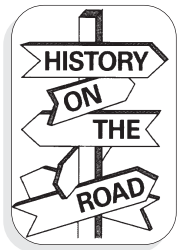


HISTORY ON THE ROAD

CLEVELAND'S HESSLER COURT

By Dianne Timblin

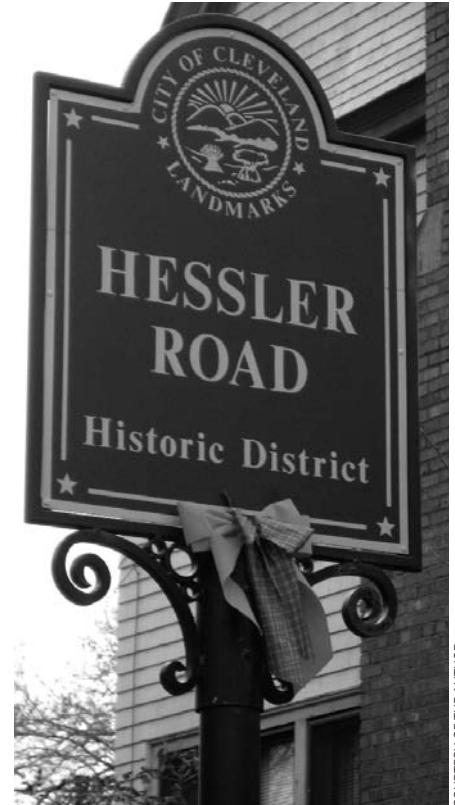


When you turn the corner onto Hessler Court, just off the Case Western Reserve University campus, the first thing you notice is the sound. Or more accurately, the lack of it, especially when you turn onto Hessler Court from Hessler Road, the brick-paved street that runs perpendicular to it. Over the decades, the brick street has buckled and cracked, and although the brickwork remains picturesque, the ride is bumpy and loud. Hessler Court, however, the last remaining wood block road in Cleveland, remains smooth and quiet, serving as a reminder of one reason wood block paving became a popular option on urban streets in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This block-long wood-paved road is typical for its time—in location, appearance, and paving style in particular—falling into a long tradition of wood paving that dates at least as far back as the second century B.C.E.

The earliest known remains of a wood road were excavated at Corlea Bog in County Longford, Ireland. Uncovered by archaeologist Barry Raftery in the 1980s, the wood road spanned the bog, connecting two points of high ground, and dates to 148 B.C.E. The construction relied primarily on halved oak trunks laid out as paired parallel “runners” across which “sleepers,” like railroad ties, were laid perpendicularly, the timbers joined with pegs and mortises. The sleepers are spaced closely together, and the flat surfaces of the logs typically face up. Without the wood road, the bog would have been impassable for many months of the year. Evidence of another, apparently Bronze Age trackway beneath the one excavated by Raftery further implies the road’s value. The bog itself is responsible for preserving the evidence of both roads, since the peat served to embalm the timbers.¹

Millennia later and half a world away, wood roads appeared in colonial North America. Corduroy roads, named for the cotton cloth because of its similarly ridged appearance, provided a means of crossing particularly muddy or swampy areas.² In a few cases, the swampy ground itself has allowed vestiges of these roads to remain in place for examination centuries later. In April 2008, for example, the remains of a corduroy-style log road dating to 1684 were uncovered in Annapolis, Maryland.³ Canadians were first to experiment with using sawed plank surfaces and in the 1830s became the first North Americans to begin systematically installing plank roads. Residents of Onondaga County, New York, liked what they saw their neighbors doing and in the 1840s followed suit with their own.⁴ Planking helped make rural American roads more passable, particularly in wet weather, but ultimately proved costly, since the planks typically had to be replaced every four to five years rather than the eight to ten years investors originally expected. Rural residents resisted paying taxes for road construction and maintenance, and even with tolls it was difficult for investors to see a return on their money.⁵

Passability was also a major concern for city dwellers. Wood roads such as Cleveland’s Hessler Court became an urban staple, first in the form of planking and later in two distinct stages of wood block construction. Stone block pavements were more common overall but expensive to build and proved noisy in an era of iron horseshoes and steel-rimmed carriage and wagon wheels. Several U.S. cities, including Cleveland, began experimenting with plank roads. But those roads typically did not live up to the seven years of durability that had been predicted for pine or the ten to twelve expected for oak. In fact, one historian found that “many plank pavements disintegrated in two years. No new plank roads were started after 1854 in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, or Iowa, and most of the existing roads were aban-

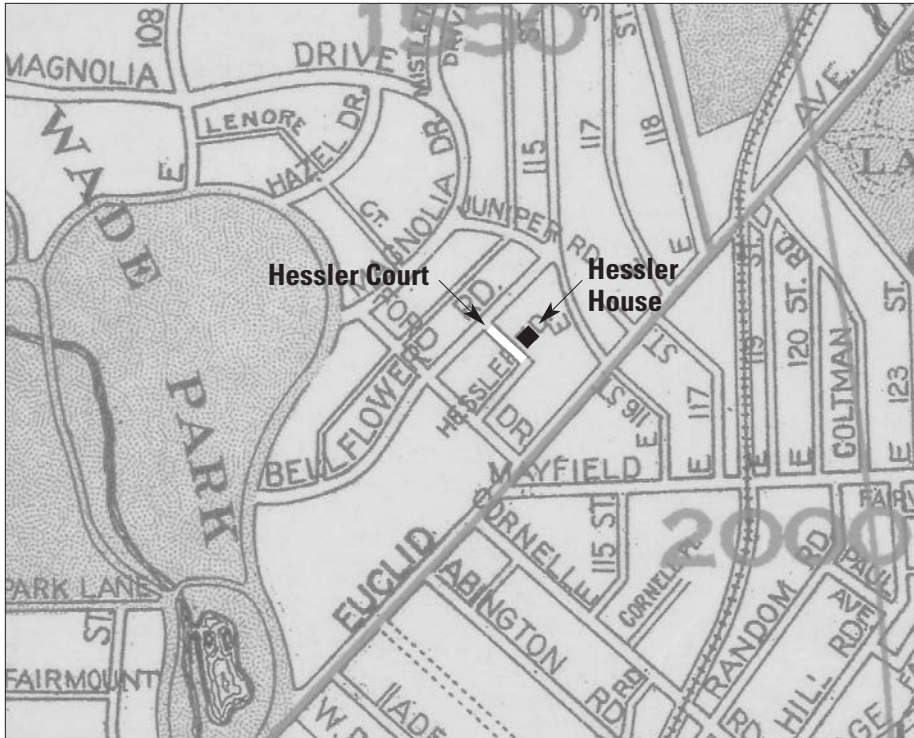


COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Owing to the neoclassical and bungalow character of the homes on Hessler Road and the wood block paving on Hessler Court, neighborhood residents persuaded the City of Cleveland to designate the area as a historic district in 1975, the first such designation in the city.

doned after 1856 or 1857.”⁶ Planking as a paving practice continued longer in northern Wisconsin and Michigan as well as in New England and the Pacific Northwest, where the availability of lumber made it viable for several more decades.⁷

In Boston, Samuel Nicholson built a road using his patented wood block pavers in 1866. The pine was soaked in creosote and cut into blocks three to four inches wide, six to fourteen inches long, and six inches deep. Nicholson’s techniques were quickly imitated by competitors, and the use of wood block paving took hold in northern U.S. cities such as New York,



The Hessler House sits at the north corner of Hessler Road and Hessler Court, the last remaining wood block paved street in the city. The two roads first appeared on maps in 1908; this map is from 1914, the same year that Emery Hessler completed purchasing land along Hessler Court. Subsequently, Hessler Road was extended past his house, which was relocated from Bellflower Road in 1916.

Newark, Detroit, and—once again—Cleveland. The abundance of timber made wood block paving an affordable option, and thus popular.

Like wood plank paving, however, Nicholson pavement failed to live up to its early promise, and in the 1870s it was abandoned, for several reasons. Nicholson blocks were “slippery when wet or fouled by mud from unpaved streets, and they offered poor traction on steep grades. The wood absorbed horse urine and excrement and sweated putrid fluid in hot

weather. The blocks also rotted rapidly, with a normal maximum use of six years and a reported life of only two years in Washington, D.C.”⁸ Multiple factors contributed to the pavement’s failure rate. The wood was generally not selected with care, with soft woods like white pine often used. The wide joints allowed water to seep in and be absorbed by the blocks, with the result that the blocks would swell and heave. Compounding these problems, “the foundation was usually of untreated planks, laid directly upon earth, so that

they soon decayed, while the pavement sank into ruts and holes.”⁹ Further damaging the reputation of Nicholson’s technique was the prevailing view that the pavement contributed to the spread of the 1871 Chicago fire; the highly flammable streets, constructed as they were with creosote-soaked wood, served as an accelerant instead of a firebreak.¹⁰

Despite the problems, wood block paving remained appealing for its quietness and affordability, and municipal experiments with it continued from the 1880s into the early 1900s. Eventually, wood block pavers injected—not just soaked—with creosote came into favor. Paving with these blocks began as early as 1873, when a road built with creosoted southern pine was constructed in Galveston, Texas. The U.S. Forest Service reported in 1908 that “the success of the modern wood block pavement” had several causes: “The wood is carefully selected, both as to kind and quality; it is cut accurately into rectangular blocks, is put through seasoning processes, and is preserved from decay, with creosote” to reduce water absorption and “consequent expansion and contraction of the pavement.” When the blocks were laid tightly, with the grain vertical, over a solid foundation of cement-concrete, the joints were waterproof and maintenance became relatively easy.¹¹ Hessler Court was platted toward the end of this latter phase of wood block paving and may represent the very last portion of three waves of wood paving in Cleveland.

Making roadways reliably passable was clearly a high priority in the Forest City. The city council authorized street planking to begin in 1840—before sewers were dug (1853), reservoirs were established (1846), or gas lines were run (1849).¹² The city started planking the streets four to five

U.S. FOREST SERVICE PHOTO, FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY PHOTO COLLECTION



Samuel Nicholson’s patented paving technique quickly fell out of favor because he spaced the blocks too far apart and because “the foundation was usually of untreated planks, laid directly upon earth, so that they soon decayed, while the pavement sank into ruts and holes.” This cross section shows the plan used by the Hale Pavement Company of Staunton, Virginia, in the 1880s.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



COURTESY OF CHRIS M. WORRELL

accompanied it, had a direct impact on the neighborhood where Hessler Court is located. As the city grew eastward, Euclid Avenue, situated one city block southeast of Hessler Road, became known after 1889 as “the showcase of America.” Wade Park, adjacent to Euclid, was the first large park in the city.¹⁵ Hessler Court, therefore, was positioned in a fashionable neighborhood, where the aesthetics and sound quality of the road might have been given greater consideration.

Hessler Court’s wood blocks can, in fact, tell us something about the nature of the neighborhood at the time of its paving. The same is true of Hessler Road

Looking northwest up Hessler Court while standing on Hessler Road. The house at right is the Hessler House (see inset), which fronts onto Hessler Road. Originally it sat on Bellflower Road, but was moved in 1916 by Emery Hessler to this location.

years after New York City and one year after London began paving with wood.¹³ As wood block paving became widely preferred over planking, Cleveland followed suit, and by 1870 the city had 8¾ miles of wood block paving. (By comparison, records for the same year show that Cleveland had 10½ miles of stone pavement.) However, in keeping once again with national paving trends, the city replaced its wooden pavements during the 1880s with Medina sandstone.¹⁴

In fact, the latter half of the nineteenth

century brought so much growth to Cleveland that in 1880 there were 975 streets, 183 avenues, and 113 lanes, alleys, and places, plus 5 roads. Despite the significant drawbacks of Medina sandstone pavement, which jarred carriage riders both physically and aurally, so prevalent was the trend to pave with stone that some residents urged the city to forgo paving the remaining dirt roads altogether so that they might drive without “shaking our bones over the stones.” Cleveland’s expansion in the late 1800s, and the myriad changes that

and its light-duty brick paving. Thoroughfares with heavy traffic called for granite blocks, heavy bricks, or iron or steel squares. Materials such as thin granite, light bricks, and blocks composed of asphalt, concrete, iron, or steel were reserved for residential streets with lower traffic levels. Wood paving was used where quietness was desired most: “near hospitals, schools, churches, and public buildings like court houses where street noise was especially bothersome and in congested streets with heavy traffic.”¹⁶ Or, of course, where a private owner preferred and could afford to install wood block pavement.

Today, Hessler Court serves as a one-way outlet for Hessler Road, a cozy enclave that includes a mix of college students and



COURTESY OF STEVEN ANDERSON

Where Hessler Road's brick construction meets Hessler Court's wood pavers, one can immediately see why the wood block paving would offer a quieter and smoother ride. The visible grain in the wood blocks indicates the road was not constructed using the Nicholson technique.

long-term residents. The combined neighborhood of Hessler Court and Hessler Road blends an Old World feel (thanks to Tudor revival and neoclassical architecture) with an artistic and scholarly vibe. In the early twentieth century, however, Hessler Road, which is only two blocks long, was a fashionable address, and the wood paving of Hessler Court would have provided an attractive and quiet approach. Hessler Court itself is shorter still, measuring roughly 275 feet long and 19½ feet wide. The wooden pavers are rectangular, laid in a staggered pattern similar to brickwork. The blocks' end grain may be easily distinguished on the road's surface, and with the blocks measuring 4½ inches by 9 inches each, the court is paved with approximately 19,000 of them. Although small portions of the court have been patched with asphalt and concrete, the wood paving is mainly intact. In the mid-1970s, the original wood block portions were estimated to make up 95 percent of Hessler Court. From the look of things today, that percentage may have dropped slightly, but not much.¹⁷

We know its dimensions, and we know that it was platted no later than 1908 and added to the National Register of Historic

Places in March 1973. But the history of Hessler Court nonetheless retains some mystery. The details of its origin and construction are unclear, leaving us with some questions: How did it get its name? When was it built? And given the life expectancy of most wood pavement, why has it survived so long?

The street name might have derived from that of the property owner who held the land prior to Hessler Court's platting. According to the National Register, it was Echo M. Heisley, a name that is only somewhat close to "Hessler." In 1892, however, his name was recorded in the Cuyahoga County Atlas as Heisler—much closer to "Hessler." Furthermore, at the time, Cleveland already had a Heisley Avenue, so that may have factored into the street's naming as well.¹⁸ Or did it? Other sources, and some research in the records of the City of Cleveland's Landmarks Commission and the Cuyahoga County Recorder's Office, clearly indicate that Hessler Court was a private drive or alley owned by Emery Hessler, a surgical instruments salesman who began buying land in the Wade Park area in 1889. By 1914 he had put together several parcels of land, purchased

from Frank and Minnie Smith and others, to create a tract bounded by Bellflower Road on the north, Euclid Avenue on the south, Ford Drive on the west side, and East 115th Street on the east side. In 1911, he sold land along Hessler Road back to Frank Smith with the understanding that houses could be built on it for no less than \$3,000 each, assuring that the neighborhood would remain exclusive.¹⁹ In 1916, Hessler relocated his house, moving it one block, from Bellflower Road to a position near what was then the end of Hessler Road. Some sources estimate Hessler Court's paving date to have been around 1916, which would coincide with Emery Hessler's house relocation and his extending Hessler Road further northeast.²⁰ Such a late date seems puzzling, however, since the platting date was eight years earlier, the same time Hessler Road first appeared on maps. (Depending on the mapmaker, Hessler Court was initially unnamed or called Hessler N.W.) In the end, sources disagree about the paving date and nothing definitive has been found.

The mystery surrounding Hessler Court's paving date raises yet more questions. Was Hessler Court constructed and

paved initially as a private drive, one that the city may have acquired by 1916? Or was Hessler Court paved with wood immediately before it was first platted in 1908? In either case, it would represent a late phase of wood block paving in the city. This could be the case, despite what one might expect in light of transportation changes occurring at the time: "In the closing year of the nineteenth century, 1900, as automobiles began to look more like the future of transportation and less like a short-lived, inefficient craze, and powered flight was a mere four years away, wood block paving continued to attract attention."²¹ Wood block had special properties that were still useful in paving. For example, it absorbed vibration from electric streetcars, it was quieter under all varieties of wheels than granite block, it was seen as more durable and easier to maintain than macadam, and it proved light and strong for paving bridges built with wooden decks.²²

But when did Cleveland stop paving with wood? By the time a May 1907 report on paving was issued, the city appears to be done using it. At a symposium on municipal paving, Cleveland's secretary of the Board of Public Service stated that although the city paved with a variety of materials, such as brick, Belgian block, and stone, "cedar block is not used."²³ Was this public official unaware of Hessler Court? Or was it not taken into consideration because it had been privately built? Or is it possible that Hessler Court was not originally paved with cedar—or with wood at all?

In the end, the wood blocks of Hessler Court have proved to be more solid than the facts surrounding their installation. The pavement's staying power appears remarkable when one considers that a decade was considered the upper limit of longevity. The pavement's origin in at least the second wave of wood block paving has perhaps played a role, since the wood was most likely injected with creosote rather than merely soaked in it. And if it was built within the first two decades of the twentieth century, the wood would have been vulnerable to wear and tear from horseshoes and wagon wheels for only a few years. It may also have helped that Hessler Court is more neighborhood lane than thoroughfare. Traffic levels are light (both in volume and weight) compared with nearby Bellflower Road and Ford

Drive, which are well-traveled city streets.

Contemporary perceptions of our remaining wood roads, in Cleveland or elsewhere, as quaint or curious belie their original practicality and utility. Whereas in rural areas, plank roads helped speed travel, "cities looked to wood-block pavements to reduce the din of horse-pulled vehicles in streets canyoned with buildings."²⁴ The ability to quiet the racket of a steel wheel meant that "wooden pavement was no small blessing in a horse and wagon society."²⁵ Consequently, the gradual move away from wood block roads does not indicate that this paving method was ineffective. Instead, the need for such roads simply decreased as times changed. The replacement of wood block speaks more to the eventual ubiquity of inflatable tires than problems with wood paving's durability. As one historian has noted, "Wooden streets, like trolleys, are no more because technology offered new alternatives in transportation that eliminated the need for them."²⁶

As you view Hessler Court today, surrounded as it is by modernity in a variety of forms—the fraternity houses opposite the exit onto Bellflower Road, the cutting-edge architecture of the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations that flanks one end of Hessler Court, and the Frank Gehry-designed Peter B. Lewis Building a stone's throw away—this single city block paved with wood provides a unique window into Cleveland's past. As you drive along, it may be a challenge to imagine the carriages, wagons, and early automobiles that once traveled here, but it is easy to notice the smoothness of the ride. If you also take note of what you cannot hear, you will experience one of the everyday pleasures for which Hessler Court was built. □

Dianne Timblin is a writer and editor living in Durham, North Carolina. She sincerely thanks Chris Worrell and Jamie Lewis for their research assistance.

NOTES

1. David O. Whitten, "A Century of Parquet Pavements: Wood as a Paving Material in the United States and Abroad, 1840–1940, Part 1, Nineteenth Century Origins," *Essays in Economic and Business History* XV (1997): 210.

2. Carl Abbott, "Plank Roads and Wood-Block Pavements," *Journal of Forest History* October 1981: 216.
3. "Archaeologists Find 18th Century Log Road in Annapolis, Maryland, US," *Science Daily*, April 24, 2008, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/04/080423180059.htm> (accessed May 7, 2008).
4. Abbott, "Plank Roads," 216.
5. Whitten, "Nineteenth Century Origins," 211.
6. Abbott, "Plank Roads," 217.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 218.
9. C.L. Hill, *Wood Paving in the United States*, U.S. Forest Service Circular 141 (Washington, D.C., 1908), 6.
10. Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 60.
11. Hill, "Wood Paving," 7.
12. Edmund H. Chapman, "City Planning Under Mercantile Expansion: The Case of Cleveland, Ohio," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 10, no. 5 (December 1951): 17.
13. *Ibid.*, 5.
14. National Park Service, "Hessler Court Wooden Pavement," National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, March 31, 1975.
15. William Ganson Rose, *Cleveland: The Making of a City* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1950), 432, 434.
16. David O. Whitten, "A Century of Parquet Pavements: Wood as a Paving Material in the United States and Abroad, 1840–1940, Part 2, Twentieth Century Decline: Geography, Technology, History," *Essays in Economic and Business History* XVI (1998): 162.
17. National Park Service, "Hessler Court."
18. *Ibid.*
19. Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Recorder's Office, Deeds and Records, Record No. 554790, Book 1333, Page 295. Accessed at: http://recorder.cuyahogacounty.us/Searchs/Docindex.aspx?docid=23874963&ref_nbr=191103240060.
20. "Hessler Rd. and Hessler Court Historic District," *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, accessed at <http://ech.case.edu/ech/cgi/article.pl?id=HRAHCHD>.
21. Whitten, "Nineteenth Century Origins," 219.
22. *Ibid.*, 220.
23. A.R. Callow, "Notes on Municipal Government. Municipal Paving: A Symposium (Cleveland)," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 29 (May 1907): 579.
24. Whitten, "Twentieth Century Decline," 162.
25. *Ibid.*, 163.
26. *Ibid.*