Oral History, Mobile Curation, and African American Memory in Cleveland's Fairfax and Glenville Neighborhoods

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Abstract

Fairfax and Glenville are historic neighborhoods with signal importance in the African American community. Too often these neighborhoods are subjected to a simplistic declension narrative that pins their heyday in the 1920s-50s and traces their decline to the convulsive riots of the late 1960s and the subsequent loss of population to the suburbs as middle-class African Americans mirrored “white flight.” Our team conducted over 40 interviews, created story clips, and curated several new sites for the Cleveland Historical website and mobile application. Our research, rooted in oral history, exposed an important post-1968 counternarrative of resilience. Our oral histories demonstrate a continuing thread of black/white/Jewish collaborative approaches to community issues, particularly in Glenville, as well as the continuing relevance of the “old neighborhoods” for work, play, and worship long after middle-class suburban flight. They also reveal a selective memory that privileges personal connections to the neighborhood through kinship, friendship, faith, and social activism, yielding a “sense of place” that is not always tied to prevailing assumptions about the neighborhoods.