



by: Linda Merrill

History of Virginia-Highland {Part I}

EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS IS THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON THE HISTORY OF VIRGINIA-HIGHLAND. THE ARTICLES ARE EXCERPTS FROM A LONGER WORK-IN-PROGRESS BEING RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY 9-YEAR VA-HI RESIDENT LINDA MERRILL. AN ART HISTORIAN BY TRAINING, LINDA WORKED AS A CURATOR AT THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION FOR THIRTEEN YEARS, AT THE HIGH MUSEUM FOR TWO, AND NOW — AFTER A HIATUS TO STAY HOME WITH HER TWO CHILDREN — SHE IS TEACHING AT EMORY. Linda welcomes comments and questions on her work. She can be reached at magdalin@mindspring.com.

Introduction

The neighborhood we know as Virginia-Highland was originally a cluster of subdivisions making up a suburban district three miles from the center of Atlanta. Its earliest attraction was its farmland; later, it became a place for country homes -- an oasis from city life offering clean air, cool breezes, and proximity to the healing waters of Ponce de Leon Springs. As the trolley became a central factor in urban development, the Virginia-Highland area became a convenient and affordable place for city workers to live, and in the 1920s new houses proliferated, chiefly single-family homes in the bungalow style.

In this way, Virginia-Highland exemplifies American housing trends. After WWI, the Harding and Coolidge administrations urged Americans to settle down in homes of their own in the belief that property ownership would not only strengthen the economy but create citizens who would support national security. Small, efficient houses such as single-story bungalows that were within the financial reach of a growing middle class were also promoted as a means of liberating women (a new constituency) from the drudgery of housework.

The neighborhood was developed and settled quickly, and it remained stable until the late 1950s, when scores of middle-class

families left Virginia-Highland for more distant suburbs. The area began to recover from the consequences of that urban flight only in the 1970s, when young families gradually began moving back into the city and renovating neglected houses with the help of a newly formed civic association. Revitalization continues to this day, with many residents drawn to the neighborhood by its convenience to the city center, exemplary schools, appealing commercial district, and comfortable, unpretentious style—the very factors that contributed to its development nearly a century ago.

Early Pioneers

Soon after the War of 1812, the United States government granted the veteran William Zachry—the first known white settler in the present-day Virginia-Highland district—Land Lot 17 of the Fourteenth District in recognition of his “patriotic service.” Then a neutral zone in the territorial battles between the Cherokee and Creek (Muscogee) Indians, the land was part of the territory ceded by the Creek Nation in January 1821. Perhaps anticipating a rise in land values, Zachry sold his 212 acres just over a year later, in February 1822, for \$100. Zachry sold his land to Richard Copeland Todd (1792–1852), a pioneer from Chester, South Carolina. Todd's older sister Sarah (d. 1865) was married to Hardy Ivy (d. 1843), who in 1833 would settle on the future

site of downtown Atlanta. When Todd took possession of the land it was deeply forested, and as the journalist Paul Hinde noted in 1924, “only those aged sentinels of centuries past, Kennesaw and Stone Mountain, stood as today, in blue-gray outline—to the west and to the east of the splendid rolling country destined to become Atlanta.”

Todd built his house on high land with a view of that rolling landscape, at what eventually became 816 Greenwood Avenue; he farmed the fields around his home until his death in 1852. During the Civil War, a Federal battery was established on a ridge not far from the Todd residence, and according to one account, Confederate breastworks were erected right in front of the house. One of Richard’s sons, John C. Todd (1847–1925), lived in the house until October 31, 1910, when that oldest of Atlanta’s landmarks was demolished by fire. A large, two-story brick residence with a wraparound front porch was subsequently constructed on the same site, and members of the Todd family continued to occupy it well into the 1950s. Since then, the lot has been occupied by an apartment building

Richard Todd and his wife Martha, together with many of their descendants, were buried in a family cemetery a short distance behind the house on what is now Ponce de Leon Terrace. Its existence did not become publicly known until the executors of Judge Todd’s estate applied for a permit to exhume his grave from Sardis Cemetery for reburial in the family plot; by then, the cemetery contained thirty-six unmarked graves. Some neighbors complained, insisting that the bodies be exhumed and buried elsewhere; the city denied the executors’ request, and upon appeal a judge upheld the decision but ruled that the land be “cleaned off” and a monument erected in the Todds’ honor. In 1932 the burial ground (one-fourteenth of an acre, or two lots) was deeded to the city for conversion to a park, with a large granite log to mark the graves of Richard and Martha Todd. As late as 1979 a path led to the graveyard from the street, “through the blooming hepatica and the bare, skinny trees,” and in 1980 neighborhood residents joined together to clean up the area. Today, regrettably, there is no public access to the former cemetery, although the Todd marker survives, surrounded by a wrought-iron fence.

Sources

Franklin M. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events* (Athens, GA, 1954); “History of Virginia-Highland,” City of Atlanta, Department of Planning, Development, and Neighborhood Conservation, Bureau of Planning, June 1998; *Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution*, 1924–79; *The Virginia-Highland Voice*, May 1980.

Next Issue: The Cheshire Family and the Nine-Mile Circle