

North Lawndale History

North Lawndale (number 29 of Chicago's 77 communities) was organized in 1857 as part of Cicero Township. It was crossed by a French and Indian portage trail that underlies today's Ogden Avenue. In 1869 the eastern portion was annexed to Chicago, and in 1889 the west portion became part of the city. Several industries developed in the rapidly growing community, the most notable being the Sears, Roebuck & Co. mail order facility and admin headquarters, which opened in 1905.

North Lawndale doubled its population between 1910 and 1920, from 46,226 to 93,750, and added 18,000 more people by 1930, when almost half of the 112,000 residents were Russian Jews. Roosevelt Road became the best-known Jewish commercial street in Chicago. Then, between 1930 and 1950, the Russian Jews began to move into communities to the north. By 1950 African-Americans had begun to replace Jewish residents.

The 1950s were a decade of "white flight," as the white population dropped from 87,000 in 1950 to less than 11,000 in 1960 and the African-American population grew from 13,000 to more than 113,000. By the 1960s North Lawndale was at its all-time population high, nearly 125,000, and was 91% African-American. In spite of the overcrowding, no new private housing was built in the area, leading to massive physical decline in the neighborhood in the 1950s.

The African American residents coming into the neighborhood were largely unable to find jobs in the area, as the industries in North Lawndale now employed those who commuted to the area only for work. Consequently, the local consumer base became much poorer, and tensions grew between the whites who worked in North Lawndale during the day and the blacks who lived there. In 1966, the neighborhood's poverty prompted Martin Luther King, Jr. to pick North Lawndale as the base for the northern civil rights movement. Residents found King's visit highly

symbolic: his stay attracted much attention, but little tangible change.

During the next two decades there were a series of economic and social disasters for this increasingly isolated, segregated community. Riots followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, destroying many of the stores along Roosevelt Road and accelerating a decline that led to a loss of 75% of the businesses in the community by 1970. Industries closed: International Harvester in 1969, Sears (partially in 1974 and completely by 1987), Zenith and Sunbeam in the 1970s, Western Electric in the 1980s. By 1970 African-Americans who could were also leaving North Lawndale, beginning a precipitous population decline that extended through 2010. Housing deteriorated or was abandoned, until North Lawndale experienced a loss of almost half of its housing units.

The 1990's saw renewed investment activity in the neighborhood, particularly as housing prices began to rebound and as extensive development was targeted in the Homan Square area, a vast tract that was previously home to Sears' headquarters and catalog operations. Western Electric's famed Hawthorne Works, at the far western edge of the neighborhood between Ogden and Cermak, is still partially an industrial site, but also includes some retail development. Cook County Jail was built where International Harvester once stood.

On many "quality of life" indicators, the neighborhood has found itself no longer at the bottom of the heap, but rather a focus of renewed interest by the public and private sectors as people rediscover the many strengths of this community. It has a great location, an affordable housing stock that is fundamentally among the best to be found in Chicago, good parks, very little congestion, close knit blocks, and many churches and associations working diligently to improve the life of the community.