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Lenox Square site once was the home of great joy

Posted By [admin](#) On June 3, 2010 @ 9:00 pm In [Brookhaven Community](#), [Buckhead Community](#), [Sandy Springs Community](#) | [No Comments](#)

By Wright Mitchell



John King Ottley joins Mrs. Carl Ramspeck for a ride on a couple of his prize-winning horses at the riding rink at Joyeuse, his Buckhead estate.

Traffic flows through the intersection of Peachtree and Lenox roads unabated. Many of the cars, riding a wave of disposable income, or credit, as the case may be, are headed to Lenox Square or Phipps Plaza.

Of all the intersections in Buckhead, the confluence of Lenox and Peachtree roads perhaps best epitomizes what Buckhead has become – a haven of high-end shops, restaurants and bars.

But the Peachtree-Lenox crossroads were once symbolic of a different era in Buckhead history, an era when Buckhead, still a rough-and-tumble outpost, became the vacation destination of Atlanta's wealthiest citizens.

Mired in the heat and noise of downtown, people began to search for a cooler, more relaxing place to spend their free time, and Buckhead, with its clear, bold streams and rolling hills, fit the bill quite nicely.

One of the first people to build a country home in Buckhead was John King Ottley, the president of First National Bank. Ottley purchased the land where Lenox Square now stands from W.F. Qullian on Oct. 4, 1897, for \$1,816.48.

The tract Ottley originally purchased consisted of approximately 150 acres in Land Lots 45 and 46 and was bounded roughly by Peachtree Street to the north, Lenox Road (then called Fulton Avenue) to the east, the Southern Railway (now MARTA) Line to the south, and Piedmont Road to the west.

Ottley initially built a small summer cottage called Joyeuse (French for "Joy") on the summit of a large granite ridge that ran through the property. A 1903 article from the Atlanta Constitution described Joyeuse thusly: "A more commodious and comfortable summer cottage could scarcely be imagined, every room having its windows and doors opening on either of the broad verandas, almost surrounding the house."

Reaching Joyeuse in those days was no easy feat, even behind Ottley's team of "sporty horses." From the Ottley home downtown, the trip to Joyeuse usually took the entire day.

But once on the property, Ottley, an accomplished outdoorsman, was right at home. Ottley often awakened before sunlight to work with his prize-winning horses, such as the Belle of Joyeuse, in the large riding rink at the rear of the property.

An avid hunter, Ottley also found no shortage of quail and other game to pursue with his hunting dogs.

Among Ottley's other activities, he also raised and sold "the finest White Plymouth Rocks in the entire South." What are White Plymouth Rocks? According to an advertising pamphlet titled "Joyeuse Farms," they are a



Ottley stands in front of the house with son John Jr., daughter-in-law Mary, and grandsons John III and Dudley.

fancy kind of chicken.

In the pamphlet, Ottley touted, "I want to call your attention to the fact that my strain of birds produces uniformly good, straight combs, fine yellow legs and bright bay eyes." One can only assume this description was of great value to buyers who were familiar with such things.

After the advent of the automobile, which cut the trip time to Joyeuse considerably, Ottley and his family decided to move to Buckhead permanently. The summer cottage, however, would not do for formal living as the Ottleys were socially active and needed a home fit for entertaining. So Ottley, who had become quite wealthy by this time, built a stately 12-room English manor on the property about where the front entrance to Lenox is now located.

A broad front porch constructed with red tile extended the length of the house, uncovered save for the front entrance. There were deep porches on the side of the house and a stone porte-cochere to the right. The new home retained the whimsical name Joyeuse, and the Ottleys moved in for good in 1913.



The front driveway to Joyeuse is in the upper left of this undated photo, near the intersection of Peachtree and Lenox roads. The riding rink is the oval in the upper right. The Peachtree Park neighborhood, built on part of Ottley's land, is seen toward the bottom of the photo.

The interior of the home was like a scene from "The Great Gatsby." The walls were heavily beamed in dark wood, and a large library dominated the front of the house. The fireplaces, kept ablaze in the winter by a team of servants, were framed by massive mantels made of Rookwood tiles. Upstairs the home had five bedrooms and a porch with magnificent views of the surrounding countryside.

Behind the home were stables, which housed a variety of curiosities that a 1935 Atlanta Journal Magazine article described as "one of the most interesting and unusual collections in the south."

The stalls in the stable were fronted with the teller windows from a First National Bank building, and the stable rails were constructed from an old iron balcony. Ottley's collection also contained a 7-to-8-foot-high round "Lock Box," which was used by police to hold prisoners until they could be retrieved by a horse-drawn "Black Maria," the predecessor to the paddy wagon.

Ottley lived at Joyeuse until his death in 1945.

Ottley's estate subsequently sold the property to Haas & Dodd Insurance Co. in 1946, and it was subdivided into apartments. From 1947 until 1953, the house also served as a private nursery and kindergarten.

In 1956, the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation purchased the property, tore down the mansion and dynamited the stone ridge to make way for Lenox Square Mall. Construction began on the mall in 1958, and it officially opened for business Aug. 3, 1959.

One wonders what Ottley might think about his former property now. Certainly, he would marvel at the changes. But being one of Atlanta's first successful businessmen, he would no doubt respond with that inimitable sense of boosterism that has defined Atlanta through the years: "Well, at least somebody is making money."

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