OUR neighborhood of concern lay in the mid-nineteenth century on the northern edge of a basin on the north bank of the Ohio River in which rested the city of Cincinnati. Hills about 400 feet high surrounded the basin, and the Miami and Erie Canal (Cincinnati's "Rhine") ran across it about halfway between the hills and the river, then turned sharply to the north, forming the southern and western sides of the triangular piece of land that became known as Over-the-Rhine. The area, like peripheral areas of other mid-nineteenth-century cities, attracted a diversity of people who lived in extraordinarily high densities amidst a mix of land uses. And Over-the-Rhine, like other peripheral neighborhoods in this period, attracted a large number of immigrants (almost half of the city's population in 1850 came from abroad), including so many from the German states that they made up 60 percent of the neighborhood's population in 1850, and 50 percent a decade later. But these men and women formed no coherent community, for they came from a variety of independent states, spoke a variety of dialects, adhered to a variety of religions and ideologies, belonged to a variety of political parties, pursued diverse occupations, ranged in wealth from rich to poor, and moved frequently, both within and beyond this large area and generally up the social ladder.
PROLOGUE: 1850s–1910s

Street map of Cincinnati, 1846. Over-the-Rhine is shown as the shaded area tucked into the angle of the Miami and Erie Canal. Courtesy of the University of Cincinnati, Over-the-Rhine Design Studies Project, 1988.

By the turn of the century Over-the-Rhine still contained most of the city's German institutions, though a lower percentage of German and other immigrants, and Germans still led the city's immigrant groups in social and residential mobility. Most Cincinnatians regarded Over-the-Rhine as the city's premier entertainment district, for it offered a gaudy array of saloons, restaurants, shooting galleries, arcades, gambling dens, dance halls, burlesque halls, and theaters. Upper Vine Street especially attracted throngs of out-of-town visitors, traveling salesmen, politicians, show people, and "sports" who gave the neighborhood an evil reputation among some respectable people. Over-the-Rhine, lamented one,

combines "all the tarnished tinsel of a Bohemianism with the trimmings of a gutter and the morals of a sewer."  

Over-the-Rhine also worried city planners at the turn of the century, but their mode of thinking restricted their remedial options. They took groups as the basic units of society and attributed to them not only an inherited physiological character but also a biologically transmitted and indivisible essence that included intelligence, morality, and culture (that is, total way of life). These planners also divided the groups into categories of superior and inferior and regarded a culturally homogeneous nation-state as the sturdiest foundation for social and civic coherence. But their sense of biology as destiny rendered city planning useless in eradicating group distinctions, including those that separated in their minds the superior and "naturally" more modern, more prosperous, and more powerful "American stock" Anglo-Saxon group from the culturally different and "naturally" inferior groups, such as Polish Americans, Italian
As a consequence city planners of that era tended to be architects, landscape designers, engineers, and sanitarians who offered advice on particular municipal problems by now and then devising a city plan as part of their larger practice. They normally worked independently of
government as part of a general effort to keep important matters out of the hands of the presumably corrupt politicians who allegedly catered to special interests and who so often controlled city hall. They focused, moreover, on defective elements of the infrastructure of cities, such as the transportation system, park system, or sewerage system, in an effort to mitigate problems of poverty, vice, crime, disease, and high mortality rates while encouraging the construction of imposing civic centers and other beautiful and monumental public buildings to inculcate a sense of municipal and civic patriotism among the diverse and, in their view, unequal and culturally incompatible groups that lived uneasily together in crowded cities. Some of these part-time planners put their infrastructure and public buildings programs together in one elaborate and artfully designed document so that the plan itself might serve as a monumental symbol to inspire civic patriotism. “Make no little plans,” advised Daniel Burnham, the author of such a plan for Chicago. “They have no magic to stir men's blood. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work. . . . Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty.”

This way of thinking yielded in Cincinnati the boss system in politics and government to manage conflict among diverse groups and “reform” activities to manage the social problems inherent in the presumption of unequal diversity. Divisions of local government planned separately for the development of park, transit, and sewerage systems to facilitate the movement of slum dwellers into healthier and morally more wholesome social and physical environments, and the Park Board proposed the creation of a centrally located and monumental civic center along a parkway to inspire a general sense of city patriotism transcending the persisting differences and competition among various groups. In this context charitable and social work agencies addressed the problems of dependent and/or deviant groups by attempting to accommodate them to the dominant American stock's alien culture.5

In 1915, then, when our story begins, the physical fabric of Over-the-Rhine and its unsavory reputation remained intact. But the proliferation of suburbs after 1850 had created a less densely heterogeneous rim of new neighborhoods in the hills around the basin, which now ranked as the oldest section of town and seemed destined for occupation entirely by the expanding central business district. Over-the-Rhine sat on downtown's northern edge, its foreign population now thinned because
Cincinnati, unlike the more rapidly growing cities along the Great Lakes corridor, attracted a relatively small stream of new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. Nonetheless, many of them, like American migrants, started their lives in the Queen City in Over-the-Rhine, the population of which remained as diverse as ever in all respects but one: almost all the prosperous people had left.

Given this history, Over-the-Rhine in the early twentieth century may be seen as a characteristically American slum, an old and declining area of mixed land uses and mixed peoples that formed part of a band of similar neighborhoods surrounding the central business district. Like such neighborhoods elsewhere, it retained that mix of land uses and peoples through the 1920s and 1930s, and after 1940 attracted large numbers of both Appalachians and African Americans. Unlike many such neighborhoods, however, Over-the-Rhine survived into the 1950s despite the adoption by city government after 1920 of new and drastic efforts to revitalize Cincinnati, including such dramatic slum clearance treatments as demolition and redevelopment.