

# **Western Heights Public Housing Complex Historic Resource Report**

**Prepared by Quantum Environmental and Engineering  
for  
Knoxville's Community Development Corporation  
April 21, 2022**

## **Introduction**

Western Heights is located at 1621 Jourlman Avenue, Knoxville, Knox County, Tennessee 37921, latitude 35.975489, and longitude -83.949873. The Tennessee State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has determined during a December 2021 Section 106 Review that the 1939-era portion of the Western Heights Housing Development was determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) under Criterion A, and the SHPO had determined that the undertaking will adversely affect the pursuant to 36 C.F.R. Part 800 of the regulations implementing Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (54 U.S.C. 306108). Therefore, this report is being generated to meet the stipulations of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the SHPO and Knoxville's Community Development Corporation (KCDC), who currently owns and manages the Western Heights Housing Development.

## **Original Owner/Occupant and Use**

KCDC was founded in 1936 as the Knoxville Housing Authority (KHA). KHA changed its name to KCDC to better reflect its role as both public housing authority and redevelopment agency for the City of Knoxville. In 2009, KCDC merged with the Knox County Housing Authority. Western Heights is currently managed by KCDC to provide housing options for families, seniors and disabled low-income residents.

## **Background and Context**

The KHA, a Depression-era development inspired by the New Deal, directed a federal initiative to subsidize construction of low-rent housing where it was needed. In 1938, KHA applied for \$2.5 million dollars for slum clearance and low-rent housing. In early 1939, KHA announced plans for the "largest single construction project ever received at City Hall." Included on the board of the KHA were many familiar names including: Walter P. Taylor, George Oldham, Frank Maloney, L.W. Frierson, O.O. Berry, Gus Kelly and Daniel Kelly. Albert B. Baumann and A.B. Baumann Jr. of the architectural firm Baumann and Baumann drew the plans and supervised the construction of

Knoxville's new low-rental housing projects. Among some of those designed by Baumann and Baumann include the Federal Court building and Post Office in Knoxville, the Andrew Johnson Hotel, the Cherokee Country Club, and St. Mary's Hospital, to name a few. Charles I. Barber and Ben A. McMurry of Barber & McMurry, Knoxville architects who had designed many of the modern structures of the University of Tennessee, planned the general grounds development of Western Heights and were also responsible for the architectural design and character of the buildings. Construction was completed by the firms of McGill & Daugherty and A.H. Whisman Co.

The first housing units of the KHA included College Homes, Western Heights, and Austin Homes. College Homes and Austin Homes were contemporaneous but different developments in different locations within the city of Knoxville. During this time period, housing was segregated. Western Heights was intended solely for disadvantaged white people, while College Homes and Austin Homes were constructed for disadvantaged African-Americans. Western Heights was intended "for low-income families now crowded in dilapidated tenements and in single shacks in slums. In the Western Heights Housing Project, they will be able to play over park-like land shaded with many trees. And they will live in clean, safe, comfortable homes, where they can take baths when they need them." (*Neeley, Jack 2021*). One new tenant was quoted as saying her "former dwelling was dark and cheerless, with no bath and the toilet located outside on a little rear porch. She stated that she cooks on a kerosene stove and the only way she could have hot water for her family of three was to heat it in a vessel" (*Knoxville News Sentinel, August 4, 1940*). On January 21, 1940, N. W. Straus, the Administrator of the U.S. Housing Authority in Washington, D.C. visited Knoxville for the opening of demonstration units for the Western Heights and College Homes projects of the KHA. A general invitation had been extended to Knoxvilleans interested in housing to visit the demonstration units. Mr. Straus was due to visit the Western Heights project where he was to be interviewed over radio station WNOX. Straus' visit was also to coincide with the calling of a conference on rural housing by C.E. Brehm, Director of Extension of the University of Tennessee (UT), to be held in the UT Alumni Memorial Auditorium. The news article indicated that Western Heights and College Homes projects were due to be completed later that year. (*The Knoxville Journal, 1940*)



1940 clip of Western Heights the day it was to be officially opened. *Knoxville News Sentinel*, August 4, 1940



Mrs. W.F. Sliger, moving into a new Western Heights unit. *Knoxville News Sentinel* 8/4/1940

Fifty young women studying housing furnishing science in the UT Home Economics department helped furnish the demonstration apartments. Tenants were selected by applying to the KHA's Western Heights office in the Park Bank building on Gay Street. Rents were \$12.20-13.60 per month, utilities included. Western Heights was 100 percent occupied right away. In August 1940, Western Heights was completed and opened the same day as College Homes. (*Neeley, Jack 2021*)

According to the Knoxville Journal, August 4, 1940, edition, "Knoxville's public housing projects have the distinction of having been pointed out by the U.S. Housing Authority technicians as among the most beautiful and best built in America". The edition also noted that "Laying out the locations of the buildings on the sites was, in itself, a big problem. It was not merely a job of taking a plot of ground and building rows of tenant houses on it. The adaptability of the site to the location of convenient thoroughfares that would at the same time provide maximum safety from traffic hazards for children and old people had to be considered".

The 1939 Western Heights Complex is locally significant as the last intact New Deal-era public housing development extant in Knoxville, TN. The complex is also significant for its contributions to a notable change in residential availability for a lower income population and activities associated with everyday life. The site has not yet been listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP); however, it has been determined to be eligible for listing under Criterion A for Government due to its association with the establishment of Knoxville's public housing programs. Drawing on the buildings' overall forms and the site layout, the property retains integrity in location, design, setting, feeling, and association.



Original sign for Western Heights courtesy of KCDC, historic files

## Physical Description

The apartment complex is located on approximately 20 acres of rolling hills. The Site has been utilized as a multi-family low-income housing project since construction of the original 1939 units. The 1939 apartment buildings were constructed as one- and two-story, concrete masonry unit buildings with exteriors of brick veneer and low-pitch, side-gable roofs clad in terracotta tiles. Concrete floor and ceiling slabs were used in all buildings provided by Volunteer Portland Cement Co., and had evenly-spaced window fenestrations with concrete sills and multiple exterior entries. The buildings featured multiple, partial, hipped-roof and front-gable roof entry stoops supported by square wood posts. The interior walls are constructed of terra cotta tiles and plaster with plaster ceilings. The doorways, windows and walls are trimmed in painted wood. Streets and driveways were laid out and houses arranged so that a child would not have to cross a street to go out of the project area. Sidewalks were designed so that children could step down from their doorstep onto the sidewalk which would lead to the regular city streets. Those children in Western Heights were expected to go to Perkins, Rule, and Beaumont schools.

According to historical newspaper articles, the Tennessee Sheet Metal Works company installed sheet metal, metal gutters and tile roofs during construction of the apartment buildings. Dixie Gem Coal, a division of the Southern Coal and Coke Co., provided the coal used to heat the apartments through coal-burning fireplaces. The units had no central air conditioning. The buildings were “solidly built, capable of lasting through the 60-year life of the bonds issued to finance the project” (*The Knoxville Journal*, 1/21/1940). Metal poles with cross bars and hooks at the top were erected at the rear of all the apartments for drying the wash. The tenants were responsible for purchasing rope and stretching the lines from post to post (*The Knoxville Journal*, 8/4/1940). A copper box was laid in the cornerstone of the administrative building that contains documents and data that state the original purposes of the project, how they were built, who built them and why. At the time the cornerstone at Western Heights was ready to be laid, the weather was inclement and was deemed inadvisable to hold a public ceremony. So, on December 11, 1939, about six months after construction of the project was started, members of the Authority staff, representatives of the contractors and architects, and USHA representatives met at the site of construction of the administration building and informally deposited the contents of the cornerstone for that project. Included in the box was a copy of the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 as amended; the Tennessee Housing Act of 1935; the agreement between the contractors and the Trades Union Council; charter of the Knoxville Housing Authority, Inc.; annual report of the Authority for 1939 with history to date; loan contract between the local Authority and USHA; construction contract with McGill & Daugherty and A.H. Whisman Co.; specifications for the project with addenda; picture of the site before work was started; members of the Knoxville Housing Authority and Staff; views of construction progress as of September and October; and a picture of substandard houses that will be eliminated (*Knoxville News Sentinel*, 1940).





Photo of a typical unit in the Western Heights complex, *The Knoxville Journal*, January 21, 1940



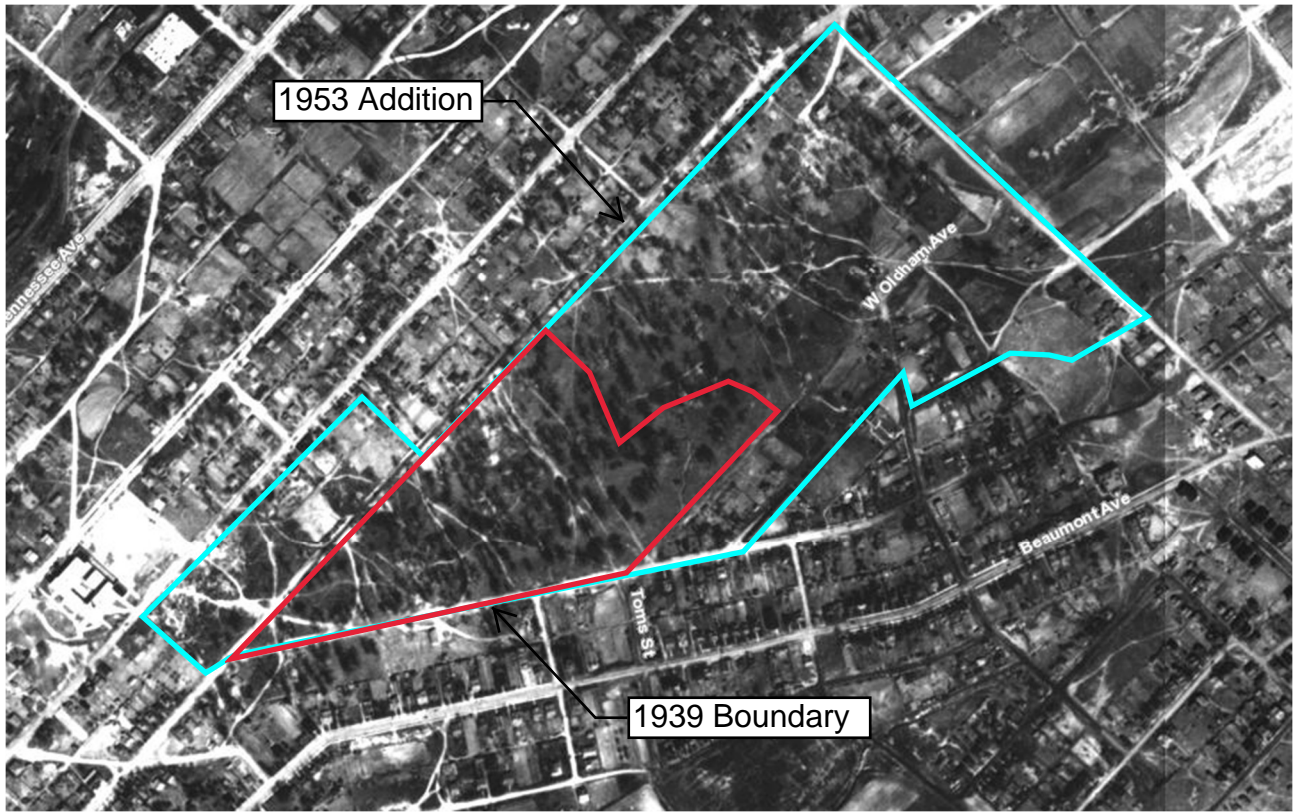
A substandard tenement house being removed. *Knoxville New Sentinel* 8/4/1940

The units are spread across four different plans: single-story duplexes (14 buildings), two-story duplexes (28 buildings), quads (eight buildings), and eight-plexes (16 buildings), for a total of 66 buildings currently. The original plans included a baseball diamond, pool, library, teen club, WPA Adult Education School, Red Cross classes, a Sunday School, playground, and stand-alone water closet (toilets). Additionally, large shade trees were scattered across the original development with the Knoxville News Sentinel referencing making fertilizer-filled holes, drilled approximately 30 inches deep around the trees to feed and preserve them. Most of these exterior features have been removed from the site property. The water closet was removed sometime prior to 1960. The pool and the playground were removed sometime after 1985 and a basketball court located behind the YMCA, now Boys and Girls Club, was removed sometime between 2008 and 2009.

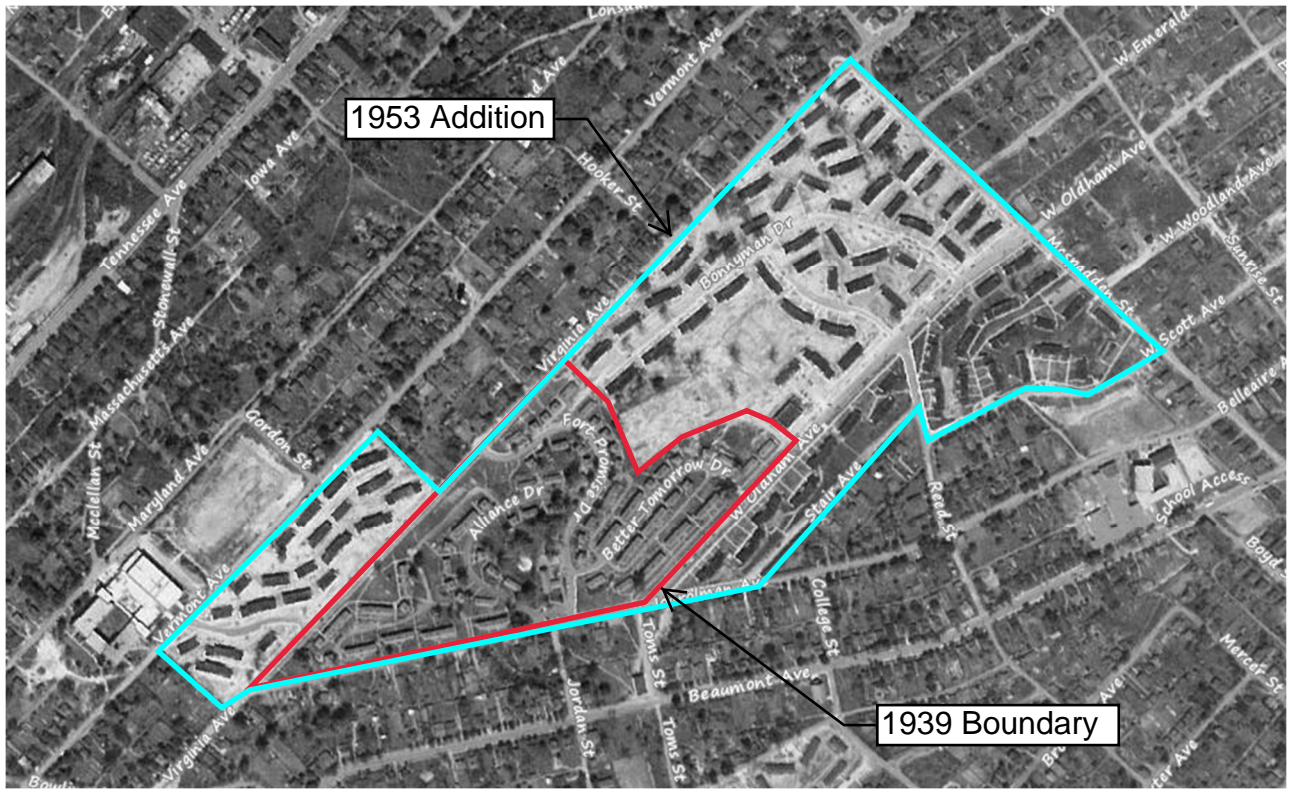
An additional 444 units were added to the Western Heights Complex in 1953 on an adjacent 38 acres. In 2011, 248 units of the 1953-era structures were demolished, leaving vacant land surrounding the existing housing. The demolition of the thirteen residential structures was due to physical obsolescence, structural degradation in the buildings, for a reduction of long-term maintenance costs, as well as the extreme distress of the 1950s-era utility infrastructure.

The buildings have received a number of rehabilitations since the original construction. The coal stoves were removed prior to the early 1980s. The terracotta tile roofs were replaced with shingles in 2006. The chimneys, long since losing their original function with the coal stove removal, had started to leak and were removed in 2016. The original windows have been replaced multiple times. Mechanical upgrades including the installation of exhaust fans and packaged terminal air conditioners (PTACs) to the bathrooms, kitchens and living rooms were added during 2013-2014. To accomplish that task, a hazardous materials survey was conducted that included asbestos-containing materials (ACMs), a lead-based paint (LBP) survey, polychlorinated biphenyl compounds (PCBs), ozone depleting substances (ODSs), mercury-containing equipment, and other miscellaneous hazardous materials. Another extensive renovation occurred in 2019. Updates included new wood-grain vinyl plank flooring, kitchen cabinets and countertops, upgrades to interior plumbing, resurfaced interior walls and energy-efficient LED light fixtures throughout the units. Exterior updates included wall repair, mold remediation, sanitary sewer line repairs, water line replacement and relocation, as well as exterior paint consisting of a silicone moisture sealant that would extend and protect the integrity of the brick.





1935 Aerial photograph, KGIS.org/KGISmaps



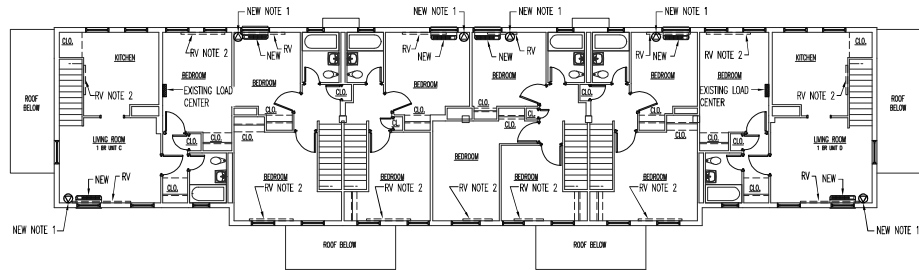
1953 Aerial photograph, KGIS.org/KGISmaps



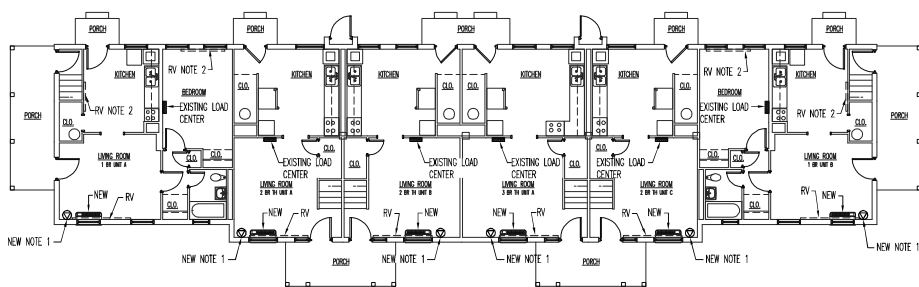
# 1950 Sanborn Map of Western Heights







3-1 BUILDING TYPE "C" SECOND FLOOR  
SCALE: 1/8"=1'-0"



3-1 BUILDING TYPE "C" FIRST FLOOR  
SCALE: 1/8"=1'-0"

- REFERENCE NOTES:**
- DISCONNECT EXISTING BASEBOARD/HEATER AS APPLICABLE AND CONNECT TO A NEW NEWA 6-ZON RECEPTACLE FOR A NEW PTAC UNIT TO EXISTING WIRING AS SHOWN. INSTALL RECEPTACLE IN A 4-INCH SQUARE JUNCTION BOX, SURFACE MOUNT THE BOX 18" AFF TO THE CENTER OF BOX. PTAC UNITS ARE FURNISHED BY OWNER AND INSTALLED BY CONTRACTOR. PTAC UNITS SHALL BE RATED 230V-1 PHASE, 20A.
  - REMOVE EXISTING BASE BOARD HEATER ALONG WITH ASSOCIATED WIRING BACK TO ORIGIN. CONCEALED CONDUITS SHALL BE ABANDON IN PLACE. REMOVE ALL SURFACE MOUNTED CONDUIT/WIREMOLD.



HVAC REVISIONS TO:  
**WESTERN HEIGHTS APARTMENTS - KGDC**  
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

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DRAWING NAME:  
POWER PLANS -  
PART 3-1 BUILDING  
TYPE C

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REVISION DATE:

DATE:	03/08/13
DRAWN BY:	AB
DATE:	1303
CHECKED:	
DRAWING NO.:	E3

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**Type C:** 14 Buildings, 28 units. All three (3) Bedroom. All first floor units. NOTE: **Two Demo Buildings**



**Type B:** 8 Buildings, 32 units. All one (1) Bedroom. Two on the first floor and 2 on the second floor.



**Type D:** 28 Buildings, 56 units. Two (2), two bedroom townhomes. Main on first floor, bedrooms second floor.



**Type A:** 16 Buildings, 128 units. End units are one bedroom (one first floor, one second floor. Interior units: three (3) two bedroom townhomes and one (1) three bedroom townhome. Townhomes have Main on the first floor and bedrooms on the second floor). NOTE: **One Demo Building**







Photo of C-1 taken 2/20/2013



C-1 East side view, taken 1/11/2022



West portion of the complex, toward the old Rule High School, taken 1/11/2022



Two story units taken 7/22/2010 prior to renovation



Two story units taken 7/22/2010 prior to renovation



Two story eight-plex taken 7/22/2010 prior to renovation





C-12 North side and adjacent, taken 1/11/2022



C-12 and adjacent units, taken 1/11/2022



A-50, two story eight-plex taken 1/11/2022



Looking east from A-50 along Better Tomorrow Drive, taken 1/11/2022



A-50 West side, taken 1/11/2022

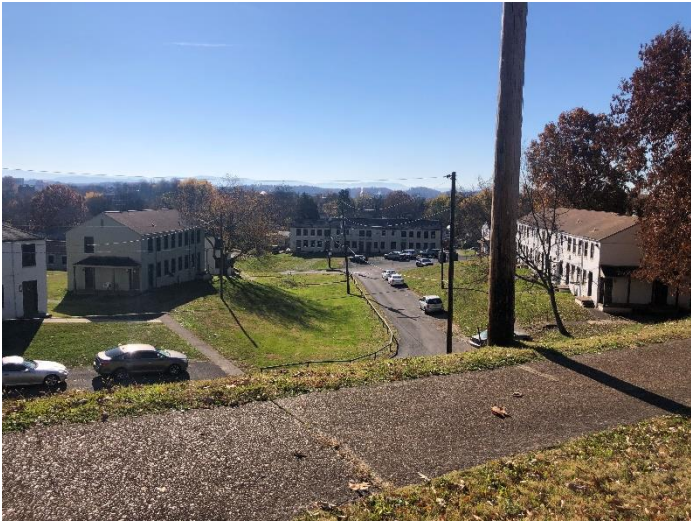


North side of A-50 looking southeast, taken 1/11/2022





Corner of Virginia and McSpadden, looking southwest over area of former 1953-era buildings, taken 11/23/2021



From Virginia Ave. looking south at 1939 buildings, taken 11/23/2021



View of the main office, taken 11/23/2021



1953-era buildings prior to demolition, taken 5/24/2011

## Sources

Neeley, Jack. 2021. "Knoxville History Project, Beaumont/Western Height, An Outline of the Neighborhood's History".

Caldwell, Thomas-Architect. 2013 Site drawings for HVAC Renovation to Western Heights Apartments. Jones, James B.

KGIS.org/kgismaps. United States Geological Survey (USGS) Knoxville, Tennessee, 7.5-minute Topographic Quadrangle. United States Geological Survey, Washington, D.C.

Historic references and photos from KCDC.org.

Library of Congress, Knoxville, Tennessee Sanborn Map, November 1948, Sheet 103.

The Knoxville Journal, Knoxville, Tennessee Sunday January 21, 1940; Sunday August 4, 1940

The Knoxville News Sentinel, Sunday August 4, 1940