

# City of SHAKER HEIGHTS

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## History

A stroll down any of the beautiful streets in Shaker Heights makes it hard to imagine the simple beginnings from which this City sprang. That the City has successfully grown and evolved in so many important ways over the last 100 years is a testament to its solid foundation.

Anchored by physical and social planning, consistent and proactive leadership, and residents deeply committed to the prosperity of the community, the City is well positioned to seize the opportunities of the 21st century and meet the challenges of its next 100 years.

The North Union Shakers, a utopian religious sect, originally settled Shaker Heights in 1822. Known as The Valley of God's Pleasure, the settlement encompassed 1,366 acres. The dreams of the North Union Shakers faded with Cleveland's emergence as an industrial metropolis in the late 19th century. Horseshoe Lake, the Lower Lakes, and a handful of streets were all that remained of the North Union settlement by the late 1800s.

In 1905, developer brothers Oris Paxton and Mantis James Van Sweringen saw potential in the land and took an option on a small portion of it. They envisioned creation of an exclusive, utopian residential suburb built around the ideals of the Garden City movement. To make it even more appealing, their plan included two rapid transit lines to whisk residents downtown in half the time it took on a standard streetcar. One hundred years later, the Rapid is still providing easy access to Cleveland and remains one of Shaker's most desirable and unique assets.

Integrating the natural landscape with the built environment was a key component of the Garden City movement and a guiding development principle for the brothers. Strict enforcement of building setbacks and spacious, lushly planted tree lawns further enhanced the environment. Marshall and Green lakes were formed by damming Doan Brook, which, along with the original two lakes created by the North Union Shakers, created some of the choicest properties in the Shaker Village. Planners created an intentional hierarchy of streets to limit traffic in residential neighborhoods, creating a quiet, idyllic environment.

Street names, according to some sources, were chosen by an employee of the F.A. Pease engineering company, an admirer of English fiction, who was responsible for laying out the streets. Legend has it that he used an old English postal directory to name many of the streets.

By 1912, Shaker Village was incorporated and in 1931 the charter was approved, establishing the City of Shaker Heights. The combination of the natural beauty of the community and easy access to rapid transit enticed hundreds of families to build homes here during the 1920s and 1930s. This explosive growth was trumpeted in early Van Sweringen advertisements, declaring that families moved to Shaker Heights at a rate of one a day.

To ensure that their vision of Shaker was maintained in the midst of rapid growth and home construction, the Van Sweringens implemented a set of development guidelines mandating everything from setbacks, building heights, architectural styles, and material choices and colors. The brothers insisted that each home be architecturally unique.

This led to houses designed within one of three proscribed styles, English, French or Colonial, but embellished with small details of differing styles. Block after block of architecturally distinguished homes emerged. Currently, an impressive 80 percent of the City is located in the Shaker Village National Register Historic District, an acknowledgement that forward thinking and planning resulted in a valuable and enduring asset: the houses of Shaker Heights.

These standards of quality and strict development controls were applied to all homes in the Shaker Village, from the palatial to the most modest. It is the reason that many two-family homes throughout Shaker Heights have a distinctive design in which a single front door leads to separate entrances for each unit on the inside, giving the appearance of a single-family house. Winslow Road, the City's only street made up entirely of two-family homes, offers many examples of this design concept. In 2007, the street was officially recognized with a local historic district designation.

Educational, religious, and recreational institutions were important parts of the vision for the Shaker Village. In order to entice these institutions to relocate from Cleveland, the Van Sweringen brothers offered land to them free of charge. Institutions that responded to the offer include Hathaway Brown School, Laurel School, University School, Plymouth Church, and Shaker Country Club.

In 1922, the Shaker Heights Public Library opened in a room at Boulevard Elementary School. The collection included mostly children's books. The public's appetite for library services grew quickly. By 1951, the Main Library was housed in a newly constructed building containing more than 6,000 titles in what is today the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Community Building.

The Library expanded again to include a second branch, Bertram Woods, which opened in 1960. The award-winning Library now boasts a collection of over 200,000 books. Thirty thousand people hold Shaker library cards today, more than half a million people use the libraries each year and more than one million items are borrowed.

For many decades Shaker Heights enjoyed growing prosperity and stability. Schools, libraries, recreation opportunities, the Shaker Heights Historical Society, and many businesses grew and thrived. The Van Sweringens would have thought they had achieved their vision of an idyllic community filled with happy families enjoying the American dream of homeownership, children playing in the yard, and a new car in the garage. But their vision was deficient in one important respect: inclusiveness.

By the mid-1950s, national and local events surrounding racial desegregation forced the leadership and residents to reexamine long-held beliefs and ultimately to redefine the City. Years of restrictive covenants limited the numbers of black, Catholic, and Jewish families living in Shaker Heights.

In 1948, a U.S. Supreme Court decision made deeds with restrictions based on race illegal. In 1956, there was a bombing of a new home being built by a black family in Ludlow. These two events set into motion a sea change in Shaker that ultimately created the racially and economically diverse City we live in today.

Black families began to settle in the Ludlow neighborhood, which fast became the first landing spot for black families leaving Cleveland. After the 1956 bombing, both black and white neighbors came together to help the family rebuild and to begin a conversation about the future of their neighborhood and their City. It was a moment of unity, perhaps uncomfortable, but it was the foundation for a new day and the beginning of the peaceful integration of Shaker Heights.

Out of these first tentative steps toward inclusion, the Ludlow Community Association (LCA) was born in 1957. Its mission was to maintain Ludlow as a stable, vibrant, and racially balanced neighborhood, and to facilitate the racial integration of other neighborhoods. So successful was the effort to diversify Shaker's neighborhoods that local and national media profiled Shaker's peaceful, planned integration efforts. And so began a new chapter in the City's history.

The mission of the LCA was solidified and enhanced over the following decades. Several other initiatives were established to further the goals of successful citywide integration. In 1967, the Shaker Housing Office was established as part of the City's Department of Community Services to ensure the stable integration of neighborhoods. The Office provided services to encourage both white families to move into predominantly black neighborhoods, and black families to move into predominantly white neighborhoods. Efforts were also made to achieve racial balance in the schools through a voluntary busing program in the 1970s. In 1986, the Fund for the Future of Shaker Heights was formed to continue the proactive integration of neighborhoods through the provision of a down payment loan program to assist families making a pro-integrative move. Maintaining and celebrating the diversity of present day Shaker Heights has become a part of a shared value system and is a defining characteristic of the city.

The Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, now a beloved institution, was born from the same intense effort on the part of active citizens that was evident in the formation of the Ludlow Community Association. In 1964, park land at the City's western edge was threatened by a proposal from Cuyahoga County Engineer Albert Porter to build two eight-lane freeways with an interchange. A group of residents, who became known as Clark Freeway Fighters, waged a fierce battle for several years resulting in a change of plans and the creation in 1966 of the Nature Center. The City continued to prosper despite a population loss connected in large part to the shrinking population of the City of Cleveland. In response to that, and to further facilitate the integration of the schools, the City closed and repurposed four of its nine elementary schools in 1987. The Main Library was able to expand by moving into the former Moreland Elementary School. New institutions also were created. The Shaker Family Center, formerly Sussex Elementary, has become a gathering place for families with young children. Two other schools, Ludlow and Malvern, became homes to specialized private non-profit schools serving specific needs of school-age children.

As the 21st century dawned, the City's Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) was created to lay out goals and priorities, particularly as they pertained to attracting private investment to help secure its prosperity. The document still serves as the framework around which development plans are made and offers yet another example of the steady leadership and planning that define Shaker Heights.

Between 2000 and 2010, guided by the SIP, the City undertook several development projects to augment the City's green space and built environment. Honoring the principles of the Garden City movement, the City's largest green space, Horseshoe Lake Park, was revitalized. Developed in the 1930s and 1940s around one of the original Shaker sawmill ponds, the park features picnic pavilions, playground equipment, and walking trails used by residents nearly year 'round. In 2007, land adjacent to the Shaker Boulevard Rapid tracks was repurposed as a paved trail for use by walkers, runners, and bike riders.

During this period, significant public and private investment was made in the Shaker Town Center area, including Shaker Commons on the south side of Chagrin. Also included were infrastructure improvements, investment in roads and streetscape work. The crown jewel of the refurbished district was a firehouse completed in 2005, the first new civic building constructed in years.

Also in 2007, a complete renovation of Thornton Park, the City's primary recreation facility, was undertaken. The enhanced pool, playground, skate park, basketball court, tennis courts, sledding hill, and an indoor ice rink hum with the active engagement of residents of all ages at all times of the year. It is at once a multi-purpose recreation facility and a community gathering place.

Responding to the market demand for new housing for young professionals and empty nesters, three upscale condominium developments were built: Sussex Courts, South Park Row, and Avalon Station. By the end of October 2011, residents had begun moving into Library Court, newly constructed apartments specifically designed for adults 55 and older. The tradition of high quality housing for which Shaker is known is evident in each of these developments.

The dawn of the 21st century also brought macro and micro economic upheaval, which led to local economic challenges in the City. Diminished tax revenue due to a global recession, deep cuts in state and federal support, and a weakened housing sector required that City leaders exercise fiscal discipline and thoughtful long-term planning in order to maintain the same high level of services and quality of life for which Shaker is known.

As part of the long-term planning of the early part of the new century, City leaders turned their focus to the need for a broader tax base to bolster the City's financial position. Created as a strictly residential community, Shaker's aging infrastructure and a changing economy required strides in a different direction. With the completion of a comprehensive economic development plan in 2010, the City directed resources toward revitalization of two major commercial districts: Warrensville/Van Aken and Chagrin/Lee.

When completed, the Warrensville/Van Aken area will be transformed into a transit-oriented, walkable district designed to attract new commercial and retail activity centered on a public transportation hub.

Anchoring the Chagrin/Lee project is a bold public-private partnership, Shaker LaunchHouse, an early-stage business accelerator and shared entrepreneurial office space. It is proving to be one of the region's most progressive economic development ideas. LaunchHouse has a clear mission: to nurture entrepreneurial ideas into profitable businesses. The Shaker Heights Development Corporation has an equity stake in LaunchHouse's portfolio companies. In time, these ventures are expected to contribute to the revitalization of Lee Road and the overall economic growth of the City and possibly the region, making Shaker Heights once again a model and a leader.

As the City celebrates its Centennial, we can look to the past and reflect on the present to see that the identity of the community has evolved from a shared set of beliefs to a shared set of values. The passionate commitment of residents – to each other and to the continued growth and prosperity of Shaker Heights – is the cornerstone of these values and identity. It is what keeps people here and brings people back. It is our most defining characteristic.

An old advertisement from the Van Sweringen Company says, "Most communities just happen; the best are planned." Many of the major milestones in the history of Shaker stand as prime examples of good planning, strong leadership, and resident engagement, and persist as hallmarks of the Shaker Heights legacy. They have made this city distinctive and have enabled it to adapt to changing times and changing needs. These characteristics tether us to our past, provide a springboard into the future, and fuel us on a confident path into our next 100 years.