

by: Linda Merrill

History of Virginia-Highland

{Part II}

The Cheshires

Another Atlanta pioneer with links to Virginia-Highland was Captain Hezekiah Cheshire (1786–1870). He and his wife, Sarah, came from South Carolina and settled in what was then DeKalb County; around 1850, Cheshire purchased eight acres for eighteen dollars in the Virginia-Highland district and planted fields of wheat, cotton, and corn. He built a house for his growing family at present-day 1186 North Highland Avenue, between Highland Terrace and Amsterdam.

Although Hezekiah himself was too old to fight in the Civil War, four of his sons served in the Confederate Army. Atlanta's outer defenses extended along Highland Avenue in what is now the Morningside neighborhood, and engagements were fought along Highland and Briarcliff, not far from the Cheshire homestead. The family did not stay to witness the battles: as the Union Army approached, the Cheshires abandoned their home, which would be used in their absence as a military hospital. By the time they returned, only the chimney remained, and on the property they found the graves of soldiers from both sides of the conflict. In 1866, Hezekiah built a new house on the site and acquired forty more acres, extending his property west from North Highland to what is now Monroe and south beyond Virginia Avenue. His eldest sons, Jerome and Napoleon, also became successful farmers and traders, eventually accumulating "handsome fortunes," according to a family history, "their estates being among the most desirable and valuable in the country." To this day, that property remains a vital part of the city as the land surrounding Cheshire Bridge Road.

As late as the 1940s, the Cheshire homestead on Highland was occupied by two of Hezekiah's daughters, Sallie (1864–1944) and Mattie Cheshire (1865–1935), who lived much as they had in childhood, reluctantly admitting electricity and forever insisting on drinking their water from the old well in the front yard.

The Nine-Mile Circle

With the advent of the streetcar, the agrarian landscape three miles outside the city rapidly began to change. As the Atlanta Constitution observed, the trolley lines, "like a veritable cobweb from center to circumference," connected Atlanta's central business district with the outlying areas, "from the heart of the city to the most distant suburban hilltop." In December 1889, the Fulton County Street Railroad Co. started service as the second electric street railway in Georgia, traversing the largely unten-

anted land northeast of town. Its route, known as the "Nine Mile Circle," began downtown, ran out Broad to Peachtree and Houston, then along Highland Avenue to Virginia and the broad, sweeping intersection that would become the heart of Virginia-Highland. From there, the track went downhill to Boulevard (now Monroe), where it made another wide turn and then continued to complete the circuit where it started in the city.

At first, the Nine-Mile Circle was used as much for recreation as for transportation. On hot summer evenings, thousands of city-dwellers would board "picnic cars" equipped with multi-colored lights and brass bands to take advantage of the breeze. In fact, with its five-cent fare, the Circle ride was often recommended as an antidote to the oppressive heat of a summer's day: "The trip carries one through the woods and meadows east of the city and the country breezes are delightfully exhilarating." These pleasure trips made the outlying county familiar to many urban residents, some of whom would eventually become suburbanites themselves; for eventually the trolley's success made it practical to extend residential development beyond the city limits—and inexpedient to reserve such valuable land solely for agriculture. As one writer for the Constitution remarked in a summary of the railway's progress in 1894, "Rapid transit encourages the extension of the residence districts and brings far away suburban points comparatively within a few minutes of the heart of the city. On that account many of Atlanta's business and professional men who formerly found it necessary to live in the center of the city have in the last few years built homes away out in what a short time ago would have been called an isolated country spot, but that is now a well populated district and growing section of the city."

Next issue: Green B. Adair and Highland Park

Sources:

Elijah Dekalb Cheshire's family history, 1896, typescript by his daughter-in-law Anne Cheshire, c. 1954, kindly provided by Harrilee Cheshire, 2008; Franklin M. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events* (Athens, GA, 1954); *The Morningside Nature Preserve Master Plan*, historical overview by Fred Crudder, 2004, http://www.atlantaga.gov/client_resources/park%20design/mnp/masterplan%20text.pdf; *Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution*, 1924–32; Sarah Toton, "Nine Mile Circle", jpg image, Southern Spaces, January 2008, <http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2008/toton/1e-018-ss-06-stoton.htm>.