

*Whittier School, September 16, 1946
(Minneapolis Star Journal Tribune photograph; Minnesota Historical Society)*

THE EVOLUTION OF THE WHITTIER NEIGHBORHOOD

**PREPARED FOR
THE WHITTIER ALLIANCE**

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IV. RECENT HISTORY: 1960 TO THE PRESENT

Changes in population and ethnic character have influenced the social and physical fabric of the Whittier neighborhood in the last decades of the twentieth century, leading to its current claim of being “the international neighborhood.” It is changes to the infrastructure, though, especially the construction of Interstate 35W, that have had the greatest impact on the physical character of Whittier—and all of south Minneapolis—during this period.

Highway Construction and Urban Renewal

The City of Minneapolis took advantage of two major federal programs intended to reshape and revitalize urban areas after World War II, the Federal Housing Act of 1949 and the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. Implementation of these programs began in the 1950s, and their physical manifestations became visible in the 1960s. The legacy of the Federal Aid Highway Act was the bisection of south Minneapolis from north to south by Interstate 35W, beginning in 1959.⁹⁹

When the preliminary design for the freeway north of Lake Street was presented to the Minneapolis City Council in 1962, neighborhoods were vehemently opposed to the plans, which they had played no role in developing. “The decisions which are now turning out to be so controversial were being made nearly a year and a half ago,” a newspaper reporter observed. “The problems involved were not talked out at that time with the people affected primarily because the system of street and highway planning in Minneapolis is not organized to raise basic policy questions.” The city did not have a system in place for long-range planning for future highway construction or for involving the public, leaving most decisions to the state: “It has not generally taken the initiative in locating future routes and in selling them to the neighborhoods affected.” As a result, “Minneapolis finds itself in 1962, after more than six years experience with the freeway program—facing another impossible choice between accepting a highway plan to which a substantial segment of the community objects, and delaying the program again for another study.”¹⁰⁰

Construction for Interstate 35W entered the city from the south and moved north.¹⁰¹ Newspaper accounts in 1964 highlighted the disruptive effect that the freeway’s impending arrival was having on individual residents north of Lake Street and on the area as a whole. Mr. and Mrs. Leon W. Brooks, for example, did not have a car, so they would not be using the freeway that would soon destroy the four-plex they owned and lived in at 2520 Fifth Avenue South. The couple depended upon rent from the other units to supplement their modest pension and Social Security income. The only comparable property they could find was \$4,000 more than Minnesota highway department would pay for their current building, so their future housing was uncertain. An African American family, Mr. and Mrs. William North, experienced racial discrimination in their

⁹⁹ “Freeways to Make Cities Truly Twins,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 8, 1968.

¹⁰⁰ Ted Kolderie, “City Freeway Hits Policy Bottleneck,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 23, 1962.

¹⁰¹ “35W Reaches Nicollet Av.,” *Minneapolis Star*, March 11, 1964.

search for a house to replace the one at 2522 Fourth Avenue South that they were being forced to leave. They wanted their children to grow up in a diverse neighborhood like Whittier, but found the only places open to them were segregated.¹⁰²

Despite community resistance, Interstate 35W prevailed. A reporter later described the exodus as construction progressed north in 1965: “The 300-foot strip between Stevens and 2nd Aves. became a linear ghost town as the first residents moved out. Their homes were moved to new sites or razed, sometimes after being looted to the point where sod was stripped from yards.” After the freeway opened from Sixty-second Street to Thirty-first Street in January 1967, the Minneapolis City Council approved an accelerated construction schedule that allowed work to be performed twenty hours per day in hopes of finishing the section between Thirty-first Street and Eleventh Street by year’s end. In November, the last 1.5-mile section of Interstate 35W was completed.¹⁰³

The following year, the *Minneapolis Star* interviewed people in areas along the interstate and found discontent. A man who lived east of the trench near Franklin Avenue complained that his walk to Saint Stephen’s Church was longer by eight blocks because he had to go around the freeway. “Besides that,” he added, “the noise is so loud you can’t hear yourself think.” He claimed that the freeway ruined the neighborhood, citing a “nice old Scandinavian couple” who moved away after the construction started and left their house vacant because they could not sell it. Soon “hippies” moved in and, although the police finally chased them away, the house was damaged beyond repair. Another respondent, Mrs. Bertha Soderlind, tried to take a positive interest in the freeway as it was being built. When she had to move to a nursing home due to health problems, though, she could not find a buyer for her house at 3501 Second Avenue South because no one wanted to live near the freeway.¹⁰⁴

Another article questioned whether the freeway’s construction would ultimately benefit the city. Unnamed city officials were quoted as saying that “the social and economic effects of the freeway on Minneapolis have so far been more negative than positive.” City streets such as Portland and Park were no longer clogged with traffic because the freeway carried 70,000 cars per day between Lake Street and downtown, but city traffic engineer David Koski noted that the relief might be only temporary: the freeway was already overcrowded and would only get worse when Interstate 94 opened to Saint Paul. Most residents objected to the noise, which averaged 75 to 80 decibels, and the physical barrier the freeway posed in neighborhoods. The assistant state highway commissioner, R. P. Braun, dismissed these concerns, referring to “a study done by planning consultants in the mid-fifties [that] concluded that ‘no functional neighborhood existed in the freeway corridor.’ Local neighborhoods have formed along the freeway and are not severed by it.” Marvin Tenhoff, planning director for Minneapolis schools, disagreed. He noted that both

¹⁰² Sam Newlund, “Freeway—Road Paved with Heartaches,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 8, 1964.

¹⁰³ Brandt, “35W at Age 25”; “Section of Hwy. 35W to Open Saturday,” *Minneapolis Star*, January 13, 1967; “Speedier Freeway Work Approved,” *Minneapolis Star*, March 6, 1967; “Last Section of Interstate to Open,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 19, 1967.

¹⁰⁴ Kristin McGrath, “Freeway View: ‘Noise, Smog, Hippies, Ruins,’” *Minneapolis Star*, November 12, 1968; Kristin McGrath, “Widow, 70 ‘Made Friends’ with Freeway,” *Minneapolis Star*, November 13, 1968.

elementary school boundaries and neighborhoods were splintered by the freeway's alignment.¹⁰⁵

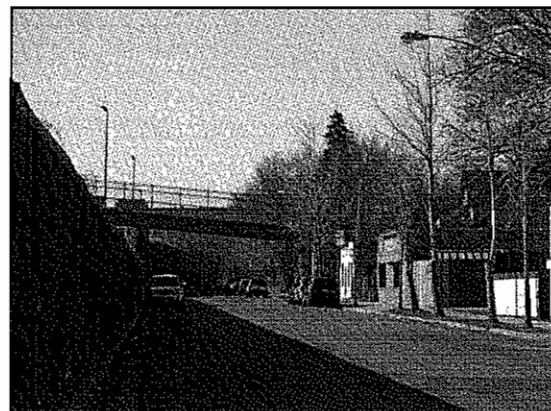
It was not until the 1970s that neighborhood concerns began yielding results. A 650-foot-long pedestrian bridge was constructed across the freeway at East Twenty-fourth Street in 1971-1972 in an effort to reconnect the east and west sides. Sound barrier walls were installed in 1974.¹⁰⁶

Sometimes working hand in hand with development of the interstate, urban renewal also affected Whittier in the decades after World War II. The city's planning department and the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority identified certain older areas for "improvement." This included Powderhorn, which at that time contained Whittier. Powderhorn was given priority because it bordered the corridor that would be cleared for construction of the interstate. The area became part of the Minneapolis Model Cities demonstration project, which set out to make both social and physical improvements. For the most part, this program focused on upgrading existing housing stock through public and private investment. The project did not result in wholesale clearance, except for a few blocks around the intersection of Lake Street and Nicollet Avenue.¹⁰⁷

The proposal to redevelop the Nicollet-Lake area with a large shopping center featuring an enclosed courtyard was a long and controversial process. Initially proposed in 1972 as a way to address the issues of vacant stores and declining revenues in the vicinity, the shopping center was viewed with skepticism by local business owners and residents who feared that viable shops and houses would be displaced. The initial developer, Nicollet-Lake Associates, was dismissed by the city council in 1976 after missing several deadlines. Waiting in the wings was another developer with a SuperValu grocery and a



*Fourth Avenue South at Twenty-sixth Street,
1930-1939
(Lee Brothers, photographer;
Minnesota Historical Society)*



*Fourth Avenue South looking toward East
Twenty-sixth Street, note I35W freeway sound at
left and pedestrian overpass
(Penny Petersen, photographer)*

¹⁰⁵ Kristin McGrath, "Success of Freeway 'Surgery' in Doubt," *Minneapolis Star*, November 14, 1968.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Walton and Ben Christensen, Minnesota Department of Transportation, telephone interviews by Marjorie Pearson, June 9, 2009; "Pedestrian Overpass Will Span 35W at 24th," *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 19, 1972.

¹⁰⁷ Judith Martin and Anthony Goddard, *Past Choices, Present Landscapes: The Impact of Urban Renewal on the Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, 1989), 123-125, 136-142.