

The Special Character of The Blount Street Historic District

The Blount Street Historic District includes the last remaining elements of Raleigh's premier late 19th and early 20th century residential neighborhood. The district comprises a six-block stretch of North Blount Street plus portions of some intersecting streets. Anchored at its southern end by the Executive Mansion on Burke Square, the district commemorates the fashionable neighborhood and illustrates the results of 20th century inter-governmental cooperation in historic preservation.

Blount Street was included in a legislated state government development area in the late 1960s, and at that time many of the mansions were destroyed and replaced by parking lots. In 1976, the City Council, in cooperation with the State Properties Office and the Council of State, designated the area a historic district upon the recommendation of the Raleigh Historic Districts Commission. This district designation sparked a restoration and beautification program in the district that includes using many of the former homes of Raleigh's 19th century leaders as state government office space, reducing the impact of existing parking lots (either by relocating historic buildings on them or by screening them with landscaping), and providing tourist information at the Capital Area Visitors Center. Despite the fact that many of the buildings are adaptively used for office space, the district maintains a decidedly residential feeling. Service functions attendant to the office uses are generally well-screened and unobtrusive.

North Blount and North Person streets are presently major traffic arteries forming a north/south one-way pair serving the state government center and the east side of downtown, a product of contemporary traffic engineering design. East Peace Street is the major east/west two-way artery north of the government area, and East Jones and East Lane streets form an east/west one-way pair in the south part of the district. Lining the streets are regularly-spaced tree plantings in the right-of-way, which provides a sense of rhythm to movement through the district for both pedestrian and motorists where houses have been demolished. Prominent examples of the generally well maintained and generous landscapes of the district can be seen in the grounds of Peace College and the Executive Mansion. At the south end of the district are substantial stretches of patterned brick sidewalk laid in running bond, including original patterned bricks on the west side of the street. There is granite street curbing throughout the neighborhood, and frequent instances of low concrete and stone dividers demarcating property lines.

Setbacks vary considerably, from isolated houses centered on generous lots to others set close to each other and to the street. However, there are enough large lot properties to render Blount Street unique in establishing a more open spatial quality and character the city's other primarily residential historic districts impart a much more compact feeling. Because many properties in the Blount Street district are in office usage under the same ownership, the district's side and rear yards are not segmented by privacy fences to the extent of the other residential districts, which also contributes to the feeling of spatial openness. Even though the Executive Mansion grounds are encircled by a high fence, the design of the fence with its simple wrought iron panels is transparent enough that it provides the necessary security without markedly detracting from the sense of open space in the district. few exceptions, existing houses have suffered only minor exterior alterations and are in fair to excellent condition. A great number of buildings exhibiting high-style architecture at a grand scale creates a formal, stately atmosphere, in contrast to the more vernacular expressions of domesticity found in the other districts of residential character. Less pretentious and generally newer dwellings make up the rest of the district's

fabric. Common to virtually all structures are front porches that convey a welcoming sense of neighborliness.

Despite selective demolition of houses in the 1960s and early '70s by the state, and the use of a considerable amount of land for surface parking, the Blount Street Historic District has retained a remarkable degree of continuity. This is principally due to the quality of the remaining structures and the presence of linking landscape elements such as stretches of brick sidewalks, granite curbs, and the numerous great oaks and magnolias.