

## The Portland Neighborhood and Portland Wharf Park

The Portland Neighborhood is located in the northwestern corner of Louisville, Kentucky along the Ohio River approximately two miles from the central business district (Figure 1). It is two square miles in size and has a population of 12,979. Most of the people in the neighborhood are white (73%), with a significant percentage of (23%) African American. Portland is Louisville's poorest neighborhood economically, with 33% of its residents being identified as poverty status compared to 12.1% citywide. The median household income \$21,998, which is less than half of the Louisville's total median household income of \$49,161. Housing in the neighborhood is slightly majority owner occupied (52%), while 48% are renter occupied (Louisville Community Design Center 2005).

Portland Wharf Park encompasses 55 acres along the banks of the Ohio River, just below the Falls and the entrance to the Portland Canal. It is primarily a forested environment with dense trees and undergrowth interrupted by symmetrical swaths of mowed grass and an open meadow. It is bounded by a large rusted railroad bridge on the east, the Ohio River on the north, a golf course on the west, and an earthen levee and elevated interstate highway on the south. It is an island of nature within the concrete and asphalt of urban Louisville.

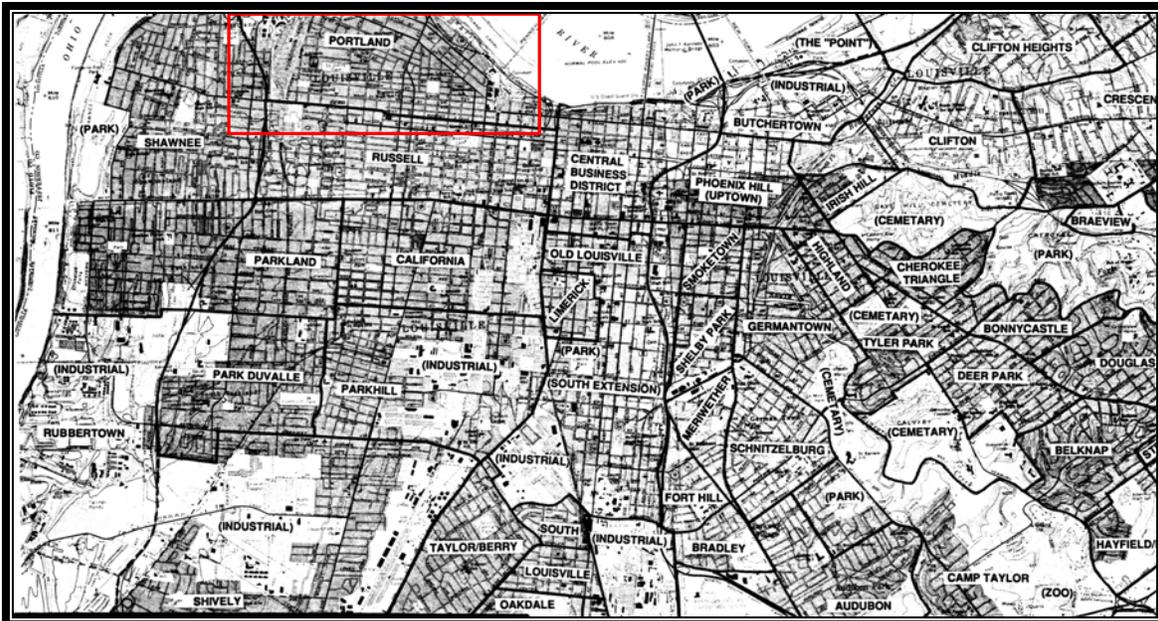


Figure 1. Map of Louisville's Neighborhoods.

## A Contentious Past: Historical Context

### Louisville

Louisville is Kentucky's largest metropolitan area. It was founded in 1778 during George Rogers Clark's expedition against the British in the Northwest Territories. Clark's militia accompanied a small group of settlers from Pittsburgh to Kentucky. The group set-up camp on a small island at the Falls of the Ohio River, before Clark and his men left to battle the British (Figure 2). The island was named Corn Island and was home to the settlers for several months. Later in 1778, the settlers moved to the Kentucky shore and laid the foundation for a town called Louisville, which was named in honor of King Louis XVI of France, who had just pledged France's support to America during the Revolutionary War. In 1780 Louisville was granted a town charter by the Commonwealth of Virginia (Yater 1987).

Louisville's growth was very slow for the first 30 years of its existence. It was rather unhealthy place to live due to the many ponds that dotted the landscape. Its status as the western most American settlement left it vulnerable to Indian attacks, further inhibiting its growth. Louisville would not see significant growth until the Louisiana Territory was purchased from France (Yater 1987).

By 1803, the United States controlled the rivers between Pittsburgh and New Orleans. With the invention of the steamboat, the Ohio River became one of America's most important shipping lanes. The Falls were a natural obstacle, which made traversing the Ohio River near impossible by boat. Most travelers and cargo would disembark at Louisville, above the Falls, and put to port below the Falls (Freda 1996). The Falls made Louisville one of the busiest ports in the country. During the period between 1810 and 1840, Louisville grew rapidly. By 1830, it was the largest city in Kentucky with a population of over 11,000 (Yater 1987).

In the 1850s, Louisville strengthened its position as a mercantile center with the establishment of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. Even the Civil War could not slow Louisville's growth. The city was fortunately never attacked and profited handsomely from the war. It served as a base of operations and a supply distribution center for the Union Army. Local businesses and manufacturers expanded to supply the needs of war. After the war the

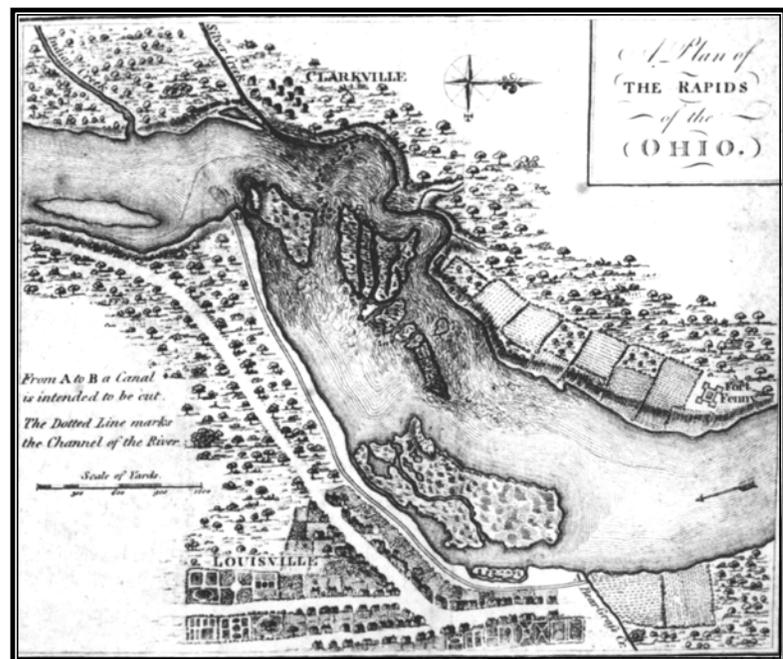


Figure 2. Map of the Falls of the Ohio ca. 1788 (Imlay 1793).

shipping industry began to slow and manufacturing took over spurred by the profits of war. By 1870, Louisville was a major manufacturing center and its population soared to over 100,000 (Yater 1987). The establishment of streetcar lines led to rapid suburban growth during the late 1800s and early 1900s, as the central core of Louisville became primarily commercial. Throughout the early 1900s, Louisville would experience times of prosperity and depression that paralleled that of the Nation. Surviving the two world wars and a devastating flood in 1937, Louisville's growth leveled in the mid-1900s and it has remained one of America's many mid-sized cities.

## Portland

Portland was founded at the base of the Falls to capitalize on the lucrative portage service that had been established when the Ohio River became a major shipping lane West (Figure 3). It was originally surveyed by Alex Ralston and laid out by Josh Barclay and Robert Todd R.S. (Figure 4.) The survey was financed by William Lytle of Cincinnati, who purchased the land in 1811 and 1813 from Henry Clay (Kleber 1992). Lytle was an "absentee landlord" and left much of the organization of Portland to Ralston, Barclay and Todd. It was Ralston and Barclay, who first named the town Portland (Rick Bell, personal communication 2002). This name was typical for English settlements situated next to a body of water, with 16 states claiming towns called Portland (Jefferson Co. Archives Vertical Files).

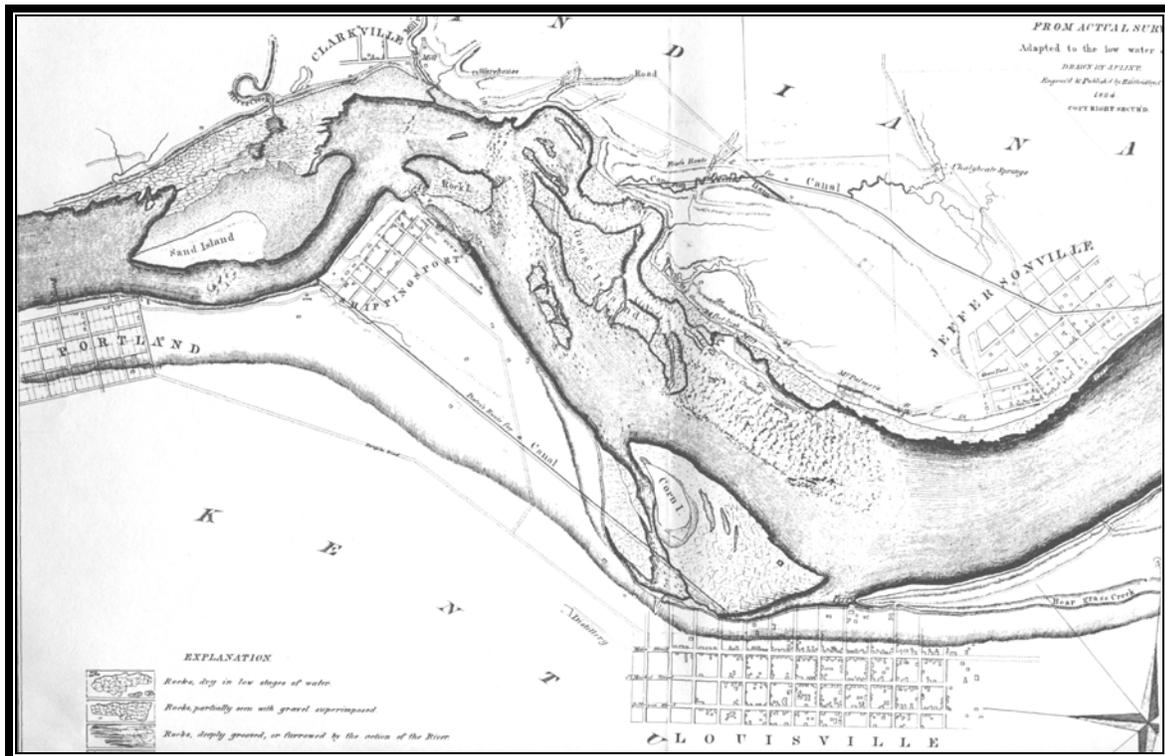


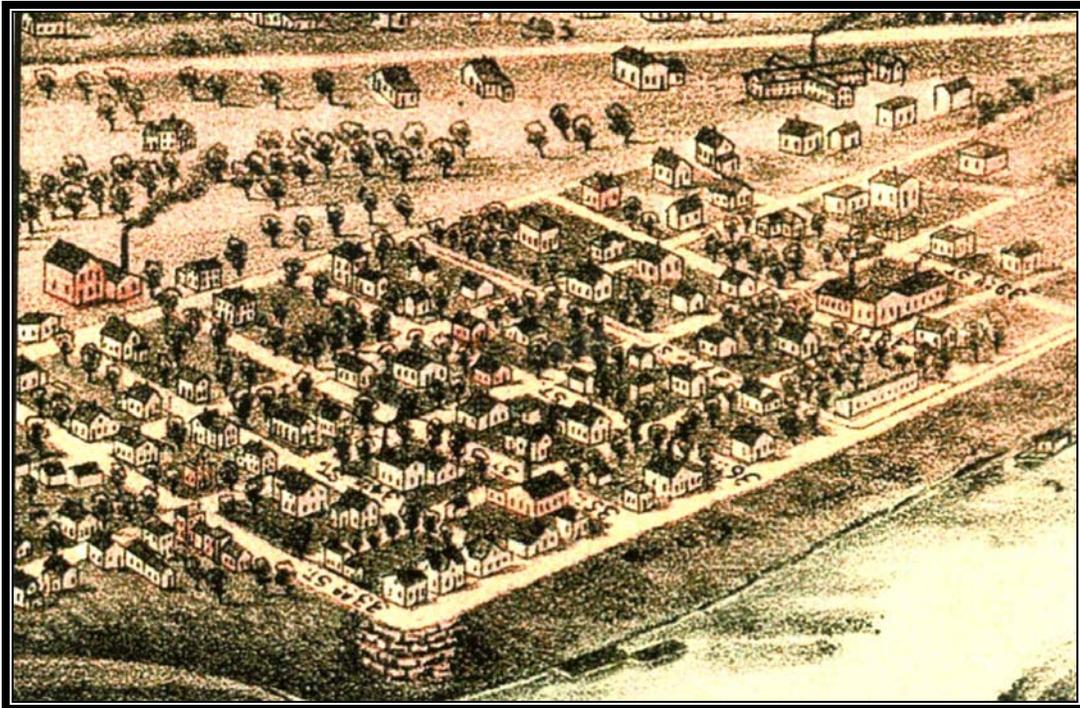
Figure 3. Map of the Falls of the Ohio Showing Louisville, Shippingport, and Portland ca. 1824 (Flint 1824).

The town of Portland was an immediate rival of the town of Shippingport, its neighbor established a few years prior also at the end of the falls. Because Portland had a more favorable location downstream from the Falls and had a much larger harbor than the earlier settlement, it drew business from Shippingport. Furthermore, in 1818, the first major road linking the town of Louisville above the Falls with the new town of Portland, below the Falls, was completed. This plank road, named the Portland and Louisville turnpike, by-passed Shippingport and made the transportation of cargo from Portland to Louisville much more convenient (Freda 1996; Munro-Leighton 1979; Watrous 1977). Moreover, the road helped Portland's businessmen obtain their first prosperous endeavor, since one third of the cost of shipping goods from Louisville to Louisiana came from the transfer of cargo down this road and around the Falls. Cargo traveled the road in mule-drawn wagons, while the passengers traveled by horse or carriages. This road would later become Portland Avenue, Portland's main street (Munro-Leighton 1979).

Although the portage service was a prosperous business for Louisville and Portland, interest in a canal to bypass the Falls had been in the works since 1804 and favored by shipmen and Louisville businessmen alike, many of whom anticipated huge profits from an increase in river traffic and large canal tolls. The City of Cincinnati was especially anxious for a canal, for it felt that Louisville was benefiting too much from the portage business, as evident in an 1824 map for a proposed canal commissioned by the city (Figure 3) (Watrous 1977). In 1825 the Louisville and Portland Canal Company was chartered and construction of the canal began the following year (Watrous 1977). It was finally completed in 1830 (Freda 1996; Watrous 1977). By its completion, the canal was already too narrow for many of the new and ever-increasing steamboats of the time, measuring only 3 ft deep and 50 ft wide and was ineffective. Thus, began a series of improvements that culminated in 1870, when the Federal Government bought out the remaining stock in the canal. The Federal Government enlarged it once again and removed the toll (Karem 1988; Watrous 1977).

When the Commonwealth of Kentucky incorporated Louisville as a city in 1828, Shippingport was included within its boundaries. However, Portland remained a separate town. Portland received its own charter from the Kentucky legislature in 1834 (Kleber 1992; Watrous 1977). Thus, began a period of competition and conflict between the two cities. During this period, business interest in the City of Lexington wanted access to a port below the Falls without stopping in Louisville. They and the Lexington and Ohio Railroad proposed to build a rail line directly to Portland's wharf (Freda 1996; Kleber 1992; Yater 1987). However, the project ran out of money in 1837 and a new plan was proposed that included a stop in Louisville. In a major compromise, Portland agreed to be annexed by Louisville on February 23, 1837, and in-turn was promised the railroad terminus and a link to the inner Bluegrass regions around Lexington (Freda 1996; Kleber 1992; Yater 1987). The rail line between Portland and Louisville was built, however, the Louisville businessmen failed to extend the track to Lexington, thus angering the people in Portland. Moreover, within five months of its construction, the businesses in Louisville, stating noise pollution, successfully obtained a court order stopping the trains to Portland. The tension came to a head in 1842, when Portlanders sought and gained independence from Louisville. Yet, this autonomy was short-lived and in 1852 Portland once again became part of Louisville (Karem 1988).

Portland's economy flourished in the early part of the nineteenth century, first from cargo on flatboats and keelboats coming downriver from Pittsburgh and later by steamboats traveling upriver from New Orleans. The portage business created a large demand for river oriented industries and many merchants became quite wealthy. Although Portland had been annexed in 1852, it continued to be a thriving port, as the canal was still largely ineffective and the portage industry continued to grow during the 1850s. The City of Louisville recognized the importance of the new neighborhood to its prosperity and was committed to supporting it by improving streets, sewers, the wharf, and encouraging development, such as the construction of a luxury hotel in 1856.



**Figure 4. An 1883 Birdseye View of Portland (Clarke 1883).**

The improvement of the canal in the 1870s brought an end to the portage business at the Falls of the Ohio. Portland felt the pressure of a changing economy. The wharf, which had brought so much prosperity to the region, was made obsolete. In 1886, a rail bridge connecting Portland with Indiana was completed, thus ending the ferry service that had been a vital part of Portland's economy since 1812 (Freda 1996). By the turn of the century, Portland, like many other older urban areas, encountered an era of degrading structures and mass unemployment. In the 1880s, 1937 and again in 1945, terrible floods ravaged the "old" section of town and by the late 1940s plans for building a floodwall through Portland's port area were approved.

The building of the floodwall successfully removed the last vestige of the oldest section of Portland and its wharf. Partially funded by the Federal Government, construction began in 1947, with the removal of homes and businesses. The completion of Interstate 64, constructed atop the floodwall, served as the final action that successfully disconnected Portland from its original livelihood and a major part of its identity, the Ohio River (Karem 1988).

The area of Portland that was outside of the floodwall had been known in the past as Portland Proper, which included the old Portland Wharf. This area once formed the core of Portland's commercial district that grew out of the river traffic at its public wharf. The construction of the floodwall effectively ended occupation of Portland Proper, as the buildings that survived the floods were demolished and the streets were buried. This area of Portland has become Portland Wharf Park, a 60-acre

Although the strong link to the river that Portland once enjoyed is gone, the neighborhood has still managed to retain much of its former heritage. Many of the large high-style mansions, like the home of Portland's first magistrate Squire Earick, still stand as a testament to the community's preservation. Moreover, religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church of Our Lady stand as a testament to the community's unity. Portland Museum, founded in the 1970s, carries on the traditions of "old" Portland and helps teach new generations of Portlanders about its historic prominence. However, the historic conflict between Portland and Louisville and Portland's sense of independence has also endured and manifested itself into the identity of the modern Portland neighborhood, the process of which has left its mark on the landscape.

## **Normalizing Identity in Portland's Past Landscape**

### **Changing Contours and Building Patterns**

A staple of landscape analysis in urban archaeology has been the examination of land filling and changes in building patterns over time or in other words, the process of development (Sandweiss 1996; Solari 2001; Zierden 1996). Through archaeology, particularly in the urban environment, we can document the changes made to the physical landscape at different times in the past and how those changes affected successive development. This approach was taken at the Portland Wharf site, where stratigraphic analysis of over 6 feet of cultural deposits and the placement of structures and yard use revealed modification of the landscape in an erasure of the previous landscape and the implementation of a normalized new one. An archaeological examination of the Portland Wharf area can help reconstruct the appearance of the landscape early in its history and examine how it was changed throughout the nineteenth century.

The archaeological data used in this paper was generated during an archaeological survey of the entire 55-acre Portland Wharf Park in 2002 and excavations conducted within a city block located just south of Portland's commercial strip along the wharf in 2005 and 2006. These excavations were primarily focused on Lot number 56 in Square 84 of the Portland town plat (Figure 4).

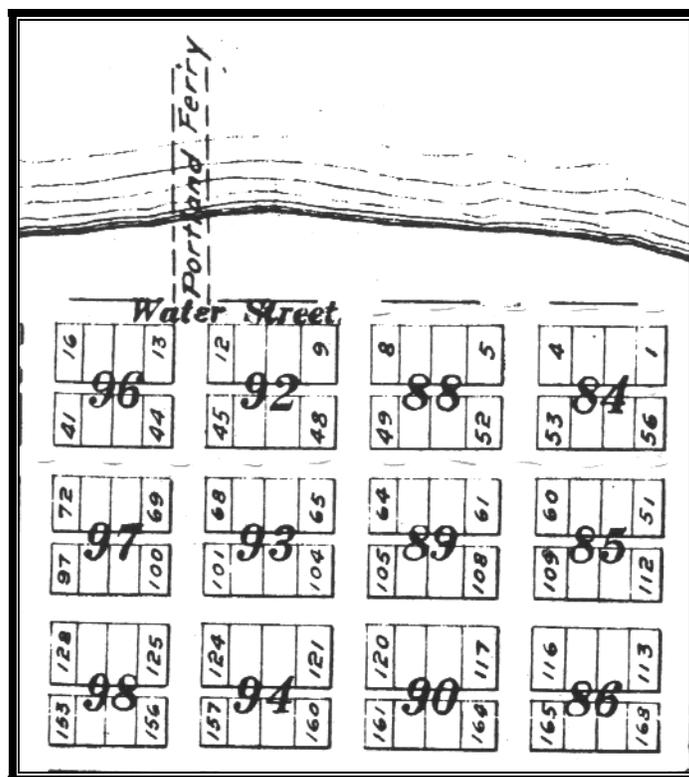


Figure 4. Portion of the Portland Plat Map 1818 Showing Square 84, Lot 56.

### The Early Portland Landscape

Excavations at Lot 56 revealed a stratigraphic profile that included ten distinct strata extending to a total depth of 1.8 m from the present day ground surface to subsoil. This profile indicates that the topography of the lot had been significantly altered over time, as the area was raised and leveled. The profile also indicates that the original ground surface was not level and varied greatly, with the area near the streets being 30 to 40 cm below the current ground surface and the area towards the middle of the block being as much as 2 m below the current ground surface (Figure 5). The topography would have looked like many floodplains along the Ohio River consisting of area of flat land with small drainages, ponds, and eroded areas with steep relief. The stratigraphic evidence from the city block that formed the north half of Square 84 indicates that a large depression or eroded area existed towards the middle of the block with a nearly 4 ft. drop from Fulton Street towards the middle of the block. This information indicates that like many developing towns in the early nineteenth century, the early development of Portland took place utilizing the contours of the existing topography with little effort to level the land. The topography of Portland area would not have been a level flat plain, but a rather uneven landscape created by erosion from the river and weather.



**Figure 5. Block Excavation at Lot 56 Starting at 1.5 m Below the Ground Surface.**

The town of Portland was founded and developed on this topography during the 1820s and 1830s. While a town plan and grid was developed in order to divide the property and sell lots, this grid does not appear to have been fully imprinted on the landscape initially (Figure 4). An 1824 map of the Falls area shows that development was sparse in Portland at that time, with just a few buildings being depicted along the major streets (Figure 3). Most of these appear to be commercial buildings located near the river and it is unlikely that the majority of the streets shown on the grid actually existed at the time. This map indicates that Portland initially developed a commercial district along the riverfront at the wharf, with residential development dispersed to the south on large 198 x 105 foot lots. The focus of the early development of the town was squarely focused on the wharf and landing for riverboats. This initial pattern of development continued as Portland began to grow substantially in the late 1830s. Based on a ca. 1840 painting of Portland, it appears that some of the main streets had been developed on the flat land along the top of the riverbank where commercial development of stores and warehouses took place (Figure 6). The residential area behind the main commercial strip shows a dispersed pattern of development, as houses appear to be spaced far apart. This pattern is unlike most urban residential development patterns where houses were built close to each other on small lots. However, this pattern would not be unexpected considering that Portland was just a fledgling rivertown at the time and was not experiencing rapid residential growth.



**Figure 6. A Ca. 1840s Water Color Painting of Portland (Shippingport is in the Background).**

The archaeological evidence recovered from Lot 56 appears to confirm this pattern, as the remains of house built in the 1830s were identified over 100 ft. from the street towards the middle of the lot. Several demolition related strata dating to the 1850s were identified in the area and showed evidence of burning (Figure 7). The deposits suggested that a house had burned in the area during the 1850s. The remains of the house were buried and the area graded and left vacant for a number of years. A court case involving the property indicates that the house located on the property was at the center of a dispute over a purchase price. The house burned down just days after the new owner purchased the property in 1856. The new owner attempted to get his money back to no avail and according to deeds and tax records the property was vacant until around 1870 when its value had sufficiently appreciated to cover the purchase price at which point it was sold and redeveloped. The early history of Lot 56 exemplifies the development pattern of Portland during the early to mid nineteenth century and indicates that it remained as such until around the 1870s.



**Figure 7. Block Excavation at Lot 56 Showing Strata Associated with 1856 Burned House.**

The early development pattern established in Portland consisted of a gradual establishment of the planned street grid with dense commercial development along the top of the riverbank and wharf with low density dispersed residential development on streets behind. This development took place in concert with the topography, which was rather uneven in places, as there does not appear to be any evidence of land filling or leveling during this period. This pattern seems to be indicative of a small town, like Portland was at the time. Portland like many small towns had a commercial district comparable to a typical Main Street and a center in the form of the wharf, which acted as the focal point of the town. Dispersed residences radiated from this center towards south, east, and west bracketed by rural agricultural lands, as the town center was not the geographic center, but the economic and cultural center. Based on this pattern of development imprinted on the landscape, Portland was distinctive as a small independent town. Although Louisville had annexed Portland for the final time in 1852 and it experienced substantial growth at the time, documentary and archaeological evidence suggests that the early development pattern established in Portland persisted into the 1860s and was a distinctive landscape that reflected its former town status. Because the portage industry was still strong and Portland was a destination for steamboats, Louisville did little to change things in Portland and invested resources in the neighborhood to pave the wharf and improve streets. In 1853, the City of Louisville sought to pave the wharf. It was improved and paved with stone to accommodate increasing river traffic. One of the first sewers in Louisville was built under 35<sup>th</sup> St. to aid

drainage in Portland. By the 1880s, many of Portland's streets had been paved (Louisville Municipal Reports 1866-1916). In fact, in 1856 a large brick hotel was built in Portland to accommodate the many boatmen and passengers from the steamboats. An announcement in the *Louisville Daily Courier* for the St. Charles Hotel describes it as such and provides a sense of the Portland landscape at the time:

A Hotel in Portland It has often been to us a source of wonderment that the neighboring town of Portland – now incorporated as part and parcel of our own city – had not first class hotel for the accommodation of the great throng of passengers daily arriving at that place. That such an establishment would be profitable to the proprietors, and highly convenient to the traveling public, can admit of no doubt. Every day throughout the year, there are a large number of steamboat arrivals, crowded with travelers, many arriving in the night time, who in order to reach this city, must submit to many inconveniences. This pressing demand for hotel accommodations in Portland is now about being satisfied. Mr. Paul Villier, a wealthy and public spirited citizen has erected a very fine and commodious building admirably adapted for a house of public entertainment. It is situated on Commercial street, within a few steps of the steamboat landing, and yet sufficiently removed from the bustle of the wharf to be quiet and secluded.

This Hotel, the St. Charles, is now about completed, and will soon be in readiness for occupancy. It is a beautiful specimen of architecture—five stories in height, and embracing some sixty spacious, well ventilated and convenient rooms. The parlors are large and handsome—the dining room is a perfect model and the sleeping apartments snug, airy and light. We do not know of a public house combining greater advantage of location and construction than this. Mr. Villier has spared no pains to render it unexceptionable. Adjoining the hotel structure, are very large and handsome grounds, properly ornamented with shade and fruit trees, flowers, shrubbery and other embellishments for the gratification of the taste and the luxurious enjoyment of the body. So that the visitor while convenient to the whirl of business, can find a petite paradise of rural sweets, by stepping from his room.

The basement of the St. Charles consists of several large, dry and light rooms, adapted to various hotel purposes. In the yard there is a fine well and force pump—furnished by Thos. Williams & Co., of this city—that can, with the labor of four men, throw streams of water all over the premises, thus preventing any danger from conflagration. The view from the observatory upon the top of the hotel is of exceeding beauty. A most charming landscape—a perfect panorama of variegated scenes, spreads out before the eye. The Knobs of Indiana and busy little city of New Albany in their shadows—the falls and islands of the Ohio—the green woods in the rear of Portland—and the church spires of Louisville—can all be embraced with one sweep of the vision. It is the purpose of Mr. Villier to rent the establishment to a good landlord on the most reasonable terms. His main object in erecting it, has been to increase the trade and importance of Portland.

That portion of our city needs such a hotel. Its busy commerce—its large boarding school for young ladies, and the future promise of growth, all testify to the importance of this improvement. We trust that the energy and public spirit of Mr. Villier, may meet with due reward, and that Portland may soon boast of a first class hotel in the St. Charles.

This description exemplifies the Portland landscape of 1856 and even hints at contrast with Louisville, as Portland seems to be independent and distinctive, except as a political entity. However, archaeological evidence indicates that this landscape saw significant changes later in the nineteenth century and as such represents a contrast in the landscape that can make identity visible and expose the landscape as a vehicle of normalization.

### **Late Nineteenth Century Changes to the Portland Landscape**

An analysis of the archaeological deposits identified at Lot 56 indicates that substantial changes to the Portland landscape occurred by the 1870s and continued into the 1890s. Extensive filling and leveling of the area took place in the late nineteenth century, as nearly 3 feet of fill was added. The large lot was subdivided into as many as 6 smaller lots, which were subsequently redeveloped with small shotgun houses adjacent to the street in the 1870s (Figure 8). An 1884 map of Portland shows that the development pattern had changed dramatically on Lot 56 and in Portland overall, as the town plan street grid had been fully realized and subdivided into many small lots with the street fronts densely packed with small houses (Figure 9). According to archaeological and map evidence these houses were situated much closer to the street than the earlier house located on the property. In fact the location of the ca.1830s house becomes the rear yard area of the shotgun houses in the 1870s as several privies were constructed there. Although Lot 56 had significantly changed by 1884, remnants of the old residential pattern remained such as the large residence set back from the street on Lot 54. However, this house had been demolished by 1892 and Lot 54 became a coal yard sometime between 1892 and 1905, as the area became more industrialized and dense.

The 1880s Portland landscape looked much different than that of the 1840s, as the topography was filled and leveled followed by a change in the building pattern and the realization of the planned street grid. The original town center, the commercial strip and wharf, is only distinguished by a concentration of brick buildings along Water Street. Although not an accurate depiction of the density of buildings located in Portland at the time (only large residences and commercial buildings were shown), an 1883 birds eye map showing Portland depicts a different landscape than that illustrated by the 1840 painting (Figure 10). This new landscape more resembled a traditional urban neighborhood of Louisville than that of a traditional small town.



Figure 8. The Remains of an 1870s Shotgun House on Lot 56.

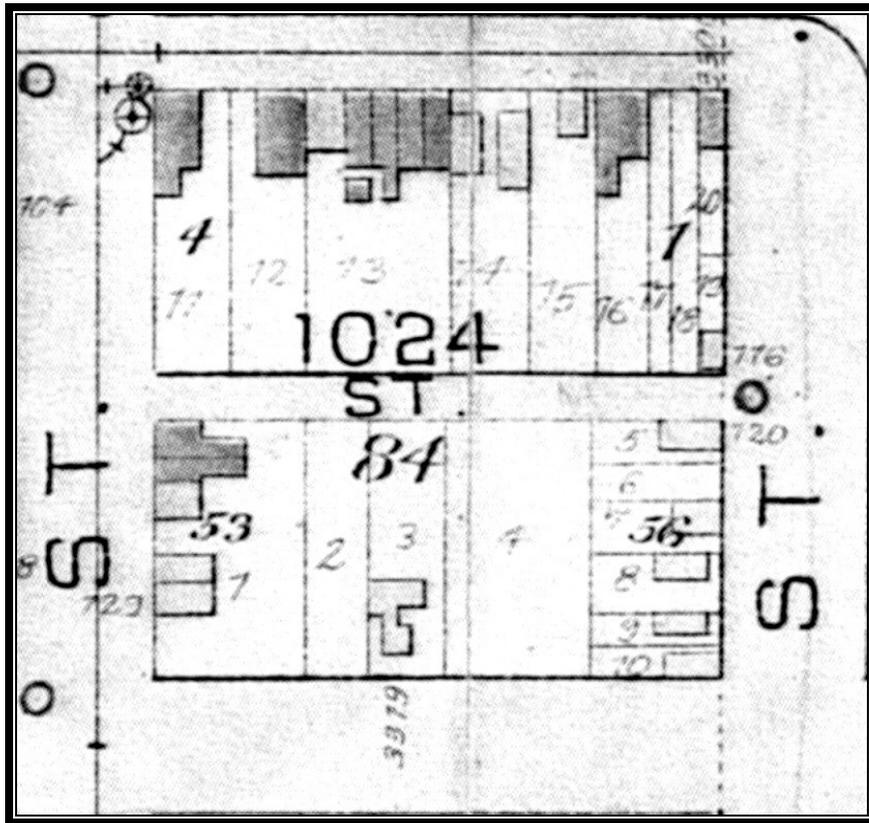
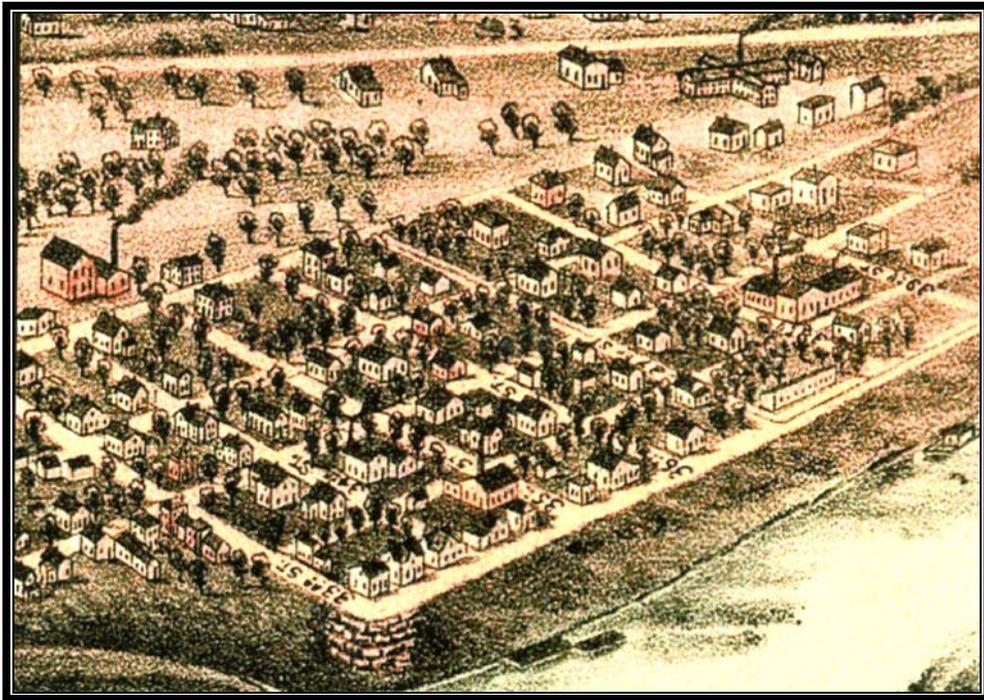


Figure 9. 1884 Map Showing Square 84, Lot 56 with Subdivisions (Hopkins 1884).



**Figure 10. An 1883 Birdseye View of Portland (Clarke 1883).**

This new landscape represented a modification of the old landscape that was influenced by a wide variety of factors that coincided with significant economic and political changes, as well as several major floods. Certainly a significant cause of the changes in the landscape is due to the growth of Portland, which like many towns facilitated higher density and subdivision of lots. However, the attitude of Louisville towards Portland and the perceptions of the former town had changed significantly. Once improvements were made to the Portland Canal and it was taken under the control of the federal government in 1870, Portland's economic fortunes diminished greatly. Railroads carried a larger share of freight across the country and the steamboats that still plied the river no longer needed to stop in Portland. Though it was home to some industry, Portland lost its economic value and it was no longer a destination for travelers or goods. A series of devastating floods occurred during the 1880s and damaged many of the buildings in Portland. At this time, the perception of the former town was not one of independence, but of a neighborhood of Louisville. Thus, residential development became a way for landowners in Portland to profit, as they leveled the land, subdivided their large lots, and built small homes on the street for the working class. The result of these factors was a change in the development pattern from a town center with dispersed residences pattern to a traditional urban neighborhood pattern that featured higher density housing with corner commercial properties that catered to residents (Figure 9 and 10).