

Aldine Square: from Joy to Jelly Roll and Beyond

James C Ballowe

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Chicago has always been in the process of remaking itself, in whole or in part. Sometimes it has been forced to do so, as after the Great Fire of 1871. But from the time of its first handful of permanent pioneer settlers, it has become accustomed to rapid transformation. James Thompson's plat in 1830 included an area of ten square miles for a population of around 100 people and formalized for the first time that a community called Chicago existed. The plat, an infinitely extendable grid, was foresighted in its expansiveness. Only one year following an Asiatic cholera epidemic and the Blackhawk War of 1832, Chicago became a village of around 200 citizens, and by 1837, it incorporated as a city, with a population of a little over 4,000. This early expansion could be expected for a location central to pioneer and trade routes to the west and north around the southwestern most end of the largest body of fresh water in the world. Also situated along century-old trails for bison and Native Americans, such as the Vincennes Trace, Chicago was a natural location for growth as the United States began to settle lands it had acquired from France in 1803. By 1848, the opening of the Illinois and Michigan Canal and the construction of the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad encouraged industry and the opening of new markets. Within another decade, Chicago's population reached some 30,000.

Transportation routes and the improvement of modes of travel have not caused some of the most dramatic changes in the city. Everyone is aware that the Great Chicago

Fire of October 8 through 10, 1871 forced the city to remake itself almost instantaneously. The fire led to new building methods and materials, most notably the steel-skeleton ten-story Home Insurance Building, conceived and built in 1884-85 by William Le Baron Jenney. The fire also forced many city-dwellers to locate elsewhere around the city. Many who were financially able began to build homes along Prairie Avenue, south of 12th Street, hiring architects like Henry Hobson Richardson whose style came to be known as Richardson Romanesque. Areas further to the south attracted younger entrepreneurs, particularly to the area of Oakenwald, the fifty-three acre estate once owned by Senator Stephen A. Douglas, and to properties just west along Vincennes Avenue and State Street. One need only to know the history of Aldine Square, constructed along Vincennes Avenue between 37th and 38th Streets three years following the Great Chicago Fire, to understand Chicago's propensity to embrace and often encourage change.

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By 1870, Chicago's population had grown to almost 300,000 citizens. The fire did not retard that growth, for by 1880, the population was a little over a half million. One of the newcomers in that year was a twenty-five year-old businessman named Joy Morton who rented his first apartment on Vincennes Avenue. Unlike migrants to Chicago who had come from the eastern and southern portions of the country, Morton was the son of a politician, publisher, a founder of Arbor Day, and, later, Grover Cleveland's Secretary of Agriculture. His mother was the cultured graduate of an eastern finishing school. Joy grew up on his father's estate in Nebraska City, Nebraska, and, after a serious illness in his late teens, farmed his own land, and later worked for the

treasurer's office of the Baltimore and Maryland Railroad in Omaha. Then, for a short while, he was Store Manager for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy in Aurora, Illinois, when he learned of an opportunity to buy into a salt distribution firm in Chicago and did so with \$5,000, relocating to Chicago as he was about to marry the daughter of George B. Lake, a Nebraska Supreme Court Justice.

It is tempting to think that Joy settled on Vincennes Avenue not just because many of the inhabitants were up-and-coming entrepreneurs like himself but also because he might have seen the location as having a pioneer history not unlike that he had witnessed in Nebraska City, the departure place for commercial wagon traffic heading west from the Missouri River to the Rockies and beyond. The Overland Trail passed the northern boundary of the Morton estate, and Joy and his brothers marveled at the bull whackers urging on the six yoke of oxen that pulled the heavily-laden wagons.

Vincennes is named after what was known as the Vincennes Trace, an ancient trail stretching from Vincennes, Indiana northward along what became the Illinois-Indiana boundary. As the historian Milo Quaife wrote in *Chicago's Highways Old and New*, in its earliest years the Trace was defined by the hooves of bison during their seasonal journeys from the Illinois prairie to the Kentucky blue-grass country and was used by native tribes that migrated throughout the territory. Later the trail was frequented by fur traders and then in the 1830s became a major passageway northward for Hoosiers from the Wabash River Valley who, as Quaife quotes one writer as saying, drove their "huge Pennsylvania mountain wagons, drawn by eight or ten yoke of oxen or five or six span of horses" to the burgeoning market in Chicago where they sold their surplus produce. That Chicago writer said, "The Wabash was our Egypt." Quaife's history was

written and published in 1923 under the sponsorship of Joy Morton, who wrote the introduction. Morton was then the President and Chairman of the board of The Morton Salt Company, established in 1910, but his interest in transportation routes as an index to the history of place led to this book. That is why it seems reasonable to suggest that in 1880 he liked the historicity of Vincennes Avenue.

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As his wedding day approached, Joy looked for a place that he and his finance, Carrie Lake, could begin their life together in Chicago in quarters similar to those that she was accustomed to at her father's home in Omaha. He believed that he had found the perfect spot nearby at No. 40 Aldine Square, and wrote enthusiastically to Carrie. His description offers insight into the interior of the homes on the square and into the economic and social class of their inhabitants:

I have done gone and done it sure enough. Have rented a house completely furnished from cellar to garret. Kitchen utensils, furnace, cracking bed clothes, furniture, carpets, and all that goes to make up a well arranged house.

[It is] owned by a Mr. Henning, a wealthy man... [who] was obliged to remove to Michigan to look after his business. He rented it to Mr. Pierce, a railroad man...and he has lived there since. His lease does not run out until next May but he wanted to move to a house of his own, so he has rented it just as it stands to us for \$60 per month until May 1st by which time you will have had experience enough to know just what we will want in the way of furniture, etc.

The house is perhaps larger than we need, but it was such a good chance that I did not think best to let it go. It is 2 storys [sic] and a basement and is

arranged as follows: Basement, Dining Room, Brussels carpet, good furniture, room larger a little than your dining room. Kitchen is nicely arranged, new range with hot water attachment etc, servants' room off kitchen. Furnace room, cellar etc. on same floor, next floor is double parlor and small bedroom all nicely furnished in much better style than houses that are furnished for the purpose of being rented. Hall and stairs carpeted with Brussels carpet too. Up stairs are the bedrooms, two large ones and two small ones and a large bathroom and water closet in the best of order....

The family that have been living in it are first class in every respect and you will find no vermin or dirt in the house....

I feel as though we had begun to get settled and am sure you will like the house. The locality is good and the square in front is beautiful.

A few days later, Joy's enthusiasm was dampened by a rejoinder from Carrie who could not abide that he had rented a place without her approval. She had wanted a place near his work so that he could join her for lunch.

Still, the newly-weds moved into Aldine Square shortly after their marriage a week later and continued to live there until May of 1881, at which time they moved south to Oakwood Avenue, and later, in 1887, rented in Groveland Park, a botanical setting somewhat similar to that of Aldine Square but located nearer the lake at 33rd Street and Cottage Grove at the north end of Stephen A. Douglas's former Oakenwald estate. Like Aldine Square, Groveland Park was an inland echo of the green necklace of parks along the lakefront envisioned by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. The Morton's neighbors were successful businessmen like J. A. Moffett, a trustee

of Standard Oil, Herbert Jones, a founder of Inland Steel, and J. K. Robinson, an executive of Diamond Match Co. By this time, Joy himself was the sole owner of the salt firm known by 1885 as The Morton Salt Company.

In 1889, Joy built a Richardsonian style home on the north side of Groveland Park, selling it in 1905, and within a few years began to build his estate to the west of Chicago on the site that later became The Morton Arboretum. There is no doubt that Joy's interest in both Aldine Square and Groveland Park was sparked to a great extent by their botanical settings that satisfied his own interest in trees and gardens and that helped to confirm Chicago's 1830s motto of *Urbs in horto*, City in a Garden.

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While the north side of Groveland Park has been demolished and replaced with less expensive and far less architecturally interesting housing, several original Richardsonian homes to the south still open onto the preserved park-like space even today, providing a visitor an opportunity to see the residual grandeur of such sites that existed in the late 1800s. In contrast, Aldine Square remains but a subject for study of the history of Chicago's economic and demographic development. Although, there is no tangible evidence of the Square today, many commentators on Chicago's architectural history have kept the memory of Aldine Square alive. In a WBEZ blog on June 8, 2012, Ley Bey quoted a *Chicago Tribune* writer from 1877 who called the Square "the most charming of all the beautiful places of residence in the city." To substantiate that claim, Bey includes in his blog photographs of the Victorian homes and the impressive pillars on either side of the entrance from Vincennes. But Joseph R. Ornig in "Aldine Square: 1874-1938," a talk he gave before the Society of Architectural Historians (Chicago

Chapter) on December 4, 2013, offers a more detailed history of the Square. And I base much of the following description of Aldine Square on his essay and other materials that can be found in the archives of the Chicago History Museum.

After the fire, Uzziel P. Smith, a wealthy attorney and real estate developer, had the idea of building Aldine Square on two and one-half acres he had purchased along Vincennes between 37th and 38th Streets, near the city limits at 39th Street. The Square was to be exclusive, intended for “well-heeled” buyers. Smith chose a Chicago architect by the name of Adolph Cudell who had come to Chicago at the age of 19 from Germany in 1869 and had begun work as a draftsman for William LeBaron Jenney. By the age of 22, Cudell had his own architectural firm with another German émigré by the name of August Blumenthal and was designing mansions for notables such as Cyrus McCormick. But his most impressive work was Aldine Square. A *Chicago Tribune* writer called it “a plan of private residences which for convenience and beauty is unsurpassed in the United States.” Smith himself occupied two adjoining residences.

Aldine Square fit into Chicago’s first Gold Coasts on the south side of the city that included Prairie Avenue, Michigan Avenue, Drexel Boulevard, and Grand Boulevard. The square itself was but 500’ wide, presenting Cudell with the task of meeting the challenge of placing the homes around a park-like setting in a way that would help attract residents and allow Smith to make good on his investment. Cudell met that challenge by designing 42 two- and three-story row houses with Neo-classical fronts that probably used Bedford limestone over brick, according to Ornig who exhaustively researched the material used in the construction. Joseph Kubal, a co-author of “A Curious Traveler’s Guide to Route 66 in Metro Chicago,” offers another view that the limestone was from

Joliet Lemont limestone, first discovered in the excavations for the Illinois and Michigan Canal in the 1840s and prominently used in the 1848 building of the imposing State Penitentiary at Joliet and in Chicago's Water Tower, built in 1869. But the exterior of the homes was grey, like Bedford, rather than yellow, like Lemont limestone, particularly after it was exposed to air. Still, limestone from either source would have given the dwellings the appearance of stability. Each home was 22-feet in width. A stable for 70 horses and carriages was located in a hidden corner to the rear of the square, and residents could call for their carriages by means of an electric annunciator. The residences were built in a U shape around a gas-lit park that included a pond with two fountains and overarched by a bridge. The park belonged to the city, was open to the public, and was managed by a gardener whose salary was paid by a special tax levied on each resident.

The stone pillars on either side of the entrance made one of the most distinctive features of Aldine Square. An ornamental lantern topped each, and a sculptural relief of an anchor and a dolphin alluded to the Square's name. Ornig explains the relief thusly: "The anchor and dolphin motif on the pillars was derived from the logo of the Aldine Press, the 15th century printing house in Venice, which was famous for its pocket-sized octavo editions of Greek and Latin classics. This motif was chosen to signify that people of culture and refinement dwelt within." In Greek and Roman cultures, prominent leaders used the anchor and the dolphin symbol. The symbol is an oxymoron, the dolphin standing for haste, the anchor for stability. In Latin, the motto for the motif is *festina lente* translated as "make haste slowly." This motif fit the mindset of the successful professionals that moved into Uzziel Smith's residences in the 1880s and

1890s. As to Smith himself, he could not hold on to his own wealth, perhaps overwhelmed by his investment, and he had to leave his Aldine Square home some three years after it was built.

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Within less than a generation, most professionals who had bought into Aldine Square began to look for quieter quarters. The seclusion they had sought was encroached upon by businesses and industry that attracted a cheap work force. By the 1890s, the south side of Chicago became a principal destination for the first migrants from southern states in what is now known as The Great Migration. African-Americans were attracted to northern cities by wages that averaged \$2.50 a day, an amount that they earned for a week's work of farm labor in the South. Black occupants of Aldine Square struggled to pay the absentee landlords' rents. Many of the homes began to fall into disrepair, and the neighborhood was drastically altered. Chicago, of course, was not alone in this phenomenon, as white populations of means were quick to abandon what they considered to be undesirable environments of encroaching small business, industry, and, of course, black communities, and the small industries in the area that had lured blacks to Chicago were themselves being dismantled and moved elsewhere.

In the teens, Vivien Marie Palmer, a sociology professor at the University of Chicago, led students and community volunteers in an oral history project that offers insight into resident's thoughts on the neighborhood surrounding Aldine Square. Residents from 1917 remember that there were "drinking places" for every 215 people and that the district was "more than 1 and 3/5 times as wet as the city." One observed that the area contained one vaudeville house, a few theatres, and no parks and that

“Negroes get their recreation and...social life mainly through the church, the saloon, the cabaret, and the sociability of the street.” Whites still owned the grocery stores and saloons. Another interviewee characterized housing west of State Street “as poor and inadequate” and “crowded with lodgers.” To the east of State, where Aldine Square was located, housing was little better. “In respect to the housing east of State,” he said, “the houses are not well adapted to Negro needs, rents are high, and lodgers are taken in quite large numbers, though with more discrimination than in the poorer district west of State.”

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Three years before these interviews, another Morton had settled in the area. He was known to both black and white jazz aficionados as Jelly Roll. His background was not at all like that of Joy Morton. Jelly Roll had been born in New Orleans of mixed European and African descent, the son of Louise and Ed Lamothe. His father was a contractor. Jelly Roll was baptized Ferdinand Joseph Lamothe. As Howard Reich and William Gaines write in *Jelly's Blues*, he maintained that his birth was on September 20, 1895, but his baptism records show that he might have been born on October 20, 1890. His father and mother divorced early on, and he was raised by his godmother and her husband and taken care of by an extended family until his mother married Willie Mouton. As he grew into his teens, the young “Ferd,” as he was known, was employed as a pianist in houses of ill-repute, much to the dismay of his more proper Creole relatives who had introduced him to French opera and a more cultured way of life.

Ferd adopted early on the name “Jelly Roll” and changed his step father’s French name from Mouton to Morton, thus becoming for the public once and for all Jelly Roll Morton. His stage name referred to the private parts of a female and was used by others

in the vaudeville industry in which Jelly Roll played the piano while wearing black face and whitened lips, as many mulatto vaudevillians did to please their audiences. Jelly Roll Morton's journey to a residency in Chicago was preceded by gigs in entertainment venues across the southern states, and an occasional gig in New York and Chicago where he found enthusiastic audiences for New Orleans jazz. Along the way, he earned a reputation as a pool and card shark and even a pimp, particularly for his earlier days playing in houses of prostitution. He also began to compose his own music, completing his signature jazz piece "Jelly's Blues" in 1905. By the time he arrived in Chicago in 1914, he was already becoming a legend, a composer and pianist who drew crowds that included the best jazz players and aspirants in Chicago, both white and black. He was known by fellow musicians and aficionados as a meticulous composer and stylist who would not tolerate musicians that strayed from the compositions he orchestrated.

It is natural that Jelly Roll would have moved into 545 Aldine Square. It was close to where he performed, first at the Richielieu Café, then the Deluxe Café, and finally the Elite No. 2 cabaret at 3500 South State Street. He also plugged songs briefly at a music shop in the area before taking the job at the Elite No. 2. He published "Jelly Roll Blues" in 1915, copyrighted by Will Rossiter of Chicago.

It is doubtful, though, that in his line of work Jelly Roll would have spent much time at Aldine Square, which he gave as his permanent address to the draft board. Jelly Roll told Alan Lomax when Lomax interviewed him for the library of Congress and his book *Mister Jelly Roll* (1950) that by 1917 "I was thinking of leaving Chicago – a different class of people were invading the city at the time." The "different class" Jelly referred to was, no doubt, the dark-skinned African Americans that continued to migrate

to the south side of Chicago in large numbers during WWI. In Chicago, Jelly Roll had counted on attracting an affluent audience, meaning white audiences. By this time, he was paid well, was a dandy dresser, and sported a gold-crowned tooth with a diamond set into it. He was also known by his fellow musicians as being somewhat arrogant, calling himself the inventor of jazz. But that is a claim that many support even today. When Jelly Roll returned to Chicago in 1922 for a stay of six years, he had to compete with the likes of Louis Armstrong and King Oliver and white musicians such as Bix Beiderbecke, and the up-and-coming Benny Goodman, born in Chicago. But Jelly Roll remained confident about himself and his talent, and was publishing in Chicago such compositions as the *Wolverine Blues*, *Kansas City Stomp*, *King Porter Stomp*, and the *Windy City Blues* with the Chicago-based Melrose Brothers. Obviously, Jelly Roll was quite a different personality from his predecessor at Aldine Square, Joy Morton, who by the 1920s had made Morton Salt a household name in the United States and who had just established the now world-renowned Morton Arboretum.

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Since one of the reasons Jelly Roll moved from Chicago in 1917 was what he termed the invasion of “a different class of people,” he likely did not return to Aldine Square that had been abandoned by its white owners for the same reason. The overcrowded homes became a refuge for a growing number of underemployed migrants. Some of the homes were divided into small apartments. The once stately houses were deteriorating rapidly. In 1929, a newspaper article told of the disrepair visible from the exterior: broken windows into which rags and papers were stuffed, porches sagging, pillars cracked, and bright paint covering the brown and grey stone fronts. The homes

had become unsightly, if not unlivable, obviously not entirely the fault of those who lived there. Too many absentee landlords had failed to make necessary repairs for well over a decade.

The Chicago Housing Authority planners began to consider a solution for the entire community of Douglas in which Aldine Square sat on two and a half acres. But in 1938, six years after the area was renamed Bronzeville by James Gentry and popularized by the *Chicago Defender* and two years after Aldine Square was renamed Du Sable Square in honor of Jean Baptiste Du Sable, the reputed first non-native settler of the Chicago region, the Square was demolished by the Federal Public Works Administration along with buildings on thirty-five adjoining acres to make way for the Ida B. Wells homes, the housing planners' ultimate solution to growing problems of overcrowding, violence, and poverty.

However, as with other areas of high black population density throughout northern cities, the solution assured that de facto segregation would be continued into the next generations by ghettoizing low income and poverty-level African Americans within a well-defined geographical location. The solution was to build the Ida B. Wells Homes, ironically named after the 1890s early migrant to Chicago who became a respected community leader and national spokesman for civil rights. Built on fifty-three acres, including the former site of Aldine Square, the project had nondescript, institutional architecture and included row houses, low-rise, and high-rise residences that the Housing Authority ultimately failed to maintain effectively. The community quickly became defined by its lack of sufficient human services, including educational and employment opportunities that doubtless contributed to poverty and a high crime rate.

The problems with this type of housing, practiced throughout the nation, were exacerbated on the south side of Chicago when what became known as the “State Street Corridor” was begun to the East and South in the 1950s, stretching for two miles from 39th Street to 54th Street. The Robert Taylor Homes, built in 1962, was again ironically named after Robert Taylor. He had been the first black chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority, but had resigned from that position in 1950 when his colleagues refused to consider distributing mixed-race public housing throughout the city. Other housing continued to be built to relieve the immediate overcrowding of these structures. In 1961 and 1970 respectively, the Clarence Darrow Homes and the Madden Homes were built adjacent to the Ida B. Wells Homes, providing a collective 2891 housing units. But they, too, quickly became overcrowded and fell into disrepair.

A new solution to the housing problem was launched by the CHA, and the demolition of the Ida B. Wells complex was completed in 2011, with the Darrow and Madden homes having disappeared by 2001 and 2003 respectively. A transformation solution for high-density areas of race and poverty was created with the idea of building mixed-income housing in these areas. The result in the area that included the Aldine Square site has been Oakwood Shores, a community that includes a diversity of CHA supported homes priced at rates for low-income owners as well as market priced homes. At the current time, only about a third of the units of some promised 3,000 have been constructed. The site is one of the reasons that the City made available to Mariano’s, the upscale grocery chain, the land on which it has been built, even though there is lingering controversy as to why that particular site was offered to a grocery chain that also is known for relatively high-priced food. Problems remain at this mixed-income site as

well as others that have been built on the site of the notorious Cabrini-Green and elsewhere throughout the City. Former residents have felt that they are not welcome in their old neighborhood, and many maintain that their relocation has been unsatisfactory. Current residents of the new homes have also begun to complain of insufficient maintenance and community security.

Obviously, Chicago's housing concerns have not been resolved. One might conclude that white flight and the consequent inability of cities to provide educational and work opportunities within minority communities is due to a failure in city planning. But it could also be argued that a mindset of Jim Crowism remains. Established communities, whether those within cities or in small towns, have always found ways of isolating themselves from people of economic, ethnic, religious, and cultural differences. For instance, the deep southern Illinois town in which I came of age, Herrin, Illinois, had no blacks living within its borders until 1951. Although there was no Jim Crow per se, there was an understanding, as the Irish said of the absence of snakes, that they didn't have blacks because they didn't let them in. The history of Aldine Square is not just one of the creation and demise of an architectural treasure. The transformation of the site also offers microcosmic evidence that residents and planners do not yet have the prescience to accommodate the diversity that they claim to embrace.

-- James Ballowe