

Murphy Triangle



Theme

The Murphy Triangle is a historically significant railroad center, located at the junction of two major railroads, the Southern Railway and the Beltline. Out of this railroad intersection grew a substantial center of industry. For the greater part of the 20th century, it was a hub for metalworking and machine shops. Support industries, such as oil and scrap iron, also proliferated. A secondary industry, food services, began to emerge in the 1930s and 40s. As the centuries progressed, the node became typical of the effects of transitioning from railroads to the trucking industry. By the later part of the century, these early industries had been replaced with local services and warehousing.

Developmental History

Prior to 1900 the area surrounding the Murphy Triangle was a mostly residential area comprised of some of the earliest trolley-car suburbs of Atlanta. Beginning in the 1870s, the neighborhoods of West End, Adair Park, Capitol View and Oakland City began to be developed and incorporated. These white middle and upper class neighborhoods became the home to Atlanta businessmen as well as mechanics, machinists and workers who were employed by the railroad companies that comprised the Beltline.

The two largest roads, which run through the Murphy Triangle, are Murphy Avenue and Lee Street. While the development of the Murphy Triangle can be attributed to manufacturing, the railroad and the growth of the area, these two streets grew differently and provided different areas of service to the area. The majority of manufacturing occurred on Murphy Avenue, while Lee Street remained residential for a longer period of time. Once Lee Street developed retail and service shops they were focused on providing goods to those who lived in the surrounding neighborhoods.



Adair Park

Through the 1920s to the 1940s Lee Street was a majority residential street. Those who lived on Lee Street were white and middle class, who held jobs such as railroad engineer, carpenter and butcher. Lee Street did not begin to develop commercial businesses until the 1950s. The businesses that were located on Lee Street were mostly focused on serving the local community and most were owned by those who lived in the surrounding neighborhoods. The West End Service Station (651 Lee Street), Wilson Brothers Grocery (785 Lee Street) and Glass Pharmacy (1177 Lee Street) are examples of this. Lee Street also differed from Murphy Avenue, in the fact that Murphy Ave had a lot of fluctuation in the amount of business and manufacturing companies. However Lee Street maintained the same types of business up until the 1980s and remains much the same today.

At the turn of the twentieth century Murphy Avenue was known as Jacobs Drive. Jacobs Drive was a mostly undeveloped portion of Atlanta located southwest of the city center. By 1910 the area begins to become the home to manufacturing companies centered along the Southern Railway. The Willingham-Tift Lumber Company, Dowman-Dozier Manufacturing Company, and Gulf Refining Oil were some of the companies that specialized in the production of lumber, sheet metal and oil. The area that once held the Willingham-Tift Lumber Company mill and factory is now Adair Park II (a recreational park). It was also during this time that the Hanson Motor Works was constructed (1917). The Hanson Motor Company only survived until 1924, however it was known for manufacturing the Hanson Six, the first and only automobile to be fully manufactured in Atlanta. The opening of the Hanson Motor Company marked the beginning of numerous automobile and motor related companies that would settle in the Murphy Triangle.

During the 1920s, the number of manufacturing companies decreased along Murphy Avenue. With the closing of the Hanson Motor Works in 1924, only two of the original companies were left in the area. Additionally, the Roebing Wire Manufacturer, located at 934 Avon Avenue, was the only new company to come in. The Roebing Company manufactured wire nationally for buildings and structures. Some of its most famous projects included the production of the wire for the Brooklyn Bridge, the cable wire for the elevators in the Empire State Building and most of the telegraph wire used in the United States. With the exception of The Winchester Simmons Company of Atlanta and the Atlanta Foundry and Machine Company, the area along Murphy Ave remained largely residential. The addresses of buildings that are still standing today, such as 892, 894 and 900 Murphy Ave would remain residences until the early 1980s



Drawing of Hanson Motorworks, c1920



1934 map, Murphy Avenue and railroad

The increase in manufacturing continued into the 1940s. However the industrial and manufacturing nature of the area was changed slightly with the location of the State Farmer Market at the corner of Murphy Avenue and Sylvan Road. The construction of the facility was met with much protest from the surrounding residential areas due to the increase in traffic; however the facility was built and soon became integrated into the community. According the Atlanta City Directories, many of the residents, who lived along Murphy Avenue at this time, either worked for the nearby railroad or had a stand at the State Farmers Market.

During the 1930s there was a surge in companies and factories in the Murphy Triangle. There were a total of sixteen companies located in the area, including new companies such as the Link Belt Company, which was located at 1116 Murphy Avenue. William Dana Ewart founded the Link Belt Company in 1880. Ewart began manufacturing square detachable links for the chain belts used in power transmission and materials-handling equipment. By the 1900s, Link Belt began to be a leader in the manufacturing of steam-powered cranes used for the moving of construction materials. The Link Belt Company merged with FMC Corporation in 1967; however it remained at this same address through the 1980s. The National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) constructed a facility at 1400 Murphy Avenue, where it remains today, and the Kroger Grocery and Bakery Company/Piggly Wiggly Stores began to occupy 1100 Murphy Avenue. Kroger and Piggly Wiggly would remain here until the early 1950s.



Aerial photograph, State Farmers Market



Dillard Paper Company, c1950

The 1950s caused little change to the Murphy Triangle in terms of a decreased in manufacturing. Atlanta became one of sixteen branches of The Dillard Paper Company, which was headquartered in Greensboro, North Carolina, with the opening of a distributing facility at 1100 Murphy Avenue. It was also during this time that the area first begins to experience the spread of manufacturing companies into previously residential areas of Murphy Avenue. The Chrysler Motor Parts Corporation located itself at 1150 Murphy Ave, a site that had been residential since the 1920s. The Chrysler Motor Parts Corporation was the first automobile company to be located on Murphy Avenue, since the Hanson Motor Works of the 1920s. The Allen Scale Company and Allen & Roebuck Welding and Repairs began operating at 774 Murphy Avenue, which was another location that had been residential since the early 1900s. The Murphy Avenue Service Center and Filling Station was also constructed during this time at 950 Murphy Avenue, becoming the first gas station to be located on Murphy Avenue.

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of transition for Murphy Avenue. Murphy Avenue began to see a decrease in the amount of manufacturing companies located in the area. Also this was the time that some of the larger manufacturing companies began moving out of the area. According to the 1965 Atlanta City Directory, the Dillard Paper Company left its location on Murphy Avenue (1100 Murphy Avenue) and moved to 300 Peters Street. However the building on Murphy Avenue did not remain vacant, because it soon became the home of the Cut Rate Box Company. It was also during this period that the State of Georgia moved the farmers market to its current location in Jonesboro, and began using the Murphy Avenue facility as a library for the blind and a textbook warehouse. While Murphy Avenue still contained most of its national manufactures such as Nabisco, Chrysler and Roebing Wire, new businesses began moving into the area. However, these companies were smaller and known more locally than nationally.

By the 1980s, Murphy Avenue only had four large manufactures located on it. Chrysler, Cut Rate Box Company, FMC Sprocket manufactures (formerly The Link Belt Company) and Nabisco remained in the area, while the Murphy Triangle became home to numerous local businesses that offered services to local community. Former businesses which focused on the manufacturing of a variety of things were replaced with businesses aimed at providing automotive repair and storage. According to the 1981 Atlanta City Directory, 774 Murphy Avenue, the former location of Allen Scale Company and Allen Roebuck Company, became the home of L Shaw's Body Shop. This shows the path that the Murphy Triangle would follow for the next 20 years, until there were only two large manufacturing operations left in the area.

Presently Nabisco and the Cut Rate Box Company are the only two large manufactures left in the area. While the Murphy Triangle has not stopped developing, it does not attract large companies like in the past. The businesses located in the area now focus on providing services ranging from automotive to beauty supply. Older structures have been rehabilitated into lofts and apartments, which reflects the changing nature of the area. More residents are moving back into the area and surrounding neighborhoods therefore pushing the need for older buildings to be adapted for modern use.

Physical Description

The Murphy Triangle is a heavily industrial area, born out of the intersection of the Beltline with the Southern Railway (today Norfolk-Southern). The intersection serves as the dividing line between the segments of the Beltline constructed by the Louisville & Nashville (L&N) Railroad and the Atlanta & West Point (A&WP) Railroad. The L&N Beltline crosses from southeast to northwest, intersecting the Norfolk-Southern line, which runs southwest to northeast, at nearly a 90 degree angle. At this point the Beltline is recessed into a deep gulch, passing under the Norfolk Southern line through a vast concrete tunnel. This tunnel is among the longest on the Beltline, spanning under the entire breadth of Murphy Avenue, the Norfolk Southern Line and Lee St. It is three bays wide and is supported on concrete piers, which have a slightly pebbled finish and flared tops. It at least dates to the 1920s, and is likely an original component of this leg of the Beltline circa 1906. The A&WP railroad branches off at Allene Avenue, curving to the southwest to join the main Southern Railway line.



Beltline cross under Murphy Avenue

In addition to being a major railroad intersection, it is the junction of several major roads. Murphy Avenue and Lee Street are the largest roads, running parallel to the Norfolk-Southern Railroad. The north-south MARTA line runs through the center of these roads, raised above ground level on concrete piers. On the west side of this broad road/railroad, the city grid runs at a 45 degree angle, southeast to northwest. Two wide roads, White St. and Donnelly Ave., run parallel to the Beltline at this point, creating a large isolated island between the two roads. On the east side of the Murphy Ave/Norfolk Southern Line, the city grid runs north-south, with Sylvan Rd being the main north-south road.

The intersection of these two major railroads, combined with the major roads and shifting street grid, has had great influence on the development of the Murphy Triangle, creating an odd street pattern with many wedge-shaped lots. The deep gulch of the Beltline and the vast Murphy Ave/Norfolk-Southern/Lee St./MARTA corridor creates a heavily divided neighborhood, rather disjointed in character. The overall effect is a discontinuous neighborhood, characterized by irregular shaped buildings and underutilized parcels.

This massive railroad intersection served as a dividing line between four historic neighborhoods. To the northwest is West End, the oldest neighborhood incorporated as a city in 1871 and annexed into Atlanta in 1894. To the southwest is Oakland City, incorporated in 1894 and annexed in 1910. To the southeast is Capitol View, developed circa 1915 and annexed in 1925. And to the northeast is Adair Park, a circa 1890s trolley neighborhood, with portions annexed in 1894 and 1910. All neighborhoods are similar in character, with late Victorian to early 20th century suburban developments, consisting primarily of modest cottages and bungalows. Currently, all but Capitol View are recognized by the National Register of Historic Places, and are also locally designated historic districts, overseen by the Atlanta Urban Design Commission. However, Capitol View is eligible for both the national and local recognition.



The A&WP Beltline

At the intersection of the railroads, industrial development has been the predominant use. Due to the deep recess which the Beltline is in, most industry spins off of the Norfolk-Southern line. Manufacturers would place railroad spurs from the main line to their plants. Many of these spurs still exist, including the spur to the Roebling Factory. Another spur runs behind the Cut Rate Box Company, linking Central of Georgia Railroad to the A & WP Beltline. This spur still has telegraph poles an old crossing signal and some railroad switchgear along it.

The industrial history of the intersection has left a physical imprint on it today. The node is an eclectic mix of industrial buildings, ranging from small concrete masonry buildings such as the State Farmers Market to multi-story brick warehouses such as the Cut Rate Box Co. No one style or construction method predominates. There are, however, a few typical characteristics. As noted, the majority of buildings are industrial, although there are a few commercial and residential buildings scattered throughout the node, primarily along Woodrow St. and Warner St. Brick and concrete masonry units are the most common building materials. The majority of the construction on the east side of the tracks dates from the 1920s-40s. On the west side, between Donnelly St. and White Ave, the buildings are largely 1950s-60s truck transfer facilities. Most buildings are one story tall. Ornamentation, where there is any, is simple, generally in the form of modest brickwork or glass block.



Commercial development on Woodrow Street

While most of the buildings are simple industrial construction, a few have notable ornamentation or construction techniques, or are significant simply due to their size. The 1920 Roebing Wire Manufacturer, a long-standing local business and a nationally important wire manufacturer, is at 934 Avon Ave, at the junction of Sylvan Rd. and Avon St. Not only was this building the location of a nationally important manufacturer, but it has some of the most unique architecture in the node. A long, low one-story building, it is currently unoccupied. The bulk of the building is typical mill construction with brick walls resting on a concrete foundation, large steel pivot windows, and a flat roof. The offices, at the corner of Sylvan Rd. and Avon St., have significantly more detailing. It is slightly taller than the manufacturing areas, and has very unusual concrete door and window surrounds. The windows are in pairs, and the surrounds are recessed into the brick and form a cross shape around the windows, with concrete panels where the transoms would be. One of these windows has been converted into a door, with glass block around a stepped concrete door surround. The original entrance has a shallow arch with keystone, and a recessed concrete panel above it. The building is currently unoccupied.



934 Avon Street



1116 Murphy Avenue

Another long-standing company in the neighborhood was the Bailey Burruss Foundry, built circa 1930 at 1116 Murphy Ave. While the company is no longer there, the building remains, currently occupied by PTC. This building is by far the most unusual building in the node. It is a massive steel and glass industrial building with a three-tiered shed roof system stepping up to a gabled clerestory in the center. Each tier is lined with expansive steel windows. The front of the building is equally unique. A circa 1950s glass block ribbon windows run the length of the front facade, resting on a concrete foundation. This design continues in the semi-circular entrance protruding toward Murphy Ave. The entrance has glass block windows, a concrete foundation, a concrete door surround and flat concrete roof. Through studying Sanborn maps and historic renderings, it appears that a similar building may have been adjacent to it, but now only a concrete slab remains.

The largest complex of buildings in the node is the old State Farmers Market, currently the Public Auction Facility. This 1941 complex is located at 1040 Sylvan Rd., at the critical intersection of the Beltline and Norfolk Southern, as well as Murphy Ave. and Sylvan Rd. This location provides it with good access by both train and truck. It was originally a series of 10 long, low sheds. These sheds had gable roofs, and were raised on a concrete foundation for easy truck access. While three of these sheds have been combined into one large building, the remainder are largely intact. Significant features such as exposed steel web joists and original light fixtures can be found throughout the complex.



State Farmers Market

While their construction is fairly simple, the two buildings at 1080 and 1100 Murphy Ave, currently occupied by the Cut Rate Box Company, are unusual in the node for their size. Built circa 1920, the two buildings are fairly typical mill construction of the period. They are three stories tall with brick bearing walls and heavy timber framing. The building at 1080 Murphy has a stepped parapet in front, with modest brick pilasters at the corners. The building at 1100 Murphy has shallow brick arched windows as its only ornamentation. The steel pivot windows have been replaced in the front of both buildings, but remain on the side.



Cut Rate Box Company, example of 20th century mill construction



Loading facility, only remaining structure like it along Beltline

A significant piece of industrial infrastructure remains along a spur of the A&WP Railroad which runs along Avon Ave. It is a large cylindrical storage bin, approximately 50-60 feet tall, straddling the railroad tracks. Eight smaller cylinders are attached to the east of it. Steel ladders and platforms are provided for access. A cloth chute leads directly to the railroad tracks.

The neighborhood has also suffered some significant losses to its architectural fabric. Most unfortunate is the recent demolition (2005) of the 1917 Hanson Motorworks. It was this home to one of the most unique businesses in the node, the only locally owned auto manufacturer. It was also easily the most ornate building. It was located at the prominent junction of Sylvan Rd. and Murphy Avenue. In plan it was a triangle around an open courtyard, in order to maximize the use of the wedge-shaped property. It faced the Southern Railway and Murphy Avenue, with two-story office areas at the northern and southern corners of the building. It was constructed of brick with ample windows, and had fine detailing such as a parapet formed into steps and cuspings, and ornamental door surrounds. The loss of such a fine building, at such a prominent location in the node, is truly detrimental to the character of the node.

Another significant loss is the former Atlanta & West Point Railroad Garage and Freight Depot. Studies of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, in conjunction with renderings and aerial photographs, indicate that it was a large facility, close in size to the neighboring Bailey Burrus building, with wood posts and a concrete floor.



Hanson Motorworks, before demolition

Conclusion

Today, the Murphy Triangle is significant for its history as a major center of industry, and for the many significant companies that existed there. It illustrates the development of industry throughout the 20th century, from railroad dependence to trucking. Locally, it helps to show the history of Atlanta's development from a rural town to a major center of industry. It also documents the decline of those industries that has been so widespread throughout the City. It contains significant pieces of architecture and infrastructure, as well as a good collection of everyday industrial buildings. Several of these buildings, including the State Farmers Market, Bailey Burrus building, Cut Rate Box Company and Roebling Wire Manufacturer are potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Three of the four residential districts surrounding it, West End, Adair Park and Oakland City are already listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The fourth, Capitol View, is certainly eligible. Due to the significance of the node, the number of significant resources it contains and the level of integrity it retains, this entire node is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Murphy Triangle is home to some of the most unique businesses and buildings along the Beltline. With industry ranging from local to state to national significance, it has a rich history. It helps tell the story of industrial development along the Beltline, and is highly important to its history. While currently underutilized and largely vacant, the resources in the node present a wonderful opportunity for reuse in a redevelopment plan. Many of the buildings are suitable for conversion to residential and commercial uses. A thoughtful plan will encourage growth in the neighborhood while retaining the historic integrity of this significant railroad intersection.