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Black Flight Hits Detroit

By ALEX P. KELLOGG

DETROIT—This shrinking city needs to hang on to people like Johnette Barham: taxpaying, middle-class professionals who invest in local real estate, work and play downtown, and make their home here.

Ms. Barham just left. And she's not coming back.

In seven years as a homeowner in Detroit, she endured more than 10 burglaries and break-ins at her house and a nearby rental property she owned. Still, she defied friends' pleas to leave as she fortified her home with locks, bars, alarms and a dog.



Johnette Barham leaves her old home in the Atkinson district of Detroit

Then, a week before Christmas, someone torched the house and destroyed almost everything she owned.

In March, police arrested a suspect in connection with the case, someone who turned out to be remarkably easy to find. For Ms. Barham, the arrest came one crime too late. "I was constantly being targeted in a way I couldn't predict, in a way that couldn't be controlled by the police," she says. "I couldn't take it anymore."

Ms. Barham's journey from diehard to defector illustrates the precarious state of Detroit today. The city—which has shed roughly 1 million residents since the 1950s—is now losing the African-American professionals who had stayed steadfastly, almost defiantly, loyal.

Through decades of white flight and economic distress, these diehards have sustained the city's cultural institutions and allowed prime neighborhoods such as Indian Village and Palmer Woods to stave off the blight that infects large swaths of Detroit.

Today, frustrated by plummeting property values and high crime, many diehards have hit their breaking point. Their exodus is consigning borderline neighborhoods to full-blown blight and putting prime residential areas at risk. By some estimates, this year's Census will show a population drop of 150,000 people from the 951,000 people who lived within city limits in 2000. That would be roughly double the population loss in the 1990s, when black, middle-class flight began replacing white flight as the prevailing dynamic.

There are other signs the middle class is throwing in the towel. From 1999 to 2008, median household income in Detroit dropped nearly 25% to \$28,730, after growing 17% in the 1990s, according to Data Driven Detroit, a nonprofit that analyzes Census data for the city. Over that period, the proportion of owner-occupied homes fell to 39% from 49%, while the proportion of vacant homes nearly tripled to 28%.

"The folks with the wherewithal to leave, the folks with the jobs... those are the people that have the ability to exercise voting with your feet," says David Martin, a professor of public policy at Wayne State University in Detroit.

Further erosion of Detroit's middle-class could cripple a turnaround plan by government and private-sector leaders here. It calls for "right-sizing" the city's government and geography to fit a shrunken population. But it hinges on the city shoring up stable neighborhoods and retaining middle-class taxpayers, while converting blighted areas for such uses as parks or farms.

"All of that is kind of intertwined," says Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, a former pro basketball star and local businessman brought into office last year by an election that pushed out most of the city's old leadership. "The first stage that we want to focus on is to keep those people that are here... and then create the right type of environment that will bring those kinds of people back." Mr. Bing has seen several friends leave town.

Even the best neighborhoods are struggling to hold on. Boston-Edison was once home to Henry Ford and other auto magnates. It has a neighborhood association that enforces strict rules on home upkeep and it employs a private-security firm to patrol its mansion-lined streets.

Crime is low because of the security. But the district shows the scars of an economic and real-estate crisis that has savaged Detroit.

"When you're totally occupied you have a bigger buffer" against scourges like vandalism and blight.,," says Pamela Miller Malone, president of the neighborhood association. "There's nothing like that buffer."

Atkinson Street, where Johnette Barham bought her home, was once that buffer. One block north is the southern boundary of Boston-Edison. One block south is Clairmount Street, the flashpoint of the 1967 riots. It is now a run-down boulevard with boarded-up homes and weedy lots.

Built before the Depression, Atkinson was among the few middle-class developments of its time that didn't bar blacks or Jews. Today about a quarter of the 225 homes in this historic district surrounding Ms. Barham's old house are boarded up.

Ms. Barham bought on Atkinson in 2003, when things were different. Born and raised in Detroit, she attended college and worked in Tennessee before returning to her hometown in 1996 to care for her ailing father. He died two years later.

She decided to stay, and worked as a personal assistant to Aretha Franklin before landing a \$75,000-a-year post as a pharmaceutical sales rep with Abbot Laboratories. In late 2002, she invested in an \$84,000 two-family rental property on Glynn Court, just a block north of Boston-Edison.

The next year, Ms. Barham purchased a 2,950-square-foot, brick Colonial at 1239 Atkinson, for just \$74,900. If the rental units were an investment, she says, the house would be "an ongoing labor of love."

At the time, Detroit looked like it was going somewhere, with an ambitious downtown revitalization; new stadiums and casinos; and a budding nightlife. Billions were pumped into development during the 2000s.

Others were putting down their own roots in Detroit. Stephanie Lipscombe, 39, who worked with Ms. Barham in pharmaceutical sales, bought a condo in the city in a high-rise overlooking the Detroit River. "That was a great time to live downtown, when all the black restaurants, the mainstream black restaurants started popping up," she recalls. "It was sort of like a little glimmer of hope for Detroit."

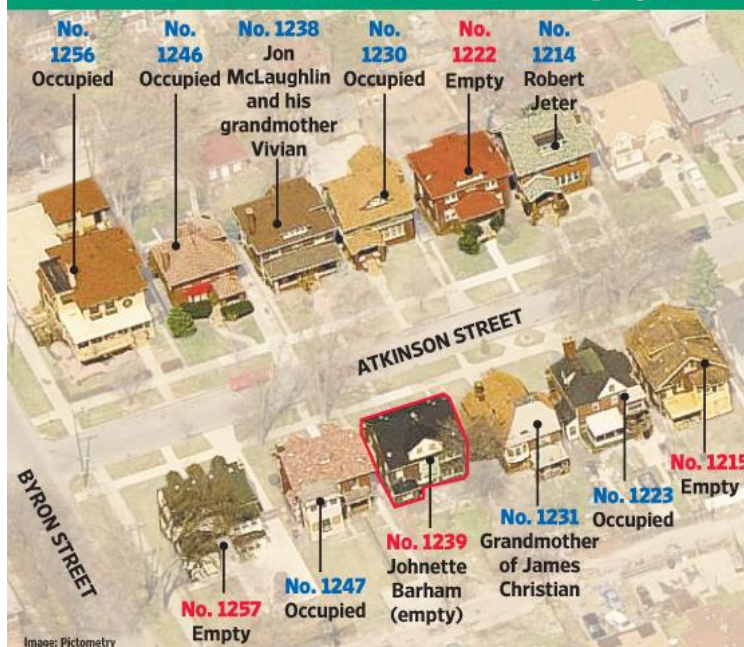
Simon McCune, a businessman who became friends with Ms. Barham before she moved back to Detroit, bought a house in the late 1990s in East English Village, a quaint neighborhood of brick Colonial and Tudor-style houses. In a few years, the 42-year-old said he watched his block slide from a nice place to raise a family to downright unsafe.

Mr. McCune decided to leave the city for the suburbs and finally for Chicago in 2005, when his future wife refused to move to Detroit.

As for Ms. Barham, she soon learned that Atkinson was the kind of neighborhood where residents had to be vigilant. "I used to tell her I'm looking out for her," says Jon McLaughlin, 40, who lived across the street from Ms. Barham. "She'd hurry up to get in the house."

Ms. Barham befriended a local policeman, who would drive by at night to check on her. But he was soon reassigned to another precinct. After that, if Ms. Barham felt unsafe returning home late at night, she would drive to a major road, flag down a squad car and ask for an escort home.

Johnette Barham's house was robbed and torched. Now she's leaving for good.



As a single woman with a predictable schedule, Ms. Barham was an easy target for theft. There was one at the house even before she moved in, she recalls, in which a contractor she hired lost his tools. "I was just thinking, 'Oh, it's a vacant house, and somebody broke in and stole some tools,'" she recalls. "That happens sometimes."

But the break-ins would become routine. One evening in February 2004, she returned home to find that her back door was busted in, and several rooms had been ransacked. Mr. McCune helped her pay a company to board up the door with plywood.

On July 17, 2005, Ms. Barham returned home around 1:30 in the morning to find her front door busted open and what she thought was a robbery in progress. She rushed back to her car to call 911 and waited there for police.

They arrived at 4:41 a.m., according to their report. Missing items included a \$1,200 Dell laptop and a \$385 money order. The house was dusted for fingerprints, but Ms. Barham says police never followed up with her.

Afterward, Ms. Barham had a monitored alarm system put in. But in a break-in just four months later, the alarm was ripped from the wall.

By then, Ms. Barham's friends were becoming afraid for her safety. They urged her to move out of the city, as many of them had. "I was telling her as a friend that you need to let the house go and leave the city," says Mr. McCune. "But Johnette grew up in Detroit, and she's very loyal to Detroit."

A neighbor suggested Ms. Barham get a dog, and brought over a pit-bull mix. Ms. Barham led the dog to her backyard and watched as his barking frightened a passing stranger.

"I'll take him," she said. She named him Diesel.

With Diesel in the yard and new bars on the windows, her home went untouched for more than three years. But over on Glynn Court, her investment was souring. Repeated car break-ins and, ultimately, a gunpoint hold-up scared away her tenants, a group of suburbanites in their 20s.

Ms. Barham chalked it up to naiveté. "They didn't have a concept of where to go and where not to go," she says.

During the five years she owned it, the two-family flat was rented for less than 12 months, and the dual mortgage payments strained her budget. After being laid off by Abbott in 2007, just as the mortgage crisis began to hit Detroit, she let the rental property go into foreclosure.

Ms. Barham worked freelance jobs until early 2009, when she found work as a clinical research coordinator at Detroit's Karmanos Cancer Institute facility.

The relative calm at 1239 Atkinson ended on a snowy Friday in January 2009 when Ms. Barham returned from a trip to the vet with her dog to discover an upstairs rear window broken. Yet another computer and sundry possessions were gone.



Police followed footprints in the snow to a house next door. James Christian, 28, who lived there with his grandmother, had just been released from Wayne County Jail after serving a 90-day sentence for a drug conviction, court records show. He had a reputation as a thief and neighbors had been complaining to police about him for years, says Robert Jeter Sr., whose house across the street had been robbed twice in the previous year and a half.

The grandmother told police that Mr. Christian wasn't home, according to the police report. Police wouldn't question Mr. Christian for a year.

The Detroit Police Department is short about 700 officers, says Warren Evans, appointed police chief in July 2009. The result is he must assign officers to the worst crimes. Homicides have dropped roughly 25% since he took the job.

"The average Detroiter is worrying about home burglaries and auto thefts," not being shot, he says. But homicide numbers were so alarming, "that we decided to take a triage approach."

Petty theft? "I've got nobody to send to that," he said.

Even after all the burglaries, Ms. Barham says, she was determined to stay. Then came a burglary in October 2009, the first while Diesel was home.

After that, Ms. Barham couldn't sleep at night. She made sure Diesel slept next to her bed. She hid her valuables. She replaced locks and two doors.

On Dec. 17, Mr. McLaughlin, her neighbor, had lit a cigarette and was warming up his car when he peered across the street at Ms. Barham's house and noticed flames behind the living-room curtain. He ran back inside and called 911. Another neighbor phoned Ms. Barham at work.

When she arrived at the house, five fire trucks were there. Feeling almost ashamed to face her neighbors, she watched from her car as her home burned. The firefighters found Diesel and her cat, Tinker, upstairs in her bedroom, dead.

Ms. Barham spent almost two months at the home of her friend Michele Robinson in suburban Plymouth, Mich. Ms. Robinson, 40, born and raised in Detroit, had urged Ms. Barham to leave the city.

Ms. Robinson has watched in recent years as her father's home was burglarized twice, his car was repeatedly stolen and he was held up at gunpoint at his Detroit home. She looked at homes in some historic Detroit neighborhoods in 2003 but eventually decided to buy a \$650,000, 5,800-square-foot house in Plymouth, an affluent western suburb. "I could have gotten, literally, 10,000 square feet for what I paid for my house in Plymouth," says Ms. Robinson, who moved to Atlanta last month. But "I didn't feel comfortable."

In February, Ms. Barham returned to the house on Atkinson along with her boyfriend. She plucked a few items from the ashes. Down in the basement, the copper pipes had been stripped by scavengers. On an earlier visit, she'd retrieved her late mother's Bible.

Today, Ms. Barham lives in temporary housing, a tiny condo provided by State Farm Insurance in suburban West Bloomfield, about 20 miles northwest of her old house, while she negotiates her insurance settlement. She doesn't know where she plans to move for good.

Mr. McCune says Ms. Barham was the last person in his circle of about 40 friends to leave Detroit.

Aside from work, Ms. Barham now rarely ventures into Detroit. But she makes sure to be there whenever James Christian is in court.

Police arrested Mr. Christian in March, roughly two weeks after The Wall Street Journal requested records on the Barham cases. They found the 5-foot-6, 220-pound man hiding under the bed in an upstairs bedroom of his grandmother's house. He surrendered without incident, asking only for medication to treat his asthma.

Within hours, police say, Mr. Christian confessed to the two robberies at Mr. Jeter's home and the January 2009 break-in at Ms. Barham's house. He also told police he was one of a handful of people inside Ms. Barham's house when it was set afire. Under an agreement with prosecutors, he pleaded guilty to one count of second-degree home invasion and was to serve 90 days in jail.

But in late May, a judge threw out the plea after Ms. Barham spoke in court. Mr. Christian was arraigned for the arson, a felony, the next day. He heads back to court next week.

Days after the arrest, Ms. Barham was summoned to give a statement at the 10th Precinct station. There, she related for two officers the events that led her from a home on Atkinson to a condo in the suburbs.

"Wow," she recalls one officer saying. "I would've moved out of the city after the second one."

The officer quickly recanted. ""You're brave," he said. "Plus, someone's got to live in the city."

"I looked at him and I said, 'I put my time in,'" Ms. Barham recalls. "And I walked out."

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