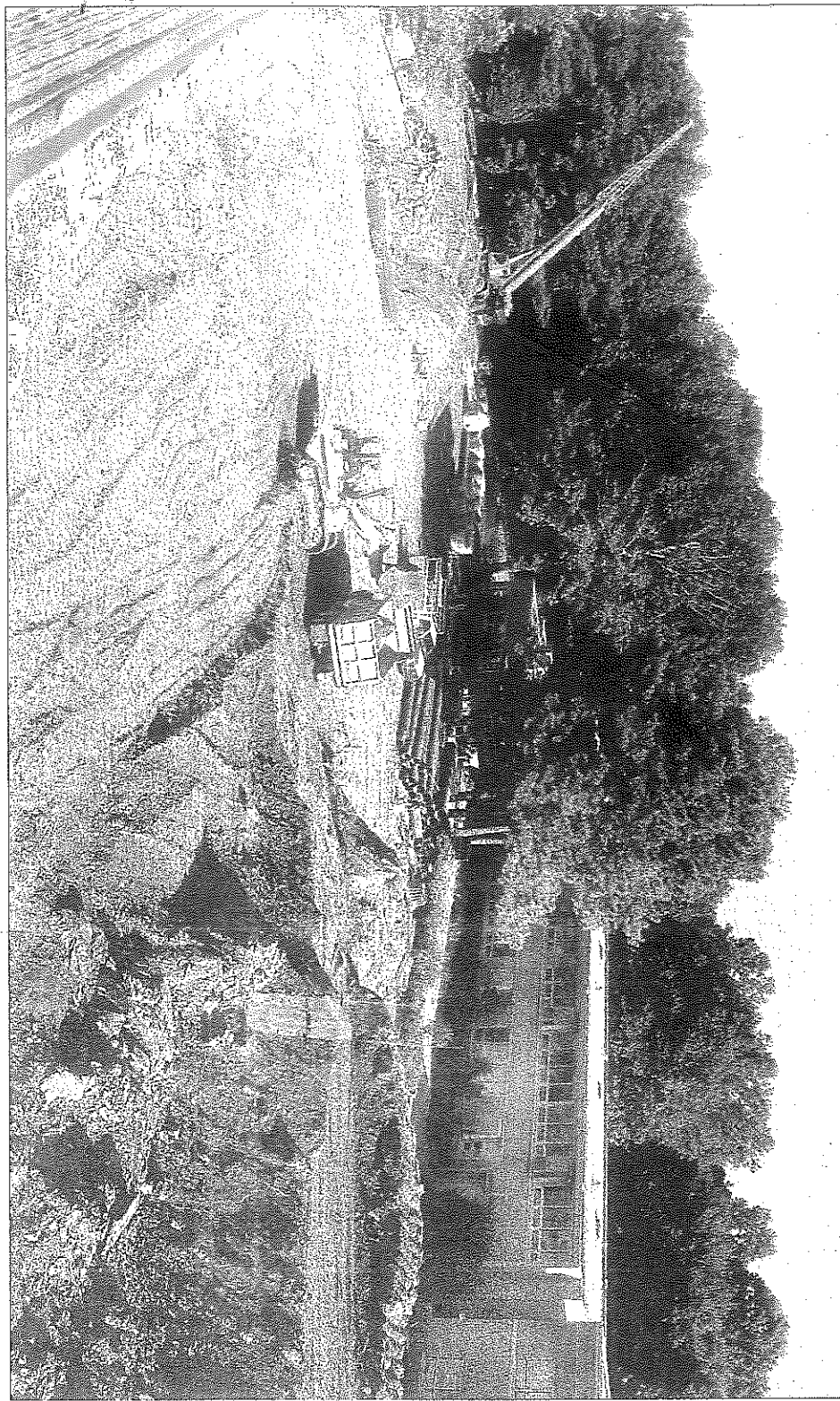


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Construction at Our Lady of the Assumption Church has generated complaints about noise, dust from dump trucks and runoff.

KEITH HADLEY / Star

# Not loving thy neighbor

## Church, residents at odds over building of new sanctuary, school expansion

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A quarter-century ago, Larry Danese used to walk across the street on Sundays to attend mass at Our Lady of the Assumption Church.

Today, he's suing his former parish. The split didn't happen overnight. But Danese's suit to block construction of a six-story steeple on the 9-acre church prop-

erty atop a hill above Silver Lake may mark the widest point in the growing split between the church and many residents in the north Dekalb neighborhood.

Danese said the rift opened long ago. "Twenty years ago, it wasn't uncommon to see a lot of people walking to church on Sunday," said Danese. "You don't see that anymore."

Instead, residents complain about the noise, the dust kicked up by dump trucks

rolling through the neighborhood and the runoff caused by construction of a new sanctuary and a two-room expansion of the existing church school.

Church representatives complain that the parish has been subjected to an excessively long three-year delay because of zoning disputes and court fights by the neighbors, simply to get approval for a sanctuary large enough for weddings and an expanded day care facility.

After numerous hearings and court proceedings, the neighbors lost their fight against the church's expansion. Danese's lawsuit, which was rejected in Superior Court, is being appealed.

This church-neighborhood conflict in Silver Lake may be noisier than others, but it is symptomatic of many metro Atlanta churches whose congregations are more likely now to be dispersed across the city rather than living in neighborhoods near their home parishes. That can make the church seem like an intrusion to neighborhood residents.

Danese, who left the church years ago over a separate issue, said many in Our Lady of the Assumption's congregation appear to come from outside the neighborhood, "due largely to the fact that kids grew up and moved on to other places."

Those children have left behind the

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neighborhood's rich history, beginning a century ago when West Coast multimillionaire newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst created the body of water that is the neighborhood's centerpiece.

Hearst, who led an effort to revive nearby Oglethorpe University, had a small creek dammed to form the lake, which was originally named Lake Phoebe, after his mother. When the tract was later developed as a residential neighborhood, the 56-acre body of water was renamed Silver Lake.

The lake is now owned by the people who live there. The heavily wooded areas along the lake's southern banks have been maintained as a nature preserve.

The upscale neighborhood — with property appraisals averaging \$360,000 — features winding roads covered with tree canopies, including Irman Drive, which has the feel of a country lane and is filled with dogwoods and wildflowers.

More recently, some of the neighborhood's bucolic appearance has been disrupted by the addition of massive Atlanta suburban-style homes, replacing the ranches that once stood

there.

Some residents complain the church's redevelopment has also hurt the neighborhood.

"To allow this industrial-size development back in this bucolic area is simply an atrocity," said Ray Garrett, a neighborhood resident who lives on Hearst Drive, near the entrance to Our Lady of the Assumption.

Garrett complained about the noise created by dump trucks constantly rolling through the neighborhood and the runoff that he says is threatening not only his property but the shoreline of the lake.

The expansion of the school, which will bring more cars and buses to the neighborhood, will only make it worse, Garrett said.

"The traffic we have around here now is almost unbearable," Garrett said.

But Kathy Zickert, a lawyer representing the church, said neighborhood complaints about the scope of the church's redevelopment are exaggerated.

"If somebody is actually trying to grow as a church, why are we interfering with that? Isn't that a good thing?" Zickert said. "If you accept the argument of the plaintiff [Danesel] in this case, essentially what you're saying is churches cannot co-exist in neighborhoods."