

3.0 Cuyahoga County Environmental Setting

3.1 Topography of Cuyahoga County

Cuyahoga County is located in the northeastern portion of Ohio. The county is bounded to the north by Lake Erie, Lake and Geauga counties to the east, Summit and Medina counties to the south, and Lorain County to the west. East of Cleveland, the Cuyahoga River bisects the county winding through Cleveland's city limits, ultimately emptying into Lake Erie, while the much smaller Rocky River begins in North Olmsted and flows through the west side of the county before terminating at Lake Erie.

The downtown area in the city has historically been known as "The Flats" for its flat and low-lying elevation. This topographical combination of a waterway in a low area made it undesirable place to live. However, the flat land and Cuyahoga River leading into Lake Erie was amenable to industrial development as flat land was easier to build upon and it provided a transportation route for raw materials to enter and finished products to leave for market. The industrialization of the area ultimately led to extreme pollution of the river and its immediate surroundings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At times the Cuyahoga River became so polluted with chemicals and other industrial waste that it caught fire. The final river fire occurred in 1969; a year later the national and Ohio state Environmental Protection Agency administrations were enacted in part in response to these disasters. Residential development in the Flats was limited to the cheapest tenements often inhabited by the new immigrants to the city, who left the area as soon as feasible. The demise of Cleveland's industrial concerns in the 1970s began to change the Flats, first leaving the area largely underutilized with vacant buildings and crumbling infrastructure. Beginning in the 1980s, the Flats transformed into an entertainment area with numerous bars, restaurants, and music venues (Miller and Wheeler 1997).

In opposition to the Flats, Cuyahoga County includes several communities with "Heights" in their names. The names are apt as the elevation of the county rises once beyond the river bottom areas. Topographical maps note the elevation near where the Cuyahoga River reaches Lake Erie at approximately 580 feet while the Heights areas across the county reach to near or just over 1000 feet. The areas beyond the city limits were mostly used for agricultural purposes with small village and town settlements into the early twentieth century. As the population increased after World War II, these areas were developed for new residential subdivisions, which then necessitated commercial, religious, educational, and other new buildings to be constructed in the areas.

The environmental setting of Cuyahoga County has been altered by human activity, especially during the mid-twentieth century with the construction of miles of interstates and other highway improvements, industrial complexes, commercial centers, and countless residential developments including thousands of houses. The effects of these changes are discussed in the following corresponding sections.