

Simpson Road



Theme

The Simpson Road activity node encompasses the area bounded by Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway to the north, Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive to the south, Northside Drive to the east and Chappell Road to the west. Joseph E. Lowry Boulevard, running north/south and Simpson Road, running east/west are the major streets bisecting the area. The area is inside the two historic Beltline routes of the Atlanta, Birmingham & Coastline Railroad to the east and the Louisville & Nashville Railroad to the west.

There are several neighborhoods in the area: English Avenue is located in the northeast quadrant of the Lowry/Simpson intersection; Vine City is located in the southeast quadrant; and Washington Park makes up the southeast quadrant. The Hunter Hills neighborhood is to the west of Washington Park. The Grove Park neighborhood lies just outside the node area to the northwest. There are two parks in the node, Maddox Park, through which the Louisville & Nashville line ran, and Washington Park.

This area developed slowly into the late 1800s and in the early 1900s it began to become a quickly growing suburban area of bungalow neighborhoods for lower to middle class working people, both white and African American. The businesses that developed in the area were generally small in nature and supported the surrounding neighborhoods. They were particularly concentrated around the major intersection of Simpson Road and Joseph E. Lowry (formerly Ashby Street), and along Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (formerly Hunter) and to a lesser extent along Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway (formerly Bankhead Highway). The small number of industrial businesses that existed were concentrated around the rail lines and particularly along Donald Lee Hollowell.

Developmental History

The earliest known settlement in the area is that of the Jett family, in what is now the English Avenue neighborhood, sometime in the mid-1800s, when Atlanta was still called Marthasville. At that time, the larger area was known as NashBans, after two of the major roads in the area.

By 1844, a ferry had been established along the Chattahoochee River, to which Mayson Ferry Road (which became Mayson Turner Road) was the route from Atlanta. The area that would become Washington Park was being established at this time by two white farmers, H.F. Emery and G.W. Elliott.

The area did not see any battles during the Civil War, however, General Sherman had headquarters located southwest of the present Maddox Park, during the siege of Atlanta. The remains of defensive fortifications were found in this area, which later became the Grove Park neighborhood, originally called Fortified Hills.

Following the Civil War, Atlanta began to reach this area as its population grew. Atlanta University was built in 1869 in what was still the outskirts of Atlanta, but would soon be a vibrant and growing area. In the early 1870s the Vine City neighborhood began to develop, originally by whites. By 1884, the city of Atlanta had a municipal dump in the area that would become Maddox Park.



1871 Birdseye View Map, Simpson Road

By the time of the 1886 Atlanta city directory, which was also the first year of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, this area was almost completely residential, and that was predominantly white. The area did not extend very far past Joseph Lowry Boulevard, which was then Ashby Street. The English Avenue neighborhood had grown enough to that point to require an elementary school to be built in 1888, the Gray Street School, later named Craddock Elementary. This was the first brick school built in Atlanta for African Americans, who had begun moving in to the area following the Civil War. In 1889, the Bankhead or Bellwood neighborhood was plotted at the end of the street car line along what is now Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway, formerly Bankhead Highway.



1892 Sanborn Map, Simpson Road on edge of city, growing westward

By the time of the 1900 Atlanta City Directory, the roads in the area stretched further west just past the rail line. Most of the area was still predominantly white, however, along Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, which was Hunter at that time, the area from Davis Street running west had become predominantly African American. There were still very few businesses in the area and those that existed were small enterprises such as grocers and barbers.

1911 Sanborn Map, Simpson Road growing westward toward the Louisville and Nashville rail line

There was a great deal of development in the 1910s. Grove Park was being developed at this time. Several schools were built throughout the area. The number of African American listings in the city directories was growing, as were listings for small businesses. By 1912, there were two major trolley lines running along the boundaries of the English Avenue neighborhood. One ran along what is now Northside Drive to Kennedy to English Avenue. The other ran along Hunter to Ashby and then north to Bankhead Highway. These lines created a racial divide. Whites tended to live inside these lines, while African Americans for the most part lived outside. Ashby Street in particular was a color line for the area, with African Americans generally living to the west of it.

The 1920s saw tremendous growth in the area, particularly among African American population and business. Washington Park, the park itself, was developed from 1919 to 1926, after lengthy petitioning by African Americans to the Atlanta City Council for a park of their own. The park provided a pool, bathhouse, restrooms and concession stands specifically for African Americans in the neighborhood. Heman Perry, who founded the Citizen Trust Company in 1921 and who had already risen to prominence as an African American entrepreneur in the Sweet Auburn area, purchased and then sold property along Ashby Street, to encourage African American settlement and business in the area. The Bankhead Library was built in 1922 along Bankhead Highway. The land for the library had been obtained from St. Luke's Methodist Episcopal Church, an African American church. The library was built with a grant from the Carnegie Foundation as an expansion of Atlanta's public library system. There are no records to indicate that it was built specifically for African American use.



Maddox Park Pavilion, constructed 1931

Not long after, a branch of the Salvation Army was built across the street from the library. Booker T. Washington High School was constructed in 1924 to support the growing African American population. By the later 1920s, Maddox Park was being developed over what had been the Atlanta Municipal Dump. The swimming pool and gazebo in the park were built in 1931.

Through the 1940s and 1950s, the African American population was steadily increasing in this area. The English Avenue neighborhood saw the largest increase in African American population in the city of Atlanta in the 1940s. The late 1940s and into the 1950s saw the expansion of business in the area, especially around Simpson Road and Ashby Street intersections. Beginning in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, garden apartments began to be constructed as the population grew. These were especially concentrated along Simpson Road.



Intersection of Bankhead Highway and Ashby Street, 1955

In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the population of the area, particularly of white residents, began to decline. Vine City, which had been one of the most prestigious addresses for African Americans in Atlanta, became mostly occupied by the unemployed and manual laborers, and since 1970, has lost 56% of its former population. The English Avenue neighborhood began to decline sharply into the 1980s, and currently, over half of its population lives in poverty. This trend was not confined to English Avenue but was felt in the entire Simpson Road Node area.

Physical Description

Today, the Simpson Road area still retains the general characteristics of its past, although with far less glory. Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway, formerly Bankhead Highway, remains mainly industrial with interspersed commercial buildings. There are many vacant buildings and lots along the road. The Bankhead Library remains at the corner of English Avenue, although it is boarded up. Behind it, the English Avenue School likewise remains, boarded and empty. The English Avenue neighborhood itself is perhaps the most depressed of the area neighborhoods. There are vacant lots scattered throughout, and many homes are in poor repair. Throughout most of the neighborhoods, commercial buildings remain on many corners, which in many cases were grocery stores.



Intersection of Jefferson Street and Griffen Street, 1954

Simpson Road has remained largely commercial. Many former commercial buildings are vacant. There is a very large vacant area, approximately 2 blocks in total, at the eastern end of the street towards Northside Drive. The garden apartments which remain are in fairly poor repair but appear to be structurally sound. Homes remain scattered along Simpson, many in poor condition.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive also has many vacant commercial buildings along its length. Moving west past Booker T. Washington High School however, the Washington Park neighborhood remains in reasonable repair with many attractive mature trees. Likewise, the Vine City neighborhood has retained more homes in reasonable repair than not, although there area scattered vacant lots throughout both neighborhoods. Lowry Boulevard remains largely residential with scattered commercial areas, particularly around the intersections of Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, Simpson Road and Hollowell Parkway.

There are many significant resources which remain in the area. The neighborhoods are generally made up of small bungalows with craftsman details, or what is called the American small house. Vine City has some examples of larger, two story homes, with varying architectural styles. The landscaping and mature trees of the neighborhoods are important characteristics of the area. Many of the area's churches are over 50 years old. Most are still active, while several are currently vacant.

Significantly contributing garden apartments include apartments at 1177 Simpson Road, built in 1957; Fairway Court Apartments at 1247 Simpson Road, built in 1960; Trafalgar Square, at 1155 Simpson Road, built in 1962; and the Chappell Forest Apartments at 425 Chappell Road, built in 1963. These could potentially be eligible for listing on the National Register as a group nomination.

There are quite a number of significant commercial buildings in the area. Although most do not have connections to prominent people or events, they are important in retaining the character of the area ñ somewhat self sufficient neighborhoods outside the larger city. The corner store buildings which remain in many intersections speak to this character. Most of the truly significant commercial buildings remain on Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive and along Joseph E. Lowry Boulevard. These include the William A. Harris Memorial Hospital, a one story colonial revival built in 1930; the Ashby Street Theatre, a two story masonry colonial revival built in 1925; the Citizen Trust Company West Side Branch bank building, a two story international style building constructed in 1955; and the Calloway Building, also a two story international style building constructed in 1958. These four buildings are all located on Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive near the Joseph E. Lowry intersection. Many of these buildings could be eligible for the National Register as a multi-structure listing. The other commercial buildings in the area follow the styles and appearances of these, generally constructed in the 1920s-30s and the 1950s.



*708 Jefferson Street, Guardian Chemical Company,
constructed in 1890*

There are a number of significant schools in the area. Booker T. Washington High School, built in 1924, was listed on the National Register in 1986. Other historic schools include E.R. Carter Elementary, a three story brick building built in 1910, and the English Avenue School, a three story brick building with gothic details, also built in 1910.

Several historically contributing commercial and industrial buildings, possibly eligible for listing the National Register, remain on Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway, near the rail line. A number are currently vacant. Others still house businesses such as the Bearden-Thompson Electric Company at 1085 Hollowell, and the Beavers Rebuilt & Guaranteed Appliance, at 1435 Hollowell, both constructed in the 1940s.

Conclusion

There is a great opportunity for development in the Simpson Road area. The area greatly needs economic revitalization to realize a return to its vibrant past. The development however, must be in keeping with the historical character of the area.

There is a great deal of room for infill housing, as well as some scattered housing which probably could be safely demolished for health and safety reasons. The infill housing should be in keeping with the nature of surrounding homes in being fairly small and not too densely constructed. Most of the garden apartments which remain appear to be structurally sound and perhaps only need some general repair and maintenance. Because these apartments represent the highest density housing in the area, their character must direct future higher density housing. High-rise apartments or condominiums are not compatible with the character of the area. Perhaps four or five stories at the very most would be acceptable, and that should be concentrated along Simpson Road and other major roads where there is already a mix of residential and commercial use. The vacant English Avenue School would be a very good resource to rehabilitate for higher density housing, as well as any vacant industrial buildings.



English Avenue School, constructed in 1922

The majority of the commercial structures in the area appear to be structurally sound and ready for rehabilitation and reuse for a variety of purposes. The many vacant corner store buildings could be put to use as corner grocery stores again, or restaurants or even apartments or condominiums. Because of the current condition of Hollowell Parkway, with many vacant buildings and lots, and because of its historic industrial and commercial nature, this would be a good location for denser commercial, even residential development, or mixed use.