en and Vicki Brooks spent a year studying Lexington neighborhoods as they prepared to downsize and move back to town from their farm in Garrard County, Kentucky. Ultimately, they chose Ashland Park, one of Lexington’s most popular near-downtown neighborhoods, flanked by the shops and restaurants of Chevy Chase and by Richmond Road, a direct route to downtown.

The couple liked Ashland Park’s abundant trees, winding streets, grassy medians, and mixture of early 20th-century architecture. Those traits made it tangibly different from other nearby neighborhoods, and Ken, a retired architect, set out to learn exactly how Ashland Park came to be. “I wondered, was this just an accident or did someone have a great idea?” he said, as he led a walking tour in June through Ashland Park for docents who volunteer at nearby Ashland, the Henry Clay Estate.
Tyler Ewell and daughter Clara, above, enjoy a beautiful day in Ashland Park, where neighbors gather on grassy medians to socialize and celebrate holidays. The neighborhood’s design anticipated a strong sense of community.
It didn’t take long for Brooks to find his answer. Ashland Park, he learned, was designed by a famous landscape architecture firm in 1908. “What happened here,” Brooks told his tour, “was Frederick Law Olmsted and the Olmsted Brothers.”

Brooks’ research, aided by his son Eric Brooks, curator at Ashland, has led Ken to give talks about the Olmsted influence in Ashland Park, and his Olmsted-themed walking tour will soon be added to the group tour options at the Henry Clay estate.

**Drawn by the deep shade**

Ashland Park today is as close to life in a forest as it gets in downtown Lexington. The neighborhood’s tree canopy, at 41 percent, is among the city’s most substantial. Those trees are what attracted many home owners, including Janie Fergus, current president of the Ashland Park Neighborhood Association, one of two associations that represent Ashland Park.

“I would drive over here so I could run in the neighborhood. I just felt so comfortable on these streets, and it was so shady and pretty.”

Fergus eventually moved to the neighborhood, and when she married in 1995, she told her husband that they must live in Ashland Park. “I told him, ‘I’m not leaving the neighborhood.’” They bought a fixer-upper on South Hanover.

**From pasture to progressive subdivision**

Had Fergus run through what is now Ashland Park a century ago, she would have found little to shade her. In the early 1900s, the land was pasture, part of what had been Henry Clay’s 600-acre estate.

His descendants, the McDowell family, owned the estate’s mansion and about 300 acres around it. In 1904 they had a clear view of downtown Lexington a mile or so away. And they could also see development headed their way. Houses were popping up in Bell Court, Aylesford, and along Ashland Avenue. The streetcar route was stretching beyond downtown.

Realizing their land was prime for development, the McDowells set out to create a desirable neighborhood aimed at upper-middle and upper-class buyers on the 95 acres now bounded by Hanover Avenue and McDowell, Richmond, and Fontaine roads. They reasoned that the nicer it was, the better their profits. They also wanted to ensure their neighbors were good ones. After all, “This [neighborhood] was literally out their front door,” said Bettie Kerr, director of the city’s historic preservation office.
The McDowells commissioned the Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts, the landscape architects of the day. Frederick Law Olmsted, who founded the firm in 1858, was famous for his first commission, New York’s Central Park, and his firm was leading the way in design not only of parks and campuses but of neighborhoods and private estates.

Olmsted died in 1903, but his sons, who had worked closely with their father, kept both the firm and Olmsted’s design principles alive. After several trips to Lexington, Olmsted Brothers presented the McDowells with a plan in 1908 that was unlike any other neighborhood in Lexington.

As Brooks found in his research, Ashland Park embodies the elder Olmsted’s ideals. Winding streets complement the land’s natural contours. “It was the first neighborhood to do curvilinear streets,” said Kerr. “It was a very thoughtfully put forward development.”

Councilman Bill Farmer grew up near the neighborhood, which is within the district he represents. He calls the curving streets the “genius of Olmsted. It will take you someplace, but it is not a straight shot.”

Unlike other downtown streets, straight and gridded, “the Olmsted Brothers didn’t want you to see forever,” said Brooks. “They wanted you to see about a dozen houses and that was enough.”

Going local before it was fashionable

Instead of importing exotic plants, as many of their peers did, the Olmsteds promoted native trees and plants.

Their advice was followed in Ashland Park, and many of its original street trees were pin oaks, a western Kentucky swamp tree that adapted well to urban life, according to city arborist Tim Queary.

As the pin oaks have died from disease or old age, homeowners have been quick to replace them, Queary said. The result is a happy mix of street trees — from maples to gingko — which prevents the neighborhood from losing all its trees from a species-specific
disease or insect, Queary said.

“Property owners have replaced street trees with all sorts of species so instead of an even-aged stand of trees that are all the same, you have an uneven aged stand of different species. The tree canopy is one of the reasons people want to live there. It is very desirable because of all the shade and beauty of the trees themselves.”

**Amalgam of architectural styles**

The Olmsted Brothers had nothing to do with Ashland Park’s built architecture, yet its stew of early 20th-century housing styles complements the landscape and contributes to the neighborhood’s charm. Colonial Revival, Craftsman, bungalow, and American four-square styles are dominant, but there are also examples of Tudor Revival, Dutch Colonial, Italian Renaissance, Prairie, and French eclectic.

“No two houses look alike, and to some, that is a great pleasure,” said David Burg, who has lived on Ashland Avenue 49 years and is a founding member of the Ashland Park Neighborhood Association.

A scattering of duplexes, fourplexes, even a few small apartment buildings throughout the neighborhood has added economic diversity and probably helped prevent large old homes from being divided into apartments.

“It has facilitated the neighborhood staying on a reasonably even keel,” said Kerr.

**Shared public spaces create community**

One of Olmsted’s biggest contributions to landscape architecture was his belief in the importance of shared spaces. After witnessing the heartbreak of segregation in the South, “he wanted to bring people together,” said Brooks.

In Ashland Park, the communal spaces his firm designed have done just that. Residents not only have the 17 park-like acres of the Ashland estate to meander through, but a series of medians, some oblong, others triangular, that the Olmsted plan included. Except for a few park benches, some swings hanging from tree branches and one sculpture, the medians are grass and trees.

They’ve become sites for potluck picnics and pickup ballgames. Dogs on leashes sniffle along, and babies take their first shaky steps on the soft grass. Residents meet, greet, and gab beneath sycamore trees.

“My children learned to play soccer over there,” longtime resident Gerri Henry said, motioning toward the wide, green swath in the middle of Slashes Road.
The medians make relatively small yards a nonissue for families with energetic youngsters.

“When you look at Ashland Park, every house is within one block of a public space,” said Brooks.

David Phemister and his family moved to Lexington a couple of years ago from Charlottesville, Virginia. They bought a house in Ashland Park because they liked its location, which is blocks away from the Nature Conservancy’s offices on Woodland Avenue where Phemister is director.

“And, we fell in love with how green the neighborhood is, with the number of old trees, and how the streets are laid out with the common areas — our children love playing in the medians,” said Phemister.

Neighborhood benefits from old and new

Kerr has lived in the neighborhood and studied it as she prepared its application for National Register of Historic Places status in 1986.

The stability provided by longtime residents has been protective, she said. “Families have tended to stay; a lot may only be the third family to live in the house.”

Involved homeowners, such as Burg and Henry, also have been key. Through involvement in the neighborhood associations, they’ve sought zoning protections, gotten funds to plant street trees, and voiced concerns about issues such as traffic and safety.
They are being joined by an increasing number of young families such as the Phemisters. Burg marvels that when he moved to his home, “everyone on the street was in their 80s and 90s.” Now, his neighbors are families with young children.

Gatherings of the neighborhood’s women’s group also speak to its changing demographics. “We are all shapes and sizes,” said Henry. “Young women and old women like me. All professions.”

Henry gets the chance to meet newcomers as she delivers welcome baskets, a tradition maintained by both neighborhood associations in Ashland Park. Flowers, fresh-baked brownies, a bottle of wine, and information about the neighborhood and the association fill the baskets.

Delivering them reminds Henry of the hectic times spent raising a family in the neighborhood and how much welcoming gestures meant then and now. “These young women, they’ve got the dogs and the kids running around and you show up with this basket. It is really a good way to get people to feel like part of our neighborhood.”

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**ASHLAND, THE HENRY CLAY ESTATE** has added a group tour to its offerings that focuses on Ashland Park’s development, architecture, and the part the Olmsted Brothers played in its design. Neighborhood resident and retired architect Ken Brooks will lead the tour. For more information about scheduled tours for 10 or more, visit www.henryclay.org/visit or contact jfrost@henryclay.org.
HAVEN IN THE CITY

CAREFUL PLANNING HELPED ASHLAND PARK FULFILL ITS PROMISE

Frederick Law Olmsted and the Olmsted Brothers landscape firm were involved with some of the most impressive landscaping projects in America. The elder Olmsted is best known for his first project, Central Park. Yet his firm also designed the U.S. Capitol grounds; the Buffalo, New York, and Louisville parks systems; the nation’s first arboretum at Harvard; and the grounds and gardens of the Biltmore Estate. In Lexington, Olmsted Brothers designed Woodland and Duncan parks and did a master plan for the UK campus. Ashland Park is one of more than 350 neighborhoods the firm was commissioned to design. The Olmsted-designed section of Ashland Park was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

Although the Olmsted Plan for Ashland Park was completed in 1908, it would be another 10 years before development began in earnest. The McDowells, descendants of original landowner Henry Clay, first chose to put in streets, sidewalks, curbs, and street trees and give the trees time to mature. According to Bettie Kerr, director of the city’s historic preservation office, the McDowells are thought to have wanted potential buyers “to be able to have a sense with your eyes what you could experience” if you lived in the neighborhood.

The Clay descendants capitalized on the new subdivision’s Olmsted design. One early ad touted Ashland Park as “laid off by Olmsted brothers (sic), the greatest Landscape Architects in America! The wonderful, natural beauty, added to by the cunning art of these geniuses ... YOU MUST SEE IT TO UNDERSTAND!” Ads also pointed out that infrastructure was already in place and that the streetcar line would serve the neighborhood, running up through the median of South Hanover Avenue from High Street to Main.

The 95 acres included in the Olmsted design were purchased by a group of Lexington men in 1919 that sold all 200 lots in a one-day auction for more than $275,000, then the largest price paid for land in Lexington. Homes were built over the next 15 years by some of the city’s best-known architects — John V. Moore, Joseph Giannini, William H. Churchill, Robert McMeekin, and partners Leon K. Frankel and John J. Curtis.

Many street names in Ashland Park are tied to Henry Clay. Hanover Avenue is named for the Virginia county where Clay was born, and Fincastle Road also has ties to Virginia as Kentucky was formed from that state’s Fincastle County. The area where Henry Clay grew up in Virginia was called “the slashes,” hence Slashes Road. Ghent Road is named for the Belgian city where Clay signed the Treaty of Ghent to end the War of 1812. A few streets pay homage to the trees that line them: Sycamore, which fronts the Ashland estate, and Catalpa, to the estate’s west, which today is lined with gingko, not catalpa, trees. KM