

CITY OF WYOMING
DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION TASK FORCE
Meeting Minutes
February 23, 2021
7:00 p.m.

Members Present: David Ambrose, Becky Johnson, Cindy Peebles, April Robles, Nedra Ward, and Judd Weis

Staff members present: Rachel Leininger—Director of Recreation and Citizen Engagement

Others Present: Mayor Thaddeus Hoffmeister

1. Mayor Hoffmeister addressed the task force members thanking them for their important work. He reminded members of the public meeting rules which went into effect when there was a quorum of 50% of the group. Mayor Hoffmeister also reminded the group that they were charged with task of looking into DEI matters in relation to the City and that they would present their investigation and finding of facts to City Council. Mr. Ambrose asked the mayor if he could write a letter to City Council to support the hiring of a search firm in the city manager process. Mayor Hoffmeister stated that City Council had elected to move forward with a search firm, but that he is welcome to submit a letter of support.
2. Presentation on the history of diversity, equity, and inclusion in Wyoming.
Presented by Rebecca Johnson.

“The Arcadia book I wrote in 2006 and the third grade tours we developed the same year are not the kinds of presentations that have delved deeply into the struggles Wyoming...reflecting the rest of America...has had with racism. But neither the book nor the tour has totally ignored those struggles either...the touch has just been very light.

This presentation goes a little...just a little...deeper, and there is much more work still to do. Recently someone in Wyoming asked me what I thought about new material like the 1619 project...exploring American history through slavery. Was this revisionist history? She asked. Wasn't this negative view of America making us feel bad about our country and ourselves? I think what we learned was revisionist history and now new stories are expanding and enriching what we thought we knew so well. No matter what, the truth should be nothing to be afraid of.

On that note, let's get started...this is an overview of general Wyoming history and I have included what I know of Wyoming's struggle with discrimination. There are many more stories out there that we as a community can uncover and learn from.

In a nutshell, transportation routes – roads, rivers, rails - created Wyoming, as they do most communities. And an early infusion of wealth from the nearby canal and railroad into this farming community would direct the growth of Wyoming from the 1850s on: shaping its housing and cultural development with a very controlled response to change.

Early History

Wyoming before 1800 was just another five miles of heavily forested hills and creeks that fed a large stream the indigenous people called Maketewa, now known as the Mill Creek. In 1750, before any white settlers came to Ohio, a squirrel could jump on a tree at the Ohio River and jump from tree to tree, never touching the ground, all the way to Lake Erie -- fully 95% of Ohio was so deeply forested.

The Adenas were indigenous people who lived in Ohio from 1000 BC to 700 AD. The Adenas, their descendants the Hopewell, and their descendants the Mississippians, were the Mound Builders. You can see how prolific these cultures were here in Ohio, which has more mounds than any other place in N. America. There was even a mound on the northernmost section of present-day Wyoming, which was leveled for farmland years ago, like most mounds in Ohio.

So when American settlers did arrive here, this land wasn't empty but teeming with Woodland tribes, at least a dozen living throughout the Ohio territory: the dominant Miami and Shawnee, and others: the Ottawa, Pottawatomie, Wyandot, Mingo, Tuscarawas, Muskingum, and Delaware. The Shawnee and Miami were farmers as well as hunters, with fields of corn and wheat far larger than what many settlers had ever seen in Europe.

The Northwest Ordinance was passed in 1787, which gave the new United States of America a plan for the governance of territories and the organization of new states. At that point, there was a flood of white settlers to the Ohio Valley. And that rush of settlement caused what became known as the Ohio Indian Wars.

Pioneers to this area were encouraged to build outlying settlements, called "stations" which were a few log houses protected by a blockhouse or two and wooden pickets. Because they were isolated, these stations were attacked, in this area frequently by the local Shawnee. The Shawnee had permanent settlements in Ohio...their largest was called Chillicothe, meaning capitol city, where they allowed women on their councils, explaining to a white visitor, "some women are wiser than some men."

Something to note, which was well known and puzzled over by white Americans -- the indigenous tribes captured numerous Euro-Americans in their raids, and if those people were adopted into a family, they were treated as complete equals from that time on, particularly women. They often took the place of the person that family had lost to an attack. So when Euro-Americans, particularly youth and women who were captured, were later returned to their families, far more often than not they tried to escape back to their indigenous families. Because there was no caste system or racism in natural indigenous culture like what white society practiced. In addition, troubles in indigenous societies were communal...in hard times, everyone suffered together and in good times, everyone shared the bounty. In the developing American capitalistic society, economic suffering and celebrating were often individual or class experiences.

Of course, indigenous people are human beings like the rest of us. Their attacks were ruthless and terribly violent. This was war. White's Station was in Hartwell, by the bridge over the Mill Creek on Wayne Ave., and I tell the third graders the story about the attack there, when a woman who had just lost her husband to another raid lost 2 of her children

in this one, only escaping by running down the creek with her last child in her arms. That happened just a mile or so from here, in 1793.

The US Army fared quite poorly through most of the Ohio Indian Wars, culminating in General St. Clair's defeat in 1792, still considered the worse defeat in American history. We only had about 2,000 active troops in the US Army then, and St. Clair lost literally half of the army in that one encounter...over 1,000 men.

President Washington appointed General Anthony Wayne to take command. Wayne Ave. is named after him, because it was this narrow, dirt trail that General Wayne led thousands of new recruits up the valley and onto the high plains of western Ohio, founding fort after fort, training his troops the entire time. He waged psychological warfare on the Indians, building these forts and depositing troops there and then heading north again. Each new fort established said to the Indigenous people, "We're here to stay."

The Indigenous warriors were roundly defeated in 1794 at the Battle of Fallen Timbers near Toledo. Outmanned and outgunned, they ran back to the English fort nearby, which had armed and encouraged them, but the British troops kept the gates locked and they were massacred outside the fort by the Americans.

The Indigenous tribes signed the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, banning them from most of Ohio Territory. At the end of the War of 1812, the US threw the rest of the tribes out of Ohio permanently. This is why most townships in Ohio are "founded" around 1815-17.

I tell these stories to the children – and to you - because this is our local history, and we also should understand that the land our houses sit on today are, in all honesty, ours through the spoils of war.

After the Indian wars, settlement began in earnest in the Ohio Valley. Settlers traveled by river to Cincinnati, then made the difficult journey north through very thick wilderness. Settlers claiming land in the Mill Creek Valley used the Wayne Road, called the "Great Road," connecting Ft. Washington in Cincinnati with Ft. Hamilton, thirty miles north. It was the only road in the Valley, dirt and barely wide enough for a wagon. In 1806, a "shortcut" path for a road was cut through the woodlands, beginning in Carthage and running due north along the section line, rejoining the Great Road again in the southern part of Glendale. That road is today the Springfield Pike section that runs through Wyoming and Woodlawn. Over the years it was improved and became a toll road in 1834. You can see the last of many mile markers at Centennial Park, where it was moved years ago.

A good road was good for the whole community, because a farmer could get marketable goods down to Cincinnati and, from there, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. This became a productive farming community, and most of the forest was cleared for farmland by white settlers from New Jersey, New York, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

Canals, Locks, and Lockland

In the early 1830s, Wyoming's future changed with the construction of the locks for the Miami-Erie Canal. This canal would, in many ways, "reroute" Wyoming's rural nature as it gained a greater connection with the outside world.

By 1850, Ohio had dug a thousand miles of canal. Ours, here, was one of the earliest canals...the Miami and Erie Canal, which eventually connected the Ohio River at Cincinnati with Lake Erie. It was patterned after the success of New York's Erie Canal and it opened up the interior of Ohio and its port cities to a tremendous amount of commerce.

In the section of the Miami and Erie Canal near Wyoming, four locks were needed to lower the waterway 48 feet. This created an abundance of hydropower. That, and the convenient supply route, created the first manufacturing center in the entire region, known as "Lockland." Industries there manufactured paper, starch, flour, cotton, lumber, all mill-type, water-wheel operations.

Lockland's industrial growth led directly to the residential growth of Wyoming, because company owners wanted property away from the industrial noise and upwind from the smell of the paper mills. Wyoming was due west and a one mile commute. The Miami canal, and the coming of the railroad in 1851, fully directed Wyoming's development as one of Cincinnati's earliest bedroom communities.

One of the most influential wealthy families to first live in Wyoming, the Stearns, typify the migration of business owners and other professionals looking to escape the urban industrialization they had created. George Stearns was already a successful industrialist in Cincinnati when he started a lumber mill in Lockland, and then purchased a part of the Riddle Farm in Wyoming and moved his family here. He encouraged his friends to move here, too, and offered them discounts on lumber for their homes, which is why so many stately houses built here in that period are wood frame, not brick like much of Cincinnati. The same year of Wyoming's incorporation, in 1874, 45 acres of village land went on the market, and nine Wyoming individuals, including Stearns, created the Wyoming Land and Building Company to purchase that tract in order to protect existing land use patterns in the area. This early control of land use allowed Wyoming to continue developing as a residential suburb, which was a benefit to the people living here, while businesses would move their operations to available sites in Lockland and Woodlawn.

Another example of this kind of control is Cross County Hwy. During the decades of planning for this highway, enough influential people in Wyoming voiced their concerns over its route that, although original plans had it following Galbraith most of the way, today it does a huge loop south of Galbraith and then loops back around to Finneytown. It goes nowhere close to Wyoming, although hundreds of houses in Mt. Healthy and North College Hill were torn down in that last phase of its construction.

The Railway in the Village

Before the 1850s, it took an entire day on horse or walking or in a canal boat to reach Cincinnati from Wyoming. In 1851, on its first day of operation here, the steam passenger train shortened that commute to less than one hour. By the 1880s, there were 33 daily trains through the station and you could get to downtown Cincinnati in 23 minutes. Train travel allowed many more people to move here and still easily commute to their work in Cincinnati. As that happened, the established farms in Wyoming began to subdivide and Victorian homes were built in the village and on the hills, particularly after the Civil War with a burst of housing demand. Now, a monthly ticket (for 60 rides) cost \$5 in 1860, which was very expensive, so the people moving here from Cincinnati were professionals, and

that class was all white. Less advantaged people who lived here – Blacks and immigrants - lived either close to the tracks because they worked on the railroad or in the Lockland factories or as servants in the finer homes in Wyoming.

Churches

The Wyoming community was so rural, people living here traveled to Lockland, Reading or Cincinnati to worship before the 1860s. The first actual church founded in Wyoming was by Black families, the Second Baptist Church, founded in 1869 by families who had ridden a wave of emancipated people out of the South after the Civil War and then found that no area church would welcome them. Its first church was located on Mulberry Street. Eventually, a weather-board church was built in Lockland and today it is the Mt. Zion Baptist Church of Woodlawn.

The 1870s saw a wave of church building as Wyoming's population increased. The Wyoming Presbyterian Church, then a Swedenborgian church. In 1872, the Episcopal congregation built Holy Trinity on Burns Avenue, the white families' Baptist church was built on Burns soon after.

For years, few Catholics lived here – Wyoming was predominantly white and Protestant because of the farmers who had settled here in early days from New England and the wealthier Cincinnatians who moved here because of the canal or convenient train travel. Poor Irish and German Catholic immigrants had come to Cincinnati to help build the canal; they stayed and began to build wealth but most were still poor or working-class, and we were also seeing huge new numbers of Irish and German refugees coming here in the 1850s. Catholics who did live here went to Mass in Reading, a working class neighborhood filled with immigrant Catholics.

However, among some Wyoming friends was a popular, wealthier couple who were Catholic, and in 1887, with his friends in mind, Lewis Worthington offered land near the tracks, on Crescent, at a deeply discounted rate to the Archdiocese of Cincinnati for the building of St. James Catholic Church. His condition? That the congregation agree to ban "foreigners" from the new church. Thus, announcements about the new church mentioned that it would "accommodate the English-speaking Catholics" in the area. This was a nativist reaction, in the hope that a Catholic church in Wyoming would not attract immigrants. St. James quickly established a parochial school to educate Wyoming Catholic children, who were often exposed in Wyoming school district curriculum to Protestant teachings. St. James eventually moved to its current location on the Pike.

The Valley Temple traces its roots to the Cincinnati School of Judaism, which began in 1952 with a meeting of Reform Jewish families in North Avondale. Parents served as teachers, obtaining their curriculum from the Reform Movement's School for Judaism, and conducted family worship services.

A large farm owned by the Meyer dairy family on Galbraith Road was sold for development around this time, and the land was first offered to family friends from the Jewish community. A number of Jewish families established the Compton Ridge neighborhood and continued their Reform Movement classes in Wyoming, eventually moving to the Wyoming Masonic Temple and then, in 1973, to The Valley Temple on Springfield Pike.

There was a negative reaction to the movement of Jewish people into Wyoming, which was an almost entirely Christian community. The private Wyoming Golf Course, founded on the Hollman dairy farm, refused to accept Jewish members for years, and this is remembered by some Wyoming Jewish families to this day. I had friends who didn't let their kids sled on the golf course for that very reason.

Village Incorporation

Before the Civil War, about 50 people lived in Wyoming. After the war, migration here from Cincinnati began in earnest, and Wyoming incorporated as a village with the requisite population of 600 in 1874. A census taken that year showed not just wealthier white families but also Germans, Irish, and Italian families, and over 10% of the population was African American, mostly living in an area called Greenwood, north of Wyoming Ave. There was resistance to annexing Greenwood in 1874 but without that neighborhood, Wyoming didn't have the 600 people necessary to be incorporated as a village.

Thus, they annexed Greenwood but made an arrangement with the Lockland school district to educate Black children from Greenwood in Lockland schools. I'll return to the schools later.

Forming a Community

By the 1880s, Wyoming was active in the civic and social bustle that characterized late nineteenth century American village life.

By 1880, Wyoming had a drugstore, a blacksmith shop, a coppersmith, a butcher, a carriage maker, dress and shoe makers, and a jeweler. With an increasing population of middle and upper class residents, recreational activities and social organizations began to flourish. These that I mention now were entirely segregated...only white. There was the Wyoming Musical Club, the Wyoming Dramatic Club, and the Wyoming Improvement Society, the Wyoming Masonic Lodge, the Monday Club and the Society of Letters which later merged into the current Wyoming Woman's Club.

The Wyoming Roller Rink was white only and continued to be so when it was moved to the Wyoming Amusement Hall, built in 1885. The hall included tennis courts, a bowling alley, the library, the village offices, and an auditorium. This civic center was completely segregated, as was the new hall that took its place after a fire in 1907. The final Civic Center was built after another fire in 1948. There were no village social opportunities available to Black families living in Wyoming, including the parks being developed here. Even into the 1960s, Black families were not allowed to use Wyoming city parks and could only use the Oak Park area...which was the city dump at the time, not a park.

Black families had to look elsewhere to join organizations and find amusement. Wyoming had numerous organized baseball teams but not for Black players, so they joined the Glendale Umbrels, pictured here in 1921. Until the 1960s, there were no area swimming pools that allowed Black families; the golf club didn't admit Jewish or Black people, and the Wyoming Swim Club didn't allow Black people. In organized church outings, Black kids were able to swim at a pool in Middletown and, on the weekend, they were allowed to swim in the Hartwell public pool right before they drained it each week. Most of the time, Wyoming Black families socialized, joined organizations and went to church outside of Wyoming....in Lockland, Lincoln Heights and Woodlawn.

Schools

The first, official school in Wyoming was a two-room brick structure, built in 1842. I am sure the farm children here were being educated before then, but the families probably paid for an itinerant teacher to live with a family and teach out of a house until the 1840s.

As mentioned earlier, when the Wyoming district school was created in 1874, the village excluded the Black children living in Greenwood through an agreement to educate them in Lockland District #9 and paying tuition for them to be educated there, at an annual rate of \$120. That got expensive, so in 1877, Wyoming's district purchased a house on Oak Ave between Wyoming and Wentworth for its Black students to be educated separately, grades 1-9. It was understaffed, with only Black teachers and former students recalled that a smoking coal stove was its only heat source, making learning conditions very difficult.

A new school for the Wyoming community was built in 1880, and six years later, Wyoming was forced to abolish segregated schools because of the repeal of the State of Ohio's Black Laws. In September, 1887, Wyoming announced that any Black child was welcome to transfer to the new school on Wyoming Avenue if they wanted to, but Wyoming did not close the Oak Ave. schoolhouse. Many children stayed there. In Cincinnati, they did the same thing. As a result, on the first day of desegregation, only ten Black children in the entire city of Cincinnati felt at liberty to take advantage of their new choices. Wyoming finally shut down its segregated school in 1892.

Then the Supreme Court ruled on Plessey v Furguson in 1896, which allowed "separate but equal" segregation, Wyoming moved back to segregated classrooms in the grammar school, but not the high school, mostly for financial reasons. It was hard enough for the small school district to afford a separate grade school situation. The segregation movement here started with parents complaining to the school board about their young children in classrooms and playing with Black children. So the Board authorized the building of the Oak Ave. School in 1911, known as the Colony School. Today it is the City Building. High school students remained desegregated, but when official school sports teams were formed during the early 1900s, Blacks were not allowed to participate. Another example of discrimination: a 1937 Wyoming High School yearbook placed the Black students in the back of the yearbook, like other yearbooks of that era. In the 1950s, the counselors for the high school would gather the white students for college counseling but separated the Black students out to give them advice for trade schools or associate degree programs. Black students formed their own organizations at the high school, like the Colored Hi-Y in 1933.

In 1954, with the ruling of Brown v Board of Education, America began desegregating its schools. Wyoming built a new freestanding elementary school, Vermont, the year before, in 1953, and opened its enrollment to Black children. The Colony School was closed in 1956. The Colony School was not just a place children were educated in Wyoming...it was a community center for Black families who were excluded from most other city-centered activities in Wyoming. Today, there is an active Oak School Alumni Association that is working on a memoir of their experiences in the Colony School.

Development of Modern Wyoming

In 1910, Cincinnati expressed an interest in annexing Wyoming, but the offer was voted down. After that threat, Wyoming appointed a Zoning Board and Planning Commission to monitor the development of the village, creating a system to keep land use tracked and carefully controlled under strict zoning laws that are virtually still in place. Mid-priced and affordable housing were encouraged in land development and the affordability of the streetcar.

After incorporating as a city with over 5,000 residents in 1949, Wyoming began to annex land west of the Pike, develop adjacent farmlands, and increase tax revenue to cover the expanding costs of city and school operations.

There was a time during the 1950s-70s that the desirable housing areas in Wyoming were on the hills, and many of the older houses in the village fell into disrepair. But a concerted effort to define and designate a historic district has given the village a new breath of life now and has increased property values tremendously in that area.

Conclusion

Wyoming is unique as a very early bedroom community for big city industrialists in Cincinnati. That wealth gave them the privilege of living beyond the soot of 19th century industrialization. That wealth also gave them the means to protect their Wyoming community from industrial sprawl and, later, urban infrastructure. That protection went even further...Wyoming could be protected against others, people of different races and classes, too. Wyoming's current Master Plan calls for an inclusive community of choice, but that is not our deep history. Yes, people of color, immigrants, others could live here. But did they feel they belonged here?

I think we all know that we bring our own sensibilities, even anxieties, to the study of the past. We – historians and everyone else - can get caught up in seeing what we WANT to see, we'll pick out the stories that make our point or make us feel good. We'll ignore stories that don't. I've certainly done that here, with this presentation...pulling out the stories that reveal discrimination and racism, lack of equity and inclusion. But in previous presentations, I've left this stuff out. It's ALL our history. The way we understand the past inevitably shapes how we understand the present. And knowing the truth should not be frightening....it should be empowering."

3. Discuss and set next meeting date: member agreed to resume bi-weekly meeting on Tuesdays at 7 pm at the Recreation Center in the multi-purpose room as this room has multiple exterior doors and windows for lots of fresh air. The next meeting will be set for March 9 at 7 pm to resume department head interviews. There will also be a meeting on March 16 to avoid scheduling a meeting during Spring Break. Ms. Leininger will record and post the minutes to the Google docs folder, as well as email members of the upcoming meetings and book the meeting space. Members who are unable to meet in person due to safety concerns can be zoomed or conference called in.
4. Meeting adjourned at 8:30 pm.