

Approximate boundaries:

N-W. North Ave; **S**-W. Highland Ave;

E-N. 20th St, **W**-N. 31st St

NORTH SIDE *Midtown*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Midtown is a hilly neighborhood. It has a high population density with a variety of housing styles. A majority of the housing dates from the late 19th century but there are a number of early 20th century bungalows. Midtown is mainly residential with a few businesses along North Avenue and West Lisbon.

The streets follow a rectangular grid with the exception of Lisbon that runs west to east at a slight diagonal from North 30th Street to North 24th, where it becomes West Walnut Street. The main green space is Tiefenthaler Park, a 10-acre park with a basketball court, tot lot, and a wading pool. A second green space is at Lynden Hill between 22nd and 23rd Streets.

HISTORY

Historically, Midtown has been a haven for populations on the move—sometimes fleeing threatening circumstances, sometimes losing their homes, and sometimes seeking a place where they could afford to raise a family. The neighborhood's earliest European population fell into the latter category.

Early populations

The area comprising the Midtown neighborhood developed in the last decades of the 19th century. By the 1880s, mostly German working class families were migrating in from other Milwaukee neighborhoods and building modest frame houses first along Lisbon Avenue and then on other Midtown blocks. The lots they purchased were narrow and the construction of alley houses added to the population density of the area. Residents lived within walking distance of jobs at tanneries, the Schlitz Brewery, factories, and mills. By 1892 they had built St. Michael's Catholic Church on North 24th Street—a congregation that began with 125 families. Churches of other faiths would follow.

By the end of the century, Midtown was attracting wealthier residents—some migrating into the neighborhood from

Milwaukee's Grand Avenue. Still

mainly German, the new residents tended to be merchants or professionals. They built large, ornate homes on McKinley Avenue (then Cold Spring Avenue). An example of one of these professional families that would leave its mark on the neighborhood is profiled on the following page.



Today's neighborhood—
Frances Starns Early Childhood Center

Midtown family profile (early 20th century)

(Information found in U.S. Census and other public records)

The Tiefenthalers

Born in Austria in 1844, Pancratius Tiefenthaler immigrated to the United States in 1868. He married Clara, a Wisconsin-born daughter of German immigrants. The couple had four children, Leo, Gustav, Laura, and Eugene—all speaking German as their first language at home. Sometime prior to 1900, Pancratius and his family moved to 2425 West McKinley Avenue (then Cold Spring).

Pancratius became a teacher, and by 1903 served as the first principal of the Ninth District #1 School at the corner of North 14th and Galena (the school would later be renamed Fourteenth Street School). He was succeeded by Henry O.R. Siefert. Three of Pancratius's four children would also become teachers. Only son Eugene would take up another trade—that of a building contractor.

By 1922, Pancratius' son Gustav became principal of Fourteenth Street School. He served until 1929. During his years of service, the school was renovated and upgraded from gas to electric lighting. In 1928, the facility was renamed Siefert School, in honor of the second principal.

Son Leo also went on to make a name for himself. He became a member of the City Club of Milwaukee. The prestigious City Club was organized in 1909 to educate citizens interested in studying municipal affairs and becoming more involved in civic matters. Leo Tiefenthaler rose to become secretary of the club by 1920. While the club dismantled in 1974, Leo's contributions to the city were not forgotten. In 1978, Midtown's only park was renamed Tiefenthaler Park (see photo).



Early in the 20th century, the Midtown neighborhood became more diverse. In the 1920s, a sizable Hungarian community migrated from the downtown area into Midtown. And as the neighborhood drew more businesses, it also attracted families of origins other than Germany, including those from French Canada, Yugoslavia, Russia, Ireland, Romania, Greece, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Luxembourg.

Businesses in early Midtown

By the middle of the 20th century, Lisbon Avenue—particularly west of 27th Street--was becoming less a street for working class cottages and more a commercial corridor. The following chart lists the businesses that were on Lisbon between West 27th and West 30th Streets in 1949. See summary and notes below.

<i>Addresses on Lisbon in the Midtown neighborhood</i>	<i>Names of businesses, offices, organizations, and apartments from the <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
2700	Ira Billington Restaurant
2701	Robin Landman Cigars
2702	A.F. Baumgartner Dentist
2703	El Kaye Beauty Shoppe
2704	H.A. Grosch Inc. Paints
2704a	Apartments
2705	Rainbow Building Apartments Woodlo Construction Company Elridge C. Edwards Dentist
2707	Paul P. Kalt Baker
2709	Style-Step Hosiery
2710	Apartments
2711	George Psiropoulos Restaurant
2712	John P. Huebschen Men's Wear
2715	Blankstein's Food Market
2716	Mrs. Harriet Haideman Confectioner
2717	Rainbow Building Rooms Valentine Kuhn Chiropodist Bertran H. Protzmann Accountant Stero-Colorists Inc. Photographers Harry G. Johns Jr. Investments
2720	Rainbow Theate
2721	Apartments
2723	Chick's Meat Market
2725	Leonard Rittberg Dentist
2726	Apartments
2728	Howe's Quality Popcorn
2729	Mrs. Alma Peterson Gift Shop
2730	Behren's Sport Shop
2732	Norman S. Strad Department Store
2733	Mrs. Clara D. Gregory Clothes Cleaner Lillie Breyer Nurse

<i>Addresses on Lisbon in the Midtown neighborhood</i>	<i>Names of businesses, offices, organizations, and apartments from the <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
2800	West Side Savings & Loan Association
2801	Thomas G. Collier Tavern
2802	Joseph L. Pondelac Barber
2806	Elmer Krause Tavern Mae Schneider Beauty Shop
2810	Mrs. Rose Peaslee Dressmaker Domestic Heating Service
2814	Milo P. Janzen Barber
2815	Andres Durr Tavern
2818	Erwin Boettcher Furs
2819	Mrs Gertrude M. Feypel Hosiery
2823	Harry Linschutz Grocer
2824	Edward V. Craun Radios William F. Kinnee Repair Shop
2826	Bob Cat Tap
2827	Snug Harbor Bar
2828	John B. Thirjung Real Estate
2831-2833	A & H Home Equipment Company
2832	Midway Poultry Company
2900	Joseph Davidson Grocery and Meats
2901	Charles B. Flanagan Tavern
2904	Parkway Tavern
2906	Sisley Letter Service
2907	Neitzel Printing Company
2908	Lisbon Cleaners & Dyers
2908b	William Becker Landscape and Gardening
2910	William H. Bade/Bode Barber
2911	J. Lee Fischer Tavern
2914	Frank S. Greindl Restauran
2915	Kolf Revken Shoe Repair

<i>Addresses on Lisbon in the Midtown neighborhood</i>	<i>Names of businesses, offices, organizations, and apartments from the <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
2917	Palfuss Realty Service
2924	Model Iron and Wire Works
2925	Warren Cartage & Trucking Company
2928	Truckin' Inn Tavern

Summary and notes from U.S. Census and other public records

- As in most Milwaukee neighborhoods on the north side of town, women proprietors were well represented on the street (for the times).
- Also, as in most other Milwaukee neighborhoods prior to 1970, few shopkeepers had attended high school. Most were also immigrants or children of immigrants. Most also lived at the same addresses as their stores or within a block of them.
- Midtown residents were well served with seven food stores (groceries, butchers, confectioners, bakers), four healthcare providers, three barbers, one hardware outlet, two cleaners, and three clothing stores.
- The neighborhood was teeming with outlets for leisure time activities with one theater, three restaurants, one sporting goods store, and a whopping six taverns.
- Ira Billington, with the restaurants, was an anomaly on the street in that he was not an immigrant or son of immigrants. However, his educational level was typical. He'd completed the 7th grade.
- Robin Landman, with the cigar store, was an immigrant from Poland.
- Paul P. Kalt, the baker, was the son of German immigrants.
- Frederick C. Buege, the jeweler, had a long tenure on Lisbon. He was the son of German immigrants.
- George Psiropoulas, with the restaurant, was an immigrant from Greece. He worked at a tannery before opening his restaurant.
- John Huebschen, with the men's wear store, was the grandson of German immigrants. He was an anomaly on the street in that he'd attended two years of high school.
- Mrs. Harriet Haideman, the confectioner, was another Greek immigrant. (Her maiden name is not known.)
- Norman S. Strad/Straud/Strnad, with the department store, was the son of a Bohemian immigrant from Czechoslovakia.
- Lillie Breyer, the nurse, was born in Illinois, the daughter of German immigrants. Despite her status as a nurse, she'd only completed the 8th grade.
- Thomas G. and Hazel Collier, with the tavern, were not immigrants or children of immigrants. They were probably of UK extraction.
- Joseph L. Pondelac, the barber, also was not an immigrant or son of immigrants. The name suggests Central European extraction.
- Rose Peaslee, the dressmaker, was the daughter of German immigrants. She was an anomaly in that she'd completed high school.

- Andrew Durr, with the tavern, was a Hungarian immigrant from Austria.
- Gertrude M. Feypel, with the hosiery shop, was the son of a German immigrant. Her husband Joseph was the son of an immigrant from Luxembourg.
- Edward V. Craun, with the radio store, was not an immigrant or son of immigrants. His family had roots in Virginia.
- William F. Kinnee, with the repair shop, was the son of a French-Canadian immigrant. He'd been born in Michigan.
- John B. Thirjung, the real estate agent, was the son of immigrants from Romania and Yugoslavia.
- Charles B. Flanagan, with the bar, was the grandson of an Irish immigrant. He'd managed a restaurant before opening his bar.
- William H. Bode, the barber, was an immigrant from Germany.
- Frank S. Greindl, with the restaurant, was also an immigrant from Germany.
- Kolf (probably Wolf) Revken, the shoe repairman, was an immigrant from Russia (probably Jewish).

Midtown becomes a sanctuary

From the turn of the 20th century on, the words on the Statue of Liberty could have applied to the Midtown neighborhood. "Give me your . . ."

Unwed mothers

The pattern more or less began in 1908 when Archbishop Sebastian G. Messmer requested the Reverend Mother St. Cecelia, the superior general of the order of Misericorde of Montreal to establish a hospital at the location that he was vacating at 22nd and Juneau in favor of the Pabst Mansion downtown. Soon Sisters St. Celestin and St. Fabian arrived to review the site. Shortly after taking ownership, a decision was made to turn the old mansion into a hospital for unwed mothers.

Helping unwed mothers remained the main function of the facility until 1923 when the site was enlarged and became an all-around hospital.

German-speaking refugees

The neighborhood once again became a sanctuary at the close of World War II. St. Michael's Parish that had been organized by the original German settlers in Midtown became a sanctuary site for displaced German-speaking people from Eastern Europe. The Donauschwaben (local Danube Swabian) populations were targeted during World War II due to hatred of the Germans.

Approximately 250,000 were imprisoned in concentration camps by Yugoslavia's Tito. Many of the remaining Danube Swabians were deported to Russian work camps.

At the end of the war, several hundred thousand came to America. Milwaukee and St. Michael's became a sanctuary site where the displaced Germans could restart their lives.

Displaced African Americans

In the 1950s and 1960s urban renewal and freeway building uprooted thousands of African Americans from their Bronzeville neighborhoods. Over 8,000 African American dwelling units and scores of family-run businesses were lost. Nearby neighborhoods like Midtown experienced an influx of African Americans who'd lost their village. In Midtown they were able to form an active neighborhood association and begin a new north side community.



Today's neighborhood-
Commercial building at 25th & Lisbon

Homeless and refugees/asylees

In 1968, Michael and Annette Cullen and the Milwaukee branch of the Catholic Worker movement opened the Casa Maria house in the Midtown neighborhood. The site, which eventually expanded to four houses on the block, became a shelter for homeless families and refugees. The Casa Maria organization, comprised of all volunteers without government support, was also a wellspring of social action for the area, spawning the city's first Montessori School (Highland Community School), the St. Ben's Meal Program for families in poverty, and the now-defunct West Side Housing Cooperative.

To the present day, people seeking asylum or housing have been served in many ways. They can access short- and long-term shelter from the Casa Maria organization, and assistance of food, clothing, and furniture for those seeking independent housing.

Southeast Asian refugees

St. Michael's Parish, which had become a sanctuary to the Danube Swabians at the close of World War II, has more recently become a sanctuary for Southeast Asians. Hundreds of thousands of Hmong, who faced genocide at the close of the Vietnam War, came to the United States late in the 20th century. Milwaukee became a primary and secondary migration area, and St. Michael's welcomed them to the Midtown area, offering them social services and masses in Hmong.

More recently, the parish has opened its doors to recent immigrants from Myanmar (formerly Burma), who have arrived in Milwaukee, escaping conflict and discrimination in their native country. The parish also offers services and mass in Spanish to accommodate Midtown's Latino population.

Midtown faced urban renewal

In 1969, the Midtown Conservation Project began as an urban renewal program. However, many residents of the (now-defunct) Midtown Neighborhood Association recalled the loss of community in other Milwaukee neighborhoods, and placed limitations on the amount of clearance they would tolerate. They sought a balance between block clearance/redevelopment and preservation. The project provided nearly \$1,000,000 in grants and low-interest loans for property improvements, resulting in the rehabilitation of approximately 650 buildings.

However, nearly half the buildings in Midtown were demolished with redevelopment on the cleared space. The neighborhood ended up with widened streets, improved infrastructure, and new housing units. But significant history was also lost. This included an apartment complex on 27th and Highland that had been designed by famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Now a sanctuary for residents

In 1977, Misericordia Hospital closed. The buildings were demolished in 1982 and the square block area, bordered by 22nd and 23rd Streets and Juneau and McKinley Avenues, began to take on an identity of itself--known as Lynden Hill. Resident members of the (now-defunct) Midtown Neighborhood Association wanted to keep the area as an open green space. The sloping hill and expansive space had become home to over 50 trees and was a natural amphitheater. In 1999, Lynden Hill was designated as the site for Milwaukee's Urban Tree House, an environmental education project of the USDA Forest Service. Two years later, the organization secured a lease from the city to maintain the open green space.

Since that time, Lynden Hill has developed the Milwaukee Teach Responsible Environmental Education (T.R.E.E.) House program, designed to develop an environmental stewardship ethic among youth and increase public awareness and appreciation of natural resources. The program, run today by the Keep Greater Milwaukee Beautiful organization, encourages children to remain productive and active after school and families to explore nature together.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today there are over 7,000 residents living within Midtown's boundaries. Of these, over 7 in 10 are African Americans. The neighborhood also has a significant Asian population (approximately 1 in 7), and most of these are Hmong/Lao with a few families from Korea and Myanmar (Burma). The remaining residents are Latino (mostly of Puerto Rican ancestry), European American (mostly of German ancestry), and people of multiple backgrounds.

The median household income of residents is just over \$30,000 annually, placing the neighborhood in the lower middle income-stratum. The leading occupations claimed by residents are in the fields of production, sales, and administration.

INTERESTING FEATURES

- **Milwaukee High School of the Arts**, at 2300 W. Highland, a school promoting development of visual arts, dance, theatre, music, and creative writing.
- **Milwaukee Urban T.R.E.E. House**, at Lynden Hill, (see above).
- **St. Michael's Parish**, at 1445 N. 24th St., (see above).
- **Casa Maria**, at 1131 N. 21st St., (see above).
- **Frances Starns Early Childhood Center**, at 2616 W. Garfield, an MPS site that promotes acting, singing, and dancing for youth in grades 5 to 10.

RECURRING NEARBY OUTINGS (Health conditions permitting)

In the following section the website addresses have been eliminated due to technical problems with the various ways different web browsers display PDF files. Website information on these events is available through the book *Milwaukee Area Outings on the Cheap*. See below.

LYNDEN HILL/MILWAUKEE URBAN T.R.E.E. HOUSE

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Daily	2130 W. McKinley Ave.	Opportunity to explore a natural setting.	Free

MARTIN LUTHER KING CELEBRATION

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Martin Luther King Day, 2:30 pm	Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center, 1531 W. Vliet St.	An afternoon in honor of Dr. King involving music, spoken work, and praise dance.	Free

BRONZEVILLE WEEK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Aug., 2nd week	MLK Dr., between Garfield Ave. and Center St.	Cultural and arts festival, with a run/walk run, health screenings, trolley rides, arts night, poetry readings.	Free

BRONZEVILLE JAZZ IN THE HOOD

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Jul., Fri. 4-9pm	4th St. between North and Garfield	Celebration of African-American culture that focuses on local creative entrepreneurial talent with art performances.	Free

WALK THROUGH OLD BRONZEVILLE

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Daily, by appt., 1:30-4	Lapham Park Apartments and Senior Center 1901 N. 6th St.	Visit to replica of the once thriving Walnut Street, the heart of Bronzeville, in lower level of Lapham Center. To reserve time, call (414) 286-8859	Free

These outings are provided courtesy of MECAH Publishing. To access the book that provides nearly 600 outings—all priced under \$10—for the entire Greater Milwaukee area, go to <http://mecahmilwaukee.com/NonFiction.html>

QUOTES FROM RESIDENTS

“I was working with the Urban Tree House project when it first began. At that time Mark Weaver from the National Parks was a major organizer. I and a group of others had the responsibility to go door-to-door and interview residents about their neighborhood and their aspirations for the project. Wherever we were interviewing near the Lynden Hill area, we found general satisfaction with the neighborhood. People loved all the work going on restoring old houses. What came up again and again was the stabilizing effects of the Casa Maria complex on the neighborhood. Everyone talked about it. This was very interesting to us because you often see neighborhoods up in arms if they think any kind of homeless service would come to their neighborhood. Not the case here. They saw in Casa Maria a group of very committed people who were not only helping the poor but trying to do the best they could for the overall neighborhood.”

--Anonymous

If you are a resident of this neighborhood and have an insightful quote you'd like to make, please email JFLanthropologist@currently.com

PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood-Houses at 25th & Galena



Today's neighborhood-
Detail of house porch at 24th & McKinley

Today's neighborhood-St Michael's Congregation

Today's neighborhood-Queen Anne style house
undergoing restoration on 24th St.



Today's neighborhood-Lion of Judah Christian Ministries at 24th & McKinley

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods* and Jill Florence Lackey's and Rick Petrie's *Germans in Milwaukee: A neighborhood history*.

Do you have great photos of this neighborhood? Are you a resident with an interesting quote about this neighborhood? Do you have recurring outings, additions, corrections, or general comments about this neighborhood? Please email your input to:

JFLanthropologist@currently.com

OLDER PHOTOS FROM RESIDENTS

Local community gardening. Shoots 'n Roots program of the late 1970s, early 1980s. (Photos courtesy of Dennis Lukaszewski of the University Extension.)



