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Journal of Urban History 2005; 31; 219

DOI: 10.1177/0096144204266765

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FROM DAIRY FARMS TO HOUSING TRACTS

Environment and Race in the Making of a Memphis Suburb

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Focusing on changing land use in a Memphis suburb, this article examines the displacement of dairy farms by housing tracts during the twentieth century as well as the pollution of a local waterway by chemical production wastes. It also investigates the ways in which race shaped evolving residential patterns, determined exposure to environmental hazards, and influenced the activism that developed in response to these problems. This part of the history locates the origins of environmentalism at the grass roots and suggests an early date for the rise of organizing and protest that would later be called “environmental justice activism.”

Keywords: environment; suburb; environmentalism; race; Memphis

In 1974, Nathan Greene, an African American recently returned to his native Memphis from New York City, made a visit to Cypress Junior High School. The school was built in 1967, oriented to face east toward the predominantly poor, black area it was meant to serve, rather than toward the whiter and more affluent Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood, where it was actually located. The school was also built at the point where the Overton Bayou drained into Cypress Creek. When Greene toured the building, on invitation of the principal who was a boyhood friend, he found raw sewage from these waterways leaking up through the basement and into the auditorium where the children ate their lunches. Boards were laid on the floor to provide them a walkway through the mess, and the smell was palpable. Never one to be too delicate with words, but not intending to make a pun, Greene told his friend, “This shit has got to stop.”¹

Greene’s visit to Cypress Junior High is only one small part of the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood’s history, but it captures the complex interplay between race and environment that is so important to that narrative. This article traces the changes leading up to and through that particular

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The author would like to thank John Dougan, Steve Gadbois, Russ Wigginton, Moses Hull, and the late Nathan Greene. Two anonymous reviewers also offered helpful comments. Research for the article was made possible by a Campus-Community Partnership Grant from the Associated Colleges of the South.*

JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY, Vol. 31 No. 2, January 2005 219-240
DOI: 10.1177/0096144204266765
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moment in time, starting with the displacement of dairy farms by housing tracts in the early twentieth century and ending with continuing efforts to clean up Cypress Creek as the twenty-first century dawned. It builds on recent work exploring the environmental history of American suburbs but also, in a very basic way, adds to that literature. Kenneth Jackson and Adam Rome have discussed the contours of suburbanization in their path-breaking books (*Crabgrass Frontier* and *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*, respectively), but we need now to investigate how the transformation took place in specific neighborhoods. This history of Vollintine-Evergreen provides a detailed, local portrait of the changing land use, highlighting the shift from dairy farming to large-scale home building, the impact of nearby petrochemical plants, and the importance of race relations in shaping evolving residential patterns.²

This study also contributes to discussions among academics and activists about the origins and character of environmentalism and environmental justice. Again, Rome is primarily concerned with a national story and, when he argues that suburban development was critical in spawning environmentalism, he talks primarily about prominent national figures, such as William Whyte, and scientists in federal government agencies. A history of the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood locates environmental activism at the grass roots, centered on the likes of Nathan Greene, who combined a concern for the natural environment with a militant race consciousness.³ Although he worked with both white and black residents, his primary constituency was the growing number of African Americans moving into the section of Vollintine-Evergreen near the polluted Cypress Creek. Yet, to complicate the story further, that part of the neighborhood had once been all white and affluent, even during the first two decades after World War II, when chemical companies dumped all sorts of hazardous and toxic waste into the stream. Also, the area of North Memphis on the other side of the creek, and Binghamton to the east, had a mix of residents as well as a combination of residential and industrial land use. This, in a city as racist and segregated as Memphis, provides further evidence that overt racism—in which manufacturing plants or waste companies deliberately target communities of African Americans or Hispanics—is not always or even typically the explanation for environmental racism.⁴

DAIRY FARMS

The southern half of what became the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood was included in an original 5,000-acre grant in the late eighteenth century, but since then, the property has changed hands many times. From John Overton, it eventually devolved to the heirs of Ann Overton Brinkley and Robert Bogardus Snowden, who gradually sold off portions of the 1,068 acres during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of the other half of the neighborhood, on the north side of Vollintine Avenue, was originally part of a large

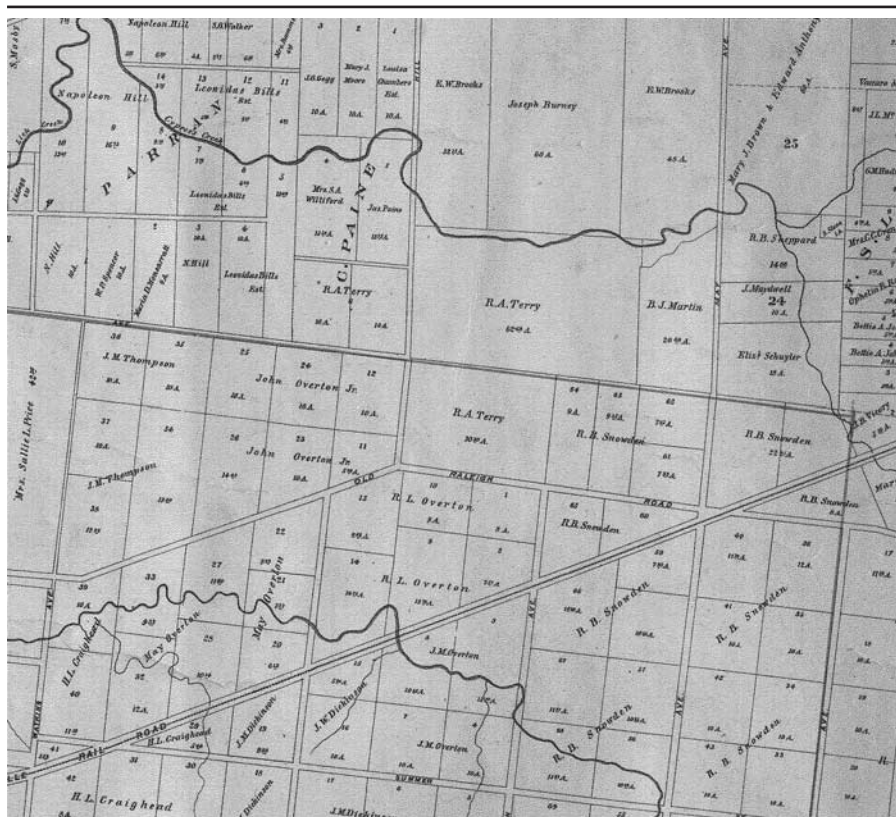


Figure 1: Vollintine-Evergreen Area 1891

SOURCE: "Memphis Tennessee and Suburbs, 1891," published by M. T. Williamson, Memphis-Shelby County Archives.

state grant to Williams Lawrence. A portion of this property was purchased by Hiram Vollentine (the spelling changed later) in 1859, which he developed as a subdivision to the west of Vollintine-Evergreen. Another section, between Evergreen Street and McLean Boulevard and north of Old Raleigh Road (Jackson Avenue), was bought up by Robert Allen (R. A.) Terry, one of the first permanent white settlers in the neighborhood (see Figures 1 and 2).⁵

R. A. Terry and his wife moved to Memphis from Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1876. They originally purchased twenty acres of the eighty-acre Constantine Paine estate and set up the Chestnut Grove Dairy, while J. N. Paine and his wife continued to farm the remaining land to the north. In the course of a decade, Terry bought one hundred more acres nearby, partly for his one hundred head of cattle but also to develop a section of minifarms. He and his carpenter father built about fifteen homes, each with their own ten acres and barn and most of them south of Vollintine Avenue. These homes became the core of Terrytown, between Evergreen and McLean and Jackson and Brown (then a cattle lane known as Red Bud). By the turn of the century, W. J.

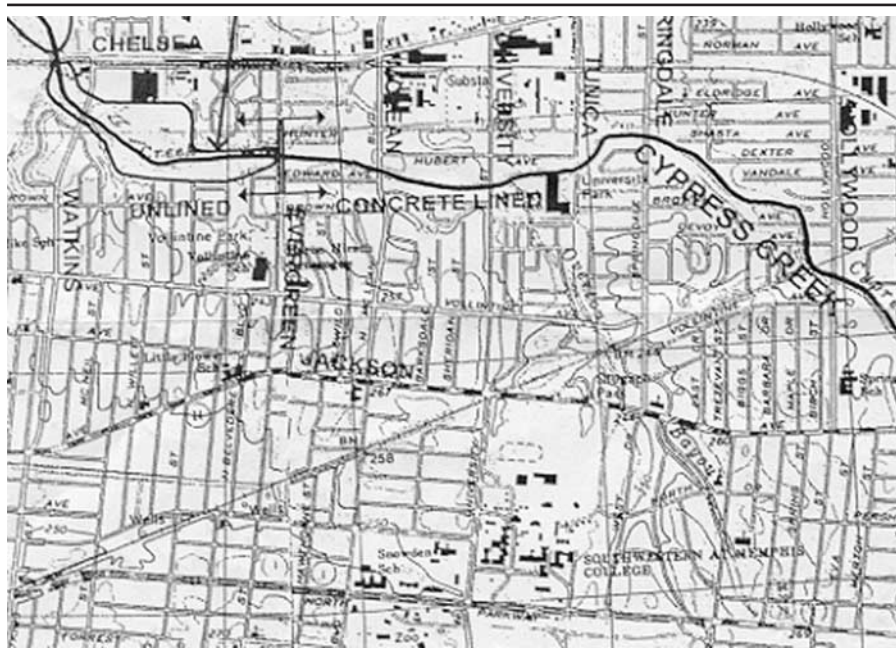


Figure 2: Vollintine-Evergreen Neighborhood 2001

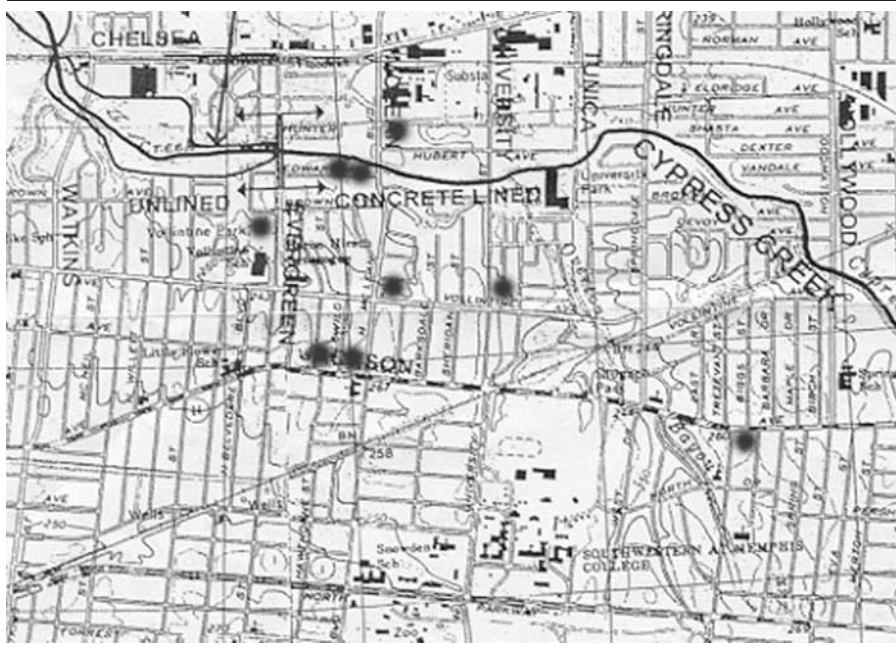


Figure 3: Approximate Location of Dairy Farms, 1920

Pinkston and W. J. Percer had taken over operations on the Terry dairy land, another dairy had been set up south of Jackson, and three dairies had been established on nearby May (now University). The latter included T. J. Briggs's twenty-eight-acre dairy on the corner of Vollintine and two smaller dairies (three and six acres) on the lots north.⁶

To the east of the growing Terrytown settlement was Springdale, which grew up near a toll gate on Raleigh Road (Jackson Avenue) and was a stop on the L&N Railroad. R. A. Terry's sister, Georgianna, and her husband, J. B. Vicory, moved their family to the area in 1881. They worked a small truck farm and kept some dairy cows on the north side of the railroad line east of Springdale, selling their vegetables, butter, and milk to a small grocery downtown. By 1900, there was a full-fledged dairy operating on the adjacent lot, fifteen acres owned by J. S. Court, and three other dairies to the south of them. These were the Garner Dairy between the railroad and Raleigh Road, another on the Overton Bayou on the west side of Trezevant, and a third at the northeast corner of Springdale and Raleigh, the site of one of the area's springs and what was until 1995 the location of Springdale Church of Christ. Including those in Terrytown, eleven of the thirty-six dairies in Shelby County were within or on the future boundaries of Vollintine-Evergreen at this time.⁷

By 1910, a number of dairies had been sold off while others had expanded. Garner Dairy went out of business; the two dairies on the other side of T. J. Briggs were bought out by J. R. Hollish, though Briggs remained at the corner of May and Vollintine. J. S. Court purchased J. N. Vicory's property to add to his fifteen acres and went into business with his brother. The dairy near the springs in Springdale passed to a new owner. W. J. Pinkston continued to operate on part of the old dairy land of R. A. Terry but along with his son. W. J. Percer sold out to B. M. Barham (whose son later reestablished the Chestnut Grove Dairy when he married a Terry daughter but farther west on Vollintine); two others simply went out of business. Rook & Rook sold off their property for early subdivision development, and two new dairies were started, one near Vollintine and McLean and another on the south side of Red Bud (Brown) east of Evergreen. All told, the number of dairies in Vollintine-Evergreen declined to eight, of fifty-four in the county as a whole, although this does not represent a decline in the local dairy industry, which remained vibrant until the 1920s (see Figure 3).⁸

There were, of course, other residents besides dairymen and their families in Vollintine-Evergreen at the turn of the century, including truck farmers, blacksmiths, harness makers, woodcutters, and even a handful of grocers. But in terms of scale, dairy farming was the most significant land use in the neighborhood. The nature of this land use can be gathered from a couple of disparate sources, including an interview of a former dairy hand, Moses Hull. Hull is an African American, born in Memphis in 1914, and was employed by W. H. Scheele & Son on his dairy just northwest of Watkins and south of Cypress

Creek in the early 1930s. He recalls that whites owned all the neighborhood dairies but, while there were more white dairy hands, he was among a number of other blacks employed in the local industry. Hull arrived every morning at about four o'clock, from his home in North Memphis, to assist and clean up after the two white milkers. Before the milking, he washed off the cows' milk bags, which would get splattered with mud and manure, then set the milk in the chilled milk room to keep it cool. Afterward, he hosed down the barn and sprinkled the area with lime. The twenty to twenty-five cows Scheele owned, Hull remembers, spent much of the rest of the day in a twelve-acre pasture, which was divided up by barbed wire so the animals could be rotated from one section to another. Sometimes they also grazed in a small plot on the north side of the creek where an Italian who lived with the Scheeles had a small truck garden (they might have been sent over to feed on roughage and manure the field there). In the winter and at other times, they were fed "sweet feed": enriched corn that was purchased rather than grown in a meadow on the farm.⁹

Hull's recollections suggest that the Scheele dairy, much like the other dairies in Vollintine-Evergreen in the early twentieth century, was at least somewhat typical of the scattered operations throughout Shelby County. By the mid-1920s, within a twenty-mile radius of Memphis, there were 182 dairies classified as "producer-distributors" and 346 classified as "producers," only 33 of which were actually engaged in full-time dairy production. The average number of cows at these operations was twenty-five, which is about what the Scheeles kept but less than the thirty to fifty cows advocated by a 1877 dairy-farming manual. The average pasture on a producer-distributor dairy was sixty-seven acres, however, which was much higher than any dairy in the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood. W. H. Scheele & Son was also among a minority of producer-distributors who owned all of their land rather than renting part or all of it. The dairy was more typical by not growing its own feed, as land became unavailable, rents too high, or property too expensive to work a meadow close to the city. In addition, the Scheeles' and the great majority of area dairies did not give away or sell manure, suggesting that they let it drop in the pasture uncollected or used it to fertilize truck farms or gardens of their own.¹⁰

Although in some ways representative and in other ways not, W. H. Scheele & Son was, with other dairies serving the Memphis area, a primary concern of the city and county health agencies. The city board of health was inspecting dairies by the early 1890s, checking on the health of the cows, their food and water supply, and condition of barns. By mid-decade, dairymen had to register with the health office and submit samples for a health officer to test. Since there were no existing legal standards for purity, however, the city council passed such an ordinance in 1898, and, by that measure, the milk supply was poor, not only dirty but also adulterated with preservatives such as formaldehyde and salicylic acid. A few dairymen were subsequently arrested and fined,

and their names were published in the newspaper; supposedly great improvements in quality followed, but complaints and hand-wringing continued.¹¹

Both board of health personnel and many other city officials insisted that disease in the suburbs was a direct menace to city residents, whether due to unsanitary dairies and impure milk or inadequate sewage infrastructure, and this belief, strengthened by the threat of a fever epidemic in the summer of 1898, spurred on an annexation campaign. This effort was successful in January 1899, adding more than twelve square miles to the existing four-square-mile city area, including the area south of Vollintine east to May (University). Later, annexation in 1909 pushed the eastern boundary to Trezevant, and another enlargement of city limits in 1929 brought in the section of Vollintine-Evergreen north of Vollintine.¹² In the wake of the 1899 annexation, the board of health stepped up its dairy oversight, and a report at the turn of the century found that “the majority of dairies were kept in unsanitary condition, and in some instances positively filthy.” More dairymen were arrested and fined, and a general cleaning and white-washing of barns and dairy houses was ordered. By 1916, the board was calling for pasteurization of the milk supply too, but well into the 1930s, this was not required. At the end of 1936, however, the county health department graders put pasteurized milk in a top category by itself, declared it safer than any other for drinking, and the percentage of pasteurized supply increased from 57 to 84 percent.¹³

As dairy inspection and milk testing expanded in Memphis, it had important implications for the dairy farms in Vollintine-Evergreen (and elsewhere in the city). The higher standards added to the even greater pressure to sell out brought on by increased real estate development in the neighborhood. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of dairies in Vollintine-Evergreen actually increased by one, with some in the same location and under the same ownership while others were entirely new.¹⁴ During the next decade, however, the number of dairies in the area shrunk to three and, in the city as a whole, dropped from fifty-three to twenty-three. Julian Wilson moved from Vollintine and McLean to Vollintine and May (University) to make way for the Colonial Garden Subdivision, C. E. Paty opened up a new dairy on the west side of Springdale north of the L&N railroad, and C. R. Barham (the son of B. M. Barham who had gone out of the dairy business the decade before) reestablished the Chestnut Grove Dairy (he had married a daughter of R. A. Terry) at 1634 Vollintine. Of the six other dairies that disappeared between 1920 and 1930, nearly all of them were squeezed out by real estate development. This included the employer of Moses Hull, W. H. Scheele, who moved north to Chelsea and continued to operate a dairy with his son Bill. By 1940, there was only one dairy left in the neighborhood, on the northeast corner of Springdale and Vollintine, run by Mrs. Anna Russom, probably the widow of W. A. Russom, who had owned a dairy on the east side of Springdale at Chelsea back in the 1910s.¹⁵

HOUSING TRACTS

Stepped up oversight of area dairies in the early twentieth century was only one part of a larger effort by local government to expand and extend city and county services. Sewer construction had begun in earnest after the 1878 yellow fever epidemic, introducing an innovative "separate system" designed by George Waring and pushing the amount of pipe laid from 26 miles in 1879 to 171 by 1901, increasing considerably more in the decades that followed.¹⁶ Regular garbage collection was improved after 1900 by the division of Memphis into two districts, north and south of Union Avenue, and most of the trash from those areas went to one of two newly built municipal-owned crematories or, by 1916, to a third east-end incinerator.¹⁷ A year after the 1899 annexation, the city of Memphis also established a park commission and purchased a 340-acre tract along the river for Riverside Park and a 337-acre tract between North Parkway and Poplar Avenue for Overton Park. Neither of these parks was open to blacks, however, and within a decade, the commission established Douglass Park as well, on Macon Road, an extension of Jackson Avenue outside the eastern city limits.¹⁸

In the newly annexed suburbs of south Memphis (south of Union Avenue), expanding public infrastructure served the immediate needs of an already dense collection of neighborhoods. Two decades into the twentieth century, however, what became Vollintine-Evergreen was still largely a mix of dairy pastures, truck farm fields, wooded areas, and two small settlements (Terrytown and Springdale). City sewers were connected at Snowden and Belvedere by 1908, but it was not until the 1920s that the bayou at Faxon, Tutwiler, and Stonewall was filled, the streets paved, and gas lamps installed. Residents of Terrytown, outside the city limits until 1929, used lamplight until 1923, when the city allowed them to put up a pole and draw electricity. Both Vollintine and McLean were variably dusty or muddy roads then, while the Jackson Avenue streetcar running from downtown ended at Watkins. And even in 1930, when developers purchased property to build the University Terrace subdivision around Vollintine and University, Thomas Briggs was still actively farming the land and received permission to stay until he brought in his last crop.¹⁹

Subdivision building in Vollintine-Evergreen first occurred in the southwest corner of the neighborhood during the years prior to World War I, then during the 1920s in a band between Jackson and Vollintine from Watkins to Springdale (which also included Hein Park a bit further south), followed by some scattered construction north of Vollintine in the 1930s, and more intensified development efforts during the 1940s and 1950s to fill in the area up to Cypress Creek. This timing suggests there were important local forces at work in terms of Vollintine-Evergreen housing construction, particularly proximity to the infrastructure creeping outward from the city and the fact of a concentrated population of black residents in north Memphis, just on the other side of

Cypress Creek, that made the south part of the neighborhood more desirable to whites. But developments at the national level also played an important role in encouraging home building in the area. As builders applied mass production methods to lower the cost of their homes, the National Housing Act of 1934 (and the G.I. Bill a decade later) enabled prospective homeowners to secure low-interest mortgages. Just as important, New Deal public works programs supplemented city and county efforts to lay sewers, channelize creeks, build bridges, extend roads, and otherwise transform the landscape to facilitate suburban expansion.²⁰

Perhaps the most significant federal public works projects in Vollintine-Evergreen addressed a variety of problems associated with Cypress and Lick Creeks and the Overton Bayou. To some extent, this work was prompted by concerns about flooding in the north Memphis drainage basin, which also included the Wolf River, but the main objective seems to have been vector control.²¹ The city had begun filling and drainage work in an effort to control insect vectors of disease, particularly the two types of mosquitoes responsible for carrying yellow fever and malaria pathogens, just after the turn of the century. In 1918, the board of health also began spreading used motor oil on the surface of standing water. During the 1930s, both the Works Progress Administration and the Public Works Association provided funds to employ laborers for drainage channel work in Memphis, including more than a hundred men to straighten and enlarge Cypress Creek from University to McLean, construct culverts and concrete walls on Lick Creek, and build concrete ditches along the Overton Bayou through the Hein Park subdivision. City health officials also set up a division of malaria mosquito control that, by 1937, included three full-time inspectors and operated thirteen oil trucks. In 1942, when the city and county health agencies merged, larviciding crews distributed 185,000 gallons of oil and 600 pounds of paris green on more than 4,000 miles of streams and 300 acres of mosquito-breeding waters. Additional crews continued to add to the more than 128 miles of paved ditches and fill in old cisterns, ponds, and abandoned cesspools (see Figures 4 and 5).²²

As drainage work and vector control proceeded apace in Vollintine-Evergreen and the number of malaria cases began a steady decline, residents of the newly established suburb organized themselves into neighborhood groups to protect and enhance existing area amenities. The first such organization was the Evergreen Club, formed in 1935 out of separate men's and women's branches established decades earlier. This group played instrumental roles in obtaining the Snowden Elementary School and Southwestern College, as well as the zoo, but it declined in the 1940s and gave up its charter in 1959. The short-lived Jackson Avenue Civic Club, formed in 1927 as the Jackson Boulevard Improvement Club, worked on extending the Jackson Avenue carline, obtaining the Vollentine School and equipping a playground behind it, extending sidewalks, and blocking the establishment of a "Negro College" into the area (which it boasted about in a 1935 brochure). Neither of these



Figure 4: Lick Creek Channelization 1948
 SOURCE: Board of Health Collection, Memphis-Shelby County Archives.

organizations gave any attention to addressing the new environmental problems caused by subdivision development, however, and, as the Jackson Avenue Civic Club brochure suggests, they were more likely to be engaged in defending racial exclusion in the suburbs rather than challenging it.²³

In terms of environmental impact, the home building in Vollintine-Evergreen could have been worse. Most of the homes in the neighborhood were almost immediately connected to sewer lines, and the area avoided the numerous problems associated with septic tanks, including groundwater contamination. But the great increase in the amount of impermeable surfaces—roofs, streets, and even lawns—combined with regular, heavy downpours meant that even the improved drainage channels were sometimes greatly overloaded. And those improved drainage channels, of course, involved the transformation if not destruction of natural stream flow and wetlands. Aerial surveys from



Figure 5: Oil Truck

SOURCE: Board of Health Collection, Memphis-Shelby County Archives.

1938 and 1959 show that there were also few trees of any notable size throughout the neighborhood, even along Cypress Creek. Compared to an 1862-1863 topographical map done for the Union Army, a significant amount of land clearing had taken place in the intervening period between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, some of it for pastures but much more of it for housing tracts, with little apparent attempt at reforestation. In conjunction with the manipulation of creeks and bayous in the area, this represented a major change in habitat for wildlife (see Figures 6 and 7).²⁴

As for racial exclusion, it is difficult to imagine that white residents of Vollintine-Evergreen could have been more “successful” in keeping out African Americans. A 1936 study suggests that the neighborhood was entirely white as well as middle and upper class. At the time, only a few housing

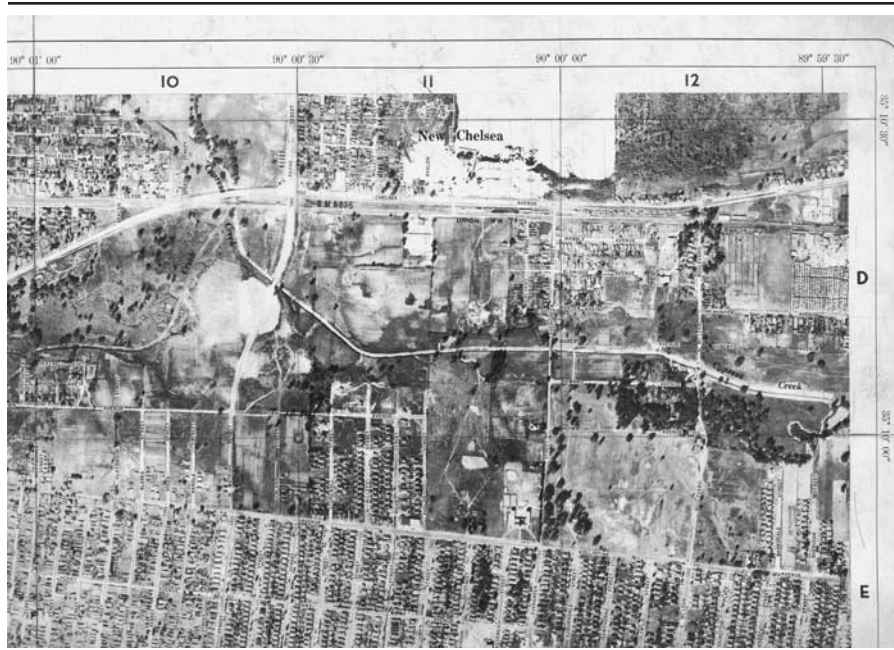


Figure 6: 1938 Aerial Survey: Cypress Creek in Vollintine-Evergreen
SOURCE: Memphis-Shelby County Archives.



Figure 7: 1959 Aerial Survey: Cypress Creek in Vollintine-Evergreen
SOURCE: Memphis-Shelby County Archives.

developments had inched away from Vollintine Avenue toward Cypress Creek, due in part to the reluctance of whites to live too close to blacks on the other side as well as developers' hesitation to build in an area prone to flooding and deemed unhealthy. Once this area of the neighborhood was filled in with homes, it was almost exclusively white until the end of the 1950s. As the

neighborhood began to integrate, however, it was this section that received the first black residents and that eventually absorbed the largest concentration of them. The reason for that, very likely, stems at least in part from the racism that made whites reluctant to move there in the first place. The movement of African Americans into the area north of Vollintine prompted the most drastic white flight, while south of Vollintine but north of Jackson there was a bit less of it, and, south of Jackson, residents continued to live in nearly all-white subdivisions even into the 1990s.²⁵

PETROCHEMICALS AND RACE

By the 1950s, housing development in Vollintine-Evergreen was nearly complete, with the exception of some land that had once been part of a pasture belonging to T. J. Briggs, later developed as the University Cabanna Apartments and Cypress Junior High School in the 1960s. As dairy farms were replaced by subdivisions, the area also saw the arrival of a number of chemical plants on its borders. In the years after World War II, petrochemical manufacturing increased substantially in the United States, and Memphis experienced more than its share of this particular industrial growth and development. Between 1947 and 1967, the number of chemical companies alone in Shelby County increased from 53 to 77. These companies, like the numerous other local industries, were attracted to the area by sufficient river and railroad transportation options and low freight costs, low cost power from the Tennessee Valley Authority, proximity to raw materials, and abundant and relatively inexpensive land and labor. The plants that moved near Cypress Creek could also rely on the waterway to carry off waste materials.²⁶

By the 1930s, Memphis had three manufacturing districts, each of which was contiguous to railroad lines: one in the north, another in the east, and a third in the south part of the city. In the northern and eastern districts, which bordered Vollintine-Evergreen, there was also a mix of both poor white and black neighborhoods, which predated the industrial users. To the north of Cypress Creek were the predominantly white East Hollywood and predominantly black West and South Hollywood communities, while to the east were the largely white West and Central Binghamton and mostly black East Binghamton neighborhoods. The homes in these areas were often substandard, in need of major repairs, lacking indoor plumbing and/or electricity, and crammed with too many people, which reflected the poverty of the inhabitants. Dispersed among them were woodworking facilities, sand and gravel pits, metallurgical plants, and cottonseed oil mills, major employers that were sometimes so close as to be “detrimental to health and safety” of their residential neighbors.²⁷

The first chemical company to open in the northern manufacturing district was Buckman Laboratories, founded in 1945 by Stanley Buckman. The

company established its headquarters and production facilities on McLean, on the north side of Cypress Creek, at a site that had alternately been part of a fifty-acre horse farm, a lumber company office, and a residential rental property. Soon after its opening, however, the new plant was heavily damaged by an explosion of benzene gas and subsequent fire. The workers managed to escape after smelling the gas, and none were seriously injured or killed, but the explosion was felt eighteen miles away, and the building was left a shell of twisted steel girders and pipes. The company was able to build another plant rather quickly, and little time was lost marketing its first main product, BSM-11, a slime-control agent used by the pulp and paper industry. In the next couple of decades, Buckman expanded its facilities and also began producing and selling a whole host of other chemical compounds designed primarily for a number of different parts of the paper-manufacturing process. In 1974, there was another explosion, resulting from a chemical reaction involving methylene bromide, which blew off a part of the roof but, probably because it occurred in the predawn hours, fortunately caused no injuries. This second major accident did not seem to slow the company's growth, however, and it continued to develop new products and expand its operations around the world.²⁸

Less than a decade after Buckman's founding, in 1952, the Velsicol Corporation purchased a plant built for the war effort, also adjacent to Cypress Creek but several miles northeast of Vollintine-Evergreen, and transformed it into a pesticide-manufacturing facility. In the 1940s, Velsicol had created heptachlor, a chlorinated hydrocarbon that the company manufactured along with endrin and other pesticides at its new facilities in Memphis. By 1974, Velsicol was producing six million pounds of heptachlor a year and, even after it was banned for use in the United States in the 1980s, production continued for shipments to mainly tropical countries. But Velsicol was not the only other pesticide manufacturer in north Memphis. Just down the road, and also adjacent to Cypress Creek, was Creotox, a pesticide-blending company founded in 1946.²⁹

The environmental impact Buckman, Velsicol, and Creotox eventually had on the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood was largely a matter of their chosen waste disposal methods. Prior to 1963, when the Wolf River Interceptor was finished along the south side of Cypress Creek, the chemical companies dumped nearly all of their production wastes into the waterway (after 1963, they supposedly dumped only "noncontact" waste there).³⁰ Velsicol was perhaps the worst polluter, the main source of the aldrin, dieldrin, and heptachlor epoxide found in sediment and soil samples taken from along creek banks. In addition, the company poured thousands of pounds of toxic emissions into the air. Still, the other companies also disposed of manufacturing wastes seemingly without regard for the social costs.³¹ Buckman Laboratories used the Wolf Interceptor to dispose of chemical wastes once it was available, but throughout the 1970s, these discharge products frequently plugged the sewer and overflowed into the creek. This material, according to Dr. Buckman,

contained large quantities of hydrogen sulfides, which explained the bad odors that sometimes permeated the neighborhood.³²

The petrochemical industry as a whole affected the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood in another way as well, by developing products that transformed the health department's vector control program. In addition to ditching, filling, oiling, and dusting water surfaces with paris green, starting in 1945, the city-county agency began using dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) to kill adult anophelene mosquitoes. Personnel sprayed this insecticide inside and around rural and river-zone homes, in city and county school cafeterias, as well as on streams and other bodies of water. By 1950, the program's chemical arsenal also included chlordane and methoxychlor and, in the last year of that decade, health department personnel sprayed more than forty thousand gallons of DDT fuel oil emulsion alone. The 1966 health report declared that malaria had "ceased to exist as a disease of importance in the community," but spraying, along with other vector control efforts, continued into the 1970s. In Vollintine-Evergreen, this decades-long effort to control mosquitoes with chemicals introduced a variety of new ways for residents to be exposed to pesticides, from taking a walk near Lick Creek to eating in the Snowden School cafeteria (see Figure 8).³³

As polluting chemical plants became a fixture in the areas adjacent to the neighborhood and chemical vector control introduced additional routes for toxic exposure, the racial composition of Vollintine-Evergreen was beginning to change, although these developments do not appear to be directly linked. In 1970, the area south of Vollintine Avenue, which included about 75 percent of the neighborhood's entire population, was still overwhelmingly white. This was also an affluent section of town, with a median annual income per household of \$10,000, as compared to \$8,646 in the city as a whole, and 547 families had incomes that exceeded \$15,000 a year. In the census tract north of Vollintine, however, which extended across Cypress Creek to Chelsea, there was a black majority, and median annual income in the area was \$7,369, although both the white and black residents who lived within the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood boundaries tended to be more affluent. Modeane Thompson, for example, a black woman born and raised in north Memphis, moved to 1936 Edward in 1964. She was a social worker and worked part time for family services while her husband was an insurance executive. Four of their five children went to Catholic grade schools, while the other attended Fontbonne College in St. Louis.³⁴

By 1980, Vollintine-Evergreen had 14,352 residents, half of whom were black and nearly all of the rest white. Annual median income, even in parts of the area south of Vollintine Avenue, had dropped below the city median, and an increasing number of households lived near or below the poverty line. There were also significant variations in patterns of residence, although more in terms of race than in income. Looking at the census block level, most of the movement of blacks into the neighborhood was still north of Vollintine, with a

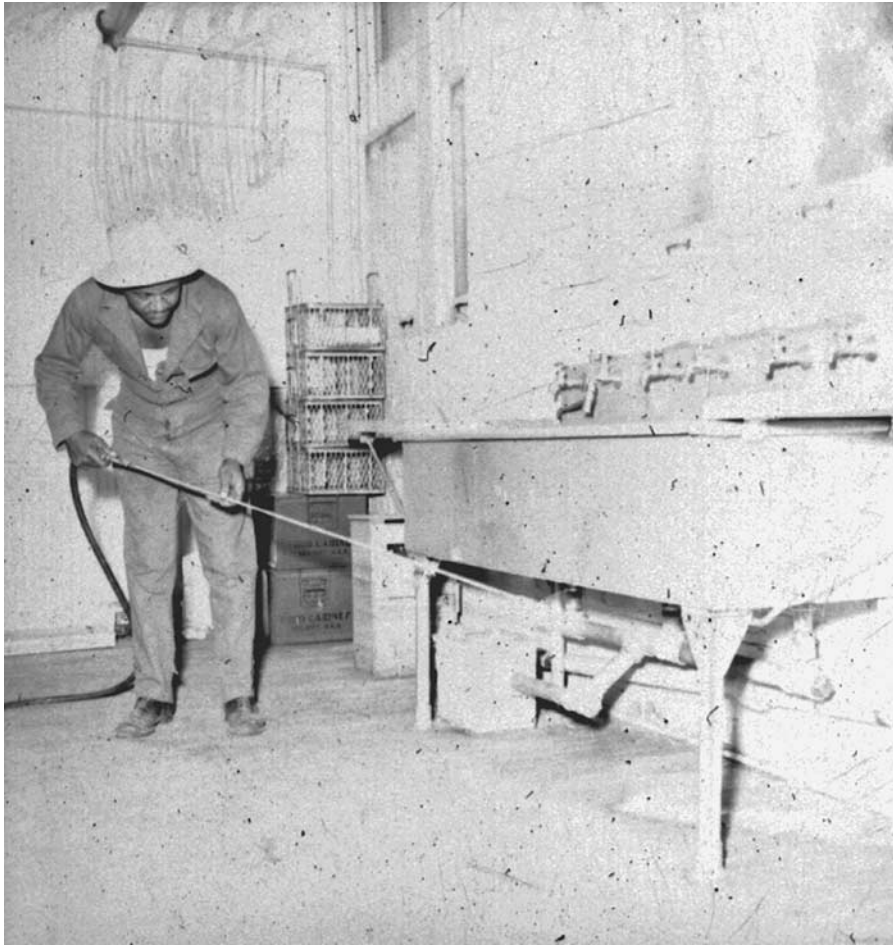


Figure 8: DDT Spraying, Snowden School, 1949

SOURCE: Board of Health Collection, Memphis-Shelby County Archives.

lesser number moving to the section between Jackson and Vollintine, and only a minuscule percentage of African Americans buying or renting homes in the subdivisions south of Jackson and east of Evergreen. Integration was taking place but not evenly, and the wave of African Americans who did move to Vollintine-Evergreen in the 1970s tended to be significantly poorer (as well as younger) than previous residents.³⁵

That there was any integration at all in Vollintine-Evergreen is due in part to the Vollintine-Evergreen Community Action Association (VECAA), established in May 1970 by residents who sought to prevent whites from fleeing in response to a black influx. The steering committee of this new organization included both white and black professionals, including Modeane Thompson. They worked toward their main objective by establishing a twelve-member real estate committee that set up a consulting service for residents to discuss

property values, put pressure on real estate companies to end block busting, and started a welcoming program for new residents. In addition to these activities, the VECAA also functioned as a more traditional community improvement group, blocking the removal of the tree-lined median on Jackson Avenue for left-turning lanes as well as setting and enforcing aesthetic standards for homes and yards. In 1976, the organization shortened its name to Vollintine-Evergreen Community Association (VECA) and, under the leadership of Southwestern professor Mike Kirby, directed more attention to rezoning (to preserve the single-family character of the neighborhood) and housing deterioration. Toward the end of the decade, it also began a long, drawn-out effort to rehabilitate an apartment complex on Vollintine and Watkins, which had become a haven for prostitution and drug dealing.³⁶

The VECA took the initiative on a number of issues affecting the neighborhood during the 1970s, including racial integration of housing and schools, but some residents wanted to take a more combative approach, including N. T. Greene. Born on Davis Street in north Memphis in 1925, Greene left for New York City during the start of World War II. There he worked on the docks and in an electronics factory, but wishing to escape the worst of workplace racism (he was black), he eventually took a job as a window washer. When he married and decided not to raise his children in New York, the family returned to Memphis in 1972. They bought a home on Terry Circle, near Vollintine and Evergreen and, shortly thereafter, Brother Greene (as he likes to be called) established the Shelby County Democratic Club 40-2 (SCDC; the numbers a reference to the home precinct of Greene and other members). Membership usually hovered about forty, with only about half that number regularly active, but it included both black and white residents.³⁷

Greene's social consciousness had been shaped in the 1960s by wide-ranging reading, including Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, as well as by following news of civil rights and antiwar protests. This reading and the swirl of events during the decade of upheaval also inspired a spirit of militancy. What made Greene unique was his readiness and ability to blend the fight against racism with concerns about the environment, as this was well before any discussion of "environmental racism" or "environmental justice." One of the first issues the Shelby County Democratic Club addressed, and the one that consumed most of the members' time during the rest of the decade, was the problem of sewage overflow in Cypress Creek. Their campaign began in the early part of December 1972, when the SCDC and VECAA arranged a dialogue meeting with the city engineer and Dr John Buckman. The engineer explained that the sanitary and storm sewers were technically separate systems, but when excess rain water got into the sanitary sewers, the raw sewage overflowed into the storm sewer system, including Cypress Creek. He suggested that the existing main sewer line was inadequate and proposed the construction of a larger line to the Wolf River Interceptor, at an estimated cost of \$200,000. Buckman explained the efforts his company had made to reduce the waste it dumped into Cypress

Creek and promised they would correct their role in the sewage overflow problem.³⁸

During the summer of 1973, the Memphis public works department cleaned trash and tree limbs out of Cypress Creek from Springdale to Evergreen, and Buckman Labs made improvements to its part of the sewer system, although chemical waste continued to pour into the creek during frequent overloads at the plant. The next summer, the city held an environmental impact hearing on the proposed sewer line, which would follow the old one down the creek from Hollywood to the Wolf River. Bids were taken on the work the following year, by which point the cost had risen to at least \$1.7 million. As the city made preparations for the project, Brother Greene changed the name of the SCDC to the Cypress Citizens' Committee (CCC) and, in the early part of 1976, he changed the name again to the Cypress Health and Safety Committee (CHSC). Like the SCDC, both the CCC and CHSC focused primarily on sewage overflow problems, including the drainage conditions at Cypress Junior High School. After Greene's tour of the school in 1974, for example, the CCC filed a lawsuit, seeking \$340,000 in damages from the city. This case was dismissed, but a solution to the problem, the larger sewer line first proposed by the city engineer, was already in the works. It was finally finished in 1977.³⁹

On the issue of sewage overflow, the SCDC and VECAA were able to work together. At other times, however, there were differences of opinion about both means and ends. Greene has since claimed that the major point of division between the two groups was the SCDC's commitment to action, pointing out the irony of the VECAA dropping this word from their name in 1976. He also insisted that friction developed due to the VECAA's unwillingness to expand its boundaries beyond Cypress Creek, to encompass predominantly black Chelsea. At the time, no other organization, environmental or otherwise, would address conditions in that area, and Greene interpreted this as being due to racism. "There was group called Audubon Society in Memphis and another I can't think of," Greene recalled, "[but] they didn't open their mouths about anything, the reason I'm sure although I don't know if anybody ever said this, was that they didn't want to be identified with the black people pure and simple."⁴⁰

The Vollintine-Evergreen association was always much more than a social club, however, and certainly not inactive or even ineffective. In fact, the VECA outlasted the SCDC, CCC, and CHSC and went on to win some important victories. The VECA joined with other midtown organizations, for example, to successfully fight new proposals to extend Interstate 40 down North Parkway or, alternatively, by way of the old L&N railroad line.⁴¹ Rather than put an interstate on the L&N property, in the 1990s, the VECA proposed and eventually acquired the land for a "greenway," a 1.7-mile-long stretch of park-like area through the middle of the Vollintine-Evergreen community. Before the Greenline was made, the old bed was "like a jungle," only periodically mowed

and sprayed with herbicides, sometimes catching on fire, and littered with trash. Now it is one of the more pleasant places to walk in the neighborhood.⁴²

The VECA has also continued to focus attention on Cypress Creek, which, in some respects, has become a “drainage channel,” as the Velsicol Corporation claims. These days, it not only carries storm water runoff from thousands of surrounding acres of land but also litter, automotive chemicals from the streets, pesticides and herbicides from lawns, and chemicals from manufacturing plants and unregulated dumps. This degraded water quality reflects some of the many varied changes that have taken place in or near the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood, particularly housing construction and industrial development in the twentieth century. To begin to address what might arguably be thought of as a decline in the creek’s health, in 1998, the VECA established the Cypress Creek Project, which involved students and faculty from Rhodes College in surveying residents in the watershed, assessing water quality, and preparing reports of their findings.⁴³

More recently, Velsicol has added to the VECA’s assessments with a report of its own, based on soil tests in five “sub-areas” in and around the neighborhood. Only in Sub-area III, however, the residential property along Cypress around Evergreen, did testing reveal toxic chemicals (dieldrin, endrin ketone, and endrine isodrin) exceeding Environmental Protection Agency standards. Overall, the results “demonstrated that the concentrations of constituents identified along the various segments of the Cypress Creek Drainage Channel do not represent a level of potential risk to current receptors that requires immediate action.” Conclusions of that sort seem to negate the need for efforts like the Cypress Creek Project and ensure the likelihood of continuing conflict between past and present users of the waterway, both corporate and residential.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

The environmental history of Vollintine-Evergreen, though it is only one case, suggests some of the ways in which a mix of local, regional, and national factors shaped the making of American suburbs in the twentieth century. The dairy farms so prevalent in the area before the 1930s were replaced by housing tracts in part because of rising land values, stepped-up oversight by the board of health, New Deal drainage projects, and federal homeownership programs. The residents who moved into those homes, and gained access to the amenities the neighborhood offered, were initially all white. When integration did take place, blacks were concentrated in a particular section of Vollintine-Evergreen, the area closest to the black parts of north Memphis and bordering the polluted Cypress Creek. Not coincidentally, it was the combination of integration and environmental threats that also sparked the highest level activism in the neighborhood, with the VECA leading the campaign to manage the shifting

population and Brother Greene's groups spearheading efforts to deal with sewage overflow. Later, when the Cypress Health and Safety Committee had disappeared, the VECA continued to work on environmental issues, including persistent hazards in the creek. Suburban environmental activism, then, was not simply a matter of discussions among federal bureaucrats or national social critics but also not simply a movement of white, middle-class residents newly concerned about quality of life. At least in Vollintine-Evergreen, where petrochemicals and race played such important roles, it was sometimes very close to what we might now call "environmental justice" activism.

NOTES

1. N. T. Greene, interview by author, June 11, 2002, Memphis, Tennessee, tape and notes in author's possession.

2. Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Adam Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

3. Andrew Hurley examines the various approaches taken by residents in Gary, Indiana, to deal with pollution there. In his case study, white suburbanites, black and white steelworkers, and black urban dwellers managed to form a coalition, uniting their different interests, although this had ruptured by the end of the 1970s. See Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

4. For the debate on this, see Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

5. Peggy Boyce Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen, A Diverse Community: A History* (Memphis, TN: Metropolitan Inter-faith Association, 1980), 9-11.

6. *Ibid.*, 12-14; *City Directory* (Memphis, TN, 1900), 1229; and Brennan-Paul Map of Memphis, Tenn. and Suburbs, etc., Memphis Abstract Co., 1907 (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives, hereafter cited as Brennan-Paul Map).

7. Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 19-21; *City Directory* (1900), 1229; and Brennan-Paul Map.

8. Some of the changes in dairy ownership might actually represent men marrying into a dairy family and the operation then appearing under their name. *City Directory* 1900, 1229; *City Directory* (1910), 2003-4; and Brennan-Paul Map.

9. Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 27. Hull says there were a sizeable number of Italians living south of Jackson and some of them were also farmers. Moses Hull, telephone interview by author, June 12, 2002, Memphis, Tennessee (notes in author's possession). John Collins, who grew up on Lyndale in the 1940s and 1950s, remembers Italian farmers still growing vegetables in the area near Stonewall and Overton, just south of the Vollintine-Evergreen neighborhood. *The EvergreenNews*, December 1, 1977.

10. J. J. Durrett et al., *A Study of Memphis' Milk Supply* (Memphis, TN: Department of Health, 1925), 43-56. It is possible that the W. H. Scheele & Son, and other Memphis-area dairies, might have sown their pastures with timothy grass, red or white clover, June or Kentucky bluegrass, and the like. They might also have periodically added phosphate in the form of "bone dust," ashes, or superphosphate (guano treated with sulfuric acid) because herds pulled out such a great quantity of the soil element in grazing. See X. A. Willard, *Willard's Practical Dairy Husbandry* (New York: Excelsior, 1877), 25, 55-56, and several of the essays in Frank D. Gardner, *Traditional American Farming Techniques: A Ready Reference on All Phases of Agriculture for Farmers of the United States and Canada* (1916; repr., Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2001).

11. *Report of the Board of Health, 1892*, 13-14; *Report of the Board of Health, 1894*, 11; *Report of the Board of Health, 1895*, 9; and *Report of the Board of Health, 1898*, 24.

12. William D. Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era: 1900-1917* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1957), 64-65; *Report of the Board of Health, 1895*, 5; *Report of the Board of Health, 1897*, 17-18; Gerald M. Capers Jr., *The Biography of a River Town: Memphis, Its Heroic Age* (Chapel Hill:

University of North Carolina Press, 214); Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 22; and *Report of the Board of Health, 1900*, 5, 24.

13. Department of Health Papers, folder "History: Health, 1878-1929, Garbage, milk, diseases, death rate, etc.," Department of Health Papers, no box numbers (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives); and Department of Health, *Ten Year Report of Department of Health, Memphis, Tennessee, 1928-1937* (Memphis, TN: Health Promotion Office, Shelby County Department of Health), 22.

14. B. M. Barham on the north side of Vollintine near McLean sold out; T. J. Briggs remained in the same location; the Court Brothers sold out although their land east of Springdale and north of the L&N railroad was not developed until the 1940s; W. B. Henderson sold his land on the north side of Vollintine east of McLean to another dairy farmer, Julian Wilson; J. R. Hollish sold his property to a new dairy farmer in the Vollintine/May (University) area, J. J. Jones; W. L. Pinkston continued to run a dairy at Jackson and McLean but without his father; P. F. Ray remained on the south side of Red Bud (Brown) east of Evergreen; J. G. Semminger closed his dairy on Jackson and Springdale; H. R. N. Briggs opened a dairy on the southeast corner of Trezevant and Jackson; J. F. Edwards set up a dairy farm just east of W. L. Pinkston on Jackson; and both W. J. Faught and W. H. Scheele opened dairies on Edward west of McLean. See *City Directory* (1910), 2003-4, and *City Directory* (1920), 1945.

15. *City Directory* (1920), 1945; *City Directory*, 1626; and *City Directory* (1940), 1435.

16. *Report of the Board of Health, 1900*, 8; *Report of the Board of Health, 1901*, 39.

17. Before construction of the crematories in 1898, most garbage was dumped into the Mississippi River. Item in folder "History: Health, 1878-1929, Garbage, milk, diseases, death rate, etc.," Department of Health Papers, no box number (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives); and *Report of the Board of Health, 1900*, 6.

18. William D. Miller, *Memphis during the Progressive Era: 1900-1917* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1957), 73-75, 84.

19. Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 17, 36, 105; *The EvergreenNews*, March 1991.

20. Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside*, 23-35; "PWA Project: Memphis, Tennessee" (1936 Yearbook), Box 23, Public Works Administration Collection (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives, hereafter cited as PWA Papers).

21. Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 106-7; *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), June 19, 1937; City of Memphis Chamber of Commerce, *Inter-chamber City Health Conservation Contest: Fact-Finding Schedule* (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives, 1939).

22. *Report of the Board of Health, 1902*, 27; *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 19, 1933; Index of Specifications and Contract Documents, Lick Creek Drainage, P.W.A. Docket No. Tenn. 1230-DS, "Lick Creek, 1230-F," Box 5, PWA Papers; "Data Supporting Grant Application to PWA" and "PWA Project: Memphis, Tennessee," Box 23, PWA Papers; Department of Health, *Ten Year Report*, 24, 136; *Commercial Appeal*, March 30, 1937; and *Report of the Department of Health, 1942*, 30.

23. Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 69-70.

24. Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside*, 191-92, 197; Aerial Survey: City of Memphis, Tennessee, 1938, Sheet No. 11 (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives, hereafter cited as 1938 Aerial Survey); Aerial Survey: Memphis, Tennessee, 1959 (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives, hereafter cited as 1959 Aerial Survey); "Topographical Map of Memphis and Vicinity," surveyed and drawn by order of General W. T. Sherman, Lieutenants Pitzman and Frick topographical engineers, 1862-1863 (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives).

25. According to Rayburn W. Johnson, in the mid-1930s, Memphis blacks were much more likely than whites to live in the lowest elevations, many of which were traversed by small creeks and bayous and poorly drained, as well as adjacent to lands used by railroads and factories. When whites did live near industrial areas, they tended to be the poorest of their race. This does not necessarily mean, however, that industry moved to the area because it was black and/or poor. Land values were obviously cheaper in such parts of the city, which would attract both poor residents and industry. This might then continue to depress land values. Also, in some cases, residents moved to the area after factories and other businesses were sited. Rayburn W. Johnson, "Land Utilization in Memphis" (Ph.D., dissertation, University of Chicago, 1936), 14, 45.

26. Thomas R. Doering, "Locational and Structural Changes in the Chemical Industry of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee, 1947-1967" (M.A. thesis, Memphis State University, 1971), 29, 33-38, 94.

27. Johnson, "Land Utilization," 8, 23-24; and Memphis Housing Authority, *The Housing Survey of the City of Memphis and Part of Shelby County Tennessee* (Memphis, TN: Memphis Housing Authority, 1941), 14-15.

28. "Memphis Tennessee and Suburbs, 1891," published by M. T. Williamson (Memphis, TN: Shelby County Archives); Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 15; and Buckman Laboratories, *Bu-Lines/By-Lines: Special Edition*, June 1989 (Memphis, TN: Buckman Laboratories), 2-9, 18, 27, 65.
29. Correspondence from Glenda Akins, Memphis Plant Manager, Veliscol Chemical Corporation, July 9, 2002; and Patrick R. Duncan, "Dirty Little Secret," copy in author's possession.
30. Emily Passini, "Cypress Creek Environmental Justice: An Environmental Concerns Survey for the Vollintine-Evergreen Community," file folder "EPA DEJ Small Grant 3-6-98," May 1999, 5-6; Emily Passini and Trent Pingnot, "Cypress Creek Virtual Toxic Tour," Vollintine-Evergreen Community Association (1999), n.p.; Historian Jim Schwab reports a fish kill in the early 1970s in Louisiana that was eventually traced back to the chemicals dumped by Veliscol into the interceptor. Jim Schwab, *Deeper Shades of Green: The Rise of Blue-Collar and Minority Environmentalism in America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), 212.
31. Duncan, "Dirty Little Secret"; Memphis Environmental Center, Inc., *Cypress Creek Drainage Channel Investigation and Preliminary Human Health Risk Evaluations*, prepared for Veliscol Chemical Corporation (January 2002), 5-7; Vollintine-Evergreen Community Association (VECA) CDC, "Cypress Creek Project, Final Report: July 31, 2000," file folder "EPA DEJ Small Grant 3-6-98," VECA files, 3-4.
32. *The EvergreeNews*, January 1973, and July 1973.
33. *Report of the Department of Health, 1945*, 31; *Report of the Department of Health, 1949*, 30; *Report of the Department of Health, 1950*, 29; *Report of the Department of Health, 1952*, 24; *Report of the Department of Health, 1959*, n.p.; and *Report of the Department of Health, 1966*, 98.
34. *The EvergreeNews*, February 1972; and *The EvergreeNews*, August 1972.
35. Sonia S. Flowers to Steve Lockwood, March 24, 1998, VECA Files; Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 82, 84-85; Census Blocks Map, 1980, VECA Files; Kirby Michael, "Diversity in the Vollintine-Evergreen Community of Memphis," National Working Conference: Creating and Sustaining Viable, Inclusive, Diverse, Stable Urban Neighborhoods in the United States, June 14-15, 1996, 5-45.
36. Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 71-75; *The EvergreeNews*, January 1971; *The EvergreeNews*, May 1971; *The EvergreeNews*, July 1971; *The EvergreeNews*, February 1976; *The EvergreeNews*, April 1979; and *The EvergreeNews*, August 1979.
37. Greene, interview; and *The EvergreeNews*, November 1975.
38. *Ibid.*; and *The EvergreeNews*, January 1973.
39. *The EvergreeNews*, July 1973; *The EvergreeNews*, October 1973; *The EvergreeNews*, June 1974; *The EvergreeNews*, July 1975; *The EvergreeNews*, November 1975; *The EvergreeNews*, March 1976; *The EvergreeNews*, August 1971; and Greene, interview. Jemison suggests the Cypress Citizens Committee was established in 1974, but the *EvergreeNews* continues to make reference to the Shelby County Democratic Club through that year and takes note of the new group only in June 1975. The Cypress Health and Safety Committee is first mentioned in a March 1976 issue. Jemison, *Vollintine-Evergreen*, 77-78.
40. Greene, interview.
41. Earlier, in 1971, city, county, and state officials failed to push Interstate 40 the rest of the way through Memphis initially by a route through the north section of Overton Park. See Irma O. Sternberg, *Overton Park Is Your Park, Memphis!* (Memphis, TN: Tri-State Press, 1971), 8, Irma Sternberg Collection (Memphis, TN: Rhodes College Archives); *The EvergreeNews*, June 1973; *The EvergreeNews*, August 1975; and *The EvergreeNews*, July 1990.
42. *The EvergreeNews*, September 1982; and *The Vollintine Evergreen News*, December 1996.
43. *The Vollintine Evergreen News*, November 1998; *The Vollintine Evergreen News*, May 2001; Emily Passini, "Cypress Creek Environmental Justice: An Environmental Concerns Survey for the Vollintine-Evergreen Community," file folder "EPA DEJ Small Grant 3-6-98," May 1999, VECA Files; and Emily Passini and Trent Pingnot, "Cypress Creek Virtual Toxic Tour," Vollintine-Evergreen Community Association (1999), VECA Files.
44. Memphis Environmental Center, Inc., *Cypress Creek Drainage Channel Investigation*, iv, 26, 38, 41.

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