

EAST KNOXVILLE HISTORIC DRIVING TOUR

MAGNOLIA AVENUE/BURLINGTON/MLK AVE/DANDRIDGE AVENUE

Start at Caswell Park at 620 Winona Street off Magnolia Avenue.

Total Driving Distance = 9.3 miles

1. CASWELL PARK

The park is named for William Caswell (1846-1926), businessman and real-estate developer who loved baseball; he reportedly played in the first game ever played in Knoxville, ca. 1865. In 1916 he gave this land, all within clear view of his home on Sixth Avenue, for use as a public park. Today it's a complex of softball and other athletic fields, but it was originally the longtime home of Knoxville's minor-league pro baseball teams. Hundreds of future major-leaguers played here, as well as Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig when the Yankees played exhibition games in town. Other stars, like Satchel Paige and Jesse Owens, performed athletic exhibitions here. Many years later, basketball star Michael Jordan played a few games here during his short career as a baseball player. It was also a venue for musical events; electric-guitar pioneer Sister Rosetta Tharpe performed here in 1951, and Otis Redding sang here in the early 1960s.



-- Follow Winona St. north for 0.2 miles and at the traffic light turn onto Washington Ave. To complete a short Parkridge loop, follow Washington for 0.4 miles, turn right onto N. Olive St., turn next right onto Jefferson Ave, and follow back to Winona St. --

2. PARKRIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD LOOP

starts 0.2 miles ahead

The Parkridge neighborhood, once part of Park City, existed as an incorporated community from 1907 to 1917. Part of its name, the "ridge" suffix is an homage to Chestnut Ridge, once a predominantly black community on the northwestern fringe of Park City. The neighborhood is known for its late Victorian architecture, especially that of George Barber, who was a partner in the original development of the neighborhood. Originally from the Chicago area, Barber (1854-1915) tried to make Victorian wood-frame architecture affordable to middle-class families across the nation through his mail-order plans, and there are believed to be thousands of Barber houses across America, from coast to coast. However, Parkridge boasts the highest concentration of them, perhaps because from the 1880s until the end of his life, it was Barber's home neighborhood. (Barber was the father of local architect Charles Barber, co-founder of Barber McMurry, who grew up here.) George Barber, probably the best-known architect ever to live in Knoxville, lived in several different places in his favorite neighborhood, but he's most associated with the colorful house at 1635 Washington Ave. on the corner at Monroe.



-- From Jefferson Ave., turn left onto Winona St. and head south back towards Magnolia Ave --

3. JOHN T. O'CONNOR SENIOR CITIZENS CENTER

0.2 miles ahead on right

On the right is the John T. O'Connor Senior Citizens Center. It's been here as a public amenity serving the seniors of Knoxville since the 1960s, but its name is especially interesting. John T. O'Connor (1881-1968), a popular mayor of Knoxville in the early 1930s, was a machinist by trade, a Union leader, a champion boxer, and a proud child of old Irish Town, the late-19th-century community of Irish immigrants that stretched between First and Second Creeks on the north side of downtown, and had its own Irish-dominated culture and economy. The Caswell Park area is on its eastern fringe of Irish Town.



-- Turn left onto Magnolia Ave --

4. MAGNOLIA AVENUE

Magnolia Avenue is named for Georgia-born Magnolia Branner (1829-1907), mother of H. Bryan Branner, who was elected mayor of Knoxville in 1880. She was widowed by 1888, when the city named a broad new street for her; she lived alone on Magnolia for many years. Her name prompted the planting of hundreds of magnolia trees along the route.



5. PELLISSEPP STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

0.1 miles ahead on right

On the right, Pellissippi State is the old Knoxville Catholic High School, established here in an old house in 1932, though the current building dates to 1942, with a major addition in 1951. Among the many who attended the school in the 1940s and early '50s was young Charles McCarthy, an attorney's son who would later be known as Cormac McCarthy. He wrote his first published work for the Catholic High newspaper. Catholic High remained here until it built a large school in West Knoxville in 1998.



-- Continue east on Magnolia Ave --

6. SWAN'S BAKERY

<0.1 miles ahead on left



The long brick building on the left, between Austin and Bertrand, is the old Swan's Bakery. It opened its modern new plant with some fanfare in 1927, and was so proud of it that Swan's invited the public to see it, and even made the bakery available as an event space for community meetings and parties. By the 1940s, Swan's was nationally known for its sponsored African American gospel group, Swan Silvertones, who have been cited as an influence by Paul Simon and others. Swan's remained in business until 1991.

-- Turn left onto N. Bertrand St. and head north 0.1 mile, then turn around and head back and turn left onto Magnolia Ave --

7. PARK PLACE (on N. Bertrand St.)

0.1 mile ahead on left



Park Place, on the side street just past Swan's, has been an upscale condo building earns its high-rent name with an appropriate grandeur--but it was built in 1927 as Park City Junior High. That public school closed in 1980. Five years later, hairdresser and restaurateur Kristopher Kendrick converted it into a residential building. In the 35 years since, it has been described as a catalyst for the city's new preservation-oriented interest in the long-ignored Parkridge community.

8. MOUNTAIN DEW

0.1 miles ahead on left on Magnolia



Just past Bertrand on the left, the plain-looking old white brick building at 1921 Magnolia has a special place in the history of a certain beverage with something of a cult following. It was here around 1945 that brothers Barney and Ally Hartman formulated the original recipe for Mountain Dew.

9. OLD PARK THEATRE SITE

0.3 miles ahead on left



On the northeast corner of Magnolia and Olive Street was the old Park Theatre. Built as a neighborhood theater in 1939, it unexpectedly became one of the city's main first-run theaters in the 1960s and '70s, and was the place where thousands of Knoxvillians first saw blockbusters like *The Sound of Music*, *Patton*, and *Jaws*. After some years of vacancy, it was torn down. One of the last known images of it is a fleeting glimpse in the 1996 John Turturro / Sam Rockwell film *Box of Moonlight*.

10. FORMER PARK CITY BRANCH LIBRARY

0.3 miles ahead on left



Park City Branch Library was built in 1930, with a classical Georgian design by Baumann and Baumann. It was immediately popular, offering separate adults' and children's reading rooms, plus a community meeting room, and was open nightly until 9 p.m. During a belt-tightening, the library system attempted to close the branch in 1965, but after strong community resistance, chose to keep it open for another decade. It finally closed in 1975, completing what was announced as a consolidation effort.

11. MAGNOLIA AVE UNITED METHODIST

0.3 miles ahead on right



On the right, at the corner of Harrison, the architecturally imposing brick church, with its lofty bell tower, is Magnolia Avenue United Methodist, built in 1927. In its 93 years, it has served hundreds of local families, including that of future Oscar-winning actress Patricia Neal, who lived near here. Just beyond it on the right are three handsome old brick apartment buildings, the Shenandoah, the Lakewood, and the Aston, all dating from the 1920s; the smaller Graham is across the street. Knoxville once had dozens of stylish old apartment buildings, but most have been torn down.

12. PIZZA PALACE

0.6 miles ahead on right



The Pizza Palace, at 3132 Magnolia, opened in 1961, courtesy of Greek immigrant Charlie Peroulas and his sons. Offering a full Italian menu, its Knoxville's oldest drive-in--and one of the city's oldest restaurants of any sort. Perhaps unusual among drive-ins, it offers beer, and has since its earliest days.



13. CHILOOEE PARK

0.1 miles ahead on left

Chilhowee Park, which is on both sides of Magnolia (they're linked by a tunnel under the street) started as a privately owned dairy farm run by former New Yorker Fernando Cortes Beaman, who made part of his farm available to the public in the 1880s, marketed as "Lake Ottosee." It became the destination of East Tennessee's first electric streetcar, in 1890, and for many years was a holiday picnic site, especially popular on Fourth of July and Labor Day. It became known for spectacles, including balloon ascensions, motorcycle races, fireworks, and some of the first football games ever seen in Knoxville.



In 1910 and 1911, Chilhowee hosted two very large regional fairs, the Appalachian Expositions, followed in 1913 by an even bigger one, the National Conservation Exposition, which drew one million visitors over two months, among them major progressive reformers like Booker T. Washington, Helen Keller, William Jennings Bryan, and Gifford Pinchot, the conservationist who was chairman of the event. The success of those expositions inspired an annual Tennessee Valley Fair in 1916. It continues every fall to this day.



Two historic structures remain at the park. One is the 1910 marble bandstand, in the middle of the park, the only remnant of the many buildings built at the park for the grand Exposition era of 1910-1913. The other is the Jacob Building, built in 1941 and named for prominent veterinarian and Fair administrator Dr. Moses Jacob. Almost forgotten is the fact that it was once among Knoxville's most exciting music venues, hosting concerts by Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Louis Armstrong, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bo Diddley, Ike and Tina Turner, and James Brown. Knoxville discovered both R&B and rock 'n' roll at the Jacob Building.

Adjacent to it, accessed by Prosser Road, is Zoo Knoxville. It evolved from very humble beginnings in 1948, when one alligator, an overgrown pet, became the first attraction of a very modest operation known as the Birthday Park Zoo. In the early 1960s, a disorderly African elephant named Ole Diamond, abandoned by Ringling Brothers, became its main attraction. Through major investment in the 1970s, it became a world-class zoo, earning unexpected acclaim as the site of the birth of the first African elephant ever born in the Western Hemisphere, sired by Ole Diamond himself. Since then, it has become a center for the study of red pandas and other species.



14. THE LUNCH HOUSE

0.4 miles ahead on right

Proceeding a bit farther east on Magnolia, note the little white cottage known as the Lunch House on the right, which has been an East Knoxville breakfast and lunch institution since 1993, in a house that had hosted residences and several other businesses before it. It's open for lunch, as you'd expect, but it's also famous for its old-fashioned breakfasts.

-- Turn right at Shelby Street, and right again at MLK --



15. BURLINGTON

0.1 miles ahead

What looks like the business district of a small town is old Burlington, originally a pocket shopping district at the turnaround of the Magnolia streetcar. Burlington once had its own movie theater, and still has a couple of distinctive restaurants, a fish market, and a barber shop. Most of its commercial buildings date to the early 20th century. Barnes' Barber Shop has been little changed since the 1940s. Lema's World Famous Chitlins has been catering to acquired tastes for 35 years.



"Downtown Burlington," one of very few old community commercial centers that have survived roughly intact, has been the subject of organized revival efforts in recent years by architectural and preservationist groups.

Burlington was once proud of its baseball team, a regional champion in the 1920s. A group that gathered to cheer it on, the Old Burlington Gang, still meets near here once a year, now as a neighborhood reunion.

-- Turn left at the traffic light onto Fern St., and then a quick left on Calvin St. and left onto Speedway Circle --



16. SPEEDWAY CIRCLE & KNAFFL HOUSE

0.2 miles ahead on right

Speedway Circle is a rarity on several levels. The half-mile oval, strictly residential since the 1920s, was originally a horse-racing track, created in the 1890s by resourceful businessman Cal Johnson, who was born into slavery. The racetrack got unusual attention during the Appalachian Exposition of 1910, when it hosted the very first airplane landing in Knoxville-area history, an early Wright flier.

At 3738 Speedway is an oddity on this oval block of mostly mid-century homes. It has an odd number on it, 918. This facade originally stood at 918 South Gay Street, as the townhouse home of prominent photographer Joseph Knaffl, from the 1890s until about 1926, when it was torn down for the construction of the Andrew Johnson Hotel. An enterprising contractor named J.R. Stephens salvaged the brick and stone facade, including Knaffl's porch, and moved it out here, to be his own home; his family remained here for more than 30 years. The house remained a residence until the very late 20th century. It has stood empty for several years but recently has been the subject of interest from developers.

-- Continue clockwise around Speedway Circle --



17. WORD OF LIFE MINISTRIES CHURCH

0.4 miles ahead on right

The Burlington Church of God built this chapel ca. 1938, after a neighbor's lawsuit alleged the church was likely to put up a cheap building, threatening the integrity of the previously all-residential neighborhood. The substantial design of the brick church may have been a response to that assumption. That church operated here until about 1966, then sold the building to the Greater Warner Tabernacle AME church. In recent years, it has been the Word of Life Ministries Church.

-- Head back to MLK Ave by turning left just after the church onto Calvin St., right onto Fern St., and at the traffic light turn left back onto MLK heading west 0.6 miles to S. Castle St--

OPTIONAL: OUT & BACK ON MLK TO AUSTIN EAST, JARNIGAN MORTUARY & COLD SPRINGS FARM



Just passed the turning for S. Castle St. is **Austin East High School**, on the left, at 2800 MLK. The name of the school reflects a desegregation combination: East High was the public high school for whites built on this site in 1951 Austin High was a post-Civil War school for black students originally located downtown. The two were combined in 1965. The resulting school has produced several championship football and basketball teams.



Opposite Austin East, **Jarnigan's Mortuary**, at 2823 MLK, is a remarkable story of perseverance. It's by far the oldest black-owned business in Knoxville, dating back to 1886, when Clem Jarnigan, already an experienced "undertaker," in the parlance of the day, founded it downtown on Commerce Street, near Gay. At the time, undertakers doubled as carpenters, making coffins for their clients. Jarnigan later moved to Nelson Street, in what was considered the black part of town. When Jarnigan died in 1927, he claimed to have buried more than 5,000 people. Generations of his family kept up the essential business's reputation for integrity. During Urban Renewal in the 1960s, demolition of the old neighborhood for highway construction forced Jarnigan's to move east. Since then, Jarnigan's has often been cited as the only black-owned business to survive the move.

A little further west on the right, there's some mystery about the earliest years of the long brick house behind the fence at 2639 Martin Luther King, but part of it may date back to the 1820s, when this was way out in the countryside. It was later known to businessman Joseph Mabry as **Cold Springs Farm**, and sometimes served as his family home. Mabry sold it to Thomas O'Conner in 1881—the year before O'Conner shot Mabry to death. During the Progressive era, it became the Mary McClung School for Girls, and in 1901 the Mount Rest Home.

-- From Burlington traffic light on MLK, head west for half a mile and turn left on S. Castle Street and follow up hill 0.6 miles to the top of the ridge, then turn right onto Wimpole Ave. --



18. KNOXVILLE BOTANICAL GARDEN & ARBORETUM

0.2 miles ahead on Wimpole Ave.

Knoxville Botanical Garden and Arboretum has a history dating back to the 1780s, when it became Revolutionary War veteran David Howell's farm and orchard. It constituted the origins of the durable Howell Nursery, which started as a business in the 1870s and served as a prolific source of trees and ornamental plants for the region until it closed in 2002. Thereafter, with a major gift from the Aslan Foundation, and further contributions, it became a 47-acre public garden run by the nonprofit KBGA. It's notable for its encyclopedic array of trees and shrubs and for some unusual original buildings, like the circular stone huts. Later equipped with a modernist Visitor Center, it has been used for indoor community conferences as well as outdoor concerts.

-- Continue past Knoxville Botanical Gardens and head downhill to Biddle St. and turn left. At the stop sign, keep right, still on Biddle St., and turn right onto Brooks Ave. until the 5-way stop sign at the gas station. Stay straight and proceed uphill to the next stop: Beck Cultural Exchange Center --

OPTIONAL: SHORT OUT & BACK ON DANDRIDGE AVE.



WILLIAMS HOUSE

0.4 miles ahead on left on Whittle Springs Rd.

Before heading towards Beck, take a sharp left onto the eastern part of Dandridge, to see the neighborhood's oldest house. The brick house on the left, at the entrance to Williams Creek Golf Course, is the John Williams home, built in 1826 for former U.S. senator and ambassador John Williams (1778-1837). It's one of Knoxville's oldest residences, but was abandoned for many years before it was renovated for office use. Williams was an outspoken opponent of several of the policies of Andrew Jackson, and may have been the origin of the term "Tennessee Volunteer." He was also great-great grandfather of the playwright Tennessee Williams, who visited this house more than once. Williams Creek Golf Course is a par-three course intended for community use.] Behind the house is the former school for the deaf for black students which now serves as the club house for Williams Creek Golf Course.

19. BECK CULTURAL EXCHANGE CENTER

It was the final home of James and Ethel Beck, who were an inspiring couple to Knoxville's African American community for much of the 20th century. James Beck was the state's first black postal clerk, and was the leading founder of Knoxville's chapter of the NAACP; Ethel, a former tennis champ, was founder of an orphanage for black children. Built in 1912 for a white family, this house became a target for a cross-burning in 1947, when Dr. E.F. Lennon, a well-known black physician, purchased the house. The Beck Cultural Exchange Center, which includes an extensive library, has served as a museum of local African American history since 1975.

Immediately to the west of Beck is the Delaney House, currently being renovated as a museum of the life and work of internationally known modern portraitist and abstract expressionist Beauford Delaney and his younger brother Joseph Delaney, also a professional artist noted for his New York street scenes. They did not live here—it was the home of their brother, Samuel—but it's the surviving house most intimately associated with their family. Beauford Delaney stayed here during his last visit to Knoxville in the winter of 1969-1970. He died in Paris nine years later, and his work has been the subject of exhibitions there in the years since. Recently, the Knoxville Museum of Art has acquired a significant number of Beauford's paintings as part of its permanent collection.

20. MABRY-HAZEN HOUSE

0.3 miles ahead on right



Farther on the right is the Mabry-Hazen House. One of the most prominent citizens in antebellum Knoxville, real-estate and railroad investor Joe Mabry had already led the effort to establish Market Square before he built this stylish frame house in 1858. The impulsive, hot-tempered Mabry got in more than one gun scrape, and his sons may have taken after him. One was killed in a Gay Street saloon gunfire in 1881; less than a year later, Mabry himself and another son were both killed on another part of Gay Street in a shootout with banker Thomas O'Conner, who was also killed in the melee. The house remained in the family for more than a century, last occupied by Mabry's granddaughter, Evelyn Hazen, famous herself in 1934 for a nationally publicized breach of promise lawsuit against her former fiance, much of it concerning romantic activities in this house. Since 1992, the Mabry-Hazen House has been a museum open to the public; they tell all the family's dramatic stories there.

21. MORNINGSIDE PARK/ALEX HALEY HERITAGE SQUARE

0.1 miles ahead on left



-- Turn left out of Morningside Park and at traffic light turn right onto MLK Jr Ave. --

22. VINE MIDDLE SCHOOL

0.3 miles ahead on left



On the left is Vine Middle School, which has roots in the early 1950s as a school for black children. It desegregated in the '60s, and in recent years has been a magnet school. It bears the name of old Vine Avenue, which was once the economic and cultural center of the black community. Vine Avenue was mostly erased by Urban Renewal in the 1960s, and mostly replaced with what's now Summit Hill Drive.

23. CALVARY CEMETERY

0.2 miles ahead on right



Ahead is an extraordinary cluster of cemeteries. The first one on the right, with the elaborate statuary, is Calvary, which was established in the 1800s as a Catholic cemetery. Most of those buried here have roots in the Irish, German, and other immigrant communities of the era. Mayor John T. O'Connor, mentioned earlier in this tour, along with other locals such as Patrick Sullivan, the well known Old City saloon keeper, are buried here.

-- Turn right onto S. Kyle St. Potters Field Cemetery is on the right, Odd Fellows Cemetery is on the left --

24. POTTERS FIELD CEMETERY

0.2 miles ahead on right



To the east is old Potter's Field, the county cemetery designated for the homeless and unclaimed, most of them unmarked and unrecorded. Estimates of the number buried here, mostly before 1940, are upwards of 6,000. The large monument was installed to represent them all. Engraved on it is a poignant passage from English poet Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

25. ODD FELLOWS CEMETERY

<0.1 miles ahead on left

Across to the east from Potters Field is Odd Fellows Cemetery, an African American cemetery that includes many memorials to people born into slavery. Among those buried here are multiple soldiers, from the Civil War and later, as well as the grave of notable businessman Cal Johnson.

**--- From S. Kyle St., turn right onto Bethel Ave. and head approx 0.3 miles to Bethel Cemetery on your right.
Return to MLK the way you came --**

26. BETHEL CEMETERY

0.3 miles ahead on right

Adjacent to both Calvary and Potter's Field, is the Bethel Cemetery, often known as the Confederate cemetery for the large number of war dead buried there. The tall monument at its center is the largest Confederate monument in the Knoxville area. That fenced cemetery is open by appointment via the Mabry-Hazen House.

-- Proceed on MLK Ave. farther east to the cross streets of Olive St. and Ben Hur Ave --

Note: Ben Hur Avenue's surprising name may have been inspired by a groundbreaking 1907 silent film based on the popular novel of ancient Rome. This is the site of the old business district known as Five Points. After generations of road improvements, the "five points" are no longer discernible, but the old name remains.

-- From MLK Ave., turn left onto Olive St. --

27. WORD OF FAITH CHRISTIAN CENTER

0.2 miles ahead on left

At the top of the hill on the left, at Linden, note the old fortress-like brick church used recently by the Word of Faith Christian Center. It was once the Park City Presbyterian Church, originally built in 1891, with an extensive addition in 1924.

-- Head downhill on N. Olive St. back to Magnolia Ave. and end of the tour --

HISTORIC KNOXVILLE: THE CURIOUS VISITOR'S GUIDE TO ITS STORIES & PLACES



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