

A Lost Neighborhood (11)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Gadfly's posts, Lehigh University, Neighborhoods, Serious Issues November 2, 2018

(11th in a series of posts about Lehigh University)

(See also our thread on Neighborhoods)

Nicole Radzievich, “Bethlehem’s lost neighborhood rebuilt.” *Morning Call*, May 14, 2015.

Lehigh University, [Still Looking for You: A Bethlehem Place + Memory Project](#)

PICTURES: Bethlehem’s lost neighborhood

Good things happen to Gadfly.

He had been researching Mary Pongracz. Reputed to be worthy of charter membership in the Bethlehem Gadfly Hall of Fame.

Gadfly has a department here on the blog called “Gadfly History,” where we will memorialize and immortalize local gadflies. Currently in the department are posts on Stephen Antalics and Bill Scheirer.

Gadfly is looking to do a piece on Mary.

While researching Mary, Gadfly found Nicole’s above-linked article on “Bethlehem’s lost neighborhood.” It whacked him ‘tween the eyes.

Neighborhoods have been on Gadfly’s mind (we have a thread so-titled and threads on Northside 2027, and the Rose Garden, etc.), and the ominous phrase “Lehigh sprawl” (conjuring up some hydra-headed monster) from the anonymous poster #4 in this series has been pinging just below his consciousness.

Enter “Bethlehem’s lost neighborhood.”

The web site — [“Still Looking for You”](#) — is fascinating. Go there!

The “lost neighborhood” is “the solid, working-class neighborhood community that once existed within the borders of Vine and Webster streets and Morton Street and Packer Avenue.” Now Lehigh University campus.

With trembling hand, Gadfly quotes at length from the [“Lost Neighborhood”](#) section:

During the 1950s, Bethlehem’s the neighborhood between Packer Ave, Martel, Morton and Webster Streets was a bustling community that was home to local families, small businesses, two schools, and communities of faith, and it surrounded a growing Lehigh University that was contemplating expansion. In the early fifties, Lehigh began its expansion by purchasing land in the neighborhood using “straw

buyers”—for example, the secretary at the university’s law firm—to obscure the university’s interest in acquiring land for expansion and keep property-owners from raising prices. Throughout this time period, the federal government’s urban renewal plan encouraged cities to promote development through the acquisition of blighted properties and their subsequent demolition and redevelopment. Urban renewal provided a potential mechanism for university expansion at Lehigh. By the late fifties Lehigh had acquired a critical mass of local properties and the City of Bethlehem agreed to request federal urban renewal funds to acquire the other homes in the neighborhood. Vague federal guidelines required cities to identify targeted areas as “blighted” before they could receive federal money for “slum clearance.” Taking advantage of this vague designation, the city condemned entire blocks by identifying just a few properties on each one as evidence of urban blight. Residents recall that many of the rundown properties had been acquired by the university early on in its expansion planning, and had been neglected, with peeling paint, overgrown weeds and bushes, and broken sidewalks. Homeowners, led by businesswoman and Vine Street resident Anna Pongracz spoke out at City Council meetings and accused the university administration and trustees of deliberately seeking the “blighted designation” for the city blocks needed for campus expansion. As the project unfolded into the early 1960s, some residents fought to save their homes and the neighborhood from acquisition through urban renewal while other property owners were happy to sell their homes. Once houses were condemned and families had moved, demolition workers tore down both run down properties and well-maintained homes, gardens, and yards at a rate of five houses per day.

Is there any wonder that Lehigh’s latest off-campus “moves” are causing community palpitations? Memory glands are twitching.

Let’s keep asking (forcing!) Lehigh to be up-front about what they are doing.

If this memory nugget has anything to do with the parking issue with which this thread started, it is that Lehigh has not always been mindful of lower-class City residents and taxpayers.

A shout-out for this wonderful web site to my former Lehigh colleagues Julia Maserjian, Rob Weidman, Kimberly Carrell-Smith, Scott Gordon, and Vincent Munley.