

Approximate boundaries:
N-W. Capitol Dr; **S**-W. Keefe Ave;
E-N. Holton St, **W**-Hwy 43

NORTH SIDE *Williamsburg Heights*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Williamsburg Heights has moderate population density. Roughly half of the neighborhood is industrial and/or commercial property. The rest of the area has a mix of one- and two-story wood frame houses and bungalows.

There are no parks in the neighborhood, but an abandoned railroad corridor called the “ARTery” has become a place for temporary art projects and installations. See Williamsburg Heights photos below.

HISTORY

While Williamsburg Heights comprises the northern section of the Harambee neighborhood, it has a distinct history of its own.

Early populations

In the mid-1800s, a German farming and trading community was established north of Milwaukee’s border, which was North Avenue at the time. The immigrant trading center developed in the triangle formed by Green Bay Avenue, Port Washington Road, and Keefe Avenue. The settlement was called Williamsburg—hence came the current neighborhood name of Williamsburg Heights.

The Williamsburg community was commercially active, with its own flour mill, greenhouses, blacksmiths, bakeries, and even its own post office. By the early 20th century, the area was beginning to industrialize. Industries were attracted to the open land and railroad service to the area. The largest factory in the industrial district was the Seaman Body Corp. on Richards Street. At its peak, the plant occupied over one million square feet of floor space and employed 6,500 workers.

Gradually populations to the south began to expand into the Williamsburg community. Most of these were Germans who had been settling in large numbers in Milwaukee since the early 1800s. City of Milwaukee boundaries moved north, reaching Center Street in 1865 and Burleigh in 1866. Third Street became the German “downtown,” and 1st, 2nd, and Palmer Streets became the German north side gold coast. Beautiful Queen Anne and Colonial Revival homes lined the streets with ornate fireplaces, glass-stained windows, and elaborate woodwork. One resident on 1st Street was Edward Schuster, who founded Milwaukee’s largest department store of that era.

The German population dominated the region that is today known as Harambee through the 1920s. But other populations were pushing into the area, mainly from the Lower East Side, which included Poles, Italians, and Puerto Ricans, particularly after World War II. Some Eastern European Jews opened shops along the business corridors in the neighborhood. (To read a sample of the business owners in the major commercial corridors in Harambee, click on the [Harambee neighborhood link](#).)

Today's neighborhood-
The “ARTery,” an abandoned
railroad corridor turned into an
impromptu art space



African American era

It was the African American population that would dominate Harambee in the latter half of the 20th century. Free blacks had lived in Milwaukee since the turn of the nineteenth century. Milwaukee's first mayor, Solomon Juneau, had an African American cook named Joe Oliver. Most of the earliest arriving blacks who settled in Milwaukee were self-employed or semi-skilled workers, and lived in every area of the city. Many owned property.

Much would change during the period called the Great Migration, which began in 1910. Many push-pull factors would contribute to urban migration of blacks all over the United States—factors including worsening racism in the South, higher wages in the North, and the wartime decline in European immigration—which reduced the number of available workers in industrial cities. Milwaukee actually played a central role in this migration. A city industry, Allis Chalmers, produced the cotton-picking machine, which put many blacks in the South out of work. In addition, some local industrialists began recruiting African Americans from the South.

By mid-century, most African Americans in Milwaukee lived within one square mile in the central city—an area just south of today's Harambee neighborhood—that was then known as Bronzeville. The exact boundaries of Bronzeville are disputed, but most locate them somewhere between Juneau and North Avenues and 3rd (as it was known at the time) and 17th Streets. Walnut Street was the community's business and entertainment center.

During the 1950s and 1960s, two government programs displaced most in this community. One program was the urban renewal, which had been designed to improve central city housing. Many blocks in Bronzeville were slated for revitalization, and residents on these blocks were forced to sell their homes or were offered alternative housing in other areas of the city. During the same time period, the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission was building two major freeway corridors in the heart of the city. One cut directly across Bronzeville, discarding Walnut Street as the center of the community.

Over 8,000 African-American dwelling units were lost as were nearly all of the scores of businesses and organizations on or near Walnut Street. Many of the displaced residents of Bronzeville moved north into the Harambee area, including Williamsburg Heights.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today, nearly 9 in 10 of Williamsburg Heights' roughly 2,500 residents are African Americans. Most of the others are European Americans and people of multiple backgrounds. The neighborhood also skews young, with nearly 4 in 10 residents aged 19 or under.

Slightly over half the residents in Williamsburg Heights live in low-income households, where the annual income is under \$25,000. Nearly half of the adult population works in sales, production, administrative support, or food service.

Today Williamsburg Heights is a major source of Milwaukee employment. The Riverworks Center initiative north of Keefe Avenue has brought in new employers. The Center is made up of two organizations working together to positively impact businesses and neighborhood residents. These include the Riverworks Development Corporation (RDC) and the Riverworks Business Improvement District (BID). As a result of the coordinated efforts, hundreds of jobs and millions of dollars have been added to the local economy.

Another major development in the Williamsburg Heights neighborhood has been the ARTery project, a 10-foot-wide asphalt path that runs two-thirds of a mile from the intersection of North Richards Street and East Keefe Avenue north to Capitol Drive. The area, that had been a railroad corridor and gradually became a dumping ground for garbage and old tires, was redeveloped in 2015 into an extension of Milwaukee's Beerline Trail and a home for creative projects. The paved path is now used for walking, biking, running, skateboarding, motorized wheelchairs, and scooters. Creative projects in the pathway have included poetry readings, drumming, dance performances, and cooking classes.

INTERESTING FEATURES

- **Riverworks**, at Keefe Ave. and Richards St., is a major source of employment in the neighborhood.
- **The "ARTery**, at Keefe Ave. and Richards St., is an abandoned railroad corridor turned into an impromptu art space and hiking path.

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.

JUNETEENTH DAY			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
June 19, daytime	Along Martin Luther King Dr. between Center and Burleigh Sts.	Celebration of the US holiday that commemorates the day in 1865 when the end of slavery was announced in Texas, with everything African American—the food, families, music, clothes, dance, exhibits, crafts, art, and a parade.	Free

RIVERWEST ART WALK			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Oct., Sat. all day	Get tickets and maps at Art Bar (722 E. Burleigh St.), Jazz Gallery (926 E. Center St.), and Riverwest Food Co-op (733 E. Clarke St.)	A walk that features artist studios, beautiful gardens, and various sanctuaries.	unk

LOCUST STREET FESTIVAL OF MUSIC AND ART			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Jun., Sun. 11am-8pm	Locust St. between Humboldt & Holton	Featuring six live music venues and a variety of food, artists and vendors with up to 30,000 people.	Free

KWANZAA			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Dec.	Wisconsin Black Historical Center, 2620 W. Center St.	An African-American cultural festival held from December 26 to January 1.	Free

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

If you are a resident in the Williamsburg Heights neighborhood and would like to add an interesting quote about this area, please send an email to JFLanthropologist@currently.com

PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood-The "ARtery,"
an abandoned railroad corridor turned
into an impromptu art space



Today's neighborhood-N. 5th St. north of Keefe Ave.



Today's neighborhood-Sign for Riverworks on the corner of Keefe Ave. and Richards St.

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



Photo contributed by Fred Hang, descendant of the butcher shop proprietor (located on Holton)