

Ansley Mall



Theme

The Ansley Mall node in the Northeast Quadrant is located at the intersection of Piedmont Avenue and Monroe Drive and contains the oldest section of the Beltline. From its earliest settlement as the small farming community of Easton in the mid-1800s to the present day, the area surrounding the node has been composed of single-family residences and the small commercial/retail businesses that grew to serve the surrounding communities. The areas surrounding the node represent distinct examples of Atlanta's early population migration in the early 1900s, as the white elite fled the increasing urbanization in the city core and moved to fashionable suburbs north and east of the city. These suburbs became possible as the city's transportation was transformed from rail to streetcar to automobiles.

As early as 1871, trains passed through the Ansley Mall node providing passenger and commercial service along the rail line that would become the Southern Railway (now CSX). Adjacent to the node are some of the most historically significant residential areas in Atlanta, which are virtually intact and remain thriving intown neighborhoods today. Also adjacent to the node are historic early greenspaces such as the Piedmont Driving Club (1887), Piedmont Park (1904), and the Ansley Park Golf Club (1912), which are also significant in Atlanta's development as early public/private suburban parks.



Early photo of Piedmont Driving Club

Within the node there are three identifiable retail/commercial centers, each representing a distinct period of development. The oldest is a cluster of retail buildings in the 1400 block of Piedmont Avenue located just south of the Piedmont Avenue overpass. Dating to the development of Ansley Park in the late 1910s, this area north of Piedmont Park represents the earliest commercial development in the area. The second is the Morningside Shopping Center, a small retail strip along the 1500 block of Piedmont Avenue north of the Monroe Drive intersection, which was developed in the late 1920s. The third is the Ansley Mall shopping center on the 1500-1700 blocks of Monroe Drive, which was developed in 1966 as one of Atlanta's first suburban malls.

The Ansley Mall node is surrounded by historic upscale residential neighborhoods, including Ansley Park, Morningside/Lenox, Piedmont Heights and Sherwood Forest. Overall the growth of this node was not relative to the railroad, but resulted from the creation of planned upscale residential neighborhoods and the development of small retail and service businesses that served the surrounding communities. Though the railroad bisects the node and surrounding residential areas, the railroad was for the most part inconsequential to the node's development.

Developmental History

The Creek Indians originally inhabited the rolling, hilly terrain where the city of Atlanta is located until they were forced out of the area in the early 1800s by settlers who acquired the land via land grants and the land lottery. In the early 1820s, the land surrounding what is now the Ansley node was acquired by one of Atlanta's earliest settlers, Meredith Collier. The original homestead of his son, George Washington Collier, was built c 1823 and is the oldest standing residence in Atlanta. It remained the home of G. W. Collier until his death in 1903. The house is located at 1649 Maid Marion Lane in what is now the Sherwood Forest subdivision, and though it has been significantly modified over the years, it remains a landmark of Atlanta's earliest settlement. After G.W. Collier's death in 1905 the Collier heirs sold the land, with the exception of 25 acres, to developers who established Atlanta's first automobile suburb, Ansley Park. The remaining 25 acres of the original parcel remained in the Collier family until it was sold in the early 1950s, at which time the neighborhood of Sherwood Forest was developed.

In the mid-1800s the early farming community of Easton was located near the current intersection of Piedmont Avenue and Monroe Drive, and corn and cotton were the primary crops. Corn was ground at Walker's Gin and Grist Mill, located on Piedmont Avenue (then known as Plaster Bridge Road) on Clear Creek near the current Ansley Mall. In 1911, as nearby Ansley Park and Virginia-Highland were being developed, Plaster Bridge Road was paved and in 1917 the name was changed to Piedmont Avenue. The steam train, The Air-Line Belle maintained passenger service from Atlanta through Easton north to Toccoa from 1871 until the early 1920s, stopping at a passenger depot near what is now the intersection of Piedmont Road and Monroe Drive.



Train on the Southern Railway line adjacent to Piedmont Park

By the end of the nineteenth century, the white elite population of Atlanta was growing northward along Peachtree Street but the area around the Ansley node remained largely rural and sparsely populated. In 1887, a group of influential businessmen formed the Gentlemen's Driving Club (later known as the Piedmont Driving Club) and purchased 189 acres of vacant land northeast of the city to establish a club and grounds for racing enthusiasts. Shortly afterwards, the group leased the land for use as fairgrounds and expositions, the most notable of which was the Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895. Historic maps of the Exposition show a railroad spur from the Southern Railway's main line to the southeast entrance of the Exposition. By 1895, the Southern Railway's main line was already known as the beltline.

In 1904 the City of Atlanta purchased the 185-acre site of the Exposition and extended the city limits to include the area, which was later named Piedmont Park. The Southern Railway line formed the eastern boundary of the park. As of 1910, development north of Atlanta had reached what is now 15th street and consisted mainly of upscale single-family residences.



Advertisement for Ansley, c 1907

Also in 1904, the Southern Real Estate Improvement Company and E.H. Inman purchased approximately 200 acres of land from the Collier heirs and began the development that would become Ansley Park. Ansley Park, whose design was determined by the rolling, hilly topography, is historically and architecturally significant to Atlanta as the first automobile suburb. Wealthy, prominent white citizens of Atlanta fled the increasing urbanization of the city to this picturesque landscape. Their relocation was made possible by the advancement of transportation from rail to streetcar to the automobile. Restrictive covenants insured that the area would remain strictly residential and further, would be limited to white persons only. Early flyers advertise that Ansley Park would never have a store, a garage, a factory, a hospital or a shop of any kind. The Ansley Park Golf Club, established in 1912, is adjacent to the node and is located between the Ansley Park neighborhood and the Beltline.

By 1915, the upscale residential development north of Atlanta between Piedmont Avenue on the east and Peachtree Road on the west created retail and commercial opportunities, and since the area of Ansley Park strictly excluded commercial development, businesses began developing on the eastern edge of Ansley Park on Piedmont Avenue north of Piedmont Park. The Atlanta City Directory of 1915 lists some of the first businesses that were located in this area, including a furniture store and doctors' offices. Within the next five years, other retail businesses located in the area along Piedmont Avenue, such as grocery stores, a pharmacy and additional doctors' offices. These buildings remain intact and continue to function as small retail businesses serving the surrounding neighborhoods.



1921 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map showing early businesses adjacent to Ansley Park

Between 1920 and 1930, Atlanta's population grew by 70,000, from 200,616 to 270,366, with much of the growth occurring in the new close-in suburbs north of the city. By the early 1920s, Ansley Park was completely developed and construction had begun on the Morningside /Lenox subdivision, which was annexed into the city of Atlanta in 1925.



1927 Map of Atlanta



The Morningside Shopping Center, 1947

One of the buildings in the strip is currently occupied by the popular Smiths' Olde Bar. The original retail center also included a Masonic Lodge, which continued on the site until the 1980s.

In 1927, construction began on the Morningside Shopping Center, a small retail center located on Piedmont Avenue just north of Monroe Drive. Among the locally important businesses that were located there over the years were J. S. Broyles grocery, the King Hardware Company, the Rogers Organ Company, Blair's Florist, Rhodes Bakery and in later years, the Hickory House Restaurant and Gene and Gabe's Restaurant and Cabaret.



Morningside Shopping Center, 1983

The last tract of the original Collier property was sold c 1950 to a group of developers who purchased the wooded, rolling land and established Sherwood Forest, Atlanta's first post-WW II subdivision. The property, said to be the last major tract of land on the north side of Atlanta within the city limits to be developed, was bounded on the west by Peachtree Road, the south by Beverly Road, Ansley Park Golf course on the east and the Southern Railway on the north.



1949 Aerial photo, intersection of Piedmont and Monroe

By the 1950s, the Ansley Mall node had been completely surrounded by established upscale residential neighborhoods. During the white flight period of the 1960s and 1970s, these subdivisions experienced a slight depression but for the most part, they remained intact in-town neighborhoods that retained their value and desirability. Currently they are among the most sought-after close-in residential areas in the city. During the late 1990s to the present, these neighborhoods have experienced increasing pressures from residential infill but, due to the continuous vigilance of the residents to maintain the historic character of their neighborhoods, recent infill development has been for the most part compatible with the historic context.

The neighborhood of Piedmont Heights is a small subdivision of mainly one- and one-half story residences developed in the 1930s and 1940s. It is bordered by Piedmont Avenue on the east, Monroe Drive on the west, I-85 on the north and Montgomery Ferry on the south. In the 1950s, the Northeast Expressway was built and the Piedmont Heights began to experience encroaching commercial development, rezoning and other problems related to Atlanta's explosive growth during this period.

The historic fabric of the Ansley Mall node was severely threatened in 1964 when the Georgia DOT announced plans to construct Interstate 485, an interstate highway from I-285 at what is now Highway 400 to an off-ramp just south of Ponce de Leon. This full-bore, six-lane highway would have cut through the center of several in-town historic neighborhoods, including the Morningside/Lenox Park near the Piedmont-Monroe Drive intersection. In an unusual display of citizen strength, the Morningside/Lenox Park Civic Association, along with other neighborhood associations and residents, successfully led the fight against the construction of the highway. After years of heated controversy and in a rare instance of defeat, the Georgia DOT dropped plans for the interstate in the early 1970s.

Closely following the periods of residential development, the commercial centers in the Ansley Mall node remained for the most part small retail businesses catering to the surrounding neighborhoods. Though ownership and type of business changed over the decades, the businesses continued to operate in the early brick structures built in the first part of the twentieth century. One exception was the construction of the Ansley Mall Shopping Center in 1966, heralded as one of Atlanta's first suburban malls. The land on which the shopping center was built contained scattered residential structures and several small retail establishments dating to the 1920s that were demolished at the time of the Mall's construction. The shopping center currently is home to various small stores and businesses and large big-box stores such as Publix and Kroger are recent additions.

Physical Description



1447 Piedmont Avenue

This section of small retail buildings on Piedmont Avenue just south of the Beltline overpass is the oldest retail section in the node. Built between 1910 and 1920, these early buildings have been adapted over the years as business needs have changed but they have retained their original character. They are generally one-story brick buildings with flat roofs, some with overhanging awnings and large windows on the front (streetside). An unusual exception to the building pattern in this block is the triangular-shaped building on Piedmont adjacent to the Piedmont Avenue overpass. Situated on the steep grade down to the rail line, the building is a one-story building at the upper (south) facade and a two-story building on the lower (north) facade. It has an unusual dual-angled steeply pitched mansard-style roof.

The commercial buildings in this block, known as the Morningside Shopping Center, were constructed in 1929 by developer Albert Heery Bailey and consisted originally of eleven commercial tenants. The buildings have not changed materially over the years but have been adapted with changing business needs. The strip of attached buildings consists of one- and two-story brick structures built along a steep grade sloping down to Clear Creek and the Piedmont Avenue overpass.



Morningside Shopping Center at the intersection of Piedmont Avenue and Monroe Drive



Decorative brickwork at 1580 Piedmont Avenue, Smiths Olde Bar

The buildings feature large glass store-fronts that follow the slope of the sidewalks at street level. They are the block-style typical of small retail buildings built during that time period but many have some sort of decorative brickwork on the front facade near the rooflines. Especially notable is the decorative pattern of brickwork on the building at 1580 Piedmont, where Smiths Olde Bar is currently located. Also, the brickwork of the two-story building at 1584 Piedmont is unusual, with decorative Greek Revival-style pilasters framing the emblem of the Masonic Lodge, an organization that occupied the upper floor of the building until the early 1980s. Several of the buildings have front facade awnings on the street level or the upper level, as did some of the original buildings.



1584 Piedmont Avenue, Atlanta Bass Gallery

Until the Ansley Mall shopping center was built in 1966, the two blocks on the southwest corner of the Piedmont and Monroe intersection consisted of scattered single-family residences and small businesses, such as a beauty salon and a restaurant. The Ansley Mall was constructed in the style typical of 1960s and 1970s outdoor strip shopping centers, with continuous one-story plain brick buildings with flat roofs and glass storefronts facing a center pedestrian walkway. By 1970 bank branches were constructed by the Citizens and Southern National Bank and the Atlanta Federal Savings and Loan Association and in the 1990s the big box grocery stores, Publix and Kroger, were constructed in the 1600 and 1700 blocks.

The historic neighborhoods surrounding the node, each characteristic of a distinct development period, are architecturally significant and each has been thoroughly documented. In general, residences in Ansley Park are diverse in style, character and scale. They represent a range of early-twentieth-century eclectic and contemporary architectural styles, such as Colonial Revival, Federal Revival, Neo-classical Revival, Queen Anne, and English Vernacular Revival styles, as well as Late Victorian, Prairie-school and Craftsman style bungalows.



1514 Monroe Drive c 1929, Agnes and Muriel's Restaurant

In 1923, developers James R. Smith and M. S. Rankin began the construction of the Morningside Park subdivision. The Morningside neighborhood is characterized by one and two story residences with deep lawns situated on wide, curvilinear streets. The prevalent architectural styles were those popular in Atlanta in the early twentieth, such as Dutch Revival, Colonial Revival and English Vernacular Revival. Lenox Park, developed in 1931, featured model homes designed by the prominent Atlanta architects Ivey and Crook in more elaborate styles of French Revival, Colonial Revival and English Vernacular Revival. Sherwood

Forest, developed in the mid-1950s, featured typical 1950s ranch style homes on large lots, situated on wide, winding streets.

Within the node there are two historically significant residences, located at 1514 and 1518 Monroe Drive, both constructed in the late 1920s to early 1930s. The structure at 1514 Monroe Drive is a two-story brick Dutch Colonial Revival on a full basement, with two front dormers and a chimney on each side. The rear shed addition appears to be recent. The house has been adapted for commercial use and is currently the site of Agnes and Muriel's Restaurant. The house at 1518 Monroe Drive is also a two-story brick structure on a full basement, built in the Georgian Revival style. It has a chimney on each side and a low brick wall at the front sidewalk with half-columns at the center walkway. It also has been adapted for commercial use and now houses law offices.



1518 Monroe Drive, Law Offices

The historic significance of the Ansley Mall node is multi-fold. It represents very distinct periods of Atlanta's early development from the early 1900s to the 1950s, as planned suburban communities were developed north and east of the city and retail businesses quickly followed. It is adjacent to historic neighborhoods with architecture representative of the styles of the development periods, which remain very much intact. Designed as some of Atlanta's first automobile suburbs, these neighborhoods are also significant because they represent some of the earliest concerns of Atlanta citizens with urban traffic. As early suburbs, they were laid out with the specific intention of discouraging traffic, designed with winding, curvilinear streets, cul-de-sacs and few through streets. That pattern exists today and, with the exception of Piedmont Road and Monroe Drive, traffic does not easily pass through these neighborhoods.



Wood trestle, c1870s

This node also is significant for two of the earliest extant railroad infrastructures on the Beltline, two early wooden trestles spanning Clear Creek. One is located behind Ansley Mall and the other is located at the north-eastern edge of Piedmont Park. An early photo shows workers repairing one of the trestles in 1895, and an article in the Atlanta Constitution in May 1869, suggests that these were part of the original Southern Railway beltline that was built the late 1860s and early 1870s.



Wood trestle over Clear Creek behind Ansley Mall



The Villa Apartments c 1920, designed by Phillip Schutze

Also adjacent to this node are several architecturally significant individual buildings, including the Jacobean-style Piedmont Driving Club (1887), the Ansley Golf Club (1912) and the ornate High Renaissance Eclectic style Villa Apartments, built in 1920 and designed by Philip Shutze. Located at 200 Montgomery Road adjacent to the Beltline at the Montgomery Ferry Road overpass, the apartments were originally designed as suites for guests visiting the Ansley Park Golf Club.

Conclusion

Development in the Ansley Mall node will be limited to certain areas, as this section of the Beltline passes through or is adjacent to existing upscale historic neighborhoods. In some cases the Beltline literally abuts the rear yards of private residences. The node is also adjacent to the existing large greenspaces of Piedmont Park and the private Ansley Golf Club. Development near these areas would probably be limited to additional greenspaces, hiking/walking trails and possibly an urban plaza as a focal point.



Ansley Park Golf Club

There are, however, excellent opportunities for mixed-use, low-density development in the commercial areas immediately adjacent to the Beltline on the north and the southeast sides of the Piedmont Avenue overpass. There are established businesses in these strip malls that are currently operating that could be utilized as-is, or adapted for new uses. There are also large open parking lots just north of the Beltline on Piedmont Avenue which could be redesigned for mixed-use projects that would more efficiently utilize the land.

The Ansley Mall node is significant because it illustrates a continuous developmental time-line in Atlanta's history, representative of the earliest farming settlements in the early 1820s, the development of the railways in the late 1800s, and distinct periods of residential development representing the out-migration of Atlanta's elite classes to planned automobile suburbs and the retail/commercial businesses that followed during the first half of the twentieth century. It also illustrates the close interconnection between the local neighborhoods and the small businesses that located nearby to serve them.