

Olmsted Park makes a fine green space to walk, stroll in Atlanta by Fernbank and Druid Hills Golf Club

by Sally Sears



MOVING ARTS AND CRAFTS

When a carful of bookclub friends wanted to stop reading and stroll in Atlanta's late spring evenings, I offered a perfect site. The freshly-restored Olmsted Linear Park, along Ponce de Leon, boasts woods and meadows, plus a safe stretch of good walking with a few gentle hills.

Close to Druid Hills Golf Club, beside Fernbank Museum of Natural History, an historic sweep of park lured us to the easternmost of the parks created by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted named Deepdene.

It holds a broad expanse of woods, laced with a creek and stitched with fresh trails made carefully to look 100 years old. As if Frederick Law Olmsted and his entire beard were woven into the woods he left for Atlantans to enjoy. We parked along North Ponce de Leon, near Lakeshore Drive by the Fraser Center Woods. Hiking into Deepdene, we passed great mansions on the left, but our eyes were on the woods & trails on the right. At the top of the hill the park spreads out into a simple open field. A new granite curb brakes the speed of rainwater runoff. Soon we walked through the grass to a curving bridge over the creek. Friend Vicky Benedict wanted to know why the water was so clear. I tried to remember every detail landscape architect Spencer Tunnell improved with the hydrology engineers working on better water quality.



Sally shows off hydrology knowledge.

H 2 OH NO!

The water meanders through a made meadow of grasses, past boulders for stepping stones so we can get right down in the creekbed. The changes to the creek are intended to brake the speed of rainy runoff, and let it linger, ridding itself of road pollution and keeping the water meadows green and thick. This spring's rain has been a wonderful test. Green Deepdene Gets an A.

We crossed the bridge, climbed the bank on carefully constructed paths of granite, concealed beneath a natural cover of wood mulch. Three choices of path wait for the strollers. If you have a literal stroller with a baby or a grandparent inside, the path along Ponce de Leon is the most level. When the state DOT and Georgia Power finish burying the power lines, adding a promenade and planting new hardwoods which won't need trimming over the top of the street, Ponce will be a tunnel of green again for everyone to enjoy.



Recent rains down a century old tree.

HOBBIT HIKE

A second path is more adventurous, and you see more of the century-old oaks and beeches. The middle path of Olmsted's hierarchy of paths goes up and down in gentle bounces, crossing ravines on granite bridges that seem to grow out of the bedrock. Laura Hardman Collins was sniffing as we crossed like hobbits in the gloaming.

"It smells so great!" she admired. Honeysuckle, jasmine, even privet blossoms made the evening air vivid.

We took the third and most serious path last. It hugs the edge of the stream, with strong up and down passages lined by well-placed steps and boulders.

Too difficult? “It’s still a flip flop walk,” Amy assured us, as the path broadened downstream. We came out of the woods at the corner of Ponce and Lakeshore, spotted the buried remnant of the old Georgia Power trolley track, and crossed the street. Walking west, we crossed the creek coming out of the Fraser Center and entered Dellwood Park on an asphalt trail. Recent replantings include a sumac nursery on the right, and full stands of native dogwood and redbud up the hill.

Who’s paying for this green glory? A non-profit group of neighbors named the Olmsted Linear Park Alliance. For the hundred years since Olmsted and his patron Joel Hurt laid out the park and the streets surrounding it, the parks grew, then slowly declined. Only in the last 15 years, born of the anxiety that the state Department of Transportation would destroy the park with a highway to Stone Mountain, did neighbors raise money to restore the parks. Under the leadership of Tally Sweat and her board, they raised almost ten million dollars. Perhaps more importantly the OLPA board negotiated partnerships with Atlanta and DeKalb County parks departments for joint upkeep and improvements. If the maintenance dollars stay in place, the park will not need a similar rescue in another 100 years. True Disclosure: I am a member of the OLPA board.



Well-placed steps climb out of the creek.

GET THAT CREEK OUT OF YOUR PIPE

The conversation varied with the landscape. We caught up on babies, jobs, husbands as we topped the hill, crossed Clifton Road and started down again, through Shady Side park. An historic well commanded our attention, as well as the wonderful maps of Olmsted's original design, printed on ceramic signs and placed by benches in the park segments. Beyond us traffic on Ponce de Leon was easy to ignore. Olmsted and his modern interpreter Spencer Tunnel designed and renewed the park to be a pastoral escape from the city. Shrubs at the edges are placed to eliminate the sight and sound of cars, enhance the stretch of the land and make the acreage look bigger and deeper.

We crossed the creek that flows out of Candler Park, cleaner and slower thanks to the city of Atlanta's extensive restoration of the golf course. The watershed managers and the parks department under Mayor Shirley Franklin & Parks Director Dianne Harnell Cohen and took the creek out of a pipe and let it live in daylight again.

Paideia School owns a slice of land beside the arched bridge over the creek. It's a science and landscape project in motion, yet today a tangle of kudzu and other wild plants from elsewhere. It could be cleared like Deepdene in the future. Meanwhile, Paideia students and teachers love the newly clear front yard of the popular school. At lunchtime, Oak Grove turns into a lively dining hall for the open air picnickers of Paideia.

Debbie and I walked together across the street to Lullwater Road, talking about middle school challenges and now to stay true to public schools. Her son at Inman, mine finishing Druid Hills High, we felt like veterans in the parental involvement wars. Tough stuff. Many of the wonderful kids in our lives leave public school in the middle years, then return for high school. We both sigh at the parents who quit volunteering as soon as elementary school is over.

DRIVING MISS DAISY

We left Olmsted behind when we turned right on Lullwater Road. The light was fading, but not before we spotted the house Miss Daisy was driven to. And on the right, at Lullwater Circle, we walked through the Conservation Garden, owned and managed by the Lullwater Garden Club. Those ladies are doing a wonderful job of removing the non-native invasive plants that were choking the downstream end of their park.



The Dell, or Hollow, in Dellwood.

NO LOLLING ON LULLWATER

Back onto Lullwater Parkway we walked up the hill to North Decatur, took a right and walked into Emory Village. There a cup of tea at Method Coffee Shop and book club member Sister Smith waited for us to catch our breath. Finally the book club talked about books, and club meetings, and the walk we'd taken.

By this time, it was dark so we didn't complete the loop on foot. We could have left the coffee shop, turned right on South Oxford Road and walked to Burbank Park at Clifton Road. That's a new park with Peavine Creek running right through it, created by Emory University and its neighbors, including the Druid Hills Civic Association. The route stays on Clifton, curving past the Druid Hills Golf Club, and includes a great stretch of Fernbank Forest and the museum itself. At Ponce, the route takes a left and returns to the start at the eastern end of Deepdene Park.



Recent rains down a century old tree.

JUST THE ROUTE:

Park at intersection of Deepdene Park, North Ponce de Leon and Ponce de Leon, east of EastLake Road.

Walk through the park, exit and cross Ponce to the left Lakeshore Drive.

Enter Dellwood and walk west, crossing Clifton. Enter Shadyside and walk downhill , crossing the creek on Ponce and turning right on Lullwater Parkway.

At Lullwater Circle, enter the conservation garden on the right. Exit onto Lullwater Circle or Parkway and go downstream to North Decatur Road.

Take a right and walk through Emory Village to Oxford Road South. Take a right at the Emory entrance. Keep the BP gas station on your left.

Oxford Road south to Clifton Road, and take a right. Stay on Clifton to Ponce de Leon and take a left at Fernbank Museum.