

SECTION H - HISTORY OF EAST LAWRENCE

Adapted from the *Draft Old Town East Lawrence Neighborhood Plan* presented to the Lawrence/Douglas County Planning Commission, September 25, 1995.

In the 1930s the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration described Lawrence as “having the atmosphere of a nineteenth century New England town with brick paved streets, low retaining walls, broad landscaped lawns and old mansions of brick and stone.” Unfortunately, this popular image is deceptive, ignoring a history that is far more diverse and significant than that of a colonial American culture transferred to the Kansas plains.¹

Lawrence’s oldest, most ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood is East Lawrence. Representing the residential development from the settlement period to the middle of the twentieth century, East Lawrence is filled with readily identifiable examples of the city’s social, economic, political and cultural history. Its unique and vernacular historic architecture, much of which dates to the late nineteenth century reflects that of a predominantly working class, ethnically diverse neighborhood. Early residents were the carpenters, craftsmen, laborers who built the houses and business places in East Lawrence, Downtown, old West Lawrence and other neighborhoods. World famous poet and author Langston Hughes resided in East Lawrence for a significant portion of his childhood. The neighborhood contains one of the city’s oldest extant houses, the Eldridge Residence at 945 Rhode Island built in 1857, as well as many other surviving structures of the infamous raid by Quantrill’s bushwhackers in 1863.

Today, East Lawrence continues to reflect its past and is recognized as a historic neighborhood containing a unique collection of architectural and cultural landscape resources. It is a vibrant neighborhood with growing community pride and is unique among Lawrence neighborhoods for its ethnic and economic diversity. Unfortunately, deteriorating housing stock and infrastructure and encroaching development threaten the neighborhood’s future. The neighborhood and the city face a unique challenge to merge the past with the future. As a diverse neighborhood containing a variety of historic resources, conservation, renovation and preservation of the existing building stock, streetscapes and character defining elements is a goal supported by a large percentage of neighborhood residents. At the same time, the thriving Downtown business area, that remains the heart of the city, borders the neighborhood. Residents and property owners of East Lawrence find themselves in the delicate position of preserving the neighborhood’s history and quality of residential life while supporting the inevitable changes necessary to keep the neighborhood and the city a healthy, thriving community.

Settlement Period (1854-1863)

Established in September 1854, the town of Lawrence grew rapidly during its first decade. The first settlers came from the Border States north of the Ohio River, Europe, New England, and joined native Americans and African Americans.

East Lawrence's strategic location made it one of the principle districts of development during Lawrence's early history. Despite being surrounded by major transportation routes—Massachusetts on the west, the river to the north and the railroad to the east—East Lawrence's early residential, commercial and industrial development did not become established until after the Civil and Border wars ended in 1864. Also influencing building patters was the Lane-Jenkins Claim dispute that limited the ability to purchase land with a clear title.

The lack of sewers, poor sanitation habits and elevation of the original townsite, earned East Lawrence its first name "The Bottoms." Residents perceived East Lawrence as unhealthy to live in,

1 Ambler, Cathy. "Identity formation in the East Lawrence Neighborhood," Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas. 1991), p. 15.

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and lacking a safe water supply. Additionally, Quantrill's raiders murdered a significant portion of East Lawrence residents along with residents of the rest of Lawrence, reducing the population of the neighborhood. The route of the raid and infamous sacking of Lawrence that August day in 1863, can still be physically traced through East Lawrence to the other historic neighborhoods, including Downtown, Old West Lawrence, Pinckney, and Oread. The settlement problems and physical characteristics that contributed to East Lawrence's early identity are clearly reflected in the 1865 tax records: vacant land was valued at \$2 per lot in East Lawrence and \$5 per lot in West Lawrence.

City Building Period (1864-1873)

The post-war era marked by the establishment of a railroad line to Lawrence in 1864 ushered in a period of robust growth. This brief period in the city's history began with the completion of the rail line and the rebuilding of the town after Quantrill's raid. The era ended with the national economic panic of 1873. The advent of the railroad, development of agriculture in the surrounding region, and commercial growth typified the town during this period.

This period of development is the most significant in terms of establishing the image of East Lawrence as a mixed-ethnic, working-class neighborhood. Lawrence's increase in population from 1,645 in 1860 to 8,320 in 1870, and its designation as the "Head City" (freight terminal for goods going west), combined to aid Lawrence's development as a significant manufacturing center. Because of its strategic location near river and rail lines, almost all of the major manufacturing facilities located in the what is today the of East Lawrence neighborhood. Among the industries that located in the neighborhood were shirt, chemical, plow, carriage and wagon, soap, basket and furniture factories along with woolen and flourmills.

The location of the manufacturing facilities in East Lawrence secured its identity as a working-class neighborhood. Men and women could easily walk from their homes and boarding houses to their jobs on Massachusetts Street and the booming industrial area along the river's edge. As noted by local historian Paul Caviness, most individuals lived no more than three to four blocks from their employment.ⁱ The pedestrian nature of the neighborhood proved inviting to small grocery stores and local social institutions and churches.

A good indicator of the number and variety of ethnic groups which resided in East Lawrence can be found in the variety of church and social institutions formed during this period. By 1873, the city directory lists the following churches: German Evangelical, Swedish Lutheran, English Lutheran and African Methodist Episcopal. In addition, the Turnverein Hall, a German-American social club and gymnasium, remains one of the monumental structures in the neighborhood.

As historian Cathy Ambler notes, this ethnic and working class background did not ennoble East Lawrence's image to residents of other neighborhoods of Lawrence with social and economic aspirations. The newspapers also played a role in fostering a disparaging image of East Lawrence. While members of the local press constantly make recommendations for improvements in West Lawrence, the newspapers usually focused on the poor living conditions, problems with ethnic groups and the lower standard of living when addressing the needs of East Lawrence. The cultural prejudices towards ethnic populations as well as the perception of East Lawrence as an inferior middle- and working class neighborhood, continued in subsequent decades.

Agricultural and Manufacturing Period (1874-1899)

Rapid growth in Lawrence came to a halt with the nationwide recession, known as the Panic of 1873. Because of its dependence on the rail lines Lawrence felt the effect of the collapse of the railroad bond market. The residents of East Lawrence who depended on regional transportation of manufacture goods and supplied the labor for manufacturing and shipping concerns, in particular felt the effects of the market's collapse. Adding to the economic decline was the decay and eventual demolition of the main railroad bridge across the Kaw River (the LLG Bridge) in the 1880s. Many of the manufacturing plants vital to the neighborhood went out of business, including the largest

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employer, the Consolidated Barbed Wire Company. Closing in 1899, Consolidated Barbed Wire, founded in 1878, established Lawrence as the "Barb Wire Capital of the West" and employed over 375 individuals. Although a few smaller manufacturing firms provided some degree of stability, the lack of employment opportunities led many residents to leave East Lawrence for more secure communities or new opportunities. Many residential structures became vacant and began to decay. By 1899 Lawrence's business community and residents abandoned their dream of establishing Lawrence as a great industrial city.

University Town Period (1900-1945)

As the city's economic focus changed to support the growing University of Kansas, West Lawrence saw an influx of population and investment, while East Lawrence saw little or no investment. Two major neighborhood investment initiatives came toward the end of this period with the construction of a new New York School facility in 1934 and the construction of a German prisoner-of-war camp in 1944.

The detrimental image of East Lawrence as a deteriorating and economically unstable area continued to plague the neighborhood. The perception can be documented in both the *Lawrence Social Survey* (1917) and the *1930 City Plan*, which again defined East Lawrence as the "Bottoms." The movement from the neighborhood to other areas of town reinforced negative perceptions. In 1936, the Social Service League moved its thrift store to its present location on Rhode Island Street. As older immigrants began to die and new residents joined the first settler's children, the social activities and shared cultural ties of the previously close knit East Lawrence community disappeared.

Post-War Period (1945-1970) From the 1940s through the 1960s, while the rest of Lawrence grew, changed and prospered, East Lawrence remained essentially the same. The only major civic investment in the neighborhood was the construction of the municipal baseball park at 11th and Delaware streets in 1948 in the futile hope of attracting minor league baseball team to Lawrence. The perception of East Lawrence as the "bottoms" continued well into the 1970s. The *Lawrence Area Neighborhood Analysis* (1972) ranked East Lawrence as one of the City's major areas of blight.

A number of elements contributed to the increasing decline of the neighborhood, including the City's lack of maintenance of existing infrastructure. However, the establishment of multi-family zoning, despite the overwhelming single-family use up to 1966, and the decrease in the number of owner-occupied dwellings were the major contributors to the steeper decline of the neighborhood.

Rebirth (1970-1999)

The last 25 years of East Lawrence's history brought change to the neighborhood's self-image and community spirit. As long-time residents died, the lower cost of housing encouraged both an influx of younger residents and rental-housing investors, causing a decline in the owner-occupancy rate from 1979 to the present. The social and political changes of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement and increased community activism involved many East Lawrence residents. Activists established Afro-House (946 ½ Rhode Island), a safe haven for African-Americans working for civil rights in Lawrence, on East 10th Street. Galvanized by a proposal to develop a major transportation loop through the heart of the neighborhood (the Haskell Loop), residents reformed the neighborhood association (the East Lawrence Improvement Association), founded Penn House and the East Side Community Grocery. These new organizations together with the neighborhood's commitment to improving the neighborhood created a renewed sense of community.

The Present (2000)

Today, East Lawrence continues to seek an increase in community spirit and in the quality of neighborhood life. The neighborhoods distinct identity and preservation are beginning to be recognized as vital to the further well being of the rest of the city. A walk through the streets of East Lawrence is a step back in time – homes that survived Quantrill's Raid, the mansions of Lawrence's

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East Lawrence Neighborhood Revitalization Plan - Background Studies

late nineteenth industrial magnates, the quiet streets of an early-twentieth-century university town, the effects of the post-war boom -- all within walking distance of the equally historic Downtown and Old West Lawrence neighborhoods. East Lawrence's physical and historical heritage is a valuable resource of Lawrence, joining the city's other historic neighborhoods, its natural beauty, infrastructure and people as assets to be protected and nurtured. The City must recognize this economic and cultural asset and work with the property owners and residents to develop a plan to strengthen, preserve and enhance the neighborhood as a unique element that enhances the economic and cultural diversity of all of Lawrence.
