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Clifton

An inner-city village

BY CAROL FRIEL
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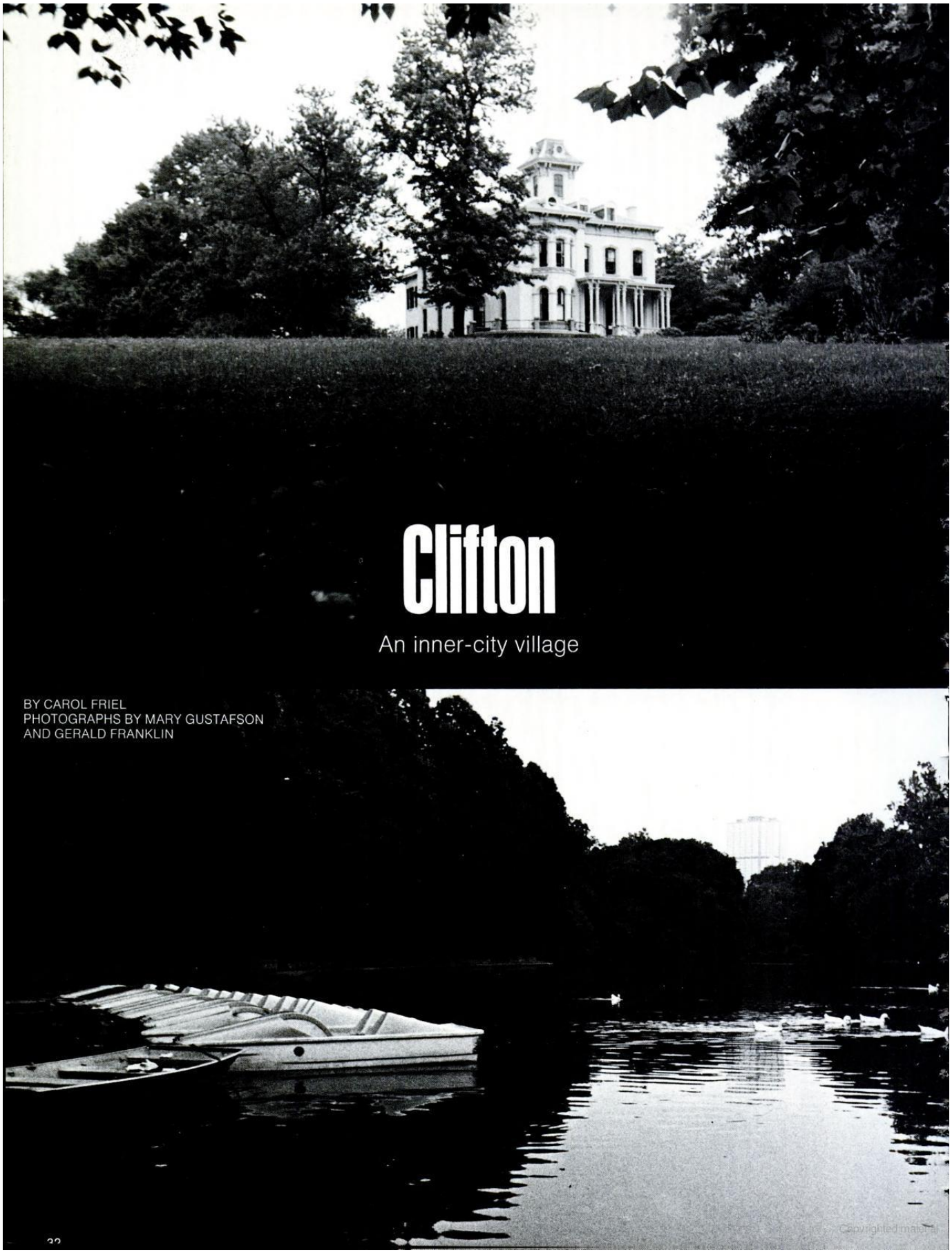
AND GERALD FRANKLIN



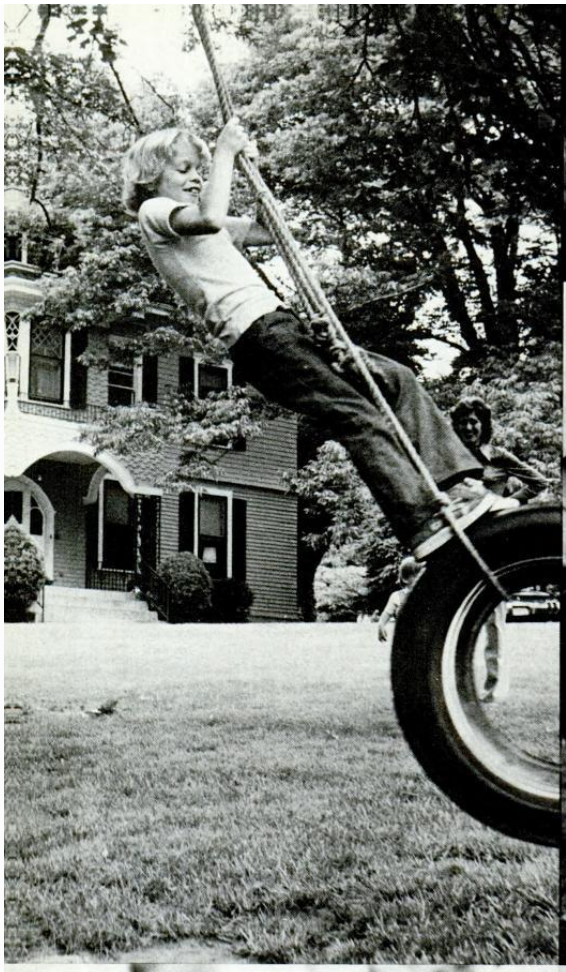
Plunk in the middle of the urban world, Clifton clings to its history with fine old homes, gas lights and the mind-refreshing Burnet Woods that edges up to the University of Cincinnati. But it's not all old and contemplative. That modern invention — the Walkathon — brings out Clifton kids in whooping droves to raise money for local projects.

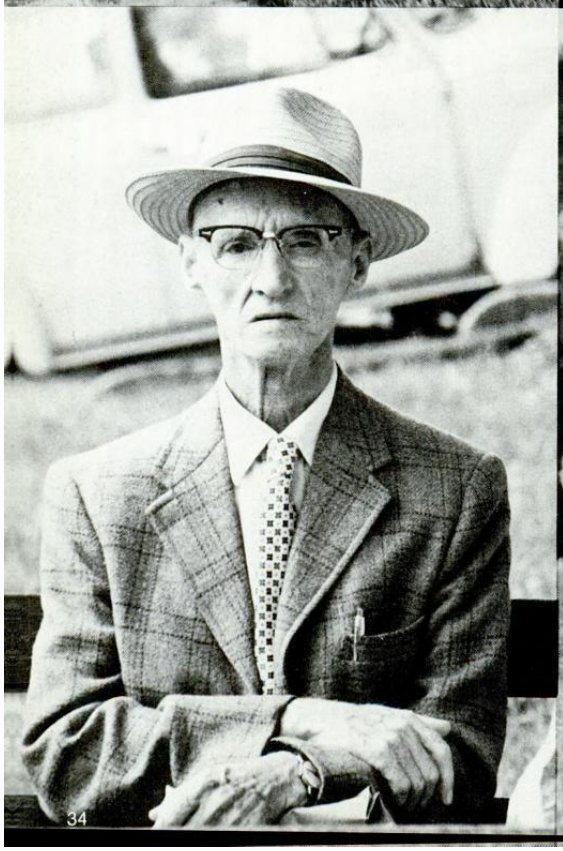
Three miles north of downtown Cincinnati, the charm of the past and the excitement of the present blend in the woods and hills of Clifton.

Even in the last century, Clifton was a well-defined locale with its own government, its own local characters, its own way of life.

The pace was more leisurely then. Street cars, brought up hill on the Bellevue incline, vied with horse carriages on Clifton Avenue.

The board sidewalks were crowded with University of Cincinnati students and professors. West of Clifton Avenue, past Hebrew Union College, the woods were interrupted by a rock quarry and





a nine-hole golf course, but there were no houses.

Nineteenth century Clifton grew rapidly after 1842, when Charles Clarkson's 600-acre farm, named "Clifton", (and which had been mortgaged during the 1837 money panic) was repossessed by the Lafayette Bank and subdivided into 10-60 acre lots.

The lots were bought by such early commuters as W.C.W. Gano, who rode his horse into Cincinnati each day to his bank cashier job.

Other lots were bought by some of Cincinnati's newly-wealthy brewers, pork packers, shippers and manufacturers. By the 1860's, there were a number of palatial estates in the Lafayette Avenue area of Clifton. Money seemed no object.

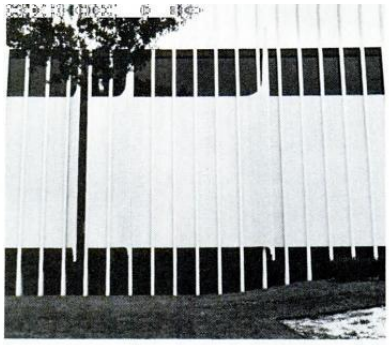
One house allegedly built by a ship's captain had a widow's walk with a view of the canal. The owner of Scarlet Oaks had a tower built into his house which supposedly looked down on his first wife's tombstone in Spring Grove Cemetery.

A leader, then, among Clifton's new "city folk" was a distinguished lawyer and early civil rights advocate with the colorful name of Flamen Ball. He was Clifton's mayor for 20 years after it incorporated in 1850. Village ordinances passed during Ball's time prohibited "Immoral practices on Sunday", "Racing an animal or driving a vehicle faster than six miles per hour", and "cutting down or maliciously injuring trees and bushes."

The famous and infamous have, over the years, enjoyed the pleasures of Clifton. George B. "Boss" Cox, Cincinnati's notorious tavernkeeper-turned-political-czar, lived in his mansion, Parkview, on the corner of Jefferson and Brookline in Clifton during the years he was dictating policies, dispensing patronage, and hatching political intrigues.

William Howard Taft, former President and Chief Justice, used to swim in Brown's Basin, the largest of a group

Space, commerce, kids, old folks, work, play . . . they're all part of Clifton, as they are a part of any community that successfully manages to have a say in its destiny. Top left, the home of Councilmember David Mann; Walkathon hoofers at the Probasco Fountain checkpoint; below, a typical bus stop scene; two Clifton soccer teams in half-time play at a Comets' match. Top right, a potter at work at Earthworks; a loom demonstration at Peterson's Yarn Store; below, the Ludlow Avenue business district . . . the commercial hub of the real Clifton.



Face-to-face diversity in church design.

of basins formed by the Miami-Erie Canal in the Clifton area.

Clifton of the late 1800's had many of the physical characteristics of its farm origins. Several streams ran through the wooded hills; water fowl lived on the two ponds east of Clifton Avenue; and raccoons, rabbits, fox, owl and deer roamed the glens.

Today, many of Clifton's hillsides are still wooded, sheltering rabbits, raccoons and other wildlife. Clifton's raccoon population was, in fact, the subject of a recent study conducted by two UC graduate students for their thesis.

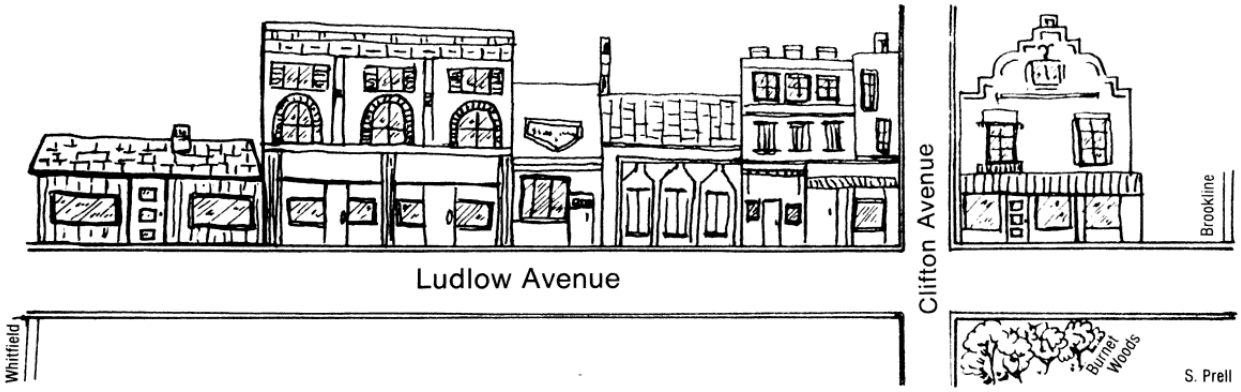
Rawson Bird Preserve provides a nesting place for clouds of migrating birds on the flyway between northern nesting grounds and southern wintering sites. It is also a stopover for the wild geese which feed at the Zoo and nest in Spring Grove Cemetery.

Burnet Woods Trailside Nature Center conducts nature walks and provides lectures on the resident birds, trees, wildflowers and general ecology of the area.

And there is still a pond — in Burnet Woods — which is home to wild and domestic waterfowl. In fact, the wild mallards hatch their chicks more successfully than do their domestic relatives. Puzzled park officials discovered that the wily mallards, less trusting of their environment, were hiding their camouflaged eggs, while the big, white ducks and geese lay theirs in plain sight of a human neighbor who collects them for breakfast.

Some property in Clifton retains the

An invitation to unique CLIFTON shopping…



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prerogatives of its original farm zoning, which allows horses (and even a venerable 20-year-old burro named Edward).

Although part of the City of Cincinnati, Clifton still functions like a traditional village, with gas lights throughout the neighborhood evoking the charm of an earlier age.

The boundaries of Clifton, as incorporated in 1850, were the same as the present boundaries defined by the City: the canal, now Millcreek Expressway, on the north; Dixmyth Avenue on the south; Vine Street and Ruther Street on the east; and the canal, now Central Parkway, on the west. These are also the boundaries recognized by Clifton Town Meeting (CTM), the Clifton community council.

The geographical area constitutes the Clifton statistical neighborhood . . . one of 44 clearly-defined neighborhoods which make up the City of Cincinnati.

Boundary disputes as heated as those in the old west have preoccupied Cliftonites since the day in 1896 when Clifton lost its battle to prevent annexation by Cincinnati.

The news media and institutions such as the University tend to loosely lump together several separate communities and call them all "Clifton".

Actually, the area south of Dixmyth along both sides of Clifton Avenue is called University Heights, and south of that is the Fairview-Clifton Heights neighborhood. The Fairview-Clifton Heights Community Council speaks for

Students — a colorful Clifton influence.

This Fall, Clifton School will become a multi-age, non-graded magnet school.

these neighborhoods, which have their own unique identity to preserve, their own problems to solve, even their own public school attendance area.

Latest census figures show that Clifton's population of 10,736 is 10 per cent black, 88 per cent white, and 2 per cent "other". Yet Clifton School's enrollment for the last several years was 49 per cent black, 49 per cent white, and two per cent "other". Census figures also show that the median family income in Clifton is about 20 per cent higher than that of the City of Cincinnati, yet 42 per cent of the Clifton School children received regular free lunch during the 74-75 school year, indicating a low level of income among many of the school's families.

When the fight is on for more recreation in Clifton, parents — black and white — storm City Hall as they did in March of 1974. (The result of that battle was a promised recreation center adjacent to Clifton School. Construction began this summer, along with renovation of the old school building).

When the CTM Recreation Committee stages a Walkathon to raise money — as they did in 1973 and again this year — parents and children from all parts of the school district participate. Funds raised have been used to sponsor a popular and extensive children's soccer program. Long-range plans envision baseball diamonds, tennis courts and swimming pools.

Historically, there have been no public recreation facilities in Clifton at all. The city has in the past considered Clifton a wealthy neighborhood with plenty of open space and with a private swim club. Actually, only the north end of Clifton has some open space, and the swim club serves only 280 families.

Crime, in general, is a problem in Clifton, as it is everywhere. Yet a study of crime rates in Clifton shows a dramatic difference in the occurrence of crime, depending on which boundaries one uses to define Clifton.

The Cincinnati Police, like the news media, tend to refer to the entire Clifton — Clifton Heights, Fairview and UC — as "Clifton". That whole area includes a large transient student population and young apartment dwellers who are easy victims for crime. Taken as a whole, the area consequently shows a fairly high incidence of crimes of all kinds.

Yet, when figures for Clifton alone are extracted, a different picture emerges. According to Sgt. Jim Mills of District Five, Cincinnati Police, there are fewer incidents of violent crime in Clifton than in adjacent areas. Burglaries account for most of the serious crimes, and there are numerous cases of petty crimes . . . shoplifting, auto theft, bike thefts.

Despite those problems, Mills says of Clifton, "I think you're talking about a pretty good area, a safe neighborhood."

In October, COM-SEC (Community Sector), a team policing technique which has been successful in reducing crime in District One, will be inaugurated in District Five. COM-SEC brings back the old idea of policemen walking their beats and getting personally acquainted with the people in the neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, the Clifton Town Meeting is working with homeowners and apartment dwellers to educate people in crime prevention techniques such as keeping doors locked, leaving porch lights on, being alert to strangers in the neighborhood.

CTM, which was founded in 1961 to oppose (successfully) the proposed widening of Clifton Avenue from Ludlow

to Spring Grove, is deeply involved in working with the residents and the city to protect and improve the quality of life in Clifton.

Betty Ames, one of the founders of CTM and a Clifton resident for 45 years, returned to the CTM board of directors in 1973 as president. The threat of a 300 unit apartment complex on the old Sacred Heart Academy property on Lafayette Avenue brought her back this time. "There's always some kind of crisis in Clifton," she says.

The Sacred Heart issue was dealt with successfully and the 42-acre tract is now scheduled to become public park land while the old buildings on the land may be renovated for use as a conference center by UC.

CTM has devoted much time in 1975 to drawing up a neighborhood master plan which eventually will be submitted to City Council for approval. It will then guide future land use, business development, and community services in Clifton.

On of the goals of the Clifton plan is "to protect Clifton's village atmosphere and advantages".

Betty Ames knows people who have lived in the same Clifton house for most of the 20th century, like Kay Taft Benedict on Lafayette Avenue and Dorothy and Marian Rawson on Clifton Avenue. (Even the flowers in Mrs. Ames' garden have a long Clifton history. The bulbs originally flourished on what is now Rural Lane, and were transplanted around the community when the street was developed).

Bill Kayse, manager of the Clifton office of the First National Bank, spends a lot of time walking around Clifton, talking to people and getting to know the neighborhood's history. "There's more history in Clifton than any other place in Cincinnati," he says.

Walter Kearns, manager of the Home Federal Savings and Loan on Ludlow Avenue, said Clifton is one of the few communities he knows where it takes two hours to complete a short shopping trip . . . there are so many people to talk to on the way.

The present owner of Probasco house on West Cliff Lane, Carol Nagel, and her mother, Margaret Spalding, are long-time Clifton residents. Mrs. Spalding has watched Clifton grow since the turn of the century, but says the character of the neighborhood has not changed radically.

She remembers Clifton as a community where educational attainment was always important, partly because of the influence of UC people who have traditionally made up a large portion of the area's residents.

Mrs. Nagel, who attended Clifton School as a child and has been active in the school's affairs as a parent, sees many similarities between then and

now. "Clifton School always had a variety of students," she says. "There may be more socio-economic differences among the students today, but there was always a wide range."

"Clifton in 1930, especially the northern part, was distinctly upper middle class, "Mrs. Ames recalls. "There were private homes — almost no apartments at all. Now there is so much more diversity. In fact, I spend half my life trying to convince City Hall that Clifton isn't a rich neighborhood anymore."

The change is reflected in political preferences in Clifton. Once a strong Republican area, it has changed so dramatically that in the 1973 City Council election, voters in Clifton gave eight of the top nine places to candidates from the Democratic-Charter Coalition.

"People who buy homes in Clifton today," says Steve Gerdsen, Clifton resident and salesman with Wood Realty Co., "are attracted by its reputation as an intellectual, liberal, friendly neighborhood. The community has a stability because of the doctors, lawyers and others who live in the same homes for many years. It also has an element of transiency as university people move in and out."

Another attraction to Clifton is its healthy business district. Residents enjoy walking to stores, and children can walk or bike to the library and to movies.

The shops on Ludlow Avenue also draw non-residents to Clifton. According to the Clifton Businessmen's Association, about half of Clifton's shoppers come from outside the community.

Specialty shops in Clifton include places like "The Pottery", which offers wheel-thrown stoneware plus lessons; Peterson's, specializing in art needlecraft materials and lessons; Shaker Plane, a cozy gift shop with everything from incense to India print dresses; Ta-Wa-Na, a Mexican import shop; Lance's, with every type of gift imaginable; the New World Bookshop, and the New World Foodshop; the Cheese Cellar; and such old-time favorites as Rich's 5¢ to $1.00 store, Pete's News Shop and Virginia Bakery... all of which go back 40 or 50 years in the same location.

Because other businesses in the area are profitable, newcomers like Kevin Borders are attracted to Ludlow Avenue. "We studied a number of different locations before settling on this one," she said, discussing her misses' clothing shop opened this spring. "We found the business climate in Clifton was very favorable, and we knew this was a friendly neighborhood."

Senior citizens find Clifton a convenient place to live, close to shops, buses and health care. Fifteen percent of the population there is 65 or older.

A new Senior Center was opened in December 1974 by community resi-

dents, with help from CTM, churches, Kiwanis and the businessmen's association. The center, which uses rooms in the Clifton United Methodist Church, offers lunch and a full program of activities every Tuesday and Friday.

And Clifton School is getting a facelift — physically and programmatically. Its main building, constructed in 1905, is being completely renovated, and a new multi-age, non-graded open classroom program organized by Harrison Herms, principal, will open in September. About 200 children from all over the Cincinnati school district will be enrolled, along with 600 neighborhood children.

Parents of neighborhood children have strongly supported the school. A unique organization is the Clifton School Foundation, a non-profit fund raising group developed by Clifton parents to supplement the school's budget. Since its formation in 1973, $16,000 has been raised for teacher training, instructional materials, musical instruments, art supplies and other educational items.

Along with its well-known mansions, many houses of the Victorian era still line Clifton Avenue. The recently restored homestead of William Resor, one of the founders of the Zoo and the Art Museum, is a gracious Victorian farmhouse with long windows and a wide veranda.

On Bryant Street, an Italian diplomat built a home in the provincial style of his country. And one of the last homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright is on Rawson Woods Circle. Redwood paneling and two-story expanses of windows make it seem part of the woods surrounding it. Wright even designed the light fixtures and furniture.

Clifton's churches are also diverse architecturally. The fluted ionic columns supporting the entablature of Annunciation Church are 25 centuries removed in style from the strong vertical lines and contemporary design of St. John's Unitarian Church across Resor Street. The pitch of the roof and the vertical window fins on St. John's are functional. They are set to direct shafts of sunlight to the altar during the Christmas season. Calvary Episcopal Church on Clifton Avenue is an excellent example of Gothic church architecture, and its west window with five stained-glass panes is a copy of the famous window in the cathedral at York, England.

All in all, Clifton is a healthy combination. Betty Ames sums up the feelings of many residents: "Even if we sell the house, we would get an apartment in Clifton. It's the most interesting neighborhood to live in — the people, the terrain, the architecture, the different income levels, and age groups. That's what urban living is all about."