



# SHAKER HEIGHTS

## Historical Development of Shaker Heights

The City of Shaker Heights has a rich and varied history. The area was first settled at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1822, the North Union Colony of the “United Society of Believers” (commonly known as Shakers) was founded on 1,400 acres donated by early township settlers. This utopian community farmed the land and operated a mill. As the nearby city of Cleveland grew, membership in the colony declined until the few remaining members disbanded to other Shaker colonies in 1889.

The Shakers’ lands were purchased by various speculators during the 1890s. However, the land was not successfully developed until two enterprising brothers, Oris Paxton and Mantis James Van Sweringen, began selling lots in 1905. The brothers realized the potential of the beautiful, large tract of farmland and saw in it an opportunity to develop an extraordinary community.

The developers hired the F.A. Pease Engineering Company to design roads, transit, lakes and parks for the development, then called Shaker Village. The development was planned in accordance with the principles of the English Garden City Movement, taking advantage of the natural landscape and incorporating tree-lined boulevards and neighborhood green spaces as part of the design.

The first section of Shaker Village was developed near Fairmount Boulevard and extended east beyond Eaton Road and south to Fernway Road. Shaker Village grew quickly from the Van Sweringens’ initial purchases in 1905. By 1920, the boundaries of the development were essentially the same as exist today for the City of Shaker Heights. Shaker Heights was incorporated as a city in 1931.



Although it cannot be specifically documented, it is apparent that the philosophy followed by the Van Sweringens bore great similarity, if not a direct relationship, to that of the “Garden Cities Movement” begun in England in the late 1890s. In 1898, Ebenezer Howard, an English social reformer, wrote a book called *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, in which he argued for the carefully controlled development of new cities in agricultural districts as an alternative to the haphazard evolution of sprawling suburbs which he saw taking place in London and other large cities.

The Garden City movement became popular in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the problems that Ebenezer Howard found in London, most notably pollution and overcrowded living conditions, were occurring in American cities as well. Therefore, American architects and planners adapted some of the Garden City ideals to newly developing suburbs with the goal of combining the health benefits and pleasures of rural living with the urban conveniences and modern amenities available at the time. Other notable examples of American Garden City suburbs include Riverside, Illinois and Radburn, New Jersey.

Although Howard’s proposals envisioned new industrial cities, the Van Sweringens applied his philosophy to the development of a residential city. In accordance with the Garden City idea, they began purchasing



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large tracts of agricultural land that were to be held under single ownership. Small districts within the original parcels were to be subdivided while the remaining land would serve as permanent green space and parks. Another similarity with the Garden City concept was the limiting of the population of each district with development of future districts elsewhere within the original parcel. Each district was to have its own green area or park system to act as a buffer, thereby keeping the district separate and distinct but accessible to each other. Also, in order to create close-knit communities within the districts, each was to have its own neighborhood school located on prominent parcels of land as designated by the planners. Gradually the neighborhoods came to be identified by the names of the nine elementary schools established in Shaker Village.

Integrating the natural landscape with the built environment, another important ideal in the Garden City movement, was a key feature of Shaker Village. Strict enforcement of building setbacks and spacious tree lawns planted with sycamores, elms, and maples further enhanced the green vistas. In addition to preserving the two large man-made lakes created by the North Union Shakers, two smaller lakes, Marshall and Green Lake, were created by damming a secondary branch of Doan Brook, creating some of the choicest properties in Shaker Village.

To help with the overall planning of the community, the Van Sweringen brothers hired the F.A. Pease Engineering Company to design the system of roads. Two east-west boulevards, Shaker and South Moreland (now Van Aken), were laid with the intention of accommodating both automotive and rapid transit uses. Two north-south roads, Lee and Warrensville Center, were already in existence and completed their primary street pattern. With traffic directed to these major roads, a street hierarchy could be established. The smaller residential roads, following the natural topography of the land, discouraged through traffic.

Although Shaker Village was only eight miles from downtown Cleveland, the travel time by streetcar was 45 minutes to one hour. The Van Sweringens understood this lengthy commute diminished the village's attraction as a place to build a family's home. Therefore, the brothers began investigating the possibility of developing a rapid transit service. They again hired the F.A. Pease Engineering Company to construct the transit line. Beginning in 1914, track construction took six years to complete due to delays caused by World War I and a post-war steel strike. On April 11, 1920, the first car traveled to the Lynnfield stop on the South Moreland line (now the Van Aken or Blue line). Five days later the Shaker Boulevard line (the Green line) commenced operation. The easy and quick accessibility to downtown, 21 minutes, coupled with the natural beauty of the residential sites, enticed thousands of families to build homes in Shaker Village during the 1920s and 1930s. According to a 1928 Van Sweringen advertisement, one family a day moved to Shaker Village in 1927. Due to Shaker Village's explosive growth, residents of the village (which had been incorporated in 1912) decided to incorporate as a city. In 1931 the city's charter was approved; the City of Shaker Heights was established.

As Shaker Village grew, the Van Sweringen brothers were interested in creating a broader choice of educational opportunities for the area's children. They offered a donation of land to a number of private schools located in Cleveland with the goal that they would relocate to Shaker Village. The three private schools approached by the Van Sweringens accepted the offers and relocated to Shaker Village. The three schools, Hathaway Brown, Laurel School and University School, are still in operation today.



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The Van Sweringens were also interested in having religious organizations relocate to the area. They first extended an offer of land to Plymouth Church. The congregation did relocate to Shaker Village; the main structure was built in 1919. Similar to the schools, the siting of religious buildings was important. They also received visually prominent parcels of land on which to build their sanctuaries.

Donations of land were not only made to educational and religious organizations, but to recreational organizations as well. In 1913, the Van Sweringens offered a donation of land (unsuitable for homes as it is a flood plain) to the Euclid Golf Club. They accepted, and upon moving to the area the club was renamed the Shaker Country Club.

The zoning ordinance, adopted in 1927, required uniform building setbacks and building heights. Residential setbacks were large, and the deep front yards and dense tree lawns allowed the quickly developing area to retain its wooded appearance. The restrictions on building heights created a standard building mass that allowed the homes, differing greatly in architectural styles and ornament, to create a cohesive streetscape.

Securing the village's future as a residential community was of extreme importance to the Van Sweringens. They had watched Euclid Avenue, once a street lined with beautiful mansions, transform into a commercial district. The brothers did not want this to happen to Shaker Village. Therefore, deed restrictions were attached to each property requiring that it forever be zoned residential.

Originally, apartment buildings were not allowed within Shaker Village. This changed in the late 1920s when the Van Sweringens recognized the need for density to fully support the rapid transit system. The brothers required that the rental properties be built along the main thoroughfares only and to be designed within the established Shaker standard of quality architecture and craftsmanship.

Because Shaker Village was owned by one company, its development could be strictly controlled. Each residential development had to be approved by the Van Sweringen Land Company. To ensure the quality of homes being built, as well as to assist architects with this approval process, design guidelines were established. *Shaker Village Standards*, first published in 1925, informed those interested in building a home of the architectural styles allowed as well as the materials and colors that should be used depending on the style of architecture chosen. As the number of permits for new homes grew, an Architectural Board of Review was established to review and approve all plans (this Board is still in existence today).

The Van Sweringens laid the charge that each house built must be architecturally unique. Because of this, most of the homes within Shaker Heights are not exact replicas of a particular architectural style. The house may have a dominant style, but small details of differing styles create an architectural richness to each home that will not be duplicated. Also, the Van Sweringens promoted the use of natural and textured materials for all construction.

Palatial homes for wealthy families were not the only homes built in the quickly developing Shaker Village. The Van Sweringens, when creating the zoning ordinance, designated specific areas of the village for smaller single-family homes as well as two-family homes. This gave families of a wider range of incomes the opportunity to live in Shaker Village. The overall design of Shaker's two-family homes is unique; they have one front entrance. By sharing one entry, the two-family homes retain the appearance of single-



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family homes. The design and construction of smaller homes were held to the same Shaker standard as larger homes. As quoted from the *Shaker Village Standards*, "the architectural expression will be as carefully considered as in the higher priced sections."

Three broad architectural styles were promoted within *Shaker Village Standards*: French, English, and Colonial. These three revival styles, although different, blend harmoniously with each other creating classic, refined neighborhoods that have stood the test of time.

### **ENGLISH**

The English style encompasses four categories: Early English, Jacobethan, English Tudor and Cottage. An Early English home, with its towers, small vertical windows, and steep rooflines, has a medieval appearance. Jacobethan homes frequently have bay windows and stone mullions frame the rectangular leaded glass windows. English Tudor homes typically display half-timbering, where stucco or brick fills the areas between the exposed timbers. Cottage style homes have distinctive rooflines. The shingles extend beyond the edge of the roof and curl around the edges imitating the look of a thatched roof.

### **FRENCH**

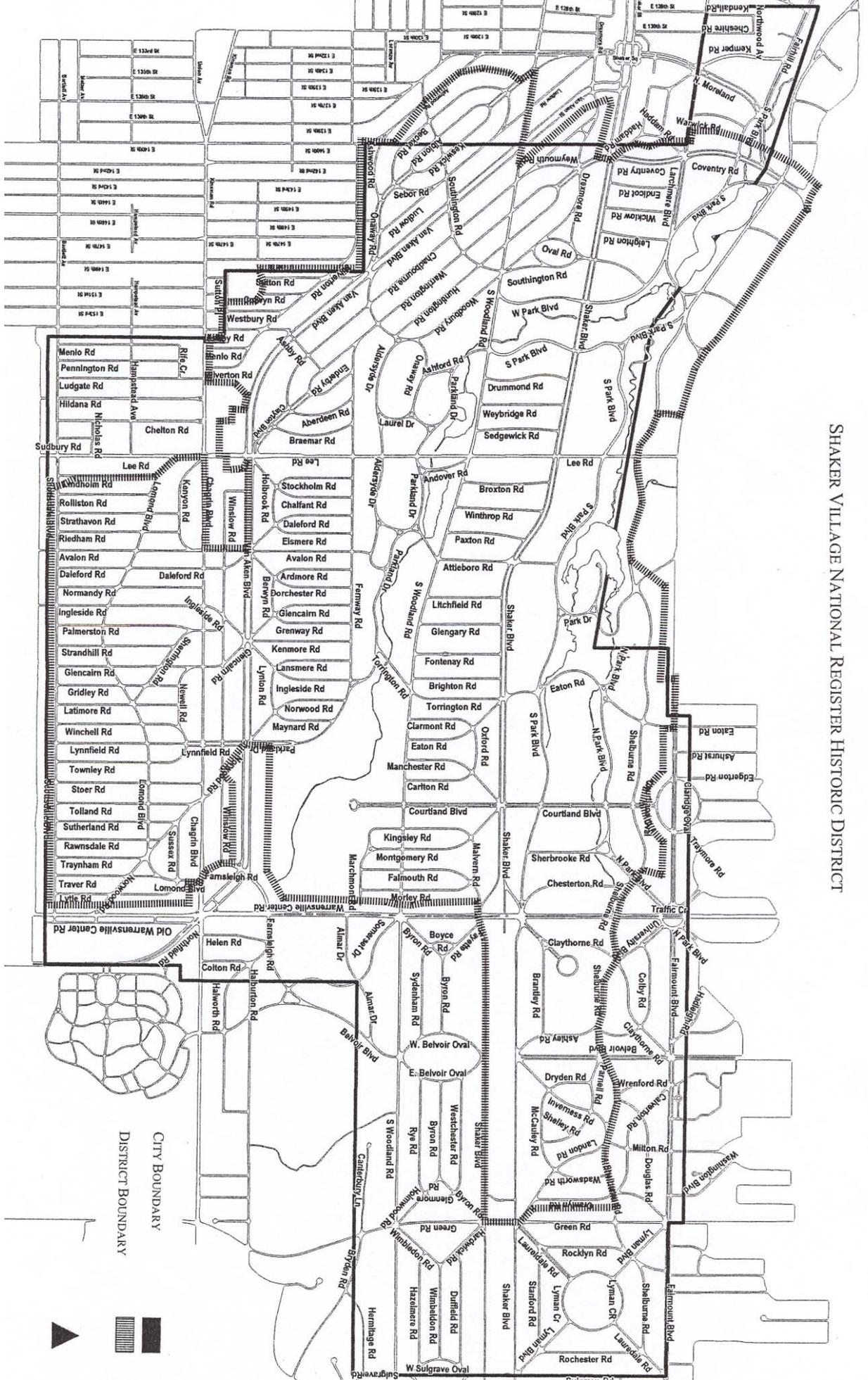
The predominant French styles found in Shaker Heights are Country Chateau and French Classical. Country Chateau homes have steeply pitched hip roofs. Dormers cutting into the lower roofline help to diminish the dominance of the roof. Exterior walls are brick, stone or stucco and the roofing material is typically wood shingle or slate. French Classical homes, constructed of brick or stone, possess large vertical windows adorned with stone.

### **COLONIAL**

Colonial homes can be described as New England Vernacular, Federal, Georgian, Pennsylvania Farmhouse, and Dutch Colonial. New England Vernacular homes have shingle or clapboard siding, central front entry and double hung windows with shutters. Details found on Federal style homes include decorative moldings around the roofline, sidelights and a semi-circular fanlight over the front door, as well as second-story Palladian windows. Many Georgian residences have a decorative molding around the roofline, typically in a dentil pattern. The windows are symmetrical, aligned both vertically and horizontally. Pennsylvania Farmhouses typically have first floor stone walls with high-contrasting mortar. Dutch Colonial homes can be easily identified by their double-pitched gambrel roofs.

Throughout the years, the City's high standards have gained Shaker Heights national recognition for its residential architecture and overall city design. Seventy-five percent of the City is located within the Shaker Village Historic District, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

SHAKER VILLAGE NATIONAL REGISTER HISTORIC DISTRICT



CITY BOUNDARY  
DISTRICT BOUNDARY

