

Ginkgo trees inspire generations in Buckhead

By Judy Tindel



The Peachtree Battle Avenue median parkway as it looked in 1937. Members of the Neighborhood Garden Club decided the area needed to be spruced up, so they planted ginkgo trees.

Blazing gold against the autumn sky, two massive ginkgo trees shelter the median park on Peachtree Battle Avenue at Peachtree Road, framing the entrance to historic Buckhead neighborhoods. Each fall, the small park entices admirers both old and young to photograph the dramatic “maidenhair” canopy and frolic in brilliant duck foot leaves beneath.

Records at the Kenan Research Center of the Atlanta History Center reveal the story of neighbors who planted the trees 73 years ago, shaping the cultural landscape of Buckhead today.

In the early 20th century, Atlanta’s population approached 100,000 and automobile ownership, in its infancy, increased rapidly. In 1907, the streetcar was extended to Buckhead, opening access to lands north of the city considered quite remote, five miles out of town in the realm of summer homes. Land developers emphasized the opportunity for residents of Atlanta to live full-time in the country while working in the city.

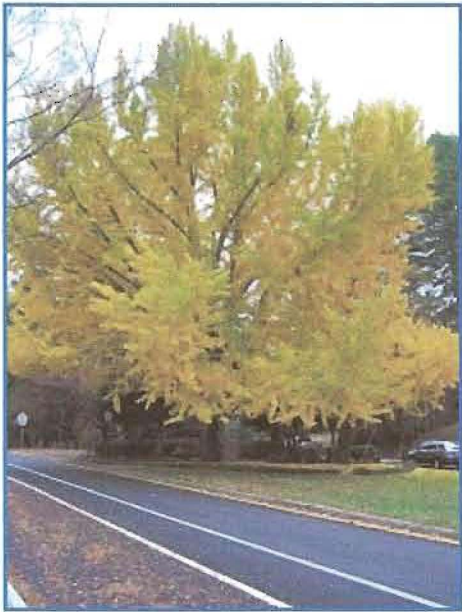
In 1909, Peachtree Battle Avenue was donated to Fulton County and named in honor of the historic association with the Civil War battlefield of nearby Peachtree Creek. Development of garden suburb Peachtree Heights Park began in 1910. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Atlanta in 1914, developer Eretus Rivers launched a proposal to expand the avenue into a 100-foot parked boulevard from Peachtree Road to Howell Mill Road with federally funded battlefield markers.

Deeds secured in 1915 from landowners adjacent to the avenue specified that a condition of the land donation was reservation for park purposes of a 25-foot strip in the center of the 100-foot conveyance. The median parks were graded into the unpaved avenue around 1917, but no formal landscape plan has come to light. Peachtree Battle Avenue was paved in 1925, spurring development of the Haynes Manor and Westover subdivisions adjacent to Peachtree Heights Park.

In 1930, neighbors complained to the Fulton County Commissioners of Roads and Revenues about maintenance and petitioned Commissioners to clean off and beautify the parkway along Peachtree Battle Avenue. Though the Habersham and Primrose Garden Clubs adopted portions of the park as

civic projects starting in 1932, working diligently on beautification efforts, additional complaints were made to the commission in 1935 about the overall condition of untended areas of the park.

In 1935, the Old Guard of Atlanta dedicated the War Veterans' Monument on Peachtree Battle Avenue to commemorate the Battle of Atlanta and to honor soldiers who had fought in the country's three great wars. By 1937, members of the Neighborhood Garden Club, residents of the community, noted, "This monument was completely hidden by overgrown shrubbery and weeds... [and they] felt that such a memorial deserved a more suitable setting and more fitting surroundings."



This photo shows the ginkgo trees in the Peachtree Battle median park as they look now.

The Neighborhood Garden Club was organized in 1931 by Florence King Jackson Bryan (Mrs. Shepard Bryan) and Blanche Lipscomb Ellis (Mrs. William D. Ellis, Jr.) and admitted to the Garden Club of Georgia in 1932 through the endorsement of Loraine Meeks Cooney (Mrs. Robert L. Cooney) of Peachtree Garden Club and Sarah Cobb Orme Huger (Mrs. William E. Huger) of Cherokee Garden Club. "The neighborhood" encompassed the area of Peachtree and Wesley roads and Andrews Drive where the 25 members lived, according to an Atlanta Constitution account.

Adoption of a civic project accessible to their residences permitted members "to oversee and enjoy the work," so a committee chaired by Nellie Barksdale Brawner (Mrs. James Newton Brawner) was formed to improve the first parkway on Peachtree Battle Avenue to provide a "beautiful background for the monument..." and a "garden of memories" on "hallowed ground," according to documents at the Kenan Research Center.

In a document written by Mrs. Brawner titled "Civic Project of the Neighborhood Garden Club 1937-38," conditions of the entrance parkway were described as "unsightly and deplorable... shrubbery untrimmed and overgrown with weeds, grass uncut and littered with papers, tin cans, and other rubbish- a suitable feeding ground for the billy goat which was continuously staked there."

The document recognized the prominent location of the park at the entrance to "an extensive and beautiful residential section" with proximity to the E. Rivers School, a bustling public school known

as “one of the largest and best attended” in Fulton County. Housed in a handsome 20-year-old structure of Stone Mountain granite, the school was located on Peachtree Battle across from the Lodge, used in those days as a kindergarten under the leadership of Mrs. Mary Hardwick Bloodworth.

The club “felt that a civic project would serve as an inspiration to the many pupils who pass it daily.” Each of the 25 club members contributed \$2.00 toward the project.

“With the funds in hand the committee had the shrubbery replanted and trimmed so as to give a better view of the monument, had all rubbish removed, planted new grass seeds and had the old grass cut, put out two ginkgo [sic] trees and five dogwood trees, and planted forty pieces of shrubbery, with all well watered and fertilized.”

Garden Club photos from 1937-38 feature barely visible ginkgo saplings in the median park of Peachtree Battle Avenue.

The Neighborhood Garden Club was assuredly influenced with its choice of planting material by what the School of Urban Forestry at the University of Georgia has called a “planting fad” that erupted in the early 20th century due to the “curiosity and strangeness factor” and “rarity of form and ancient lineage” of the ginkgo.

The generous civic spirit and vision of neighborhood gardeners who planted knee-high trees nearly three quarters of a century ago inspire those who sit in the shade of the same trees today. This conservation legacy challenges Buckhead residents to preserve and restore the inherited landscape.

Judy Tindel is a member of the Buckhead Heritage Society and a member of the Board of Directors of the Peachtree Battle Alliance.