

Wednesday, 01/31/07

## West End Park's grand expansion vision fell short

By GEORGE ZEPP

Urban living is becoming increasingly popular in Nashville, particularly in the area in Midtown at West End and 31st Avenue North, which appears to have the highest concentration of luxury condominium buildings....

Signs in this neighborhood identify it as "West End Park, Established 1893." Could this be Nashville's original urban neighborhood? Can you tell me more about the history of West End Park? — Mike Reed, Nashville

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Residences packed the center of the downtown in Nashville's earliest days. Many areas now considered urban are actually among the growing and spreading city's first suburbs, from Germantown on the north to the Rutledge Hill/College Hill area on the south.

West End Park, a later suburb, was one of the grandest visions for westward residential expansion. As conceived in 1893, it would have been a 140-acre gated community with lots no smaller than an acre, but ranging up to

three acres, "dotted with villas and handsome suburban homes."

Outer fences and four gates were planned to surround the whole development and render it "protected from the intruding public," according to a Nashville profile of the development published in the early 1890s.

The elaborate West End gate was built of stone and included an impressive "lodge," or gatehouse. Slight remnants of it, including two of its columns labeled "West" and "Park," remain today on what is now Acklen Park Drive.

"As our cities grow in population and wealth, those whose means enable them naturally seek to get away from the dust and clamor of city life, and this new park offers an Elysium, unsurpassed in pleasing features, where the tired toiler of the city can rest and recuperate from his labors," the profile said.

Later records indicate the actual development proved to be not quite so extravagant. A national financial panic that arrived at the same time in 1893 couldn't have helped sales.

While some large lots close to West End Avenue were sold, those in the rear parts of the development lagged behind. Subdivision maps filed in 1910 and 1915 show much of it was chopped up into smaller tracts to better fit buyers' more modest incomes.

### City's boundary moves

Adding to later interest was the eventual extension of a downtown electric streetcar line from a few hundred feet short of the development to right through the middle of it, along what is now Long Boulevard.

The original 1893 developers were led by Joseph Hayes Acklen, a son of noted Nashvillian Adelia Acklen, builder of the historic Belmont Mansion. The son (1850-1938), a Nashville native, had been a Louisiana congressman but returned to Nashville in 1885 to practice law and later become president of an investment firm.

Acklen built a brick-and-stone mansion behind the main gate and high on the largest plot in West End Park as he made plans to develop the rest. The West End Park Co. filed its state charter on Feb. 6, 1894, listing Acklen and four other principals.

The year before, Acklen had filed a deed conveying park-like greenways, roads, "ornamental spots" and gate houses to the Nashville Trust Co. as trustee to protect and preserve them.

The tree-lined strip bordering West End Avenue between 31st Avenue North and Murphy Road remains undeveloped today from that original plan. In 1987, seven adjoining property owners organized the "Acklen Park Lawns Association" to help fund its ongoing taxes and upkeep.

The city's western boundary moved out to encompass Vanderbilt University and West End Park in 1906.

By April 1909, Acklen had apparently sold out of the development. An amended charter filed that year shows T.J. Hays of Williams-Hays Co. Real Estate, E.B. Long and three others organized with \$120,000 in capital stock.

Six months later, John A. Bell and Thomas J. Tyne bought in as capital stock was increased to



Acklen Park, the Joseph H. Acklen house, was the centerpiece for West End Park when the neighborhood was being started in 1893. The three-story residence of brick and Indiana limestone was demolished in 1961, the year of this photo, following a fire that damaged some of its interior in 1960. (FILE / THE TENNESSEAN)



This elaborate gate on West End Avenue at what was Grand Avenue (now Acklen Park Drive) led up to the Acklen home seen on a hill behind it. The gate was one of four planned in 1893 to be built for a perimeter fence of the 140-acre West End Park residential development. (METRO ARCHIVES)



Today two identical columns with the words "West" and "Park" are the most visible remnants of the massive 1890s gate on West End Avenue that once marked the main entry to the West End Park. Behind them is the Blackstone apartment building. (GEORGE ZEPP / FOR THE TENNESSEAN)



The Blackstone apartment building with its 48 units dates to the late 1920s and is now one of the most visible older structures identifying West End Park. The neighborhood signs were purchased with a city grant received by the West End Park Neighborhood Association in 2003. (GEORGE ZEPP / FOR THE TENNESSEAN)



This architectural rendering of the main gate for West End Park, "Lodge and entrance to park on West End Avenue," credits H.J. Dudley & Son as its architects. The firm operated under that name from 1892 to 1897. The sketch is from a

\$360,000.

Acklen sold his three-story mansion, called Acklen Park, to the John Howe family in 1931. It was demolished in 1961. It featured six bedrooms, a ballroom and an observatory.

A fire in 1960, blamed on faulty wiring in a lamp, had damaged part of it. The home's resident, Elizabeth Howe, was rescued by Centennial Park workers with a ladder and escaped with singed eyebrows, according to a newspaper report at the time.

A cluster of condominiums and apartments now occupy most of the mansion property along Fairmont Drive. One of the large West End Avenue houses, at 3324 adjacent to Murphy Road, was used as a Ruby Tuesday's restaurant in the 1980s until it was razed for an office building.

While West End Park of the 20th century didn't turn out to be as luxurious and exclusive as originally planned, it largely avoided the "cheap tenement or inferior house" its originators intended to keep out.

Development pressures in the 21st century are taking much of the neighborhood in yet a new direction toward higher density.

booklet on Nashville by Andrew Morrison and published about 1893.



Jeannette T. Acklen, wife of Joseph H. Acklen, stands next to a suffragette banner in this 1948 photo, seven years before her death. Mrs. Acklen had paraded behind the banner when women were seeking the right to vote. Her husband worked behind the scenes in support. Tennessee's legislature in 1920 was the key body to ratify the amendment so that it finally became national law.

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Sources: Newspaper archives; Metro Archives; "Nashville in the 1890s," William Waller, 1970; "Nashville, Tennessee," Englehardt Series, Andrew Morrison, circa 1893; [www.westendpark.org](http://www.westendpark.org); [bioguide.congress.gov](http://bioguide.congress.gov).