

From Exhibition to Conversation: The Elusive Art of Digital Storytelling

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For several decades in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Cleveland's Euclid Avenue was known as "Millionaires' Row" and even "The Showplace of America." Standard Oil founder John D. Rockefeller, arc lamp inventor Charles Brush, Western Union founder Jeptha Wade, and many other luminaries called the thoroughfare home. But nearly all of their baronial mansions met the wrecking ball as Cleveland rose to the status of America's "Fifth City" (right behind Detroit).

Euclid Avenue's downtown section became a celebrated shopping street—the nation's sixth largest—with six major department stores, an echo of Chicago's State Street. That too had completely disappeared by the 1990s. Perhaps the only bright spots along the entire six-mile corridor were Playhouse Square, a warren of interconnected theaters from the 1920s that were reopened after the nation's largest theater restoration project, and University Circle, a collective campus housing the city's major museums and "eds-meds" institutions. Most of the rest was a shell of what it was a century before.

Then, in 2005, I had the opportunity to work with a colleague and our students on a place-making project that focused on the history of Euclid Avenue—Cleveland's answer to Woodward Avenue. The city's transit authority was building a busway on Euclid with a federal grant that had a 1% earmark for the arts. A local public art nonprofit signed on to produce artistic components along the six-mile corridor. It understood right away that much of the art would necessarily reflect history, but *what* history?

Ultimately, we joined the project and crafted a public history initiative with the additional goal of creating a born-digital exhibition that might recover not only the well-known stories of the avenue but also help people reimagine the place. We conducted dozens of oral histories and created multimedia portraits of places known or forgotten, combining interpretive text, historical images, oral history story clips, and even mini-documentaries (see Figure 1).

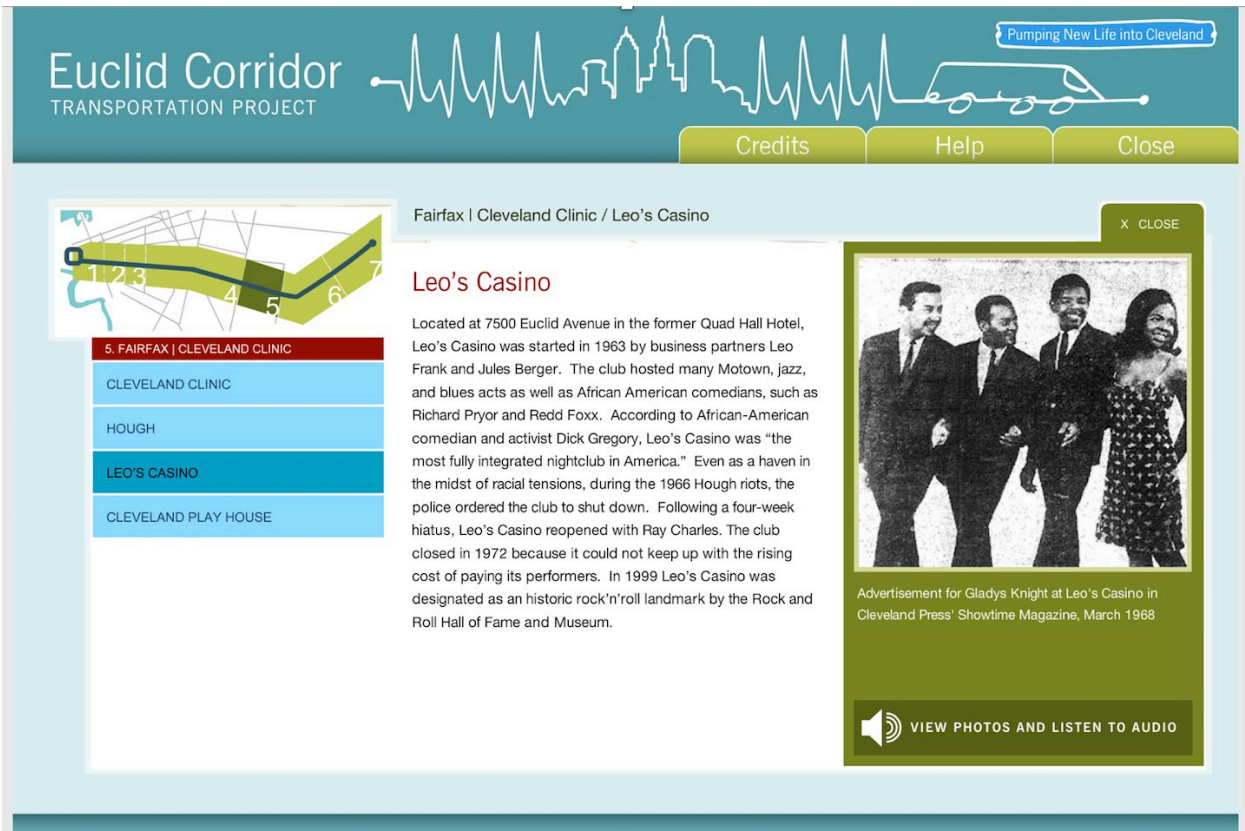


Figure 1. Leo's Casino story on Euclid Corridor History Project, 2008.

Beyond Millionaires' Row, we included Leo's Casino (a stop on the Motown circuit), and before long we were reaching laterally across the corridor to tap stories that weren't on the avenue itself: Jane Edna Hunter's Phillis Wheatley Association, which became a supportive haven for young African American women newly arrived from the South during the Great Migration. Hungarian immigrant Martin Rose's century-old Rose Iron Works, which made the craft metalwork that adorned many of the city's notable buildings and estates.

We put these stories—60 in all—on a series of touchscreen kiosks in bus stations up and down the street. We called this series of kiosks a "virtual linear museum." It was just that—an exhibition. However, the Euclid Corridor History Project, which debuted in 2008, was a show without an audience because people were there to catch a bus. After the Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals added their "Healthline" branding in place, our content was hidden behind a splash screen and it was unclear to riders why they should look further. Nor was there any way to interact with our mostly fictive audience. In fact, the content had to be preloaded. It was a static, self-contained, Flash-based presentation—a take it or leave it proposition. However, the idea of curating the city as a teaching tool and a way to reshape public understandings about place was one that we couldn't let sit.



Figure 2. Splash screen of Cleveland Historical iOS app (version 1.0), 2011

Apple debuted the iPhone about a year before we launched the kiosks, suggesting our project's limits from the start. What if we could take the idea of curating the city through digital exhibitions and put it directly in people's hands so they could engage with historical content as they moved about the present-day landscape? And, using social media, they could share their discoveries and possibly further curate them with their own responses. This led to Cleveland Historical (see Figure 2).

Our model of student-created pieces, initially a balance of text, images, audio, video, allowed us to present rich multimedia portraits of place throughout the city. Our model privileged breadth over depth, and a selective, interpretive voice over an encyclopedia approach. We spread out across the entire metro area with this approach. By working with a range of community orgs and K-12 teachers, we were able to enhance their ability to connect with their own constituencies. We were part of a community-building and 'place-making' process, which prevented our being a detached curator of the region.

We released on iOS and Android in early 2011. Soon we saw potential for this model to be applied elsewhere, and that entailed developing a generalized codebase that would allow extensibility at modest cost. In 2011-12, we obtained a Cleveland State University Faculty Research Development (FRD) grant and then a National Endowment for the



Figure 3. Curatescape, 2012-present

Humanities (NEH) digital humanities start-up grant to build Mobile Historical, later renamed Curatescape. The first Curatescape apps besides our own were unveiled in Baltimore, New Orleans, Spokane, and Medina, Ohio. Then we worked with our university to create a process for licensing Curatescape apps, and by 2013 Curatescape had approximately two-dozen adopters.

Curatescape's streamlined simplicity was both an asset and a liability: Simplicity was important for maintenance and controlling cost, but users clamored for additional functionality that would enhance the user experience with greater interactivity, including possibility of user submissions and conversation. We found it was easy to create functionality on the web side of the project, which we controlled at CSU by virtue of having our own web developer, but there was some slippage between our desire for more functionality on the app side and our ability to afford the expense of retaining an external developer. In 2014, we decided to rebuild the apps in-house in a more sustainable way (using open-source tools like Ionic, Angular, Leaflet, Open Street Map, and Apache Cordova). We added modest functionality while greatly improving user experience. We opted to keep Version 2 simple out of a desire to control cost. That same year, we began collaborating with Maseno University in Kisumu, Kenya, on another NEH-funded digital humanities project to explore optimizing Curatescape for the



Figure 5. MaCleKi | Curating Kisumu, 2014-present

developing world, a project that has demanded even greater sensitivity to barriers to public access on one hand and institutional maintenance on the other (see Figure 4). This need for sustainability is what ultimately dictates the degree and manner in which we can move from exhibition to conversation with the public.

The architecture of Cleveland Historical (and, by extension, Curatescape) makes it essentially a framework for publishing place-based humanities content. Like other publications, print or electronic, it delivers a product that others will in turn consume. We can sustain story creation through ongoing use as a teaching and learning tool in university courses and ongoing partnerships with community organizations, but as a tool for stimulating conversations about the past in the broader community, we need more than tech solutions. The closest that the app itself comes to inviting conversation is to offer social media buttons that enable sharing of app content.

We were mistaken in thinking that most people would use the app in the field to enhance their experience of places while in those places. Only a small proportion of our audience accesses Cleveland Historical via native apps. Far more use the website, and 70% of the latter arrive after a Google search. In fact, 46% access Cleveland Historical on a computer rather than a mobile device. Cleveland Historical's website averages 60,000 page views per month, which means about 100 views per story each month.



Figure 6. Camp Karamu in Brecksville Metropolitan Park Reservation. *Courtesy of Cleveland State University Library Special Collections*

The web version of Cleveland Historical, unlike the apps, integrates a discussion forum called Disqus. Since adding Disqus in 2013, Cleveland Historical has had close to 350 comments. These include compliments, points of information, corrections, questions, observations, and memories. Although they represent a tiny fraction of the project's audience, they offer a glimpse of the ways the project engages users.

Three examples will illustrate the richness of some of the responses Cleveland Historical generates on the forum. The first is a response to our story about the [East End Neighborhood House](#). A 91-year-old woman from California wrote to share some of her memories from when she worked as a day camp staffer in the 1940s. One of these memories hints at the racial barrier that divided city and suburbs. She writes:

In the WWII summer of 1944, following my sophomore year at college, I was hired as staff for what was called day-camping, which meant taking a different class and their teacher each day in the back of an open truck to a Metropolitan Park. ... One uncomfortable experience was traveling through lily-white Shaker Heights where I lived with an African-American teacher on board, knowing she could not live there even if she chose to. Fortunately Shaker Heights has changed for the better.



This memory was echoed in a comment to our [Collinwood High School Riots](#) story by a man who attended Collinwood during its most turbulent period (mid-1960s to mid-'70s). He commented:

[Y]ou never really ever get over the things that you learn that people are capable of when they become a frenzied and hysterical mob, and that very mob is after you. ... Walking along as a lone black in a neighborhood with a high concentration of angry whites was a constantly fearful and unnerving experience.

Figure 7. Cleveland mounted police watch for outbreaks of violence at Collinwood High School, 1969. *Courtesy of Cleveland State University Library Special Collections*



A reader of our story on [Severance Center](#) hints at the environmental cost of suburban sprawl. He writes:

I grew up living on Severn Road on the 1950's. Our house backed up on the Milliken estate and although I was strictly forbidden to do so, I was fond of sneaking through the barbed wire fence and exploring the woods and ponds. It seems like poetic justice that the mall that despoiled this other Eden eventually fell on hard times.

Figure 8. Severance Center, 1963. *Courtesy of Cleveland State University Library Special Collections*

Many people remembered places on Cleveland Historical in the context of family and friends. [One recalled stories from his grandmother](#), who in the 1930s lived in the 7-bedroom mansion that was the residence of the Van Sweringen brothers, who started the planned garden city suburb of Shaker Heights. His grandmother's family had only enough money to heat the kitchen, living room, and one bedroom during the Great Depression.

As exciting as it is to see conversations around our stories in Disqus, we see limited potential there for further engagement. Anthropologists speak of multivocality, and the ability to assemble communities of voices around content is the holy grail of digital humanities projects, but achieving multivocality isn't just a matter of creating a forum for it. Most users prefer to engage in conversation on their favorite social media platforms than in separate spaces we offer such as this one.

To some degree, Cleveland Historical has become a trusted source for local history. One anecdotal but telling measure of this is the fact that we get frequent emails that presume that Cleveland Historical is anything from a library to a tour company to a history consulting firm to a historical society. Many readers assume, despite our photo credits, that we maintain a physical archive of the images on Cleveland Historical. Many also hope that we can help them with genealogical inquiries. Others see our virtual tours and write to ask how they can register for in-person tours. Some ask us questions such as how much their heirloom is worth or for a list of the historic center-aisle churches suitable for weddings! More than a couple have called us the "Cleveland Historical Society."

A surprisingly fruitful avenue for generating conversation has been social media. One superficial way that we know social media shapes use of our content is that we can see in our analytics how sharing a particular story on Twitter and Facebook sometimes helps that story disrupt the dominance of those stories (like the Cuyahoga River Fire) that tend to appear over and over again atop our weekly lists of most-visited stories.

Twitter rarely moves beyond retweets and likes, but increasingly we find ourselves tagged in tweets by individuals and organizations hoping to connect to others with similar interests. And, occasionally we see more direct engagement, such as when a recent tweet of our story on the racial unrest at Collinwood High School prompted two African American readers to respond (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. Tweets about Collinwood High School Riots story, 2016

In contrast, Facebook sometimes opens up rich exchanges, especially now that we've built a Facebook audience of nearly 1,400 people. Compelling photos, such as this one of cattle holding up auto and streetcar traffic on a 1920s city street (taken from our [Cleveland Union Stockyards](#) story,) draw attention. Sometimes there's a snowball effect, and our posts go "viral." The Stockyards post prompted some comments that turned into conversations once we responded (see Figure 10).

Cleveland Historical
Published by James Dubelko [?] · April 25 ·

There was a time when cattle roamed the west side of Cleveland. And it was not so very long ago. Imagine what it was like for these motorists on their way to work on Monday morning, January 24, 1927, to encounter this herd on West 65th Street near Clark Avenue. Motorists traveling through the Stockyards District in the first half of the twentieth century often had such encounters. Experience what they saw, heard, and, yes, smelled, at: <http://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/644>



3,444 people reached

Boost Post

Like Comment Share

George Lonero, Bela Vajko and 35 others

Top Comments

31 shares

George Lonero I grew-up on Clark Avenue in the Clark/Fulton area. It wasn't that unusual to hear the commotion, look out and see the stray cattle roaming down Clark Avenue toward West 25th Street. They would periodically break loose from the over crowded pens of the Stockyards as I remember it. Police and other personal would have to guide them all the way back to the Stockyards on foot using rods and a lot of yelling. The scene would have made John Wayne giggle!

Unlike · Reply · Message · 1 · June 26 at 10:35pm

Cleveland Historical Great memory!

Like · Reply · 1 · Commented on by James Dubelko [?] · June 26 at 10:36pm

George Lonero After reading the some of the comments no one mentioned the way the cattle were put to sleep. It was my understanding they were whacked in the forehead with a special heavy hammer. Could you verify that? The pungent odor of what I believe was burning... See More

Like · Reply · Message · 1 · June 27 at 5:34am · Edited

Write a reply...

Susan Magnone Cornelsen I grew up on 127th in the 50's and 60's. When I was a child, I remember an elderly man who lived up the street tell my parents that they used to drive cattle up our street. Had to have been in the early 1900's.

Like · Reply · Message · 1 · April 25 at 12:02pm

Cleveland Historical Hi Susan Magnone Cornelsen, do you remember the man's name or the address of the house where he lived?

Like · Reply · Commented on by James Dubelko [?] · April 25 at 1:36pm

Susan Magnone Cornelsen He lived between Belden and Triskett on 127th. ...all I can remember is he was short and wore cowboy boots and hat.

Like · Reply · Message · April 25 at 2:19pm

Cleveland Historical Susan Magnone Cornelsen, I took a look at the 1940 census for the 3200 block of W. 127th St., but unfortunately couldn't find anyone listed as a drover. It was a long shot. I did see there were two families -- the Aber and Kloess families at 3275 and 3279 W. 127th, of whom a number of the men were listed as butchers. Close.

Like · Reply · Commented on by James Dubelko [?] · April 25 at 5:14pm

View more replies

Figure 10. Stockyards story Facebook post (April 2016) and sample of responses

Another post, one of our story of the nation's oldest Hungarian church, [St. Elizabeth of Hungary](#), prompted even more comment (see Figure 11). The post reached more than 26,000 readers, leading to more than 300 likes, more than 200 shares, and dozens of comments and replies. Readers recounted fond memories of marriages, baptisms, food culture, and neighborhood life in Cleveland's Hungarian enclave of Buckeye. More recently, a [Collinwood High School](#) story post reached almost 32,000 readers, more than 400 shares, and hundreds of comments and replies. Again, nostalgia suffused the comments and conversations it drew. Unlike the Buckeye story, which struck a chord with Hungarian Americans, the Collinwood story interested a wide cross-section of people who attended the school before and after its racial integration.

At one time, there were more Hungarians living in Cleveland than in any other city in the world--except Budapest. And most of them lived on the southeast side of the city, in the Buckeye Road neighborhood. In this photo from 1930, Hungarians (and their Model-T Fords) line the north and south sides of Buckeye Road, near East 90th Street, as a procession winds its way toward St. Elizabeth of Hungary Catholic Church to celebrate a religious event. To learn more about this historic church--home of the oldest Hungarian parish in the United States, see: <http://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/203>



26,702 people reached

Boost Post


Like Comment Share


301


Top Comments


231 shares


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
Holly Gigante St Procops, st bonifice, were attended by largely Czech people. My family roots were at St Procops, then bonifice. As for st. procop church bldg, it should never have been closed. It has the best worship space of any of the nearby churches. And that is the main function, worship. It was stupid to close such a welcoming, warm, bldg. My opinion, and experience from bring in the others, too.
 Unlike · Reply · Message · 1 · March 1 at 1:28pm
- 

Nancy Ibranyi-Bucci I grew up on 126th in Buckeye, just a few houses passed Forrest. Went to St. Margaret's then Marymount. Treasure every memory I have!
 Unlike · Reply · Message · 2 · March 14 at 10:13am
- 

Linda Anne Spisak Lasenyik My grandparents belonged to St. Elizabeth's. They came to the USA in 1908. My dad Stephen, born in 1914 went to elementary school there. He married my mom Grace Kent in 1951 on September 1st at St. Elizabeth's and my sister Joanne and I were baptized ... See More
 Unlike · Reply · Message · 2 · March 6 at 8:39pm · Edited
- 

Brian Lasenyik I grew up in the Buckeye neighborhood. We were members of St. Johns Hungarian Greek Catholic Church.on the corner of Ambler and Buckeye.
 Unlike · Reply · Message · 1 · March 6 at 1:42pm
 4 Replies
- 

Jennifer Telenko Nice article. My dad grew up on Buckeye Rd. And went to St. Elizabeth's where my parents were later married. He drove me through the neighborhood at Christmas. I grew up with many stories from there.
 Unlike · Reply · Message · 1 · March 6 at 6:32pm
- 

Deborah Biringer My Grandparents came to US in 1906 left NewYork came to Chicago on the South side by the stock yards. After a few years moved North to Fremont & Armitage . St Vincent was their church it was a very Eastern European area. My Grand Father was the dec... See More
 Unlike · Reply · Message · 2 · March 2 at 2:37pm
- 

Janet Kickel I am sure the little boy in the corner of the picture is my dad. I have never seen this picture before. My dad died when he was in his 30's.
 Unlike · Reply · Message · 5 · March 2 at 4:22pm
- 

Celeste Vasas Rogers I was baptized at St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church. So was my sister. My sister went to St. Elizabeth of Hungary School for grades K-8.
 Unlike · Reply · Message · 1 · March 12 at 5:37pm
- 

Mark Knapik East 93rd and Buckeye--remember it well, where grandparents

Figure 11. St. Elizabeth of Hungary Facebook post (March 1, 2016) and sample of responses

The project has also stimulated meaningful relationships with community partners. In 2005, six years before the public launch of Cleveland Historical and three years before the formal inception of our [Center for Public History + Digital Humanities](#), we partnered with the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization (DSCDO) to collect oral histories. Since its founding in 1971, DSCDO has had an unusually strong commitment to cultivating a strong, socially diverse community. The oral history project was a way to document not only the history of DSCDO but also to record stories from a wide range of DS residents. Through this project, we were introduced to one of the DSCDO's founders, Judge Raymond L. Pianka, who has served for many years as Judge for the Cleveland Municipal Housing Court and lives in the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood. Judge Pianka has been deeply committed to safeguarding housing and has seen public history as a vehicle for saving vulnerable housing and building community. He was able to point us to a local foundation, and through that channel we obtained the first of our digital recorder-and-mic setups. Over the years that have followed the foundation has funded several graduate students who have continued to do oral histories in both that neighborhood and in others (Stockyards, Clark-Fulton, Ohio City), and these interviews have shaped many stories that we've added to Cleveland Historical.



Figure 12. Needham Castle. *Courtesy of Nancy T. Schreiner*

Our relationship with Judge Pianka has produced some memorable moments that reflect the power of the digital humanities to go beyond exhibition and foster conversation. In one case, a story of a long-since-demolished house known as [Needham Castle](#), we issued a call for public input when we failed to locate a single historical photo of the house. After many months, a descendant of the family discovered the story and got in touch. She not only had 115-year-old photographs to share, she also shared a series of paintings of the house (see Figure 12).

Another story that sprang from the tip from Judge Pianka was that of a long-forgotten landmark, [Samuel White's Roadside Inn](#), which turns out to be a little-known counterpart to the well-known Dunham Tavern Museum across town. Our story stimulated the nomination and eventual designation of the former inn as a Cleveland Landmark, providing a point of interest along a struggling stretch of Detroit Avenue well away from the energetic center of Detroit Shoreway.

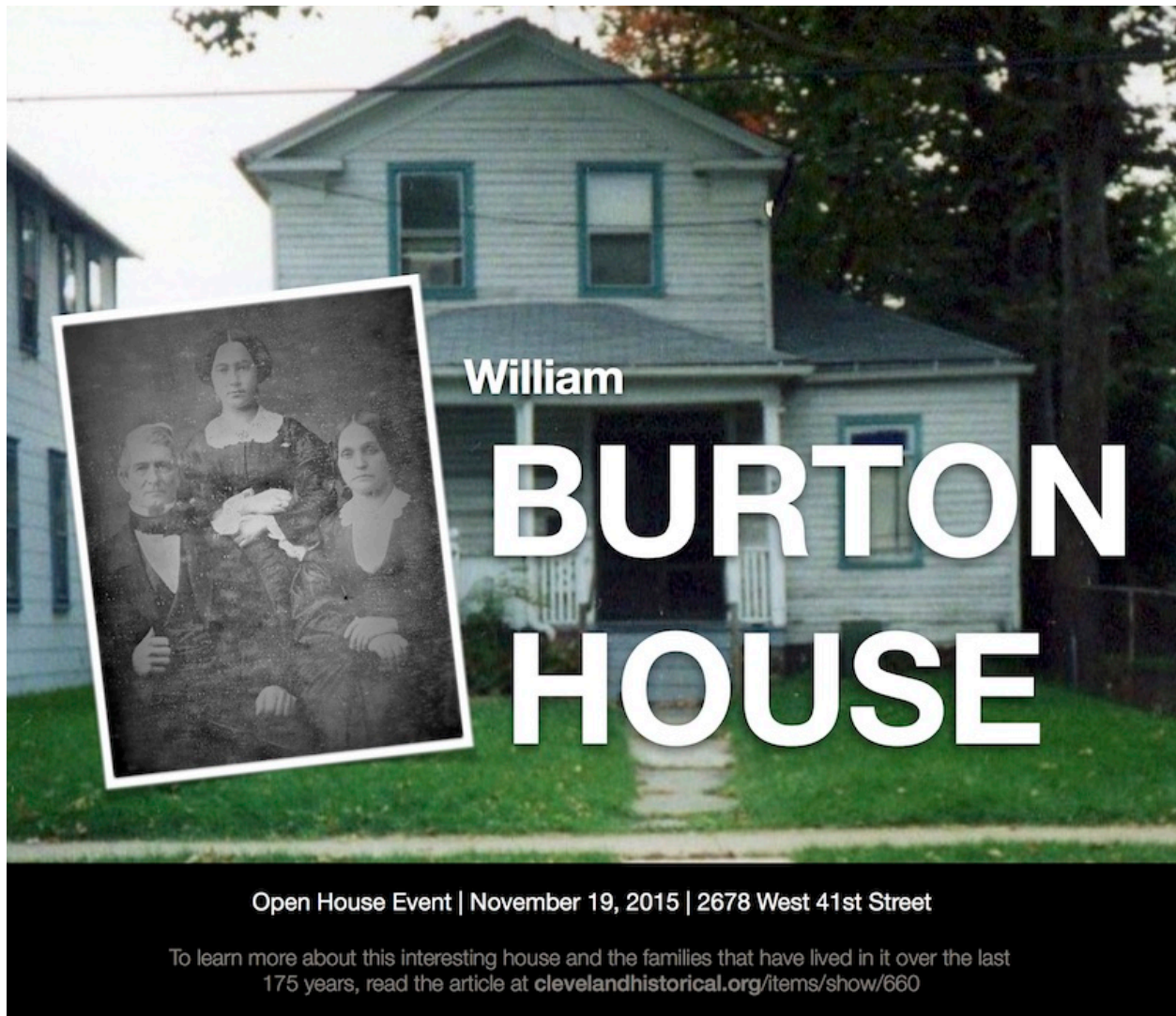


Figure 13. William Burton House Open House flyer, 2015

Perhaps more exciting, another story provided documentation another of Cleveland's oldest standing structures, the [William Burton House](#), which has stood vacant and dilapidated for many years in the hardscrabble Clark-Fulton neighborhood. Judge Pianka worked with the county land bank and a neighborhood-based community development corporation to hold an open house that showcased the house's history to seek a buyer willing to restore the structure (see Figure 13).

My favorite story, however, is that of [Kilbane Town](#), a little pocket on the edge of DS that CH literally put on the map again (see Figure 14). On St. Patrick's Day in 1912, Cleveland held one of the largest parades in its history. Johnny Kilbane, son of Irish immigrants to Cleveland, had just won the world featherweight boxing title in Los Angeles and returned to Cleveland by train on March 17, the day of the parade. Hundreds of thousands of Clevelanders met Kilbane at Cleveland's Union Station. The

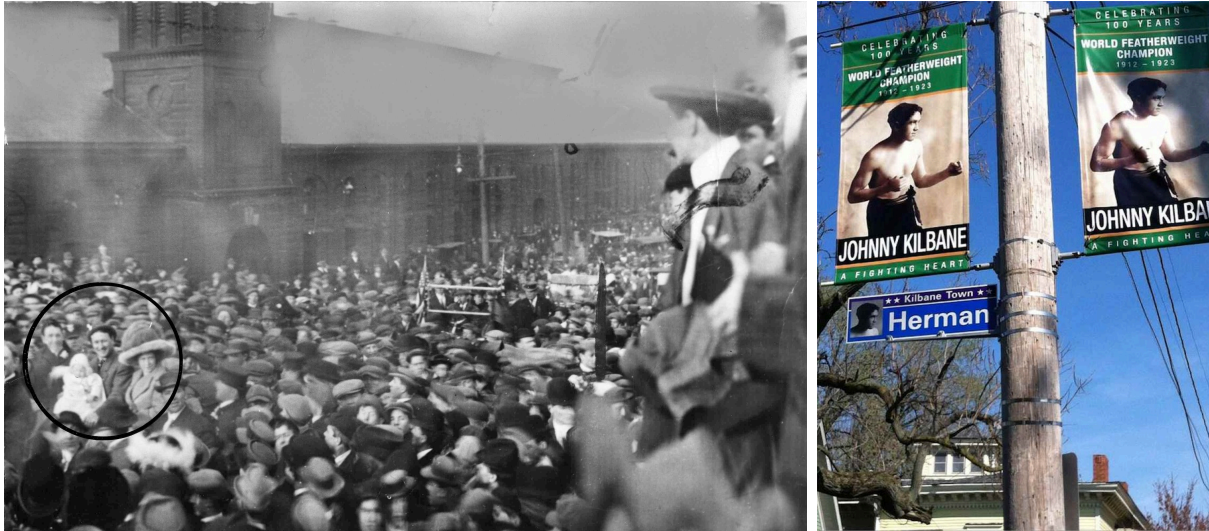


Figure 14. Crowd welcoming Johnny Kilbane, 1912. *Courtesy of Cleveland State University Library Special Collections.* Kilbane Town street sign and banners. *Courtesy of Jim Dubelko*

story of Kilbane’s victory and the massive parade that celebrated his return to the city was widely reported in the city’s newspapers but gradually faded from memory for most Clevelanders. Through research by CPHDH researcher Jim Dubelko in 2011, we learned that the 1912 parade had gone from downtown westward on Detroit Avenue and ended at the Herman Avenue home of Kilbane’s family. His house turned out to be still standing, and our research uncovered that one of the newspapers had even dubbed his neighborhood “Kilbane Town.” That became the title of Dubelko’s Cleveland Historical story. The publication of the story might have been as far as this story went, but with help from Pianka and others in the community, the story was shared widely. The community embraced Kilbane Town and worked together to place a plaque in front of the Kilbane house and petitioned the city to rename several blocks of Herman Avenue “Kilbane Town.” The city placed colorful banners with photos of the rediscovered boxer on poles in the neighborhood, and many people attended a centennial dedication. A nearby restaurant even embraced Kilbane, having its staff wear special Kilbane t-shirts. A year later, an Irish filmmaker premiered a documentary about Kilbane’s life (“A Fighting Heart”) at the Cleveland International Film Festival, with a special showing at the restored Capitol Theater in Detroit Shoreway’s Gordon Square Arcade. The Cleveland Historical story also inspired the sculpting of a monument to Kilbane on the grounds of the nearby Battery Park residential complex in a former National Carbon Company factory. Although this story might be dismissed as a mere celebratory moment, arguably it reshaped how neighborhood residents imagined where they lived. It gave a new point of pride to a mostly working-class section of the Detroit Shoreway area that previously was a nameless area between more recognized nodes of revitalization activity.

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Unlike most academic projects that we measure once at the time of their publication (and maybe again if they win an award or get a good review), our project is one whose success is measured by how well and how long it engages the public. We're heartened that the Cleveland Metroparks engaged the Center to assist in doing oral histories about people's experiences in the park system and to create two dozen Cleveland Historical stories for a [Metroparks tour](#) (the first six stories are published, with the remainder to come in January 2017) about park sites for the Metroparks' 2017 centennial. Also, we are pleased that [Destination Cleveland looked to Cleveland Historical](#) as a resource when it took a decided turn toward marketing Cleveland in a way that tries to conflate tourist and local experiences. These and other uses of the app reflect a project that has found a workable balance of scale, sustainability, and engagement. In closing, my hope for Cleveland Historical is that it continues to build a sense of place, shape community, and help people connect their own experiences to the past in ways that connect them with place and community.