



Clintonville Main Street USA: 1950s-1960s

Historical Context and Overview

In the period following World War II, the United States experienced an unprecedented economic boom. Economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s was driven by the need for new residential housing and increased spending on consumer goods. The postwar baby boom and the movement of people away from central cities to suburban neighborhoods created consumer demand for housing, automobiles, televisions, and other consumer goods.

Many World War II veterans took advantage of low-interest loans under the GI bill to purchase new houses in suburbs. The number of houses in the United States doubled in the 1950s, as home ownership became a symbol of the American dream. Indeed, consumer spending in general, became a measure of freedom in this new “consumer culture.”

New businesses emerged to meet the consumer demand of suburban residents. Large shopping centers provided one-stop shopping for groceries, home appliances, and consumer goods. But, small stores and restaurants, car repair shops, and other family-owned businesses also fueled the local economy in suburban communities.

The transition of Clintonville from a rural to postwar suburban community reflected larger national patterns in American history. The Graceland Shopping Center became a major hub for the consumer-driven economy of Clintonville. Along High Street, many of Clintonville’s stores and restaurants were family-owned businesses that contributed to the small town atmosphere of the community.

While suburban development brought economic benefits to communities, it also created tensions and controversy. Just as many central urban centers were cut apart by expanding freeways, surrounding suburbs were often impacted as well. In Clintonville, the expansion of Rt. 315 proved especially controversial.

Standards Alignment

Ohio’s New Learning Standards: Social Studies

Grade 3

Content Statement 17: A consumer is a person whose wants are satisfied by using goods and services. A producer makes goods and/or provides services.

Content Statement 19: Making decisions involves weighing costs and benefits.

Grade 4

Content Statement 14: The choices people make have both present and future consequences.

Grade 8

Content Statement 22: Choices made by individuals, businesses and governments have both present and future consequences.

High School American History

Content Statement 29: The postwar economic boom, greatly affected by advances in science, produced epic changes in American life.

Learning Objectives

- Explain how the postwar economic boom in the 1950s changed suburban communities in the United States.
- Discuss the economic decision-making factors associated with suburban development in the 1950s and 1960s.
- Analyze the impact of the decision to buy local or not. Evaluate the short-term and long-term consequences of each.
- Compare aspects of daily life in the past with daily life today.
- Analyze multiple perspectives on the construction of a freeway through a neighborhood.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the economic costs and benefits of Casto's decision to develop Graceland Shopping Center?
2. How did the development of Graceland Shopping Center reflect the economic boom and consumer culture of the 1950s and 1960s?
3. What changes in Clintonville in the 1950s and 1960s reflected its transition from a rural area to postwar suburb? Why is the title "Main Street USA" an appropriate description for Clintonville in this time period?
4. How has our experience in stores and restaurants changed over time? Use specific examples from the segment.
5. What are some advantages to making your purchases at local, family-owned businesses? What are some disadvantages of this decision?
6. What types of activities brought the people of Clintonville together? How did new development cause divisions among the people of Clintonville?
7. The construction of Rt. 315 through Clintonville created controversy. What issues were involved in the construction of the freeway? What were the various perspectives on the issues?

Extension Activities

- Have students take a neighborhood walking tour (in person or virtually) and identify the shopping centers, stores, and restaurants that reflect 1950s and 1960s suburban development. Have students identify the number of stores and restaurants that appear to be locally-owned vs. national chains. Students can also research the history of some of the neighborhood stores and restaurants.
- Have students use the Ad Access website (<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/>) to research consumer products of the 1950s. Students can browse the database by date and download ads of various products. Have students create a collage of ads and write an explanation of how these ads reflect the postwar economic boom and growing consumer economy.

- Provide students with a map of their own or another neighborhood. Explain that there is a new freeway being proposed to run through the neighborhood, and they need to come up with a plan of where it should go (or you as the teacher can determine the path of the freeway ahead of time). Assign some students to play the part of residents, some to be business owners in the path of the freeway, some to be business owners along the proposed freeway, and some to be the government. Give students time to research and develop their cases and then hold a debate/town hall meeting.

Additional Resources

- History of Graceland Shopping Center: <http://www.tallgeorge.com/graceland2.php?selection=Home>
- Building Suburbia: Highways and Housing in Postwar America: <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/building-suburbia-highways-and-housing-postwar-america>
- Digital History: Postwar Era: <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/era.cfm?eraid=16&smtid=1>
- Suburban Communities on the Move: <http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/learning/classroom.html#1950>
- Interstate Highways lesson plan: <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/highways-docsouth/1548>
- Ad Access: <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/>