

HISTORY OF THE USE AND TRANSIT OF CINCINNATI HILLSIDES

The Ohio River Valley slope rising above the Cincinnati shoreline is interrupted by the mouths of many tributary valleys, including those of the Little Miami and Mill Creek. Lunken Airport covers the level expanse at the mouth of the Little Miami Valley and Cincinnati's Downtown, Pendleton, Over-the-Rhine, West End, Queensgate, and Lower Price Hill neighborhoods share the basin at the mouth of the Mill Creek.

The eastern and western slopes of the Little Miami and Mill Creek Valleys are incised by inflowing branch streams while the valley slopes along the branches are notched by ravines. This extensive stream dissection of Cincinnati's landscape has created gradients of twenty percent or more over about one-fifth of the city's surface. Cincinnati's hilly terrain is reflected in the names of almost half its neighborhoods: Bond Hill, Clifton (derived from the Old English *clif* and *tun*, meaning "hillside settlement"), College Hill, CUF (Clifton Heights/University Heights/Fairview), East Price Hill, East Walnut Hills, Kennedy Heights, Lower Price Hill, Mount Adams, Mount Airy, Mount Auburn, Mount Lookout, Mount Washington, North Fairmount, Paddock Hills, Pleasant Ridge, Roll Hill, South Fairmount, Tusculum (named after a wealthy Roman hill town), Walnut Hills, West Price Hill, and Winton Hills.

Prior to the enlargement of Cincinnati's boundaries during the late nineteenth century, town boosters characterized the municipality as a "City of Seven Hills," the historical title for Rome, Italy. The seven highlands that surrounded Cincinnati, according to an 1853 publication, were Mount Adams, Walnut Hills (originally called Walnut Hill), Mount Auburn, Vine Street Hill (now Clifton Heights), College Hill, Fairmont (now Fairmount), and Mount Harrison (now Price Hill). The "Seven Hills" designation for Cincinnati is seldom used today, although the label survives in the names of a few local schools, businesses, and organizations. The city nevertheless remains tied to Rome since it is the namesake of the Society of Cincinnati, a Revolutionary War veterans group titled in honor of the Roman soldier Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus. Arthur St. Clair, the first governor of the Northwest Territory and a member of the veterans group, was responsible for changing the town's name from Losantiville to Cincinnati.ⁱ

When Governor St. Clair first arrived in the area in 1790, only the settlements of Losantiville and Columbia had been cleared of the trees that covered the land within today's city boundaries. Increased logging activity during the following decades provided a growing population with space for crop fields, timber for fuel, and lumber for buildings. The deforestation initially skipped hillsides, since cultivating sloped ground was much harder than raising crops on valley bottoms and upland plateaus. Intact woodland still surrounded the Mt. Auburn hillside site of Dr. Daniel Drake's cabin in 1819, and ten years later, Frances Trollope's family became lost in the woods on the Clifton Heights hillside, a slope "so steep that we sometimes fancied we could rest ourselves against it by only leaning forward a little."ⁱⁱ

Although hillside trees at first escaped the axe, they eventually were felled for their valuable wood. The formerly forested slopes largely became pastures and, by the mid-nineteenth century, vineyards. Hundreds of Cincinnati's hillside acres were devoted to the growth of the Catawba grape for the production of a nationally-distributed sparkling wine. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow praised the bubbly drink as well as Cincinnati's vine-covered heights:

*. . . the richest and best
Is the wine of the West,
That grows by the Beautiful River . . .
And this song of the wine,*

*This greeting of mine,
The winds and the birds shall deliver
To the Queen of the West,
In her garlands dressed,
By the banks of the beautiful river.ⁱⁱⁱ*

A second alcohol-producing industry began to utilize the hillsides in the mid-nineteenth century when breweries dug tunnels into the Mt. Auburn, Clifton Heights, and Fairview hills. The excavations were lined with brick and stocked with barrels of lager for storage at constant cool temperatures. One of the breweries also tapped into a Clifton Heights hillside spring for water, an essential ingredient of beer. Springs are common features on Cincinnati's slopes, as attested by the springhouse in Fairview Park and the numerous spring-fed lakes at the base of the hill in Spring Grove Cemetery. A hillside spring in Eden Park supplied visitors with over one hundred barrels of water daily until it was capped and covered with the Spring House Gazebo, now the icon of the Cincinnati Park Board.^{iv}

Before Eden Park became a city property in 1870, the site included several limestone quarries in addition to vineyards. The locations of the park's Twin Lakes and Mirror Lake were quarries that provided stone for numerous buildings in the surrounding area. Nearby, the steepness of the slopes around Mt. Adams is due to the many quarries operated by stonecutters and carters who resided in the hilltop neighborhood. Most hillsides in Cincinnati at some point hosted at least one quarry.^v

Limestone blocks produced by the quarries initially were carried to building sites in the Cincinnati basin. However, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the stone also was used in the construction of suburbs that were displacing farmlands in the valleys and on the uplands. From the suburban homes, commuters reached their jobs in the city by riding down dirt roads in horse-drawn omnibuses, hacks, or wagons. The omnibuses soon were replaced by horse-drawn streetcars running on tracks that were smoother than the wheel-rutted dirt lanes.^{vi}

Travel speed increased as steam railroads set forth from Cincinnati over the gently-sloping floors of the Mill Creek, Little Miami, and Ohio River Valleys. The railroad companies operated trains to distant cities but also used their tracks to run local trains to valley suburbs such as Hartwell, Linwood, and Sayler Park. In addition, a short commuter railway traveled up the Mill Creek Valley to South Fairmount and then climbed west through the Lick Run Valley to Westwood. Another small railway line took commuters to Mount Lookout by running east along the Ohio River to Columbia and then ascending north through the valley of Crayfish Creek. A third minor railroad went from the Mill Creek Valley at Northside up the Badgeley's Run Valley to College Hill.^{vii}

Beginning in the 1870s, inclined-plane railways were built to transport commuters to hilltop communities previously unserved by railroads. An incline consisted of a pair of side-by-side railroad tracks connecting the top to the bottom of a hill. A powerhouse at the summit held two steam engines, each attached to a steel cable that moved a car up and down its track, or plane. The two cars also were tethered to each other by a cable that looped around a pulley in the powerhouse, so as one car went up, the other went down. Because the cars were counterbalanced, they could easily be moved by the steam engines unless one car was overburdened.^{viii}

The Cincinnati Inclined Plane Railway Company in 1872 opened its Mt. Auburn Incline between a lower station at the head of Main Street and an upper station at the site that is now

Jackson Hill Park. Two years later, the Price Hill Inclined Plane Railroad commenced operations from West Eighth Street and Glenway up to West Eighth and Matson, now the location of Olden View Park. In 1876, the Price Hill company added an adjoining freight incline for horse-drawn wagons, the Cincinnati & Clifton Inclined Railroad Company built an inclined plane from the head of Elm Street up to the level area that has become Bellevue Park, and the Mt. Adams & Eden Park Inclined Railway began operations from Lock Street to the junction of Celestial and Ida Streets. Finally, in 1894, the Cincinnati Street Railway constructed the Fairview Incline connecting McMicken Street at the bottom of the hill with Fairview Avenue at the top.^{ix}

As the cable-driven inclines were being built, Cincinnati's streetcar companies began to consider using cables instead of horses to propel their vehicles. Horses were expensive to obtain and replace, required housing and feeding, and sometimes inconveniently died in harness. The animals also deposited volumes of urine and manure on streets and occasionally kicked, trampled, or trod on people. Finally, horses had so much difficulty pulling cars up hillsides that their numbers had to be augmented by the addition of animals held by "hill boys" stationed at the toes of the slopes. It became apparent that a gradient could be ascended more quickly and economically if a streetcar was towed uphill by a cable moving within a trench between the rails, a technology introduced in San Francisco.^x

In 1885, the Gilbert Avenue Cable Railway established an operation to draw its streetcars up the west side of Mt. Adams. The horses pulling a streetcar to the toe of the Gilbert Avenue hill were unhitched as the car was attached to the ascending portion of the cable, an endless wire rope that looped around pulleys and a driving wheel rotated by a steam engine in the powerhouse. When the streetcar reached the top of the hill, it was detached from the cable and hitched again to a team of horses. The system worked so well that the owners soon retired the company horses and installed cables over the entire length of the route between Downtown Cincinnati and Evanston. By 1888, two more cable companies had commenced operations: the Vine Street Cable Railway running from Downtown to Clifton and the Mount Auburn Cable Railway traveling from Downtown to Avondale via the Sycamore Street Hill.^{xi}

At the same time when horse-drawn streetcars on some routes were being supplanted by cable cars, other horse-drawn streetcars were being replaced by electric streetcars. A trolley riding on suspended wires supplied enough electricity to move a streetcar over a level or sloped road without the aid of either horses or a cable. Electric streetcars replaced the Gilbert Avenue and Vine Street cable lines in 1898, and the Mount Auburn Cable Railway closed in 1902, the same year in which Cincinnati's last horse-drawn streetcar was converted to electric operation. The Gilbert Avenue cable powerhouse still stands at 2245 Gilbert and the Mt. Auburn cable car barn survives at the northwest corner of Highland and Dorchester.^{xii}

Cincinnati's inclined planes likewise suffered from competition against the electric streetcars that ascended the city's hillsides. The Mt. Auburn Incline was abandoned in 1898—its right-of-way is now occupied by the Main Street Steps built in the early 1940s by the Works Progress Administration. The Fairview Incline carried its last passengers in 1923, after which its right-of-way became incorporated into the western slope of Fairview Park. The Elm Street Incline closed for renovations in 1926 and never reopened. Following the replacement of horse-drawn freight wagons by gasoline-powered trucks, the Price Hill Incline's freight plane shut down in 1929. Structural problems resulting from inadequate maintenance funding caused the closures of the Price Hill Incline's passenger plane in 1943 and the Mount Adams Incline in 1948.^{xiii}

Ever since 1951, when streetcars last climbed Cincinnati's slopes, only rubber-wheeled vehicles have scaled the hillside roads. People can also ascend the hills by walking up the city's

inclined sidewalks and nearly 400 stairways—only San Francisco exceeds Cincinnati in the number of stairsteps available to its citizens. Of the miles of public steps in the Queen City, the best known are those that lead up the Mt. Adams slope to Immaculata, the “church of the steps.” On every Good Friday since the hilltop structure was finished in 1859, thousands of people say a prayer on each step as they quietly climb to the church.^{xiv}

Cincinnati’s slopes were sparsely wooded when the “praying-the-steps” tradition began, but over the past one-and-a-half centuries they have largely returned to their natural tree-covered state. The hillside pastures disappeared as farms were squeezed out of the city, the vineyards went out of business when a root disease destroyed the grapevines, and the quarries shut down as limestone was replaced by less expensive building materials. Tree regrowth by the 1930s clothed the hillsides with woodlands that caused Winston Churchill to name Cincinnati as the most beautiful inland city in the nation. Unfortunately, the city’s slopes continue to be threatened by human-caused landslides and ill-planned real estate developments, two problems that are fully examined in this website’s reprinted article on the history of hillside regulations in Cincinnati.^{xv}

ⁱ “Cincinnati: Its Relations to the West and South,” *The West American Review* 1 (1853): 79-80.

ⁱⁱ Caroline Williams, *The City on Seven Hills, Second Edition* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Enquirer, 1938), 12; Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1832), 134.

ⁱⁱⁱ John F. Von Daacke, “Grape-Growing and Wine-Making in Cincinnati, 1800-1870,” *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* 25, no. 3 (July 1967): 207; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Catawba Wine,” *Complete Poetical Works* (Boston Houghton Mifflin, 1893).

^{iv} Robert A. Musson, *Brewing Beer in the Queen City, Second Edition* (Medina OH: Zepp Publications, 2012), 1: 15, 63; Michael D. Morgan, *Cincinnati Beer* (Charleston SC: American Palate, 2019), 48; Geoffrey J. Giglierano, Deborah A. Overmyer, and Frederic L. Propas, *The Bicentennial Guide to Greater Cincinnati: A Portrait of Two Hundred Years* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Historical Society, 1988), 238, 441; *Guide to Art and Architecture in Cincinnati Parks* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Park Board, 1995), 22.

^v Giglierano, Overmyer, and Propas, *The Bicentennial Guide*, 164; Thomas R. Schiff and Owen Findsen, *Panoramic Parks* (Cincinnati: Thomas R. Schiff and Lightborne Publishing, 2005), 11; John Clubbe, *Cincinnati Observed* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1992), 322.

^{vi} Richard M. Wagner and Roy J. Wright, *Cincinnati Streetcars* (Cincinnati: Wagner Car Co., 1969), 5.

^{vii} Carl W. Condit, *The Railroad and the City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 6-24; John H. White Jr., *On the Right Track: Some Historic Cincinnati Railroads* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Railroad Club, 2003), 52-105.

^{viii} John H. White Jr., *Cincinnati, City of Seven Hills and Five Inclines* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Railroad Club, 2001), 11.

^{ix} Roy Hotchkiss, *The Price Hill Inclined Plane Railroad Co.* (Cincinnati: Price Hill Historical Society Museum, 1999), 3-5; White Jr., *Cincinnati*, 13, 17-18.

^x Daniel Hurley, “Building Community through Mass Transit: Metro at 25,” *Queen City Heritage* 56, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 29.

^{xi} Wagner and Wright, *Cincinnati Streetcars*, 75-79, 84, 92.

^{xii} Wagner and Wright, *Cincinnati Streetcars*, 83, 87, 93.

^{xiii} Mary Anna DuSablon, *Walking the Steps of Cincinnati* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 35-36; White Jr., *Cincinnati*, 22-23, 26.

^{xiv} Hurley, "Mass Transit," 42; Caroline Williams, *Mirrored Landscapes of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Enquirer, 1939), 78; DuSablon, *Walking the Steps*, xiii, xv, 7.

^{xv} Winston Churchill, "Land of Corn and Lobsters," *Collier's* 91 (Aug. 5, 1933): 45.