

Approximate boundaries:

N-Railroad tracks; **S**-W. Pierce St;

E-N. 16th St; **W**-S. Layton Blvd

SOUTH SIDE *Mitchell Park*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

There are very few residential properties in the Mitchell Park neighborhood. Most of the hilly neighborhood is occupied by Mitchell Park on the west and businesses and industries on the east. Residential properties are mainly along a two-block area on the north side of Pierce Street just east of the park. The home architectural styles here are mostly two-story Queen Anne or Colonial style houses.

The main green space is the park, a 60-acre site of glass domes and surrounding lands that was one of the original Milwaukee parks created by the area's first park commission.

HISTORY

The neighborhood of Mitchell Park was named after its park, and the park was named after the family of banking tycoon Alexander Mitchell, that donated the original land core of 5 acres and sold an additional 25 acres to the Milwaukee Board of Park Commissioners in 1891.

Early populations

Mitchell Park was once the site of an early Indian village (probably Potawatomi). The village was situated on a hill that is part of today's park lands overlooking the Menomonee Valley. According to Increase Lapham, there were once 30 to 40 wigwams at this site. Jacques Vieau, the first white settler to the Milwaukee area, built a cabin on the hill and turned it into a trading post in 1795. His daughter, Josette, by a Menomonee woman, ultimately became the wife of Solomon Juneau, Milwaukee's first mayor.

A park is born

The next population wave to the Mitchell Park area followed the development of the park. As Washington Park had drawn settlers to the blocks on Milwaukee's West Side, so Mitchell Park drew a proportion of its modest population to Milwaukee's Near South Side.

In 1889 the city's first park board—the Milwaukee Board of Park Commissioners—met for the purpose of locating appropriate sites for parks. By 1890, the commissioners had decided on five—Kosciuszko, Humboldt, Lake, Riverside, and Mitchell Parks. John Lendum Mitchell, son of banking tycoon, Alexander Mitchell, sold 25 acres to the board in 1891, which would become the core of the park that would carry Mitchell's name. The commissioners hired architect C. Koch and Company to design the park. A lake was excavated on the site, which was immediately used for recreational boating by Milwaukee residents. By 1898, ground was broken for a conservatory which would allow Milwaukeeans the opportunity to enjoy gardens throughout the cold weather months. By 1903, a sunken garden was added. All this drew settlers to the surrounding blocks. Most of them were Germans, Austrians, and Poles.

The park was named after the Mitchell family that had conveyed the initial acreage. See their profile below.



The Mitchells

The Mitchell family made significant contributions to Milwaukee, the State of Wisconsin, and the nation. The first Mitchell family that settled in today's West Town neighborhood was that of Alexander and Martha Reed Mitchell. An immigrant from Scotland at age 22, Alexander rose to prominence very quickly in Milwaukee. He founded the Marine bank, sat on numerous boards of directors, and served two terms in the House of Representatives between 1871 and 1875. Over his lifetime he built the ornate mansion that currently stands at 900 West Wisconsin Avenue (today's Wisconsin Club).

His only child, John Lendum Mitchell, born 1842, was raised in the Mitchell Mansion. He followed in his father's footsteps in number of accomplishments, which included military service in the Civil War, two terms in the Wisconsin State Senate, president of the Milwaukee Public School Board, two years in the United States Congress, and one term in the United States Senate. He gave his name to Mitchell Park, following the sale of 25 acres of land to the Milwaukee Board of Park Commissioners.

Probably the best known of the Mitchells was "Billy," son of John Lendum and Harriet Mitchell (*see photoⁱ to right*). His legacy was expanding the use of air power in the U.S. military. Born in 1879, he enlisted in the army while still in college in order to serve in the Spanish-American War. Deciding on a military career, he also served in World War I and increasingly began to recognize the importance of aviation in battle. He learned to fly at his own expense. Mitchell rose to the ranks of Brigadier General and made Chief of Air Service of the Group of Armies, the top aviation command. However, his insistent claims of air superiority over the sea led to confrontations with the U.S. Navy and his superiors. He was eventually tried by court-martial and found guilty of insubordination.

When Mitchell resigned from service in 1926, he continued his advocacy for increased air power in the military—a position that was eventually accepted in the United States military. Mitchell International Airport would carry General Mitchell's name.



Businesses in Mitchell Park

Pierce Street, named after land speculator Jonathan Peirce (who spelled his name with the "e" before the "i"), became the main business corridor for the Mitchell Park neighborhood. The following chart shows the businesses and organizations that were on West Pierce between Cesar Chavez Drive (then South 16th Street) and Layton Boulevard in 1932. See the notes following the chart.

<i>Addresses on W. Pierce in 1932</i>	<i>Name of business or organization from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
1600	John Hydusek Soft Drinks
1616	Western State Envelope Company
1619	Mrs. Anna B. Stamm Soft Drinks

<i>Addresses on W. Pierce in 1932</i>	<i>Name of business or organization from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
1630	G & O Pattern Works
1638	Western States Envelope Company W. Pierce Paint Shop
1712	Mrs. Anna Markel Soft Drinks
1721	Shell Petroleum Corporation Filling Station
1731	Creamline Dairy Company
1819	Henry J. Ball & Sons Garage
1823-27	Mrs. Karl's Bakeries Inc.
1828	Bentley Brothers Inc. Contractors McNamara Motor Express
1843	Milwaukee Trucking Terminals Inc.
1912	Harvester Works Club
1927	Deep Rock Oil Company Filling Station
2102	Van Dyke Knitting Company
2131	Apartments

Notes from census and other public records:

- W. Pierce had three soft drink establishments in 1932, while Prohibition was still in effect. Some of these were probably speakeasies.
- As in most Milwaukee neighborhoods prior to 1970, few shopkeepers had attended high school. Most were also immigrants or children of immigrants. Most also lived at or near their shops.
- John Hydusek, one of the soft drink establishments, was a typical shopkeeper. He had gone as far as the 7th grade in school and was a Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia.
- Mrs. Anna B. Stamm, also with the soft drink establishment, was the daughter of German immigrants. She had completed the 8th grade.
- Mrs. Anna Markel, again with the soft drink establishment, had operated a restaurant before her soft drink café. When Prohibition ended, she opened a tavern on Hartford Avenue. Her ethnic background and education are not known.

- Henry J. Ball & Sons, with both the stable and the garage, represents the changing trends in transportation during this time. Henry, the son of German immigrants, had completed the 8th grade. One of his two sons, Howard Ball, had completed three years of high school.
- The knitting factory was owned by the Van Dyke family. See the profile below.

Mitchell Park business profile

(Information from U.S. Census and other public records)

The Van Dykes

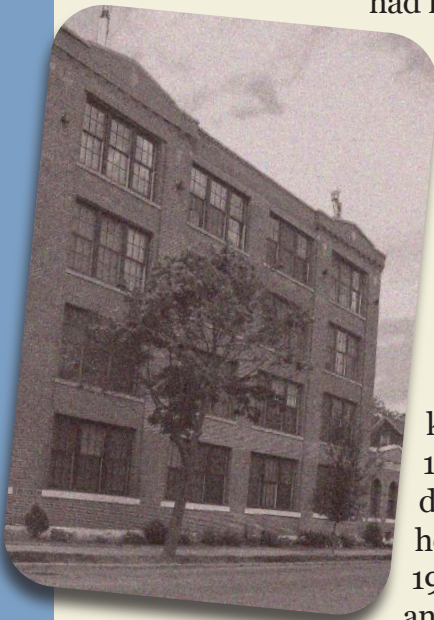
In just about every way, the Van Dyke family was unlike other entrepreneurs that sold their goods on Milwaukee streets before and during the Great Depression. Likely of Dutch or Flemish ancestry, the first generation of Van Dykes to arrive in Milwaukee from Pennsylvania was the John H. Van Dyke family. A college-educated attorney, John H. married Mary from New York, moved to an expensive home on Marshall in the late decades of the 19th century, and had four sons and one daughter. The expensive home was fully staffed with servants.

John H.'s son, John H. Jr., was the founder of the Van Dyke Knitting Factory. By 1900 John H. Jr. was living on Canal Street with wife Anna, one son, and two daughters. The household had more servants than family members, including a Swedish coachman, a porter from New York, and four female maids—two Germans, one English, and one Irish. John H. Jr. may have begun his business on Canal Street, but he built the large industrial complex on West Pierce in 1912.

John H. Jr.'s only son, John C. Van Dyke took over the knitting factory from his father. He also lived a life of abundance. By 1920 he had graduated from college, married wife Gertrude--the daughter of a Canadian immigrant--and had four children. The household also had four servants—all of North European ancestry. By 1930, John C. had left Milwaukee for Fox Point and purchased another expensive home. The household members remained

unchanged, but the servants were no longer Germans and Scandinavians, but were of Slavic origins.

The building complex that had been Van Dyke Knitting changed hands in 1931, when it was purchased by Goodwill Industries. Goodwill oversaw the placement of the structure on the National Register of Historic Places. Today the complex houses apartment lofts for residents of the Mitchell Park neighborhood (see photo).



Post World War II

In 1907, the Wisconsin legislature created the Milwaukee County Parks Commission, and Mitchell Park was now under its direction. The economic boom that followed World War II brought changes to the park, which in turn exponentially increased its number of visitors. The commission made a decision to replace the old conservatory with a more modern design and hired architect Donald L. Grieb to design something new. Grieb suggested beehive-shaped glass domes. In 1964 the show dome was opened which hosted seasonal shows and special programs—

usually with ethnic themes. Two years later the tropical dome was opened, with nearly 1,000 plants from humid ecosystems including award-winning orchids. The following year the arid dome opened, featuring mainly African and North/South American plants from deserts and savannahs. A lobby area was built to connect all three domes. Structural problems in 2008 and 2016 and later closed parts of the conservatory to visitors.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today there are just over 300 residents living in the Mitchell Park neighborhood. Of these, over one-third each are Latinos (mostly of Mexican ancestry) and African Americans. Approximately 2 in 10 residents are European Americans (mostly of German, Irish, and mixed European descent). There is also a scattering of Asians (mostly Hmong), indigenous Africans, American Indians, and people of multiple racial backgrounds in the neighborhood.

The median household income of residents in Mitchell Park is \$14,000 annually, placing the neighborhood in the low-income stratum. The largest number of occupations claimed by adult residents are in the fields of administration, production, healthcare support, and firefighting. Mitchell Park has more than six times the number of residents in the firefighting field than the proportion in other Milwaukee areas.

Rents are a buy in Mitchell Park, with the median monthly rent going for \$545, compared to \$666 for Milwaukee overall. Houses are also a buy. The median detached house in the neighborhood is valued at just over \$184,000 compared to just over \$210,000 for Milwaukee generally. The median housing unit in a two-unit building is valued at just over \$92,000 compared to just under \$143,000 for Milwaukee generally.

INTERESTING FEATURES

- **Mitchell Park Conservatory**, at 524 W. Layton Blvd. (see above and below).
- **Knitting Factory Lofts**, at 2100 W. Pierce, offering 100 loft-style, large 1-and 2-bedroom apartments, a movie theater, resident lounge, and fitness center (see photo below).

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.

MITCHELL PARK DOMES			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Check website	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd.	A place to experience a desert oasis, a tropical jungle, and special floral gardens all in one morning.	unk

FALL FLORAL SHOW			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Check website	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd.	Fall harvest festival and floral exhibits.	unk

STORY TIME AT THE DOMES

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Check website	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd.	Children's stories about autumn, perfect for the home-schooled.	unk

NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING—HOLIDAY FLORAL SHOW

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Check website	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd.	Holiday floral show at the Horticultural Center.	unk

MILWAUKEE COUNTY WINTER FARMERS MARKET

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Nov. thru Feb. Sat. 9am- 12:30pm	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd.	Fresh produce, meat, eggs, dairy from Wisconsin small farms.	Free

GARDEN IMPRESSIONS SPRING FLORAL SHOW AT THE DOMES

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Check website	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd.	The experience of a spring garden as an outdoor art gallery in the Show Domes amongst the brilliant tulips, Easter lilies, hydrangeas and marigolds, including easels displaying paintings of the domes done in the styles of Monet, Cezanne, and Van Gogh.	unk

WINTER WONDERLANDS CELEBRATION

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Dec.,	Journey House, 2110 W. Scott St.	Opportunity to meet Santa and Mrs. Claus, do crafts, eat cookies and refreshments, and receive clothing.	Free (families)

GHOSTS UNDER GLASS

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Check website	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd.	A not-too-spooky night of family fun with treats and ghostly fun.	unk

WALKER'S SQUARE FARMERS MARKET

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Jun. thru Aug., Sun., Thu. 8am-5pm	1031 S. 9th St.	Fresh produce from Wisconsin farmers, baked goods, art, crafts.	Free

SUMMER ON OLYMPUS: SUMMER FLORAL SHOW

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Jun.-mid Sep., Mon.'s 9am-4pm	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd.	Opportunity to see the best in summer blooms.	unk

JULY 4TH CELEBRATION--MITCHELL

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
July 4th, 9am- 10pm	Mitchell Park, 2200 W. Pierce St.	Parade, Doll Buggy, Bike & Trike, and Coaster judging, music, fireworks.	Free

A.W.E.'S SUMMER TRUCK PROGRAM

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
6 weeks during summer, various weekdays, 12-3pm	Clarke Square Park; see website	Program of meaningful, drop-in, art-based enrichment activities for youth ages 4 – 14, with a focus on working with youth in Milwaukee's under-served neighborhoods.	Free

GINGERBREAD LAND—HOLIDAY SHOW

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Check website	Mitchell Park Domes, 524 S. Layton Blvd	Visit a gingerbread house covered in snowy frosting and candy canes and gum drops, among the poinsettias and decked holiday tree	unk

Most of 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

Quotes from ongoing oral history of Mitchell Park conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.¹—about THEN.

“Mainly, it was groups coming in from Walker’s Point in the early years. It was mainly Europeans. There were a lot of jobs on the South Side.”

“If I had to pick one person [as a leader], I would pick John Norquist. He was a major that lived in the neighborhood and he was a presence here who had a very strong connection to this neighborhood.”

“Well [the early residents] were predominantly Polish. . . There were Polish restaurants and a strong Polish community, pretty much anchored by the church, and pretty much at that time the basilica became our go-to.”

Quotes from ongoing oral history of Mitchell Park—about NOW.

“There used to be a bar on almost every corner of the neighborhood. Those have disappeared now. There’s still a lot of bars but even more restaurants than there ever was. I would say around 6th Street, National, and Greenfield there’s a very heavy concentration of Mexican, Puerto Rican restaurants, and also Asian. So, I feel there’s more restaurants than we’ve ever had in this neighborhood but less bars. Commercially Mitchell Street was a very strong center for retail and that has kind of gone down and back up again.”

“There’s a strong Hispanic population here but I also see a lot of different Asian groups as well. We do a lot of ethnic festivals and cultural events here. And that was something I brought to this job was to bring more cultural events--everything before that had been more focused on plants--the Orchid Society, the Violet Society--those kinds of things. I really found an affinity to the cultural groups that surround this park because they are very horticulturally inclined, with gardens, with the Japanese--how they actually use some of the plants we grow in their cooking.”

“Other [leaders] today would be Perez and Donovan.”

“The main ethnic groups [in Mitchell Park] are Hispanic--mainly Mexicans--and I would say they have a stronger sense of working together when it comes to business development. They are very supportive of each other and their businesses. I mean National Avenue is a good example of that. The Hmong also seem to be very tight and they also seem to do a lot of co-living . . . A lot of people also allow their family members to live with them to give a leg up when they do come to this community.”

“We are surrounded by neighborhoods that people feel intimidated by, and I get a lot of people asking me is okay to park my car here. Is it safe at the Domes? Their perception in driving is that it’s not a safe neighborhood. And that’s one of the biggest challenges for us here at the Domes. I’ve lived in the city my entire life and [I know it’s] just about being smart. Whether you’re anywhere in the city, you don’t leave your laptop, you don’t leave your purse, in the front seat. For me it’s just second nature to be conscientious about those things. But there is a perception, and we get a lot of out-of-towners that come to the Domes. Really tourism is a really big thing for us here, especially in the summer. Seventy percent of the people that come here are from another state or another country. So, people have a perception that this is a challenged neighborhood.”

“Around here, it’s the restaurants. Everywhere. All ethnic. Mexican, Asian, South American. They’ve replaced all the retail stores. It’s something the Internet can’t bring you—freshly cooked food.”

“Many neighbors would sit out on their porches a lot, and there used to be a lot of wild rabbits out there. Now there’s no more rabbits. Neighbors were always friendly and there used to be gardens at the Domes, playgrounds and parks. ”

“The lawns were immaculately cut and huge Elm trees everywhere. A nice and quaint neighborhood”

“There’s a lot of Asian restaurants and businesses and stores--and Puerto Rican ones as well. There used to be a lot of Polish delis that are gone now. A lot of people own their own businesses with mom and pop shops and fast food places.”

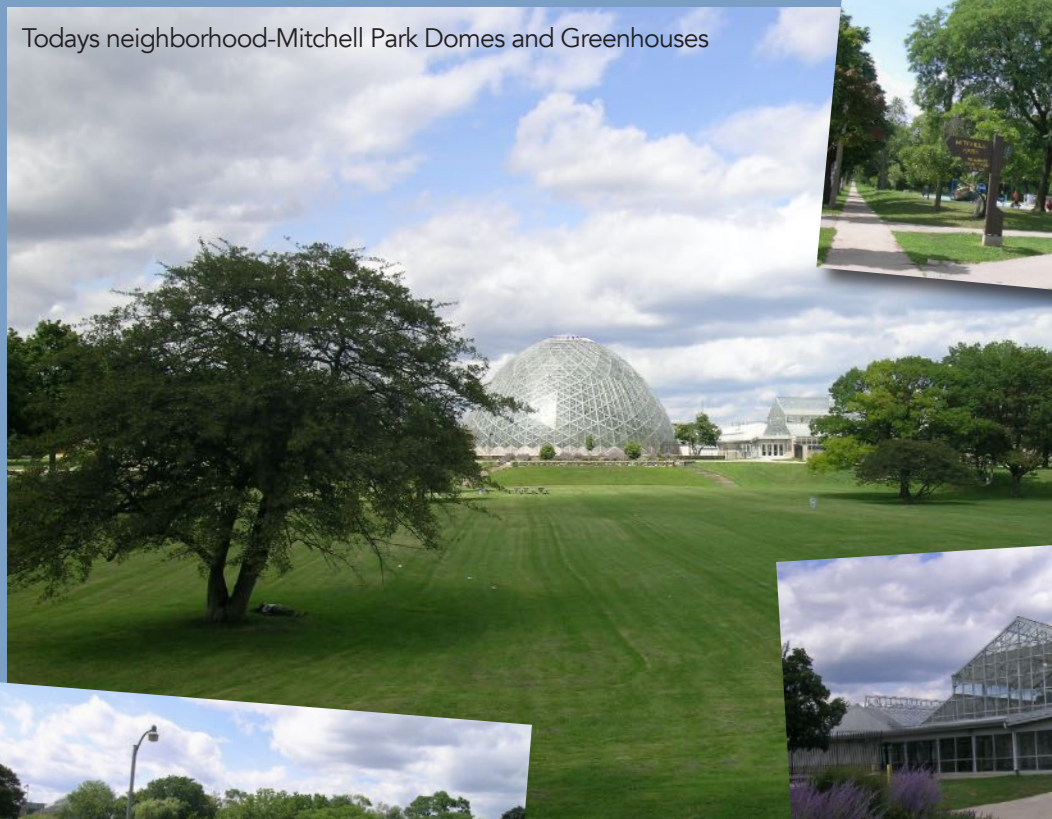
“There’s a growing Asian population in Clarke Square/Muskego Way/Mitchell Park—more towards the northwest side of the district. There’s more Asian shops, many “Hmong students. There’s many similarities in family values, work ethics, and pride in their communities. They take pride in their properties. There’s a lot of activity around food sharing”

“I don't know that it has had a major effect on the neighborhood yet, but the temporary closure of the Domes and subsequent decision-making process related to the future of the conservatory has been fairly significant in my mind. Maybe not "that historical" but the installation of the Cesar Chavez statue on Chavez Drive was a significant event. If memory serves me right, that was 2016. ”

¹ Urban Anthropology Inc. complies with human subjects requirements of formal research and asks informants to sign informed consent forms that stipulate anonymity, hence names are not provided with the quotes.

PHOTOS

Today's neighborhood-Mitchell Park Domes and Greenhouses



Today's neighborhood-Mitchell Park Playground



Today's neighborhood-Mitchell Park Lagoon



Today's neighborhood-Milwaukee County Greenhouses



Today's neighborhood-
Houses on 20th & Pierce



Today's neighborhood-Knitting Factory Lofts



Today's neighborhood-Mitchell Park Domes

¹ Photo (modified) attribution: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/ba/Billy_Mitchell.jpg

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@sbcglobal.net