

Kenton

by Elizabeth Mylott

The North Portland Neighborhood of Kenton has long held the distinctive identity that comes from being a company town. Like the residents of all company towns, Kentonites shared more than a physical neighborhood. Their lives and livelihoods were tied to one industry: meat packing. Now, after years of decline, the small community faces a problem familiar to neighborhoods across Portland: how do they maintain their history and identity in the face of being discovered?

Kenton was first developed in 1911 as a company town by Swift Meat Packing. Swift bought the Union Meat Company and 3,400 acres of land adjacent to the Columbia River in 1907, and set about turning the area north of Portland into the Meat Packing Center of the Pacific Coast. This identity was strengthened in 1919 when the Portland Union Stockyards moved from their original location at NW 17th and Vaughn to their new home in Kenton, at the Portland International Livestock Exposition Building. A number of other meat-related businesses were also located in Kenton, including O'Shea Brothers Meat Market and the Schlessler Brothers Slaughterhouse. By 1958, nearly 30 million animals had passed through the Portland Union Stockyards, the largest in a five state area. Portland, the center of the west coast cattle trade, set the livestock prices for the Pacific Northwest Region.

By mid-century, however, the industry began to change. Centralized stockyards declined in popularity and the businesses that had long defined the landscape and lives of Kenton began to close. In 1966 the Swift Meat Company closed its doors. Just a few short years later, the Portland Stockyards closed after suffering years of declining sales. The once solidly working-class neighborhood fell into decline. Crime increased as businesses shut their doors, and long-time residents moved in search of jobs.

At the turn of the 21st century, the City of Portland turned its attention to Kenton. The Interstate MAX line opened for service in 2004. The following year, the Portland Development Commission, Portland Office of Transportation, SERA Architects, GreenWorks, and a Citizens Advisory Committee joined together to design and implement the Downtown Kenton Redevelopment Project. Now Kenton is ripe for a renaissance, with the Denver Avenue retail district, historic single-family homes that include Craftsman style Bungalows and cottages on tree-lined streets, and several public parks. The Denver Avenue Streetscape Improvement Project is currently in its second phase, designed to stimulate development along North Denver Avenue by supporting existing businesses, filling in vacant properties, and drawing new retail tenants and customers to the area. New businesses are opening in vacant storefronts while real estate prices steadily increase.

While some Kenton residents welcome the changes, there is concern that the once distinctive and close-knit neighborhood will lose its identity. This is a familiar story in Portland, where neighborhoods with central retail strips have been experiencing city-led revitalization efforts for years. Northwest 23rd, Hawthorne, Belmont, Alberta, and most recently Mississippi have all experienced the transformation beginning in Kenton. Once again we are left to ask how much gentrification a neighborhood can absorb before its identity is irrevocably altered. Streetscape improvements, access to light rail, and increasing property values are all assets to a community. The question is whether community identity and cohesion will remain in Kenton five years from now.



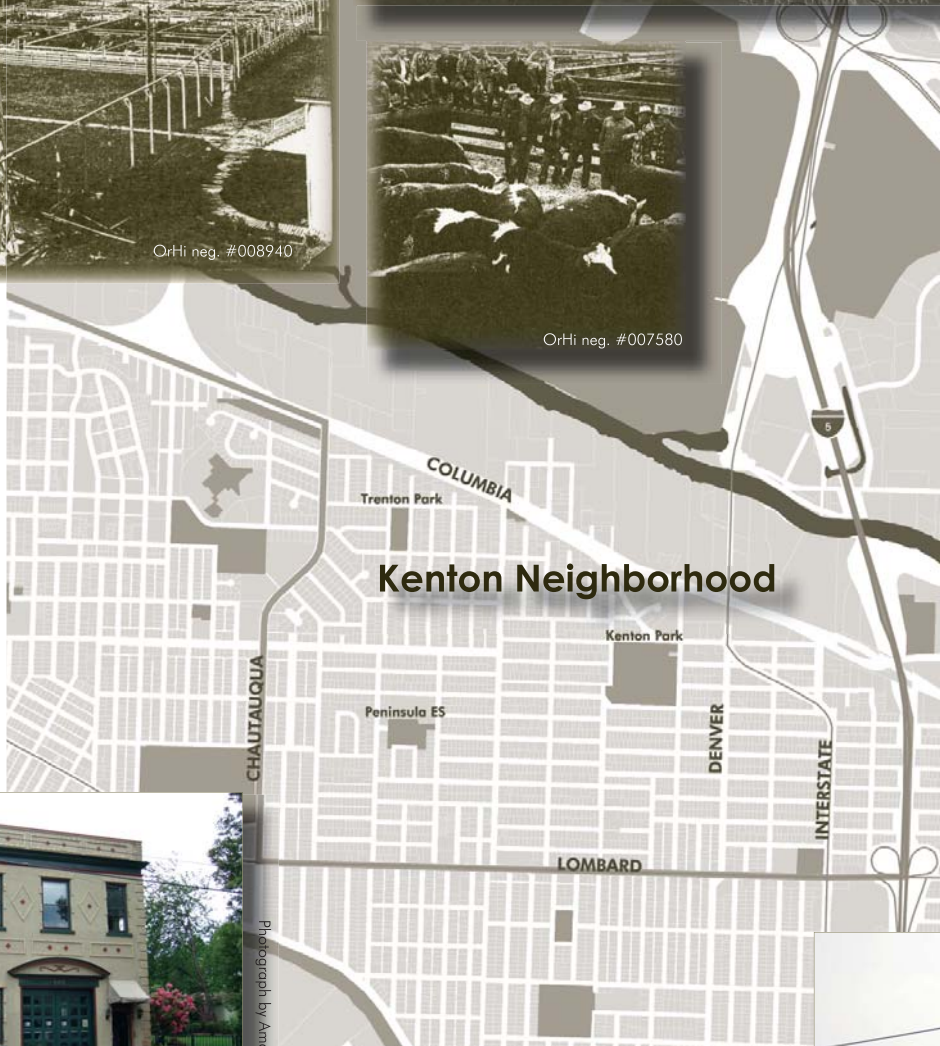
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Kenton Neighborhood



Kenton Firehouse.

Photograph by Amanda Berry



Photograph by Amanda Berry



The Masonic Lodge (left) and the Kenton Hotel Building (above) are located on Denver Avenue. The Paul Bunyan statue (Denver Avenue and Interstate), a signature of the neighborhood, was erected for the Oregon centennial exposition in 1959.