

Elizabeth Ring Mather: University Circle Visionary

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Every great city experiences spurts of growth as key individuals dedicate wealth and influence toward the founding of cultural resources. Cleveland's early leading families displayed this taste for fostering urban sophistication with the proceeds of the industrial era before the advent of the Federal Income Tax. Cleveland's progress from smokestack city to highly visible exponent of art, music, horticulture, the liberal arts, medicine, science and professional education is secured in large part by the anchoring of our museums, university complex and medical center in University Circle. One woman from Cleveland's leading Mather family had the vision and the civic experience to guide the formation of this unmatched concentration of resources in a sylvan setting. She was Elizabeth Ring Mather (1891-1957).

Elizabeth Ring married an iron ore industry executive in her native Saginaw, Michigan before coming to Cleveland as Mrs. James D. Ireland. She was widowed in 1921. Her Bratenahl neighbor to the west was a bachelor for his first seventy-two years until their marriage in 1929. He was William Gwinn Mather (1857-1951), president of the Cleveland Iron Mining Company (later Cleveland Cliffs) and with his brother Samuel (1851-1931) the leader of Cleveland's innovative Community Chest (now the United Way). His extensive service to community organizations was legendary, as was the dramatic setting from which he worked, the Bratenahl estate named Gwinn after his mother. Mather paired the genius of Charles Platt, the Palladio inspired architect and Warren Manning, the masterful landscape planner in 1908 to provide himself the daily inspiration of Lake Erie from sun up to sun down. Once Elizabeth Mather joined him in his pursuit of leaving a finer city for all to enjoy, the Mather name was carried to dozens of ambitious projects to not only beautify the city, but to alleviate the suffering caused by the depression and war years. Mrs. Mather's executive abilities and grasp of the complexities confronting Cleveland's progress made her the ideal civic partner to William.

Both Elizabeth and William were intimately familiar with the growing pains of various institutions neighboring one another in University Circle. First in her working clothes as a gardener with other women determined to beautify the surroundings of the Art Museum, and later in her guise as leader of "The Ivy Project," Mrs. Mather had considerable feeling for the problems of coordinating land use, managing the troublesome automobile, laying out the walkways and streets of the cultural preserve and attending to the removal of unsightly defects in an otherwise splendid parkland. At the end of her life, she educated herself in the emerging field of urban planning, seeing the danger of institutional conflict among neighbors competing for limited resources. Mrs. Mather had the talent to bring the best minds of the day together at her Bratenahl estate. In 1955 she consulted with the brilliant and formidable New York City planner, Robert

Moses about the problems presented by the overlapping of institutional prerogatives. His was the first concrete advice to suggest a plan of action and Elizabeth Mather was the person most equipped to marshal leadership at this critical juncture. The formation of the University Circle Development Foundation and the funding of the Adams, Howard and Greely master plan for University Circle at the end of her life provided her city with a spurt of growth that enriches every person in Cleveland to this day.