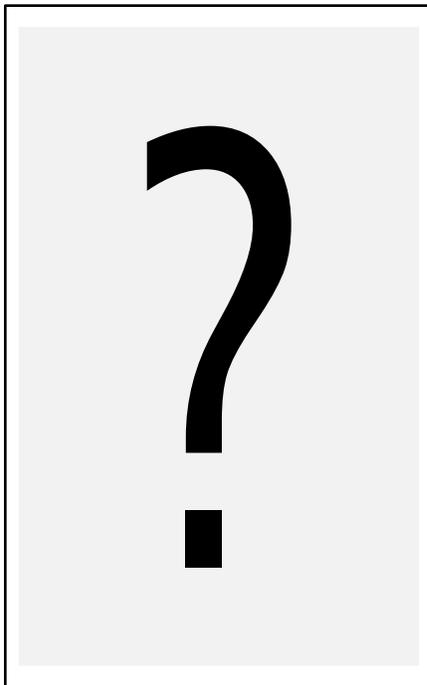




Sunday, June 17, 2001

## Broken Detroit: Death of a City Block

*From Detroit News, Part 1 of 5*



David Coates / The Detroit

News

**Harry Shiovitz visits his old house at 1956 Elmhurst. He moved his family out in the 1950s as pressure from realtors mounted.**

**Life of one street mirrors city's fall**

## **Racial fears trigger white flight in '50s**

*Here I come! Been saving all my life  
To get a nice home For me and my wife.*

—Langston Hughes, *"Little Song on Housing,"* 1955

*By Cameron McWhirter*

## **DETROIT**

As the *moyel* finished the ceremonial circumcision, family and friends who had gathered in the living room of the modest home at 1956 Elmhurst chanted in unison, in accordance with the ancient Jewish rites:

“Let this boy be happy in this world, in the goodness of this home, in the holiness of this place.”

Harry Shiovitz had invited everyone over to celebrate the *bris* of his first son, Nathan, on the morning of Sunday, July 8, 1951.

The dining room table was stacked with traditional Jewish dishes: blintzes, kugels, cheeses, pastries, and smoked fish.

Shiovitz, a 32-year-old salesman of used restaurant equipment, was struggling to make ends meet, but he decided after careful calculations that he could afford the ceremony.

But even as the family was chatting and eating amid shouts of *Mazel Tov*, Shiovitz and his wife knew that this story-and-a-half house, for which he had borrowed the \$500 down payment only a year earlier, would not long be home for Nathan.

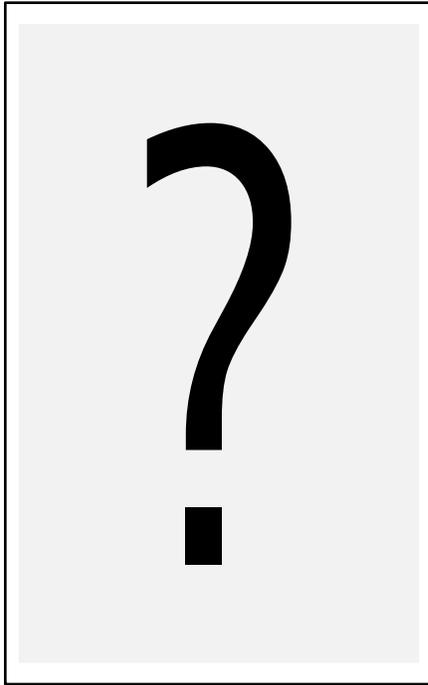
This world, the northern frontier of Detroit’s Jewish neighborhood, was coming to an end.

“We were already planning to leave,” he said. “Everyone was getting out.... Even while she was pregnant we knew we had to go.”

Detroit, the world’s “Arsenal of Democracy,” had emerged from World War II to resume its role as the world capital of the booming auto industry. The 1950 census recorded the city’s zenith in population — 1,849,568, more than six times the total only a half-century earlier. More than 83 percent — 1,545,847 — were white. In the 1950s, Detroit had the highest home ownership rate of any major city in America, and median household income exceeded that of all other major cities.

Though no one knew it, Detroit’s course for the next half-century was about to go terribly wrong.

The life of one city block, Elmhurst between 12th and 14th on the city’s west side, tells the story in microcosm. White flight, abandonment, confusing tax and property laws, absentee landlords, profit-hungry real-estate agents, criminals, drug addicts, lax bureaucracy and ineffective federal and local policies caused a city block to die.



Detroit News

Photo by David Coates / The

**Michael H. Traison, attorney for Miller Canfield, grew up at 2019 Elmhurst in the 1940s and 50s.**

## **2: Life on Elmhurst in 1951 would never be better**

That summer of 1951, the 1900 block of Elmhurst was lined with tall elm trees that shaded the street and sidewalks with a canopy of broad branches and leaves. The 17 houses, four four-family flats, four apartment buildings and two storefront/apartment buildings were full to capacity. The shops fronting 12th — Nino's pizzeria, Olympia Candy Shop (known to the kids as Gussy's), Black & White Cleaners, the Kosher butcher and others — were busy and thriving.

The assessed value of the block's 28 parcels — about \$200,000 — would never be higher. Its nearby schools would never be better. Central High School students regularly went off to prominent colleges out east, or to Wayne State, or to the University of Michigan. Roosevelt was considered one of the best public elementary schools in the country.

By modern standards, crime was nonexistent. Police walking the beat in the area coped with minor infractions: an occasional drunk outside the bar and juvenile monkeyshines. That year, 129 homicides occurred in the city of more than 1.8 million.

Phyllis Shiovitz Weeks, Harry's daughter who was four in 1951, remembers the biggest problem on Elmhurst was a little girl who liked to bite other kids. Police came and talked to her parents, and things were ironed out.

Ed Gold, 60, now an attorney with Butzel Long, lived with his family at 1981 Elmhurst. He remembers his mother always left the back door, and occasionally the front door, unlocked.

Elmhurst was a perfect street for families with children, within walking distance of Central High,

Durfee Middle School and Roosevelt Elementary only two blocks away. Beth Yehuda, the Jewish parochial school, was also a few blocks away. Jewish kids walked to school or to the playground or the butcher's on 12th to pick up orders for their mothers.

And just down the street, B'nai David had been the cultural center of this part of Elmhurst since it opened in 1928. "On the High Holy Days, it was packed wall-to-wall," said former state Judge Schlomo Sperka, whose father was the Rabbi of B'nai David in the early 1950s.

In 1951, Elmhurst was a typical post-war Detroit street. It was primarily white, like the city at the time. It was working class. It was crowded. And everyone wanted to get out, move up, make it. Part of the American Dream was a new, modern, suburban house.

"My impression was that it was a very bland Jewish neighborhood, not very rich at all, and it was a pleasant neighborhood," Sperka said.

The Jews on Elmhurst, like most other Jews in the city, did not actively work to keep blacks out of their neighborhood. In other parts of the city, whites had attacked black homes with bricks or Molotov cocktails. White homeowners' associations were filing lawsuits and petitioning city government to stop blacks from moving to their blocks in other areas of Detroit.

### **3: Real estate agents push: 'Now is the time to sell'**

real-estate agent had been talking to Shiovitz. The agents called homeowners all the time in those days.

"The real-estate man called and told me, 'I can get you a good price....' He said, 'Well now is the time to sell. If you wait a few years you're not going to get the price you want,'" Shiovitz recalled.

Shiovitz could get a larger house on Westmoreland, past Evergreen. Other Jews were moving that way. A bigger yard. Three bedrooms. A garage that would fit his car. The house would be affordable with the \$3,500 down payment he would raise by selling now.

Shiovitz knew that the family moving into his old house would be black, though he never met them. The real-estate agent handled everything.

Blacks were moving up 12th Street, having crossed over from the lower east side, where the Jews used to live. Whites had better sell before their property values went down, real estate agents were warning. Remember the 1943 riots? Blacks meant trouble, the real-estate people said. Read The News, the Free Press or the Times: Blacks meant crime.

Shiovitz didn't buy all of that. He had no problem with black people. He had worked with them all his life. During the Depression he grew up alongside them on Alger near Hastings Street. Jews in Detroit always had gotten along with blacks, not like other ethnic groups, such as the Poles, who always seemed to be fighting with blacks. But that did not mean Jews wanted to live next to black people.

Black children were enrolling at Roosevelt Elementary a few blocks away. His daughter walked home one day from school and announced her new "boyfriend," a little black kid. B'nai David, with its 1,600-seat temple on the corner of 14th, was looking into buying land in Southfield, a burgeoning suburb where lots of Jews were moving.

Shiovitz's white *Goyim* neighbors on either side seemed fearful that blacks would bring crime, and they were looking to sell. Petty crime had been increasing. Smart-aleck kids — he didn't know whether

white or black —would occasionally steal children’s bikes off porches to joyride. That kind of thing didn’t happen before.

“Sometimes (the bicycles) would be missing altogether. Sometimes they would find them down on the corner,” he said. “This was the start of things going down.”

Why not move to a bigger house away from all these problems?

"Genug iz genug," as the Yiddish saying goes: "enough is enough."

#### **4: House by house, the faces of Elmhurst changed**

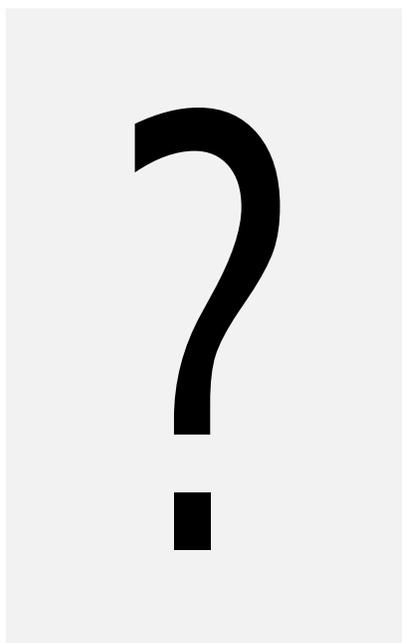
In the early 1950s, some blacks started to move to Elmhurst. At first they moved to apartments on 12th: Mrs. Lottie Mills and others. The home of Ed Gold’s parents was one of the first on Elmhurst to go to a black family. They sold in 1951 to move near McNichols and Wyoming.

Gold, then only 10, said he didn’t want to move, but his parents, Ukrainian Jewish immigrants with little money, were afraid that blacks would bring down property values. Their modest home — purchased with a down payment from a settlement after Ed had been hit by a car — was the only investment they had.

“The sense was that you’d better not be the last one off the block,” Gold said. “The real-estate agents were out there fanning the flames.”

“Real-estate agents learned to use a variety of tactics to drive sales,” said Cliff Schrupp, executive director of the Fair Housing Center of Metropolitan Detroit. “Money was a factor. But it obviously wasn’t the driving factor. Racial fears were.”

#### **Neighborhood snapshot: The high school senior class**



**A page in Central High School’s class of 1951 yearbook that shows mostly white students attended the school.**

Jim Bush, now 66, worked from 1962 to 1992 for the Detroit Commission on Community Relations, a city agency that tried to monitor and alleviate racial tensions in neighborhoods. Bush lays much of the blame for white flight on short-sighted real-estate agents and the State of Michigan, which allowed the real-estate agents to use racist fears to boost sales.

“Segregation was enforced by the state until 1948,” Bush said, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional covenants in real-estate titles blocking sales based on race or ethnicity. Bush added that segregation “was allowed by the state until 1968” when Michigan passed a fair housing bill. “It was egregiously unstrategic,” Bush said.

The commission found evidence that real-estate agents had regularly “flipped” blocks, bringing in a black family to look at a house, then scaring whites into selling their homes and raking in the commissions from outgoing whites and incoming blacks. The practice was known as “block busting.” Now block busting is illegal.

“There was a joke going around at the time,” Bush recalled. “What is racial integration? It’s the time elapsed between when the first black family moves in and the last white family moves out.” Bush found that about 4,500 houses transferred from white to black families annually in the 1950s.

The pattern was often confusing and quick. Bush said white community groups would hold meetings where a white real-estate agent would stand up and announce that the block must not sell to blacks. Blacks brought crime. Blacks brought down property values.

Throughout the early 1950s, no one remembers anything violent or awkward that happened as blacks started to show up on the block, but tensions were in the air. Any local crime was perceived through the prism of race. Jews today still remember an incident in 1954 when a white basketball player from Mackenzie was stabbed with an ice pick after a game at Central. The player was white. His attackers were black, according to newspaper accounts of the arrest and trial.

And so the Jews prepared for an exodus, led by mostly Jewish real-estate agents. On Elmhurst the transition was quiet, but sweeping.

“By ’53, the pressure was on,” said Sperka, who grew up in the neighborhood. “It all happened in those few years.”

The Detroit City Directory for 1953 — the year Shiovitz moved — lists 191 people and businesses with phone numbers on the Elmhurst block. Only three apartments were listed as vacant. The 1958 City Directory lists 159 people with phone numbers and 28 vacancies. Only 10 of the names are the same. Names like Rolvitzsky, Sheffel, Katzenstein, Faigenbaum, Abramson and Goldberg were gone, never to return.

These vacancies, a result of the flight of Jews and other whites, caused rents in the area to drop for the first time in years. The lower rents attracted low-income blacks, who had been crammed into substandard housing. Home prices remained stable through much of the 1950s, but many of the houses on the street became rentals.

The buyer of Shiovitz’s house at 1956 Elmhurst promptly defaulted. This became increasingly common in the 1950s as real estate agents eagerly provided financing for blacks looking for homes.



## **5: Block by block, pattern repeats throughout city**

Thomas Sugrue, a University of Pennsylvania professor, documents this in his award-winning book, “The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit.” He shows that real-estate agents had the most to gain financially from whites deserting a city block.

Agents often bought the houses for less than market value, then sold them to blacks at a profit. Sometimes, they also provided financing, making more money on the mortgage. If the new black family couldn’t meet the mortgage payments, the real-estate agent would simply call in the loan, have the sheriff seize the house, and then sell it again, earning even more profits.

In 1954, Shiovitz’s former house at 1956 Elmhurst was sold at the Sheriff’s sale for \$849.32 to a Joel W. Josephson, who turned the house into a rental. Starting in 1954, through at least eight owners following Josephson, Tim Lewis, a black carpenter, lived in the house with his family. Lewis bought the house in 1970. Lewis had moved up from Arkansas after the war, like hundreds of thousands of other blacks looking for work.

His son, Curtis Lewis, lives in the house today. He said he remembers the lush trees and the quiet street. “Most of the Jews had moved off the block,” he recalls.

Why did they move? Lewis shrugged.

“Maybe they wanted to be bettering themselves,” he said. “Maybe too many blacks was moving in.”

The blacks who moved onto Elmhurst in the 1950s were generally poorer than the Jews who had left, but not by much. They were mostly working-class: factory workers, tradesmen, shop workers. They brought large families. On Sundays, they went to church and had cookouts. On weekdays, they went to work.

Those who were children on the block at the time remain baffled by the complex interplay of racial fear and economic incentive that led whites to leave Elmhurst.

Rita Vanerian Jury, who now lives in Birmingham, was only four in 1954 when her Armenian immigrant father decided to move the family off the street. She still doesn’t know exactly why they moved. The new house was actually smaller.

She has only good memories of Elmhurst: walks with her father down to the corner store for ice cream; games with kids of all races in the open lots; and the beautiful flowing elms standing watch above the street and its inhabitants. She simply isn’t sure why they moved. “We were just kind of going in the same direction as the others,” she said.

Phyllis Shiovitz Weeks, now a school librarian living in Southfield, said she never heard

her parents utter any racist words, nor as a girl did she ever consider race as a reason they moved away. But now that she looks back on it, she said the predominant mood of older Jews on Elmhurst was worry and anxiety.

“It’s so complex,” she said, thinking about the move 50 years later. “Racial differences were never mentioned in my house . . . but I think people find it hard to not be influenced by a natural fear of the unknown.”

What happened on Elmhurst was repeated thousands of times, block by block, across the city and into the suburbs: whites “moving up” and away from blacks.

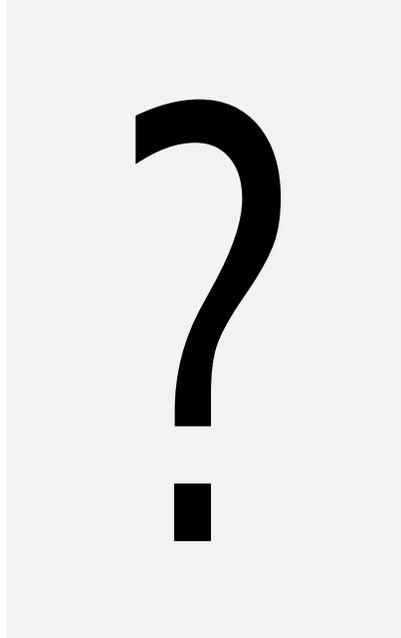
Most of the whites leaving Elmhurst didn’t move to the suburbs. They moved first to northwest Detroit. Later, they would leave the city altogether.

“A lot of black people were moving in. . . . At that point there was this turmoil beginning,” Shiovitz, now 82, said sitting in his Southfield home. “If I look back . . . I didn’t have the sense at that point, you could see all of this was brewing. Eventually something had to come about. The biggest thing was you would see all these people moving out.”

All these years later, Shiovitz still remembers the work that he did on his house. He built an archway from the kitchen to the dining room. He fixed the porch. He put in a new sink cabinet. He replaced rotting wood under the house. He put new tiling in the kitchen.

“When I left that house, it was all in good shape,” he said. “There was nothing more I could do.”

## Migration



### Freeways bring change

#### Roadways carved up city and facilitated white flight

By Cameron McWhirter / *The Detroit News*

**DETROIT** — The construction of Detroit's freeways starting in the 1950s had a huge impact on population migrations in Detroit.

In the early 1950s, the Lodge Freeway cut Elmhurst in half to the east of the 1900 block.

Interstate 75 led to the destruction of the main black neighborhood, Black Bottom, increasing the housing pressures from the burgeoning black population.

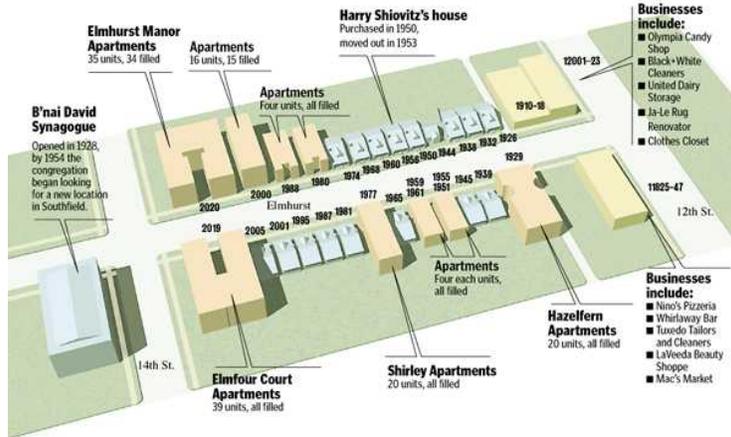
Moreover, the expressways made suburban housing developments and suburban shopping malls economically viable.

Northland Mall in Southfield opened in 1954, drawing shoppers away from the city. Tract after tract of former farmland was developed for new modern homes with large garages.

The suburbs offered white homebuyers modern amenities, huge lawns — and no integration.

# 1953 A snapshot of Elmhurst

In 1953, the 1900 block of Elmhurst on Detroit's west side was at its apex. The city directory at the time listed 191 phone numbers on the block, which was primarily Jewish and working class. But whites were already moving out to the north and west of the city, and some to the suburbs. Blacks began to move in quickly and by 1958, the Synagogue on the corner held its last services and the majority of the street was occupied by blacks.



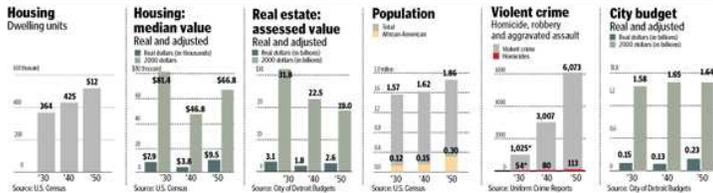
## A snapshot of Detroit Mayors 1950-1959: Albert E. Cobo, 1950-1957; Louis C. Miriani, 1958-1962

■ Throughout his time in office, Mayor Albert Cobo (1950 to 1957) severely limited the construction of public housing, a position supported by most of the city's white neighborhood associations. To this day, Detroit has one of the smallest public housing authorities of any major city in the country.

■ In 1954, the Northland Mall in Southfield — the first shopping mall in the United States — opened. The mall transformed consumer spending habits in metro Detroit, drawing many from traditional mom-and-pop neighborhood stores and from downtown stores.

■ In the 1950s, the Tigers were the city's baseball team — if you were white. The team was one of the last major league teams to break the color barrier, bringing on its first black player, Ozzie Vergil, in 1958.

■ By 1960, Detroit's overall unemployment rate was 10.2 percent, but 18.2 percent for blacks, according to federal statistics.



## Who lived where in 1953:

- |                          |                          |                       |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1910 Gus Karvitis        | 1981 Stern Morgan        | A2 Fred Emmert        |
| 1920 United Dairies Inc. | 1987 Clarence O'Neil     | 101 Herman Hollenberg |
| 1922 Jack Knott          | 1987 Frank DeFranco      | 102 Sadie Eisenberg   |
| 1926 W Barr Vessey       | 1988 Apartments          | 103 Pearl Denney      |
| 1926 A Conrad Fregin     | Albert Bosman            | 104 Lewis Richmond    |
| 1929 Hazelfern Apts.     | Abr Nessel               | 105 Richd Charties    |
| 1 Frank Wright           | Morris Klein             | 106 Marie Francis     |
| 1a Beske Alexander       | Harry Gertmansky         | 107 Dora Tilson       |
| 2 Golden Rohlitzky       | 1995 Elmer Hamery        | 108 Alex Dusham       |
| 3 John Crossins          | 2000 Apartments          | 109 John Polow        |
| 4 Rudy Olson             | El Robt Williams         | 110 Harry Ulchenik    |
| 5 Jack Hayes             | 100 Wayne Haganan        | 111 Morris Berlin     |
| 6 Jennie Salmi           | 101 Ralph Greenberg      | 203 Corla Auerod      |
| 7 Madeline Terry         | 102 Kenneth Doyle        | 202 Robt Burke        |
| 21 L McClatchie          | 103 Donald Ainsbender    | 203 Dora Wasseman     |
| 22 Edw Sheffield         | 104 Marc Beagh           | 204 Morris Blair      |
| 23 Marc N Fox            | 200 Louis Freedman       | 205 David Milner      |
| 24 Robt Reiner           | 201 Ezra McConnell       | 206 Jacob Lwazer      |
| 25 Arth Mickelson        | 202 Harold Glen          | 208 Fannie Parter     |
| 26 Nedbet Blong          | 203 Bert Adelson         | 209 Jas Cox           |
| 31 Fred LaVie            | 204 L Laine              | 210 Notman Patler     |
| 32 Gust Scandary         | 300 Mary Ranney          | 211 Harry Bliznick    |
| 33 Eva Abcanson          | 301 Ruben Nayback        | 301 Morris Kane       |
| 34 Harry Padberg         | 302 Vacant               | 302 Stella Dorf       |
| 35 Margt O'Neil          | 303 Peter Simonen        | 303 Lewis Dandorf     |
| 36 Morton Stockler       | 304 Resben Sarkissian    | 304 Roy Clich         |
| 1932 Jack Knott          | 2001 Jos Kattan          | 305 Frank Halperin    |
| 1938 Hagop Vanerian      | 2005 Jos Bell            | 306 Eug Waldman       |
| 1939 Win Brundie         | 2019 Elmfour Court Apts. | 308 Wm Lampela        |
| 1944 Martin Lunder       | B1 Geo Hradak            | 309 Paul Walker       |
| 1945 Lester Vollick      | B2 Gus Morgas            | H Sterling            |
| 1950 Michl Daratory      | B3 Frank McInerney       | 310 Edw Bellola       |
| 1951 John Richard        | B4 Kelly Neswander       | 311 Boone             |
| 1951 Milton Scott        | B5 Kenneth Hall          |                       |
| 1955 Robt Dean           | B6 Deatir Cornis         |                       |
| 1955 Geo Hanley          | 101 Ernest Dempsey       |                       |
| 1956 Harry Shiovit       | 102 Richd Crawford       |                       |
| 1959 Wilbur Gentry       | 103 Louis Eckhouse       |                       |
| 1959 Arne Lehto          | 104 Jos Willis           |                       |
| 1960 Edison Whitewood    | 105 Benj Purple          |                       |
| 1961 Frank Snyder        | 106 Lydia McDonald       |                       |
| 1961 Albert Carter       | 107 Roy Roudy            |                       |
| 1966 David Darrah        | 108 Saml Traison         |                       |
| 1968 Francis Hageman     | 109 Morris Parler        |                       |
| 1971 Gerald Dell         | 110 Jas Cantabrogh       |                       |
| 1971 J Namash            | 111 Holart Jenkins       |                       |
| 1977 Shirley Apts.       | 201 Dilon Motin          |                       |
| B1 Ethel Kennedy         | 202 Benj Golbin          |                       |
| B2 Wm Schlein            | 203 Gerald Sigman        |                       |
| 101 Leo Mehler           | 204 Chas Hart            |                       |
| 102 Raymond Lude         | 205 Sheyndon Holzman     |                       |
| 103 Geo Schnell          | 206 Arth Washkupter      |                       |
| 104 Ray Lambert          | 207 Nathan Wallace       |                       |
| 105 Peter Verbanic       | 208 Sylvia Goldberg      |                       |
| 106 Mary Wesley          | 209 Marvin Weckstein     |                       |
| 201 Jessie Simla         | 210 Nathan Chodonow      |                       |
| 202 Sant Storchan        | 211 D Sapac              |                       |
| 203 Ernest Remyndyer     | 301 Gerald Frye          |                       |

### Along 12th Street

- 1825 Francis Jaques
- 1827 Nino's Pizzeria
- 1829 Whirlaway Bar
- 1831 Arth Cumming
- 1831 John Smith
- 1835 Fred Gilbert
- Marcus Frost
- Dentist
- 1837 Tuxedo Tailors and Cleaners
- 1839 Roland White
- Mrs. Lottie Mills
- LaVeada Beauty Shoppe
- 1843 Andrew Ios
- barber
- 1847 Mac's Market
- 12001 Olympia Candy Shop
- 12003 Black & White Cleaners
- 12005 Vacant
- 12007 Thos Michalis

## Motives

# Why did whites leave so quickly?

By Cameron McWhirter / *The Detroit News*

**DETROIT** — Why did the Jews leave Elmhurst in the 1950s?

Fifty years on, the participants in the block's rapid transformation, both black and white, see Jewish motives at the time as confused, murky.

Some say the whites simply wanted a bigger home, or they were afraid of crime. Others say that Jews simply wanted to live near Jews. No one recalls any animosity on the block — but the Jews and other whites suddenly just left.

Many Jewish leaders actively supported a proposed Fair Employment ordinance then being debated in the City Council. The Jewish Community Council issued public statements against housing discrimination. Most Jews had voted against conservative Republican Albert Cobo, who had stopped expansion of the city's public housing program and was strongly supported by white homeowners groups.

Jewish families knew blacks chiefly as domestics and laborers, as the women who cleaned their kitchens or the men who swept their shop floors. The Orthodox would hire black children in their homes on Friday nights, the Sabbath, to turn on electric lights and the stove, since their religion forbade them from doing so themselves.

Many Jews had a perception that blacks, who were generally poorer and less educated, were more likely to commit crimes. They lived in slums. They caused problems. Elderly Jewish apartment-dwellers often would not allow black paperboys in their building vestibules.

Larry James, now 54, grew up one block from Elmhurst and used to deliver newspapers on the street and do other odd jobs for the Jewish merchants and homeowners. While Jewish children liked to play with black kids, he said, the older Jews seemed fearful. He remembers many older Jews immigrating from war-torn Europe. He remembers noticing numbers tattooed on their forearms as he handed them their paper or delivered their vegetables.

One white resident of German descent used to complain to her black neighbor Curtis Lewis about the Jews, claiming they were conspiratorial financiers. The young Lewis used to question the woman. "How do you hate someone you don't even know?" he would ask.

Larry James, who is black, recalls playing with the Jewish kids in the street. "We played stickball, we played other games," he said. "There was no problem because we were friends, until they moved away."

Michael H. Traison, a downtown corporate attorney who is white, was a little boy in 1951 living with his brothers and immigrant Russian parents in a two-bedroom apartment in the Elmfour Court apartments at 2019 Elmhurst, across 14th from B'nai David, where they attended services.

Traison doesn't remember noticing much when blacks started moving in. He doesn't remember any concerns about crime. But by 1954, his father decided the family should move farther out, to the edges of Detroit.

Their synagogue, B'nai David, held its last service on Elmhurst in 1958. The temple leaders held a

special ceremony to carry the Torah out of the building. They drove it up to the brand new Temple in Southfield.

Traison believes he was one of the last Jewish boys to live on the block, if not the last. Asked whether he was sad to leave his friends, Traison said, “By the time I moved, I didn’t have any friends.”

## Housing

# Realtors’ tactics shaped exodus

By Cameron McWhirter / *The Detroit News*

**DETROIT** — Detroit in the 1950s, crowded and cramped as never before or since, became a disordered chess game fueled by racial anxiety, controlled by a small group of white real estate agents and unchecked by government.

Block by block, the city turned quickly from white to black — whenever white real-estate agents decided that it was time — and the suburbs began to develop homes by the thousands for whites moving up and out for good.

Blacks often found the least resistance to purchasing housing or renting from Jews. The victims of prejudice themselves, many Jews were more open to dealing with blacks than other whites. So as the Jewish population moved through the city, out from Hasting Street to the North End, then west through the city and out into the suburbs, blacks followed.

Since the dawn of the 20th century, when blacks from the South began coming to Detroit to work, racial tensions had developed over where they would live. Since the 1920s, whites on some blocks had organized community associations geared toward keeping blacks out.

In 1925, a black doctor named Ossian Sweet and his family moved onto a white street on the east side and were promptly harassed and the house pelted with rocks. After one such assault, Sweet and his family had opened fire on a crowd, killing one man.

In the high-profile murder trial that followed, Sweet and his relatives were found not guilty. But the trial’s publicity exacerbated racial tensions.

In the 1940s, hundreds of thousands more blacks came to Detroit to fill armament-industry jobs. In 1943, riots caused to a great extent by housing tensions led to the deaths of 34 people.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People issued a postmortem report on the riot, blaming unfair housing practices by whites against blacks. But little was done in the years following to resolve the housing crisis.

Blacks continued to pour into Detroit after the war. Pay was good in manufacturing jobs. And the automobile industry, thanks in part to black activists working to integrate the United Auto Workers, treated blacks more equitably than many other industries.

Black activists such as the youthful pastor C.L. Franklin raised issues about segregation of schools, hospitals and housing.

But few white leaders paid attention. Albert Cobo, the conservative Republican mayor of the city from 1950-57, believed in an unrestrained real-estate market.

Monday, June 18, 2001

## Broken Detroit: Death of a City Block

*From Detroit News, Part 2 of 5 Parts*



David Coates / The Detroit News

**First the looters came, says the Rev. Edith Johnson, who has lived on Elmhurst for four decades. “They came down the street here singing, ‘Hey, hey, it’s Christmas day,’ and their carts were full of everything they could get.”**

## 1967 riot sent street into wrenching spiral

**Once-stable block withers as property owners desert**

*“...We must come to see that de facto segregation in the North is just as injurious as the actual segregation in the South.”*

— **Martin Luther King Jr.**, in a speech at the Great March on Detroit, June 23, 1963

By Cameron McWhirter

### **DETROIT**

The Rev. Edith Johnson was struck by how few worshipers came to hear her preach that summer morning at her storefront church, the Universal Meditation Center, a few blocks from her home at 1965 Elmhurst.

Where was everyone? Why was it so quiet? Riding home with her husband through deserted streets,

she suddenly heard gunshots and reflexively pushed her granddaughter Paris, who was wearing her Sunday best, down on the floor in the back seat.

By the time the Johnsons got home, the worst American riot since the Civil War was well under way. It was Sunday, July 23, 1967.

In the middle of the next day, Rev. Johnson watched from her porch in amazement as young men wheeled grocery carts down Elmhurst. The carts were full of booty from the stores on 12th — dry cleaning, food, hardware supplies, liquor.

The 1967 riot spilled into a neighborhood that, after the upheaval of white flight in the 1950s, had turned into a stable, well-maintained, working-class community for African-Americans. The 1900 block of Elmhurst had a front-row seat to the drama of civil unrest that would forever alter it and the city's landscape.

**Paris Freeman, now 38, grew up with her grandmother, Rev. Johnson, on 1965 Elmhurst.**

David Coates / The Detroit News

**Paris Freeman tries to get her 1-year-old son Isiah to fall asleep at the home of her grandmother, Rev. Edith Johnson, who has lived at 1965 Elmhurst for the past four decades.**

## **2: Detroit a synonym for industrial greatness**

In 1951, during Detroit's 250th anniversary celebrations at the apex of the city's population and industrial strength, standing before throngs at city hall, President Harry Truman declared: "Today, the word Detroit is a synonym throughout the world for the industrial greatness of America."

By 1967, a demoralized Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh compared his burning city to Berlin in 1945.

On Elmhurst between 12th and 14th streets, on Detroit's west side, the rapid movements of entire ethnic populations during the 1950s had helped set the stage for the social upheavals of the 1960s. The life of this block was a microcosm of life in Detroit.

Moreover, the history of this working-class neighborhood shows how white flight, abandonment, confused tax and property laws, absentee landlords, profit-hungry real-estate agents, criminals, drug addicts, lax bureaucracy and ineffective federal and local policies over several decades caused the death of a city block.

Detroit News Photo

**It was July 23, 1967, the first day of the Detroit riot. Hundreds of protesters charged down 12th Street near Clairmount. They threw stones and bottles at store windows and looted the shops.**

### 3: Jewish exodus brings instability to Elmhurst

The exodus of Jewish families and apartment dwellers from Elmhurst in the mid-1950s had brought instability to the block. By 1958, the street's five apartment buildings had a total of 27 vacant apartments — the highest vacancy rate in decades.

To fill apartments, landlords lowered rents. Owners of houses, when unable to sell them quickly, rented them out for the first time. Poorer blacks, desperate for housing in the rigidly segregated city, moved in from streets to the south. As long as the houses were occupied and property taxes were being paid, this development of absentee landlords holding single-family houses didn't initially pose a problem.

More disturbing was the increased use of land contracts, under which real-estate agents could sell houses with very low down payments but with high interest rates. Black families could live in the houses and buy the property over time. But if they missed payments, they were quickly evicted. Rapid property turnover became common.

Choice Cooper, a factory worker at the nearby Cadillac factory, bought the house at 1926 Elmhurst in February 1962. He had grown up in Oklahoma but moved to Detroit after military service to find work.

At the time, Detroit was a magnet for black workers across America. Manufacturing jobs were plentiful, and Cavanaugh, the city's youthful new mayor, had promised to eliminate racial problems in the police department and other branches of city government. He also pledged to deal with unemployment among black youth, improve the schools and help end segregation in the city's housing.

Cooper thought Detroit was becoming more receptive to black people, and his job paid well, so he decided to buy a house. The black real-estate agent showed him the story-and-a-half home next to Red Front Collision. Elmhurst was pretty, quiet, close to work and safe. The house had a small yard and easy access to the alley garage for his car. It seemed like a good place for his wife and son.

"At that time they had police walking the beat," he said. "Crime was nothing." Cooper remembers fixing up the yard when he moved in and planting juniper bushes in front of his porch.

Tim Lewis, a carpenter, was renting the house at 1956 Elmhurst where Harry Shiovitz had once lived. Lewis rehabbed the small garage and fixed up the kitchen, putting in new tiles, according to his son Curtis. Lewis also scrimped to buy the place one day.

Close to Roosevelt Elementary, Durfee Middle School and Central High School, the area had lots of children. It was a good place to raise a family.

"It was quiet here," Curtis Lewis said. "When you looked down the street, all you saw was trees."

Wing Chow and his wife Irene, who went by "Renie," bought the white clapboard one-story between the 20-unit Hazelfern apartment building and another house on the southeast side of the block. Chow, part owner of a Chinese restaurant, took out a \$4,900 mortgage.

The Chows were the only mixed-race couple around, and Wing was the only Asian for blocks. But Renie Chow, who is black, said no one bothered them about racial issues. City services — street lights, garbage pickup, police patrols — all remained good, she remembers. Renie Chow, who worked as a waitress and later in a factory, remembers walking her dogs at night and leaving the door open when she went to work.

Even the principal vacant building in the area was soon filled. The 1,600-seat B'nai David Temple, which had been closed in 1958 when the congregation followed most of its members to Southfield, was



#### **4: Racial tensions simmer with unemployment**

Trouble was brewing only a few blocks south of Elmhurst, in the heart of what had become the city's black ghetto. In the 1960s, the black neighborhood around 12th Street had a population density that was twice the city average.

And while the city's total population was dropping (and so was the property tax base), city schools like Central High, Durfee Middle School and Roosevelt Elementary were more crowded than ever. Unemployment among black men was more than double that of white men in the city. Blacks were less educated than whites, and when they did have the same education, they were generally paid less than white counterparts.

Black leaders had been complaining about these issues for years. Martin Luther King Jr. had even come to Detroit in 1963 for a great march to protest segregation and racism.

Nowhere were these problems more manifest than on 12th Street, around Clairmount on the west side, 13 blocks south of the Elmhurst neighborhood.

A decade earlier, the area around Clairmount had been a solid center for Jewish businesses.

By the time of the riot in 1967, it had turned into a strip of pool halls, liquor stores, small party stores and illegal drinking establishments called "Sin Street." The neighborhood on Elmhurst had few social ills, but the residents noticed the changes on 12th, the main thoroughfare.

Vagrants started to panhandle more in front of the shops. The bars along the street, Skid's and LaVert's Lounge up the way, were filling with men, even during the day.

Sharon Jackson, now 44 and living in Lansing, was a young girl living with her mom in an apartment in the four-family flat at 1957 Elmhurst in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She remembers a strange white man who would walk the street with a tomahawk, claiming he was an Indian. A short, thin black man, who had returned from Vietnam, would stand at the corner of 12th and Elm, flinching and jerking.

"I don't know if anyone ever knew his name," she said. "I can still see him standing there in his trenchcoat, dodging bullets in his mind."

Rev. Gooden had started to stand on the corner of Elmhurst on Saturday nights, preaching against the evils of drink.

#### **5: July 23, 1967: The riot spills over to Elmhurst**

The block was ill-prepared for the havoc unleashed when police raided an illegal after-hours liquor joint, a "blind pig," 13 blocks south of Elmhurst on 12th in the early morning hours of July 23, 1967.

The next day, looters, mostly young men and teen-age boys, had hit the businesses at the end of the block on Elmhurst — Mac's grocery, Diggs TV Shop, Skid's Bar, the candy shop — and even the small garage on Elmhurst behind the 12th Street shops, Red Front Collision.

"They came down the street here singing, 'Hey, hey, it's Christmas day,' and their carts were full of everything they could get," Rev. Johnson recalled.

Then the soldiers came. National Guard and U.S. Army troops drove down the streets and alleys in

armored trucks. Tanks drove down 12th. Army marksmen stood on the roof of a nearby warehouse. Shots rang out each night. No fires were started on Elmhurst, but all the stores fronting 12th had been ransacked. The curfew kept everyone inside.

Wanda Cowans, then living in the flat at 1910 Elmhurst above the Summerville Party Store, remembers cowering in her apartment with her daughter and two sons. She looked out to see teens smashing windows and running away with food and clothes. People fought over dry-cleaning in the street.

After three days, Cowans and her children tried to sneak to her sister's house down the block, away from the looting. They were met by soldiers, guns drawn.

"I never been so scared," she said. The soldiers yelled at them but let them go.

On July 27, 1967, the day the riot ended, a grim-faced President Lyndon Johnson addressed the nation on television, as disheartened shopkeepers swept glass from their shop floors on the corner of Elmhurst and 12th.

"The only genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack, mounted at every level, upon the conditions that breed despair and violence," Johnson declared. "All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs.... We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America."

But the shopowners, property owners and residents on the 1900 block of Elmhurst got little help from the federal or the local government after the riot.

Federal "Great Society" programs focused on jobs and centered in the worst-hit neighborhoods. Conflicts about fair housing were still being fought in the city, but they were irrelevant to Elmhurst: The whites had all left in the 1950s. For quiet, modest streets like Elmhurst, the "Great Society" meant little.

After the riot, "Sin Street" was demolished. The area of 12th and Clairmount, the heart of the riot, was turned into modern, well-kept urban renewal housing. Today, those houses have a higher property value than the ones on Elmhurst.

"Places like Elmhurst were just left behind by community development policy," said Thomas Sugrue, a University of Pennsylvania history professor and an expert on Detroit's race relations.

David Coates / The Detroit News

**Mary Thomas, who was a deaconess at Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church on Elmhurst and 14th, says she remembers trees and children were everywhere on the street.**



## 6: Commercial district dies as vacancies gut street

The stores were the first to go. In 1964, eight stores operated on the end of the block on 12th. By 1970, only five remained: the Elmhurst Barber Shop, the Summerville Party Store, Billy’s Cleaners, The Four Season’s Bar-B-Q and Skid’s Bar.

“Investors, most of them white, were wary of putting their money in poor, urban minority areas anyway,” Sugrue said. “The riot just killed the 12th Street commercial district.”

The residential section of the street also suffered. By 1970, three years after the riot, the city directory listed 128 phone numbers on the Elmhurst block and listed 41 vacancies, more than double the number of vacancies in 1964.

Most of the vacancies were in the apartments. Landlords had little choice but to lower rents again, bringing in even poorer people. Evictions went up. The apartments became less desirable to working people, and the neighboring homes less desirable to home buyers.

Landlords also started using these properties for tax writeoffs. They wrote off the depreciation of these old buildings while not investing in their upkeep. The financial incentive wasn’t there, Sugrue said.

The physical deterioration started at the Elmfour, 2019 Elmhurst. On July 31, 1967, only four days after the riot ended, the Brant family, which had owned the building for decades, filed with the Wayne County Register of Deeds that the property had been sold to Forbes-Cohen Corp.

In 1968, Forbes-Cohen took out a \$65,000 loan against the property with Chicago Mortgage Co. The same day, Harry and Mary D. Walton bought the property from Forbes-Cohen. Wayne County records then show a flurry of owners and claimants to the building. By 1971, the building was mostly vacant, and building inspectors had declared it uninhabitable.

On Feb. 10, 1972, the city filed suit for the Elmfour “to be demolished and the cost assessed against the property.” By then, the last owners, Edward and Jessie Armstrong and Evelyn J. Woods, had defaulted on their mortgage and were nowhere to be found. Because of bureaucratic and legal delays, the building would not be torn down for years.

The police still came to the street, but now they drove by in squad cars. Crime citywide was on the rise, even as the overall population continued to drop. In 1960, 150 homicides were reported in a city of 1,670,144 people. In 1970, 495 people were murdered in a city of 1,514,063.

The rioting only accelerated white flight to the suburbs. White people who had left neighborhoods like Elmhurst for the outer sections of Detroit fled the city altogether. And black people from neighborhoods like Elmhurst began moving into the outer sections that white people were leaving.

After the riot, the modest working-class community that the Elmhurst block had always been lurching into a frightening downward spiral. Drugs, crime and abandonment came quickly. Despite the efforts of those on the block and the stated intentions and investments of local and national governments, Elmhurst was doomed to become a lost block.

“We didn’t have any problems until ’67, when they started breaking in them stores — that was the turn of it,” said Renie Chow.

Paris Freeman, now 38, grew up with her grandmother, Rev. Johnson, on Elmhurst. She traces the block’s downfall to those momentous days in July 1967. “That just devastated the land values here, the shops and everybody living here,” she said.

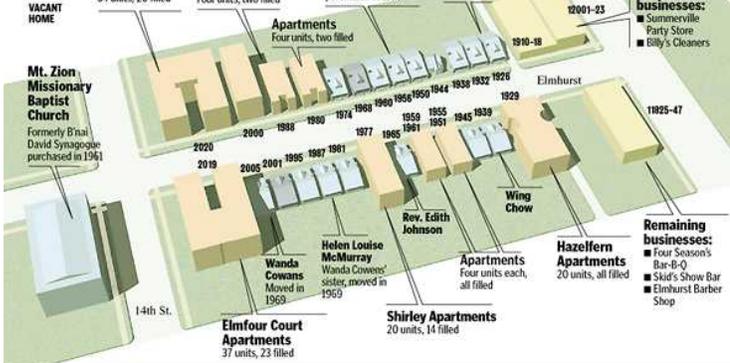
Curtis Lewis now lives in the house at 1956 Elmhurst, where he grew up, but he didn’t live there during the riot. As for most older Detroiters and former Detroiters, the riot was a bitter, pivotal moment in his life. He doesn’t condone the riot, but he understands why it happened.

“People just got tired of being victimized by the police,” he said.

Harry Shiovitz, the Jewish salesman who had owned and lived in Lewis’ house in the early 1950s, by 1967 had moved his family to far northwest Detroit. He recalls driving home through the city from a wedding with his wife on July 23, when he noticed a young black couple stopped at a light next to them. Both cars had the windows down. The woman in the other car caught Shiovitz’s eye and nervously told him she was frightened.

“I’m as scared as you are,” he told her.

The Shiovitz family moved to Southfield in 1972.



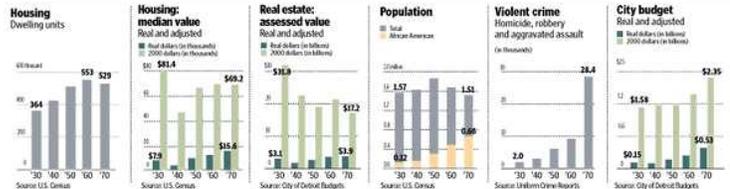
**A snapshot of Detroit** Mayors 1960-1980 Louis C. Miriani, 1958-1962; Jerome Cavanaugh, 1962-1970; Roman Gribbs, 1970-1974

■ Jerome Cavanaugh, heralded by the national media as a progressive urban leader, was elected at the age of 33 in 1961, with the overwhelming support of the city's black voters.

■ On June 23, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. marched in Detroit with the Rev. C.F. Franklin, Detroit Mayor Cavanaugh, Michigan Gov. George Romney and 125,000 others. At the time, the march was the largest civil rights demonstration in U.S. history. Two months later, on Aug. 28, King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C. to 250,000 people.

■ During five days of rioting in July 1967, 43 people were killed, 7,231 people were arrested. More than 88 percent of those arrested were black. President Lyndon Johnson ordered in more than 4,700 members of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions to restore order. They supplemented more than 7,000 Michigan National Guard who were already stationed in the city.

■ Despite losing population, Detroit's homicides jumped after the riots. In 1964, the city reported 125 homicides. In 1970, the city reported 495.



**Who lived where in 1970:**

- |                       |                      |                        |
|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1910 Wanda J Covans   | 1W C Phillips        | At Robt Thomas         |
| 1920 Vacant           | 2W No Return         | Bt Stephanie           |
| 1925 No Return        | 1961 Frank Gordon    | Michigan               |
| 1929 Hazelfern Apts   | 1987 Norma Taylor    | 101 Calvin Outlaw      |
| Bt Wattie Patterson   | 1988 Apartments      | 102 Margt Washington   |
| Al Namon Gardner      | 1E James Lately      | 103 Vacant             |
| 2 Sallie Dickerson    | 2E Betty Teasler     | 104 Vacant             |
| 3 Henry Clark         | 1W Vacant            | 105 Fred Bynan         |
| 4 James Welch         | 2W Miller James      | 106 Vacant             |
| 5 Edith Wright        | 1995 Fred T Johnson  | 107 Vacant             |
| 6 Georgetta Baker     | 2000 Apartments      | 108 Charles Taylor     |
| 7 Mary Bonange        | Bt Charles T Johnson | 109 Gary Cheeks        |
| 21 John W Wilson      | 100 Vacant           | 110 Vacant             |
| 22 Beanda E Schultz   | 101 Mrs V Brice      | 111 Vacant             |
| 23 Mary Alston        | 102 Howard Williams  | 201 Wm Bice            |
| 24 Cordelia Smith     | 103 Ovide            | 202 James Rhodes       |
| 25 Oscar J Nash       | 104 Vacant           | 203 Lucius Crawford    |
| 26 Julia M Scott      | 200 No Return        | 204 Vacant             |
| 31 Rev John Kerr      | 201 Donna Dickerson  | 205 Joyce Guise        |
| 32 David Piggae       | 202 Walter Brown     | 206-209 Vacant         |
| 33 Philip Foster      | 203 Alco Johnson     | 210 Charles Burns      |
| 34 Earl Knox Jr       | 204 Arth White       | 211 Vacant             |
| 35 Toney Smith        | 300 Isiah Love       | 301 Randolph Combs     |
| 36 McKinley Dillard   | 301 Wm L Kennedy     | 302 Robt Galtrite      |
| 1932 Robt B Rucker    | 302 Vacant           | 303 Vacant             |
| 1938 Clyde Carrington | 303 Vacant           | 304 Vacant             |
| 1939 Wing J Chow      | 304 Harriett Walker  | 305 Earl Hardy         |
| 1944 Maggie Patton    | 2000 No Return       | 306 Jimmie Spraud      |
| 1945 Lehman Harris    | 2005 Helen McMurray  | 307 Robt A Matthews    |
| 1950 John Montgomery  | 2019 Elmfour Court   | 308 Robt Burns         |
| 1951 Sheila Birse     | Apts.                | 309 Vacant             |
| Betty Preston         | Bt Annie Gless       | 310 Priscilla Treat    |
| 1956 Tim Lewis        | B2 Vacant            | 311 Betty J Bailey     |
| 1959 Bernice McCarver | E3 Azalee Kapor      |                        |
| Anthony Gwynn         | B4 Margie Robinson   |                        |
| Geneva Howshaw        | B5 Vacant            | 11825 Vacant           |
| E Holman              | 101 Robt L McGraw    | 11827 Four Season's    |
| 1960 Leon Wiggins     | 102 Odella Smith     | Bar-B-Q Restr          |
| 1961 Phyllis Bost     | 103 Carolyn Echols   | 11831 Olivia           |
| Reginald Smith        | 104 Jay Coleman      | Massenburg             |
| 1965 Jeff Johnson     | 105 Robt Green       | 11835 Skid's Show Bar  |
| 1968 Vacant           | 106 Vacant           | 11837 Mildred Brown    |
| 1971 Thos Walker      | 107 Hurschel Boykins | 11839 V Boddie         |
| 1977 Shirley Apts.    | 108 Harold Meccinson | 11841 Vacant           |
| Bt Vacant             | 109 Vacant           | 11843 Elmhurst Barber  |
| 101 Wm Bedsoe         | 110 Dekens Carter    | Shop                   |
| 102 Jessie Davis      | 111 Wm Gribbs        | 11845 Geo Brewer       |
| 103 Joseph Hudson     | 201 Mommie Calton    | Laymen Wornack         |
| 104 Alvin Parker      | 202-206 Vacant       | Mary Johnson           |
| 105 Reginald Payton   | 207 Wm Gray          | 11847 Addie Lawson     |
| 106 Johnny Taylor     | 208 Keith Terry      | 12001 Summerville      |
| 106 No Return         | 209 Hazel Gray       | Party Store            |
| 202 Oscar Stargus     | 210 Arth Young       | 12003 Billy's Cleaners |
| 203 Juanita Byrd      | 211 Vacant           | 12005 Elvise Beauty    |
| 203 Ch Connor         | 301 Vacant           | Shop                   |
| 204 Ghafur Hasum      | 302 Aureo Ulmer      | 12007 Wm Burley        |
| 205 Wilbern Haynes    | 303 Vacant           | 12009 Vacant           |
| 206 James Ivey        | 304 Barbara Lewis    | 12011 Ora Kersey       |
| 301 Leonard Brantly   | 305 Myodkan Gray     | 12015 Vacant           |
| 302 Vacant            | 306 Melissa Fann     | 12021 Otis Moore       |
| 303 Melvin Lanus      | 307 Vacant           | 12023 Peter Ferguson   |
| 304 Vacant            | 308 Vacant           |                        |
| 305 Vacant            | 309 Pat Pettway      |                        |
| 306 Vacant            | 310 John Ellis       |                        |
| 1980 Apartments       | 311 Vacant           |                        |
| E Vacant              | 2020 Elmhurst Manor  |                        |
| Z Robt Willis         | Apts.                |                        |
- \* "No return" - No response to Directory inquiry, possibly vacant  
 \* Based on 1969 address  
 Source: City Directory

