



History of Fairmont



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Introduction



Two of Fairmont's numerous Churches. Left: St. John Vinnay. Right: Kingdom Hall of Jehova's Witnesses

Fairmont is a small, urban, unincorporated neighborhood located between Lockport and Joliet in Will County, Illinois. As an unincorporated region, Fairmont does not have direct municipal oversight such as a city does. Fairmont is under the governance of Lockport Township and Will County. Will County is home to numerous unincorporated areas, but Fairmont is unique because of its density, and urban-like small lot sizes. It is predominately comprised of single family homes with 89.4% of the 824 total homes identified as single family, detached structures surrounded by small scale agriculture or open space and platted land that was never developed. Because Fairmont does not have direct municipal oversight, it does not have sidewalks, storm drains or street lights. This was not a problem when the population was small, because the need for this type of infrastructure was not as great. Residents moved to the area for its “county charm” in the city, but as the population continued to grow so did the need for these services. Unincorporated areas are frequently annexed into neighboring municipalities, which provides the sidewalks, street lights and other amenities. In the case of Fairmont, there has never been a sufficient tax base for surrounding cities to be interested in annexation. Since Fairmont is unincorporated, residents pay less in taxes because they are paying just to Will County. Garbage pickup is an additional expense. Between the early 1900’s up until the 1980’s many residents had free water from private wells on their properties.

Fairmont has one local elementary school that serves kindergarten through eighth grade students, housing approximately 250 total students. Many students walk to school in the street because of the lack of sidewalks, causing a concern for their safety. Currently Will County is piloting a project to address this issue by constructing 1,000 feet of sidewalk leading up to the school. This is part of the “Safe Routes to School” project which is a national program that improves the safety and accessibility around schools. Generally speaking, counties do not take on projects of this nature for unincorporated neighborhoods because they often lack the population density to warrant sidewalks. Despite Fairmont’s increasing infrastructure issues, residents are very clear they are staying for better or worse. Many residents have been in the neighborhood since the 1950’s, with some living in the homes they built upon first arriving in the northern part of the U.S. Resident’s sense of connection to the land and neighborhood is strong, and they are willing to stay and fight for improvements, rather than move to a nearby municipality that has desired amenities.

Fairmont was platted in the early 1900's and evidence of early residents date back to the 1870's. The population of Fairmont and neighboring Joliet grew in conjunction as Eastern European and Irish immigrants moved to Illinois to work on the construction of the Illinois & Michigan Canal (I&M Canal), the Rock Island Railroad, and the Illinois Ship and Sanitary Canal. By the 1950's Fairmont was growing from uncharted territory into an established neighborhood. The Great Migration of African Americans from Southern to Northern United States after World II contributed to this growth. Migrants moved to work in the previously booming manufacturing industry, and expanded the population of Joliet considerably. With access to good paying jobs in close proximity, low taxes, and plentiful land, Fairmont was a premier destination in the 1940's and 1950's. The population continued to grow and residents opened up stores, taverns, and small businesses that served the neighborhood. Around the late 1960's and 1970's, Fairmont, which until this point had experienced steady growth, began to lose population. This was mainly due to the loss of manufacturing. Residents began to move, or aged out of the neighborhood and many of the small businesses went with them. In the 1960's the United States began to see an increase in the construction of large scale public housing developments. The City of Joliet built two housing developments in close proximity to Fairmont that saw problems not uncommon to any public housing built during this time. Unfortunately the problems of the public housing combined with high unemployment rates and population loss in Fairmont transformed the neighborhood into a very different place from what it was in the 1950's.

Currently, Fairmont is home to a changing population with a growing number of Hispanic residents moving in. The housing stock has changed as Habitat for Humanity began building homes, and new independent contractors have moved in and are increasing the variety of homes. The Will County Land Use Department recently developed a neighborhood plan with the assistance of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) that is a guide to assist in the future growth of Fairmont. At this time the County is in the process of implementing this plan, and residents have organized a community group, Fairmont Community Partnership, that is working to advocate for the needs of Fairmont. Fairmont once again is undergoing many changes, and the following section will detail its history.

This document is one of the implementation steps that came out of the Fairmont Neighborhood Plan, developed by CMAP. Presently there is little documented history of the area, and its long legacy lives on in the memories and photo albums of its residents. If this history is not captured, Fairmont's long, rich legacy is at risk of being lost. This document is the product of numerous interviews with community residents, leaders, elected officials, and government employees familiar with the area. This information, combined with newspaper articles, photographs generously donated by residents, plat maps, census data and well records, helped develop this history. Will County has taken this project on to continue the process of providing a sense of identity for the community. While Fairmont has a rich history, and a number of long term residents, the neighborhood is undergoing change and does not have a strong overarching identity. This document seeks to contribute to Fairmont's identity, and to show that this neighborhood is a unique place in Will County with a history worth preserving.

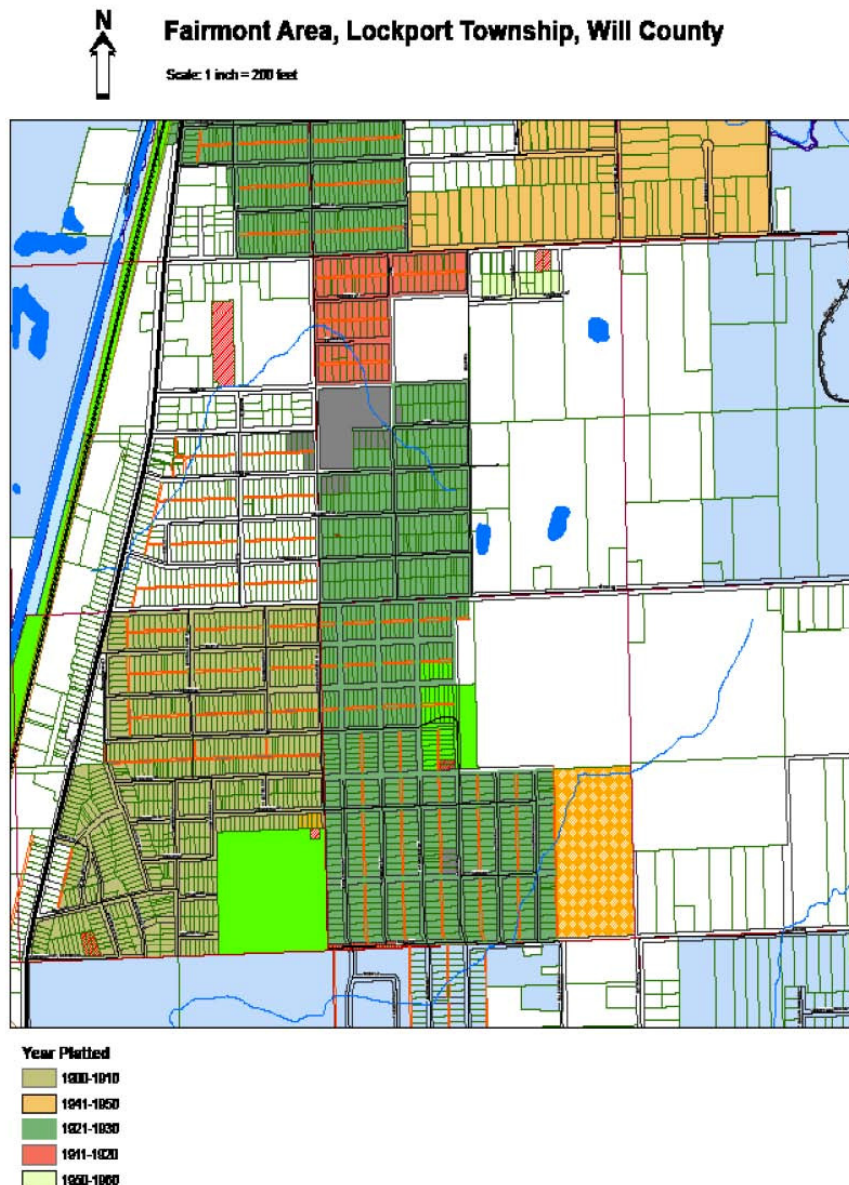


Early Migration into Fairmont Late 1800's through early 1900's



Image: Russian Grove Cemetary Headstone from 1913

One of the earliest documented residents of Fairmont was Isaac Nobes, an English immigrant who owned the Oak Hill Quarry in Joliet in 1873. Nobes built his home on what is now Nobes Avenue and Illinois Route 171, which was said to have had a perfect view of the Des Plaines River Valley. The Nobes Mansion was just one of the beautiful homes that existed in Fairmont and reflects the architectural influence of the immigrants who once lived there. While some older homes still exist, many have since been demolished after becoming vacant and falling into disrepair. The Nobes Mansion does not exist anymore. Over time it became too much work for Nobes and his wife to keep up by themselves, and they sold the property. The size of the Nobes mansion was too large, and likely too expensive to be sold or rented out as a single family dwelling, so the new owner converted it into apartments. It is unclear what happened to the apartments, but in the 1970's the Will County Code Enforcement Department demolished the building after it sat vacant for 10 years. Neglect had turned the building into an unsafe structure.



There is little to no documented history on the early years of Fairmont, (prior to 1940) but it can be inferred that residents worked in the same industries as Joliet residents and were of a similar ethnic composition.

Major Industry that Attracted Immigration:

Illinois & Michigan Canal Construction 1836-1848

The I&M Canal runs for 96 miles from Chicago to La Salle, Illinois and its construction attracted a large number of Irish, German, and Swedish immigrants to assist in its construction. The construction of the Rock Island Railroad in 1852 provided an alternative method to transport goods that was cheaper and faster, effectively rendering the canal obsolete. The construction of the canal did encourage the growth of Joliet and surrounding areas when limestone was discovered. Joliet was known as the "City of Stone" for its abundance of limestone. In the 1900's Indiana's limestone was found to be superior thereby reducing Joliet's limestone output and total number of jobs. The most significant aspect of the I & M Canal was the growth of the manufacturing industry for Joliet.

Illinois Ship and Sanitary Canal Construction 1892-1900

The Illinois Ship and Sanitary canal went from Chicago to Lockport and was originally constructed to send pollution out of a growing Chicago, south to Missouri. The construction of this canal attracted and employed many Eastern European immigrants in the Joliet region. The canal was a prominent shipping route until the 1950's when the Calumet Harbor began receiving a larger volume of ships, taking a significant amount of business away from the Illinois Ship and Sanitary Canal.

The Joliet Correctional Center 1858-2002

The Joliet Correctional Center was a large customer of the nearby limestone quarries as it is built predominately out of limestone. The architect of the project was a man by the name of William Boyington, who is well known for designing Chicago's original water tower in 1867. The correctional center currently sits vacant as a potential tourist destination right off of route 171 in neighboring Forest Park. Its closure resulted in a large number of layoffs which took place over an extended period of time until the complete closure in 2002.

U.S. Steel 1869-1986

U.S. Steel (formerly the Joliet Steel Plant) was built in 1869 and attracted thousands of Eastern European immigrants to the area. The nearby railroad serviced the steel mill and contributed to its success. During this time, Joliet was becoming a center of activity because it was in a position to export and import goods through multiple water ways. The Illinois Ship and Sanitary Canal, the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern (EJ&E) railroad and the I & M Canal allowed for the movement of limestone, steel and other materials used during World War II. U.S. Steel and the national steel industry as a whole saw massive competition and layoffs during the 1970's and 1980's due to international competition.

Kopper's Coke Oven Plant 1907-1980's

Kopper's was acquired by U.S. Steel and worked in conjunction with it to create wood byproducts that could be used by various wartime industries.

Joliet Arsenal 1940-1970's

The Joliet Arsenal, otherwise known as the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant, was another large employer found in nearby Wilmington. Located approximately fifteen miles south of Fairmont it served to produce ammunition and explosives during World War II and was shut down after the war ended in 1945. The plant later reopened in 1951 through 1957 for production during the Korean War and again from 1965 to 1976 during the Vietnam War. The plant finally ceased operations in the late 1970's and officially shut its doors in 1992. These periods of on and off operations may have contributed to unstable employment for nearby residents. The land now hosts many uses including a military cemetery, an inland port and a national tallgrass prairie.

Rock Island Railroad 1852-Present

The Rock Island Railroad established in 1852 in Joliet worked in conjunction with the Joliet Steel Mill to transport goods throughout the region. Metra currently uses the train lines for commuter trains to Chicago.

Fairmont is home to two cemeteries, both of which have a rich history and are the oldest relics of history in the area.

Russian Grove Early 1900's - Present

The Russian Grove Cemetary sits to the northern side of A.F. Hill Park, and was an area used for picnics by the members of the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church which used to be located in Fairmont. Remnants of its old pavilion can still be seen in the foundation of the current Bethlehem Apostolic Church. At one time, the pavilion was a popular location for picnics, dances and other communal uses after residents attended church. Today the cemetery does not appear to be frequented, and the upkeep is minimal. Yet, it still bears the mark of its Eastern European heritage which was Russian, Greek, and Serbian. There are still grave markers in the cemetery with Eastern European characters to denote the placement of graves. The pavilion stopped being used in 1959 when the church moved to Joliet. St. Nicholas Orthodox Church built a new cemetery in 1981, and many bodies were exhumed from the Russian Grove cemetery and moved to the new Joliet location.



Entrance to the Russian Grove Cemetery



Images taken of the Russian Grove Cemetery

Mt. Cavalry Cemetery Late 1920's-1980's

St. Mary's Assumption Church is the current property owner of the Mt. Cavalry Cemetery. There is not much information available on this site, but the church, similar to the Russian Grove Cemetery, has since moved out of Fairmont. St. Mary's Assumption was established in 1917 in Joliet near Fairmont, and their cemetery was built in what is now considered Fairmont. Similar to St. Nicholas Orthodox Church the congregation was made up of Russian, Slovakian, and Ukrainian members and moved in the late 1980's.

Second Wave of Migration: 1950's through 1980's



Images of Fairmont Church & Home

The second wave of migration Fairmont saw was African American migrants moving from the south for the booming industry and wide range of available jobs found in Joliet at the time. Many residents described Fairmont as country living in the city, and chose to live in an unincorporated neighborhood for its rural charm, and cheap land prices. During the 1950's through the 1970's Fairmont was a melting pot of cultures. Residents of different ethnic backgrounds lived on the same block harmoniously, although there was some racial division at the time, such as Oak Street, which historically has been a dividing line between White and African American homeowners.

Shiloh Baptist Church 1947 - Present

Shiloh Baptist Church is, and has been, a very influential and strong organization in Fairmont. Not only does it have its roots anchored to the community, but its membership is composed of locals and neighboring residents. Shiloh was originally built in 1907 in Lockport, and relocated in 1947 to be closer to its parishoners. In 1957 the Church expanded to accommodate a growing membership. In 1963 Reverend James Walton became the pastor and pushed forth with a renovation for the church. He was such an influential community member that "Reverend Walton Drive" in Fairmont was named after him in 1990. In 2002 Shiloh Baptist Church acquired 42 acres of land in Fairmont and has since rebuilt a larger church with the capacity to better serve a greater population.

Habitat for Humanity Started Building 1988 - Present

Fairmont has approximately thirty Habitat for Humanity Homes; which are built in communities with a need for decent, affordable housing. The program provides families with a no interest loan to purchase the house, and requires partnership of 350 hours of sweat equity to build the home. The reception of Habitat homes in the Fairmont Community has been mixed. While this organization provides an essential service to families in need of a home, the Habitat Homes are very easily identifiable as such.

Many of the Fairmont residents migrated to the area from the South where “shotgun houses” are a prevalent form of architecture. These homes may be identified by their small size and lack of hallways. They received their name from their construction which would allow for a “bullet to go straight through the front door to the back without hitting a wall”. They are remembered by many as indicative of poverty and a life residents moved north to get away from. The Habitat Homes, as can be seen in the picture below, are of a similar design to shotgun houses. They are modest, simple homes that all follow the same design. Residents expressed concern about the zoning of the Habitat Homes because the setbacks are often too relaxed or not large enough to keep the appearance of the homes consistent with the rest of the community. These homes may provide housing to those in need, but residents feel they brand Fairmont as a poor community. The majority of residents in these homes are coming from outside of Fairmont.



Image: Fairmont Habitat for Humanity Home
Source: Will County Habitat for Humanity



Image: Example of Shotgun style home
Source: Wikipedia commons

Fairmont School 1909 - Present

The Fairmont School is located in central Fairmont, in its own school district which is designated predominately for children from Fairmont but captures a small portion of residents in unincorporated Will County to the West. The original building was two stories, but has since been rebuilt after it burned down. A second school, named A.F. Hill School, was built to house the students displaced during the fire in the 1950's. As the population of Fairmont continued to increase, the A.F. Hill school was converted into a kindergarten in 1959 once Fairmont School was rebuilt. The Fairmont school's enrollment dropped from its peak of 500 students in the 1960's to about half that number currently. Because of this drop in enrollment, the A.F. Hill School was closed in the 1970's. Currently Fairmont School is open and serves kindergarten through eighth grade students.



A.F. Hill School 1959 - 1970's

The A.F. Hill School was built as a temporary school after a fire burned down the original Fairmont school on Green Garden Place. Once the Fairmont School was rebuilt, the A.F. Hill School was turned into a kindergarten to house the growing young population in Fairmont, and was later turned into a community center when the population started to decline in the 1970's.



A. F. HILL - 1971-1972 - MRS. CULVERS - GRADE 2

Image: A.F. Hill Elementary School
Photo credit: Henry Travis

A.F. Hill Park 1960's - Present

The park was named after A.F. Hill, the Superintendent of Fairmont School, in the 1940's. The park sits adjacent to the Russian Grove Cemetery, but is owned and maintained by the Lockport Township Park District.



Image: A.F. Hill Park



Dellwood Park 1905 - Present

Dellwood Park is located directly north of Fairmont in Lockport. Built in 1906 by the Chicago and Joliet Electric Railroad Company, Dellwood Park once thrived and could boast up to 15,000 visitors on weekends. The park covers a lush 150 acres, and used to house an amusement park, dancehall, restaurant and boathouse . Currently the park does not have the same amenities. The amusement park and dancehall are gone, but one can still find different forms of recreation, including playgrounds, tennis, and basketball courts.



Bridge leading from Fairmont into Dellwood Park



Outside of Dellwood Park bridge

Fairview Homes 1966 - Present

The Fairview Homes are a Joliet Housing Authority property consisting of 168 units of low income housing on Rosalind Avenue in the Forest Park neighborhood of Joliet. Their close proximity to Fairmont, density, and lack of upkeep, has had a large effect on Fairmont. Built in 1966 the Fairview Homes were said to be beautiful, described as “country living in the projects”. They were a place where residents could escape the city life and raise their children with a backyard. A resident described Fairview Homes by saying that “when you first moved in, you would be so careful to keep up your apartment you wouldn’t even put a nail in the wall to hang a picture”. Currently the Fairview Homes are facing numerous challenges, as is the Joliet Housing Authority. The crime rate is high, and the Joliet Housing Authority is having a hard time with rent collection and non residents loitering on the property and committing crimes.

The Joliet Housing Authority has experienced a tumultuous period recently, and in August of 2012 the manager of Fairview Homes resigned. We were unable to make direct contact with the Executive Director of the Joliet Housing Authority, as administrative capabilities may have been limited. As of 2009 the Housing Authority has been planning to “demolish and dispose” of the Fairview Homes to replace them with mixed income housing. No action is being taken on this at the current time.

Additionally, the Fairview Homes are not very integrated, and seem to have concentrated poverty, as did many of the housing projects built in the 1960’s, many of which have been torn down in the 2000’s. The demographics of the Fairview homes are as follows:

Occupancy by Household of Fairview Homes:	
Single Mothers	140
Single Fathers	5
2 Parent Households	4
1 Person Household	3
Total Households	152

To put the Fairview Homes in context with Fairmont, they have contributed to the perceived or real crime problem in Fairmont. The outside of the buildings and the grounds in which they sit on are in poor physical condition, and the perception of crime to nonresidents is that they are a dangerous place to visit. Fairmont residents refer to the Fairview Homes as “the rail”, because there was a guard rail put in on Rosalind Avenue. This guard rail was put in to stop traffic from passing through the Fairview community into Fairmont and to stop people from committing crimes in Fairview then driving through Fairmont towards Illinois Route 171.

The residents of Fairmont were very clear that they did not want this guard rail put in.



J.A.C.O.B Public Assembly
Image courtesy of Henry Travis

In response to the guard rail a group of churches and concerned residents got together to form the Joliet Area Church Organization Basement or J.A.C.O.B.

This group included pastors from churches in Fairmont and Joliet to fight against the guard rail with a march, and protested with a large prayer group at the site of the guard rail. Despite strong community opposition, Mayor Arthur Shultz of Joliet and the Joliet Police Department put the guard rail in. The community feared that this guard rail would obstruct a direct route for emergency vehicles to the highway. Residents were very clear about the effort against the guard rail, there was not a lack of exertion on residents' parts.

Poole Gardens or Spring Bluff 1966 - Present

Poole Gardens was another housing project in the Forest Park neighborhood of Joliet that had an impact on Fairmont. Built in 1966 Poole Gardens was a 106 unit housing project located directly southwest of Fairmont. While residents do not mention Poole Gardens as having a strong negative impact on Fairmont as Fairview Homes did, it was part of the changing character of Forest Park at the time. Poole Gardens was torn down in 2007 and is currently being replaced by single family homes. The Joliet Housing Authority will construct 114 new housing units called Liberty Meadows. The style of these homes is very different from their dense predecessors, Poole Gardens. Liberty Meadows will be a single family home community with large yards and quiet streets.

Forest Park Neighborhood 1870's - Present

Forest Park is a neighborhood located directly south of Fairmont in the City of Joliet and has a demographic makeup similar to Fairmont. The neighborhood was settled in the 1870's and is part of what residents call "The Hill", which includes a portion of Fairmont. This designation can be attributed to a noticeable increase in elevation along Illinois Route 171, and describes a small geographic region. Forest Park grew in a similar manner to Fairmont, with the surrounding industry and the large influx of African American residents in the 1950's and 1960's. Though different from Fairmont, Forest Park has been more of a transitional community where residents could purchase starter homes. Forest Park residents moved away while many of Fairmont's residents stayed, and did not seek larger homes. A large difference between the neighborhoods is the presence of the Joliet Housing Authority. While Forest Park is predominately single family homes, the majority of their rental housing is owned by the Joliet Housing Authority. Forest Park has faced similar problems to Fairmont, with the main difference being that Forest Park is incorporated into the City of Joliet, giving them some more municipal oversight. The areas are closely related, and residents refer to the Forest Park/Fairmont border as part of "The Hill".



Forest Park Community Center
Source: Forest Park Community Center Website



Example of Forest Park Home
Source: Trulia

A.F. Hill Community Center 1970's - Present

The Fairmont Community Center was established in the 1970's, and is housed in the old A.F. Hill elementary school building on Barry Street. The Fairmont Community Center previously housed numerous activities for residents. The Community Center has the capacity to support numerous activities, and staff who are long term residents of the community and familiar with its needs. Around ten to fifteen years ago the Community Center began to lose a lot of its programming.



Stories were told about how the wrestling instructor was no longer able to successfully perform his duties. He was eventually asked to leave and took his equipment with him. The African Dance instructor moved away and a replacement was never found. The Lockport Township Park District provided \$3,000 to purchase games for the center. Vandals came in and destroyed them, and there was not enough money to replace what was lost.

The hallways of the building still display black and white photos reminiscent of a time long since passed when the Community Center was bustling with activity. Local law enforcement patrols the park near the center, but since Fairmont has Sheriff protection, as opposed to the police, their enforcement powers are limited at best. The Will County Sheriff's Department patrols the park in front of the Community Center once a night, which residents say is not sufficient.

Currently, the Community Center has All My Children Daycare, a playground, an open gym, a food pantry, and the Nation of Islam Church meets in their gym. The Community Center is available to be rented out for birthday parties and baby showers, but there is not much activity going on there currently. The Community Center is looking to expand their activities, but are constrained by a tight budget.



A.F. Hill Community Center & adjacent playground

Four Neighborhood Grocery Stores

Zanzola's, Grohar's, Salbego's (Owners retired in the late 1970's)

In the 1960's there were four grocery stores in the Fairmont neighborhood. Over time these grocery stores closed because their owners aged out of the neighborhood, and they appear to have been 'mom and pop' type shops. There is currently one small store that sells simple items such as nachos and candy. One resident described it as "things kids like". While this store used to be a gourmet restaurant, it has been transitioned into a small store. Currently the closest full service grocery store is the Super Walmart located three miles to the east in Lockport.

Neighborhood Taverns:

Fairmont Tavern, Oasis Club, Pheasant Club, Big 10, Rock Inn, Daw's Tavern

Fairmont was home to numerous taverns back in its heyday. However, taverns closed as a result of the decreasing populations and the aging owners. When these businesses were still in operation they served as social centers for the neighborhood. Residents spoke of these taverns with fond memories as places they would go to visit with their neighbors to relax after work. In their absence, residents have very few places that foster a sense of community or where they can gather for social purposes. While the Community Center still exists, there is nowhere else that gives residents an opportunity to spend time together and get to know each other. That "friendly neighborhood bar", which was around the corner, acting as a community gathering space, no longer exists.

"The Hill"

"The Hill" is a cultural reference to a section of Fairmont and Forest Park where the majority of the African American residents lived. To outsiders "The Hill" may have just been known as Riley's Hill, a street with an incline that passes through the southern end of Fairmont. "The Hill" bares great significance and was indicative of the outside reception of Fairmont. While residents spoke of the neighborhood being racially integrated in the 1960's, interviews revealed that White residents lived North of Oak Street, and African American residents to the South. Currently "The Hill" is still a stigma that has been placed on Fairmont and Joliet. Anyone not from "The Hill" would consider it to be a dangerous area with a high concentration of poverty. While elements of this may be true, the crime does not appear to be coming from Fairmont itself, but from outside. The problems this neighborhood is facing are similar to that of any predominately low income neighborhood in the country right now. A look into the actual neighborhood will reveal a number of hard working families with a strong commitment to a neighborhood that once thrived, and due to economic disinvestment is currently struggling.

Reception of Neighborhood

Fairmont has a reputation among people outside of the community as being a low income, disinvested neighborhood with some crime problems. Census data on Fairmont will show that it is predominately lower income, and ethnically mixed with an increasing Hispanic population. Long term residents have noted that crime in Fairmont is coming from the outside, and that residents are just homeowners who want a safe environment for their families and a reasonable standard of living. Fairmont has faced years of neglect and a lack of municipal oversight that has allowed the neighborhood's problems to continue to get worse.



Newspaper article courtesy of Henry Travis

Segregation or Integration?

The Fairmont neighborhood in the 1950's and 1960's was comprised of African American and Eastern European immigrants. In the 1970's the White population declined substantially, but not due to "white flight". Interviews with previous residents of Eastern European descent revealed positive memories of Fairmont as a place where people of different ethnicities lived harmoniously side by side. The out-migration of white residents can be attributed to the aging population needing different types of housing that Fairmont did not offer at the time, including larger homes to raise a family or senior housing. Fairmont did not lose all of its White Eastern European population. North of Oak Street has many larger homes where long term residents have remained. Fairmont, South of Oak Street, does not have a varied housing stock. The majority of homes are what today's standards would consider 'starter homes' built in the 1960's. The combination small square footage and size, the homes were likely not suitable for the second generation of Fairmont residents: people whose families immigrated there, were born in the neighborhood and raised there. Many of them reside in nearby areas, but have since left Fairmont with a fond memory of it.



Image credit: Henry Travis

Loss of Industry 1970's - 1980's

Neighborhood Begins to Change

By the late 1970's the economic downturn was hitting Joliet hard and Fairmont was feeling the effects. The loss of industry left many laborers unemployed. Residents who could afford to relocate for work did. Many of the Southern African American residents that migrated to Fairmont and Joliet to work in the once bustling manufacturing industry were left with few options for future employment because their skills were in businesses that no longer existed. Even in the 1960's when the population of Fairmont was at its peak, its density never matched the surrounding suburbs. However, the density was always high for an unincorporated community. Fairmont has always been a rural community, so much so that certain plots of land were never platted for development. These lands are vacant, but not due to the abandonment of the property owner, as there never was a property owner to begin with. In addition to this, some of the lots were platted for development, but never developed. The zoning was never changed from agricultural, presumably because the lots were platted prior to the implementation of zoning codes. Some lots in Fairmont are too small for agricultural uses, because they were platted to be residential, but the zoning may be acting as a barrier to their development. In the 1990's Fairmont began to see an increase in the Hispanic population and the newer residents did not put down the strong roots that older residents had and the neighborhood became more transitional. One resident described Fairmont as a place where she knew all of her neighbors. Now she may know her newer neighbors but was very clear that the neighborhood reception of newer residents is very different than that of long term people. One example of this can be found in two households on the same block. An aunt and niece live on the same block and have been there for over 80 years combined.

Township targets empty homes

Gang migration gives problem new urgency

By Carrie Churnovic
HERALD-NEWS WRITER

LOCKPORT TOWNSHIP — Area officials want to get rid of abandoned homes before they become a haven for gangs.

Township and county governments are responsible for an unincorporated area in Lockport Township where more than 30 abandoned homes were found in the past year.

"Regardless of the neighborhood, a little deterioration can be like cancer — it keeps getting worse," Will County Sheriff Tom Fitzgerald said. "Abandoned homes used to be an invitation for horseplay. Now, they're used for narcotic traffic and gang traffic."

Abandoned houses are a magnet for migrating gangs in search of a new home, Township Supervisor Patricia Hartley says. She is responsible for identifying abandoned homes in unincorporated township areas.



An abandoned house at the corner of Oak Avenue and Illinois 171 in Lockport Township is typical of more than 30 in the Fairmont neighborhood that township

LIZ WILKINSON ALLEN/HERALD-NEWS and Will County officials have targeted for demolition. Authorities say some abandoned homes have become havens for gang activity.

Since 1992 the township has been assisting the county to condemn and destroy 34 abandoned homes in the Fairmont area, just south of Lockport. Sixteen homes already have been demolished.

Once the township recognizes a problem, the county works to identify owners, check historic value and declare the home to be a public nuisance.

The township does not have the authority to create or implement laws, but officials' recommendations are what leads the county to a decision to demolish abandoned homes.

"A lot of homes are being rehabilitat-

ed," says Barb Smiles, head of the Will County Land Use Department. "That's great, since the demolition of a home is such a long process."

City and police officials say that however the problem is addressed, it needs prompt attention.

"Whether gangs are using them or not, somebody is," explains Undersheriff Tom Hernandez. "Abandoned homes are being used to store dope, and we've found stolen cars in the garages."

Hartley says if progress continues, the remaining abandoned homes in Fairmont will be demolished by early spring.

Image credit: Henry Travis

Third Wave of Migration
1980's-Present

1980's - Present

Elevated Water Tower Construction 1987

The elevated water tower was put into Fairmont in 1987. Fairmont experienced problems with their water delivery governance. Residents were having trouble paying their water bills and the City of Joliet, who previously handled the water for Fairmont, shut off service to the neighborhood. As a result, the Lockport Township Water Department had to take over and started providing water to Fairmont.



Well Capping in 1996/1997

The majority of Fairmont homes were on private wells until 1996 when a joint project was taken on between the Will County Department of Health and Lockport Township. This project identified about 150 cross connected wells in the neighborhood. This meant private wells were still being used in conjunction with the Lockport Township wells, which posed a risk of cross contamination if the private wells were to get contaminated. This was a particular threat because Fairmont has a lot of vacant lots and dumping became a problem. This dumping could potentially contaminate the abandoned wells, thus contaminating the entire water system. Representatives went door to door to attempt to convince residents to close their private wells. Since a private well is essentially free water, many were not interested in participating and only 1/3 of the wells were closed. Additionally the Lockport Township Water Department does not have the authority to close the wells without consent, therefore, many were left open.

This became a serious problem when the Lockport Township Water Department had two community wells that were contaminated, presumably due to cross contamination. There was a concern that abandoned wells on vacant properties were being used as sewers. Currently the cross contamination of wells in Fairmont is still a concern, as it is very expensive to decontaminate the water system.

Stormwater Flooding

Due to the lack of infrastructure in Fairmont, flooding has become a problem, mainly because the community does not have sidewalks, or an adequate drainage system to accommodate the relative density. In a community with sidewalks there are generally storm water drainage systems that connect to underground infrastructure. In the case of Fairmont, the roads are built in such a way that storm water runs off into ditches located at the edge of property lines. When these ditches are not well maintained (i.e. plants growing in them or being paved over) the storm water has nowhere to go and will pool up in front yards or on the road, contributing damage to both.

Outside Perception

One of the problems Fairmont has experienced since the increase in vacant land is the transient population moving in and the increase in crime causing a less positive perception of the neighborhood by outsiders. Fairmont has a reputation as a “tough” neighborhood. Some consider the neighborhood not to be a safe place to walk or drive in, and the perception of crime in Fairmont is high. While residents acknowledge crime is a problem, they also mention that crime is coming from outside influences and are not from the neighborhood itself.

Call to Action

The Fairmont Community has been undergoing an increase of community activism, and a few projects are underway due to a partnership between the Will County Land Use Department and the Fairmont Community Partnership. In 2008 a planning process began with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) in which the Land Use Department applied for a Local Technical Assistance Grant. This grant allowed the Land Use Department to get the assistance of a planner from CMAP to put together a neighborhood plan for Fairmont that plans for the future growth of the community. The plan was put together with the help of Fairmont residents and community leaders through a series of workshops to identify the wants and needs of the residents.

To date, some projects have been completed. CMAP has completed the visioning process which resulted in the neighborhood plan, as well as using Fairmont as a study area showing how infrastructure improvements can have a positive effect on the community for the Future Leaders in Planning Program (FLIP). A “safe routes to school” grant has been secured to allow for the construction of a segment of sidewalk leading to the Fairmont School, and a community garden has been started next to the Fairmont Community Center.



Images: Left private backyard garden. Right: Fairmont Elementary School

Appendix:

A non-exhaustive list of local churches and businesses.

Churches:

Bethlehem Apostolic Church

Shiloh Baptist Church

City of Refuge Church

Mt. Ebal Baptist Church

Christ United Methodist Church

Jehova's Witness Kingdom Hall

St. John Vianney Church

Bethlehem Healing Temple

Mt. Moriah (Although this church is technically in Joliet, multiple residents identified it as a Fairmont Church)

Nation of Islam (Meets in the Fairmont Community Center)
(church in grade school)

Businesses:

S&S BBQ

Granite Tile Company

Conway's Barbershop

Norma's Cafe



S&S BBQ located in Fairmont