Curating Oral History for Community Goals

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Abstract

Eastwick is a low elevation neighborhood in Southwest Philadelphia. The neighborhood is home to a vibrant community that has been subject to extreme natural disasters and disenfranchising policies. Eastwick represented one of the only racially integrated neighborhoods in Philadelphia through the 1950s. Many residents were attracted by the landscape's vast open space. The area was formerly underlain by 5,700 ac. of freshwater tidal marsh, 200 ac. of which remain in John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge (JHNWR). Overflow from the Schuylkill River and Cobbs Creek now threatens to inundate Eastwick with severe floods.

Environmental risks, in addition to racial bias, prompted Philadelphia to declare Eastwick as blighted in 1950. From 1950 to 2015, Eastwick was home to the largest urban renewal project in the United States. Outside Eastwick, the project was met with optimism from prospective tenants and city planners. However, residents faced the demolition of 4,000 homes of the forced migration of 8,000 neighbors. In 2006, efforts to revive the urban renewal plan were met with intense rejection from residents. City Council voted to cancel the project in 2015.

This project curated oral histories collected by Penn Program in the Environmental Humanities (PPEH) to contextualize the current development strategy in Eastwick. Events from residents' stories are sorted in chronological order and annotated with their historic context. This project is currently under community review, but will be available at http://schuylkillcorps.org.

Previous Work

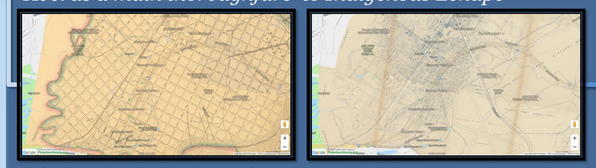
- Seven interviews with eight Eastwick residents were conducted from July to November 2017
  - All interviews were conducted by an undergraduate student at PPEH
  - Three interviewees lived in Eastwick during the original urban renewal project
  - Interviews ranged from 43 minutes to two hours
  - Questions covered the original and revived development plans in Eastwick, flooding, the airport, adjacent Superfund sites, community activism and alliances, and the green environment in Eastwick
- Other undergraduate fellows transcribed interviews
- The full interviews and their transcripts are found on the Schuylkill Corps website
- In winter 2018, excerpts from the resident interviews were featured at an "Oral History Jukebox" at the JHNWR visitor center

Urban Renewal Era

Memories of Eastwick Prior to Urban Renewal:

- Eastwick's landscape has always been characterized by the open spaces of Tinicum Marsh. At the turn of the century, open lands attracted many downtown visitors

Oral History: John Hemphill III traces the use of Island Ave. as a main thoroughfare to Indigenous Lenape



Left: Samuel L. Smedley's map of Eastwick, published in 1862. Right: 1942 Works Progress Administration map of Eastwick Credit: PhilaGeoHistory

- Residents used Eastwick's vacant lots to establish small farms and plant fruit trees through the 1950s

Oral History: Terry Williams recalls his neighbors' abundant fruit trees; Leonard Stewart describes his father's farm.

- Eastwick's population of 19,300 comprised an organically integrated community in the 1950s.
  - Residence was 2/3 white, 1/3 black

Oral History: Terry Williams discusses population demographics during his childhood, Earl Wilson describes an animated commercial hub along Eastwick Ave.

- The neighborhood's semirural setting led to several environmental problems
  - Buildings were unconnected to the city sewer system

Oral History: Leonard Stewart describes an open sewer adjacent to his father's home.

Eastwick, the Nation's Largest Urban Renewal Project:

- The Housing Act of 1949 provided funds to bring vital infrastructure to Eastwick
  - Also included provisions for slum clearance
- In 1950 Eastwick was scheduled for redevelopment

1. The City Planning Commision (PCPC) finalized the Eastwick Redevelopment Area Plan in 1954
   - Projected 45,000 new residents
   - Displaced 8,000 people from 4,000 existing homes



Right: An artist's conception of "a typical residential street in the Eastwick redevelopment plan," published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 17, 1955

2. The Redevelopment Authority (PRA) began to demolish condemned homes in 1957.

Oral History: John Hemphill III discusses the optimism the media portrayed about the project. Terry Williams discusses his family's three moves due to redevelopment.

3. The Reynolds Aluminum Service Corp. began to construct a "New Eastwick" in 1961

- Korman joined Reynolds in 1970
  - Population after 1970s projects rose to 18,000

1862 · 1910s · 1942 · 1949 · 1950s · 1950 · 1954 · 1957 · 1961 · 1970 · 1999 · 2006 · 2011 · Apr. 2012 · May 2012 · June 2012 · Oct. 2012

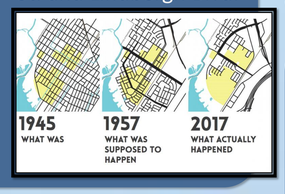
Current Development

Blight Recertification:

"I remember often wondering if they would ever rebuild that neighborhood." –John Hemphill III

- In 2006, the PCPC recertified Eastwick as "blighted" on the basis of a 128-ac. vacant lot
- This parcel soon became the subject of a lawsuit between the PRA, the City, and Reynolds/Korman
  - PRA: Disgruntled at lack of construction progress
  - City: Wanted 79 acres to expand the airport
  - Korman: Wanted to optimize development potential
- 2011 settlement would grant the city 79 ac. if Korman's remaining 35 ac. were rezoned for apartments
- In April 2012 two residents found representatives from Korman surveying the lot at 84th St. and Lindbergh Blvd.

Oral History: Leonard Stewart describes the day he found the surveyors and the movement that followed.



Right: Map contrasted Eastwick in 1942, the vision of the Eastwick Redevelopment Area Plan, and the current reality. Credit: Interface Studio

Resident Concerns:

- On May 22, 2012 representatives from Korman presented their plans at a community meeting
  - 148 out of 150 residents rejected the proposal
- Community members formed the Eastwick Friends and Neighbors Coalition (EFNC) to gather resident concerns

Oral History: Terry Williams discusses the Eastwick Community Survey, which aggregated public opinion

- The risk of floods was one of residents' main interests
  - Most sites are within the FEMA 100-year floodplain

Oral History: Leonard Stewart describes how living in the 100-year floodplain affects living in Eastwick.

- Residents worried the impervious surface of Korman's proposed 1,034-car parking lot would increase flooding



Left: FEMA floodplain map of Eastwick. Land marked in blue lies within the 100-year floodplain (1% annual chance of flooding), while areas marked in red lie in the 500-year floodplain (.2% annual chance of flooding).

- Many homes were flooded by Hurricane Floyd in 1999

Oral History: Margie and Nancy Cobb describe when Hurricane Floyd indundated their houses

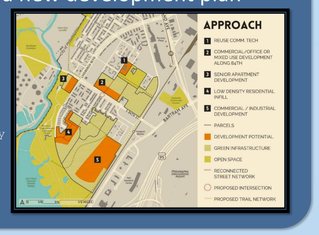
- Residents worried an increased population density would impede evacuation during an emergency
- Others associated Korman with forced removal
- EFNC mobilized over 100 residents to fight the rezoning bill at a City Council Meeting on June 22, 2012
- A follow-up hearing investigated flooding in Eastwick on October 9, 2012 and rejected the rezoning bill

Oral History: Terry Williams discusses EFNC's alliances with hydrologists at Drexel, Temple, and the EPA.

Future Directions

Community-Based Planning:

- In December 2015, the PRA unanimously voted to end the urban renewal agreement in Eastwick.
- In 2016, the PRA approved a contract with Interface Studio to conduct a study on the 84th & Lindbergh site
  - Included interviews with 42 community stakeholders
- Results were drafted into a new development plan
  - Presented to the Eastwick residents on July 26, 2018
  - Public comment is open until October 31, 2018



Right: Interface's proposed development strategy for Eastwick. The study area includes five sites, three of which (3, 4, and 5) were encompassed in the Korman plan. Sites 1 & 2 were transferred from the Department of Education.

Project Directions:

- Several things remain to be done in this project:
  1. This project needs community approval before becoming publicly available
     - Residents may prioritize other historical events
  2. Two existing oral histories remain unincorporated in this exhibit
  3. Additional oral histories could add new perspective
  4. The exhibit will adapt with development plans
- This project has several goals:
  1. To be an accessible tool for Eastwick residents to find history relevant to contemporary plans.
  2. To reshape the telling of Eastwick's history to include community perspectives
     - There exists a strong contrast between the lived experience in Eastwick and the vision portrayed in renewal-era media.

Acknowledgements

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