

Pieces of the Past: Familiar Places (1988)

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Fort Wright: Town of Mergers and Annexations

Grocery counter tabloids are filled with the faces of celebrities who attract new partners like picnics draw flies.

If Fort Wright were a person, it would be right there among the most photographed.

In its relatively short 44-year history, Fort Wright has annexed one city, merged with two others, had serious merger talks with two more and been coveted by another. The last triggered a long and nasty court battle that matches anything Dallas or Dynasty could dream up.

Fort Wright apparently has that special something.

The city today is actually the result of the consolidation of four other cities – Fort Wright, Lookout Heights, South Hills and Lakeview.

The oldest was Lookout Heights.

Lookout Heights was incorporated in 1937, taking its name from its biggest landmark, the hill on which the old Lookout House nightclub was located. The Lookout House was a cornerstone of the old Dixie Highway “Gourmet Strip”, offering fine dining, Las Vegas-style entertainment and gambling.

The Lookout Corporate Center sits on the spot.

With the exception of the nightclub property, the boundary of Lookout Heights roughly ran on the west side of Dixie Highway, including the Fort Henry and General Drive subdivisions and streets along Park Road and the west side of Sleepy Hollow Road.

Lookout Heights also boasted Oelsner’s Colonial Inn, the Dixie Gardens Drive-In and St. Agnes Catholic Church and elementary school.

Second oldest of the four cities was Fort Wright. Its name came from the Civil War fort built on Kyles Lane.

The fort, in turn, was named from Major General Horatio Gouverneur Wright, a Connecticut native and engineering specialist. He not only helped design Northern Kentucky’s military defenses, but he also was the engineer who completed the Washington Monument in the nation’s capital.

Fort Wright was incorporated in 1941, with builder George Kreutzjans, Sr. constructing most of the homes. The old city boundary ran down Kyles Lane from Dixie Highway and across the hills about where Knob Hill is located.

Mainly residential, Fort Wright also had a civic club, which became the driving force in the city's early development.

Having a fire department proved to be a major selling point for Fort Wright during merger talks.

While Lookout Heights and South Hills never formed fire departments, residents of Fort Wright talked of forming a fire department shortly after incorporation, according to John McCormack.

McCormack is a former Fort Wright mayor and councilman and for 26 years was assistant fire chief.

McCormack said a hose wagon was purchased in the early 1940s. A drive was undertaken to form a fire department, but it never got off the ground. Realizing the need, however, the civic club began a new drive in 1949. The club asked 40 men in the community for \$25 each.

“We promised them that we would return the money if the department did not fly, but it did, and in 1950 the first fire equipment was purchased.”

The Fort Wright Civic Club sponsored the fire department until the early 1960s, when it sold the fire equipment to the city for \$1. The city purchases the equipment, but the volunteer firemen elect their own officers.

The third community was South Hills, which incorporated in 1949 to provide taxing power for street maintenance, water and sewer lines, and police protection.

South Hills was located on the other side of Kyles Lane, opposite Fort Wright, and apparently took its name from the development company that built the original streets in 1927. That name in turn, probably came from the location on the hills south of Covington.

South Hills roughly includes those streets running off Kyles Lane, such as St. Anthony, Henry Clay, Crittenden and Cumberland.

South Hills also has its own civic club and building on Bluegrass Avenue. City meetings initially were held in private basements, but later were moved to the civic club building before the merger with Fort Wright.

The newest of the four communities was Lakeview, which incorporated in 1959.

Lakeview basically was located along Madison Pike and took its name from the various lakes in the area. One was Miller's Lake, a 10-acre lake located where the TANK maintenance garage is. Another was Ratterman's lake, also now filled in. It was located across from where the Family Camping Center sits. There also were some goldfish ponds located where Eaton Asphalt has its business.

Incorporated to stave off annexation by Covington, the city ran along Madison Pike from Mother of God Cemetery south to near where Pioneer Park is.

Lakeview's city offices were in the old firehouse on Orphanage Road. Southern Hills Volunteer Fire Department once was based there, but moved up the hill to Dudley Road in Edgewood.

The first consolidation came in 1961 when Fort Wright agreed to annex South Hills. At the time South Hills was contracting with Fort Wright for fire protection. Out of those contract discussions came the idea of combining the two cities.

In addition to the fire protection, residents felt consolidation would give them better police service and more influence in heading off any annexation interest from Covington.

The second consolidation came in 1968 when Fort Wright merged with Lookout Heights. Much like the earlier union with South Hills, the merger was seen as providing better services and more protection from Covington.

The consolidation with Lookout Heights was put on the ballot in November 1967. Fort Wright voters approved the merger 532 – 319 and Lookout Heights residents gave their approval 389 – 150.

Park Hills originally was part of those merger talks, but dropped out.

For a few months after the merger the city went by the name Fort Wright-Lookout Heights and operated with two mayors and city offices.

The other merger, with Lakeview, came in 1978. It was prompted by the lack of adequate city services and city candidates.

It was approved in November 1977. Fort Wright voters approved it by a margin of 1,216 – 300 and Lakeview by 56 – 20.

While the merger solidified today's city boundary, it has not stopped the merger and annexation talk.

Over the past decade, several informal merger discussions have occurred between Fort Wright and Park Hills, although the matter has never turned serious enough to take to the voters.

Voters in Fort Wright were asked in 1983 to consider a merger with Kenton Vale, a small community on Madison Pike that borders Fort Wright in the old Lakeview area. Kenton Vale officials lobbied for a merger and the residents voted 48 – 10 in favor of becoming part of Fort Wright.

Fort Wright voters, however, were apparently not convinced they had anything to gain by a merger. Most of its city officials remained neutral on the matter and the tally was 1,008 – 953 against merging with Kenton Vale.

The only precinct in Fort Wright to vote for the merger was the area of Fort Henry and General Drives.

And those residents had a motivation that the other Fort Wright voters lacked.

Their section of Fort Wright had been the subject of court battles between Fort Wright and Covington, each of which claimed ownership.

The dispute dates to the early 1960s when Covington annexed what was then undeveloped land. The landowners filed suit to block the annexation, and for more than 20 years the matter sat in court.

In the meantime, the area was developed and annexed into Fort Wright. Once developed, Covington again claimed ownership and in 1980 the courts awarded the territory to Covington. But a new state law allowed Fort Wright to re-annex the area and put it up for a vote. The people voted overwhelming to leave Covington and become part of Fort Wright.

As part of the re-annexation, Fort Wright had to assume a portion of Covington's outstanding debt.

After negotiations, a figure of \$250,000 – to be paid out of taxes over a seven-year period – was agreed upon.

In more recent times, Fort Wright and Covington buried the hatchet, in part through the creation of a special task force made up of officials from both cities.

The task force worked to solve a variety of problems that the two share. Those problems include sewers in the St. Charles Nursing Home area, industrial development along Madison Pike and reconstruction of the Henry Clay – Highland Pike intersection.

Fort Wright is a city of more than 6,500 people.