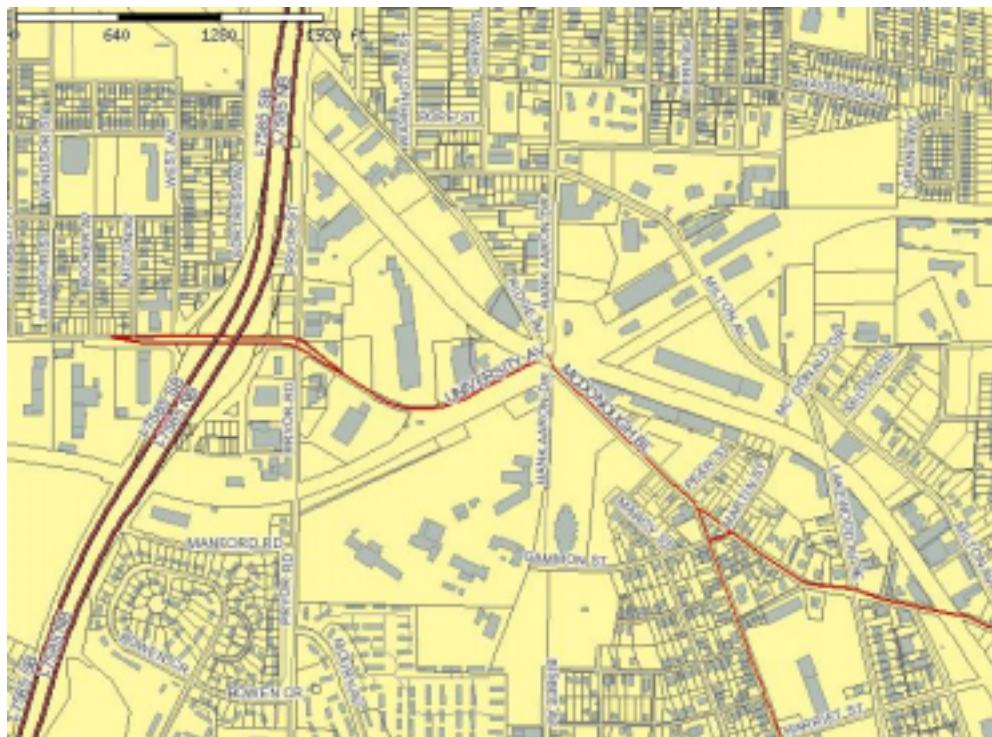


# *Pryor Road/University Avenue*



## Theme

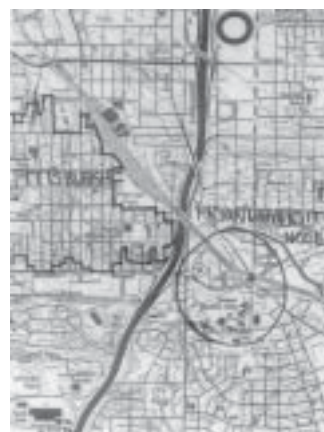
The Pryor Road/University Avenue intersection has a strong link to the history of African Americans in Atlanta, due to the presence of historically African American neighborhoods and a university. The area is dominated by light industry in an advanced state of decay, vacant lots, a fairly recently constructed strip mall with a gas station and convenience store, with abandoned warehouses to the south and west of the intersection.

## Developmental History

The Atlanta Development Authority's "Atlanta Beltline Redevelopment Plan" captures the theme of the Pryor/University activity node. The document states, "the University/Pryor activity center offers a high-density redevelopment opportunity." Intensive research backs up this assertion. As seems to be the case with other minority communities, mainstream historical documentation of life and the built environment of this node are seriously lacking. However, a September 17, 2004 National Register Nomination done by graduate students from Georgia State University on file in the State Historic Preservation Office in downtown Atlanta does shed some light on the genesis of the area in general.

According to this document, the neighborhood of Pittsburgh, just north and west of the node, established itself in the 1880s with the building of the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad Company's sprawling conglomeration of maintenance buildings and yard servicing the local Southern Railroad. A chronic lack of decent, accessible jobs for African Americans in the city limits of Atlanta forced many blacks to search elsewhere for gainful employment. The rising dominance of the railroads and resulting need for workers attracted vast numbers of blacks to this area. The incessant tendency of whites to settle on the highest and best land, coupled with the desire on the part of blacks for decent work, resulted in the area west of the railroad developing as a primarily African-American neighborhood. Most residents labored as railroad workers, craftsmen, and domestic workers.

For decades, this area remained intact, with light industry hugging the rail lines interspersed with commercial buildings, surrounded by single and multi-family dwellings of various 19th and 20th century architectural styles and a few apartment buildings, until the 1960s and the federally promulgated neighborhood revitalization and interstate highway expansion projects. As with most other cities across the nation, African-American neighborhoods bore the brunt of this road-building frenzy. For the Pittsburg neighborhood, the extreme southeast corner became isolated from the bulk of the area, sliced by Interstates 75 and 85. Separated from the vitality of the bulk of the historic neighborhood, the area around and encompassing the Pryor and University intersection stagnated and declined. With the steady rise of the automobile's popularity and dependence by Americans from the 1930s onward, the shift from the dominance of transport by rail to increasing dependence on the movement of commerce by truck further pushed the light industry and commercial structures in this node into a rut of disuse and disrepair. Many parcels, once vacant, remained vacant.



*Pittsburg Historic District*

The adjacent neighborhoods of Summerville, and Peoplestown, immediately north of the Pryor/University node, shared the same fate as Pittsburgh. Founded during the Reconstruction Era, and one of two localities allowed by the city for free colored people to settle, Summerville, named by Armstead W. Bailey, was an integrated neighborhood where blacks and Jews lived side by side. Both neighborhoods directly felt the effects of the new expressway construction, and both never fully recovered. The Peoplestown Revitalization Corporation is in the midst of a drive to stop the neglect and decay of their neighborhood through concerted and specific actions focusing on the rehabilitation or development of underutilized industrial and rail corridor areas adjacent to residential neighborhoods by allowing a mixture of uses at a scale and character which is appropriate for creating a live work environment.<sup>1</sup> The catalyst for the focus on mixed-use districts is the widespread desire for neighborhood accessible shops and services, aesthetic and practicable environmental and recreational amenities through intensive use of greenspace and landscaped buffers, and the connections to nearby neighborhood parks built around bike and pedestrian modes of transport.

### ***Physical Description***

The most notable features of the Pryor/University node, according to the Atlanta Beltline Redevelopment Plan, are I-75/85, which is elevated less than a block to the west, and Carver High School, currently under renovation in the southeast corner of the node.<sup>1</sup> Several structures thought to hold promise for preservation and contemporary use in this node were identified in a brief survey done in the summer of 2005. With the exception of the fully-documented Carver High School, built in 1920 to fill a desperate need for educational facilities in the area, efforts at research and documentation in any form or context for the history of the bulk of these buildings is virtually nonexistent. It seems possible and plausible that parcels of land bordering the active railroad in the area may have paper trails that begin and end in the railroad archives. Recent attempts to contact pertinent parties have met with futility.



*Carver High School*

Two avenues of research open to the public, the City Directories and Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, have borne fruit of a kind. The City Directories document by street name, number and intersections, the businesses, residences, and other miscellaneous buildings and structures from the early 1830s up to the mid 1990s. Company names can be cross-referenced with names of owners, employees, etc., giving added depth to the story. The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, detailed documentation of various cities' built environment by block, intermittently span from the 1870s up to the 1960s. Used together, these two historic sources give a fairly accurate picture of select areas at various points in time. For the Pryor/University node, the City Directories from the early 1900s to 1996 were employed to gain a greater understanding of the evolution of specific buildings and their occupants. Covering a more finite instant in history, the 1924-1962 Sanborn Maps, a compilation of additions over the period, provided an illustrated snapshot in black and white of the constructions on individual parcels in the node.

The Sanborn Maps show only the area of the node from just north of the active rail line at Ridge Avenue, south to University Avenue, and east excluding the intersection of University and Ridge Avenues. This forms a rough triangle centered on the active Southern rail line. Residential development dominated north and east of Ridge Avenue. South of that point, however, light industry held sway. Companies straddling the railroad were the Fulton Metal Bed Manufacturing Company, the National Lead Company's Metal Division Magnus Foundry, and the Buckeye Cotton Oil Company. Several small-scale dwellings and commercial establishments held positions along Pryor Road just south of Ridge Avenue and the railroad. Two of these, a foundry and a metal awning manufacturer, followed the light industrial character of the area. Two others, a restaurant and a food novelties store, sought to supply other commerce. Rounding out the sparse offerings of this area was an interior decorator's office, and a feed warehouse.



*Buckeye Cotton Oil Company*

The City Directories stand as mute testimony of the shift from rail to road transport in this node. The parcels along University nearest the railroad began to house delivery and pick-up truck express lines from the late 1950s into the 1980s. South and west of the University Avenue and Pryor Road intersection was another area for such business. Also located just south and west of the Pryor Road/University Avenue intersection was a scattering of dwellings and small businesses. A tour of the node done 15 April, 2006 was sobering. Of the surveyed structures, only one parcel, 99 University Avenue, is still active. The Buckeye Cotton Oil Company has been replaced by the Southern Freight Lines building and warehouses. The businesses along Ridge Avenue are long gone, replaced by a smattering of small car repair shops, abandoned structures, and vacant lots. Along Pryor Road, a new strip mall occupies the frontage facing the interstate. South of this area, a series of flat-roofed, brick veneered concrete block construction warehouses stand empty and dilapidated. Just south and east of the proposed Beltline sits a sizeable vacant and abandoned parcel of land that once housed the city of Atlanta impound lot. Across the street and adjacent to the granite railroad tunnel running under the intersection of University, Ridge, and Capital Avenue sit Slater Elementary and Carver High School. These three resources are the only extant structures with any real claim to the history of the node. Further information about other early enterprises in the area is not available at this time and may be uncovered with further research. Only company names are listed in the City Directories for this area. It is possible that the relatively recent annexation of the node in the mid 1930s could have hindered adequate documentation. The minority makeup of this section of Atlanta is also a possible contributing factor. Whatever the reason, a deeper understanding of the evolution of this part of the city is not attainable at this time.

### ***Conclusion***

As for the future implications of this area, the Atlanta Beltline Redevelopment Plan sums it up succinctly by stating, "In general, public input favored new and higher density uses here, especially given the ease of interstate access. Residents expressed a desire for retail and commercial uses, possibly of a regional scale, and an employment center." Carver High School, nominated and listed on the National Register and exhaustively documented, sits isolated in the southeast corner of the Pryor/University node. Out of less than a dozen surveyed structures, Carver High School is the only one that is remembered in any tangible way. A handful of the other buildings can be picked out on Sanborn Maps and City Directories or in an isolated historic photograph. Most of these structures do not exist in contemporary Atlanta. What is left is in bad shape, and at best, isolated from the historic context of Pittsburgh on the other side of the interstate. The highway is an effective barrier to more than race and socioeconomic class. If the few extant buildings in this node deserve to be saved for future use in the context of the Beltline, it is because they are suitable representations of the type of structures built at a time in Atlanta when the railroads were the arteries of commerce and survival. Their isolation in an area that, by neighborhood and developer consensus, is ripe and deserving of a clean slate to right the inequities of the past makes their preservation tenuous at best.