

ECHOES OF COMMUNITY



Remembering Paradise Valley through Archaeology

Paradise Valley was a vibrant neighborhood in Detroit during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that was home to Jewish American communities and, later, African American communities. Just as the Great Migration brought many African Americans to the neighborhood, urban renewal later decimated and displaced residents. Today, redevelopment of the former Douglass Homes public housing site provides opportunities to learn from the failed urban development policies of the twentieth century and reveal artifacts and stories of daily life through Section 106 archaeology – all while honoring the history of Paradise Valley.



ARCHAEOLOGY TELLS STORIES OF THE RECENT PAST

Archaeology is the study of human history by investigating the material remains, objects, and buildings we create and use. Traces of the past are often quite literally buried beneath our feet, especially in cities like Detroit that have many generations of history. While the urban landscape may rapidly transform and change, there can still be archaeological deposits intact, revealing complex stories of the past.

In the United States, the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 created a framework for preserving our shared national history. Section 106 of the NHPA specifically requires federal agencies and entities receiving federal funds or permits to consider the impact of their projects on historic properties. As part of Section 106 efforts, archaeological discovery and historic documentation may be undertaken when historic resources are affected.

Under Section 106, archaeological investigations were conducted when the Detroit Housing Commission sought to demolish the Douglass Homes towers and redevelop the land. Archaeological investigation of the Douglass Homes property began in 2012 when The Mannik & Smith Group, Inc. (MSG) was hired to ensure compliance with Section 106 because the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) had to approve the project.

MSG's initial study of the Douglass Homes project area included an architectural assessment of the remaining Douglass Homes public housing units as well as an archaeological sensitivity assessment for what may be underground. However, the archaeological assessment, which involved researching the history of the neighborhood and scouring historic fire insurance and real estate maps of Detroit, resulted in a finding that showed archaeological remnants of Paradise Valley were likely still present within the project area.



The Michigan State Historic Preservation Office agreed with this finding, and MSG conducted archaeological monitoring of select building demolitions in 2013-2014 to document any such remnants. As a result of the monitoring, MSG recorded 30 individual archaeological features across 11 separate archaeological sites. 2019 MSG conducted controlled archaeological excavations at six of the archaeological sites. Artifacts recovered here are expected to become part of a publicly owned museum collection for future exhibition and study. New knowledge based on these archaeological discoveries now sheds light on everyday life in the neighborhood.

STRUCTURAL RACISM & URBAN LANDSCAPES

Racist policies of the twentieth century shaped urban landscapes throughout the United States, including Detroit. Programs and policies, such as redlining and urban renewal, profoundly impacted Detroit communities, and their ripple effects still linger today. Detroit, like many northern cities, saw a massive influx of African Americans during a period known as the Great Migration, from about 1920-1940. African Americans moved to Detroit to seek economic opportunities in the automotive industry. However, once here, they found

their opportunities constrained by redlining and legal housing covenants that excluded them from certain neighborhoods.

Many were able to find housing in traditionally Jewish neighborhoods, like Paradise Valley, which did not have covenants blocking African Americans from home ownership. Under these circumstances, communities like Paradise Valley became the epicenter for Black culture, community, and businesses in Detroit during the first half of the twentieth century.

With limited housing options, the effects of redlining led to overcrowded and run-down conditions in the urban core of many cities, contributing to urban renewal practices that further decimated minority communities. In 1935, the Brewster Housing Project was constructed as the nation's first federally funded housing project for African Americans. The Brewster project demolished a large swath of the Paradise Valley and nearby Black Bottom neighborhoods, displacing hundreds from their homes and community without their consent. Later, the Douglass Towers projects nearby and Interstate-375 construction further decimated these neighborhoods and Black-owned businesses.



Brewster-Douglass, suffered from inadequate funding and poor management. Residents protested that other houses in the city were being demolished while residents of the projects lived in deteriorating conditions. Decades after they were constructed, the original Brewster Homes project was demolished and replaced with new townhouses. Citing poor maintenance, the last residents of the Douglass Towers were relocated to other housing complexes to allow for demolition and new use. Today, efforts are being made to acknowledge and right the unjust legacies of housing discrimination and urban renewal.

ARCHAEOLOGY UNCOVERS THE PAST: TWO STORIES FROM PARADISE VALLEY



“Schlussel’s Bath House and Mikveh”

In 1907, Louis Schlussel opened a Russian and Turkish bath house at the corner of Alfred Street and St. Antoine. The Schlusssels moved to 501 St. Antoine in 1905, and in 1907 the bath house was opened around the corner at 186 Alfred Street. The bath house included Detroit's first mikveh or Jewish ritual bath.



The baths were located in the basement of the building; tile-lined walls were recorded during MSG's excavations in 2019. Between 1916 and 1919, Schlussel sold the bath house to fellow Jewish immigrant Julius Rosenfeld. Rosenfeld, who had immigrated to the U.S. from Russia in 1900, owned the bath house until its demolition in the late 1940s. Upon purchasing the bath house Rosenfeld moved into the neighboring house at 497 St. Antoine. Many of the artifacts collected from the bath house site by MSG date to the period of Rosenfeld's ownership, including glass bottles from local companies such as the East Side Bottling Works, the West Side Brewery Company, the Trivoli Brewing Company, P.H. Kling Brewing Company, and Feigenson Brothers (later rebranded as Faygo). Numerous medicine bottles came both from local pharmacies (Kruger Bros., Davy Jones Drug Co.) and national brands (Lyric, Richter). It is likely that these products were consumed at the bath house.



“The House at 452 St. Antoine”

The house located at 452 St. Antoine Street was built sometime before 1880, when physician Amos Hoke was listed in city directories at this address. The house was connected to city water lines by 1897 at the latest. City directories from the twentieth century list a series of day laborers and other blue-collar workers at this address. Although race or ethnicity were not noted in these directories, these residents were likely African American.

Excavations at 452 St. Antoine revealed a solid brick foundation and numerous fragments of domestic items such as ceramic tableware, decorative knick-knacks, comb, and even porcelain electrical fixtures. Several artifacts point to the presence of children, including a porcelain toy pitcher, ceramic tableware sherds from “alphabet” dishes which were a popular way of teaching children how to read. These artifacts stand in stark contrast with the stereotypes of Paradise Valley as a slum full of rickety wooden tenements that were later pushed by urban planners' intent on clearing the area for public housing.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

In Paradise Valley, the transition between Jewish and African American communities was organic and resulted in a diverse and lively neighborhood with its own unique history. Urban renewal displaced and erased the original community. However, memories and material artifacts uncovered through careful archaeology are painting a more complete picture of everyday life in a once vibrant neighborhood.