

Creve Coeur

One tool used nationwide by suburbs pursuing segregation was invoking eminent domain – the power to condemn and seize land for public purposes. In 1959, Howard and Katie Venable, an African American couple, purchased a residential lot in the mostly white St. Louis suburb of Creve Coeur. The Venables applied for, and the town approved, the necessary permits to build a home, and construction had begun when town residents discovered that the purchasers were black. A hastily organized citizens committee raised contributions to purchase the property, but could not pressure the couple to sell. The city then condemned the property for use as a park and playground. The couple challenged the condemnation, but a Missouri appeals court ruled that courts could not inquire into the motives for a condemnation, provided its purpose was for a public use, which a park and playground surely were.

Fifteen years later, Creve Coeur again forestalled the possibility of integration when it ousted its one small black neighborhood, characterized by small homes on small lots that had been deeded before the city's zoning law required much larger ones. The city harassed the homeowners with code violations and denied building permits for remodeling. The city itself even bought up lots in the neighborhood through a straw party, as the Creve Coeur mayor allowed that he “personally did not want any colored in there.” The neighborhood was razed and is today the Malcolm Terrace public park and neighborhood, one of the more affluent in Creve Coeur.

- When did this take place?
- What means were used to keep the area segregated?
- What was the outcome?
- Who bore responsibility?

Black Jack

In 1969, a Methodist church-sponsored nonprofit organization proposed to construct a racially integrated and federally subsidized development for moderate- and low-income families in Black Jack, an all-white suburb in unincorporated St. Louis County. In response, Black Jack rapidly incorporated and adopted a zoning ordinance prohibiting more than three homes per acre, making development of new moderate-income housing impossible (although some already existed within the new city boundaries). Several African American residents of the city of St. Louis sued. They claimed they had been unable to find decent housing outside the ghetto and therefore had little access to employment that was increasingly suburban. The incident attracted national attention, and the Nixon administration deliberated for many months about whether to file its own suit to enjoin the zoning ordinance.

Eventually it did, and a federal appeals court ordered Black Jack to permit the development to proceed. The court observed that opposition to the integrated development was “repeatedly expressed in racial terms by persons whom the District Court found to be leaders of the incorporation movement, by individuals circulating petitions, and by zoning commissioners themselves.” The court continued: “Racial criticism of [the proposed development] was made and cheered at public meetings. The uncontradicted evidence indicates that, at all levels of opposition, race played a significant role, both in the drive to incorporate and the decision to rezone.” ...

However, by the time the court order was obtained, the Methodist group had lost its financing, interest rates had climbed, and, according to urban historian Colin Gordon, the federal government was “lukewarm” about proceeding with the integrated development. The lawyers for the integrated project said that, despite the court ruling, “no developer in his or her right mind” would proceed with the project in the face of such hostility. It was never constructed.

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Olivette (1)

In 1950, Olivette in St. Louis County annexed a portion of the adjacent unincorporated community of Elmwood Park. Twenty years later, the chairman of the Olivette Land Clearance and Redevelopment Authority asserted that the annexation was needed simply to “straighten” the city’s boundaries. Olivette was an all-white, solidly middle-class community where nearly two-thirds of residences were single-family; apartment dwellers in the balance were socioeconomically similar. Adjacent Elmwood Park, in contrast, was very poor, African American, with 37 dilapidated homes, subject to frequent flooding from the River Des Peres, and without paved roads or sewers. Elmwood Park had been settled after the Civil War by laborers, formerly slaves on nearby farms.

The area was bisected by railroad tracks; Olivette annexed the portion north of the city and south of the tracks, creating a physical boundary between the expanded city and unincorporated Elmwood Park. Olivette was under no legal obligation to notify affected Elmwood Park residents of the annexation, and it did not do so. After the annexation, Olivette provided no services to its new Elmwood Park neighborhood and erected a barbed-wire fence between the neighborhood and the nearest white subdivision. (Even after 1954 when schools were integrated, school buses did not come into the annexed neighborhood, so black children had to walk around the perimeter of the white subdivision, rather than taking a direct route across it, to board their school bus.) Olivette did mail tax bills to the newly annexed residents, but few Elmwood Park homeowners apparently understood the implication of these bills. Most were not aware of the annexation until 1955, when Olivette began to auction off their homes for nonpayment of taxes and other fees.

The actual aim of Olivette officials was almost certainly not to “straighten boundaries” but to force Elmwood Park residents to abandon their homes (or have them seized) so the area could be redeveloped with industry, both to increase Olivette’s tax revenue and to reinforce the barrier between Olivette and the remaining African American community in unincorporated Elmwood Park.

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Olivette (2)

[Background: In 1950, Olivette in St. Louis County annexed a portion of the adjacent unincorporated community of Elmwood Park... Olivette was an all-white, solidly middle-class community ... Adjacent Elmwood Park, in contrast, was very poor, African American, with 37 dilapidated homes...]

By 1960, however, a decade after the annexation, Olivette had not succeeded in driving most Elmwood Park residents away. Most had scraped up enough money to pay their back taxes. So Olivette applied for and obtained federal urban renewal funds, enabling it to condemn the land and attract industrial development. Olivette then informed Elmwood Park residents that their homes were too dilapidated to rehabilitate and would be demolished. It rezoned Elmwood Park as industrial, condemned the African American residents' properties, and began charging them rent to live in homes they had previously possessed clear of mortgages.

Although federal urban renewal policy required Olivette to relocate the displaced residents within Olivette, the federal government initially refused to enforce that requirement, and Olivette instead offered housing either in a public housing project being constructed in unincorporated Elmwood Park or in the city of St. Louis. Responding to protests, the government eventually required Olivette to build 10 residential units in the industrial zone, which the city separated from its middle-class areas by a park.⁶⁰ Most of the original residents of the annexed neighborhood relocated to St. Louis, to the all-black suburb of Wellston, or to a black neighborhood in another suburb, University City. Once constructed, Olivette's new public housing development in the industrial zone was also all-black, separated from the rest of the city.

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