
‘Our own league of nations’: Razed Bethlehem neighborhood gets historical marker

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Historical marker unveiled for Bethlehem’s razed Northampton Heights neighborhood

A true melting pot of 20th century America was remembered Saturday, as the South Bethlehem Historical Society unveiled a marker commemorating the former Northampton Heights neighborhood.

The Heights along Southside Bethlehem’s East Fourth Street was incorporated as a borough in 1901, then consolidated with West Bethlehem and South Bethlehem in 1920 into the City of Bethlehem. For decades, it served as a multi-ethnic neighborhood, before it was razed in 1968 by the former Bethlehem Steel Corp. to make way for its basic oxygen furnace. Predominantly German and Irish at first, the Heights grew into a home for Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Syrian, Spanish, Scottish, Mexican, Romanian, Austrian, English, Windish, American Greek, Czecho-Slovakian, Italian, Croatian, Black, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, Serbian, Jewish, Bohemian, Welson and Pennsylvania Dutch, according to the enrollment on display Saturday of the neighborhood’s Washington Junior High School.

“We had our own league of nations,” said Frank Podleiszek, who grew up in Northampton Heights and lived there until he was 25. “We had people from countries all over the world living right here, and we got along.”

Vivian Tarboro Hungerford scanned what was once her neighborhood and is now largely cleared spaces beside the buildings of Lehigh Valley Industrial Park VII and Bethlehem Heavy Forge and the Lynn Avenue bridge.

She can recite the Heights’ street names, which were built in alphabetical order from west to east: Anthracite, Bessemer, Carbon, Diamond and Emery. She rattled off where the stores and schools like Brodhead Elementary stood and remembers the names of the women like her mother who taught the neighborhood children to play baseball on the asphalt parking lots of Bethlehem Steel.

“We had good times and we had bad times,” Tarboro Hungerford said, conjuring up the unfair treatment of Black families like her own who could never get access to the junior high’s basketball or tennis courts.

These were families who were offered less for their homes than their white neighbors when Bethlehem Steel began acquiring the land. Tarboro Hungerford remembered how her father stepped up, to spread the word that the company’s first offer was too low and was not to be accepted. “My parents were the last ones to move from the Heights ... in ‘63,” she said.

Bethlehem Steel’s basic oxygen furnace started up on the former neighborhood in 1968, said Joe Mayer, a retired third-generation steelworker who is president of the Steelworker Archives, which leads tours of the old plant at 11:30 a.m. every Saturday and Sunday until Christmas.

The BOF took molten pig iron from the blast furnaces that still stand today along the Lehigh River and introduced oxygen to cause a chemical reaction that would create liquid steel, he said. This method created steel in massively larger quantities than the old open hearth method. In 1995, Bethlehem Steel had the BOF imploded just north of East Fourth Street, and the company was bankrupt six years later.

The city aided in the destruction of the Heights, deciding “for whatever reason drummed up at the time” that the homes were not fit to live in, said Esther Lee, a member of the South Bethlehem Historical Society who organized Saturday’s marker unveiling.

“A Borough in 1901 covering 12 city blocks with 28 ethnic groups including Jewish and African Americans,” the Northampton Heights marker purchased by the society reads, “it joined the City of Bethlehem in 1920. Razed by Bethlehem Steel for their Basic Oxygen Furnace in 1968. The BOF was razed in 1995. Today the site is an Industrial Park.”

“I am probably one of the few people still living that can still sing the alma mater of Washington Junior High School,” said Podleiszek. “All of us can,” former Heights resident Oksana Koziak said to laughter. Koziak is of Ukrainian descent, and the Heights had its own Ukrainian church — St. Josaphat — that shared the community with St. Paul Baptist and St. Mark’s Evangelical Lutheran.

“With the war that’s going on in Ukraine right now, it raises a lot of memories especially for some of our descendants who are here who had parents or family members who were escaping from the very exact same thing that was going on in World War II under the Soviet days and even before that,” offered the Rev. Paul Makar from St. Josaphat, which today is at West Union Boulevard and Kenmore Avenue in West Bethlehem.

The Heights was home to 945 people and 280 homes when it was razed, said state Rep. Steve Samuelson, D-Northampton: “It really was a vibrant community.”

Bethlehem City Councilwoman Wandalyn Enix named a pediatric cardiologist, nurse, school principal and superintendent of Allentown State Hospital who grew up there.

Robin Stanley recalled being raised there with her grandparents on Diamond. “What I remember as a child is that everybody was cordial to each other,” she said. “If you were in need, if you needed something and we had it, we gave it to you. My grandmother was notorious for making way too much food and offering it out to the community, and they gave back the same way.”