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On the Waterfront

**The West Sixth Street Bridge:
Zip Codes & Destiny**

**By David Frew
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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in July 2021.



Changing of the Guard: In 1998, the venerable West Sixth Street Viaduct was replaced by a shorter and more efficient structure, the Strong Vincent Memorial Bridge. (Photo from the Jerry Skrypzak Collection)

Much has been written about the predictive power of a person's precise birth location (ZIP code) in determining important life outcomes such as education, wealth, and socialization. As antithetical as it may seem with respect to the "American Dream," which suggests that each person has an equal opportunity to achieve success and happiness, social scientists have been suggesting that this person-place-phenomena is a sadly powerful indicator.

SAT scores, earning potential, life expectancy and other socioeconomic indicators all seem to be driven by ZIP code. The Rockefeller Foundation, for instance, points to the stunning example of a person born in New York City's Bronx as opposed to Manhattan. Although the two boroughs are just a few city blocks apart, the Manhattan baby will predictably earn hundreds of times more money than a child born in the Bronx.

Just before the Covid Pandemic broke out in 2020, I was in Milwaukee at Marquette University for graduation of a grandson. As the university president began the event and just before he introduced the commencement speaker, David Brooks, he presented that year's outstanding student, a young man who grew up in Milwaukee's inner city. In his introduction, he mentioned that the student recipient of that year's award was from Milwaukee's infamous 53206 ZIP code, where he noted that by age 25, more than half of the young men born in that neighborhood had managed to accumulate a juvenile or adult arrest record, had been placed on parole or had served time in jail.

"Our honoree," he continued, "has risen from that apparent geographic fate to be a 4.00 GPA student who is off to graduate school next year. This proves the American Dream, that with hard work and determination anyone can achieve anything."

When Brooks took the microphone to deliver the commencement address just moments later, he congratulated the young man but then commented that while he was a notable exception to the rule, inner-city Milwaukee statistics painted a troubling trend that was an ongoing threat to American exceptionalism. Both Brooks and the university president referenced a television documentary titled "Milwaukee 53206," a one-hour film that described the plight of Milwaukee's troubled neighborhood.

Since that documentary was televised, there has been controversy and debate over its internal accuracy. Detractors noted that there are other equally troubled neighborhoods in the United States. Controversies led researchers at the University of Wisconsin to compare Milwaukee's 53206 with other problem

neighborhoods and concluded that there were worse places in America to grow up.

The researchers' conclusions did not suggest that 53206 was an optimum place to grow up, especially for black or Hispanic males. They simply pointed to similar problem ZIP codes, which were as bad or worse with respect to crime and arrest records. According to Brooks, while ZIP codes should not control destinies, they do.

We did not have ZIP codes during the 1950s, but that did not mean we were without comparative neighborhood economic realities. For kids who lived in my neighborhood, there was a granite monument instead. It was the West Sixth Street Bridge that spanned both Cascade Creek and the railroad tracks that serviced the bayfront docks. We all called it the "viaduct," a term that may or may not have been technically correct. Structurally, a viaduct is a bridge that is suspended by arches, and the West Sixth Street "viaduct" was not exactly built on arches. Regardless of technical definition, however, the bridge served as a dividing line between Erie's affluent suburbs to the west, which were anchored by the Frontier neighborhood, and Bay Rat territory to the east.

The symbolic power of the bridge began with its conception and birth. Erie's original western border was Cranberry Street, and the primary east-west roadways on the northwest side of town included Fourth, Eighth, and 12th streets. West 12th Street was a short industrial corridor, West Fourth Street ended at Cranberry, and West Eighth Street was the primary road to the west and Route 5. One of the city's most important streetcar routes followed Eighth Street from downtown Erie to both the new Catholic cemetery, Trinity, and to Waldameer Park, where cars turned to return to the city.

For Erie's wealthy leaders, land acquisition was the investment of choice during the second half of the 1800s, and three local families gradually purchased all the property north of West Eighth Street and between the city and today's Presque Isle Drive. The Reeds owned the land west of today's Frontier Park-L.E.A.F. Arboretum. Charles Reed's protégé, William L. Scott, purchased two farms that were separated by more than a mile, and the Tracy family (Scott married into the Tracy family) acquired most of the rest of the western land.

Scott, who had slowly become Erie's wealthiest person, was operating two huge farms: a dairy farm called Frontier that encompassed today's Frontier Park plus the land north to Presque Isle Bay, and a second farm, Algeria Farms, that was just east of today's Peninsula Drive. Tracy owned the land between Scott's two farms. Since West Sixth Street ended at Cranberry, where it was blocked by Cascade Creek and the railroad tracks, the Scott, Reed, and Tracy properties were not interrupted by a public road.

When William Scott died in 1891, his properties passed to his two daughters. One of the girls, Annie Scott Strong, and her husband Charles Hamot Strong (1853-1936), were living downtown in today's Gannon Old Main building. Eager to develop a summer estate on the "outskirts" of town, Strong began the development of a westside summer place on the bluffs overlooking Presque Isle Bay and north of Cascade Creek. Strong already controlled the property there (on the north side of Cascade Creek) since he was owner and president of the Erie to Pittsburgh Railroad.

In 1895, he completed construction of a large Adirondack-style cottage on the bluffs, and as part of the development, he added a dock that could be accessed via pathway and steps from his cottage. Then he purchased a large motor yacht named "Mystic," which he berthed at his landing dock. The Erie Yacht Club (he was a member) was evolving at about the same time but would not move to its current western location for almost 20 years.

All three of Erie's western landowner families had vested interests in convincing the city of Erie to grow west toward their land holdings and to create a new access road, West Sixth Street. The Reeds and Tracys were hoping to develop their land into residential properties and Strong (Scott's son-in-law) needed an access road from his downtown home to his summer estate.

The three families had significant political influence. Several family members had served as mayors or council members. Given the city's interest in expanding to the west and growing its tax base as well as growing concerns about the quality of Erie's schools, shifting the city border west was beginning to seem inevitable by the turn of the century. There were three high schools at the time – East, Central, and Academy, but given the growth on the westside, it was clear that a westside high school was needed. Yet, there was no place to build because expansion had consumed the available land.

Eventually, the city would make a deal with Millcreek Township to expand its boundary west. During preliminary discussions with Millcreek, Weschler Avenue was identified as a possible new city boundary. This did not solve the problem of the disposition of Scott's Frontier Farm property, however, since Scott's will stipulated that the 150-acre farm be held in trust until the city of Erie expanded at least to today's Mohawk Drive. A preliminary agreement yielded space on West Eighth Street needed to plan for the new westside high school, Strong Vincent, and the Reed family, which owned the land from Cranberry to Scott's Frontier Farm, agreed to donate the needed land.

Strong Vincent would eventually take over Central School's academic programs, leaving the downtown school (southeast corner of 10th and Sassafras streets) to focus on purely technical curricula. The downtown school then changed its name to Tech. As a part of the deal, the city agreed to admit high school students from

Millcreek until the township was able to create its own high school – Millcreek High School (later McDowell High School). In 1920, the city limits were officially shifted west to Pittsburgh Avenue, well beyond Frontier Farm.

The city went on to build the West Sixth Street Viaduct and extended West Sixth Street across the bridge and through Frontier Farm. The new bridge ran approximately along the right-of-way of today's Bayfront Parkway and continued along the old farm until it crossed West Eighth Street. Property needed to build the bridge was donated by Charles Strong and the land needed for the Sixth Street extension was donated by the trust company that controlled Scott's will. Originally, the new Sixth Street extension was curved through the former 150-acre farm, joining West Eighth Street at today's Seminole Drive, so there would be continuous roadway access to the west. The original West Street ended at the western end of the old farm.

The original 1878 Frontier farmhouse was moved a few feet west to make room for the new road, and that home still stands at 704 Seminole. Further development of West Sixth Street continued in incremental steps from the old farm as the new roadway moved: first to Lincoln Avenue, then to Pittsburgh Avenue, and eventually beyond Peninsula Drive, where it joined West Eighth Street just west of Waldameer.

While it would seem that the first modern housing developments west of the new bridge should have been at Scott's Frontier Farm property, that was not the case. Scott's farm property ranged westward from Weschler Avenue to Monaca Drive and north from West Eighth Street to the bay. A northerly projection of Weschler Avenue became the boundary line between Charles Strong's new summer property and the old farm. The backyards of the homes on the east side of today's Monaca Drive end at the Strong property line (today's Erie Day School). The Frontier Farm property was subdivided into individual lots according to William Scott's wishes a few years after the city border shifted west (1922) and when new streets were laid out and building lots offered for sale. But legal nuances involving the new "Frontier District" were complex. As a result, the first houses were not built until the mid-1920s.

The original westside homes were built on Lincoln Avenue beginning in the early 1900s. That street was developed from West Eighth Street and preceded the expansion of West Sixth Street. When West Sixth was extended, Lincoln became the last established city street. Earlier the extension had been blocked by a golf course, the original Kahkwa Club (founded in 1893), which was just beyond Lincoln Avenue and between the bayfront and West Eighth Street (on today's Kahkwa Boulevard). In 1917, when Kahkwa opened the Donald Ross-designed course in Fairview, West Sixth was continued to Pittsburgh Avenue. The westside housing rush began. The Shenley-Beverly Association emerged in the mid-1920s with new home construction on Reed properties to the east of Shenley Drive, and

building started along the bluffs on today's South Shore Drive. By the late 1920s, construction in the Frontier neighborhoods on the old farm property was steady and it continued through the 1950s.

In 1951, the Scott estate sold the southeastern section of the old farm, a semi-useless wetland area called "The Hollows" to the city of Erie as a park. That sale and its discount price had been stipulated in the Scott will. That piece became Frontier Park and was imagined by the Frontier Association to be an aesthetic enhancement to the newly developing residential neighborhood. In 1924, Charles Strong donated the southern edge of his property (east of the Monaca Drive dividing line) to Erie Day School.

The last stages of the development of the Frontier Association were still ongoing after being delayed by the Great Depression and World War II and, as a result, the later homes were much more opulent than the first homes built in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These changes, including the exclusive new Erie Day School, created the visual impression of wealth in neighborhoods just west of "the bridge."



Wide streets with beautifully landscaped boulevards were characteristic of neighborhoods on the "other side of the bridge." (Image from the Frontier Association website)

While Erie's earliest northwestern neighborhoods (Bay Rat territory) were developed during the mid- to late 1800s, when shipping commerce came to the new Cascade Docks, the new Frontier neighborhoods were developed much later in the 1900s. Modern "over the bridge" neighborhoods were characterized by large green spaces, landscaping, organized neighborhood associations, and single-family homes. There were no flats cobbled together from old family houses or boarders who were counted on to help pay the taxes.

Granted, the old Bay Rat environs were not as scruffy as New York's South Bronx or Chicago's Southside, or Milwaukee's 53206, but the differences were quite apparent. And those differences transcended the enhanced neighborhood aesthetics west of the bridge. Families on the "other side of the tracks" had attractive new homes with driveways and cars. Usually station wagons. Children played tennis and golf, belonged to country clubs with swimming pools, and attended summer camps. Meanwhile, Bay Rats were wrapping old baseball cores with black electrical tape and organizing sandlot games.

Socio-economic differences were highlighted by daily life in the neighborhood's two bicultural schools: St. Andrew and Strong Vincent. Until Our Lady of Peace parish opened its own school, St. Andrew housed students from both sides of the bridge, as did Strong Vincent. The differences between the two sets of kids were not as glaring as those that defined Milwaukee's 53206 ZIP code. But they existed. One interesting example at St. Andrew Grade School was candy time, which happened most afternoons during class. At a pre-appointed hour each afternoon, the Sisters would produce boxes of candy, gum, and other treats to sell to the children. A line would form, and kids were encouraged to purchase and consume sugary treats. Profits from sales were alleged to be going toward classroom instructional aids, which was a continuous issue, we were told, since there was no taxpayer support for Catholic education. In addition to creating an infinite amount of work for local dentists, candy time was an opportunity for relatively well-off kids to use the cash that their parents supplied each day. Naturally, this led to classroom social chaos. Some kids were able to buy all the candy they wanted and to give some away, thus "creating friends." What a lesson.

There were other offensive dynamics, as well. These ranged from differential clothing quality to different extracurricular activity opportunities and parents advising children on friend choices based upon neighborhoods. The bridge continued as an economic dividing line through the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond as demographics slowly caught up with and eventually consumed many of the institutions on "the wrong side." Villa College moved to the "right side of the bridge." Old neighborhood stores and social clubs, including the Portuguese Club, Danish Club, and Penn Club disappeared, and the West Erie Plaza with its own theater was born. Bello's abandoned its long home and moved to the Colony Plaza and Sarafini's Italian Restaurant shifted locations to the west side of the bridge.

Even as Mayor Joyce Savocchio was replacing the beautiful old bridge with its modern predecessor in 1998, St. Andrew School was failing and Strong Vincent's student population had fallen so low that Erie School District administrators consider closing it as a high school, which they eventually did. In another infamous blow, one of Erie's most revered Italian restaurants, Chuck and Ginny's, went out of business. And then to punctuate the change, St. Mark's Lutheran Church closed.



Has differential opportunity between sides of the bridge widened or narrowed in recent years? What will happen in the future? As the 8-ball often says, "Only time will tell."

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