

Lexington's Historic Western Suburbs – A Brief History

Lexington (named in 1775 and settled in 1779) has a long, colorful and well-documented history. Fortunately, many of the buildings dating from the 1790s to the present are preserved in the historic neighborhoods surrounding Lexington's downtown commercial district. They continue to have a useful productive role in the 21st Century.

First formally platted in 1815, the Western Suburb, one of Lexington's oldest actual suburbs, is the hub of much of Lexington's history. Houses in this area date from 1795 (the Matthew Walker house at 728 West Short) to 2006 (the copper-clad house at 151 Old Georgetown). In addition, three new condominium complexes were completed in 2008. Its varied architecture reflects more than 200 years of styles and economies. Old Georgetown Street was US-25 until the 1960's, part of the Dixie Highway that served as the major north-south route, running from Sault Ste Marie, through Lexington, terminating in Miami, FL.

The land forming the Western Suburb - as it was then called - was originally part of a very large tract of land belonging to Colonel John Todd, a Revolutionary War officer and Virginia legislator. (The Colonel's brother, Levi Todd, was Mary Todd Lincoln's grandfather. Levi Todd's daughter, Hannah, is believed to be the first white child born in Kentucky - in February, 1781.) Colonel Todd was killed in 1782 while fighting in the Battle of Blue Licks - north of Bryan's Ridge and Boonesborough. (This battle occurred some 10 months after Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, and is considered the last Revolutionary War battle of any size.) Colonel Todd's daughter, Mary Owen, or Polly as she was called, inherited his vast real estate, which included the land that is now the Western Suburb. Now the richest woman in Kentucky, she married James Russell in 1799.

(After Russell died in 1802, Polly Russell began building a house called Glendower.- later called the Wickliff Mansion at what is now the northwest corner of Second and Jefferson.



Eventually becoming Preston Inn, and then Milward's Funeral Home in the first part of the 20th century, this house was razed in 1942 by St. Joseph Hospital. The hospital was then located across Second Street. They used the land to build a residence hall for its nurses. That 1942 building is now the Jefferson Center building.)

Polly Russell sold various tracts of land for houses over the years, including the land that eventually became Eastern State Hospital – or the lunatic asylum as it was then called. One of the tracts sold was to John D. Dillon in 1814 – using money partially borrowed from Henry Clay. He then platted his purchase and filed it in 1815. That parcel includes the land from 100 feet east of Jefferson Street bounded by Short, Main, and Old Georgetown streets. Most of the land was not built on until after 1830. Polly, a believer in emancipation, eventually married Robert Wickliff (referred to as the “Old Duke”) in 1826 (becoming Mary Owen Polly Todd Russell Wickliff) Robert was a shrewd, litigious, land holding real estate lawyer, and the largest slaveholder in Kentucky. He eventually sued Dillon and retrieved the land.

The Western Suburb was never a quiet staid neighborhood. From the beginning, it was always a wide mix of income levels and races. In his manuscript "Old Houses of Lexington", C. Frank Dunn wrote, "House building craftsmen, of which there were a number in the rapidly growing 'metropolis of the west', saw the opportunity to build homes for themselves and for speculation in this expanding 'western suburb' of the town". Many of the buildings in the Western Suburb were built by these Lexington craftsmen, and reflect the Greek Revival influence that was prevalent in the Bluegrass in the 1830's and 1840's. Some early houses, combined with those of a later period, create an interesting mixture of styles.

These craftsmen built houses in the area to live in, to sell or to rent. Their names appear again and again in the deeds of the properties. Names appearing include: John McMurtry, Robert King, Cincinnatus Shryrock, Benjamin Ford, James Butler, John Bradford, and others. Residents of houses in this new subdivision included merchants who found it convenient to live close to their downtown businesses. Many of these businesses (carpentry shops, liveries, blacksmith shops, lumber yards, coal yards, etc.) would be located on or next door to their owner's residence. It was also the neighborhood where Belle Brezing (1860 – 1940), who became the queen of Lexington's turn of the century red light district, grew up. (The Belle Watling character in Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind" was patterned after Belle Brezing.)

Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Historic Western Suburb is a fine example of a 19th century neighborhood, reflecting the simple but substantial way of life of the merchants, craftsmen and others who lived there. It is bounded by West Main, Newtown, Saunier and Algonquin streets. On the north, it is bounded by Second Street, but does not include Second. The area is also recognized as a local historic district by city ordinance.

In the mid-1970's, private citizens, the Bluegrass Trust for Historic Preservation, the Lexington-Fayette County Historic Commission and Board of Architectural Review members cooperated for over a year in planning the preservation and revitalization of this historic area. The Bluegrass Trust obtained options on six houses in the 600 block of West Short and sponsored a walking tour of the area that triggered public interest. Other public-spirited citizens purchased houses and resold them to buyers who agreed to

restore them. Almost all of the houses in the district have been restored at one time or another.

From the mid-20th century until just before 1980, the land at the northwest corner of Old Georgetown and West Short was used to park all of the City of Lexington's garbage trucks. On many nights the whole neighborhood vibrated as the trucks warmed up for their morning runs, not to mention the rodents that came with this usage. In 1989, the Historic Western Suburb Neighborhood Association purchased this land from the City and developed the infill housing that now occupies that site.

Later, in 2001, the neighborhood association was able to obtain the property located at 173 Old Georgetown. This was the Williams House - built in 1815 and destroyed by fire in 2000. It became known as the Cunningham Funeral Home through most of the 20th century, and was the oldest African-American owned business in Lexington when the Cunninghams sold it around 1990. The neighborhood association and an innovative developer working together resulted in the unique infill condominium complex that now appears on that site.