

# History of Virginia-Highland

## {Part V}

by: Linda Merrill



### The Park Drive Bridge

#### Dr. Henry Lumpkin Wilson and the Park Drive Bridge

The northwest quadrant of Virginia-Highland was developed later than the southern side of the district bordering Ponce de Leon Avenue. Though only two-and-a-half miles from the center of Atlanta, the land had remained largely undeveloped throughout the nineteenth century, cut off from Peachtree Street by the Clear Creek valley and the Southern Railroad tracks. The property belonged to Henry Lumpkin Wilson, a longtime Atlanta resident whose father, the city's first postmaster, had died in the Battle of Second Manassas; Henry Wilson himself had served the Confederacy as an army surgeon in the Seventh Georgia regiment, while his wife attended the wounded in Atlanta's makeshift hospitals.

After the war, Dr. Wilson resumed his medical practice in the ravaged region around town, accepting payment for his services in eggs, butter, and chickens. His lasting contribution to the history of Atlanta, however, came in 1870, when he learned from his barber about a certain spring "way over in the woods" with reputedly curative properties. When he found it himself, Wilson christened the source "Ponce de Leon Springs," after the Spanish conquistador who sought the Fountain of Youth, and although by the mid-1920s the springs had been subsumed in the sprawl of suburban Atlanta, the name of the locality has survived.

In his lifetime, Wilson's reputation rested primarily on his property holdings and real-estate transactions. He acquired the 212-acre tract of heavily wooded land east of the Beltline tracks sometime in the mid-1870s, and briefly considered making it into an entertainment park with a zoo, racetrack, refreshment rooms, tenpin alleys, shooting galleries, and other diversions. The land still lay vacant, however, in 1887, when Wilson offered to sell it to the Gentlemen's Driving Club (later the Piedmont Driving Club); but the gentlemen decided to acquire the 189-acre farm of Benjamin F. Walker instead.

Then, in 1904, the City of Atlanta purchased a large part of the Driving Club property to use for a public park. It soon became apparent that the city needed an impressive thoroughfare to connect the north and south ends of town, with Piedmont Park at one end and Grant Park on the other. Accordingly, "the Boulevard"—"a real city boulevard," as the Atlanta Constitution described it, "possessing all the attractiveness the name implies"—was paved and planted, making the area around Piedmont Park more accessible to every part of the city, and Henry Wilson's property considerably more desirable. Finally, in the summer of 1914, Wilson sold sixty valuable acres to Aquilla J. Orme, Charles Black, and their associates, a company of developers that came to be called the North Boulevard Park Corporation.

Although the city limits had been extended to encompass the new district, the Corporation's intention to develop a middle-class suburb just east of the park was contingent upon the completion of a viaduct spanning Clear Creek and the railroad tracks. The new 625-foot bridge was conceived as a continuation of Fourteenth Street through the park, offering the shortest route between the established neighborhoods of Ansley Park and Druid Hills; it would also make a gracious, ornamental gateway from the west to the new suburb of Boulevard Park.

Constructed of brick and reinforced concrete, forty feet wide including walks on both sides, the Park Drive Bridge had been designed, according to the Atlanta Constitution, "to harmonize with the park surroundings." But in style and materials, it also signaled the transition from urban park to residential district. The roadway at both ends was flanked with granite pillars faced with tiny terracotta tiles, miniatures of those that paved the walkways of the bridge and the floors of many Boulevard Park porches. The pillars themselves were crowned with acorn finials alluding to the magnificent trees in Piedmont Park and the "original oaks" said to shade the residential avenues. The walls were intricate constructions of red brick, a material that would feature prominently in the domestic architecture of the neighborhood. And halfway across the bridge on each side were lookout points affording glimpses of the brand-new bungalows bordering Boulevard Park.

**Sources:** The Historical Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution; Franklin M. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), vol. 2.

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