

How a Tragic Fire led to the Development of Candler Park

By Jennifer J. Richardson

The “absolutely fireproof” Iroquois Theatre in Chicago opened its doors for the first time on November 27, 1903. Seven days later, on December 3, 1903, it burned to the ground, costing 602 humans their lives, and injuring 250 others. The theatre was packed with well-off women and children on the day of the fire, who’d gathered to see a live stage show called “Mr. Blue Beard” starring actor-comedian Eddie Foy. The matinee was interrupted at 3:15 p.m. when an arcing stage light caught nearby muslin curtains on fire. Before long, on stage scenery was in flames and the reputed fireproof asbestos main curtain—which turned out to be cotton-- was also in flames.

The theatre had no fire alarms or sprinklers; fire escapes for the building were still under construction and unusable. All of the exit doors opened inward and there were no “panic bars” as is required today. Some exits were concealed behind thick velvet curtains. The balcony (which had cheaper seats) had locked gates to keep patrons from going downstairs to the more expensive seats during the performance. In an attempt to clear the smoke, stage hands opened some windows behind the stage, which only caused the blaze to accelerate and spread.

As panicked patrons attempted to flee, they blocked the inward opening exits. Firemen found victims in lines 20 people deep at these doors. Some people fled to the roof and jumped to their deaths in a nearby alley. Many died of smoke inhalation in their seats. The tragedy, the worst fire to that date in the United States set new standards for fire protection throughout the nation.

Mrs. Bertha Page, age 45, took her 12 year old son, Harold, to see the show on December 3. Both perished in the fire. Bertha was the wife of Charles T. Page (1840-1921). Page had fought in the Civil War, returned home and, being a cousin of Albert G. Spalding, helped organize a baseball team called the Forest City Baseball Club. It was the first regularly organized baseball club in the U.S. Page played first base for the team, and Spalding was the pitcher. Page moved to Chicago eventually, where he amassed a fortune in banking and investments. He was one of several men who bought the Chicago Cubs Baseball Team.

The loss of his wife and son in the Iroquois Theatre fire devastated Page, and he decided to leave Chicago with his surviving daughters, Florence and Edna, and move to Atlanta. He entered into a partnership with friend and wealthy real estate developer Eugene R. “Ray” Hardendorf, also of Chicago. In 1907, the two men purchased 150 acres of land from the Edgewood Investment Company for \$250,000, whose president was Judge Whitefoord Smith. They planned to subdivide the land into 750 lots, and build streets and other amenities. They named their new company the Edgewood Park Land Company, because the land they bought was inside the old City of Edgewood, Georgia at the time. (Edgewood was annexed into the city of Atlanta in 1909.)

Page re-married two years after moving to Atlanta and lived at 170 Clifton Avenue (old street numbering system). Hardendorf returned to Chicago where he bought a hotel, a section of lakefront land to develop, and even an island. In 1917, Page withdrew from the Edgewood Park Land Company, and sold his remaining undeveloped lots to Asa G. Candler for \$60,000. An estate known as the “Judge Hopkins Property” was part of the sale from Page to Candler. The Candler family marketed the rest of the lots in the old city of Edgewood and in 1922, Asa Candler gave the City of Atlanta the 53 acre Judge Hopkins land for use as a city park and golf course. “Candler Park” was dedicated in 1926 where Asa Candler, the honoree, made his last public appearance before his death. Even though the official name of the community was “Edgewood Park” or the old city of Edgewood, people began calling the neighborhood “Candler Park” because of the golf course and park.

Page, Hardendorf, and Candler all left their mark on what is today Candler Park. Candler Park has the park, Candler Park Drive, Candler Street and Callan Circle (named after an ancestral Candler home—as is Callanwolde.) Page Avenue is named for Charles T. Page and Lula Avenue (now Marlbrook) is named for Page’s second wife. Hardendorf Avenue is named for Ray Hardendorf, and Harriett Avenue is named for Hardendorf’s wife. To date, Muriel Avenue remains a mystery—Muriel is not the name of either developer’s daughter. Harold Avenue is named for the 12 year old son of Charles Page, who perished in the 1903 Iroquois fire. Thus, a tragedy in Chicago left an indelible mark on Candler Park neighborhood 115 years after the theatre fire.

Additional Notes on Candler Park Names and History

1. You [in the brief Candler Park history] mention that the RR tracks were the center of the old City of Edgewood. Black families lived on both sides of the tracks. Edgewood was annexed into the city to receive streetlights and sidewalks, and possibly other amenities in 1909. When Mary Lin School was built, it displaced many black families living in that area. These families moved across the RR tracks, making what was left of the north side of Edgewood less integrated and more white. (Although when I came over in 1970, there were still black families living on Hardendorf and other streets.) There was never the “white flight” in our neighborhood that happened in Oakhurst and Kirkwood.
2. Charles T. Page and Eugene Hardendorf, both from Chicago, formed the “Edgewood Park Realty Company” and subdivided lots. Most were sold and many had bungalow designs from Leila Ross Wilburn’s plan books. Wilburn was one of two female architects in Atlanta at the time. The cross streets on Clifton and Page were named after the wives and daughters of Hardendorf and Page (see attached article.) “Marlbrook” was originally named “Lula Ave” and the residents changed the name. As Hardendorf and Page aged, they sold their un-developed lots to Asa Candler, who continued to market them and have homes built, and this was continued after his death by his sons. “Union Square”, also known as the Judge Hopkin’s Estate, was farmland where soldiers during the Civil war had camped. Asa bought this, too, and later donated it to the city for the golf course and park. It was named

in honor of him, “Candler Park”, and the name began to be associated with the neighborhood. The dedication of the golf course was Asa’s last public appearance before he died.

3. Many of the blacks that lived in Candler Park were descendants of slaves that worked at the farm of Judge Whitefoord Smith (who was a Klan member). After their freedom, they stayed in the neighborhood and formed the Antioch (Old Stone) Church. The Whitefoord farm land was where the Euclid Apartments are today. It was said that when Judge Smith couldn’t attend Klan rallies at Stone Mountain in person, he would ascend the tower in his Eastlake Victorian home [now 520 Oakdale Road], where he could view cross-burnings in the distance at the mountain.
4. The original church of the Epiphany was located in the triangle area (now plaza) in L5Pts. It moved to another location in Little Five, then out to Ponce de Leon, where it is today. The last building on the north of McLendon as you head toward L5Pts was the old Post Office.
5. McLendon is named for Capel McLendon who ran a military Academy in the area. Other streets (Brooks, Nelms) are named after developers and their wives and children.
6. In addition to 485 and “THE ROAD” there was a plan along the same time as the beginning of THE ROAD that called for widening of Moreland Ave through Little Five, which would have ruined things. (This widening did not take place).
7. At the corner of DeKalb Avenue and the ramp going from Moreland, there is a small patch of woods behind a fence. (north side of DeKalb). This was the site of the old Federal Signal Tower during the Civil War, and also where the artists took photos a few years after the war in order to paint the Cyclorama.
8. Clifton Road is wider than the other streets because it was a streetcar route. The small shopping areas along McLendon were within a walk, and the trolley took you for bigger shopping trips to L5Pts.
9. Candler Park Market is where McMichael’s Supermarket was—he is interviewed in the CP film in the 1980s. Kelly and Waller Pharmacy and lunch counter was where Moon Brothers is now. La Fonda and Filini’s were both gas stations in the beginning.