We Almost Lost Kerrytown

In the 1950s, a group of well-meaning civic leaders came within a bulldozer's length of destroying the city's historic black district. Here's how Ann Arbor avoided—barely—the urban renewal juggernaut.

by Eve Silberman

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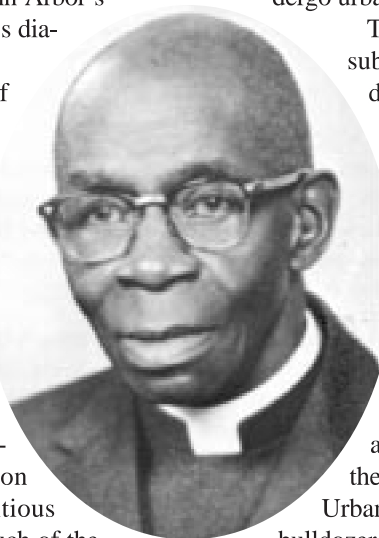
Destroying a neighborhood in order to save it: to fend off "blight," the city planned to demolish all of the buildings shown in red on this 1956 map, and an unknown number of those in yellow. At least 500 people would have been displaced.

The 1956 plan would have bulldozed entire blocks, including these homes on Summit Street (above) and businesses on Ann Street (below).

Rev. C. W. Carpenter (inset, below) fought the plan. Most of his parishioners at the Second Baptist Church would have lost their homes.

PETER YATES

"We will fight this thing from the lowest court to the Supreme Court of the United States," thundered Reverend C. W. Carpenter, the pastor of Ann Arbor's Second Baptist Church. "It's diabolical."



It was the evening of July 15, 1958. The seventy-two-year-old minister was addressing an angry audience of 400 at a public hearing, a crowd so large that the meeting had overflowed city hall and moved to a nearby church. The topic of the hour—indeed of the last two years—was urban renewal. Depending on your viewpoint, the ambitious plan to raze and rebuild much of the city's near north side was either a panacea for poverty or the destruction and dispersal of a struggling, close-knit neighborhood. That evening proved a turning point.

Urban renewal was, arguably, the city's biggest controversy of the century. "Virtually the entire citizenry of Ann Arbor was debating a momentous decision," writes Jonathan Marwil in his *A History of Ann Arbor.* "Should the north central area, comprising 74 acres, 342 structures, and 502 families (some 1,700 individuals) undergo urban renewal?"

The plan inflamed long-submerged racial and class divisions. It created confusing alliances: on one side, liberal Democrats, including an emerging group of black leaders, and moderate Republicans; on the other side, an old-time black establishment, backed by conservative Republicans who were alarmed by a plan that to them smacked of socialism.

Urban renewal came within a bulldozer's length of becoming reality. Had that happened, the buildings that today are the Kerrytown Shopping Center and Zingerman's Deli would have been demolished. An entire block of nineteenth-century brick storefronts on Ann Street would have been leveled. And at least half of the homes and apartments in the neighborhood immediately north of downtown would have been razed.

Perhaps the only thing more surprising than the grandiose effort to save a neighborhood by destroying it is the fact that the plan was defeated. More than two years before the angry public meeting, the board of aldermen had voted unanimously to declare the area "blighted" and apply for federal urban renewal funds. By 1958, the project appeared all but unstoppable. "They were going to kick us out!" exclaims Fourth Avenue printer Ben Burkhart almost forty years later.

"Probably the finest thing that could happen to Ann Arbor"

A civic facelift seemed both idealistic and practical to many civic-minded Ann Arborites. In the 1950s, Ann Arbor was one of hundreds of cities around the country to flirt with the idea of federally funded makeovers of their aging downtown neighborhoods.

It was an era when both parties still looked to the federal government as a problem solver. And with suburbanization in full flower, the decline of urban centers was a national concern. The term "urban renewal" was introduced by the Housing Act of 1954. Passed by a Democratic Congress and signed by a Republican president, Dwight Eisenhower, the act made available federal funds "to quicken our attack upon our slums in the cities and towns of our Nation . . ."

In Ann Arbor, Republicans controlled the board of aldermen when the city first applied for federal urban renewal planning funds in March 1956. Yet the board "approved the application with virtually no questions," reported the *Ann Arbor News,* "noting only that 'it probably is the finest thing that could happen to Ann Arbor.'"

PHOTO OF REVEREND CARPENTER COURTESY SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH

We Almost Lost

Kerrytown

Democratic mayor Sam Eldersveld championed the urban renewal project.

The aldermen (there was one woman in the group, philanthropist Margaret Towsley) didn't have to think twice about what part of the city to designate as "blighted." The neighborhood north of downtown was one of the oldest and poorest in Ann Arbor, and it existed in the shadow of a gritty industrial strip along the river. The coal-gasification plant that for decades had wafted tarry fumes through the neighborhood had just been dismantled, but on bad days the stench from a slaughterhouse on Summit Street could still be smelled for several blocks.

Of course, the odor was even more awful if you lived next door, as Mrs. Emery Gates of 126 East Summit told the *Michigan Daily* in 1959. "How would you like a slaughterhouse right next to you if you had a sick person who couldn't get to sleep because of it?" she demanded. Her husband complained of the rats and skunks that congregated in the junkyard across the street.

The frame houses in what was designated the "North Central Urban Renewal District" were densely populated and crowded on small lots. Some had tar-paper–sided sheds in their backyards, and a few still lacked indoor plumbing or central heating.

City administrator Guy Larcom called North Central "a blighted but not a slum neighborhood." But he and other supporters of urban renewal worried that this was a neighborhood on the skids, and in danger of slipping further. "The fantastic growth rate of our cities since World War II has forced special problems to our attention," read a brochure prepared by supporters. "If America does nothing the centers of our cities will go down hill faster and further."

At a time when most home buyers were dreaming of a ranch house in the suburbs, the neighborhood's collection of historic homes was regarded as a liability rather than an asset. "Most of the houses in the area are from 30 to 60 years of age," wrote an appraiser hired by the planners, "and very few of them are of aesthetic architectural appeal at this time." And, the appraiser noted, their value was diminished because "they are all located in a mixed racial neighborhood."

The area had been a center for Ann Arbor's African-American community since the founding of Bethel A.M.E. Church in the middle of the nineteenth century. As the city's minority population grew (it doubled in the 1920s), North Central became Ann Arbor's all-but-official black neighborhood. De facto segregation, quietly but effectively enforced by landlords and mortgage lenders, made it nearly impossible for black families to rent an apartment or buy a home anywhere else in the city. By the 1950s, North Central was 70 percent black.

The federal Urban Renewal Agency responded to the city's March 1956 application with $38,000 to fund a preliminary plan—a sign that it was favorably inclined toward Ann Arbor's project. A detailed plan was forwarded to the agency that October, and updated in March 1957.

By the time it was approved in August, U-M political science professor Sam Eldersveld had been elected mayor. He was to spend much of his two years in office advocating for the project.

An idealistic mayor

Eldersveld is now an emeritus professor, but he still teaches. At eighty, he remains trim and craggy-featured, his voice resonant and confident.

Over a lunch at the Red Hawk, he recalls, with obvious pleasure, that "the whole power structure of the city was upset when I became mayor. Ann Arbor was so conservative it was unbelievable."

Eldersveld was the first Democratic mayor in twenty-six years. His victory over car dealer Bill Brown, mayor since 1945, surprised everyone—including Eldersveld, who had planned a sabbatical for the following year. But the Muskegon native took office with a clear mission.

An early supporter of the Civil Rights movement, Eldersveld saw urban renewal as a chance to dramatically improve the lives of Ann Arbor's black residents. "People were living in such terrible conditions," he recalls. "We had to improve the lives of people living in the area. You can't improve the standard of living unless you tell them you're providing better housing."

Eldersveld drew a lot of other Democrats and liberals into the urban renewal camp. Although initially championed by Republicans, ultimately the plan became a cause célèbre for Democrats. "I bet every prominent Democrat in town was for it—and a lot of the Republicans, too," says attorney Clan Crawford Jr., a Republican and onetime city council member.

In fact, a special forty-eight-member "advisory" committee on urban renewal, assembled by the city, read like a local Who's Who. Members included banker Earl Cress, U-M professor and future Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Wilbur Cohen, prominent U-M sociologist Morris Janowitz, U-M vice-president Wilbur Pierpont, and Bob McNamara, the president of Ford Motor Company and future Secretary of Defense.

A handful of blacks were on the committee, including Reverend Lyman Parks, pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Urban renewal was also supported by the NAACP, then led by future mayor Al Wheeler. "Those of us who favored urban renewal felt that some of these houses should be replaced," recalls Rosemarion Blake, whose late husband, Richard, was another prominent black advocate of urban renewal.

But it wasn't just a few bad houses that were at stake. Eldersveld's powerful and well-intentioned alliance had inherited an urban renewal plan that called for leveling most of the neighborhood.

An explosive plan

Supporters of urban renewal repeatedly emphasized that the federal money would enable the city to buy and demolish the slaughterhouse and junkyard, removing the two worst blemishes in the neighborhood. Several streets would be repaved and broadened, and traffic rerouted to reduce its impact on homes and apartments.

In those residential areas, advocates stressed, the plan did not call for wholesale "slum clearance" but rather, selective removal of "substandard" housing. It sounded good—except that in the city's eyes, *most* of the homes were "substandard."

Ann Arbor submitted plans to the federal Urban Renewal Agency at least three times in 1956 and 1957. It appears that most people knew little about specifics of these proposals: the *Ann Arbor News* covered the topic very gingerly, providing few details. But within the thick bureaucratic packages, the city planning department had assembled what amounted to a political time bomb.

The earliest version of the plan would have leveled almost all of the commercial buildings in the area, including the entire block now occupied by Kerrytown and the Farmers' Market (see map, p. 31). Gone would be Zingerman's and Argiero's, the Treasure Mart, and the Tree. But urban renewal's blow would have fallen hardest on the people who lived in the neighborhood.

The numbers of units and people affected were adjusted slightly from one version to the next. But the general pattern remained starkly clear: out of more than 300 residential buildings in the eleven-block area, fewer than 60 were designated to be retained or rehabilitated. The fate of another 100 or so was uncertain. The rest would definitely be removed.

In other words, the city of Ann Arbor proposed to demolish at least half of the housing in the urban renewal area, and perhaps as much as 80 percent. At least 500 individuals would be displaced. Even by the city's definition, not all of the homes were dilapidated: one entire block of houses between Depot and Summit streets would be leveled for "planning reasons." In this case, the city plan envisioned rezoning the land as a "light industrial strip."

Property owners couldn't refuse to sell—if they resisted, the city planned to exert its powers of eminent domain—but they would be paid something approximating a market price. In most cases, however, that wouldn't be much: the city estimated it could acquire all of the residential property for $2.3 million—an average of about $15,000 a building.

In many cities, public housing was built in the neighborhoods cleared by urban renewal. But, as a handwritten note on one form acknowledged, there was "no public housing in Ann Arbor." Instead, once the buildings were demolished, the now-vacant lots would be resold to anyone willing to build new homes or apartments there.

Some supporters thought an upheaval in the predominantly black part of town might finally force integration on Ann Arbor. Tom Harrison, who lived on Detroit Street and was probably the only black Realtor in the city, told the *Ann Arbor News* that the project would give blacks who were stuck in North Central against their will, a chance "to get out." But there was no sign that an end to segregation was part of the vision of a "renewed" Ann Arbor. And that was a particular concern in North Central: of the 500 people to be displaced, more than 400 were black.

Where were they to go? The answer was vague. Almost forty years later, Eldersveld admits that the city wasn't "as clear as it should have been," about the fates of dislocated individuals.

The Citizens Committee for Urban Renewal pointed out that "both Federal and State laws provide that people who have to move because of a Renewal Program must be provided with housing that is 'DECENT, SAFE, AND SANITARY and WITHIN THEIR MEANS.' " But how that was to be done was not spelled out.

The blunt truth was that most residents, owners and renters, would be left to the tender mercies of a segregated housing system that until that moment had completely ignored them. Despite Ann Arbor's rapid postwar growth, city officials acknowledged in 1956 that only three new homes had been sold to black owners in the previous four years. A survey that covered more than 100 apartment units outside the urban renewal area didn't find a single one that would accept black tenants.

The great debate

The time bomb contained in the urban renewal plan went off in March 1958. That was when the two-year-old plan was first explained to the people most directly affected—the residents themselves—at a meeting at the Second Baptist Church, then on the corner of Fifth and Beakes.

Second Baptist was the poorer of the two black churches in the neighborhood. Most of the city's few black professionals attended Bethel A.M.E.; many of the people at Second Baptist made their livings at menial jobs, washing sheets and scrubbing floors at U-M Hospital, or cooking

for all-white fraternities. But through careful saving, and often with the intervention of a kindly white patron who intervened with the banks (who routinely discriminated against blacks seeking mortgages), a surprising number had managed to buy their own homes.

The March 1958 meeting was apparently the first time that residents learned just how radical the urban renewal plan was. When the plan was described, according to the *Ann Arbor News*, it "failed to receive any open support from about 90 persons who attended."

Crowded, noisy, and run-down, North Central was, nonetheless, a friendly place. "Everybody knew everybody," recalls Steve Dixon, who grew up on Fourth Avenue. Dixon (now a counselor at the Ann Arbor Community Center) and other ex–North Central children fondly recall an old-fashioned neighborhood where the kids all walked to Jones Elementary School (today Community High), where parents freely bawled out other people's kids, and where even a smelly slaughterhouse could provide moments of excitement. "We used to have bullfights with the escaped pigs," recalls Coleman Jewett, a retired school administrator and Dixon's childhood neighbor.

A survey done for the city by the U-M's Institute for Social Research showed that a majority (58 percent) did not want to move. Fifteen percent did, with the rest either undecided or not responding.

At first, many residents in North Central had been pleased to hear about a plan that would remove the slaughterhouse and junkyard. But when it became clear that they would lose their homes—with no clear alternative in sight—anticipation turned into alarm. Some were worried enough to sell their houses and move; others stopped making improvements on houses that might soon be demolished. But many decided to fight.

Grass roots advocates

With Bethel A.M.E. and the NAACP in the pro–urban-renewal camp, the resistance to the plan was led by Reverend C. W. Carpenter of Second Baptist and Walter Wickliffe, a city forester who lived across from the church on Beakes. Advocates of renewal underestimated their influence. That was a mistake.

Both were black men who had lived in North Central for decades. Walter Wickliffe, sixty-five in 1958, was the first black forestry graduate of the U-M and worked most of his life for the city. The son of a onetime slave who lost an eye fighting for the Union in the Civil War, Wickliffe was soft-spoken, eloquent, and tenacious.

In 1958, Wickliffe organized the North Central Property Owners Association (NCPOA) to fight what he perceived as dangerous do-gooders out to bulldoze the neighborhood. "He must have covered every house in the neighborhood," says Rosemarion Blake, remembering Wickliffe's door-to-door campaign to collect signatures on anti–urban-renewal petitions.

A photograph of Wickliffe in the *Michigan Daily* shows a tall, grizzled, determined man, impeccably dressed in a suit and tie. He was quietly persuasive. Urban renewal was "fine in theory," he told a *Daily* reporter, but "it doesn't consider the human element." North Central, he pointed out, is "characterized by a high percentage of elderly people, including widows and World War I veterans who fully own their homes" and who would be dispossessed by the project. In fact, half of the black home owners in the neighborhood were too poor to afford the new homes the plan envisioned.

Close friends, Wickliffe and Carpenter made a formidable team. Carpenter was a graduate of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where, to his and his congregation's pride, he developed a friendship with the famous scientist George Washington Carver. Carpenter was short and slight, but a towering figure in the neighborhood. "He was one of those old-time ministers who knew everybody in the community," says Steve Dixon. "You didn't cross him." When Dixon delivered his newspaper, the minister would sometimes make him come in to pray.

"C. W. Carpenter was the most honest preacher you ever met," says Herb Ellis, another former North Central resident who fought the plan. Had the plan passed, Ellis reflects, most of the minister's congregation would have been forced to move.

People who lived in North Central during the late 1950s recall an anxious, never-ending buzz about the neighborhood's future. "It was on everyone's lips," says Dixon, as Wickliffe, Carpenter, and others were rallying opposition to the plan. "We must have had a meeting every night for a year and a half," recalls Ellis. The NCPOA sent anti-renewal letters to home owners saying, "Your Home Is at Stake."

Both Carpenter and Wickliffe were Republicans. Their political affiliation and their opposition to urban renewal made for some strange alliances: their most influential ally among the city's elite was the Ann Arbor Board of Realtors—a group widely blamed for the rigid segregation that had confined the city's black population to North Central. The Realtors were opposed to the plan not because of the injury it would do to the area's residents, but because, they declared, urban renewal "sets a dangerous precedent for future governmental action concerning the curtailment of property rights in Ann Arbor."

Opposition by the likes of the board of Realtors vindicated supporters' sense of the righteousness of their cause. But their faith that they were doing the best thing for North Central didn't survive the meeting of July 15, 1958.

The turning point

When a new city charter was adopted in 1957, the board of aldermen had been replaced by a city council. The July meeting started as a special council session to review final aspects of the plan. But when Carpenter and Wickliffe showed up with 400 supporters, council quickly adjourned, reconvening across the street at the old Zion Lutheran Church (where Bank of Ann Arbor is today).

Speaker after speaker, addressing the crowd from the church balcony, angrily denounced the plan. Mayor Sam Eldersveld was confounded when Wickliffe, as NCPOA president, presented him with petitions signed by more than 600 residents who opposed urban renewal. About half of the total were North Central area residents and business owners, and Wickliffe later claimed to have the support of 95 percent of the area's property owners.

Eldersveld and others tried to soften the criticism by emphasizing that the planning "is in a preliminary stage." Reverend Lyman Parks of Bethel A.M.E., a Democrat and urban renewal supporter, also tried to neutralize the issue. In the *News*'s rather stilted coverage, he "urged citizens . . . to adopt an approach of offering constructive ideas."

Carpenter, according to the *News,* "warned that persons in the area would fight the contemplated urban renewal program." Calling the plan "unjust," and "ruthless," he remained enough of a diplomat to add that residents had faith that the council would do what is "right and just."

Almost forty years later, Eldersveld still shakes his head when he recalls that meeting. "I was amazed at the level of intensity and bitterness of the comments," he says.

So were many others. Six days later, a chagrined city council approved a resolution dripping with mea culpas. "The council . . . believes that there are serious defects in the urban renewal plan presented, that it is too drastic and that as such it is not now acceptable. . . . A more modest plan," council concluded, "should be developed."

Of the memorable meeting, Rosemarion Blake says, "Urban renewal lost it at that point."

Last-ditch struggle

But urban renewal's advocates didn't give up. In December 1958, council reviewed the "more modest" plan. This time, only forty-three buildings were identified as "substandard." Though most of the commercial structures targeted by the earlier plan were still scheduled for demolition, the number of residential units was greatly curtailed, to eighty-seven. The number of units targeted for rehabilitation rather than demolition soared, to almost 298.

Council approved the plan by an 8–3 majority and the city sent a revised application to the feds for final approval, which was more or less assured. Meanwhile, Eldersveld and others made house calls to well-off residents to raise money for the new apartments. "We got sixty thousand dollars in no time at all," Eldersveld recalls today. One of the most generous benefactors, remembers Eldersveld, was Ford president Bob McNamara. The future architect of the Vietnam War donated $10,000.

The council vote in December reassured Eldersveld, whose mayoral term would expire in April. Reluctantly, he had decided against seeking a second term. His attempt to balance his roles as academic and politician had been exhausting, and the U-M, he recalls, was unsympathetic. With a plan in place that would address the worst of the blight, he was satisfied it was safe to step aside.

But even some longtime supporters of urban renewal by now had serious doubts that it should proceed. In early 1959 Margaret Towsley, who had supported funding for a preliminary plan, wrote a letter to the *News* that said, in part, "Before we vote to take people's possessions, should we not all stop and try to decide impartially if this is not a stroke against liberty and freedom?" Towsley was one of the most influential people in the city, and her change of heart was telling.

Harry Mial, one of the early black supporters, also had second thoughts. "Ultimately, here was the problem," recalls Mial, a retired schools administrator. "Where were these people going to be relocated to? . . . They couldn't or wouldn't answer those questions."

A crucial veto

In the April 1959 election, Cecil Creal, a conservative Republican and former council member, was elected to succeed Eldersveld. Creal's election gave a dramatic final twist to the urban renewal drama.

For years, Creal owned and ran the Godfrey Moving and Storage Company, then located on Fourth Avenue in the building that today is Workbench furniture. He knew a lot of North Central residents personally. Though Creal had a reputation as a friendly and generous employer, he sold the business in 1956, according to his son Bob Creal, after "Jimmy Hoffa's Teamsters came by and made some demands on behalf of [his] workers . . . it gave him an incentive to get out."

Creal, however, retained warm ties with Reverend Carpenter and with Doug Williams, the director of the Dunbar Community Center, then next door to Godfrey on Fourth. (Now Legal Services of Southeastern Michigan, the Dunbar Center, too, had originally been slated for destruction.)

Cecil Creal, his son recalls, was skeptical of the urban renewal advocates, regarding them as "the thinkers at the university," aloof from the people who lived and worked in North Central. He had spoken up publicly against urban renewal the previous year, but he didn't take a clear position on the issue during his mayoral campaign in the fall of 1958.

The same month Creal became mayor, the federal urban renewal officials informed the city that the plan, submitted in December under Eldersveld, was essentially approved. But the feds' final requirements included another council vote—and another public hearing.

On June 11, 1959, several hundred people once again arrived at the Zion Lutheran Church. An urban renewal supporter admitted that the revised program "is not perfect, but we all agree there is a job to be done, and this seems to be a way to get it done." Speaking for the opposition, Carpenter was adamant. "I'm against it because God is against it," he declared.

"It's vicious, it's wicked, and I don't think God will let it prosper."

Less than a week later, council voted on urban renewal for the final time. They voted 6–5 in favor of the urban renewal plan. But one of the no votes was Creal's, and the next week, the mayor vetoed the plan. Renewal supporters on council were furious but didn't fight the veto. Urban renewal—which an earlier council had embraced "as the finest thing that could happen to Ann Arbor"—was dead.

The birth of Kerrytown

After urban renewal was defeated, the city used its own money to acquire and remove a handful of the most deteriorated homes in the North Central neighborhood. A concentrated code-enforcement program encouraged other owners to repair their property, but probably the biggest impetus to the neighborhood's recovery came in the mid-1960s, when the slaughterhouse closed.

In the late 1970s, the former Godfrey warehouse and nearby buildings, once scheduled to be demolished to make room for a motel or discount store, were refurbished to create the Kerrytown Shops. With the Treasure Mart and Farmers' Market, Kerrytown became the core of a new eclectic shopping district that has helped to transform the surrounding neighborhood.

"Before we vote to take people's possessions," Margaret Towsley wrote, "should we not all stop and try to decide impartially if this is not a stroke against liberty and freedom?"

Walter Wickliffe died in 1965. The North Central Property Owners Association, however, lived on under his dynamic younger sister, Letty Wickliffe. In the 1970s, NCPOA helped defeat a road millage that would have funneled heavy traffic through the heart of North Central. It also encouraged a city land swap that finally removed the junkyard from Summit Street, creating Wheeler Park.

Cecil Creal, whose veto had marked the end of urban renewal, carried North Central overwhelmingly in the 1960 election. He later alienated many of his black supporters, however, when he dragged his feet on the adoption of a city open housing law. Creal stepped down as mayor in 1965 and died in 1986.

Sam Eldersveld, the only surviving principal player in the conflict, basically retired from Democratic politics after his term as mayor. He remains convinced that urban renewal would have been a good thing for the city, at least in its final, milder form. Had he known the plan was still in danger of a mayoral veto, Eldersveld says, "I would never have stepped down."

The federal urban renewal effort ended in 1974. "The program, dubbed 'Negro Removal,' because it often destroyed black neighborhoods, was a huge failure by nearly all accounts," wrote the *Detroit Free Press* in an article that discussed both renewal and its less controversial stepchildren: Model Cities, Urban Development Action Grants, and currently, Community Development Block Grants.

COURTESY ANN ARBOR CITY HALL

Heeding residents' protests, Republican mayor Cecil Creal vetoed the project.

"Some programs were really good, but the costs in terms of disruption and displaced people were too high," says Gary Sands, urban planning professor at Wayne State University.

The successful fight against urban renewal was C. W. Carpenter's last battle. "During the sixties, when we had all the marching, all the protesting, that was new to Reverend Carpenter," says Arzel Hardin, longtime Second Baptist parishioner. "He's what you might call 'silent change.'" In 1965, at age eighty, Carpenter walked into the church and told his congregation that it was time for him to step down. He died five years later.

North Central itself has been on a roll in recent decades. The onetime ghetto is now thriving, even trendy. White professionals began moving into the neighborhood in the 1980s, and new homes, condos, and apartments now dot the streetscape. But a surprising number of the original black families remain, joined recently by some younger black professionals. With its eclectic blend of housing styles, and residents of all ages, races, and income levels, it is almost certainly the most diverse neighborhood in Ann Arbor. ■