

Author's Note:

Many thanks to many resources that helped contribute to this understanding and summary of Mill Creek Valley, especially Vivian Gibson , Chris Naffziger, and many more.

Mill Creek Valley

Mill Creek Valley was a large swath of land, over 200 acres, that used to be full of houses, businesses, churches, important institutions, and schools. The area that was known as Mill Creek is around Jefferson and Market streets. The official boundaries can be looked up [here](#).

When St. Louis was started as a European city in the mid 1700s, it was located near the Mississippi River because it was an access point for water travel. As more people moved and settled in St. Louis, they continued moving west away from the river. One of those first settlements were small houses near Market, Jefferson, Olive, and other streets. Many European immigrants filled these settlements, but as the city grew and the white immigrants became wealthier they moved away from the city (further west). The city was an industrial center that featured a lot of pollution and smog in the air. The vacancies left in the city were filled with poorer individuals. After the Civil War many African Americans from the South moved into Mill Creek Valley. Wealthier African Americans would choose to move into The Ville, rather than Mill Creek, because it was further from the industrial warehouses and factories.

The houses within Mill Creek were not always in good condition. Many landlords, often European Americans, did not take care of the homes that they rented out to the Mill Creek residents. But the Mill Creek residents, often just freed African Americans from the South, had very little option or sway with their landlords. They often had little money and did not feel they had the rights to complain about the condition of the houses. For the residents that did own their houses, they often lacked the funds and loans necessary from banks to fix their homes. A lot of houses continued to not even

have indoor plumbing right up until the 1950s. It was also made worse by pay discrimination and other forms of discrimination, both legal and not, that kept African Americans in St. Louis from earning a livable wage to help keep houses in proper upkeep. The city of St. Louis also did not do their part to help keep the streets and sidewalks in equal condition to other parts of the city. Many streets had severe potholes and broken sidewalks. They would use all these reasons to justify Mill Creek's demolition in the mid 1950s.

Despite all the struggles that Mill Creek had, it was still one of the few options left to African Americans fleeing an even harsher south. As a result, by the mid 1950s, it was home to about 20,000 African American residents. It had many important institutions and schools. It also had thriving churches, businesses, and activities. Specific places will be covered in the next section. The community itself was self-contained and had all of the places necessary to shop, eat, go to school, and do all the things you needed to do within this African American community. It was a place for fun and playing with your neighbors as well as a place to support each other. People remember it being a place of fun, safety, warmth, escaping racism, and real happy times. The community was very close to each member within the Mill Creek Valley.

The Mill Creek Demolition

In the 1950s, the business community pressed the mayor at the time to build a highway going from downtown to the west of St. Louis and to make spaces for businesses, industrial warehouses, and other uses. The area they looked to destroy was Mill Creek. The highway was the main justification, but the area needed to construct it was only a tiny tiny fraction of the parts that were ultimately destroyed. They also justified its demolition by blaming the deteriorating houses and streets on the Mill Creek Residents (rather than their landlords). Many residents were frustrated by this accusation because the reasons they could not fix their houses and streets were due to reasons out of their control (pay discrimination, banks refusing them loans, landlords not fixing their properties).

Specific Places:

City Hospital No. 2:

In 1918, City Hospital No. 2 was founded and took over the old Barnes Medical College building, with Dr. Roscoe Haskell as the first superintendent. This hospital was the first and only African American hospital until the Homer G. Phillips hospital opened in 1936. The hospital officially opened on January 1, 1919, with 500 beds, 16 “internes,” and 56 nurses.

The hospital was often filled over its capacity due to servicing such a large community . Because of this the building deteriorated and conditions within the building grew worse as time went on. It was well known that the building needed repairs, but little was done to fix them. An African American attorney, David M Grant, even took pictures of the hospital’s deterioration and still nothing was done. Eventually after one of the doctors, Dr. Bernice A. Yancey, was electrocuted by a broken X-Ray machine the city decided to help push the effort for repairs forward.

Kelland, Lara and Delaney Schurer. "City Hospital No. 2." Clio: Your Guide to History. April 13, 2020. <https://www.theclio.com/tour/1376/3>

People’s Finance Corporation Building

The People’s Finance Corporation Building had a lot of important stuff. It housed a bank for African Americans and was one of the largest in the country. According to Chris Naffziger’s article, “The building opened in 1926, and the article states that it was the only “modern building” in the country financed, constructed and occupied by African Americans. It was valued at \$400,000 and had 91 offices, seven storefronts, and, it was estimated, between 3,000 and 4,000 visitors a day. The *St. Louis American* originally had its offices in the building as well.”

The People's Finance Corporation served Black St. Louisans who were shut out of White-led financial institutions. In 1926, the Corporation opened the five story People's

Finance Building at the corner of Jefferson and Market Avenues. This building anchored the Mill Creek Valley neighborhood, just west of downtown St. Louis, as a hub of Black community and commerce. Throughout the years, a large number of Black professionals conducted business in the space, as well as serving as the headquarters for an array of Black unions and civil rights organizations.

Important organizations run within the People's Finance Building:

- Black Run newspapers (the St. Louis Argus and the St. Louis American)
- Civil Rights organizations: local chapters of the NAACP, March on Washington organization
- Black Labor organizations: Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Colored Motion Picture Operators.
- Doctors offices
- Legal firms (lawyers)

Working within the People's Finance Building was a badge of honor and the building itself provided a safe place for the African American community in St. Louis to organize and focus on how they could shape the future for black America together.

Kelland, Lara. "People's Finance Corporation/People's Finance Building." Clio: Your Guide to History. May 19, 2020. Accessed January 3, 2022.

<https://www.theclio.com/tour/1376/8>

Pine Street YMCA

The Pine Street YMCA was the social hub and meeting place for African Americans in St. Louis. It offered a gymnasium, swimming pool, meeting rooms, dorms, and a cafeteria. In white areas gyms, swimming pools, etc. would turn away black people. Within the YMCA civil rights groups would meet to discuss and organize events. The YMCA also was a safe place for black people to have fun and give back to the less fortunate.

The building itself served the black community even before it was a public YMCA. During World War II it housed and fed the segregated African American troops waiting to ship out.

During the Civil Rights movements the YMCA helped to organize support for the National March on Washington in the 1940s which called for the United States government to desegregate the military and stop hiring discrimination in the military. They were successful in convincing President FDR to sign an executive order enforcing fair hiring practices. This opened up new defense jobs to African Americans all around the country.

The YMCA continued to support the March on Washington movement throughout the Civil Rights movement. It also hosted the St. Louis branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This chapter was one of the largest and most active branches in the United States in the 1940s.

The YMCA was also a place for fun and relaxation for African American families. It held a kids camp outside of the city that was very popular called Camp Rivercliff. Each year a fundraiser was held for the camp that featured a gymnastics talent show as well as popular musicians like Duke Ellington and Nat King Cole.

Kelland, Lara and Lindsay Davis. "Pine Street YMCA." Clio: Your Guide to History. April 13, 2020. <https://www.theclio.com/tour/1376/4>

True Reformers Hall

The True Reformers Hall was located at Pine Street and Jefferson Avenue and was home to a national organization called the True Reformers. They were an African American group fighting for rights, one subject including the creation of a bank specifically for African Americans in the early 1900s. Though they were unsuccessful in the creation of a black bank they had around 3,000 active members. Eventually the True Reformers Hall was sold in foreclosure in 1912 and became a factory building.

While it was still used by the True Reformers the building hosted the reformers' version of the Veiled Prophet Ball strictly for the black community.

In its glory days, however, the True Reformers Hall even hosted the reformers' version of the Veiled Prophet Ball, this one for African Americans. The *St. Louis Palladium* newspaper reported on September 30, 1907, that the "Prophet Abdul Menelik ben-Hassin" appeared with his "Queen of the East" in the annual visitation of the African prophet. There were prizes: \$5 for the gold medal and \$3 for the silver. John B. Vashon, the famous African American educator, was the secretary of the organization; [Vashon High School](#) was named after him and his father.

Jefferson Bank and Trust Company

The Jefferson Bank and Trust Company at the edge of the former Mill Creek Valley became the center of one of the most famous civil rights demonstrations in St. Louis history. Just north of where the *Green Book* reported a row of hotels on Jefferson serving African Americans, the bank sat at the intersection of Jefferson with Washington Avenue, on the former site of the Coliseum and Uhrig's Cave. From late 1964 into early 1965, daily protests demanded the hiring of more African Americans.

References to cite:

Kelland, Lara and Delaney Schurer. "City Hospital No. 2." Clio: Your Guide to History. April 13, 2020. <https://www.theclio.com/tour/1376/3>

Kelland, Lara and Lindsay Davis. "Pine Street YMCA." Clio: Your Guide to History. April 13, 2020. <https://www.theclio.com/tour/1376/4>

Kelland, Lara. "People's Finance Corporation/People's Finance Building." Clio: Your Guide to History. May 19, 2020. <https://www.theclio.com/tour/1376/8>

Naffziger, C. (2019, September 26). *Centers of community that were destroyed in the Mill Creek Valley*. <https://www.stlmag.com/api/content/052b1120-dfab-11e9-b03e-12f1225286c6/>