antebellum Clifton. With the coming of the Civil War, Louisville became a major shipping center for the Union Army. Packet steamers from the north brought ammunition, rations, and supplies through Louisville on their way southward to Mississippi and Louisiana. Louisville became a natural target for Confederate raids, though the one major attempt to seize the city only made it as far as Perryville. After the Battle of Perryville, orders were given to build a system of eleven forts to guard major approaches to Louisville. Clifton, with its commanding location between the Brownsboro and Shelbyville Turnpikes, was chosen as the site of one of these forts, christened Fort Elstner.

Fort Elstner was constructed between 1864 and 1865. The fort was built of earth and timber, with a ditch encircling it, over which a drawbridge provided access to the fort's interior and underground magazine. The magazine itself housed 200 rounds of artillery shells, enough ammunition to provide continuous volleys of interlocking cross-fire between Fort Elstner and several sister forts. After the war ended in 1865, Fort Elstner was eventually abandoned with the dubious distinction of never having fired a shot in combat.

Very little remains of this Civil War fort, though outlines of the original earthworks may still exist. A stray cannonball or two has also been known to be uncovered in the area. Next time you're digging in the backyard... be careful!

Clifton Becomes a Neighborhood

Aside from the Clifton Estate and a few scattered farmhouses, very little planned residential development occurred before the Civil War. However, meat processing, quarrying, and distilling were emerging into nearby industries, setting the stage for future residential development in the area. Several natural features encouraged these industries. First, there was a constant water supply provided by the middle fork of the Beargrass Creek—ideal for distilling spirits and processing meat. Secondly, there was an abundance of limestone in the area that attracted quarry companies, whose employees slowly and painstakingly carved away huge chunks of hillside. Traces of the quarry industry are still visible, particularly near present-day Crescent Springs Condominiums, along the Interstate 64 corridor, and along Brownsboro Road at Kenilworth Avenue. The City Workhouse, destroyed by fire in 1968, was another notable remnant of quarrying activity located in adjacent Irish Hill.

With quarrying, distilling, and meat packing industries nearby, land speculators soon divided the local farms into residential lots. These developers geared their sales, and the prices of available homes, to three categories of employees: the working class laborers, the middle-class overseers and clerks, and the upper middle-class owners and managers—which is why, in part, Clifton has preserved such a diversity of dwellings.

Generally speaking, the area to the west and north, nearest to Louisville, was developed first. The first house built along Frankfort Avenue in Clifton was the home and office of Dr. Joseph Maxwell, formerly located at 1755 Frankfort Avenue next to the old Hilltop Theater. The Maxwell House was a prominent brick three-story completed in 1871, though its brick vernacular style would prove to be an exception to the rule. Most of the houses built in early developments (called “additions”) of the 1870s and 1880s were clapboard—modest in scale, intended solely to house the working class. Examples of these homes still exist on the north side of William Street.

By the 1880s, however, city-provided services such as police and fire protection, schools, and the availability of water, sewers, and gas (and in rare instances, limited electricity) provided important amenities that would enhance the quality of life for more affluent homebuyers. The housing stock gradually increased in size and scale, reflecting a range of architectural styles. Folk Victorian was the most prevalent, a combination of Italianate, Queen Anne, and Federal styles made possible through the mass production of wooden trim. The low cost and availability of cornices, brackets, bargeboards, and running trim allowed carpenters to liberally apply them to exteriors, often on homes of a simple side-hallway townhouse plan or single or double-pile shotgun homes.

Despite this residential growth, Clifton retained an agricultural undertone. Even up to 1900, Billy Goat Hill, now situated along the cliffs adjacent to Interstate 64, was home to a public spring and a pasture the Whalen family used to raise over 200 goats. The goats roamed freely on the open meadow around Billy Goat Hill (1900-2100 block of Payne St.), a reminder of Clifton’s original agricultural focus well into the 1950s.

Most Clifton homes of the 1880s and 1890s lay somewhere in between the humble three-room shotgun of the laborer and the magnificent brick and stone mansion that has come to define the late Victorian Era. The latter exists in Clifton, but certainly to a lesser degree than the Highlands and Crescent Hill. Some of the finest architecture in Clifton can still be viewed on Frankfort Avenue near Coral Avenue, and also on Coral Avenue overlooking Bingham Park and Vernon Avenue overlooking Brownsboro Road.

The development boom made Clifton an appealing target for annexation by the city. Indeed, the City of Louisville first attempted to annex Clifton in 1856, a move that resulted in the annexation of the western tip of the Clifton neighborhood, constituting the Bowles Estate and northern sections across the Brownsboro Turnpike. That stirred an ambitious movement among residents to keep Clifton autonomous. In 1876, a group of Clifton neighbors petitioned the State Legislature to grant a charter to the township of Clifton, which was home to 75 people at the time. The petition failed, and Clifton was officially recognized as a neighborhood by the City of Louisville in 1891. Clifton was completely annexed by 1897, and by 1910 most of the residential lots had been developed, though intermittent construction of bungalows continued through the 1950s.

Case Study: The Development of Pope Street

Pope Street serves as a good example of the type of development that was taking place in Clifton at the end of the nineteenth century. Pope Street is named for Louisville merchant and banker William Hamilton Pope, who had inherited a farm in the area from his father, William Pope, Sr. The younger Pope decided to parcel the land and sell it as the northern block of Pope Street, thus making it one of the early additions to the neighborhood. It was laid out in the late 1870s, just as other antebellum-era farms were beginning to be parceled off into lots.

The original addition included the north sides of William Street and Pope Street, with Embury Avenue connecting the two and forming the streets into the shape of an “H,” hence “William H. Pope”— his permanent calling card in Clifton. The northern blocks of Pope and William streets were the first to link Frankfort Avenue and Brownsboro Road. They appear on the Jefferson County Atlas in 1880. By 1890, however, the section of Pope that existed then as the 1500 block had been built up with shotgun and “camel-back” homes.

The south side of Pope Street does not exist on the 1884 Jefferson County Atlas, though Prospect Avenue (now Arlington Avenue) and Charlton Avenue had already been laid out. At that time, the southern block of Pope was still the eastern-most section of a large track of land owned by J.T. Franck, one of the original Frankfort Avenue landowners.

In 1890, the Franck property was also subdivided into additions. Theodore Harris, Jacob L. Smyser, and Jacob’s wife, Fannie, bought the entire block of land bordered between “Summit Avenue” (later South Pope Street), the alley between Pope and Smyser (later State) Streets, Prospect Avenue, and “a road running along the L&N railway.” The Pope Street frontage of this block was 564 feet long. Harris and the Smysers bought the land for \$4,800 on March 8, 1890.

Smyser was a prominent merchant in the firm of Wallace & Lithgow, a manufacturer of stoves, copper, tin, and sheet-iron. This association led him into land business and construction, an enterprise furthered by the relationship with Lithgow, his father-in-law, who was a former mayor of Louisville, director of the Louisville & Frankfort Railway, and a bank president. Through these connections, Harris and the Smysers joined a partnership with the Kentucky Excelsior Manufacturing Company, a building company under the presidency of John Drescher, who was also a partner in Hite & Drescher Real Estate at 1300 Frankfort Avenue. Drescher was instrumental in the founding of the Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, and his name is prominent on the building’s cornerstone to this day.

Under Drescher and Smyser’s development, the south end of Pope Street was laid down as a modern brick street lined with limestone curbs. With their Eastlake, Queen Anne, and Italianate treatments, the Kentucky Excelsior houses on South Pope tended to be slightly larger and grander than the houses on North Pope. The architectural style of many of these houses was the reversed “L-shape,” a type very popular in the 1890s as a cross between the traditional square home and the irregularly massed Queen Anne. Standard L-shaped plans allowed builders, carpenters, and masons to follow established patterns of form, so they could be familiar with a repeating plan and order materials accurately. They could also be fitted on smaller lots.

These first houses on Pope, the tallest homes on all blocks of the street, had commanding views of the area when they were built, since most of the land was stripped of trees and underbrush when the addition was developed in the 1890s. This may be why the new block was initially

called “Summit Avenue.” Middle to upper-middle class families soon moved in—first and second-generation German immigrants, including many who worked in the lime, cement, flour, or distillery business.

The Albert A. Stoll firehouse at Frankfort Avenue and Pope Street, built in the Gothic Revival style, was dedicated about this time to house Hook & Ladder Company No. 3.

Stoll—who was also responsible for the construction of the Franklin School—was a member of the Louisville bar. He was born in 1851 and began practicing law in Louisville in 1872. He was elected to the Kentucky Legislature in 1876, thus becoming (at 25) the youngest member of either house. He was again elected in 1884, then elected to the Board of Alderman in 1885 and again in 1887. He finally ended his civic career as School Board President in 1895.

Stoll was a proponent for “suburbanizing” Clifton with the addition of a firehouse and school. The firehouse was constructed in 1890 with a massive corner bell/watch tower that has been removed. The presence of the firehouse hastened residential development in Clifton, as potential buyers saw it as a sign of safety and settled suburban life. The firehouse quickly became a hub of community life in Clifton. After Louisville’s devastating 1937 flood, for example, the firehouse opened as one of several vaccination points throughout the city. Neighbors stretched up and down the “high ground” of Frankfort Avenue and Pope Street, fearful of disease in a city suddenly lacking clean water and working sanitation systems.

A Clifton Home, Circa 1895

The Clifton home of the 1890s was a study in late Victorian middle-class living. It was a modest clapboard residence of between three and eight rooms, fitted with masonry chimneys and a tin roof and situated on a narrow lot—often no more than 25 feet wide—over a small brick cellar.

On the exterior, the small front yard was fenced in to keep out pigs and wild goats, especially on and around Payne Street. The wooden clapboard exterior, sometimes “German grooved” for additional detail, was ornamented slightly differently than its neighbors. Finish work—Italianate cornices over the upper windows, a profusion of gingerbread brackets along the porches, leaded art glass in floral patterns over the front windows—differentiated it from the houses on either side of it. This was the formal front that the family put forward, concealing a rear yard that was often full of drying laundry and airing rugs. An outbuilding stood at the rear of the lot to accommodate a horse and sometimes buggy, as well as tools, coal, kindling, and chickens—even goats. An underground cistern gathered drinking water.

Like all late Victorian homes, the interior of the Clifton home was divided into specific spaces—formal (front hall, parlor, dining room, and staircase hall), utilitarian (kitchen, pantry, rear porch, and shed), and private (bedchambers and bathroom, if one existed). Some of these rooms were fitted with gas-fed wall fixtures for lighting, since electricity was considered a gamble, subject to sporadic outages while emitting harsher light than gas lamps (though hissing gas fixtures tended to produce greasy, messy discolorations on walls and ceilings). A few of the rooms also had fireplaces fitted with coal grates, which had to be fed constantly in the winter. The coal itself had to be lugged in bins from where the delivery carts left it in the alley shed—a dirty, smudgy process.

The Clifton home’s formal rooms were often open to one another and close to a front porch so the family could move inside and outside easily during summer living. Transoms opened over all

the doors, allowing breezes to easily circulate throughout the house. Portiere rods were run in the doorways between the formal rooms and hallways, so heavy curtains could be hung for privacy and to retain heat from the fireplaces in the wintertime.

Because it was not custom built, the Clifton home was fitted in a rather conservative style, suggesting the Eastlake craze, which came into vogue in 1876. All of the interior walls were finished in horsehair plaster over wood lathe, with wallpaper laid directly onto the wet plaster of the walls and ceilings. Vines, trellises, and roses abounded on the wallpaper in popular shades of buff, dark brown, dark green, India red, maroon, or gold.

Some of the upper middle-class households in Clifton employed outside help for cooking and laundry. Few retained live-in servants. Often, children and relatives helped with the chores or tended to modest vegetable gardens. The side and rear doors of the house were used the most, leaving the front door for formal guests. The side door, often fitted with a manually rung doorbell, was an informal entrance for friends and a service entrance for the tradespeople who visited, selling their wares.

The family who lived in this house sweated through the humid summers on their porches, shivered in the winter in rooms that smelled of burning coal and gas, rode the mule trains and trolleys to and from Louisville, listened to the shrill whistle of trains as they rumbled past, and watched as Frankfort Avenue grew from a rural toll road to a busy suburban street.

The Frankfort Avenue Business Corridor

The construction of the turnpike made Frankfort Avenue a natural business corridor. In its early years, commercial and residential development co-existed on Frankfort Avenue. Shotgun houses and larger frame residences set back off the road were common. In addition, two-story buildings with commercial storefronts on the first floor and storage areas or a residence on the second were built to attract two types of customers: Clifton residents living nearby and urban Louisville residents passing through on the toll road.

Beginning around 1910, some of the homes that fronted Frankfort Avenue began being converted to commercial use. A few of these suffered little or no change to the building's main façade, while most others were altered at the ground floor level with the addition of new storefronts or wholesale sheathing of all or part of the primary façade with a new "commercial skin." These changes continue to occur up to the present day.

In *Then and Now: The Frankfort Avenue-Clifton Experience from 1933 to 1994*, Paul Kinsella recalls commercial activity in the business corridor before and after World War II:

From 1933 until 1961 I lived on the south side of Frankfort Avenue just a few steps east of Clifton Avenue. For many years, from 1933 to 1947, my mother ran a restaurant directly across the street from where we lived.

The building in which Genny's Diner is now located was a long time ago when we first moved into the neighborhood the Grocers Ice and Cold Storage Company . . . I remember when I was a kid buying a small hunk of ice (fifty pounds) and— with a shiny metal ice tong— carry or drag it along the sidewalk some distance down the street to our restaurant. There I would chop it into small pieces and spread them on top or between the bottles of soft drinks or beer in the cooler behind the bar.

On the corner of Frankfort and Rastetter was another business that was there when I was a kid and for many years later. It was the Messmer Hardware Store. It, too, was sort of an "institution," for it was very important to the needs of those who lived in the Clifton neighborhood. They seemed to have everything in the hardware line needed for survival in that slower-paced less, complicated world. Now in this same building is the Clifton's Pizza Company . . .

I remember a horse-drawn vegetable wagon that used to stop in front of our restaurant every day during the warm weather. And my mother used to go outside to haggle with the vendor for produce. It was used as part of her delicious home cooked plate lunches.

(The original toll house) became the Clifton Police Station from 1908 until 1932. My friend, Clarence Wettstein, whom I mentioned previously, told me that he remembers the police from this station patrolling the neighborhood on bicycles.

Later . . . Freddie Mueller and his wife Polly ran the Old Toll House Tavern in that same building. There was an outside beer 'garden behind the building with a large concrete slab used as a dance floor. It was surrounded by wooden tables—the tops painted white—and chairs. Overhead strings of colorful lights added to the glamour. And in one corner an over-sized jukebox played all of the songs of the era. It was really a fun place to go and live it up.

Clifton boasted many large and impressive commercial facilities: The Kentucky School for the Blind (built in 1853 and 1899); The Printing House for the Blind (built in 1858 and 1883, with later additions); The Vernon Avenue School (which existed between 1891 and 1919); Benjamin Franklin Elementary School on State Street (built in 1892, then rehabilitated with additions in 1966); Hook and Ladder Company No. 3/The Albert A. Stoll Firehouse (built in 1890, then remodeled in 1909); The Sacred Heart Convalescent Home (built in 1892); the German Evangelical Church/Clifton Unitarian Church (built circa 1900); the Third Lutheran Church (built in 1931); St. Frances of Rome Catholic Church (built in 1887 and rebuilt in 1910); and St. Frances of Rome Catholic School (built in 1930). All are or were located within the boundaries of the Clifton neighborhood—a testament to the positive educational, spiritual, and social atmosphere Clifton residents continue to enjoy.

Transitional Years: 1950 - 1980

Development slowed after the close of the Second World War. With the automobile firmly established and highways opening new corridors of development, families began moving deeper into the county, to suburbs made suddenly more accessible. Clifton families who had been original homeowners joined the exodus, leaving their aging homes to be split up into apartments and boarding houses. Some houses were demolished in favor of apartment building and industrial complexes; others were drastically re-faced with brick and aluminum siding. The trolley stopped running and the old trolley yard where the cars turned around on their way back to the city was closed. Pool halls and bars sprung up where corner grocery stores and pharmacies once stood. Interstate 64 was constructed, obliterating a large portion of Clifton's southwestern border, including an African-American community that had been settled in the valley around Beargrass Creek and the quarry. Clifton suddenly found itself in the midst of urban blight.

For several decades, the neighborhood remained in a state of functional obsolescence. Yet some of the original families held out, maintaining their homes with pride. Visual artists, sculptors, and musicians—including famous Louisville artist Barney Bright—moved into Clifton, attracted in part by the large studio space available for low rent. In time, the art community flourished in Clifton. To this day, the neighborhood is home to a thriving community of writers, poets, actors and actresses, musicians, sculptors, metalworkers, and visual artists of all types... the anchors of Clifton's cultural scene. Clifton continues to blossom as a community of colorful and wide-ranging creativity.

Renaissance: A Historic Preservation District

Fortunately, it was not long before Clifton began to be recognized for its historic charm and importance. After the 1974 tornado devastated parts of historic Louisville, a group of concerned residents and businesses got together to form the Clifton Community Council, a volunteer organization dedicated to sustaining the historic integrity and diversity of the neighborhood. A formal step in Clifton's preservation came in 1983 with the listing of portions of the neighborhood on the National Register of Historic Places. This listing was based on the area's historical significance related to architecture, education, and industry, and ushered in the first of several succeeding waves of rejuvenation of the neighborhood.

Restoration of the Frankfort Avenue business corridor, including the planting of flowering trees and the renovation of storefronts, began in earnest in the early 1990s. In 1994 the Clifton Historic District's National Register-boundaries were significantly expanded based on additional historical significance in the areas of community planning and development. In 2003, thanks to the hard work and determination of the Council, the entire Clifton neighborhood was approved as a Preservation District under Louisville Metro Code of Ordinances.

Today, Clifton continues to undergo a renaissance of residential and commercial renovation. Recent successes include the restoration and creation of parks, environmental preserves, biking trails, walking paths, and features designed specifically to accommodate the visually impaired. Houses are being restored to their original glory, and new homes and condominiums are welcoming first-time homeowners to the community.

With the support of the Clifton Community Council and local civic and business leaders, Clifton looks forward to many more years of preservation, beautification, and celebration. We are truly a community *preserving the past and planning the future!*

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Weeter, Joanne (2006). Personal interview. Conducted interview in May 2006.

Clifton Street Names

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.

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.

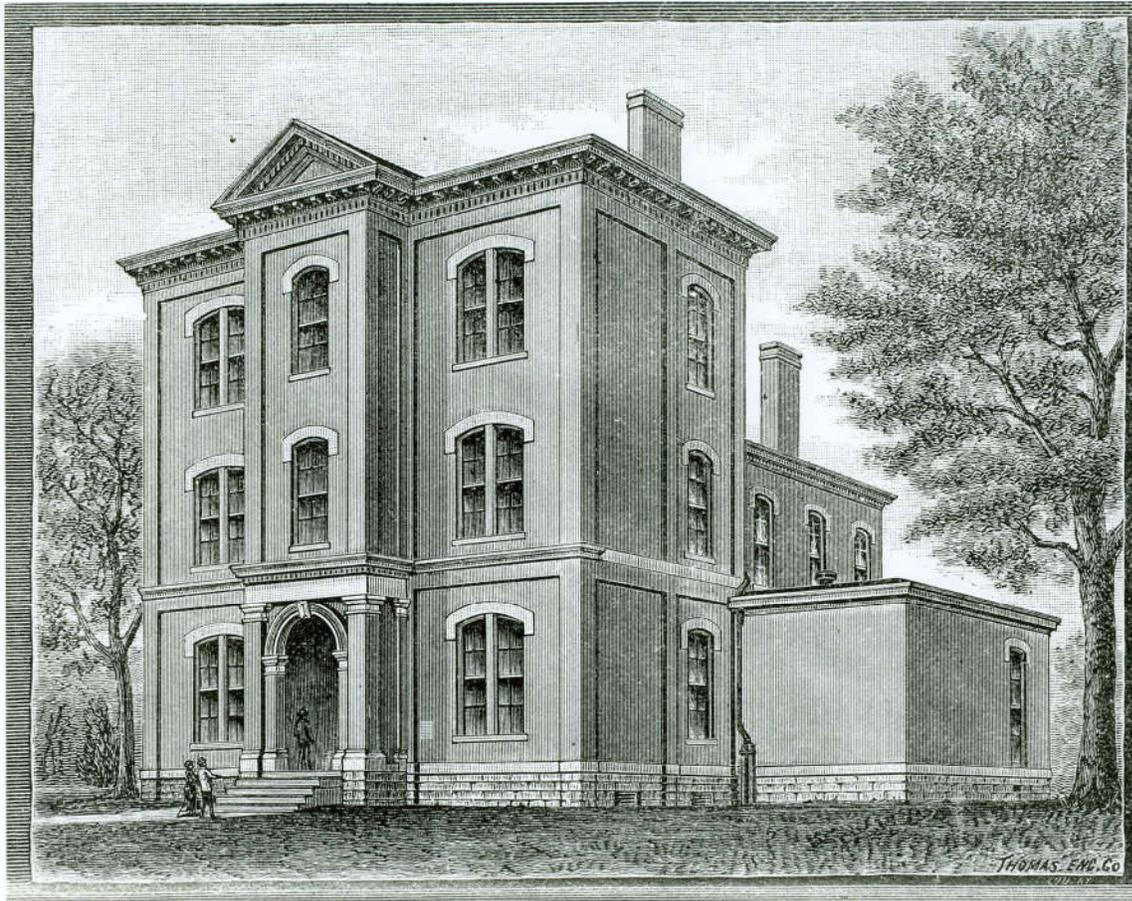
Keats Avenue - named for George Keats, a brother of John Keats, the Poet. Payne, Vernon and Keats were members of the Louisville Charter Committee of 1828. Vernon Avenue, however, was formerly known as Bowles Lane.

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.



*The American Printing House for the Blind, ca. 1883.
Image Courtesy of the Callahan Museum/American Printing House for the Blind.*

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The Clifton Community Council

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