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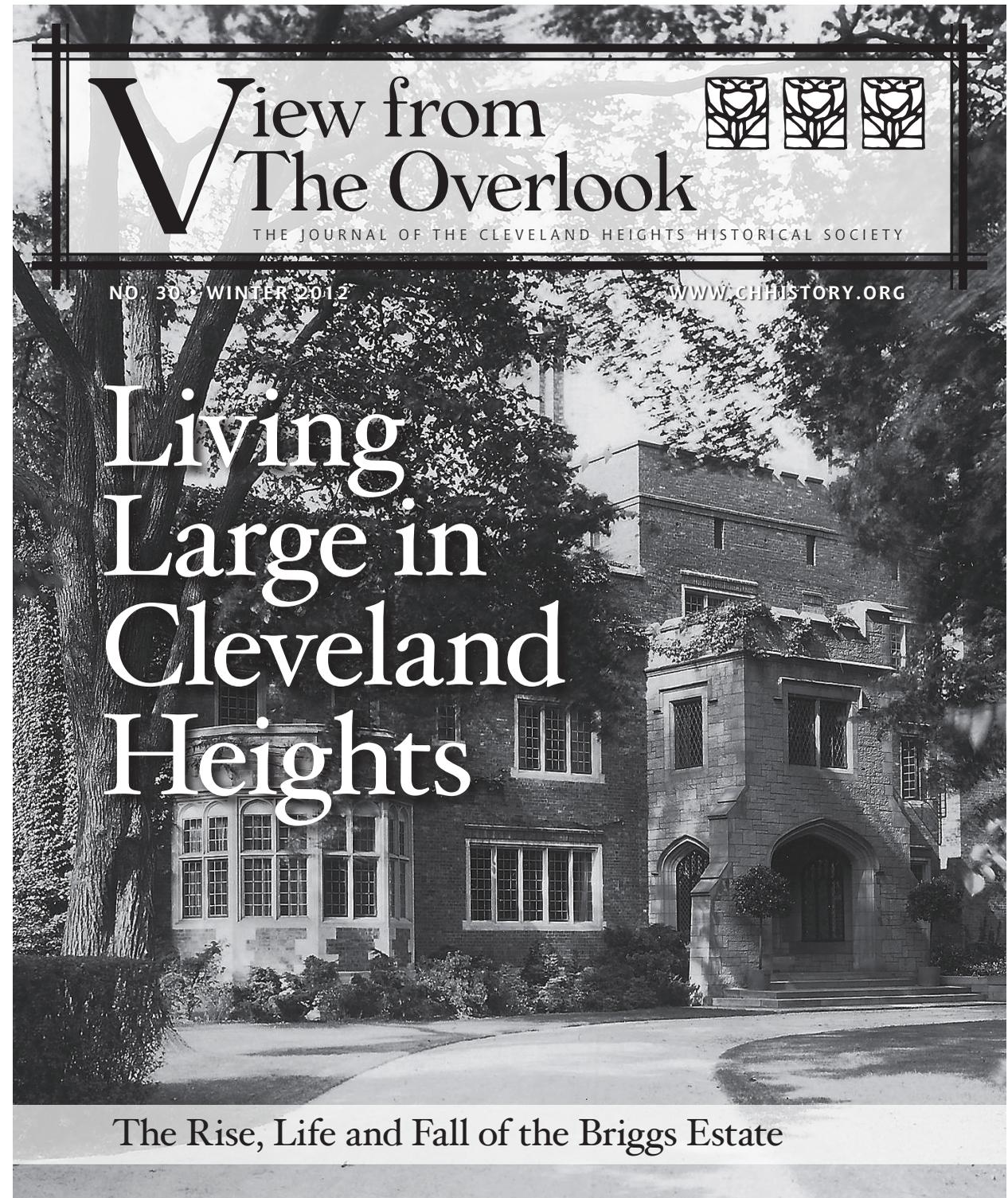
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The Rise, Life and Fall of the Briggs Estate

Living Large in Cleveland Heights

The Rise, Life and Fall of the Briggs Estate

By Chris Roy

Cleveland Heights, Ohio, was a proverbial child in short pants when Dr. Charles Edwin Briggs began building his English Tudor-style “castle” on East Overlook Road in 1906. The village’s metamorphosis from farmland to idealized “garden city suburb” had been launched only 15 years earlier. That was when developer Patrick J. Calhoun set out to create a hilltop haven for the better classes, well removed from the grit and congestion besmirching the gentry’s Cleveland neighborhoods.

Dr. Briggs undoubtedly knew that his house-building efforts were being emulated

by many hyper-successful contemporaries: industrialist and early Rockefeller partner John L. Severance, attorney and financier William Lowe Rice, socialite and big-game hunter Kenyon Painter, mining executive Howell Hinds, and many others. In fact, mixing (and identifying) with Cleveland’s bourgeois was clearly important to Briggs, whose life and property reflect a passionate desire to “live large.” Here is the story of Dr. Briggs, his Cleveland Heights home (the likes of which Cleveland Heights will never duplicate) and the structure’s demise—a near-perfect metaphor for the evolving life of a changing suburb.

Briggs’ Early Life

Charles Edwin Briggs was born in Calumet, Michigan, in 1872. A true blueblood, he was descended from Miles Standish on his father’s side and Increase Mather, the famed Boston clergyman, on his mother’s side.

Briggs graduated from Oberlin College in 1893 and Harvard Medical School in 1897. Shortly thereafter he was hired as a surgeon at Lakeside Hospital (now University Hospitals). He remained in the hospital’s employ until 1922. After leaving medicine, Dr. Briggs launched a business career, serving as a director of Phelps Dodge Corporation and Eaton Manufacturing Company until his death in 1937.

The Briggs family name is associated with East Overlook Road as early as 1898, when “CE Briggs” shows up as the owner of two parcels (613 and 614) on the year’s Cuyahoga County plat map. Briggs ultimately would own 12 plots (now identified collectively as parcel 685-13-001). Given that Dr. Briggs was fresh out of medical school in 1897, as well as only

Cover photo from the photo archives of Smith & Oby Company



Figure 1: Completed in 1894, the residence that architect Charles Schweinfurth designed and occupied is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.¹

25 years old, it seems likely that his purchases were underwritten by his father, a prominent banking and mining executive.

The 12 parcels Dr. Briggs obtained over the course of more than 20 years make up the entire block bordered by East Overlook, Coventry and Edgehill Roads and Mornington Lane. Most of those purchases were from Patrick Calhoun’s Euclid Heights Realty Company.

During his first few years in Cleveland, Dr. Briggs resided at his place of employment (Lakeside Hospital). He then relocated in 1902 to the New Amsterdam Hotel at 2145 Euclid Avenue. This was the year he married the former Jean Hamilton McDermid (1875-1929), a nurse. Three years later, in 1905, the couple

moved to 135 Ingleside Road, which soon after became known as East 75th Street.¹ Dr. and Mrs. Briggs lived on East 75th Street for four years—from 1905 to 1909. Despite their relative youth, the couple was in elite company: East 75th Street was a blueblood strip that counted among its residents the Severance (oil), Higbee (retail) and Bourne (iron & steel) families, as well as architect Charles Frederick Schweinfurth. Mr. Schweinfurth’s home (which he also designed) still stands at 1951 East 75th Street (Figure 1).

One year after moving to Ingleside, Dr. Briggs set about building what would become

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1. In 1906, many of Cleveland’s “named” streets were re-identified as numbers.

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society



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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society, founded in 1983, is a state-chartered, 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization.

Our Mission

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights.

As a community-based historic organization, the Society encourages and facilitates greater knowledge, understanding and awareness of the heritage of Cleveland Heights.



Figure 2: The Briggs Estate reportedly was modeled on a castle that Dr. Briggs had admired while vacationing in England. Some of the doors and panels from that castle were brought over from England and built into the home. According to The Cleveland Press, the house even contained a bible room “characterized by mosaic marble panels depicting biblical stories from Genesis to Revelations.”

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one of the most sumptuous homes ever to exist in Cleveland Heights. Three years later, in 1909, he and his wife moved in.

New Heights

Even by the metrics of the day, the “Briggs Castle” would stand by itself. Between 1906 and 1920, the 5.5-acre property would come to include a 30-room Tudor-style home featuring 30-inch outer walls, ten bathrooms (with tile imported from Italy), 15 hand-carved marble fireplaces and massive ballroom. Throughout the home, Briggs added hand-blown leaded glass windows, mahogany paneling and imported English slate and tile (Figure 2).

Over the same 1.5 decades, Briggs also added a guest house, two greenhouses, a swimming pool and tennis court. Fossil-marked stone was transported from a Niagara gorge to make the swimming pool patio (Figure 3). The entire initiative was designed and

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Figure 3: Briggs Estate swimming pool, late 1920s.

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executed by New York-based Wyoming Architects and Charles Schweinfurth, Briggs' former neighbor and arguably the most prominent architect in Cleveland (Figure 4).

Dr. Briggs also orchestrated the building of a smaller, but only slightly less sumptuous home (9,000 square feet on 1.5 acres with 17 rooms and a ballroom) across the street at 2750 East Overlook Road. Built for \$300,000, the home was occupied by Dr. Briggs' parents. The elder Briggs died in 1923. The home at 2750 East Overlook Road still stands. It was purchased by its current owner in 1987 for (ironically) \$300,000.

Altogether, Briggs invested between \$1.1 million and \$1.3 million in the two properties.

The Halcyon Years

Looking back, Cleveland Heights' emergence as a suburban refuge could be seen as inevitable. At the dawn of a new century, the city of Cleveland's population was approaching 400,000—the seventh highest in the country. In addition to being crowded, life in Cleveland was becoming less pleasant for the ultra-wealthy. Zoning laws were minimal. Smaller homes occupied by people of lesser economic means began to surround the upper class neighborhoods along Euclid, Prospect and Wade Park Avenues. Urban sanitation was poor (a significant problem in a city



Figure 4: Dr. Charles Edwin Briggs (left) and architect Charles Frederick Schweinfurth (right).

with tens of thousands of horses). However, the biggest incentive to relocate may have been economic: While Cleveland property taxes increased nominally until about 1900, they rose 200 percent between 1900 and 1910 and another 300 to 500 percent over the next decade.

The bottom line is that numerous Clevelanders—particularly those of means—felt they had to move; and East Cleveland (with its close proximity), Lakewood (with its miles of Lake Erie shoreline) and Cleveland Heights (situated on a picturesque bluff overlooking the city) were the premier choices. Until the 1930s, these three cities (joined later by Shaker Heights) were the primary destinations of wealthy Clevelanders seeking to relocate.

There may be no better example of high-brow expatriate living than the Briggs Estate. Dr. Charles Briggs, his wife and four children—Charles Jr. (b. 1905), John H. (b. 1907), Jean (b. 1911) and Elizabeth (b. 1914)—were the only resident title-holders the estate ever knew. And their occupancy lasted less than 30 years—from 1909 until Dr. Briggs' death in 1937. However, most of that period represented a Golden Age for Cleveland Heights' elite residents, as well as for the Briggs family itself.

There can be no doubt that Dr. Briggs had every intention of moving in Cleveland Heights—and Cleveland's—highest circles, and that his castle would be used to showcase

his prominence. By 1907, in fact, the Euclid Heights development had become a haven for socialites in the Cleveland area. Sixty-nine families who resided in the subdivision were listed in *The Blue Book*—over 75 percent of the entire number of families in the subdivision. In keeping with his (and his neighborhood's) elite status, the doctor was accepted for membership at high-brow guilds such as the Union Club, University Club, Mid-day Club, Rowfant Club, Pepper Pike Country Club, Chagrin Valley Hunt Club, Kirtland Country Club and Mayfield Country Club. In the late 1920s, images of Briggs' property were taken by famed photographer Margaret Bourke White. On June 17, 1929, Metropolitan Opera diva Lucrezia Bori was a guest at the Estate. Celebrated composer and pianist Arthur Loesser (brother of songwriter Frank Loesser) performed there on February 9, 1932. Dr. and Mrs. Briggs also were trustees of the Cleveland Institute of Music (CIM). Dr. Briggs served as president of CIM from 1923 to 1925.

Transition

It can hardly be said that Cleveland Heights peaked in the 1920s. But it is true that, toward the end of the decade, the city's role as a destination for bluebloods was beginning to cool, and that a significant demographic transition was in its early stages. On the one hand, the 1920s was a ten-year suburban coming-out party. Between 1910 and 1930, Cleveland Heights' population increased from 2,955 to 47,990. By 1930, 25 percent of the population of Cuyahoga County lived outside of Cleveland, as opposed to 12 percent in 1910. Much of this growth was literally "driven" by car: The greatest spurt of automobile ownership by American families took place in the 1920s—a trend with inarguable effects on the growth of suburban communities. However, the pent-up demand that often follows a major war was evidenced in other ways: "[Throughout the 1920s] encouraged by the wide availability of credit, Americans bought as never before: radios, fashionable clothing, tickets to the

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New President of CHHS

On December 31, 2011, Chris Roy stepped down as president of the Cleveland Heights Historical Society. Taking Chris' place is Mazie Adams, long-time CHHS trustee and former executive director of the Lakewood Historical Society. In addition to 14 years with LHS, she holds a bachelor's degree in history from Kenyon College and a master's degree in museum education from George Washington University. High on Mazie's CHHS wish list is marshaling a core group of volunteers who share trustees' passion for local history: "As the new president, I need your assistance . . . The society is looking for people to research and write articles for the newsletter, work on exhibits for the History Center at the Superior Schoolhouse, help develop lecture programs and much more. If you'd like to help, please contact me." Mazie can be reached through CHHS' website (heightshistory@gmail.com) or at 216-297-1357.

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movies, real estate in Florida and new homes in suburbia. Developers speculated as energetically in suburban allotments as traders speculated on Wall Street.⁴ Not surprisingly, most new development focused on the emerging middle class. From 1922 to 1925 new housing starts in Cleveland Heights averaged 1,200 per year. Home buying was encouraged by easy credit from banks and from developers. By 1925, approximately 75 percent had been carved into residential sections. Cleveland Heights—which became a village in 1905 and a city in 1921—was clearly in the process of redefining itself as a middle-class destination. More-modest neighborhoods such as M.M. Brown's Mayfield Heights and Grant Deming's Forest Hill, were attracting a majority of the city's new residents.

Still, business as usual went on for the community's elite. The Briggs Estate continued to be a social hub and Charles Briggs' fortunes only increased with his transition from physician to business executive in the early 1920s. Mrs. Briggs died of a mysterious illness in December, 1929. For the surviving rich, however, life was good.

Still, the writing may well have been on the wall for the elite estates. Entering the 1930s, great wealth continued to exist—more, in fact, in Cleveland Heights than in rapidly rising Shaker Heights—but several profound changes were occurring. For one thing, ostentation was less and less in style; too many people were suffering (from 1932 to 1938, 1164 Cleveland Heights homes were foreclosed and sold at sheriff's auctions). Second, Cleveland Heights was almost completely built out by 1930, yet tax-relevant expenses such as school and road

enhancements continued to rise. Middle-class homes increasingly surrounded the palatial estates. With the permanent institution of a federal income tax in 1916, wealthy people everywhere were finding themselves with less money to lavish upon their residential palaces. All in all, there must have been a creeping sense among the upper class that the gigantic abodes they had created were an unreasonable and even unacceptable drain on their pocketbooks. In fact, one of Cleveland Heights' great estates had already fallen: Buoyed by a Cleveland Heights zoning code that permitted churches, schools and philanthropic organizations to purchase and use a private home if it adjoined a park or streetcar tracks, the Howell Hinds house on Overlook Road was demolished in 1930—replaced by the Neoclassical First Church of Christ, Scientist, designed by the architectural firm of Walker & Weeks. Behind the new structure (now the headquarters of Nottingham Spirk Design Associates) one can still see the steps and slate walks of the original Hinds estate (Figure 5).

Events such as those noted above may or may not have weighed on Dr. Charles Briggs; however there is no evidence that his bank account or his style of living were compromised in the 1930s. In fact, when Briggs died on February 5, 1937, at the age of 65, he left a fortune of between \$2.2 million and 2.5 million, to be divided equally among his four children. Yet there seemed to be no desire on the children's part to occupy the palace in which they had grown up. No resident owner would ever again occupy the castle although, ironically, Briggs' son John would eventually reside in one of the condominium units that replaced the Briggs home.

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4. Marian J. Morton, *Cleveland Heights: The Making of an Urban Suburb* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2002), 48.

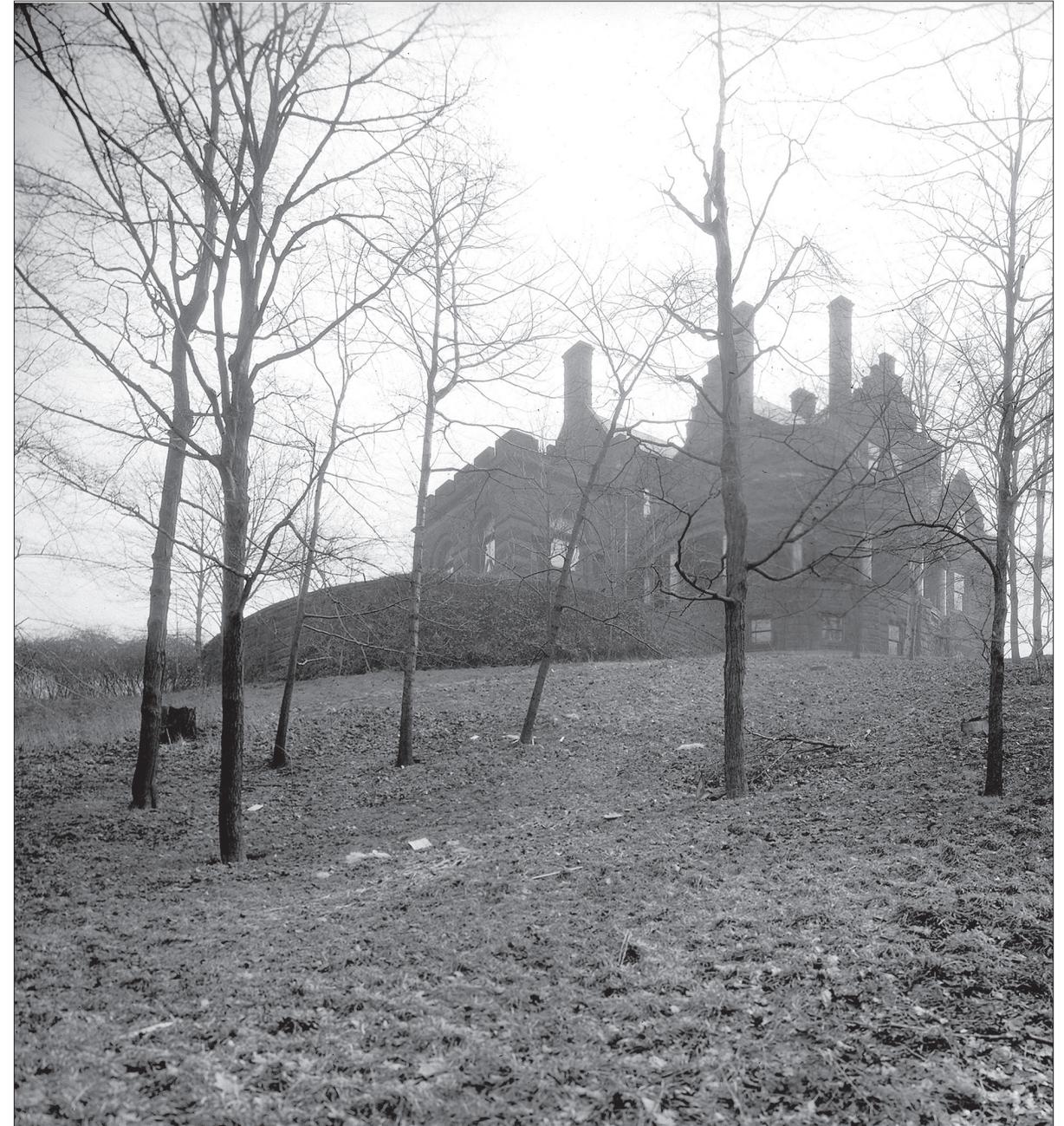


Figure 5: Rear view of the Howell Hinds estate (the corner where Edgehill turns into Cornell), looking up the hill from Little Italy, c. 1920s. (Photo archives of Nottingham Spirk Design Associates.)

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Dubious Life After Death

For roughly two years, the Briggs Estate passed through the hands of several owners. In September, 1937, much of the home's contents were sold off, including art works and library materials dispensed at auction. The following month, the parents' home across the street sold for an astonishing \$25,000—less than 10 percent of what it had cost to build it 20 years earlier. Even more amazing, the Briggs Estate itself was sold on January 9, 1939, to department store owners Joseph and Isidore Schermer for \$35,000—about 4 percent of the original construction cost and 40 percent less than the home's recent

valuation by the city. The Schermer brothers' stated goal was to find a buyer or possibly subdivide the property. They did not succeed with reselling but they did discover that what came to be known as the "rooming house racket" could generate profits aplenty. For 15 years, the Schermers rented out the castle's many rooms and outbuildings, turning the grand mansion into what was, in effect, a boarding house. In 1953, police observed that the estate was occupied by 19 people, collectively paying almost \$1,000 a month in rent. The problem was summarized in a late 1953 edition of *The Plain Dealer*:

"Alleging the owner of a 30-room mansion at 2749 East Overlook, Cleveland Heights, is ignoring notices to cease using the home as

a multiple family dwelling, the suburb's law department yesterday brought suit in Common Pleas Court. Hearing on a request for a temporary order enjoining the owner, Joseph Schermer, from renting the premises to 22 persons was set for January 15 by Common Pleas judge Arthur H. Day. Charging the mansion, which is valued for tax purposes at \$60,000, is in an area zoned for single family use, the City's suit asks both temporary and permanent injunctions."

Joseph Schermer fought back, first asking the city to re-zone and then challenging the constitutionality of the city ordinance against multi-family use of a single-family home. In 1955, an appeals judge backed the city. The lawsuit ended what was considered a zoning conflict and no further rooming situations were allowed.

However, vagrants periodically took up residence and occasional arrests were made. From that point forward, the estate's only lawful residents were music educator Frieda Schumacher, the home's caretakers (Mr. and Mrs. Harry Ciesicki), Alfred Harris (who resided in the estate's playhouse) and Elisabeth Andersen Seaver Ness (the widow of famed lawman Eliot Ness) who resided in the coach house.⁵

The Beginning of the End

In 1941, music educator Frieda Schumacher took up residence in the Briggs Estate ballroom. For almost 25 years, her efforts, programs and studio were a cultural bright

5. Eliot Ness died in 1946.

spot in Cleveland Heights (Figure 6). Thousands of children took individual lessons. Parents and adults participated in recitals at Christmastime. For many years, the Cleveland Philharmonic Orchestra used the ballroom for rehearsals. Ms. Schumacher would also participate in the fight to save the estate, beginning in May, 1964, when *The Cleveland Press* announced that

Cleveland Heights officials were studying the possibility of condominium developments as future city projects.

At that time, there was no "condominium" classification in the Cleveland Heights zoning code. Other cities had undertaken condominium projects but the term was largely foreign to local residents. Over the next half-year, semantics would play a recurring role in people's objections to changes on

the site of the Briggs Estate. On several occasions, in fact, protestors would comment that it was actually apartments that architect Jerry F. Weiss and Dr. Nils Carlson (both instructors at Western Reserve University and Case Institute of Technology) were proposing, and that "condominium" was nothing more than a fancy synonym for "apartment." The reality, however, was that what Weiss and Carlson had begun pushing in the spring of 1964 was very different from an apartment complex. A condominium, explained *The Sun Press*, is "a development wherein more than one person or family lives, with the occupants of each residence holding title to its own living

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Figure 6: A recital in Frieda Schumacher's studio—the former ballroom of the Briggs Estate. Ms. Schumacher is playing the harpsichord. ("Briggs Mansion Truly City's House of Music," *The Plain Dealer*, November 6, 1964.)

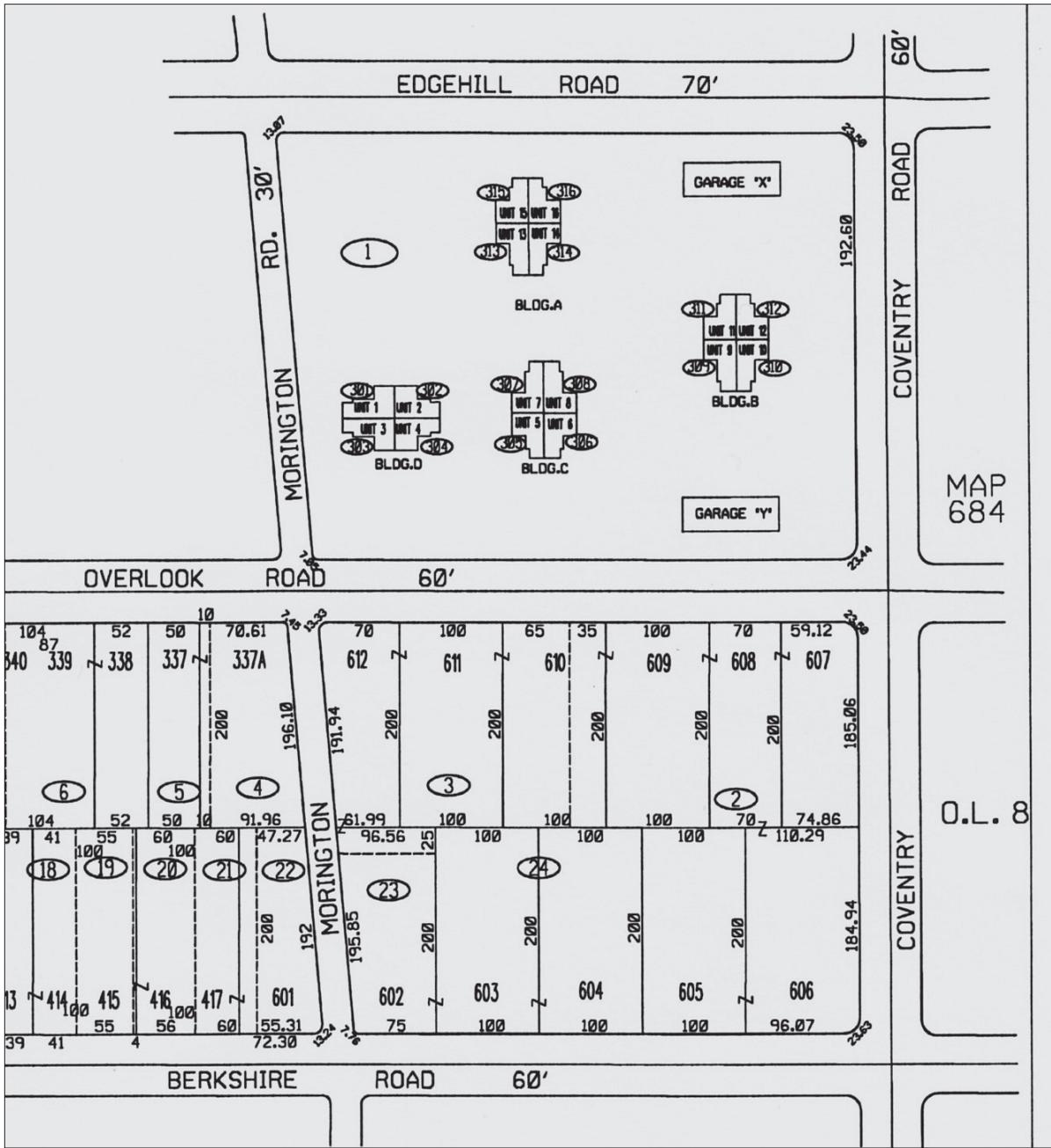


Figure 7: Diagram submitted for study by Jerry F. Weiss and Dr. Nils Carlson. (Diagram from The Planning Department of the City of Cleveland Heights.)

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quarters, but not the land underneath it. Dues are paid for maintenance of the common grounds and facilities. This differs from a co-op, where residents own shares of stock in a holding company but do not hold deeds to their individual suites.”

On May 19, 1964, *The Plain Dealer* announced that “a group of Western Reserve and Case Institute of Technology professors [Weiss and Carlson] have proposed the rezoning of the Briggs Estate to permit construction of a 16-unit apartment project.”⁶ The PD further stated that “Carlson holds an option to buy the estate if it is rezoned within 180 days after May 1, 1964. Each unit is projected to cost between \$35,000 and \$45,000 and the professors would occupy one each.”

By early June, city planning director Jerry Murphy, the Cleveland Heights Planning Commission and the Planning Committee of Cleveland Heights City Council acknowledged that they were entertaining discussions about razing the mansion and constructing a condominium development, and that a formal zoning change would be required. According to *The Sun Press*, “The Cleveland Heights Planning Commission accepted for study site plans and architects’ sketches of the condominium development. Prepared by Jerry F. Weiss and Associates, they show the condominium to be four cross-shaped units of four single-dwelling units each” (Figure 7). Effort would be made, continued *The Sun Press* article, to save as many trees as possible, as well as the swimming pool, tennis court, play

6. Note the paper’s incorrect use of the term “apartment.”
 7. “Antiquity Lovers Fighting to Preserve ‘The Castle,’” *The Plain Dealer*, June 29, 1964.

house and the rear wing of the main house containing the ballroom.

The next six months were highlighted by petitions, lawsuits, counter-suits, and scores of newspaper articles and editorials. One columnist at *The Cleveland Press*, Winsor French, wrote an ongoing series of editorials focused on the travesty of “destroying this splendid property.” One Cleveland Heights protestor actively sought assistance from then-senator Stephen Young, D-Ohio.

Despite vociferous objections from area residents, preservationists and the media, it was clear that an uphill battle was being fought. As early as May, Cleveland Heights City Councilman Fred Stashower had stated that “the mansion must be razed unless a single family can be found to take it over . . . The mansion represents the danger of becoming a boarding house or institution in a fine residential neighborhood . . . The condominium proposal is the first constructive idea we have reached.”⁷

In the end, Mr. Stashower (no doubt buoyed by his dual title as councilman and head of the Council’s Planning and Building Committee) proved provident. Before the deal was sealed, however, the City had to create a formal condominium classification (the first in any eastern Cleveland suburb), rezone the property, and survive a lawsuit, a public hearing, a postponement, and requests for a restraining order. Still, on November 11, the Cleveland Heights Planning Commission voted unanimously to recommend that City Council rezone the Briggs property for condominium use. At its regular Monday meeting on November 16, 1964, Council did just that—voting (again unanimously) to rezone the

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property. The entire affair — preliminary announcements; legal procedures; City Council and Planning Department reviews and approvals; and community resistance and litigation—had taken seven months.

Emptying of the estate, which survived intact for less than 60 years, began on January 1, 1965. Residents of the ballroom and the playhouse were not required to leave immediately, but were instructed to seek other living arrangements. As promised, the ballroom, swimming pool, playhouse and much of the natural surroundings were preserved and remain to this day. By mid-April, 1965, the mansion was completely leveled (Figure 8) and by mid-November, families began moving into the new condos. Much of the Briggs home's interior furnishings found their way into the new units, including stairs, fireplaces and grillwork. All work was completed by February, 1966.⁸

The Impact, Aftermath and Importance of the Briggs Tale

The Briggs Estate furor died down almost as quickly as it had begun. Several reasons can be cited, but the most directly relevant is that the newly erected, Prairie-style Mornington Lane Condominiums were well designed, well constructed and well received by a previously skeptical community (Figure 9). One of the best testaments to the ongoing appeal of the Mornington Lane Condominiums might be the

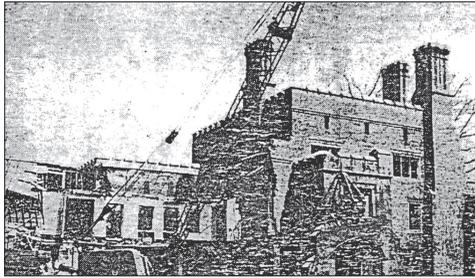


Figure 8: Demolition of the Briggs Estate, April 1965. ("Briggs Walls Come Tumblin' Down," The Sun Press, April 1, 1965.)

fact that, after 45 years, several of the original residents are still there.

It should also be noted that the scare factor associated with condominiums abated considerably. In the post-Briggs years, construction of new condominiums in Cleveland Heights and across the nation became

commonplace, as did the conversion of existing apartment buildings to condominiums. By the beginning of the 1970s, every state in the union had a condominium statute and "going condo" was a relatively familiar moniker, as well as a generally good sign—representative of a neighborhood's shift from more-transient (rental) residences to more-stable, equity-based circumstances.

Today, Cleveland Heights is a good example not only of condominiums' broad-based acceptance, but their general quality. Newer structures such as Bluestone, Cedarmount, Fairmount Hill, Brownstones of Derbyshire, Boulevard Townhomes, Greyton Court and Courtyards of Severance are home to scores of middle- and upper-class Cleveland Heights residents, while untold numbers of apartment-to-condo conversions now house owners rather than renters. As was the case with the Briggs Estate, several of these developments replaced older, single-family units (e.g., Cedarmount and Greyton Court). Though far from grand, they are aesthetically decent and generally accepted contributors to the diversity that characterizes Cleveland Heights. Charles Briggs, and the grandeur that surrounded him, belong to another age.

8. Architects of record were Weiss and Blatchford. The general contractor was Dunlap & Johnston.



Figure 9: The Mornington Lane Condominiums (photo by the author).