



Bulletin of the Kenton County Historical Society

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EARLY 20TH C. VIEW OF WEST COVINGTON

IN THIS ISSUE: WILLOW RUN CREEK and INTERSTATE-75

By John Boh

Willow Run Creek and Interstate -75

By John Boh

Where is Willow Run Creek in Covington? Of course, it is under the I-75 Expressway up to Twelfth Street. In the early 1830s the Town of Covington extended its original western border from Washington Street to Willow Run giving the Town its “West Side.” Maps show that Willow Run Creek starts up in the Highland Pike area. It drains in rivulets downward to the creek’s main course somewhere around Nineteenth Street. It then runs northward toward the Ohio River. Maps show a serpentine creek with a wider basin toward the Ohio River.¹

An early twentieth century map (next picture) shows Third Street between heavy industry operating on the Ohio River and residential buildings on the other side. The street crosses the Willow Run bottoms on an elevated structure with outlets underneath for water flowing to the river.²



Eventually the city constructed a drain (or tunnel) in the creek bottom emptying into the Ohio River for the improvement of Covington’s sewer system. With growth and congestion, the banks of Willow Run became dumping and fill-in sites. Housing was built on graded landfill. Residents have had problems from runoff and Ohio River backup flooding basements built in the lower grades. Circuses and fairs were held in the basin of the creek. Ballparks were built. Recreational sites however were considered potential locations for additional commercial development. Then the ballparks were demolished for the I-75 expressway built over Willow Run.³

Lewisburg on a branch of Willow Run

The Lewisburg neighborhood developed along a western branch of Willow Run Creek. The branch flows along Lewis Street. Dr. Harvey Lewis, a Covington physician, recorded the first plat in 1842 and in the 1840s Covington annexed Lewisburg. Lewisburg’s old businesses once included Fromand’s saloon and “zoo,” slaughterhouses, tanneries, a stock pen serving drovers along the Covington and Lexington Turnpike, and a “Pickle and Sauerkraut plant.” In 1859 Duhme & Co. opened the

Lexington Brewery on Pike Street between Lewis and Western. In 1866 Charles Lange and Frank Knoll operated a brewery at the northwest corner of Lewis and Baker streets later called the Covington Brewing Co., which closed in 1918 due to Prohibition. Overlooking the eastern bank of Willow Run Creek in 1866 Julius Deglow and Charles Best started a small brewery on Pike Street soon named "Bavarian," (with ice ponds nearby). William Riedlin and John Meyer purchased the business in 1882. By 1914 the Bavarian brewery was the largest "of its kind" in Kentucky. This high-volume brewing ceased with Prohibition, but beer production restarted after Prohibition ended.⁴

The parish of St John (the Evangelist) dates to 1854 with its first church built on the hillside street called Worth. For the present St. John's, the bishop of Covington had purchased land on Pike Street from "Colonel Morgan." A "twenty-eight-foot hill" was leveled before construction of the present-day school, rectory, and church (dedicated in 1924). According to a church history, by agreement the city of Covington used the dirt from the hill for a Ninth Street connector across Willow Run Creek.⁵

Concrete Sewer Line

A section of Willow Run Creek's natural hollow can be seen where Euclid Street terminates at the St Elizabeth Hospital parking just north of Sixteenth Street. In the hollow a concrete man-hole with metal lid is visible for access to the masonry sewer line below. (Next picture)



Willow Run was a convenient location for sewer drainage, but construction was prolonged. Initiated in 1892, politics were centered in Covington's bicameral legislative body. Litigation by the city enabled it to assess property owners near Willow Run and condemn some properties for public use. Then two years later bids were requested. Accusations of bribery and kickbacks intensified the politics. Delays occurred over the appointment of a superintendent of construction, over the issue of using union labor, and because of an incorrect printing of a bond issue. Eventually construction commenced. A second phase of construction meant getting construction bids again in 1906. These were for the section between Third Street and the Ohio River and for extending the sewer south-

ward to the independent Town of Central Covington which would get a sewer outlet. The Town itself could not afford necessary public improvements. In 1906 heavy rains caused flooding. That year a Covington ordinance annexed Central Covington giving access to the sewer. Over twenty years after the first construction bids, the city completed the project. Residents west of Willow Run were by then lobbying for a viaduct over the creek around Seventh Street.⁶



Industry

By 1900, Covington factories wanted more direct access to railroad freight cars, but they were rejected. Officials met with the Cambridge Tile Co. north of Central Covington about switching tracks along Willow Run.

In 1899 the Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Co. of Central Covington voluntarily offered, “thirty-five” art tiles to the Smithsonian. It was then “the only recorded donation by an American tile company to the national collections.” This act might well have been a historical-minded goodwill gesture as the company was turning away from a focus on “art tile” toward larger scale production for “expanding markets.” The Cambridge Tile Co., a decorative tile maker (bathrooms, fireplaces etc.), was established in the 1880s west of Holman. In the 1500 block the 1909 Sanborn Fire Insur-

ance map shows eleven cone shaped kilns extending skyward above the factory roofs, and another eight kilns in the 1600 block of present-day Woodburn Street. In 1927 the company employed 200 plus eight sales representatives. Refusal by officials to provide the company requested shipping facilities (more direct railroad connections) forbade the company's finally moving out. The company in 1929 relocated to Hartwell, Ohio. One resident recalled that her grandchildren would play in the old dump at Willow Run Creek and would find remnants of colored tile.⁷

Willow Run Creek was a factor when officials looked for a "probable route" across the creek to the Cincinnati Southern Railroad in Ludlow and to the C & O tracks that crossed the Ohio River at Main Street. Officials met about requests in the city's Westside - with the Houston, Stanwood & Gamble Co. (manufactures of steam engines and boilers), the Republic Iron and Steel Mill and other local factories. Industry owners would threaten to move out if boxcar loading were not made accessible nearby. Railroad claimed to be favorable - if there were sufficient "inducement" - which never came. Discussions lost importance with World War I.⁸

Proposed Willow Run Harbor

Right after the War improvements to Willow Run itself and nearby property involved another round of proposals: Creating a harbor for loading and unloading barges and protecting boats from ice flows on the Ohio; dredging and widening of the creek; creating "pools" between Second and Third and Third and Fourth streets; building a "pier" 500 feet into the Ohio River; building wharfs at the ends of Philadelphia, Bakewell and Main streets; and again, creating more direct railroad connections for factories. In the aftermath of World War I, such projects were again never accomplished as public funding was tight.⁹

Ballparks and Recreation

The Covington Ball Park (next picture) on the south side of Ninth between Philadelphia and Baker streets was established on graded backfill at Willow Run about 1895. It was rebuilt in 1948. Concrete stands behind home plate and along the first base and third base lines seated a total of 2,200 people. Added were a press box and lights. The 1931 street directory also lists the Golden Rod Ball Park at the south end of Hermes Street which today terminates at the Interstate 75 expressway. The "William Goebel Park," a picnic and playground facility at the corner of Fifth and Philadelphia, once included a "sports field" at the Willow Run valley before the expressway. An African American semi-pro team played on a "Covington Park," at Seventh Street "next to Willow Run" that was integrated by 1948. Covington ball parks hosted baseball, softball (women included), but also football, boxing, and wrestling.¹⁰



Interstate 75

The building of I-75 had a tremendously negative impact on the city's wellbeing. It separated Lewisburg and West Covington from the main city and brought other changes including depopulation. The original construction brought "Death Hill" into the local lexicon. In February 1955 city commission by a vote of 4 to 1, before an audience of about seventy-three, approved the route of the new \$8 million expressway. The only negative vote came from Ralph B. Grieme. Approval votes came from commissioners Bernard Brungs, Fred Hofstetter, Harold Swarthout and Mayor John J. Maloney. Grieme reiterated his position that the new highway should be built bypassing Covington. The highway was also described for Northern Kentuckians at that time as starting at the Ohio River and connecting with highways 25 and 42 in Florence. It would be funded by the Federal Government, the states of Kentucky and Ohio. Through a bond issue Kenton County would purchase rights of way. Lewisburg residents were most vocal in opposition.¹¹

The new expressway from Covington to Florence was to have a very important connection to the still new airport in Boone County. On the Ohio side an expressway along the Mill Creek was already in the works. In 1955 Kenton County voters approve \$1 million for purchase of "some" of the property for construction of Interstate 75. It would involve the purchase of "about 100 pieces of property" along Willow Run beginning in 1958. Various titles or descriptions were given to this proposed interstate. As longtime Northern Kentucky residents know, repairing and restructuring projects and have been frequent to this day.¹²

Property Acquired

Bullock Street was retained along the western edge of the new expressway from Pike Street to beyond Twelfth providing one of the vital entrances. On the eastern side of Bullock all the lots were removed for original construction as were some lots on the cross streets, Pike, Eleventh and Twelfth. On the west side of Bullock only later expressway ramp expansion meant a demolition of a row of residential homes. In the original construction before 1960, it appears that on the southern end of Hermes around nineteen residential lots and the Golden Rod Ballpark were acquired. Other acquisitions by the Department of Highways appear to include the following: six addresses - all businesses - on Pike Street; ten residences on Riedlin; nineteen on West Fourth; nine on West Fifth; one business on West Eighth; nineteen on West Twelfth; and two on West Thirteenth.¹³

The Commonwealth of Kentucky Department of Highways had to acquire land for entrances and exits (ramps). In one instance: In February 1958 Elizabeth Hellmann, a widow, sold to the Commonwealth of Kentucky "for the benefit of the Department of Highways a tract of land for a proposed public ramp, being ramp 2 of a proposed Bullock Street interchange," which was to be part of the public road "known as the proposed Covington-Lexington Road" (sic).¹⁴

Deed records sometimes referred the reader "for further details" to the Department of Transportation in Frankfort, including for this transaction: In February 1958 for \$110,000 Edgar and Isabell Zimmer sold to the Commonwealth of Kentucky, for use and benefit of the Department of Highways, land which lies within 150 feet on the right of way of the center line of a proposed public road known as the Covington-Lexington Road.¹⁵

The following deed involved one of the critics of the proposed expressway route: On March 4, 1959, for \$31,000 William H. and Estelle Nie sold the following to the Commonwealth of Kentucky: Beginning at a point in the south property line of Pike Street 5025 feet east from the southeast corner of Pike and Bullock Streets a lot fronting 32.36 feet on the south side of Pike Street and running back at right angles and between parallel line to a depth of 100.3 feet. This conveyance was indeed forced in accordance with the judgment of the Kenton Circuit Court rendered March 20, 1959. This lot had been conveyed by Charles Zimmer to William Nie October 30, 1941.¹⁶

Urban Renewal

Observations dated September 16, 1962 by a reporter from the *Louisville Courier Journal* gave insights. By this time drivers had been using the new Interstate 75 for two weeks from Florence to exits at Eleventh and Pike streets in Covington. In addition, visions of economic prosperity along the section were to accompany planning meetings already that month for the construction of another expressway, a section of I-275 (a circle freeway) which would pass through Boone, Kenton and Campbell counties and through three states encircling the Cincinnati metropolitan area. As with Interstate 75, accessibility to the Greater Cincinnati Airport in Boone County would again be of great importance.¹⁷

The Brent Spence Bridge opened in 1963. The area was getting industrial parks including one covering 930 acres at Florence in Boone County. In the 1960s a new IRS data service center was built in Covington. By 1964 it employed “hundreds full time and “thousands part time during tax season. By 2015 it was employing 4000.¹⁸

Displaced People Look Back

In 1977, twenty years later, an *Enquirer* article recalled the viewpoints about having homes and business displaced by Interstate I-75. Covington Mayor George Wermeling recalled that Lewisburg had been a very nice little German village. It was a thriving place until the expressway ruined it by separating it into two parts. The expressway brought smoke and noise. William Nie said that officials were warned that the new bridge would immediately become outdated. Nie recalled objecting to the loss of the homes as significantly reducing Covington’s tax base. Opponents had warned officials that in Northern Kentucky the superhighway would never alleviate the traffic problem. The Autobahn in Germany was cited by supporters as a model.

The protesters had proposed rerouting it around Covington as had been done in Lexington. “We were not engineers but had common sense.” Instead of bringing business and tourism the expressway caused a loss of population. St. John’s parish saw decline. Local service shops went out of business. A graduate of the Cincinnati College of Pharmacy, William Nie, in 1936, had opened a “new prescription pharmacy” at 598 Pike which was covered over by expressway construction. Nie, a leader of the Lewisburg Civic Association, who passed away in February 1991, was one of the most outspoken opponents of the new interstate passing over Willow Run Creek.¹⁹

Beyond Covington

Between Covington and Kyles Lane, acquisitions might have touched some of the pioneer Thomas Kennedy family’ former property; farther south farmland with the ponds of Joseph Schlosser behind the Lookout House; a portion of the “Dixie Outdoor Theater” property; and more. On the other side of Kyles Lane an expressway crossing under the Dixie Highway near Highland Cemetery and Maple Avenue in Ft. Mitchell required more acquisitions.²⁰

At Buttermilk Pike the Commonwealth of Kentucky also acquired a portion of the Sixth-Class city (incorporated 1952) of Crescent Park built on rural land between Lakeside Park and Crescent Springs. Crescent Park was developed after World War II in response to the housing shortage. Beyond Crescent Park and Lakeside Park toward Boone County a very important interchange connected with the Donaldson (or Airport) Road for quicker access to the Greater Cincinnati Airport (and to the Erlanger/Elsmere area).²¹

One conspicuous parcel acquired between Crescent Springs and Erlanger was situated through the middle of the poultry farm of John and Mary Tewes. For \$15,655 on February 3, 1959, the Commonwealth of Kentucky acquired “a parcel of the land lying and being in Kenton County Kentucky and being a portion of the same tract of land conveyed to the parties of the first part by Mary List Dusing, a

widow, in 1944.” For further description see plans for the highway from Covington to Lexington on file with the Department of Highways in Frankfort. The deed states that this parcel is to be used for a public road ‘leading from the BOONE KENTON line to U. S. 25 and 42 (near Maple Avenue” at the Dixie Highway).²² For years the Tewes family owned two remaining portions of their farm seen on both sides of the expressway. The northern portion was later developed and sold as a business park.

Recent Willow Run Branch Improvements: The Amsterdam Valley Regional Detention Basin

An 1883 County Atlas shows the Lewisburg branch of Willow Run Creek taking the downward slope along Amsterdam Road which intersects with Montague. Recently earth moving and a tremendous amount of grading and planting completed the “Amsterdam Valley Regional Detention Basin” project. Some buildings were razed and the roadway through the valley reconfigured. The excessive runoff from the valley of 145 acres is captured. The detention basin holds 3.5 million gallons of water.²³

Recent Willow Run Branch Improvements: Biofiltration Swale and Detention Basin Below “Death Hill”

The original construction of Interstate 75 included an “S curve,” the Jefferson Avenue interchange, and the notorious “Death Hill.” In the 1990s the expressway was redesigned - the Jefferson Avenue interchange eliminated. This left in disarray the branch of Willow Run running from Ft. Mitchell below the Dixie Highway and Interstate 75. It meets the main creek behind St. Elizabeth Hospital a short distance north of Sixteenth and Euclid. To mitigate runoff volume, to filter polluted water and to prevent erosion a “Biofiltration Swale” was constructed with berms, rows of trees and a blanket of small vegetation. At the bottom a dry pond or “Detention Basin” also takes in water at “peak” runoff.²⁴

Recent Preservation and Archeology: A Willow Run Rain Garden and Interpretive Park

When West Twelfth Street was widened into a “corridor” and buildings demolished, architectural and archaeological studies documented and assessed the historical significance of the area. The city of Covington, the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, and the Northern Kentucky Sanitation District (SD1) guided the interpretive process. The results are images and text seen on National Park Service-type panels in the “Willow Run Rain Garden and Interpretive Park” at the southeast corner of the Twelfth Street and Simon Kenton Way. The panels (next picture) recall the “architectural, cultural, and brewery history” and point to new landscaping and to the celebration of the history of Willow Run Creek.²⁵



The New Brent Spence Bridge Project, 2022-2023

The mammoth interstate project extends from the Western Hills Viaduct to Ft. Mitchell. Featured in the planning is of course environmental impact studies. On the Kentucky side of paramount importance is the impact of the enlarged and reconfigured Brant Spence Bridge and of the complex of redesigned entrances and exits. At this point acquisition of property is seen to be minimal in Covington: mainly a couple residences to be demolished and, a trading of two sections of Goebel Park between project authorities and the city of Covington. Construction is projected to start in 2022-2023 depending on the granting of funds. Water runoff is another big part of planning, but none of the new drainage culverts will connect into the Willow Run sewer.²⁶

Attribution of photos: All taken by John Boh, except: Excerpt from early 20th Century Map published by the Ohio Book Store from the Jim Tarbell Collection; Willow Run Creek construction and the Covington Ball Park, from Kenton Public Library, Faces and Places.

1. Allen Webb Smith, "Beginning at 'the Point,' A Documented History of Northern Kentucky and Environs, the Town of Covington in Particular, 1751-1834," Park Hills, Kentucky: 1977, locally printed, p. 97; *Gateway City, Covington, Kentucky, 1815-2015*, Covington: Clarisy Press, 2015, p. 313; Sanborn Insurance map, 1886; Civil War map, Cincinnati, Covington, and Newport, ("Siege" of Cincinnati, 1862) reprinted 1877; *An Atlas of Boone, Kenton and Campbell Counties, Kentucky, 1883*, reproduced through the Boone County Historic Preservation Office, Mt. Vernon, Indiana: Windmill Productions, Inc. 1992
2. "Cincinnati U. S. A.," an early twentieth century map reprinted and published (1999) by the Ohio Book Store from the collection of Jim Tarbell; another view in color is of an almost identical map on p. 313 in *Gateway City*.
3. Jim Reis, "Tracing the Roots of Willow Run," *Kentucky Post*, March 11, 1991, p. 4K.
4. John Boh, "Lewisburg (Covington)," *Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky*, p. 546
5. "Centennial Souvenir, St John's Church, Covington, Kentucky," 1854-1954
6. Jim Reis, cited above; "Will Use Concrete for Willow Run Sewer," *Kentucky Post*, March 9, 1905, p. 2; *Gateway City*, pp. 116, 117
7. *Gateway City*, cited above; John Boh, "The Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Co.," Bulletin of the Kenton County Historical Society, November/December 2009
8. John Boh, "Northern Kentucky Railroads and Bridges, Crossings, Intersections, and Stations," Bulletin of the Kenton County Historical Society, September/October 2013
9. Jim Reis, cited above
10. *Gateway City*, pp. 140, 399; Jim Reis, cited above; 1931 Covington Street directory
11. "Gets Final OK," *Kentucky Times Star*, Feb. 12, 1955, p. 1
12. Jim Reis, cited above
13. Kenton County court records in Covington; 1956, 1962 and 1991 Covington Street directories
14. Deed book 462, p. 43 (Feb. 27, 1958)
15. Deed book 462, p. 64 (Feb. 28, 1958)
16. Property records index group 1510, deed book 473, p. 541, Parcel N. 256 (May 4, 1959); Charles Zimmer owned residences, grocery, and hardware car dealership properties and businesses. – "Charles Zimmer, Jr. "Mr. Lewisburg Charles Zimmer, Sr. (1868-1942)," a twenty-two-page handout
17. Grady Clay, "I-75 May Be the First Taste of Northern Kentucky Boom," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Sept. 16, 1962
18. *Gateway City*, pp. 111-115, 196, 241
19. "Displaced People Look Back in Anger at Death Hill," *Kentucky Enquirer*, Aug. 14, 1977, p. 2; "Opens New Pharmacy," *Kentucky Post*, May 8, 1936, p. 5; obituary, *Kentucky Post*, Feb. 21, 1991, p. 6A
20. Dixie Outdoor Theater to the Commonwealth of Kentucky, deed book 487, pp. 287, 412, Kenton County court records, Covington
21. *Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky*, p. 248
22. (Real estate transaction index, Group 3013) deed book 471, pp. 48-51
23. Project Street sign
24. Public handouts: "Biofiltration Swale" and "Detention Basin," SD1, Eaton Drive, Ft. Wright; website: "Interstate 75 Construction"
25. <https://www.graypape.com/project/willow-run-rain-garden-interpretive-park/>
26. Brent Spence Bridge Corridor, Department of Transportation, for Residents of the Mutter Gottes Neighborhood, and others, Dec. 5, 2022

Kenton County Historical Society

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ARTICLES FROM BACK ISSUES ARE INDEXED ON OUR WEBSITE!

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I Bet You Didn't Know

*Tidbits from Kentucky's heritage
for every day of the calendar year*

January 22, 1813 More than 400
Kentucky volunteers were massa-
cred by British and Indians at the
battle of River Raisin

January 29, 1830 A common –
school law was enacted, which pro-
vided for tax supported schools
throughout the state

February 4, 1791 Congress passed
an act providing for the admission
of Kentucky as a state on June 1,
1792

February 5, 1842 The Kentucky
School for the Blind in Louisville
was established by the legislature,
the 6th such school in the nation

February 12, 1809 Abraham Lin-
coln was born near Hodgenville, on
the South Fork of the Nolin River

February 28, 1848 Western State Hospi-
tal, the 2nd state – supported mental
facility in Kentucky, was established in
Hopkinsville
From *On This Day in Kentucky*, by Rob-
ert A. Powell

Programs and Notices

Kenton County Historical Society

Work continues on our engagement with the Highland Cemetery on the subject of installing an appropriate marker honoring Covington Pioneers; our Board approved the draft content and that was approved by the cemetery Board. We remain waiting for Lew-in Monument to receive the necessary materials.

Behringer Crawford Museum

The BEHRINGER CRAWFORD MUSEUM HISTORY HOUR CONTINUES,
although it is now every other Wednesday at 6:30pm.

OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MUSEUM TO AWARD A PRIZE TO A
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WRITING AN ARTICLE ABOUT KENTON COUN-
TY HISTORY IS PROCEEDING. ONE SUBMISSION HAS ALREADY BEEN RE-
CEIVED. THE WINNER WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE BULLETIN.

A CORRECTION TO OUR NOVEMBER/DECEMBER ISSUE

Our friend Kathy Romero emailed us with corrections to
our last issue which discussed the Hooper Battery. She advises
that Hooper Battery was the former home of Sheldon and Fern
Storer, not Fawn Brody. Also, the property was not sold for de-
velopment and it remains a signature park for Fort Wright. The
portion sold for development was the adjoining Presbyterian
church property which is within the city limits of Covington and
stood next to the battery, .

WE NEED ARTICLES FOR THE BULLETIN! PLEASE SUBMIT ANY ARTICLES TO
THE EDITOR AT astay1965@gmail.com. AS A RULE OF THUMB, AN ARTICLE
OVER 6 PAGES IS TOO LONG, BUT WE WILL CONSIDER INSTALLMENTS. PHO-
TOS SHOULD BE IN JPEG. THE ARTICLE SHOULD DEAL WITH HISTORICAL
EVENTS OR PEOPLE IN KENTON COUNTY. WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO EDIT.