JOSIE ROE & JEFF SUESS

THE *real* WRECKAGE

exploring cincinnati's architectural woes

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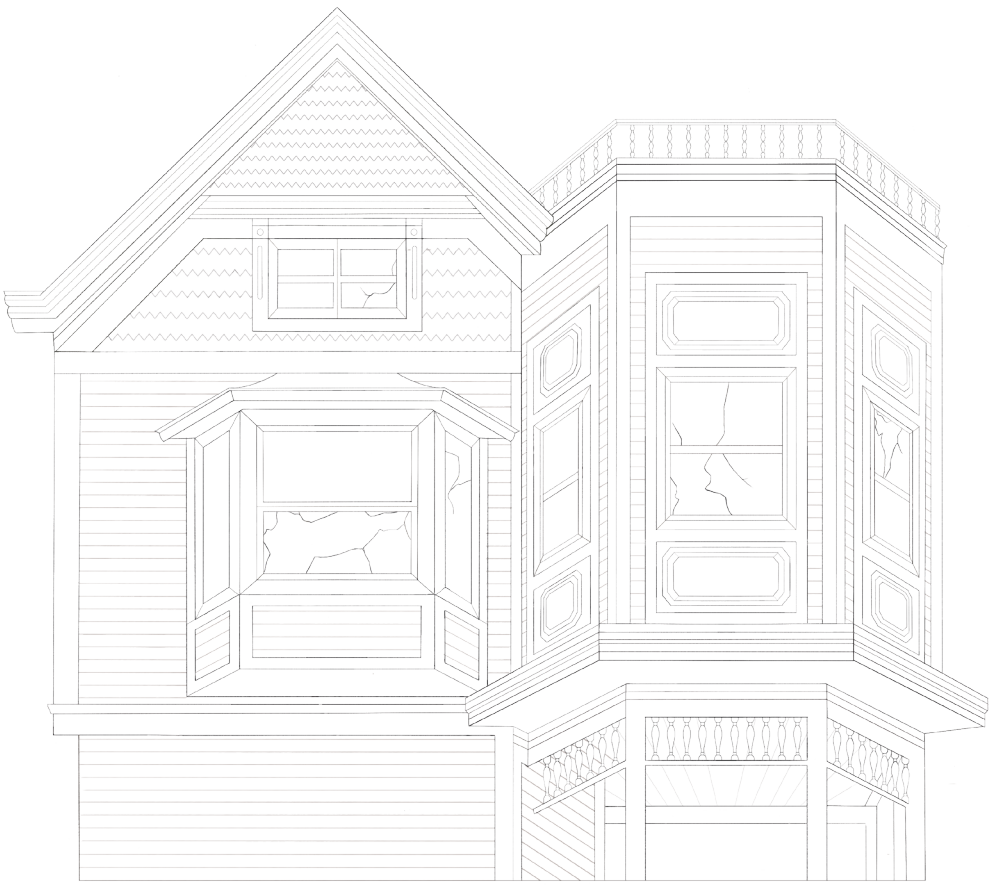
“How will we know it’s us without our past?”

— John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*



INTRODUCTION

QUEEN CITY OF THE WEST

To understand what Cincinnati has lost, we have to see the context of what Cincinnati has been. In the height of the city's stature and influence, Cincinnati was known as the Queen City of the West, noted for its arts, culture, politics and industry. As the first large city west of the Allegheny Mountains, it attracted the biggest and the best in the West. Cincinnati was founded on December 28, 1788, the second of three settlements along the Ohio River in the untamed frontier of the Northwest Territory. Originally called Losantiville, a composite of syllables loosely meaning "town opposite the Licking River", it beat out Columbia and North Bend as the location for Fort Washington to protect the settlements from the threat of Indian raids.

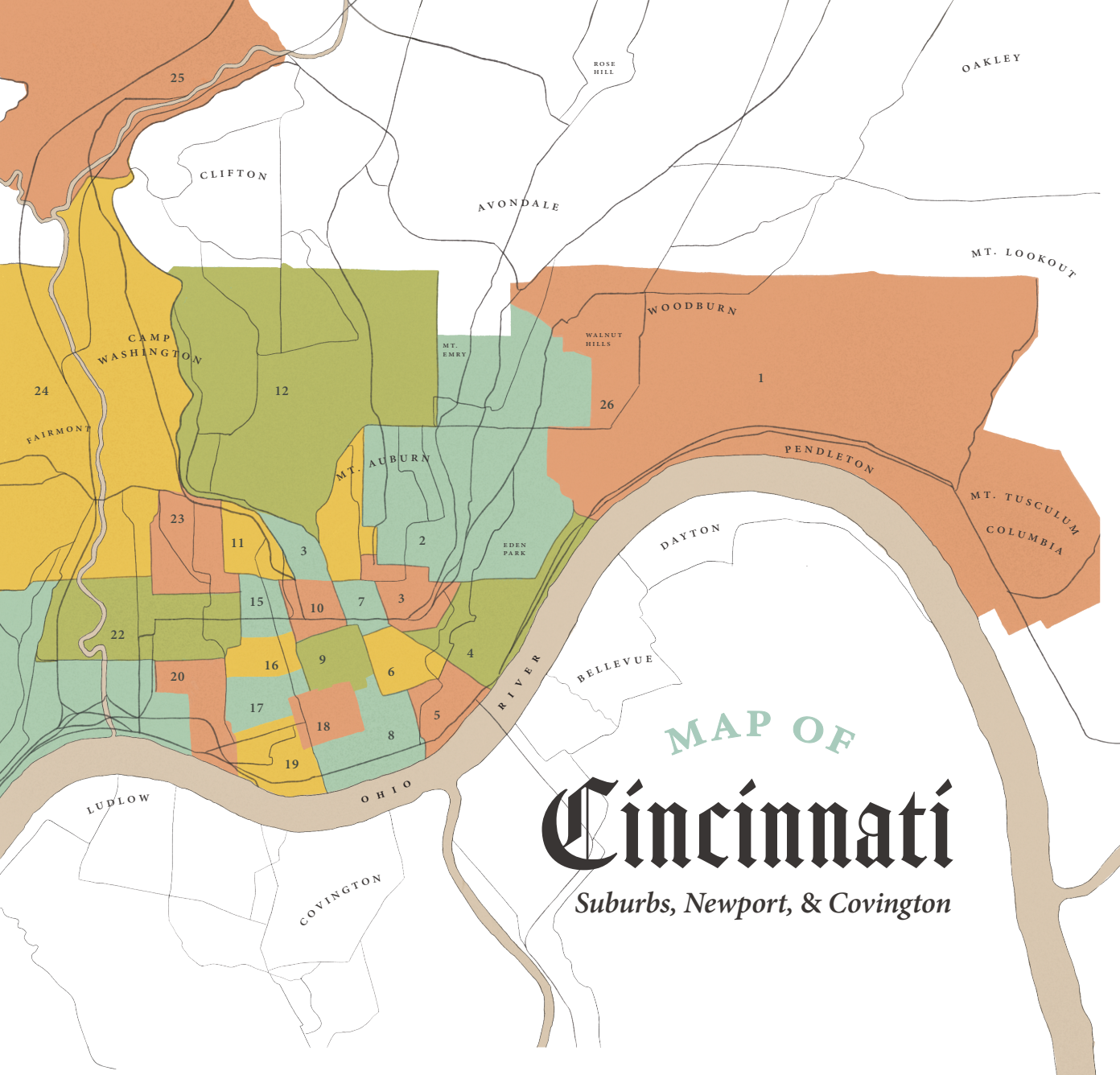
General Arthur St. Clair, the governor of the Northwest Territory, changed the name to Cincinnati after the Society of the Cincinnati, a military organization for Revolutionary War officers. The society, in turn, was named for Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus, a Roman farmer in the fifth century BC who was called to lead Rome into battle and, upon victory, gave up his power to return to the plow—a parallel to George Washington. Steamboat traffic helped to establish Cincinnati as a trading port, and by the 1840s, the bustling city was the center of the meatpacking industry, earning it the nickname Porkopolis. After the Civil War, the railroads routed to Chicago, and Cincinnati's brief stay as a top-ten metropolis had passed its welcome.

WHAT IS LEFT?

Not much is left from the city's heyday: a few houses like the Betts House and the Kemper Log House, as well as some cemeteries, though many of those were lost as well, and lie beneath Music Hall and Washington Park. By and large, those days are gone from the city's collective memory. But then another Cincinnati emerged in the late nineteenth century: a midwestern city, with its own style and character that is still evident in its architecture, pastimes and identity. This is the Cincinnati people remember, the Cincinnati of Fountain Square and Crosley Field, of the Albee and Peebles' Corner.

1.

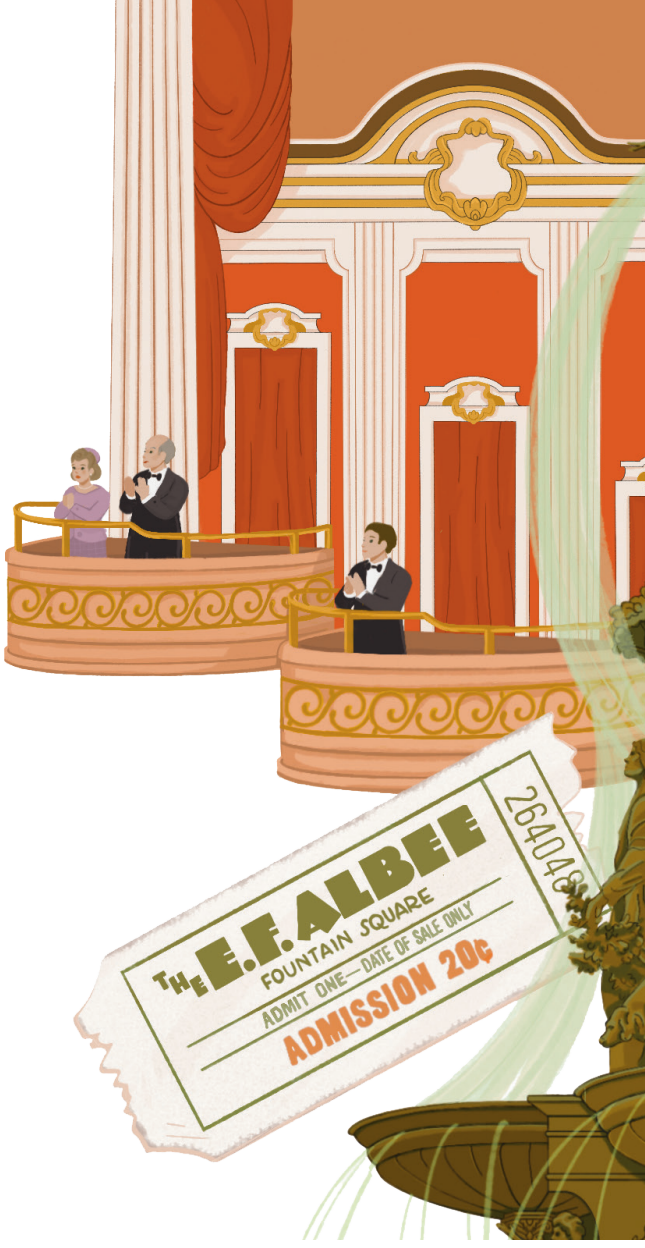
Thousands of prewar residential structures have been demolished since the 1950s, mainly caused by expressway construction and urban renewal.



This is the Queen City that people miss— riding the *Island Queen* to Coney Island and dancing in Moonlite Gardens, or taking a streetcar downtown for Christmas shopping at Mabley & Carew. Much of the lamented buildings were lost during the period of urban renewal from the 1950s through 1970s as outdated venues were replaced with modern, less ornamental structures. Others faded away as people's interests and needs changed. Many were neglected, or abandoned (1).

The buildings, attractions and districts highlighted in this book are not all those that have been lost, but they are the ones that have been woven into the character of the Queen City, the ones about which people still hold wistful remembrances or wish they could have seen. But the old city is not all lost. As disheartening as it is to look at photos of the Albee Theater, and wonder what it would be like to watch a film in its cavernous auditorium, walking through the rotunda of Union Terminal, with it's exquisite Art Deco details and beautiful mosaic murals, is just as delightful. The Cincinnati of old is still present- at least for now.

The city is losing more of its history, as even its icons are in dire need of restoration. That makes it all the more vital that we pay attention to what's still here. We have to insure that the Queen City retains its heritage, protecting it for future generations.



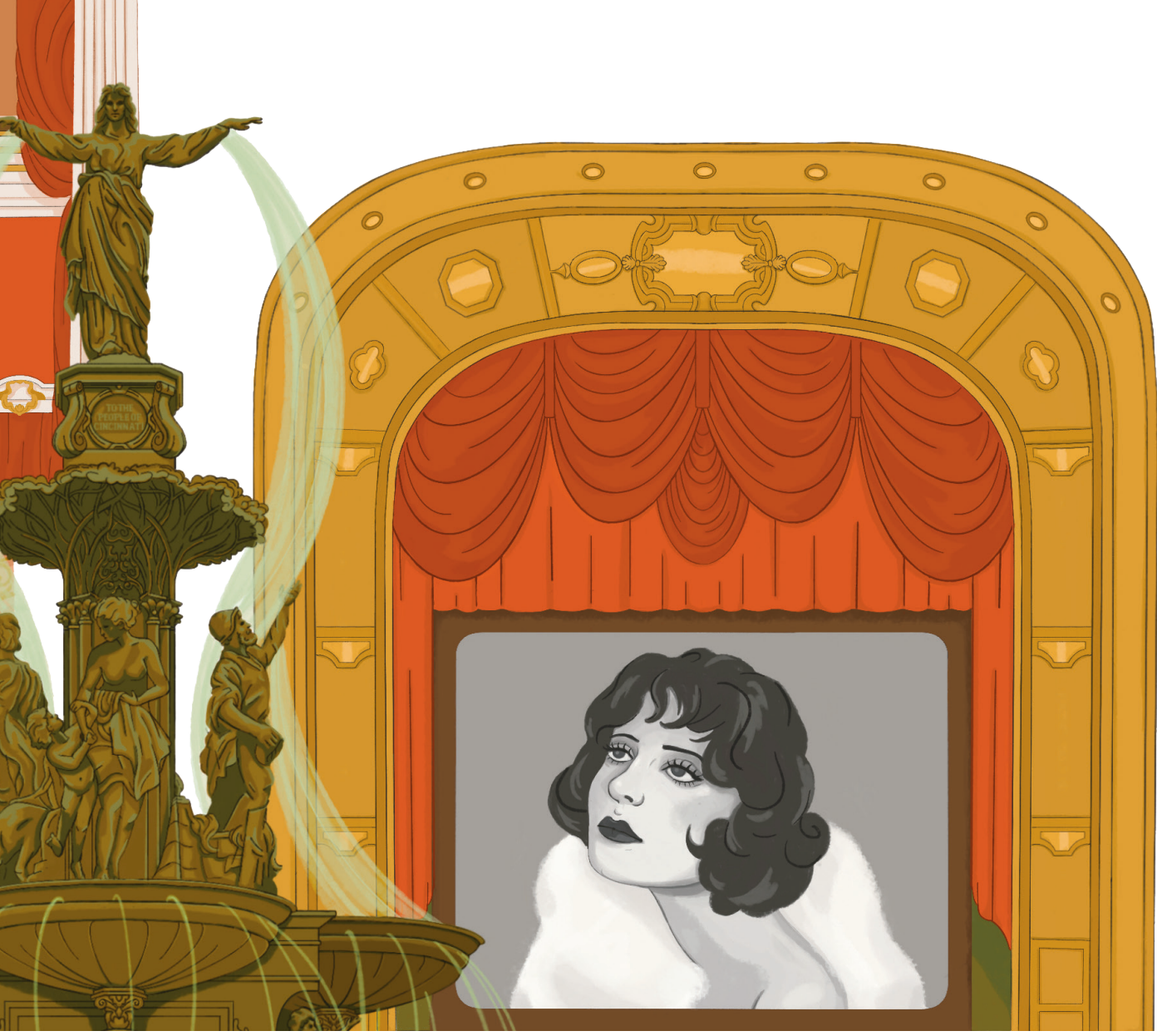
THE ALBEE THEATER

TIME MARCHES ON

Once upon a time, downtown Cincinnati had a number of palatial theaters, from opera houses to cinemas. None were finer than the Albee, located at 13 E Fifth Street, directly across from Fountain Square. Like nearly all the other downtown theaters, it is now gone. The Albee Theater is legendary in Cincinnati. It is often sited as the prime example of the short-sightedness of the city's urban renewal. Although valiant efforts were made to save the Albee, time marched on without it.

The Albee was located in the heart of downtown, being one of the last of Cincinnati's grand theaters built. It was completed in 1927. Unlike most other theaters, which were at some point converted from vaudeville stages to show movies, the Albee was built primarily to show films and theater acts, though it was designed with the opulence of the opera houses of old. The half block at the southeast corner of Fifth and Vine Streets was known as the Wiggins Block, after the former owner Samuel Wiggins. The theater, originally to be called Fountain Theater, was built in conjunction with the Fountain Square Hotel, an eleven-story hotel around the corner on Vine Street, amounting to a combined cost of $4 million.

Named for E.F. Albee, a vaudeville theater owner and the adoptive grandfather of playwright Edward Albee, the new theater would be the jewel in the Keith-Albee-Harris-Libson-Heldingsfeld chain, a complicated partnership that had been forged amongst the top names of the industry. In the 1920s, Thomas W. Lamb was the country's



premier architects of movie theater palaces, from the Capitol in New York City to the Fox Theatre in San Francisco (both demolished today), and the B.F. Keith Memorial Theatre, now called the Boston Opera House, as well as the two most magnificent looking theaters in Ohio—the Ohio Theatre in Columbus, and the Albee.

The Albee, nestled beside the Hotel Gibson to the east and the Ingalls Building to the south, was deceptively large. The façade was notable for the mamoth Neoclassical-style marble arch, looking like it belonged to another age (2). The arch was capped with an enormous sign showing 'The E.F. Albee Photo Plays'. "The exterior of the building gives no idea of the vastness of the theater's interior," the *Enquirer* newspaper wrote, adding:

"The lobby, foyer, and corridors of the New Albee seem more like the sumptous quarters of a millionaire's club than a playhouse for the people."

Lamb drew on styles of the past, and the massive size and elegance was intended to overwhelm the patrons. The interior design was influenced by the Adams style, done by late 18th century Neoclassical architect brothers Robert and John Adams. Décor included lamps purchased from the home of John Jacob Astor for $5,000 and one-story-high etched mirrors costing $10,000 apiece. The paintings displayed along the mezzanine could have been in

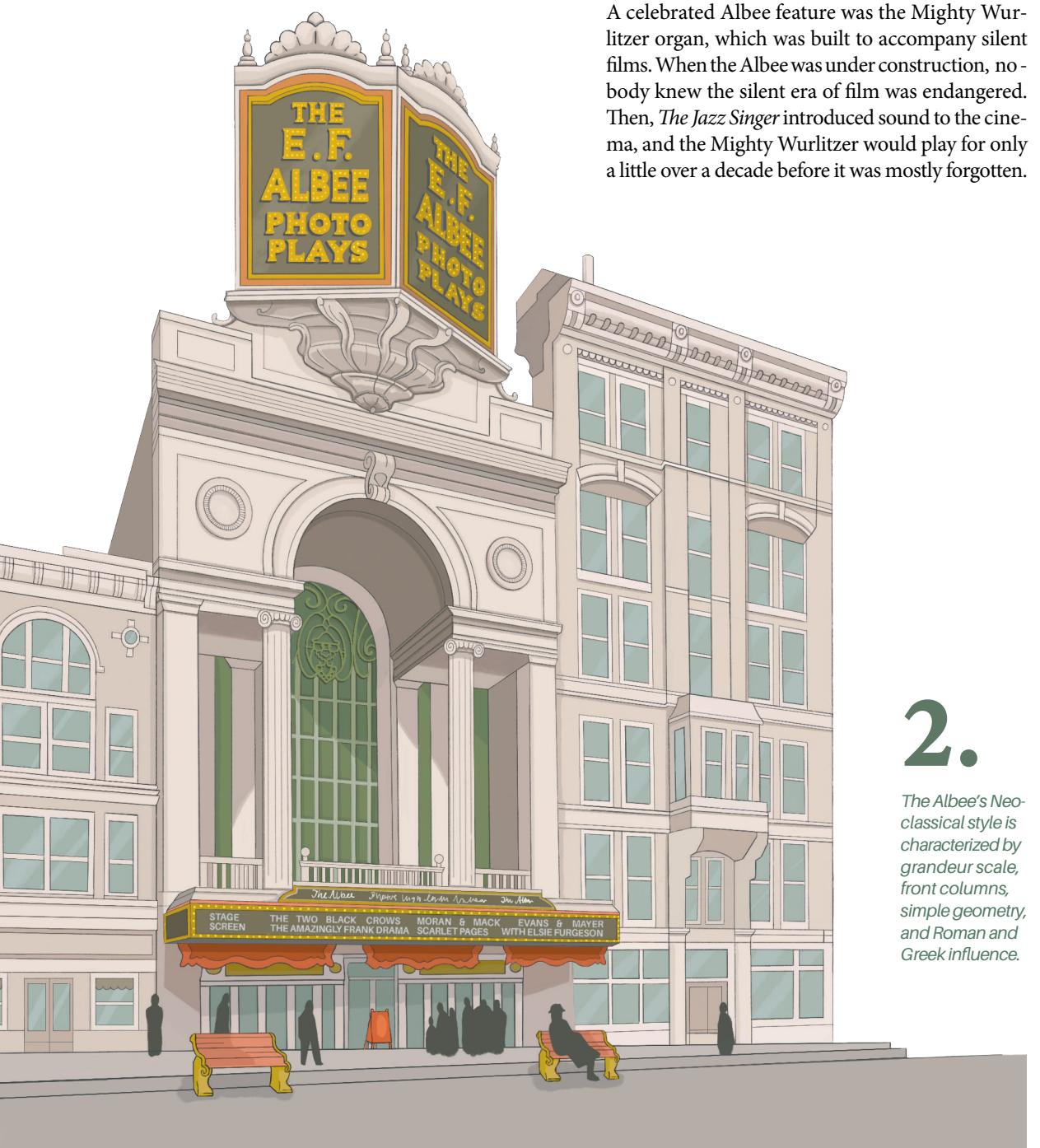
a gallery. Six floors of rooms, from a French ladies' drawing room to an English club-style men's lounge all accessible by elevator, made the theater nearly a small hotel. Those impressed by the lobby and mezzanine were overcome when they ascended one of the twin marble staircases and entered the cavernous, five story tall auditorium.

The space seated four thousand guests. It was decked out just like a true palace. Intricate Rococo styling covered every surface, from the walls and the ceiling, to the balcony and boxes (3). The acoustics were superb, and no pillars obscured the guests' sight lines. Frank Aston of the *Cincinnati Post* wrote

"What constitutes the stage show at the splendiferous new Albee probably doesn't interest you one bit. What you wish to see is the house."

DRAMA OFFSTAGE

A celebrated Albee feature was the Mighty Wurlitzer organ, which was built to accompany silent films. When the Albee was under construction, nobody knew the silent era of film was endangered. Then, *The Jazz Singer* introduced sound to the cinema, and the Mighty Wurlitzer would play for only a little over a decade before it was mostly forgotten.



2.

The Albee's Neoclassical style is characterized by grandeur scale, front columns, simple geometry, and Roman and Greek influence.

3.

Rococo style originated in Paris - seen in the Albee lobby, It emphasizes elegance and ornamentation using natural shapes and curves.

The E.F. Albee Theater opened on Christmas Eve, 1927. Following the trend at the time, it was not a formal affair, but movie stars Gloria Swanson and Norma Talmadge still wired their congratulations. Opening day featured *Get Your Man* starring Clara Bow, the "It" Girl on the screen, accompanied by Cincinnati native Hy Geis on the organ, with live entertainment on the stage. All for seventy-five cents

In 1930, Ike Libson sold his theater interests to RKO, and the theater would then be known as the RKO Albee Theater. The vaudeville acts ended in 1933, though the stage shows still continued until around 1960. Stars Fred Astaire, Jackie Gleason, and Benny Goodman made notable appearances on-stage. Later, the venue hosted rock concerts for a short time, featuring rock bands like The Kinks. The RKO Albee was the grandest of movie houses, making any film shown there special.

PAINTED GOLD

Folks gussied up to go to the Albee, which is partly why the theater was so remembered, alongside it's unique Neoclassical architecture. As television encroached on movies, audiences' experience became less of a draw to come all the way downtown.
All of the urban movie theaters suffered and closed down one by one, including similar homes to vaudeville, the West End's Regal Theatre and the Esquire in Clifton. They were both saved, however, and still exist. Even the Albee appeared a bit tired, with the brass fixtures painted gold to save on polishing.

In 1972, as "one of the country's few remaining theaters built during the period of opulent cinema palaces," the Albee was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

CLOSING THE CURTAINS

The historic Albee closed on September 17, 1974. City developers wanted to build around the city center, and the Albee was sitting on the most coveted real estate downtown. Frances Vitali helped form the Save the Albee Committee in reaction to this development. She rallied folks to spark an interest in preserving the city's architectural heritage (4).

Not everyone had such fond memories of the Albee, however. Black patrons had not been allowed into the theater until 1940, and even then, only in the balcony. William Lawless Jones, an African American from Cincinnati, wrote an opinion in the *Enquirer* newspaper in regards to segregation in the city's theaters:

"Tear it down! I'm talking about the Albee Theater, and I repeat, tear it down!"

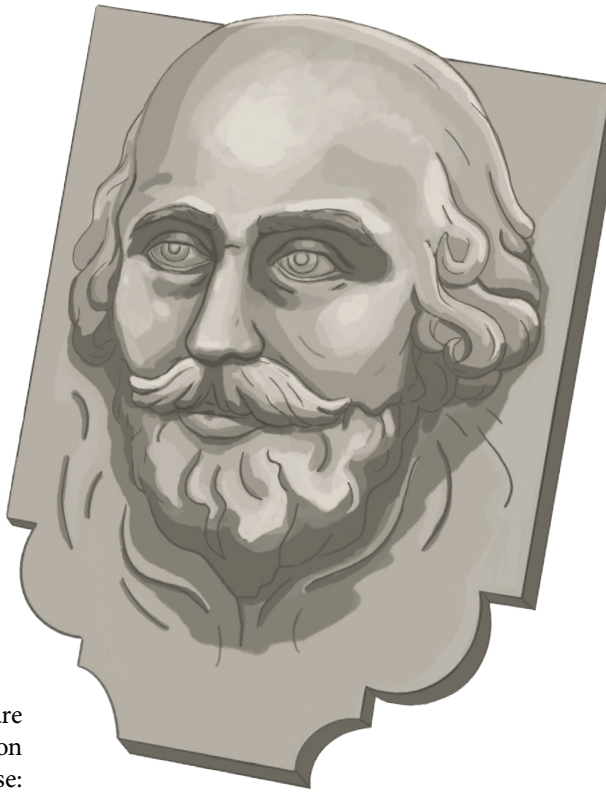
"So I say to those people who want to preserve the Albee, forget it, because all it is to black people of this now progressive city is a painful reminder of the time when they were second-class citizens deemed unfit to sit down beside someone who happened to be classified as white.

4.

Vitali, who collected signatures to advocate for the Albee, explained: "I'm only working on this because I think of the youth of tomorrow."

IN PIECES

A three-to-three tie vote by the City Planning Commission to include the Albee as a landmark under the city's "listed properties" finally doomed the theater. When the wrecking crews arrived in March 1977, workers carefully dismantled each marble piece of the facade arch. In 1986, the iconic Albee arch was affixed to the Fifth Street side of the Duke Energy Convention Center downtown. We can look to this displayed piece of history today to reminds us of what we could have saved.



OLD MAIN LIBRARY

ONCE AN OPERA HOUSE

Of all the buildings Cincinnati has lost, the most bemoaned are the Albee and the Old Main Library. Photographs of the cast-iron book alcoves and spiral staircases usually elicit the same response: How could the city have been so shortsighted as to let this gem go? But the Main Library, which became Old Main when the replacement was built, was torn down in 1955 without a whimper. The original library building stood for eighty-five years at 629 Vine Street, next door to the old Cincinnati Enquirer Building.

It was once heralded as 'the most magnificent public library in the country', but in the end, Old Main was derided as antiquated and unsuitable for the library's needs.

In 1866, Truman B. Handy announced plans to build the Handy Opera House on Vine Street to compete with Pike's Opera House. Architect James W. McLaughlin planned a four-story building with the opera house on the ground floor and an attached building for one art studio and gallery. But Handy's money dried up, and only the front building was complete when the board of education purchased the land for $83,000 in 1868. The board hired McLaughlin to complete the project, but as a library (5).

5.

Architect James W. McLaughlin designed countless Cincinnati buildings, such as the Art Museum and structures at the zoo.

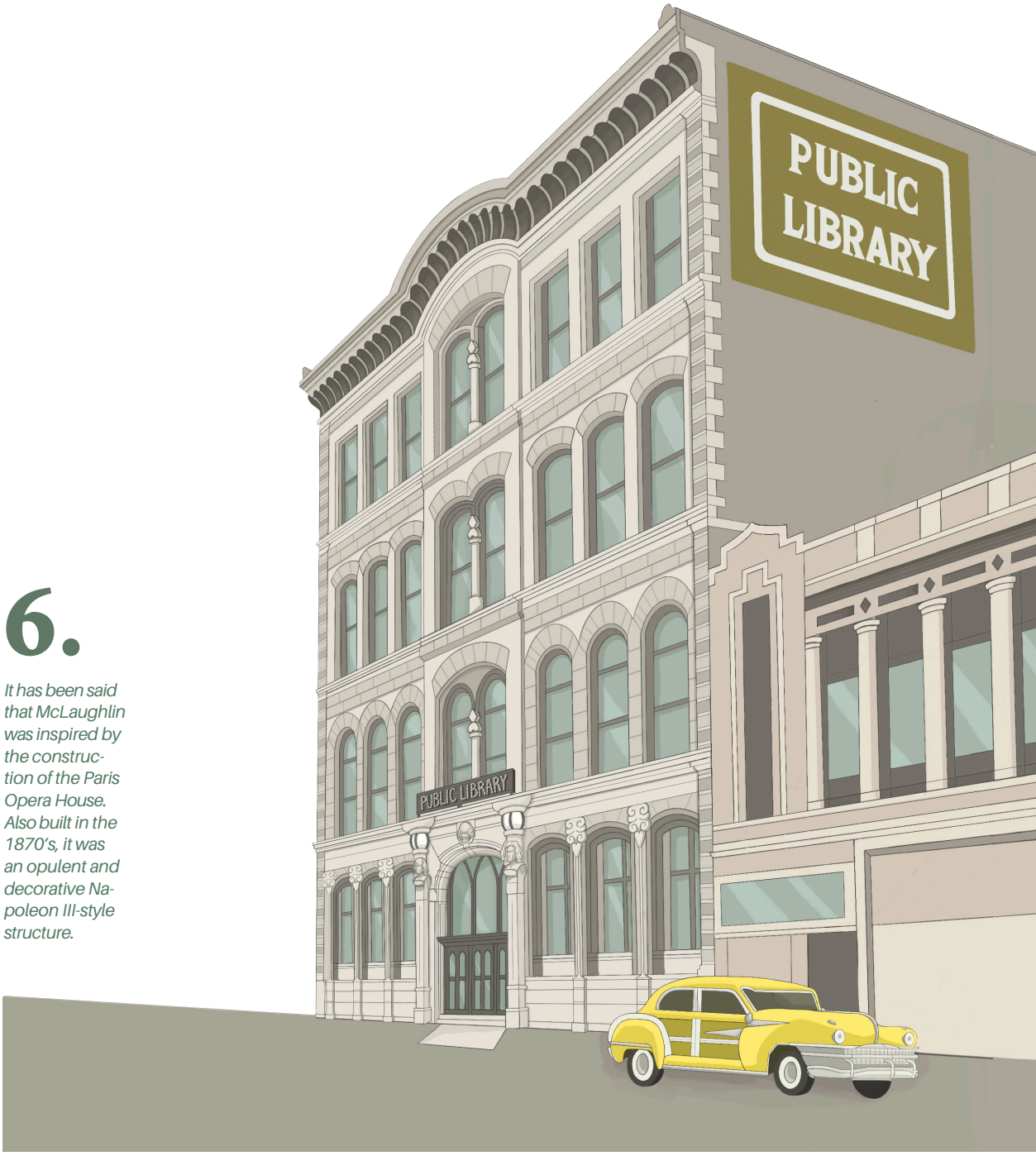
A REAL DIADEM

On December 9, 1870, the middle building and main hall opened to great fanfare on February 25, 1874. The total cost of the lot and building was $383,594.53. Patrons entered on Vine Street beneath busts of William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Benjamin Franklin. In later years, the words "PUBLIC LIBRARY" would be spelled out in light bulbs. The lobby had offices on the sides, and a front desk and booths in the center. The floor was white marble, with black and red slate checkerboard tile. In the lobby was the vestibule, a three-story connecting building, with steps that led into the main hall. Entering felt like stepped into a cathedral.

The main hall was stunning, an open well four stories tall, with five levels of cast-iron book alcoves standing like dominoes along the edges. Spiral staircases gave the librarians access to the upper shelves, with iron walkways at each level. The ceiling, supported by cantilever-type beams topped off the hall with a massive glass skylight. Shafts of sunlight cut through the windows, where it provided readers with ample illumination (6).

The *Enquirer* described the main hall: "The main hall of the building is a splendid work...The hollow square within the columns is lighted by an arched clear roof of prismatic glass set in iron, the light of which is broken and softened by a paneled ceiling of richly-colored glass.

"One is impressed not only with the magnitude and beauty of the interior, but with its adaptation to the purpose it is to serve."



6.

It has been said that McLaughlin was inspired by the construction of the Paris Opera House. Also built in the 1870's, it was an opulent and decorative Napoleon III-style structure.

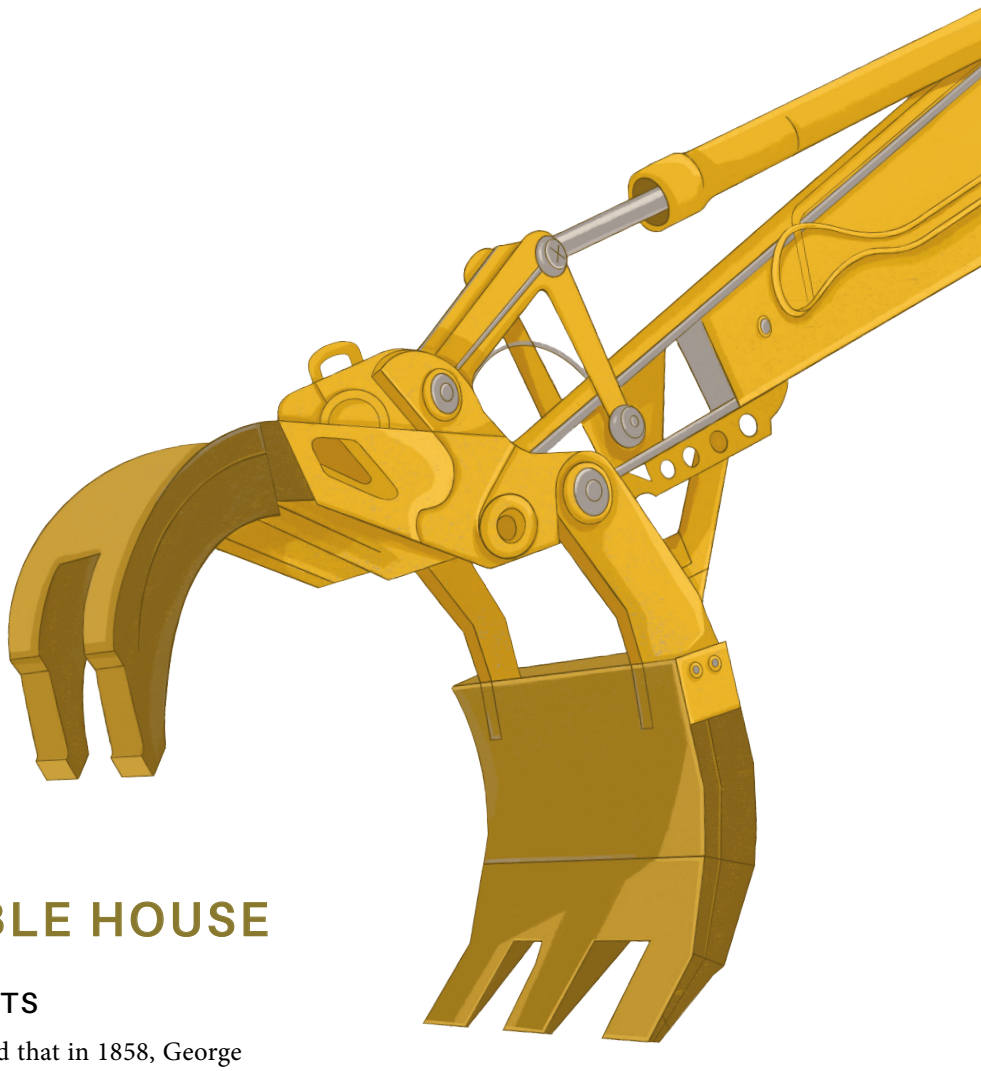
A visitor praised the library in 1877: "This is the real diadem of the Queen of the West...Cincinnati, of all the cities of the West, may boast of having the richest, the best arranged, and the most generally useful library." Only a few years after the library opened, the librarian Albert W. Whelpley wrote: "Magnificent in its proportions and imposing in appearance, our main hall, by its great waste of space, its utter lack of modern facilities and its many seriously objectionable features, approaches near to being a failure in many important ways... [T]he attendants must necessarily ascend and descend numerous flights of iron stairs a number of times each day and evening in search of books and papers in the upper alcoves." By the 1920s, the public was calling for a new main library building. The library was built for storing books, not lending them out. The vertical space had no room to grow.

GROWING PAINS

Green, the president of the library's board of trustees for over fifty years, called the library building "a constant humiliation." The library floated bond issues for a new library in the 1930s, but all were defeated until one finally passed in 1944. A new library would be built, one that, it was hoped, would create a horizontal layout for more space

The doors of Old Main closed on January 27, 1955. The building was sold to the Leman Corporation, fated to be razed for an office building and parking garage. Tiles and fixtures were snatched up by lovers of the library or people wanting to repurpose the materials. Most of the library's art was purged, including several busts of notable Cincinnatians and a replica of the Rosetta Stone. Luckily, the entrance carvings and circular stained glass windows were brought to the new library. When the end came for Old Main, there were no arguments to save it, and no one organized protests or campaigns. Interest in the building today reflects current tastes and romance with the past, not with the reality of the time. On the closure, John Fleischman wrote:

> "Yet when the doors closed forever and wise heads declared that Old Main would never be missed, they were wrong."



THE GAMBLE HOUSE

SOAP THAT FLOATS

It should be remembered that in 1858, George Washington's Virginia home, Mount Vernon, sat neglected in a state of disrepair until Ann Pamela Cunningham raised funds to purchase and preserve the mansion. If ever there were a home in America that should be saved, it was Mount Vernon, and it nearly didn't happen. That fact may help explain Cincinnati's inconsistent track record of working to preserve its own heritage.

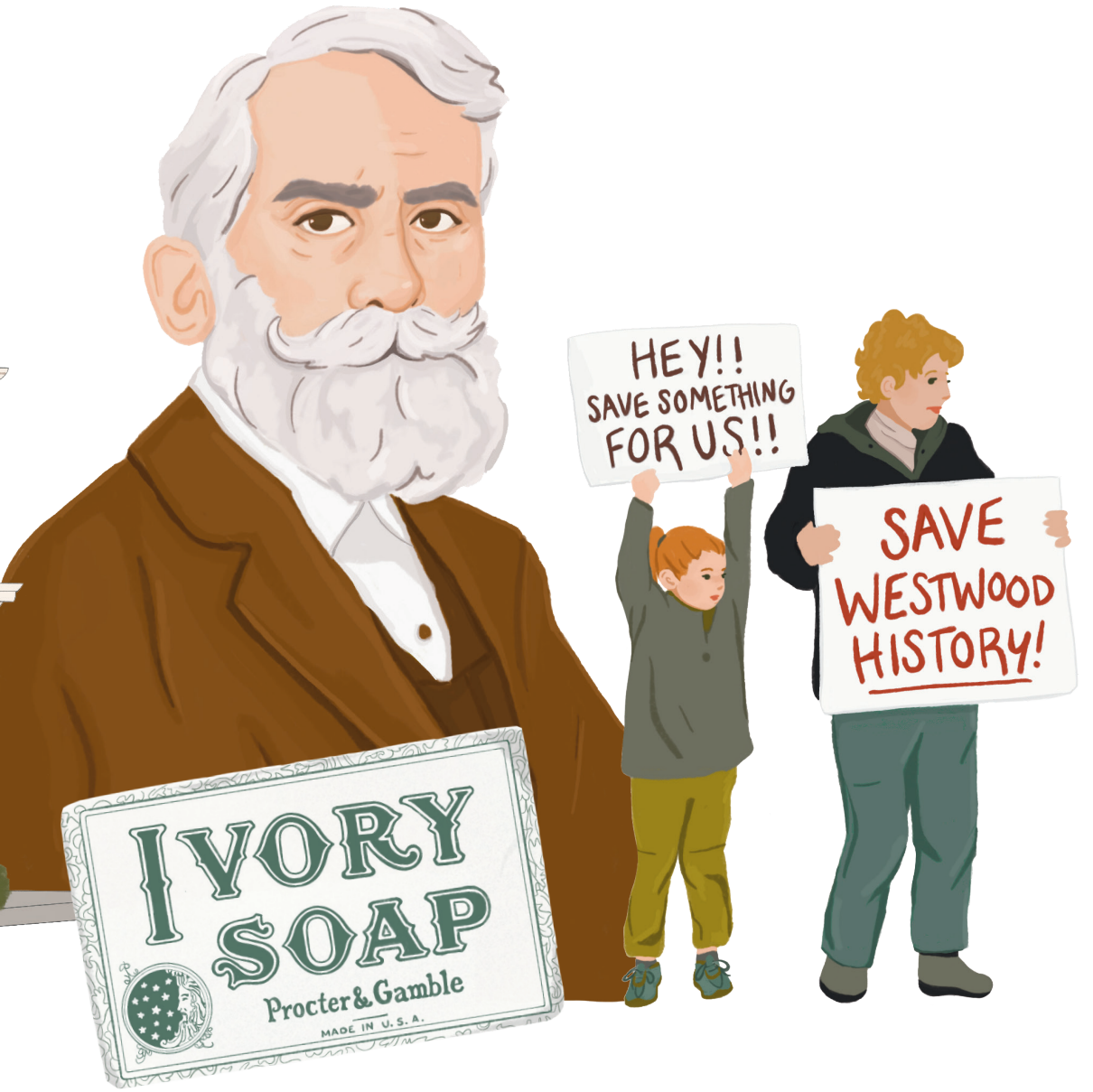
"For every Taft Birthplace [...] saved, a Gamble house is lost, sometimes despite herculean efforts to save it."

James Norris Gamble was born in 1836, a year before his father, also named James Gamble, joined William Procter and they founded Procter & Gamble. In 1879, Gamble created Ivory Soap, "the soap that floats" that was "99 44/100% pure." The soap became P&G's signature brand. Ever the philanthropist, Gamble helped found Christ Hospital in honor of his mother, Elizabeth, and funded UC's Nippert Stadium. Gamble lived in a thirteen-room Victorian home at 2918 Werk Road in Westwood for fifty years (7). It was a staple of the blue-collar neighborhood. He named the home Ratonagh, after his ancestral town in Northern Ireland. The Gamble family purchased the sixty-acre property around 1830; the earliest section of the house was a farmhouse built in 1840. Gamble inherited the property in 1875, and it dwindled over the years to eleven acres. He died in his home in 1932.

NOT WITHOUT A FIGHT

His daughter Olivia and grandson Louis Nippert, owner of the Reds during the Big Red Machine years, kept the house just as it was when Gamble lived there. When Nippert died in 1992, the ownership passed to his wife, who handed the house over to the Greenacres Foundation, which was managed by the Nipperts. In 2010, Greenacres petitioned to have the Gamble house demolished, claiming it was unable to afford the upkeep.

Both neighbors and preservationists attempted to save the home, and the city council named it a historic landmark. Meanwhile, Greenacres gutted the home of all of it's fixtures. *Enquirer* columnist Cliff Radel wrote extensively about the plight of the Gamble house, noting that according to the Greenacres' attorney, the restoration costs ranged from $1.3 to $3 million, and restoring the house was "not economically feasible." Yet Greenacres' tax return that year listed its assets at $227 million, and five years earlier, the foundation had donated $3 million to preserve the historic estate of yeast baron Julius Fleischmann in Indian Hill. The Cincinnati Preservation Association's three offers to purchase and restore the home were rejected. The city council's efforts to halt demolition did not pay off - they were overruled, and ignored.



At the State of the City address in 2012, the former Cincinnati mayor Mark Mallory tried to advocate for the property. He said

> "The reason people on the west side are so adamant about keeping the Gamble house is that it is a huge source of pride."

After all legal recourses and community efforts had been exhausted the Gamble home was finally demolished on April 1, 2013. Eight years later, the Great Parks of Hamilton County purchased the site of the former estate, and they opened the 22-acres of land for recreational use, as a public park and ecology center for the Westwood community to enjoy.

7.

The Gamble home architecture featured Victorian-era characteristics, like a grand tower and wraparound porch. The interiors were eccentric as well.

AFTERWORD

WHAT IS THE "REAL WRECKAGE"?

My senior capstone all began with the initial question - why do we demolish buildings? The reality is that there are countless answers to my query, and I've spent the last year gathering a better understanding of the topic. In truth, the foundation of a building could be crumbling, or it might be made up of hazardous materials that put our health at risk. Or, the owner refuses to see value in maintaining the property, despite it's cultural significance or what it means to the community surrounding it. These circumstances are always the most heartbreaking.

So, what is the *real wreckage*? Well, apart from the literal dismantlement of a property, razing historic and valuable buildings also wrecks and erases our history and sense of place. My ultimate goal is to highlight the rich history we've lost to (mainly) human error and neglect, and encourage Cincinnatians of all ages to care.

My future intention is to build upon this project and include buildings that we *did* manage to preserve, like the monumental use of art deco in Union Terminal, and the beautiful, Italianate-style apartment buildings in Over The Rhine.

THANK YOU!

Special thanks to writer Jeff Suess and his book, *Lost Cincinnati,* which provided the base text for *The Real Wreckage.* Beautifully written, it inspired my choices on what properties to include in the project, and encouraged my curiosity to find out more about the exciting history of the city I am from.

My thanks extend to all of my friends, family, and teachers that have helped me get to this point, I couldn't make this without their love and guidance.