

History of Virginia-Highland

{Part VIII}

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EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS IS THE EIGHTH IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON THE HISTORY OF VIRGINIA-HIGHLAND, EXCERPTED FROM A LONGER WORK-IN-PROGRESS BEING RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY LOG-TIME 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 TEACHES AT EMORY. LINDA WELCOMES COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS ON HER WORK. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT MAGDALIN@MINDSPRING.COM.

Better Homes, Parks, and Schools



In 1923, the city of Atlanta selected the home located at 57 Orme Circle as a “demonstration house” for the Better Homes Movement. This home sits on the lot today (now 562 Orme Circle).

To Americans of the interwar years, the subdivisions that made up the neighborhood now known as Virginia-Highland would have exemplified the American Dream. As President Calvin Coolidge declared in 1922, “It is time to demonstrate more effectively that property is of the people. It is time to transfer some of the approbation and effort that has gone into the building of public works to the building, ornamenting, and owning of private homes by the people at large.” The bungalows that predominated in Virginia-Highland were within the financial reach of a growing middle class. Compact and efficient, with small rooms conveniently arranged on a single floor, these houses were also promoted as a means of liberating women—a new constituency in the 1920s—from the drudgery of housework.

The Better Homes Movement was a nationwide educational campaign launched in 1922 to advance the ownership, maintenance, and beautification of houses. “Everything that can be done to

encourage home-ownership and to make homelife pleasanter,” wrote Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who served as president of the board, “is a distinct contribution not only to social well-being but to the highest spiritual values of life.” The first Better Homes Demonstration Week took place in June 1923, and in announcing the national event to his fellow Atlantans, Mayor Walter A. Sims asserted that “the progress of a city, like the progress of a nation, is measured by the quality of its homes.” So perfectly did the Virginia-Highland suburb embody the movement’s ideals that a brand new bungalow

on Orme Circle (no. 57, now 562, “a charming little house of the moderate priced type”) was selected as Atlanta’s “demonstration house.” Furnished by local merchants with every necessity and labor-saving device, the house proved so popular that Boy Scouts were recruited to handle the crowd. Atlanta won third prize in the national competition and second prize the following year, when one of the three model homes prepared for the contest was the Hardy residence on Virginia Avenue.

The same insistence on domestic stability at a time when traditional values were in flux inspired the national Playground Movement, which advocated and fostered the “wholesome use” of leisure time. Virginia-Highland participated in that campaign as well, when the women activists of Boulevard Park purchased a “playground apparatus” for Meadowbrook (now Orme) Park in 1925. girls.



Now known as Inman Middle School, the Virginia Avenue School opened its doors on this site in 1924.

The City Parks and Playgrounds Department appointed and trained a playground director for the new suburban park, charged with organizing “open air games and other interesting activities” that included basket-weaving and sewing for the older girls. Mothers were urged to take advantage of these services (offered 5 hours a day, 4 days a week) not only because of “the importance and benefit to be derived from supervised outdoor play,” but also because of the need to keep their children off the streets: “They have the ‘gang’ spirit: let them go to the community playground where even the little tots are safe and happy under the watchful eye of a supervisor, and the older children are free to play in a way they like, yet safe from automobiles and street cars.”

The neighborhood children were served in a more lasting way by the establishment of a new public school. At the urging of the Boulevard Park Women’s Auxiliary, A. J. Brownlee, proprietor of an Atlanta furniture store, agreed to sell the city a parcel of vacant woodland on the northeast corner of Virginia Avenue and Park Drive for \$18,000. The Atlanta Federation of Women’s Clubs raised \$20,000 for the building fund, largely through

bridge parties held in the homes of its members, and the cornerstone was laid in October 1923. Originally known as the Virginia Avenue School, it was designed by the architect Warren Powell under the supervision of A. Ten Eyck Brown, who oversaw the construction of an entire group of Romanesque-revival school buildings in Atlanta. The Samuel Inman School, as it was eventually named, had been planned to accommodate 630 students, but it opened its doors in 1924 to 1,000—and the neighborhood was still growing. Proposals for additions had been made even while the building was under construction. An auditorium designed by G. Lloyd Preacher was built in 1929, and a library and five additional classrooms were added in 1937, as part of a Works Progress Administration project. In 1978, Inman School was converted to a middle school, and the building was thoughtfully expanded and renovated in 2004.

Sources: *The Historical Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution*; Janet Hutchinson, “The Cure for Domestic Neglect: Better Homes in America, 1922-1935,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 2 (1986): 168-78.

Next issue: Virginia Hills and Highland