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Legacy

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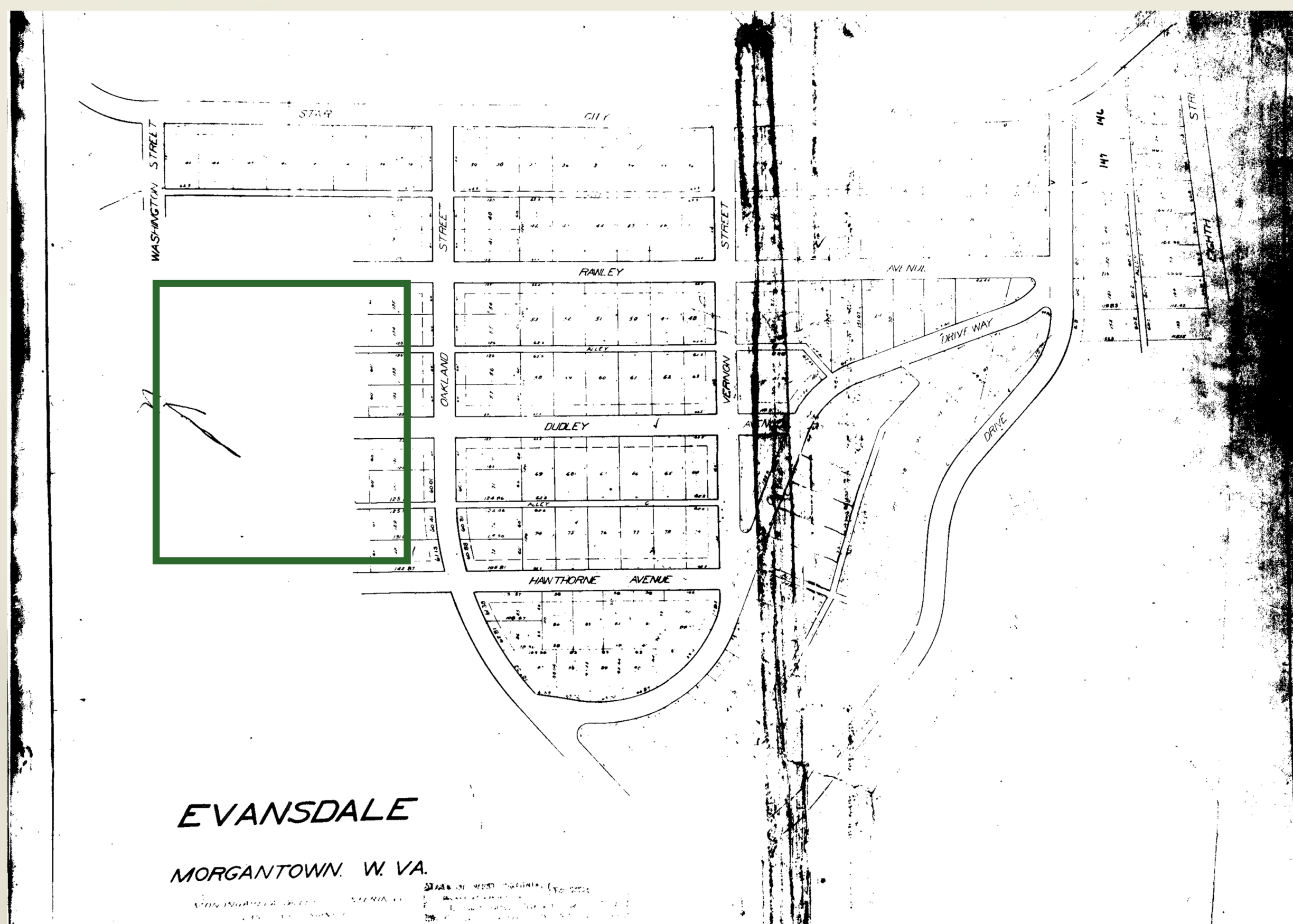
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Legacy

FROM RIVER VIEW MANSION TO WHITES-ONLY NEIGHBORHOOD



Plat map for the Evansdale neighborhood, 1923; square shows how much of the neighborhood is now the Towers Residential Complex. Credit: Monongalia County Clerk, Morgantown, West Virginia

In 1853 James Evans built a wooden “mansion” prominently situated to overlook the Monongahela River and be viewed at a distance by the residents of Morgantown. The surviving home is now a red-bricked and white-colonnaded house. James later divided his farm and sold it to two of his children, Gillian (“Gillie”) and Thomas. Thus, a fourth generation came to own the land. In 1873 Gillie married Oliver Hagans Dille, son of a prominent local judge and member of West Virginia University’s second graduating class. The couple bought the 248-acre portion closest to the river, including the house. Thomas bought the 244.5 acre (north-easterly) portion, along with parcels acquired from what was part of the original Elijah Burris farm. The Star City Road, now called University Avenue, demarcated part of the boundary between the two siblings’ parcels.

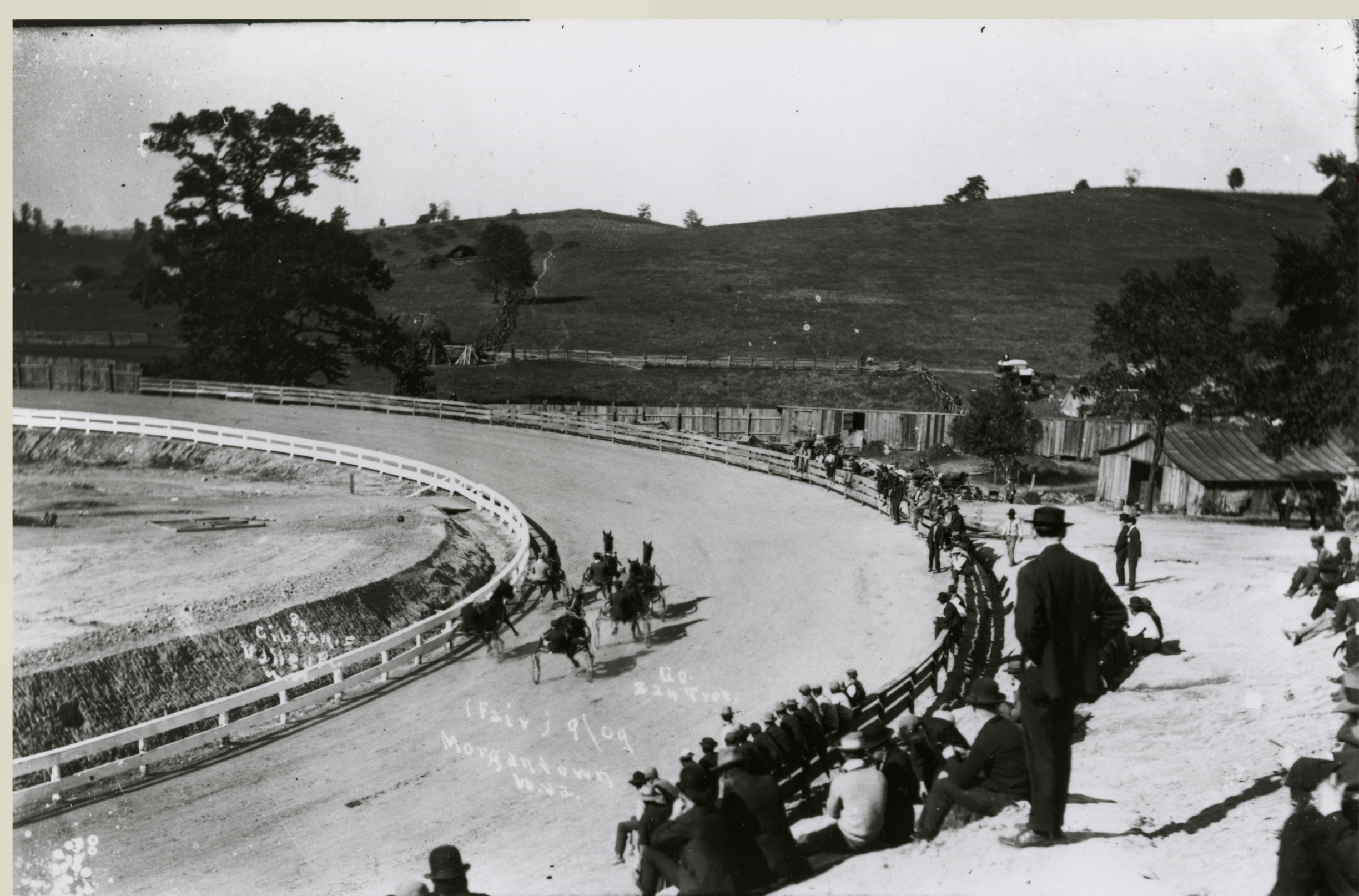
The Morgantown Fair Association’s 1908 purchase from Thomas Evans marked the first major sale of Evans land to non-family. The Fair Association also maintained a horse racetrack Thomas had built. Thomas’s land was eventually divided into three large tracts, one of which became the “University Park Addition,” where the racetrack was. Another went to Joseph McDermott and became the Morgantown Golf and Country Club, open from 1923-1969. The County Court purchased the third parcel.

Gillie and Oliver held their land until 1892, when 13 acres were sold to the Fairmont, Morgantown, and Pittsburgh Railroad. A tract of 16 acres was sold in 1898 and was later called the “Walnut Hill Addition.” In 1914 Oliver died without having recorded a will. Two years later, Gillie and her adult children formed the Evansdale Corporation and began to divest themselves of the farm. First, they created the “Evansdale Addition” around the family mansion, an area of approximately 32.5 acres divided into 171 lots and known today as the Evansdale Neighborhood. Street names reflect the Evans family history. Being two miles uphill from downtown Morgantown, initial lot sales were slow. In 1916 several contests were held to generate enthusiasm. One awarded a cash prize for the winning description of the neighborhood, which was published in the newspaper. Another contest was a drawing for a free lot. Morgantown annexed the growing neighborhood in 1947 and today families, professionals, and WVU students live there.

Like infamous “redlined” (Whites-only) neighborhoods throughout the country, many land sales of both the Evansdale neighborhood and the larger pasture parcels were discriminatory. The sales contained the restriction: “...said lot shall not be sold to, rented, nor allowed to pass into the hands of any person other than [of] the Caucasian race, or any person whose character is known to be bad.” Federal law prohibits such discriminatory practices today.

Between the racetrack and other large associated parcels, Evansdale found many uses. In 1926, a parcel rented by Thomas L. Miller hosted a Ku Klux Klan rally that preceded a KKK talk held downtown in the original WVU football stadium. This rally occurred during what historians call the country’s “second wave” of Klan activity, one of multiple periods of heightened racial violence in U.S. history.

Census data show that Black residents of Monongalia County lived and worked primarily in or near Morgantown. Notably, Janie Caldwell, a Black woman discussed in a local memoir, apparently lived on, without owning, one of the undeveloped Evansdale parcels in the 1940’s.



Harness Racing at the 1909 Morgantown Fair; the racetrack was located near today’s Harding Avenue. Credit: West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries

Background Image: The James Evans “mansion” as it looked in 1965. Credit West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries



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