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**FROM “SIN CITY” TO “ENVY OF THE REGION”:
TRANSFORMING NEWPORT, KENTUCKY IN THE LATTER 20TH
CENTURY
1950-2000**

**A Thesis
Presented to the Department of History
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
and
The Honors Program
of
Butler University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation Honors**

**Colin Thomas Reenan
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INTRODUCTION

Late in the summer of 1953, Detective Jack Thiem of the Newport, Kentucky police department, along with sixteen private detectives from Louisville and a photographer from the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, raided the Playatorium, a “plush dining-drinking-gambling-bowling club” in Newport.¹ Gambling is and was illegal in the state of Kentucky, yet numerous casinos of this size and stature were operating and advertising to the surprise of virtually no one in the city and the region, including law enforcement.² Most of Newport’s cops were content with the state of affairs, but not Thiem, believing a large bust could boost his career. When Thiem and his army of detectives burst into the club, they were shocked to see Newport police chief George Gugel and three other Newport detectives present in the casino. The photographer,

¹ “Day in Court,” *Time Magazine*, March 22, 1954.

² Hank Messick, “Big Casinos Continue Operating on Guarded Basis at Newport,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 13, 1961; Sara Gadzala, “Long before Horseshoe, gambling flourished in NKY,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 3, 2013. Some of the larger casinos in Newport during the 1950’s were the Yorkshire Club, the Latin Quarter, and the Lookout House.

George Bailey, snapped several photographs of the men, who were sitting at a blackjack table. Gugel and his cohorts were not about to be embarrassed by Bailey and Thiem; he was still the police chief and, using that power, he arrested Bailey and Thiem and destroyed Bailey's camera to eliminate any incriminating evidence.³ Eventually, a grand jury in Newport indicted Gugel for "nonfeasance of duty" and fined him \$1000, the equivalent to a slap on the wrist.⁴ Gugel's participation in a casino and his rush to cover it up were indicative of just how engrained illegal activity had become in Newport.

There have been few, if any – New Orleans possibly the only exception – cities in the mid-20th century that can match the variety, longevity, and economic entrenchment of vice that Newport experienced from 1920 to 1980. Located across from Cincinnati, Ohio at the confluence of the Licking and Ohio Rivers, Newport began its development as an "open city" after World War I. In an "open city," as defined by Thomas Barker, the politics, economics, and crime of a city became so entangled "that separating one from the other was impossible."⁵ Newport's small shopkeepers and storefront owners on Monmouth and York Streets became dependent upon the steady flow of customers from the casinos and brothels. In order for these merchants to survive, the customers had to be enticed to Newport. The attractions of the casinos, dance halls, dinner clubs, and brothels in Newport not only brought the stream of outside patrons but also earned it the distinction as a "destination city." Celebrities – including famed members of the "Rat Pack" comedy and acting group – criminals, and ordinary citizens from far away flocked

³ Thomas Barker, *Wicked Newport: Kentucky's Sin City* (Charleston, SC: History, 2008), 61

⁴ Robin Caraway, *Newport: the Sin City Years* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2009), 78; Bert Combs, Executive Order (61-815), October 10, 1961. Jack Thiem was arrested too; he was given the choice of losing his job or leaving Newport. In 1954, he finally agreed to leave, and, unsurprisingly, moved to Las Vegas, Nevada. Police Chief George Gugel continued in the same position until he was removed from office via an executive order from Kentucky Governor Bert Combs in 1961.

⁵ Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 7.

to the city for its extensive array of illegal attractions.⁶ While there were other “open cities” throughout the nation at the time – Saratoga Springs, New York, Galveston, Texas, and Phenix City, Alabama, to name a few – Newport was the premiere destination city of the Midwest, if not the nation, in the 1950’s. Before there was Las Vegas, there was Newport. The town headed the short list of the nation’s “open cities” that developed in the 20th century because it had the “longest run of unfettered criminal capitalism” that was ingrained during Prohibition.⁷ While other cities were undoubtedly havens for organized criminality and vice, Newport consistently garnered the stigma of “Sin City” and “America’s wickedest city.”⁸

Newport’s history throughout the 20th century has been intertwined with vice because of its geographic location. In addition to being a suburb of the Cincinnati Tristate area – Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky – Newport is at the nexus of many large cities in the Midwest. Louisville, Lexington, Indianapolis, Columbus, and Dayton are all within 120 miles of Newport. Further away, but still close (within 300 miles), are Pittsburgh, Nashville, Toledo, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland. It was precisely this reason why notorious Cincinnati bootlegger George Remus centered his operation in the Cincinnati Tristate area in the 1920’s. Remus’s bootlegging empire sparked and intensified the development of Newport as an “open city” during Prohibition, which was the impetus for the spreading of organized criminality. Using his background as a pharmacist, Remus, “the King of the Bootleggers,” was able to form phony pharmaceutical companies and

⁶ Sandra Gurvis, *Ohio Curiosities: Quirky Characters, Roadside Oddities, & Other Offbeat Stuff* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2007), 282; Hank Messick, *Syndicate Wife: The Story of Ann Drahmann Coppola* (New York: MacMillan, 1968), 18. Marilyn Monroe, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Jerry Lee Lewis all were regular patrons of Newport’s casinos in the 1950’s.

⁷ Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 8.

⁸ Monroe Fry, “Cross Section: Sin Town,” *Esquire Magazine*, May 1957.

legally buy liquor, selling it on the black market.⁹ He used his profits to expand the operation. By relocating from Chicago to Newport, his operation was in close proximity to 80 percent of America's legal bonded whiskey products.¹⁰ Additionally, Remus purchased or befriended distilleries in the area, including the Wiedemann Brewery in Newport. The brewery, at one time in the early 1920's, was providing Remus with over half a million distilled gallons of alcohol for "industrial purposes."

In addition to controlling the production of alcohol, Remus also organized political lagniappe on a vast scale. He bribed hundreds of police, judges, and government officials and set up bars in Newport to sell his alcohol. Without a doubt, Remus was responsible for implanting organized, local corruption, creating a routine that would continue until the 1970's. Remus met his demise when he tried to expand too quickly and could not effectively bribe federal officials; he had "created a demand he was unable to supply."¹¹ Though Remus and the upper crust of his organization were arrested in a 1922 raid, his progeny would use his "web of corruption" to ensconce illegal gambling as the main enterprise in Newport.¹²

This meshing of organized crime with politics and law enforcement attracted the Cleveland Syndicate to town in the 1940's. It was a natural fit. The Cleveland Four, as the Syndicate came to be called, brought corruption and vice to a new level in Newport, making the illegal "legal" by taking bribing and bullying to a new degree. Eventually, the Syndicate was broken up by rival coalitions, but the competition simply augmented

⁹ "Doctors Wish to Prescribe Alcohol," *Literary Digest*, May 7, 1921: 20. Passed by Congress in 1919, the Volstead Act carried out the intent of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which established prohibition of alcoholic beverages in the United States. One exception of the bill enabled doctors to prescribe whiskey for his or her patients, a tactic George Remus advantageously used extensively in the early 1920's.

¹⁰ Caraway, *Sin City Years*, 9.

¹¹ Messick, *Syndicate Wife*, 91.

¹² Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 19.

gambling revenues and heightened Newport's status as the premiere destination city in the Midwest. The organized crime unit controlled the overhead management of such gambling institutions and the local "operators provide[d] the gambling devices, personnel, and financing," sharing some of the profits with the sponsoring institution.¹³ Each gambling hall was furnished and run as if it was a true, lavish Las Vegas casino. It was no wonder that Newport had become a "magnet for gamblers and bookmakers from around the nation."¹⁴

Increasing federal pressure and media scrutiny over organized crime in Newport changed the status quo for casino operators. The Jack Thiem incident, as well as national exposés in *Esquire* and *Time Magazine*, convinced many outside observers, particularly those in Cincinnati, that Newport was nothing more than a corrupt anachronism out of step with civilized society. The irony in Newport's situation was two-fold. It was a city dependent on vice run by outside organizations, but its revenue stream came almost completely from eager citizens of Cincinnati and other nearby cities. Newport's location may have been in Kentucky, but its proximity to Cincinnati truly defined its connections and economics. Its identity, however, was muddled. While Cincinnatians referred to Syndicate crime as "Kentucky's problem," Kentucky's state legislators in Frankfort similarly ignored the quandary in Newport, choosing instead to regard it as "Cincinnati's problem."¹⁵ From the 1920's on through the 1960's, state legislators neglected Newport and adjacent Covington, a policy supported by Syndicate bosses. Thus, it was the job of local politicians and law enforcement to effectively regulate and force out organized

¹³ Howard Abadinsky, *Organized Crime*, 4th ed. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1994), 280.

¹⁴ Michael L. Williams, "Sin City Kentucky: Newport, Kentucky's Vice Heritage and its Legal Extinction, 1920-1991," (Master's thesis, University of Louisville, 2008), 10.

¹⁵ R.L. Katz, "Northern Kentucky: Cincinnati's Stepchild," *Cincinnati Magazine* 9 no. 11 (1976): 21.

crime in Northern Kentucky, but too many of those officials and officers were indifferent to or unwilling to reform.

Furthermore, this thesis argues that until local Newport residents banded together to change the economic structure of their city, Newport's reputation would keep business from investing in the city. I define "local" as being a resident of Newport. The Committee of 500 was successful in booting organized crime out of town, but, because it was not an organization of primarily Newport residents, the committee could not shake the city's "Sin City" sobriquet. Its members cared more about the economic vigor of Campbell County as a whole. After little progress in Newport in the 1960's, the committee essentially abandoned the city and enabled prostitution and stripping to dominate the scene. With such a reputation rekindled in the minds of local developers, business interests turned elsewhere. Only in the 1980's, when local Newport residents finally grew fed up with the situation, did the city shake its obstinate reputation.

Many writers and newspaper reporters have given credit for the "clean-up" of Newport to George Ratterman and the Committee of 500. This analysis fails to acknowledge the exodus of residents from Newport in the 1960's and the eventual development of licentious nightlife. A 1999 newspaper article glorifying Ratterman's legacy was titled: "George Ratterman: He's the one who cleaned up Newport."¹⁶ I would argue that the article should have read: "George Ratterman: He's the one that expelled organized crime." Yes, the Committee of 500's impact on Newport's history was momentous. But the committee was not responsible for bringing commerce and tourism to Newport.

¹⁶ Barry Horstman, "George Ratterman: He's the one who cleaned up Newport," *The Kentucky Post*, August 12, 1999.

Though there are extensive historical and academic writings on the organized crime era in Newport, few focus on the efforts of those in the 1980's to free the city from its "Sin City" reputation. Indeed, the Committee of 500 and the Ratterman affair have garnered pervasive nostalgic interest.¹⁷ However, the ensuing four decades of Newport history have lacked the same scholarly study. Many academic works on Newport have ignored or glossed over the years between 1961 and 1999, the year when plans were approved to build Newport-on-the-Levee, the largest shopping and dining center in Northern Kentucky. This thesis is obviously incomplete without a focus on committee group efforts to expel organized crime from Newport, but it will also explain why those efforts were not local, longstanding, and widespread enough to provide Newport with a viable alternative economic base. In addition, I assert that only when locally concerned citizens and elected officials of Newport banded together to reform the city and replace the vices with viable economic alternatives did the city begin to shake its inexorable "Sin City" moniker. This assessment takes into account the two-part restructuring of Newport's economy. The Committee of 500 was successful in stage one of the process -- ridding Newport of organized crime and illegal gambling. But there was also a second stage. Without gambling, there was a huge vacuum in the local economy. The second stage of restructuring the economy was replacing gambling with an effective alternative.

Previous academic research on Newport's history has not substantially delved into the economic reform efforts of Economic Development Director Laura Long, her reform colleagues, and the rehabilitation of the city. There were innumerable obstacles to

¹⁷ Indeed, the two main histories of Newport -- Robin Caraway's *Newport: The Sin City Years*, and Thomas Barker's *Wicked Newport: Kentucky's Sin City* -- both exalt the efforts of the Committee of 500. A significant chunk of each work is dedicated to George Ratterman and his war on gambling, but little or none of each book considerably delves into the reemergence of nightlife in the 1960's or the eventual urban planning and economic restructuring in the 1980's and 90's.

overcome, but Long and her fellow reformers were motivated by a desire to change the reputation and economic structure of their local community. They were able to transform Newport's attitude toward x-rated nightlife and, by attracting shopping and family fun, elevate the city's stature from "Sin City" to "Envy of the Region."

Beyond the scope of this thesis are the enormous and extensive judicial and law enforcement efforts of Newport reformers in the 1970's and 1980's. Highlighted in Michael Williams' master's thesis at the University of Louisville, these struggles were vital to forcing out x-rated nightlife.¹⁸ Nonetheless, without the simultaneous urban planning and economic development advancements of Laura Long, Newport would have experienced a period similar to the 1960's. A void in the local economy would likely have created another exodus of residents and opportunity for other vices to set up shop in Newport. The economic developments in the 1980's and 1990's were ambitious and risky yet feasible and ingenious.

Throughout Newport's latter 20th century history, numerous attempts at reform, for the most part, were unsuccessful or incomplete because of their inability to shed the city's dogged "Sin City" moniker. The chapter entitled "Reforming Illegal Gambling" highlights these efforts. Committees formed in the 1950's and 1960's were either too idealistic or disconnected from Newport to sustain a concerted and long-lasting effect on the city. The most successful of the early groups was the Committee of 500, who nominated and elected public officials responsible for running illegal gambling out of town. The famed George Ratterman affair was the final nail in organized crime's coffin.

¹⁸ Williams too glosses over Laura Long's contribution to Newport. Only twice throughout his 248 page master's thesis does he allude to Long's urban planning and economic efforts.

Without illegal gambling, Newport's economy was in a state of transformation and flux. Chapter II, "Newport Without Organized Crime," assesses the state of its economy and the reasons why the city merely sank back into other vices in the 1970's. Without the steady flow of customers out of casinos, many shopkeepers and restaurant owners on Monmouth and York Streets struggled to remain open. Newport's politicians and elite attempted to attract big industry to the city, but nightlife became its main economic tenet soon after the opening of Cincinnati's new convention center and Riverfront Stadium. Adult cinemas, strip clubs, and brothels developed decades after organized crime and their illegal gambling halls had been forced out. Newport's role as "Cincinnati's Stepchild" is also analyzed in this chapter.

The last chapter of this thesis, "The Struggle to Shed 'Sin City,'" describes the successful economic reform efforts of economic director Laura Long and the reformed City Commission. Neighborhood organizations fueled a changing attitude by Newport citizenry toward adult entertainment. This chapter also explains how reformers, unlike their 1950's and 1960's predecessors, were able to dispense long-lasting and trailblazing economic and political change.

CHAPTER I:
REFORMING ILLEGAL GAMBLING

Charles Eha and Early Reformers

Throughout the early 20th century, a clear pattern had emerged with respect to the protocol for reform. Every few years, a reform candidate would get elected upon a platform of clean-up. The do-gooder would then alert the police – in some cases the state police – to the state of affairs in Newport. The police would make the customary arrests, and the gambling halls would shut down for a few weeks, perhaps even a month. Later, when the grand jury indictments were unsuccessful, proceedings in Newport returned to normal. Gambling resumed and the police left the halls alone for awhile.

In the post-war epoch, early attempts at reform were indicative of changing local dispositions toward vice in Newport. With an indifferent state government in Frankfort and a willing consumer base in Greater Cincinnati, the citizens of Newport were in a difficult position. Rival syndicate-run gambling was firmly entrenched in the local economy. Post-war estimates place the average annual revenue of the gambling establishments at about \$1 billion during the city's peak in the 1950's. Furthermore, gambling-related businesses employed over 1500 people, or about five percent of Newport's population.¹⁹ And gambling was not restricted to solely casinos; virtually every "drugstore, candy shop, grocery and dry-cleaning establishment had slot machines on display."²⁰

In 1949 a reform group achieved moderate success in Newport. These reformers won political office and instituted sweeping regulations on nightlife. The reformers, led by Charles Eha, pushed ahead toward gambling interests. Eha repeatedly turned down bribes and, along with his other reformers, shut down an estimated eighty percent of the illegal operations within several months.²¹ But they soon found that the gamblers, café owners, and liquor dealers, long accustomed to unfettered operation, tormented under even such minor restrictions as legal closing hours and no alcohol sales on Sunday.²² With the casinos closed and their stores regulated, the local economy of Newport suffered. Eha and the reformers offered residents no alternative economic plan to replace gambling. As a result, public opinion shifted against them.

¹⁹Leonard Lefkow, "Newport Is Fit Rival for Las Vegas In Big-Time Gambling," *Louisville Times*, August 4, 1958; Joseph Dressman, "Money Changing Hands in Vegas, Peanuts to Newport Prober Says," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 25, 1961; "New Documentary Ties Vegas Roots to Newport, Kentucky," *Las Vegas Sun*, September 26, 2012. Estimates during the 1950's placed Newport gambling revenue at the very least equal to, if not significantly greater than, gambling revenue in Las Vegas.

²⁰James A. Maxwell, "Kentucky's Open City," *The Kentucky Post*, March 22, 1960.

²¹Don Pinger, "Vice Foe Tells of '50's Crusade," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 31, 1961.

²²Ibid.

Eha reported receiving copious threats; his telephone at work and home rang constantly with anonymous voices saying he was going to “get the hell kicked out of him.”²³ Bribes too were offered to the reformers – as much as \$250 thousand– but Eha and his fellow reformers did not accept the money. In defiance to these failures, organized crime financed and contrived the Newport Civic Association (NCA), campaigning on the motto “Clean Up, Not Close Up.”²⁴ At the time, gambling interests were paramount in Newport, for there were “more casinos, more gaming, more quality places than anywhere else in the nation.”²⁵ In the subsequent 1951 elections, the reformers were ousted in favor of NCA politicians more favorable to gambling and vice.²⁶ Casinos reopened and life in Newport cozily returned to normal. The reformers were mildly successful in shutting down the gambling halls for a short time, but a strong knockout blow was needed. They had neither the clout nor the public and economic support needed to vanquish organized crime for good and change the economic fabric of Newport.

In the 1950’s, gambling escalated, bringing Newport into the national spotlight. Tennessee Democratic Senator Estes Kefauver formed the United States Special Senate Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce (popularly known as the Kefauver Committee) in 1951. The main target of the committee was Newport. Kefauver subpoenaed many local nightclub owners and public officials, including Police Chief Gugel, who expressed “surprise that a committee investigator had found gambling”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Robert Gioielli, “Suburbs vs. Slot Machines: The Committee of 500 and the Battle Over Gambling in Northern Kentucky,” *Ohio Valley History*, 5, no. 2 (2005), 64.

²⁵ Gadzala, “Before Horseshoe, Gambling Flourished.”

²⁶ Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 20.

in Newport.²⁷ No significant busts resulted, but Kefauver's incessant questioning of Newport's elite attracted out-of-town journalists to the burgeoning tale of "Sin City." They wrote romantically about a far-away place where the illegal was legal. Historian Robert Gioielli has argued that these pieces were "voyeuristic peep shows for middle-class readers, allowing the hoi-polloi to get a look at life in a town supposedly run entirely on vice."²⁸ In particular, *Time Magazine* published a vignette of a typical courtroom proceeding in Newport, but Monroe Fry's expose of Newport in *Esquire Magazine* was the most influential article. It brought national attention by declaring Newport as "America's wickedest city."²⁹ The piece also caught the attention of laymen of local protestant churches, who approached the Newport Ministerial Association with a proposal.

The Social Action Committee

Newport's Protestant ministers had long seen gambling and its affixed vices as "morally reprehensible."³⁰ Led by minister and mail carrier Christian Seifried, the ministerial organization began a crusade against organized crime. The "shocking" revelation in *Esquire Magazine* as to the extent of organized crime's dominion over Newport provided the trigger for Seifried to act. In late 1956 Seifried, Harold Barkhau, and the Newport Ministerial Organization formed the Social Action Committee (SAC).³¹ The SAC consisted of a minister and two parishioners from each of Newport's Protestant

²⁷ *Final Report of the Special Committee (Kefauver Committee) to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce*, 82nd Cong. 1st sess. 1951, 50.

²⁸ Gioielli, "Suburbs vs. Slot Machines," 65.

²⁹ Fry, "Sin Town," 84.

³⁰ "Committee of 500 Provides Hope for Campbell Cleanup." *Protestant Action*, Vol. 4, No. 9, May 1961, 4.

³¹ Caraway, *The Sin City Years*, 85.

churches fervently devoted to extinguish illegal vices.³² By immorality, the committee was targeting not only prostitution and corruption, but gambling as well. These views were representative of the mainstream religious and moral reproach of vice at the time, but no economic justification was given by Siefried or Barkhau as to why Newport without gambling would be better.

The Committee faced a daunting task; the syndicates were more profitable than ever and public opinion was not supportive of vice cleanup. Indifference to illegal gambling ran rampant through Newport's cozy suburban streets. The *Esquire* reporter who took an in-depth look at Newport encountered one housewife who said, referring to the vice, that "it's been here ever since I can remember; we don't know of anything else."³³ The challenge in dealing with vice this entrenched was evident. To most residents of Newport, corruption, vice, and gambling were just part of everyday life. To change a citizenry's disposition toward a local issue is extremely difficult, but that is exactly what the Social Action Committee attempted to do.

To address public opinion, the SAC wrote letters with constituents' signatures to all public officials in Newport, calling on them to "live up to their oath of office and enforce the law vigorously and impartially."³⁴ These letters to Police Chief Gugel, City Manager Oscar Hesch, Mayor Alfred Maybury, Liquor Administrator William Livingston, and the City Commissioners encouraged a reply, but, unsurprisingly, none was given.³⁵ The concern was clear. Many officials were staunchly in the pockets of

³² Christian Seifried, "The Story of the Social Action Committee of the Newport Ministerial Assn.," NKU, box SAC, folder 1966.

³³ Fry, "Sin Town," 84.

³⁴ Social Action Committee, "List of actions recommended by the committee," Newport Ministerial Association, 1958.

³⁵ Social Action Committee. Letter to George Gugel. March 17, 1958; Letter to William J. Livingston. July 5, 1958; Letter to Alfred Maybury, Oscar Hesch, and City Commissioners. September 8, 1958.

organized crime. Those that were not being bribed would be committing political suicide by publicly supporting the SAC.

After “a year and a half of [this] fruitless action,” the SAC realized that a more urgent response was obligatory.³⁶ The committee wrote to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who advised them to plead its case before a Campbell County Grand Jury.³⁷ Seeking indictments against public officials, the SAC presented damning evidence and reputable witnesses, including *Louisville Courier-Journal* reporter and muckraker Hank Messick. The case was straightforward against many corrupt public officials and casino operators. In spite of explicit proof, the grand jury refused any indictments, declaring in its statement that “mankind, having been born in sin, will ever be prey to the temptations of sin.”³⁸ Support for organized crime and the corrupt city structure pervaded among not only the local law enforcement, but also the judges, the district attorneys, and even the grand juries.³⁹ The state government in Frankfort washed its hands clean of the situation. Every so often, when violent crime erupted, the state police would be called into Newport. But that was not the case in the late 1950’s. The Kentucky Governor at the time, A.B. “Happy” Chandler, said in response to SAC demands of state intervention that Newport’s people “have a right to have it dirty.”⁴⁰

By 1961 the SAC’s quixotic efforts had achieved little since its inception four years earlier. They had neither the financial backing nor the wide-ranging base of support to make a significant dent in organized crime’s supremacy over Newport. Chris

³⁶ Gioielli, “Suburbs vs. Slot Machines,” 65.

³⁷ Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 85.

³⁸ Hank Messick, “‘United Effort’ To Halt Vice Is Begun In Northern Kentucky,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 11, 1959; Maxwell, “Kentucky’s Open City.” Despite being presented what the jury called “indisputable evidence of widespread illegal activities” Newport, the grand jury refused indictments. The jury was not interested in such harsh measures, for they would upset the local economy.

³⁹ Gioielli, “Suburbs vs. Slot Machines,” 66

⁴⁰ Williams, “Sin City,” 32.

Seifried and the SAC were too naïve, moralistic, and polarizing to be successful. The current political and law enforcement officials were too intimate with organized crime to listen to the SAC's moral platform. Understanding that removing corrupt officials was the only option for effective change, the SAC began preparing for ouster proceedings that were valid under Kentucky state law.⁴¹ They raised a \$1000 retainer fee for the services of anti-gambling attorney Jesse Lewis, but Lewis's total fee would cost over \$5000. Though the SAC had its numerous deficiencies, it did lay the foundation for the strivings of the Committee of 500. In late 1960 the SAC contacted local businessmen, including Jack Wadsworth and Claude Johnson, to raise money. Wadsworth and Johnson, together with other pervasive Kentucky entrepreneurs, began meeting at the Newport Public Library.⁴²

The Committee of 500

In March 1961 Henry Hosea, Jack Wadsworth, Claude Johnson, and other prominent northern Kentucky businessmen united, forming the Committee of 500.⁴³ Hosea owned an export and packaging company, Wadsworth sold construction equipment, and Johnson ran an electrical supply company.⁴⁴ All three businessmen were residents of affluent Fort Thomas, Kentucky, a small suburb near Newport. They also depended on economic development in Newport in order to make money. A Newport not

⁴¹ Ouster proceedings against law enforcement officials not enforcing local and state statutes were handled by the governor. They were inherently political and quite tricky to maneuver. The Committee of 500 contributed some 8000 dollars for the ouster proceedings, which it handed over to the SAC in 1961. Once the committee had fused public and political support, re-w Governor Bert Combs met with the Committee of 500 and decided to go ahead with ouster proceedings against 7 Newport officials. Bert Combs, Executive Order (61-815), October 10, 1961; Bert Combs, Executive Order (61-816), October 10, 1961.

⁴² Ibid, 66.

⁴³ Claude Johnson, Letter to Henry Hosea. May 23, 1961.

⁴⁴ Gioielli, "Suburbs vs. Slot Machines," 68-69

controlled by organized crime would certainly attract more corporations and industries to Campbell County. In addition, two of Wadsworth's clients got robbed in one of Newport's infamous "bust-out joints," thrusting him into the fray against gambling interests.⁴⁵ The three men organized with other powerful Fort Thomas businessmen to form the Committee of 500. They modeled the organization like a true corporation with vice presidents and officers and even hired lawyers and public relations experts. The committee reasonably gathered that the time was ripe for a knock-out punch to illegal gambling.

In order to send the rival syndicates packing, the Committee of 500 needed a prolonged and encompassing movement. They understood why the Social Action Committee had not made significant breakthroughs; the SAC's greatest weakness was its limited civic base. The Committee was made up of ministers and parishioners from only Protestant churches. Northern Kentucky's Archbishop rejected the SAC's overtures to his office because the efforts of the SAC "aroused resentment among Catholics."⁴⁶ These Catholics did not support the SAC agenda for fear of a ban on church bingo and church picnics. Newport and Cincinnati were both strongly Catholic cities due in large part to an Irish and German Catholic heritage dating back to the early nineteenth century. Hank Messick argued that cultural conflicts between German and Irish Catholic immigrants and anti-immigrant, Protestant elements led to Newport's development as an "open city" in the first place.⁴⁷ Newport's religious, as well as political, diversity made it difficult for

⁴⁵ Claude Johnson. Letter to anonymous, October 31, 1964. While Claude Johnson and Jack Wadsworth were in Newport for a conference, two of Wadsworth's road construction equipment clients decided to venture to one of Newport's many casinos. Shortly after arriving there, they were both robbed. This event had a profound effect on Johnson and Wadsworth.

⁴⁶ Claude Johnson. Speech to the Committee of Fort Thomas, April 25, 1961.

⁴⁷ Messick, *The Silent Syndicate*, 153.

a religiously or politically one-sided reform group to pioneer indelible change.

Organized crime's economic dominion over the city was simply too omnipotent.

As a result, the Committee of 500 publicized that it was "not a political group."⁴⁸ Instead, the committee was "religiously non-sectarian and politically non-partisan," in order to avoid alienating segments of the Newport population.⁴⁹ The committee actively recruited members by speaking to associations and organizations and handing out flyers. Their agenda was spread around the Greater Cincinnati area with conviction and zeal. After only two months, the Committee of 500 had over fifteen thousand members.⁵⁰

Additionally, the Committee of 500 directly challenged organized crime's monopoly of local politics by nominating and campaigning for public office, most notably George Ratterman for Campbell County Sheriff. The committee targeted the position of sheriff because law enforcement was vital to controlling vice and eliminating corruption in Newport.⁵¹ Because the Committee of 500 was nonpartisan, their candidate would not be running as a Democrat or Republican. Instead, their candidate would be backed as a member of the Reform, or Honesty Party. Claude Johnson's friend and colleague, George Ratterman, decided to run soon after hearing about the committee's crusade on vice.

It would have been extremely difficult to find a better candidate. Football star at local St Xavier High School, the University of Notre Dame, and the NFL's Cleveland Browns, Ratterman was a local legend and celebrity.⁵² While in the NFL, he had worked industriously in the offseason to receive his law degree from the Chase College of Law,

⁴⁸ Committee of 500, Active Member Bulletin, June 20, 1963.

⁴⁹ Committee of 500. "Speech to Fort Thomas Ministerial Committee," April 25, 1961.

⁵⁰ "Jubilant Committee of 500 expects 15,000 at meeting," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 21, 1961.

⁵¹ Committee of 500, "Speech to Ministerial Committee."

⁵² Horstman, "George Ratterman."

which he finished in 1960.⁵³ At age thirty-four, Ratterman was an affluent, Catholic, married attorney and investment counselor living in Fort Thomas, Kentucky.⁵⁴ Because he was Catholic, the Committee of 500 was able to more effectively recruit Catholic members the SAC had been unable to attract.

The economics and politics of Newport during and after the organized crime era were labyrinthine and multilayered. Ultimately, what enabled the Committee of 500 to banish illegal gambling from Newport was a focus, not on morality, but on the elimination of corruption and the promise of economic vitality.

From all angles, Ratterman, though he had no prior law enforcement experience, seemed to be a shoo-in for sheriff. The Committee of 500's political consultant, Leonard Sive, quipped that "if you can't win with him you may as well fold up your tents."⁵⁵ Ratterman pledged an anti-vice campaign, vowing to run out the illegal gambling houses.⁵⁶ At this point, it was unclear whether organized crime was more fearful of Ratterman or the Committee of 500, whose membership had just hit twenty-three thousand.⁵⁷

The Ratterman Incident and Expulsion of Illegal Gambling

It did not take long for Ratterman's swelling public support to get the attention of organized crime. Not even a month after he announced his intent to run for Campbell County Sheriff, a crude plan to frame him was in place. Tito Carinci, former Xavier

⁵³ Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 74.

⁵⁴ Bill Davidson, "The Great Kentucky Scandal," *Look Magazine*, October 24, 1961.

⁵⁵ Claude Johnson, Letter to Bert Coombs, March 20, 1961.

⁵⁶ Williams, "Sin City," 34.

⁵⁷ Ronald L. Goldfarb, *Perfect Villains, Imperfect Heroes: Robert F. Kennedy's War against Organized Crime* (Sterling, VA: Capital, 2002), 93.

University football star and current operator of the Glenn Rendezvous, and organized crime attorney Charles Lester agreed that Ratterman had to be “taken out.”⁵⁸ On the night of May 8, 1961 Carinci invited Ratterman to the Glenn, for the two had known each other growing up in Cincinnati.⁵⁹ Carinci slipped a triple dose of chloral hydrate, the knockout drug, into Ratterman’s drink. Later that night, an anonymous tip was called in to the Newport Police Department about prostitution at the Glenn Hotel. At 2:40 A.M. on May 9, three detectives burst into room 314 of the hotel, finding a groggy Ratterman in bed with 27 year old Juanita Hodges, better known as exotic dancer April Flowers.⁶⁰

That precise moment was one of the many turning points in the “wicked” history of Newport, Kentucky. It took officials a few hours to discern what exactly had happened, but the picture soon became clear and did not take long for “all hell to break loose.”⁶¹ Ratterman’s arrest and alleged frame-up was now national news. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, upon reading about the chain of events, sent thirty-nine FBI agents to Newport.⁶² They helped local law enforcement file charges against Carinci, Lester, Hodges, and others. Ratterman went on trial, but was found innocent after sufficient evidence was presented on his behalf. The federal pressure on local law enforcement tipped the balance in favor of reformers. As one longtime Newport bookmaker said at the time, “Newport’s status quo as a great gambling town was dead.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 76.

⁵⁹ David Wecker, “Newport: Shutdown in Sin City,” *The Kentucky Post*, September 6, 2004.

⁶⁰ Davidson, “The Great Kentucky Scandal.”

⁶¹ Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 77.

⁶² Goldfarb, *Perfect Villains, Imperfect Heroes*, 86.

⁶³ Barker, *Wicked Newport*, 77.

Ratterman was elected by a wide margin in the November 1961 election.⁶⁴ The Committee of 500 had succeeded in arousing the public to its “responsibility to seek, obtain, and retain honest government.”⁶⁵ By nominating Ratterman, the Committee had finally molded capable citizen leadership (albeit not local), putting intense pressure upon organized crime for the first time. With the ball in their court, organized crime made a huge blunder by attempting to frame Ratterman. The affair shifted public opinion among the residents of Newport toward the Committee of 500-led cleanup. Even the merchants, who had long been “sold on the idea that gambling was good for vice, were having a change of heart.”⁶⁶ With Ratterman in office for only a few months, Newport was free of gambling for the first time since the turn of the century. He would say later that he “did not have to bust down any doors,” but once he did, “the other side knew what was coming, and they left quietly.”⁶⁷ The syndicates took their operations, not surprisingly, to Las Vegas. Meanwhile, the Committee of 500 went on supporting other candidates for public office, but none of them gained the popularity and fame of Ratterman.⁶⁸

The significance of the Committee of 500’s efforts to seek out and eliminate illegal gambling and political corruption in Newport is found in economics. The committee’s goals were, according to Robert Gioielli, to reorient the economic structure of Campbell County into one friendlier and dependent upon corporate America.⁶⁹

Wadsworth, Johnson, and Hosea each were influential businessmen that ably managed

⁶⁴ Hank Messick, “Republicans Sweep City And County; Ratterman Elected Campbell Sheriff,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 7, 1961.

⁶⁵ Committee of 500, Active Member Bulletin.

⁶⁶ Edwin A. Lahey, “Change in Sin City,” *The Miami Herald*, July 3, 1961. The merchants believed that the Committee of 500 would succeed in bringing industry and business to Newport.

⁶⁷ Wecker, “Shutdown in Sin City.”

⁶⁸ Committee of 500, Active Member Bulletin; Claude Johnson, Letter to John Breckinridge. February 15, 1963; Letter to John Breckinridge. February 20, 1963; The Committee of 500 sent out active member bulletins informing its members which candidates supported its aims in Newport.

⁶⁹ Gioielli, “Suburbs vs. Slot Machines,” 68.

the committee like a corporation; therefore, the committee was successful, unlike the Social Action Committee, in expelling organized crime. They attracted followers by promoting themselves as non-partisan and secular. By focusing their argument for getting rid of gambling in terms on economics and not morality, the Committee of 500 changed the structure of Newport forever. The committee effectively nominated politicians – most notably George Ratterman – for public office in 1961. Without gambling-related revenue and employment, the Newport economy suddenly was thrown into a state of flux and transition. The Committee of 500 hoped to attract industry and commerce to Newport, but nightlife would once again dominate Newport's economy for the ensuing decades. As the city once again became dependent on vice, the committee remained silent and inactive, only occasionally aroused when pockets of gambling resurfaced.

CHAPTER II:
NEWPORT WITHOUT ORGANIZED CRIME

The Committee of 500 Goes Silent

After organized crime had been dispelled, the Committee of 500 continued to support public officials for office. During the 1961 campaign, the committee had actively sponsored four candidates for the Newport City Commission. Unlike Sheriff Candidate George Ratterman, they all were soundly defeated.⁷⁰ All things considered, the campaign had been an enormous success. The committee's nomination and subsequent election of Ratterman was a crafty move. 1963 was again a banner year for the Committee of 500. In the 1963 local election, the committee targeted the legal system, nominating Frank Benton III for Commonwealth's attorney and Fred Warren for circuit judge as well as reform candidates for the Newport City Commission. Surprisingly, Benton and Warren won, though the reform candidates for City

⁷⁰ Hank Messick, "Republicans Sweep."

Commission were again defeated.⁷¹ The committee remained active in Campbell County and Newport for the next two years. With the staunch support of the committee, Ratterman served out his four year term as Campbell County Sheriff.

The 1965 election, however, was the Committee of 500's downfall. Ratterman's deputy, Ed Stevens, ran for sheriff due to the fact that Kentucky law prohibited consecutive terms. Ratterman himself was after a more powerful position. Backed by the now effervescent Committee of 500, he ran for circuit judge. Based on his popularity, the committee reasoned that Ratterman would garner the same community support he received in the 1961 election. But they were wrong. Without gambling, Newport's economy was in a transitory period; many in Campbell County longed for the "glory days" of the 1950's and blamed the Committee of 500 for the changes in the local structure. In the highly touted election, Democratic incumbent A.J. Jolly firmly routed Ratterman. Stevens too lost the sheriff election; the two defeats combined to deliver the Committee of 500 a blow that would become its "Waterloo." Though the committee, according to Claude Johnson, remained "active" over the next decade, it never again endorsed candidates in local elections.⁷² The defeat and demise of the committee can only be explained by its inability to capitalize on the ostracism of organized crime from Newport.

With that being said, the Committee of 500, looking to replace illegal revenue in Newport's economy with legitimate business, attempted a perfunctory recruiting plan to attract industry to Newport. The committee was working to invigorate Newport with a wholesome and vigorous presence of progress and prosperity. In the coming years, the

⁷¹ Worth Bingham, "Reform ticket captures posts in Kentucky County," *New York Times*, November 6, 1963.

⁷² James Ott, "Is Committee of 500 Dead?" *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 3, 1966.

committee worked closely with the Newport Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce to market Newport as an enticing location for corporations and industry.⁷³ Claude Johnson, charter member of the committee, took this mission to heart more than anyone. He wrote thousands of letters to corporations, Congressmen, and concerned citizens urging them to adopt the Committee of 500's economic hope for Newport. Both he and Sheriff George Ratterman were convinced that vice and corruption had scared away corporations that had considered relocating or opening up a plant in Campbell County.⁷⁴

The first success occurred in 1962. The Committee of 500 was vital in securing a brand new IRS building in Newport.⁷⁵ Residents were confident more good news and business would soon arrive. Just two years after Ratterman had been elected sheriff, it appeared that the committee's vision for Newport was unattainable. The new IRS building was the only major development. Skeptics were not sure if Newport could sustain itself economically without organized crime.⁷⁶ The Committee of 500 continued to lobby for business based on its assertions that organized crime was gone. The committee active bulletin in 1963 stated that "new clean industries will replace the shady old conditions which are almost eliminated."⁷⁷ Committee members also alleged that the well-being on Newport's residents had improved as a result of their efforts. One member even went so far as to say that "the only daily meal for 600 kids in Newport was a free lunch at school, because their daddies (& sometimes mommies) blew their pay checks on the horses."⁷⁸ This holy attitude might have been expected from the Social Action

⁷³ Claude Johnson, Letter to Frank Chelf. April 28, 1964.

⁷⁴ George Ratterman Announcement Speech, April 27, 1961, NKU box 1 folder 11.

⁷⁵ Ratterman, George, Letter to Mortimer Caplin, January 17, 1962.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 78.

⁷⁷ Committee of 500. Active Member Bulletin.

⁷⁸ Letter from anonymous to darlin' Annie October 31, 1964.

Committee, but certainly not the respected Committee of 500. By the mid-1960's, the committee's redundant pitch had become alienating and unheeded.

In fact, the Committee of 500 was more successful outside of Newport; in 1963 incessant lobbying paid off with the construction of Interstate 275, Cincinnati's beltway, through Campbell County.⁷⁹ Claude Johnson's vision of Campbell County's future included an institution of higher education. There was not a college of over fifteen hundred students in the three counties (Boone, Kenton, and Campbell) of northern Kentucky. In 1968 Johnson was instrumental in helping to change that fact. He met with bureaucrats from the state university, pleading with them to consider adding a branch of the state university in Campbell County. Johnson's persisting efforts led to the provenance of Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights, Kentucky, only a few miles south of Newport.⁸⁰ The groundwork was laid for sweeping economic change in Newport, but the Committee of 500's optimism was not felt everywhere. A new highway and university did not help out the many shopkeepers along Monmouth and York Streets. The business they lost to gamblers was, at the time, irreplaceable. In addition, these advancements did not bring an inpouring of business. Investment and funds were expected to be flowing into Newport; but this simply was not the case.

The Committee of 500 became inactive because of its failure to lure business and industry to Newport. During the 1961 election, the committee offered Newport residents a seemingly feasible economic vision for the future. The committee envisioned a "concerted endeavor to restructure the economy of northern Kentucky."⁸¹ By extinguishing illegal gambling, Ratterman and the Committee of 500 wanted to offer the

⁷⁹ Claude Johnson, Letter to Rex Whitten, July 2, 1963.

⁸⁰ Claude Johnson, Letter to Edward F. Pendery, December 23, 1968.

⁸¹ Gioielli, "Suburbs vs. Slot Machines," 69.

residents of Newport an alternative to vice and gambling. Hank Messick argued in *The Silent Syndicate* that, by 1965, Newport and Campbell County “gave every indication they could recover from their long-lasting economic blight.”⁸² Messick’s evidence for such optimism was an influx of new industry and the rebuilding of the town via an “urban renewal project.”⁸³ But little or no industry came. Without work opportunities, residents moved out of Newport, and the city, by some estimates, lost over a \$100 thousand in taxes.⁸⁴ In reality, Newport’s economy after the expulsion of organized crime was neither boom nor bust. The city certainly was not a ghost town, but it was suffering without gambling. Organized crime’s gambling halls provided more than just direct labor. Food distribution catered to gambling institutions small and large and local lending establishments accommodated organized crime’s capital. Shopkeepers grappled to keep their doors open; there was great resentment among them, for the Committee of 500 had been responsible for eschewing in a new era without a stream of customers from gambling joints.

Though the committee had been unable to lure business to Newport, historian Robert Gioielli has argued that any political action by the committee after 1965 would have been unnecessary because the Committee of 500 had achieved its goals.⁸⁵ It had eliminated gambling and corruption in Campbell County, and developments outside of Newport were looking promising. Most of the members of the Committee of 500 were Fort Thomas, Kentucky businessmen. Because they were not Newport residents, when push came to shove, they were more concerned with the well-being of their local

⁸² Hank Messick, *The Silent Syndicate* (New York City: MacMillan, 1967), 285.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Williams, “Sin City,” 43.

⁸⁵ Gioielli, “Suburbs vs. Slot Machines,” 79.

community, Fort Thomas. Without gambling and vice in Newport, the Committee of 500 was able to lure investment and development into most other areas of Campbell County. They tried to bring economic development to Newport, but failed because their efforts were not long-lasting. In the absence of gambling, Newport's economy floundered, a reason why Newport residents developed a disdain for the Committee of 500. To them, the committee represented meddling outsiders who did not have a stake in the city's outcome. Investment languished behind the more affluent suburbs of Campbell County, including Fort Thomas.

Over the next decade, the Committee of 500 occasionally made brief headlines, but it never actively held meetings or fundraisers. George Ratterman, the committee's "knight in shining armor," moved to Centennial, Colorado in 1967 to pursue a new career in finance.⁸⁶ Henry Hosea, the president of the committee, had tremendous success with his exporting company, Hosea & Sons.⁸⁷ Claude Johnson continued his business-recruiting plan, but the Committee of 500's impact on Newport would not be an influx of industry and commerce. Rather, the committee achieved something significant – the ousting of organized crime and the cleanup of an economy of corruption. Indeed, this accomplishment changed Newport's history forever. Though locally the city still entertains the "Sin City" reputation, its national fame was gone soon after George

⁸⁶ Letter from anonymous to darlin' Annie; George Palmer, "George Ratterman in New Field as Real Estate Sales Teacher," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 17, 1979. Ratterman also campaigned unsuccessfully for Congress in 1967. Ratterman moved to Centennial, Colorado (a suburb of Denver) in 1967 after losing the House of Representatives election. He continued NFL color commentary with Jack Buck on NBC until 1973. His many careers in Colorado included financial planning and real estate teaching. Ratterman died in 2007 from complications of Alzheimer's disease.

⁸⁷ "\$6 million coal terminal planned for licking river," 1974; Bill Vale, "Newport Shipping Firm Booming as Result," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 7, 1975. Buoyed by his post as chairman of the Northern Kentucky Port Authority, Hosea secured a coal terminal on the Licking River in 1974. Though not located in Newport the terminal would boost the local economy because, as Hosea said, "transportation is the key to industrial growth." His company thrived shortly thereafter, grossing multimillions and expanding faster than its capabilities.

Ratterman entered office as Campbell County Sheriff. The void in the local economy created by the exodus of gambling allowed strip clubs and prostitution to dominate Newport nightlife starting in the late 1960's. The Committee of 500 could have prevented this development from manifesting. However, the reform movement encompassed mostly out-of-town businessmen. It was not germane to Newport. Therefore, when Newport's economy lapsed into a lull in the 1960's, the Committee of 500 went silent, for economic development was robust in the rest of Northern Kentucky.

A New Era of Nightlife

The 1960's was a transition period for Newport. The mass egress of gambling to Las Vegas left the city ripe for economic development. Instead, Newport and the Committee of 500 failed to lure business. This downfall enabled Newport to become what it always had been: Cincinnati's entertainment district. Before long, topless bars and "clandestine" brothels dominated Newport's downtown scene. While the Committee of 500 was off working to banish bingo from Campbell County, old casino owners were reopening their establishments as nightclubs.⁸⁸ These establishments flourished in the 1970's thanks to a willing consumer base in Cincinnati.

A combination of factors contributed to the resurgence of nightlife in Newport. First and foremost, the void in the local economy and the failures of the Committee of

⁸⁸ Letter from John Kohrman to Frank Benton Re: Church Gambling September 17, 1966; Paul M. Branzberg, "Bingo... Going... Gone: Federal crackdown on big-time bingo in Newport leads to all-out ban against the game," *The Kentucky Post*, January 20, 1970. Committee member John Kohrman commented that "the idealism of religion is incompatible with church gambling... particularly where children and their education, is involved." Church gambling, to them, was just a step below organized crime's big time gambling. In 1968 a raid on five Newport nightclubs by ninety FBI agents resulted in thirty-two arrests for playing bingo. This bust resulted in the Committee of 500's last official accomplishment, banning bingo in Campbell County in 1970. Then City Commissioner Johnny "TV" Peluso commented that the ban was "overkill" because it "lumped civic organizations in with casinos." The Catholic Church was obviously irate, a reason why the Committee of 500 was unable to organize again in Newport.

500 permitted old casino owners to reopen their businesses as strip clubs and nightclubs. The reemergence of nightlife in Newport attracted all kinds of people to Newport once again. Violent crime intensified, and journalists asked the Committee of 500 for its official position. Former president Henry Hosea told *The Kentucky Post* in 1972 that the committee ““can’t get excited about the splurge of crime and murder in Newport.””⁸⁹ Despite the displeasure, the Committee of 500 remained inactive. Gambling and national attention were gone and the rest of Campbell County was flush with business development.

Additionally, the throngs of sports fans from downtown Cincinnati proved to be a reliable backbone for nightlife business. In 1970 Riverfront Stadium was completed.⁹⁰ The new park was located in downtown Cincinnati on the bank of the Ohio River, just a short walk from Newport. Combined with the inception of Cincinnati’s Convention Center, the completion of Riverfront Stadium in downtown Cincinnati once again made Newport Cincinnati’s entertainment district.⁹¹ After each game, many sports fans walked the brief egress across the Ohio River to Newport for post-game adult recreation. Topless girls became the norm in Newport’s nightclubs. Prostitution was rampant, with women soliciting patrons in many clubs.⁹²

⁸⁹ John Murphy, “Committee of 500 ‘Cool’ on slayings,” *The Kentucky Post*, August 4, 1972.

⁹⁰ Mike Shannon, *Riverfront Stadium: Home of the Big Red Machine*, (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2003), 21. For over 80 years, Crosley Field was the home of Cincinnati’s Major League Baseball franchise, the Reds. The stadium was not located downtown; rather, it was situated in the Queensgate section of the city, two miles northwest of downtown. Tentative plans for a new stadium had been in place since 1948, but Cincinnati’s opportunity to join the National Football League turned those propositions into practice. The expansion Cincinnati Bengals played their first two seasons at the University of Cincinnati’s Nippert Stadium. Both the Bengals and the Reds moved to brand new Riverfront Stadium in 1970.

⁹¹ Bruce Hadley, “Go-Go Girls Breathe Life into Newport Night Clubs,” *The Kentucky Post*, August 16, 1966.

⁹² “Easy to find girls in Newport,” *The Kentucky Post*, July 4, 1972.

Furthermore, Newport was void of reform movements during the late 1960's and 1970's. While the Committee of 500 had obvious shortcomings, it was a very potent organization during its pinnacle. No such reform movement during the 1970's gained even a fraction of the momentum enjoyed by the committee in the early 1960's. Newport's residents were hesitant to throw their support behind a reformer after the economic issues created by the Committee of 500's reform a decade earlier. Still, there were a few individuals who tried to take on adult entertainment by themselves. City Commissioner Charles Sarakatsannis verbally attacked Police Chief Edward Gugel during a 1972 Fourth of July meeting, telling *The Kentucky Post* that ““vice was running rampant in the city” and that such operations existed because of “police payoffs.”⁹³ But Sarakatsannis was in the minority during his nine years – 1966-1975 – on the City Commission.

It was clear that Newport's economy of corruption had survived without organized crime. At the end of 1972, state grand juries issued a series of indictments against nine Newport public officials, including Police Chief Gugel, City Manager Robert Sidell, and City Commissioner Johnny “TV” Peluso.⁹⁴ Unfortunately for

⁹³ Nancye Moncrief, “Gugel and police target of attack,” *The Kentucky Post*, July 4, 1972; Greg Paeth, “Siler: ‘Cut out Corrupt Police’,” *The Kentucky Post*, December 7, 1974; Williams, “Sin City,” 49. Born in Newport, Kentucky in 1926, Charles Sarakatsannis was a lifetime Newport resident. He and his family owned and operated Crystal Chili on Monmouth Street, at the heart of the vice district. After gambling left town in 1961, Sarakatsannis watched as Monmouth Street became a series of strip bars. Convinced that downtown Newport's illegal vice thrived through corruption and bribery, he sought and won a City Commission seat in 1966. Throughout his nine years on the Commission, Sarakatsannis frequently butted heads with Police Chief Edward Gugel, who was former Police Chief George Gugel's son. Sarakatsannis's challenge to Gugel and other city officials was how journalists so freely found prostitution but the Police Chief could not.

⁹⁴ Nancye Moncrief, “Grand Jury ‘bombs’ Newport; Police and officials indicted,” *The Kentucky Post*, December 15, 1972; Nancye Moncrief, “We must end vice and slayings,” *The Kentucky Post*, January 9, 1973. The nine officials were charged with many crimes including accepting a bribe and fraud. Campbell County Judge Frederick Warren urged the public to unite against the officials indicted to change their city. However, much like earlier stories in Newport, the indictments resulted in only one conviction.

Newport's few reformers, only one man was convicted.⁹⁵ Throughout the 1970's, adult entertainment dominated Newport through indifference, corruption, and even bribery. Violent crime surged upward to the city's highest levels since Prohibition.⁹⁶ Newport remained "Sin City" and "Cincinnati's Stepchild."

Still Cincinnati's Stepchild

Long before gambling and vice dominated Newport's economy, Cincinnati was notorious for its many sins. Before a post-World War I crackdown, the "Queen City" was a haven for illegal activities of all kinds.⁹⁷ These anti-vice crusades drove most illegal businesses into Northern Kentucky, especially Newport. Cincinnati enjoyed mainstream prosperity, but visitors found only a short walk separated them from Newport's special attractions. Over time, Newport's local and national reputation grew as Cincinnati's "adult playground."⁹⁸ With this designation came a double standard. Conduct which would be reprehensible in Cincinnati was "winked at if carried out in Northern Kentucky."⁹⁹

No situation better exemplifies this point than that of Gerald (Jerry) Springer in 1974. Long before his outrageous television show debuted, Springer was in fact an aspiring Cincinnati politician. He won a seat on the Cincinnati City Council in 1971 at only 27 years old.¹⁰⁰ His political career looked to be over, however, in 1974 when a scandal broke that Springer had paid for sex with two prostitutes at a Northern Kentucky

⁹⁵ Mike Palmissano, "Jury 'bomb' fuse sputters in trials," *The Kentucky Post*, June 12, 1973.

⁹⁶ Murphy, "Committee 'Cool' on slayings."

⁹⁷ Williams, "Sin City," 19.

⁹⁸ Terry Flynn, "Cincinnati's Sin City: In Newport Ever Vice Was Available for a Price, and the Sky Was the Limit," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 29, 2003.

⁹⁹ Katz, "Cincinnati's Stepchild," 27.

¹⁰⁰ Ian Markham-Smith and Liz Hodgson, *The Outrageous Jerry Springer*, (London: Blake, 1999), 57.

massage parlor.¹⁰¹ He subsequently resigned, but was returned to office by an electorate hardly known for its liberal or indulgent tendencies. Would Springer's political career have survived if his transgressions had occurred across the Ohio River in Cincinnati? Mostly likely not. Perhaps the most telling indication of Newport's stepchild status was its susceptibility to such a salacious popular myth. The main reason this image persisted long into the 1990's was Northern Kentucky's lack of a local television outlet.¹⁰² Depending on one of Greater Cincinnati's stations for news, Newport often was slighted at the mercy of Cincinnati's provincial view of local proceedings.

Furthermore, economically Newport has been forever linked to Cincinnati. Historically, its close proximity to downtown Cincinnati has made it a destination for visitors and regional residents. After a night on the town, Newport has always been a short walk or cab ride away. Cincinnatians looked down upon Newport, thinking that "if they don't do it in Ohio, they can come to Newport and get away with it."¹⁰³ While Cincinnati-Hamilton County prosecutor Simon Leis was busy waging a vigorous and well-broadcasted campaign against adult entertainment in the 1970's, Harry Virgil Mohony and Stanley Marks were opening an adult bookstore (Monmouth Street Novelty and Bookstore) and an adult movie theater (Cinema X) in Newport.¹⁰⁴ These businesses, along with strip bars enlisting prostitution, defined the city for nearly three decades,

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 89-90.

¹⁰² Stephen Wolf. "The Community with a Split Personality." *Cincinnati Magazine* 15 (1982): 54.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 55.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, "Sin City," 57. Simon Leis's most famous target was Kentucky native and founder of *Hustler Magazine*, Larry Flynt. Leis prosecuted Flynt on obscenity charges and First Amendment issues. Leis had numerous other targets including Stanley Marks, who, when unable to develop business interests in Cincinnati, then opened adult establishments in Newport.

further publicizing the “Sin City” moniker. The illegal was once again legal in Newport because “Greater Cincinnati depend[ed] on Newport to bring out the worst in itself.”¹⁰⁵

The revival of nightlife in Newport sparked citizen concern. Many residents objected to their city being Cincinnati’s vice district. 1980’s reformer and Newport Mayor Irene Deaton echoed many residents’ beliefs, stating that “a lot of residents of Newport resent it. Let them do their dirty work in their own neighborhood.”¹⁰⁶ In addition, 1970’s city manager Ralph Mussman mirrored Deaton’s remarks alleging it was “unjust that Cincinnati, which owed much of its convention and visitor business to the presence of ‘sin city’ across the Ohio River, should have adopted a holier-than-thou attitude.”¹⁰⁷ The older generation of Newport residents, like Mussman, also displayed nostalgia for the gambling and organized crime era. Mussman was the mayor during gambling’s heyday, and he was quick to point out that there was not a spike in violent crime in the 1950’s as there was when nightlife reemerged in the late 1960’s.¹⁰⁸ At the heart of these beliefs was civic pride. Only local Newport residents could possibly understand their city’s lack of identity throughout the 20th century, but they remained powerless to do anything about it for the longest time. The mighty Committee of 500 was able to gain support by promising economic change. When that change never materialized into prosperity in Newport, the committee lost public support and went quiet, for it was not a “local” organization. Most of its members were not from Newport and did not give the sustained effort necessary to rehabilitate the city. Newport residents

¹⁰⁵ R.L. Katz, “Across the River, Cincinnati After Dark,” *Cincinnati Magazine* 9 no. 12 (1976): 5.

¹⁰⁶ Wolf, “Split Personality,” 55.

¹⁰⁷ “Mussman Was Boss of Famed Newport During Its Heyday.” *The Kentucky Enquirer Digest*, April 7, 1975.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid; James A. Maxwell, “Newport, ‘Sin City,’ Revisited.” *The Kentucky Enquirer Digest*, April 7, 1975. In the very same newspaper edition, *The Kentucky Enquirer Digest* reprinted James A. Maxwell’s 1960 expose “Newport: Kentucky’s Open City.”

became so fed up with out-of-towners meddling in their city that they elected reform candidates to public positions in the late 1970's and early 80's. Their goal: to dismantle the "Sin City" and "stepchild" status of the city by invigorating Newport with sweeping economic reform.

CHAPTER III:
THE STRUGGLE TO SHED “SIN CITY”

A Reformed Political Climate

Since Prohibition, Newport had lacked the necessary combination of local reform government, citizen influence and participation, and an economic plan to overcome the money, politics, and corruption that created and sustained Sin City. These elements started to converge by 1980. Throughout the 1970's, reform's detractors – and there were many – believed that strip bars and illicit entertainment were a necessary evil. These advocates assumed that Newport's economy depended upon the sexually oriented adult attractions, especially nude dancing. Supporters nude dancing had only to point out that crowds and their money that came to bars featuring strippers. Ending nude dancing, supporters contended, would irreparably harm the city's economy.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Williams, “Sin City,” 90.

This attitude, however, was beginning to change. The 1977-78 City Commission had its first reform majority in its history. Along with Irene Deaton, Steve Goetz, Ken Mullikin, and Marty Due joined the City Commission. The three newcomers were introduced to Newport politics in style, when, prior to the election, notorious local nightlife figure Lester Lee offered them a bribe to “leave the [adult] bookstore alone.”¹¹⁰ Instead of taking bribes, the reform commission engineered connections between citizens and elected leaders. The reformers understood that changing public opinion toward vice was the only corridor to economic change. They created a new position: City Ombudsman, who would be a liaison of complaints between elected officials and Newport citizens. The commission chose Kenneth Rehtin for the job, based on his staunch leadership position in the community. Deaton, Goetz, Mullikin, and Due also introduced the practice of inviting a different Newport Citizens Advisory Council (NCAC) representative to sit with the Board during meetings. Thus, local civic organizations, such as the NCAC, attained power and forged close connections with politicians. Believing that adult entertainment “deterred making Newport a place to live and work,” the council considered adult businesses an “insult to... the citizens of Newport.”¹¹¹ By giving ordinary Newport natives a voice in local government, the NCAC fused civic pride and bureaucratic engagement, two elements sorely lacking during Newport’s 20th century history.

¹¹⁰ Tom Loftus, “Three Tell of Bribe Try,” *The Kentucky Post*, November 21, 1978. The three men met in a dark parking lot awaiting the arrival of Lee. Finally, after some time, he pulled into the lot in a dark sedan, handing the men a heavy envelope filled to brim with cash. Goetz, Mullikin, and Due returned the money shortly thereafter.

¹¹¹ Newport Commission Minutes: May 17, 1982. The Newport Citizens Advisory Council was formed in 1976 to satisfy citizen input protocols for federal urban grants. The NCAC was incorporated with the help of the Brighton Center, a local service agency. Comprised of nine assemblies from each of Newport’s different neighborhoods, the council gave local citizens a voice in government. The NCAC sought to improve the city’s lingering “Sin City” image and rehabilitate the city as a destination for business.

Reform politicians had ample detractors. Mayor Johnny “TV” Peluso was among the biggest. In the 1970’s Peluso was in the liberal camp, believing that adult entertainment was imperative to the economic well-being of Newport.¹¹² Throughout his second tenure as mayor (1976-1980), the outlandish television repairman and politician frequently butted heads with the reform commission. His main adversary was Irene Deaton. She and the reform commission colleagues proposed and passed an Adult Zoning Amendment, which inhibited new adult entertainment businesses from being built and created minimum distances between adult bars and neighborhoods and schools.¹¹³ Peluso voted against the amendment and even tried to repeal it when passed by the commission. In addition, the mayor struck down Deaton’s petition – with over a thousand signatures of Newport residents – opposing the opening of a new adult bookstore in 1976.¹¹⁴

Peluso was not the only obstacle. The 1979 election resulted in a liberal majority. Increasing pressure from Liquor Administrator and City Ombudsman Kenneth Rehtin mounted on bar owners and adult entertainment entrepreneurs. Rehtin was extremely aggressive as Newport Liquor Administrator, often forcing bars to comply to regulations by conducting fines, suspensions, and, in some cases, license revocation.¹¹⁵ His scrutiny of the bars was viewed as pugnacious by the Campbell County Tavern Owners Association, who complained that there were “too many reformers in city

¹¹² Calvin Trillin, “Newport, Ky.,: Across The River-Still Sinning,” *The New Yorker*, March 27, 1976, 114. Trillin’s critique of Newport was harsh. He even went as far to say that if city officials could “miraculously transport the Great Pyramid from Giza to Newport, the assumption would be that the purpose was to provide an authentic setting for some particularly imaginative Egyptian belly dancing.”

¹¹³ Jim Dady, “Newport Orders up Anti-Porn Law to Combat Smut,” *The Kentucky Post*, March 3, 1977.

¹¹⁴ Dick Freeman, “Irene Gathers Bushels of Dirty Book Protests,” *The Kentucky Post*, October 20, 1976. Despite Deaton’s best efforts, James “Buck” Lewallen, a former Stanley Marks employee, opened up the adult bookstore on Monmouth Street.

¹¹⁵ “Three Newport Bars Pay Fines,” *The Kentucky Post*, November 22, 1978.

government.”¹¹⁶ As a result of Rehtin and other reformers’ efforts, bar owners mounted resistance, campaigning for liberal candidates to the City Commission. Peluso, Owen Deaton (no relation to Irene Deaton), and Tony Warndorf joined the new City Commission along with reelected Steve Goetz while Irene Deaton became mayor. Warndorf was known to be friendly toward adult entertainment and Owen Deaton was a good friend of Peluso; thus, the board meetings – with the addition of the NCAC representative – were hostile and referred to as the “Monday Night Fights.”¹¹⁷ To show who the new boss in town was, the liberal majority fired Liquor Administrator Kenneth Rehtin and City Manager Ralph Mussman as well as police officers involved in anti-vice raids.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Peluso, Owen Deaton, and Warndorf frequently publicly supported expanding adult entertainment in Newport.

These actions by the liberal majority had severe consequences. Angry that they had fired loyal city employees, Campbell County Attorney Paul Twelhues called in the state police to raid adult establishments on the grounds that they were violating Kentucky obscenity laws.¹¹⁹ In the related trials, the owners and operators of the bookstores and theaters either plead guilty or were convicted of charges. In addition, a “displeased populace” in Newport reelected none of the liberal majority on the City Commission.¹²⁰ The city would have its first ever all-reform board that worked to mitigate adult entertainment’s hold of the city.

¹¹⁶ Williams, “Sin City,” 120.

¹¹⁷ Thomas L. Purvis, *Newport, Kentucky: A Bicentennial History*, (Newport, Kentucky: Otto Zimmerman and Sons, Co., Inc., 1996), 284. Local television anchor Nick Clooney – father to actor George and sister to singer and actress Rosemary Clooney – broadcasted coverage of the Commission meetings. He began the coverage with a satirical opening, saying, “Live from Newport... It’s Meeting Night.”

¹¹⁸ Bertram Workum, “Mussman Blames Newport Nightlifer for Job Loss,” *The Kentucky Post*, February 21, 1980.

¹¹⁹ Kentucky State Revised Code § 531.090 (1980).

¹²⁰ Jim Dady, “Reform Ticket Was Big In Newport,” *The Kentucky Post*, May 27, 1981.

The 1970's and 1980's reform movement in Newport was fueled by ordinary citizens of the city. The Newport Citizens Advisory Council worked to change public opinion toward adult entertainment through productive council meetings in each of the city's nine neighborhoods. The NCAC engaged citizens in politics; for the first time, local politicians became convinced that Newport's role as "Sin City" had to go. Unlike the Committee of 500, Irene Deaton, Kenneth Rehtin, and their fellow reformers were Newport residents. Therefore, they had a much more vested interest in the political and economic consequences of public officials' decisions. Once the reformers were able to overcome significant hurdles to effect political change, they turned their focus to remaking the economic component of Newport.

Laura Long and Economic Reform

By 1983, Newport's public offices were staunchly in the hands of reformers. They had wielded power away from liberals sympathetic to adult entertainment and enacted an agenda designed to change the reputation of the city. The time for change was ripe. Former City Manager Ralph Mussman observed that Newport might have to "suffer through another transition" period similar to the 1960's.¹²¹ But Newport's reformers, unlike the Committee of 500, was committed to comprehensive economic plan that would benefit solely Newport. They did not let the city's economy fall into decline.

The City Commission was committed to reviving Newport's economy by attracting commerce and family friendly fun. To help accomplish this objective, the Commission created a new position, Economic Development Director. Their choice for

¹²¹ Kevin Cullen, "Newport Unsure of Dancing Ban's Effect," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 20, 1983.

the post was puzzling. Laura Long was 31 years old and had just been fired from a similar job in Pottsville, Pennsylvania.¹²² The press was not impressed; no newspaper even ran a story about the hire. But Long was determined. She and her husband, architect Richard Nevil, moved into an old Victorian home in Newport's historic, yet decrepit Eastern Row District.¹²³ From the start, Long did not view herself as an outsider, for the city was dependent upon local leadership. No developer or government grant employee would take a concerned outsider seriously. Provincial initiative was quintessential if "Sin City" was to go through a stage of economic chrysalis.

From square one, Long faced a grandiose task. After the exodus of organized crime and illegal gambling, many Newport residents were left without jobs and suffered greatly. For example, historically Newport's largest employer, the Wiedemann Brewery, closed its doors and ceased production in 1983, leaving 400 workers without a job. Tax revenue fell sharply and Newport looked poised to be headed into another recession.¹²⁴ What's more, the city's urban blight was disturbing. Long remembered how "depressing" her first stroll down Monmouth Street had been.¹²⁵ With abandoned buildings and empty parking lots dispersed among shady liquor stores and run-down bars, the city was a mess. In addition, Newport had little if any public park space and

¹²² Skip Tate, "Long's Shot," *Cincinnati Magazine* 32 (1999): 59. Long grew up on a farm south of Champaign, Illinois. She has credited her relentlessness to the laborious farm work necessary to make ends meet for her family. Long attended Eastern Illinois University, where she majored in political science, sociology, and history as an undergraduate; she later got her master's degree in education administration from EIU. Before moving to Pottsville, she worked for the Illinois Department of Commerce and a neighborhood organization in Rockford, Illinois.

¹²³ Michael Graham, "Showgirl," *Cincinnati Magazine* 29 (1995): 69.

¹²⁴ Deborah Kremer, "Wiedemann Brewing: A Newport Institution," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 31, 2011.

¹²⁵ Graham, "Showgirl," 69.

navigable sidewalks.¹²⁶ The city's homes were old, crumbling, and in serious need of repair. Why would any large business relocate in Newport? The city was hardly an alluring place to live in 1983. Long's job, therefore, required rehabilitation and redevelopment, which was more elaborate and arduous than simple economic development.

While Newport's reformers continued to force adult entertainment out of town, Laura Long first focused on securing urban grants. In the past, Newport's politicians and leaders had not been proactive in securing grants and enticing business for the city. The Committee of 500 had planned a perfunctory recruiting plan, but after a few failures, their vision fizzled among the neon lights of Monmouth Street. Long's greatest asset was that she was not deterred by failure; in a sense, she was persistent until she got what she wanted. Jim Parsons, the city's attorney until 1989, said she was "never satisfied with the answer, 'we can't do that,'" and that attitude became infectious throughout the city's bureaucracy.¹²⁷ Providing evidence of Newport's extensive urban blight to numerous government officials, Long secured over \$15 million in grants to rehab the city's decaying infrastructure and develop vacant lots.¹²⁸ Federal grants were used for a plethora of improvements. Long siphoned off a \$1 million grant to contribute toward the construction of a new municipal building at the corner of 10th and Monmouth Streets.¹²⁹ Other grant money went toward state-of-the-art government housing that replaced dilapidated section 8 housing. Supplementary funds - \$6 million to be exact - from

¹²⁶ Arlo T. Wagner, "Solving 19th Century Problems Creates Headache Today," *The Kentucky Post*, June 28, 1966.

¹²⁷ Graham, "Showgirl," 70.

¹²⁸ Caraway, *The Sin City Years*, 123. Long, according to one of her colleagues, "knows where the grant money is buried and how to get it."

¹²⁹ Graham, "Showgirl," 69.

Newport's governmental body upgraded the main streets of the city in the form of repaving, parking, signage, and trees.

In addition, Long's comprehensive plan for the city included rehabbing Newport's historic housing. Hasty attempts to rebuild Newport homes briefly occurred in the late 1970's. A smattering of investors bought fixer-uppers at rock-bottom prices, attempting to make a quick buck. Laura Long was not interested in cursory fixes. She constructed a well thought out plan to renovate Newport's once mighty homes that together comprised the second largest historic district in Kentucky. The city's coffers were bare at the time as tax revenue had slipped even more from nightlife's heyday. While Long was able to muster \$300 thousand in grants, the city "established acted as its own lending institution and established a loan pool for housing renovation."¹³⁰ Borrowers were given 3 percent interest on loans of up to \$10,000 (the sum had to be matched by the borrower) for projects within Newport's "enterprise district." In the summer of 1993, Long pushed the program even further, introducing Rehab-A-Rama. Five haggard homes were selected to be refurbished and showcased to the public on a weekend open house. The selected participants in the event were not homeowners, but rather investors that were given no-interest \$10,000 loans and tax exemptions on materials purchased for the renovation. They were encouraged to "incorporate upmarket amenities – whirlpool tubs, walk-in closets, faux graining, all the hot buttons."¹³¹ When completed, each home was put on the open market. Long was attempted to tempt affluent single families to move to Newport in a classic *Field of Dreams* "if you build it they will come" sort of way.

¹³⁰ Linda Viccariello, "Newport News," *Cincinnati Magazine* 26 (1993): 61.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 62.

Lastly, Long succeeded in attracting business and development to Newport. Commerce was the final elusive piece to puzzle the city had been missing for a century. The Committee of 500 had failed on its promise to bring industry and business to town, but Laura Long was not about to give up after a few early hurdles. Instead of trying to remain independent from Cincinnati, Newport under Long and the reformers embraced its close relationship with downtown across the river. She said that “location, location” was the area’s primary asset with close proximity to both downtown Cincinnati and the Cincinnati/ Northern Kentucky International Airport.¹³² Banking on the flow of customers, Long was able to lock in the Islands floating-restaurant complex, which, to local residents, became a “trendsetter.”¹³³ Over time, she attracted more restaurants to what became known as “Riverboat Row.” The restaurant industry boomed in Northern Kentucky because “conventioners with one night in Cincinnati... if they have only one night they’re going to want to eat on the river.”¹³⁴

Though rehabbing the riverfront began with Riverboat Row, its driving force was office space. The view of downtown Cincinnati was spectacular, a perfect setting for an office complex. Long teamed together with flashy Cincinnati developer Dwight Brennan in 1986 and turned an old trailer park into the \$16 million, ten story Riverfront Place.¹³⁵ The gleam of the Kentucky riverfront, the office suite and parking garage, were soon home to Heinz Pet Products, a Fortune 500 company. At the time the nation’s third-largest pet food company, Heinz moved to Newport to be more centrally located. Its employees were impressed with Riverfront Place and excited about the short commute

¹³² Mary McCarty, “Northern Kentucky Sudden Boom in Quality Space,” *Cincinnati Magazine* 18, no. 9 (1985): 78.

¹³³ Gregory Hall, “Long Helped Change Newport Image,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 28, 1998.

¹³⁴ Albert Pyle, “What Next For Northern Kentucky,” *Cincinnati Magazine* 23, no. (1990): F30.

¹³⁵ Graham, “Showgirl,” 68.

and proximity to Cincinnati.¹³⁶ For once, Newport was making the most of its often stressed relationship with Cincinnati. For over a century, the city had been “the stepchild,” but now Long was working with Cincinnati developers and business leaders to enhance Greater Cincinnati’s prestige. She even said that there was a philosophical agreement that “what’s good for this side of the river is good for the other side and vice versa.”¹³⁷ By embracing its economic ties to Cincinnati, Newport was forging for itself an exclusive identity for the first time in its history. This identity would become regionally famous in the 1990’s as bigger and better expansions came to define the city at the turn of the century.

A Different Kind of Destination City

By 1995, Newport was getting to the point of being unrecognizable. A reformed City Commission remained committed to urban planning and economic development. Economic Development Director Laura Long’s efforts were phenomenal in rehabbing the city. One local journalist quipped that 12 years into Long’s career in Newport, there were “almost as many bakeries as adult entertainment establishments.”¹³⁸ While the number of adult nightclubs peaked in 1983 at 17, there were only 5 remaining in Newport by 1995. The city was changing and investors suddenly flocked to Newport with plans for development.

Major plans inevitably involved land on the riverfront with a view of downtown Cincinnati. In 1989, to encourage planning and development, the city approved a design to buy property north of 3rd Street at its Monmouth Street intersection and create a

¹³⁶ Linda Pender, “Bedrooms of the Bluegrass,” *Cincinnati Magazine* 23 (1990): F10.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, F-16.

¹³⁸ Graham, “Showgirl,” 67.

redevelopment area.¹³⁹ For 7 years, the Long and her Newport cohorts entertained ambitious and sometimes ridiculous plans, but the one that caught their eye was an aquarium proposal. James Burchenal and Thomas Heekin Jr. had a dream of building a cutting edge aquarium in the Greater Cincinnati area, but “turf wars and politics” prevented it from being built in Ohio.¹⁴⁰ Alternatively, they turned to Newport, where Long and her colleagues ran development like a business. Capitalizing on a recently passed state tax rebate, Burchenal and Heekin partnered with three other local businessmen and Oceanic Adventures to formulate and complete the Newport Aquarium on the Kentucky riverfront.¹⁴¹ The project required an immense of cooperation between not only local but state politicians as well. Long, Newport Finance Director and City Manager Phil Ciafardini, and Mayor Tom Guidugli partnered with Kentucky Governor Paul Patton and State Representative Jim Bunning to roll out the red carpet for Burchenal, Heekin, and Oceanic Adventures.¹⁴² The investment group was impressed and ground was broken on the aquarium in 1997; it was opened to the public in May 1999 amid critical acclaim.¹⁴³

Even with the Newport Aquarium completed, Long was not finished with the riverfront property. City leaders met with Steiner and Associates, a Columbus-based real

¹³⁹ David Wecker, “Envy of the Region,” *The Kentucky Post*, September 7, 2004.

¹⁴⁰ Patrick Crowley, “Levee’s Just the Latest in N. KY,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 30, 2001.

¹⁴¹ Kentucky Tourism Development Act. 300 KAR 2:030 (1996). The Newport Aquarium was the first economic development to take advantage of the Kentucky Tourism Act of 1996. For each dollar spent at the aquarium over its first ten years open to the public, the state of Kentucky rebated the developers 25 cents.

¹⁴² A few years after the Newport Aquarium was built, developer Nick Ellison was considering closing a deal to bring Hofbrauhaus Restaurant and Beer Garden to Newport. The company’s owners received a letter from Governor Patton welcoming them to Kentucky. The plans for Hofbrauhaus in Newport were finalized and work soon spread that Northern Kentucky was a place worth doing business.

¹⁴³ “The Making of an Aquarium,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 14, 1999.

estate firm interested in pairing the aquarium with a an entertainment complex.¹⁴⁴ Barry Rosenberg, the vice president of Steiner, initially proposed a \$100 million plan, but, as negotiations heated up and all involved became more intrigued, that figure would top \$200 million.¹⁴⁵ The concept fascinated Long. She had already had made a push to build the Cincinnati Reds new stadium on the Newport riverfront, but that languished in the pre-planning stage.¹⁴⁶ Still, a noticeable dining, shopping, and entertainment center on the riverfront was an unparalleled backup scenario. At the time when the Levee project, as it came to be called, was in a pre-construction phase, Long was in the process of switching jobs. She left in 1998 after 15 years in Newport for a position as executive director of the Cincinnati Business Committee.¹⁴⁷ Yet even with her life in transition, Long interceded in any way she could to make sure the Levee project was a go. Also, she had left in Newport an infectious legacy of determination and cohesion among economic and political leaders. It was this legacy that brought the entertainment complex to fruition. Newport-on-the-Levee opened to rave reviews in 2001; there were over 50 tenants including a Barnes & Noble and an AMC theater.¹⁴⁸ With Cincinnati development languishing in preliminary phases, Newport stole the customers and the attention, with one journalist referring to the city as the “envy of the region.”¹⁴⁹ Long’s vision of Newport as a major economic player had finally become fulfilled.

There is no doubt that the road to economic change in Newport was long, winding, and filled with potholes, but Laura Long and reform politicians toiled away

¹⁴⁴ Ioannis Trichopoulos, “The Case Study of Newport on the Levee, Newport, KY,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2007) 74-75.

¹⁴⁵ Skip Tate, “Fin City,” *Cincinnati Magazine* 32 (1999): 53; Crowley, “Levee’s Just the Latest.”

¹⁴⁶ Laura Pulfer, “Will Reds Play Ball with Kentucky?” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 27, 1997.

¹⁴⁷ Tate, “Long’s Shot,” 59.

¹⁴⁸ Trichopoulos, “Newport on the Levee,” 77.

¹⁴⁹ Wecker, “Envy of the Region.”

resolutely. Long worked tirelessly to change the city's "Sin City" and "stepchild" reputations by rehabbing and rebuilding the city via grants and private development. Her 1980's and 1990's work has not been chronicled to this extent in any contemporary publication. This thesis's analysis of her efforts mark a historic plunge into the contemporary struggles to change the economic structure of the city. By embracing the close relationship with Cincinnati and forging new cohesive contacts in the Bluegrass state, Long and her colleagues ushered Newport into uncharted waters. Development surged ahead with many multi-million dollar projects and Newport was suddenly a tourist destination. Cincinnati's entertainment has always been historically Kentucky, and Long "was just bringing it all home again."¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Pyle, "What Next," F30.

CONCLUSION

Traditional writings and insights into 20th century Newport have often seen the Committee of 500 and George Ratterman as responsible for the “cleanup” of the city. While it is true that they expelled organized crime and gambling from the city, they let Newport sink back into vice once gambling was gone. Journalist Hank Messick and many other contemporary columnists glorify Ratterman, giving him the credit for the turnaround. Perhaps it was Ratterman’s heroic football career that made him such a local legend; he did accomplish a tremendous feat in standing up to organized crime, but these efforts did not amount to a “cleanup.” Two decades after Ratterman left office and the Committee of 500 exited the political scene Newport was still plagued by the “Sin City” label. This thesis has put into perspective the true “cleanup” and remaking of Newport in the 1980’s and 1990’s by Economic Development Director Laura Long and her reform allies in political offices.

Ultimately, what made the Committee of 500 unsuccessful was the profile of its members. Most of the committee's members were indeed Northern Kentucky businessmen, but they were not Newport residents. By this thesis's definition, they were not a "local" reform group. And while the Committee of 500 made attempts at economic reform, they were neither longstanding nor committed enough to yield change. During the late 1960's and 1970's, Newport's adult entertainment industry prospered, as the crowds from Cincinnati's convention center and professional stadiums ventured across the river after dark. Adult nightlife reinforced Newport's legacy as "Sin City" and "Cincinnati's stepchild." During this period, there was no local reform movement trying to change the city's image. Adult entertainment flourished and operated with unfettered reign. When a reform commission took office in the 1980's, public opinion had turned against adult entertainment. Local reformers mounted a longstanding battle and planned for economic rebirth. Therefore, under Laura Long's steady leadership, Newport suddenly became a haven for business and development.

Newport going forward basks in the legacy of Laura Long. 15 years after her departure for the Cincinnati Business Committee, the city is flourishing. New projects are on the horizon and, even with Cincinnati riverfront development finally progressing, grant money and customers continue to flow into the city. In 2000 a Department of Housing and Urban Development grant, HOPE VI, rebuilt over 300 units of federal housing in Newport.¹⁵¹ In 2003 Kentucky was the motivator – at a cost of \$4 million – behind the alteration of the L&N Bridge to a pedestrian walkway "so that people could

¹⁵¹ John J. Gilderbloom, Matthew J. Hanka, and Carrie Beth Lasley, *Newport Hope VI Evaluation Final Report for U.S. Department for Housing and Urban Development and Housing Authority of Newport*, Louisville: Center for Sustainable Urban Neighborhoods and University of Louisville, 2008, 3.

amble between the Cincinnati riverfront and Newport on the Levee.”¹⁵² The nickname of the walkway: the Purple People Bridge. An \$800 million redevelopment of Newport’s riverfront at the confluence of the Licking and Ohio Rivers is in the works.¹⁵³ Cohesion between business leaders, local and state politicians, and Newport citizens has made Long’s dream a reality.

In 1957 *Esquire Magazine* ran an embarrassing exposé of Newport. Monroe Fry, the magazine’s reporter, interviewed a Newport housewife who said, referring to organized crime and vice: “it’s been here ever since I can remember; we don’t know of anything else.”¹⁵⁴ Vice was that ingrained in the city during most of 1950’s. Today, however, the status quo has changed. Newport’s suburban streets are lined with architecturally beautiful, remodel historic homes and its economy is propped up by tourism and business. Fittingly, the city’s website greets viewers with “Newport: A Great Place for Business.” For Newport residents under the age of 30, tourism and business has been there for as long as they can remember. They do not know of anything else.

¹⁵² Viccariello, Linda. “The Purple People Bridge.” *Cincinnati Magazine* 37 (2003): 140.

¹⁵³ Gilderbloom, *Newport Hope VI Evaluation*, 50.

¹⁵⁴ Fry, “Sin Town,” 84.

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