



THE HISTORY OF CLIFTON

WRITTEN BY THE CINCINNATI HISTORICAL SOCIETY | 2025

FOUNDATION & EARLY RESIDENTS

Clifton's topography was shaped by glacial activity during the Pleistocene Epoch. Around 700,000 years ago, the Licking River flowed north through what is now known as the Mill Creek valley, joining the ancient Teays River system further north. After passing Clifton to the west, it turned northeast, merging with the flow from the Vine Street ravine, establishing Clifton's northern boundary and starting the formation of its eastern boundary. The southern boundary consists of the steep Dixmyth ravine, which rises from the western Mill Creek valley to meet Burnet Woods. On a topographical map, Clifton appears as an "island" surrounded by rivers and valleys with a relief of 100 feet or more, forming the physical setting for the village of Clifton.

In 1837, Charles Clarkson, a pork merchant, purchased land on the west side of Irwin's Mill Road (later Clifton Avenue in 1850) and named it Clifton Farm, which he primarily used for grazing. The name Clifton is derived from Old English words meaning a settlement (ton) on a cliff, describing the hilltop location. On the east side of Irwin's Mill Road, Nicholas Longworth owned most of the land and rented it to farmers and gardeners. Most of the area's population resided on Longworth's tract. Due to business difficulties, Clarkson transferred his assets to Lafayette Bank, his main creditor, which then began selling the former farm piece by piece.

The completion of the Cincinnati-Hamilton-Dayton railroad increased the area's appeal for residential development. Originally belonging to Millcreek Township, Clifton became an independent village on March 23, 1850. The boundaries of the village followed the roads built along the waterways described above with Millcreek Parkway (now Central Parkway) and Carthage Turnpike (now Vine/ Ruther Streets), but its southern boundary was the centerline of Howell Avenue, which extended eastward and intersected with Jefferson Avenue. The only part of (now) Burnet Woods in the original Village of Clifton was the northwest triangle owned privately, which became part of Burnet Woods a few years after annexation.

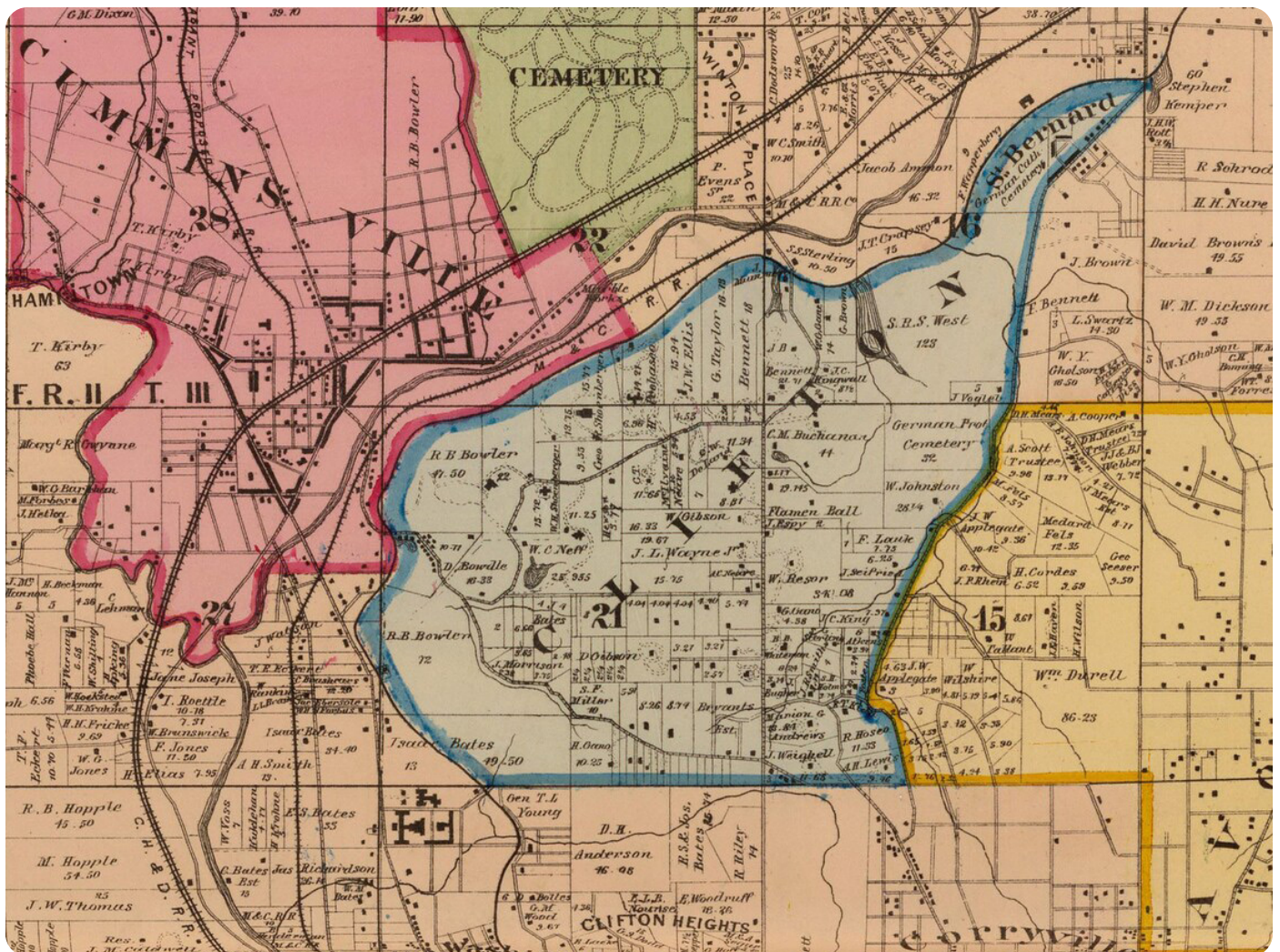


IMAGE: THE VILLAGE OF CLIFTON FROM THE CINCINNATI AND HAMILTON CO. ATLAS, 1869

At that time, there were scattered houses and several farms. Some houses from this period of the 1850s and 60s still exist, including Neave/Sabin House (1859) on Lafayette Avenue, built for industrialist Alexander Neave. The latter part of the nineteenth century saw the development of large estates north of McAlpin (then known as Central Avenue) featuring gardens, parkland, and woodlands. Prominent businesspeople moved to Clifton to escape downtown pollution and health hazards, including Henry Probasco, Robert Buchanan, Salmon P. Chase, George Schoenberger, Alexander McDonald, Robert Bowler, Rueben and William Resor, William Neff, and later, several households and generations of the Rawson family. Landscape architect Adolph Strauch designed the grounds of many estates, including Mount Storm Park, home of Robert Bowler, and eventually became the first superintendent of Cincinnati's parks, designing Burnet Woods and Eden Park as well.

SECTION: THE HISTORY OF CLIFTON

BUSINESSES & INSTITUTIONS

The southern part of Clifton was more densely settled, including a business district along Cumminsville Pike (now Ludlow Avenue), concentrated at its intersection with Clifton Avenue. Businesses started here at the end of the 19th century and consolidated through the 1920s, thanks to the arrival of streetcars from the city basin beginning in the 1890s. Architectural styles included Victorian, Queen Anne, Four Square, and eclectic designs. The teens and 1920s saw the construction of Tudor-style houses and Bungalows. Many majestic apartment buildings were constructed, providing homes for professionals working at the University of Cincinnati and thousands of commuters working downtown. The northwest portion of (now) Burnet Woods (acquired by Cincinnati in 1872, when Clifton was still an independent village) was then privately owned land in the village of Clifton, with horse stables that created an equestrian hub. That land was later donated, expanding the existing public park. Scouts from the community of Clifton erected a Christmas Tree there for many years.

Clifton was always intended to be residential rather than a place to work. Central Avenue was Clifton's first publicly funded street, designed specifically for residential use. Workplaces were located down the hill in the basin. Workers were connected by roads located along village edges but not running directly through it. The intersection of Clifton and Central avenues was the village's first nucleus, establishing the centers of civic life - a school (The Resor Academy), a public hall, a firehouse, and the municipal pound.

Clifton was developed with the intention of providing a high quality of life, starting with public education. Prior to Clifton's incorporation in 1844, a quarter-acre lot was acquired at Clifton and Lafayette Circle, where a log school measuring ten by thirteen feet was constructed just after incorporation in 1850.

Buchanan, Salmon P. Chase (who served as Senator of Ohio, Governor, Secretary of the Treasury, and later Supreme Court Justice), and William



IMAGE: HISTORIC RESOR ACADEMY, NOW THE CLIFTON NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL

(IMAGE TAKEN BY WARREN LeMAY, 2019)

Resor acquired land at Clifton and Central to establish the Resor Academy. The neighborhood school remains at this original location to this day. In 1868, resident Henry Probasco urged the village council to encourage a pedestrian lifestyle by installing limestone sidewalks for health benefits and improved aesthetics. At the time of Clifton's annexation to Cincinnati, Clifton's last mayor, Sir Alfred T. Goshorn, entreated the city to uphold and complete the vision of Clifton's founders to transform Clifton and McAlpin avenues into parkways. He also urged a commitment to plow all sidewalks after each snow event and to assign two police officers in Clifton during daytime hours and four officers at night. Also high on the wish list was a new Firehouse and a new School. Both of those had become antiquated in their original location and needed to be replaced. The City of Cincinnati built a Firehouse and Clifton School in 1906.



IMAGE: GEORGE B. COX HOUSE, NOW THE CLIFTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

(IMAGE TAKEN BY JOSH LIPNIK, 2022)

ANNEXATION TO TODAY

In the late nineteenth century, Cincinnati sought to annex several westward, eastward, and northward villages. It became painfully clear that Clifton's independence would come to an end. Most Clifton residents strongly opposed annexation and did everything possible to salvage the "quality of life" villagers had established for themselves. After many votes that had allowed Cliftonites to reject annexation, an Ohio state law was changed by the lobbying efforts

of "Boss" George B. Cox, and annexation was forced in 1896. Ballots were counted citywide, replacing the previous method that allowed the neighborhoods to be annexed to vote against annexation. Just months later, Cox and his wife moved into their new Hannaford-designed manor in Clifton - "Parkview" - now the location of our public branch library!

As one of Cincinnati's 52 neighborhoods, Clifton has maintained its spirit of independence and a strong quality of life, and it is still a cultural center due in part to our ethnic diversity. We have among our residents the largest percentage of citizens in the region who were born outside of the US, as well as artists, professors, physicians, executives, professionals, public

servants, and intellectuals.

A high level of education underpins the community's reputed "maverick" streak.

Several resident-led campaigns have successfully saved or repurposed establishments and services like the Esquire Theater, Diggs Plaza, Clifton Plaza, the Clifton Market, the old branch library, and the Ludlow Garage. At the same time, we've embraced the needs of our future together, supporting the creation of an essential new neighborhood school and a contemporary, LEED-certified, tailor-made Clifton Cultural Arts Center.



IMAGES:

TOP-THE PRESERVATION OF THE ESQUIRE THEATRE (AS ILLUSTRATED BY JIM BORGMAN OF THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER)

MIDDLE-ESQUIRE THEATER IN 1983 (IMAGE FROM CINCINNATI REFINED)

BOTTOM-ESQUIRE THEATER IN 2019 (IMAGE TAKEN BY PHIL ARMSTRONG)



Clifton – it's a place that's always been **shaped and conserved by its residents, businesses, and institutions**, who together have managed, somehow, through debate and compromise, to find balance within our dual preservationist and futurist tendencies. While not always wrought in harmony, the process is **what makes this place unforgettable, beloved, and vibrant.**