

## Houston Mill House

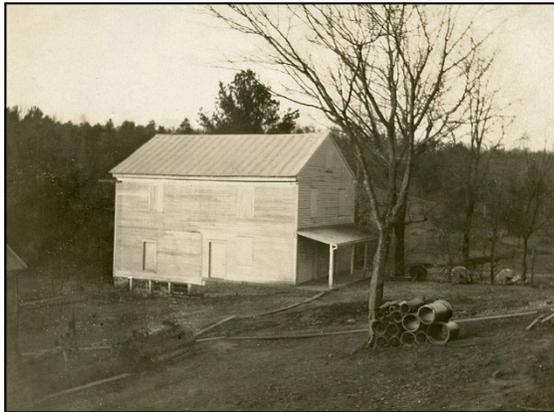
The Houston Mill House, located at the edge of Emory University's campus, was not a mill and was never occupied by the Houston family. Why does it have that name? The history of the property is tied to significant DeKalb families and institutions. And like much of the county, it has gone through dramatic change — once a rural homestead, now only a portion of the property remains undeveloped. It provides an event space and wooded respite within a busy urban campus.

The original mill building, known as Houston Mill, was built in 1876 on Peachtree Creek by W. J. (Washington Jackson) Houston. Houston dammed the South Fork of Peachtree Creek and used the energy he created to grind corn. He continued to use it as a gristmill until 1900,

when he converted it into a hydroelectric plant — the county's first. He was the president of the newly formed Decatur Electric Light, Water, and Power Company, which supplied electricity to Decatur in 1903.

W. J. Houston was the son-in-law of James Oliver Powell. During the Civil War Houston and his family lived at the Powell homeplace on Clairmont Road. Houston had many different business interests throughout his life. He was as a bank clerk and later became a general passenger and transportation agent of the Atlanta & West Point railroad system. After the Civil War he was appointed to the U.S. Department of the Interior for Indian Affairs, and late in life retired to pursue his interests in milling and raising cattle.

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*The 1873 mill built by W. J. Houston.*



*The 1925 fieldstone home built by H. J. Carr.*

## A Neat Piece

In 1976, The High Museum of Art exhibited "Furniture of the Georgia Piedmont Before 1830." Seven years later The Atlanta History Center followed with "Neat Pieces: The Plain-Style Furniture of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Georgia." Both displays featured the handiwork of cabinetmakers, farmers, and itinerant craftsmen of the Georgia Piedmont. This style of furniture, which had gone largely unnoticed in contrast to more ornate furnishings of the era, was just beginning to gain recognition, championed by St. Simon's collector Henry D. Green.

Three decades have passed since then, and furniture of the Georgia Piedmont is now prized and sought after by collectors; it has been displayed in prestigious settings such as the Georgia Governor's

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# Upcoming Events

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## Exhibits open during Book Festival

Please stop by the DeKalb History Center during the AJC Decatur Book Festival over Labor Day weekend. Our exhibits will be open on Saturday and Sunday. We will have a booth in the festival area with local history books for sale. Our booth will be in front of the Historic DeKalb County Courthouse on the Ponce de Leon side of the building.

### ***Book Signing***

The DeKalb History Center will host local author **Bob Kelley** in our booth on Saturday, September 5, from 3:00 - 6:00 pm. We will have copies of both of his books available to purchase: *Doraville*, published in 2012, and *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, which came out this year.

**Saturday, September 5, 10:00 am - 6:00 pm**

**Sunday, September 6, noon to 6:00 pm**

**Historic DeKalb Courthouse, Exhibits on the Main Floor**

## September Lunch & Learn

### ***Family Photographs***

Our next Lunch and Learn will be presented by Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., who will help us to explore Family Photographs. This will be a fun talk to help you learn: how to identify family photos, the pitfalls of identification, and tips on how to figure out who the people are in your photos.

Ken was the historian for the Historic Preservation Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources for 33 years and he also has written the genealogy column in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution since 1977.

**Tuesday, September 15, noon - 1:00 pm**

**Historic DeKalb Courthouse, Second Floor**

**Free - Bring your lunch**

## Dance Hall Decatur

Help us with some fun fundraising. Great music, sodas and light snacks included with your reservation. Drink tickets available at the event.

***Halloween costumes welcome!***

Advance reservations: \$10 for members, \$15 for non-members and \$5 for under 21 only. Day of event tickets: \$12 for members, \$17 for non-members and \$7 for under 21 only. Tickets will go on sale in September.

**Friday, October 30, 8:00 pm - Midnight**

**Historic DeKalb Courthouse, Second Floor ✦**

# Special School Programs for 2015

The DeKalb History Center is offering special school programs this fall.

On September 22 the DHC will host the **Civil War Experience** for the third time. It is a special program developed around fifth- and eighth-grade curricula. The highlight of this program is a play that the Center commissioned local playwright and actor, Cathy Kaemmerlen, to write for the purpose of teaching students about the war in DeKalb County and the Atlanta area. In addition to the one-hour play students take a Civil War walking tour of the downtown Decatur area, interact with an actor portraying Harriett Tubman, and hear the Gettysburg Address delivered by a professional living historian portraying Abraham Lincoln.

A new program for second-graders will take place on October 6 at the History Center's Historic Complex at 720 West Trinity Place in Decatur. **Second-Grade History Day** allows students to spend nearly two hours with living historians in period clothing who present the lives of James Oglethorpe, Mary Musgrove, Chief Tomochichi, and Sequoyah. Students learn about the early days of the Georgia colony, how the native people were affected by Europeans in their midst, the friendship between Oglethorpe and Tomochichi, and the many accomplishments of Oglethorpe's Creek Indian translator, Mary Musgrove. Students meet Cherokee Indian Mark Eaton as he portrays Sequoyah; students recite the Cherokee alphabet and learn about the man who singlehandedly created a written language.

Later that month, October 20-22, students experience the DHC's largest school program, the **History Adventure**. At this program students visit eight different living history stations at the DHC's Historic Complex. The program utilizes the

Benjamin Swanton House, the Mary Gay House, and two pioneer log cabins. It focuses on eighth-grade Georgia History Curriculum on October 20-21 and then switches its focus to fourth-grade early U.S. History on October 22. The stations range from Harriett Tubman and the Underground Railroad to Mary Gay, early Creek Indians, old-timey mountain music, African storytelling, Sequoyah, Revolutionary War, early life in Decatur, and more. "The History Adventure is an intense program," said Jenny Goldemund, Programs and Preservation Coordinator for the DHC, "but students create powerful associations with the people being portrayed, and they use this knowledge to build a richer understanding of history and individual lives."

The last school program this fall is the **Third-Grade History Day**. This is a two-part program with the first part on November 4 at the Historic Courthouse. Third-graders, who learn about the foundations of democracy and freedom as part of their curriculum, hear from individuals who made great sacrifices to further the cause of democracy and freedom in this country. At the event students encounter an actor playing Paul Revere, who was known for his midnight ride but who was also a mastermind of the American Revolution. Students talk with Frederick Douglass, who engineered his own escape from slavery and then wrote and spoke movingly of the inalienable rights of all people, regardless of race. Susan B. Anthony rallies students to her cause, women's suffrage, with a passion that pulls them into the action of her story. Part 2 of **Third-Grade History Day** will be on March 23, 2016.

For more information on these special programs, school tours, and outreach programs visit [www.dekalbhistory.org](http://www.dekalbhistory.org), call 404-373-1088, extension 20, or email [goldemund@dekalbhistory.org](mailto:goldemund@dekalbhistory.org). ✦



# Houston

*Continued from page 1*

From the 1900s to 1920s the mill was renowned as an event space. Houston's daughter said that her father would host a party every May. "Everybody from Decatur and miles around would come and bring a picnic dinner. Everybody danced the square dance and the Virginia reel. The mill was a beautiful spot." Many local histories mention that the mill pond was the swimming hole for this part of the county and an excellent place to camp and fish.

H. J. Carr moved to Atlanta around 1900 to begin working for his uncle, John Carr, who specialized in the construction of courthouses and jails. Henry James (known as H. J. or Harry) Carr was born in Rockingham, North Carolina. He married Bonnie Tate of Monticello, Kentucky, in 1903.

In 1909 Carr formed his own construction business, H. J. Carr & Company General Contractors. Soon rising to prominence in Atlanta and north Georgia, he formed partnerships with many of Atlanta's most prestigious architects, such as Ivey and Crook, G. Lloyd Preacher, and Neel Reid. Some of his well-known commissions included Druid Hills High School, Brookwood Station, the Candler Building, the Crum and Forster Building, the Biltmore Hotel, and the Briarcliff Hotel and Apartments.

Carr's construction company erected mostly commercial buildings; however, he also built homes for colleagues and neighbors. He was hired by the legendary Atlanta architect Henry Heintz to build his residence on Ponce de Leon Avenue. Carr built a home for Asa Candler, Jr., known as Briarcliff (also owned by Emory). Some of his buildings have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and serve as tangible examples of his talent and success.

In 1921 H. J. Carr began renting Houston's property adjacent to Peachtree Creek. He and Bonnie had been living in Druid Hills but wanted to establish an idyllic estate for their family, which now included three children: Harry Jr., Gladys, and Frances. Carr purchased the Houston property in 1922. He also put together adjacent parcels from three other owners, and by 1929 his estate totaled 61.1 acres.

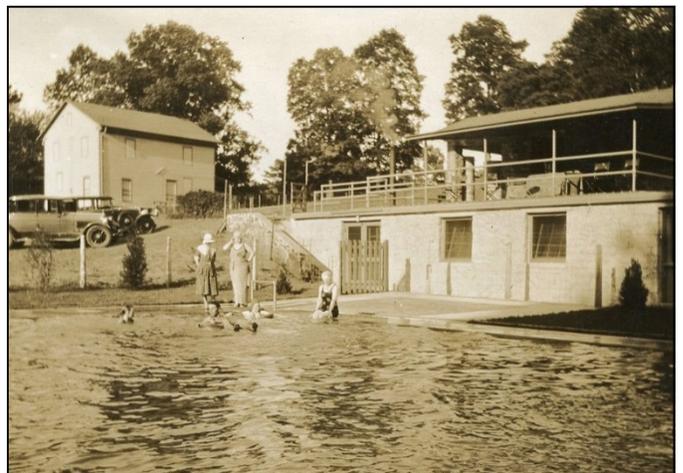
Carr made many improvements to his new estate. He renovated the mill, rebuilt the dam, and built two powerhouses using the same fieldstone he used for his home. The family used the mill for social functions. He built a large swimming pool and pool house, added foot bridges, a swinging bridge, extensive sidewalks, and the main house. He also added a springhouse and two water storage tanks. There was still a turn-of-the-century cottage (probably for a caretaker) on the property when Carr bought it. After he

restored the grist mill, locals could, until 1940, purchase six-pound bags of "slow process, unbolted corn meal" that was processed there.

Carr brought his expertise as a builder to their new home. The vernacular house was clad in fieldstones and featured a slate roof and copper gutters. The house was inventively engineered, with floors of poured concrete. Decorative wrought iron was used for balconies, gates, and stair rails. The exterior is nearly symmetrical with the two-story main block flanked by one-story wings. The left wing was a sunroom, and the right wing contained the kitchen and pantry. The house also had a basement, seen only from the rear, which included a large billiard room and a three-car garage. It was built with four bedrooms and two bathrooms on the second floor. The main floor had a guest bedroom with a bath and a very large living room. This stately home



*Peachtree Creek during heavy rain.*



*The Carrs' swimming pool with the powerhouses and old mill in the background.*

# Mill House *(cont.)*

rises 105 feet above the Peachtree Creek riverbed and was completed in 1925 for a total of \$130,000.

Maple was used for all of the interior woodwork, and some of the floors were finished with terracotta tiles. The fireplaces in the living room and billiard room were faced with granite. Kathy Harmer, one of the Carrs' grandchildren, remembered that on Christmas Eve the children would leave their shoes on the hearth instead of hanging stockings because the granite was impenetrable.

Landscaping was also carefully planned — sidewalks and drives curved around the house and estate. The front of the house was adorned with a statue in a small pool and informal hedges. Terraces were built to slope down from the lawn; this emphasized the position of the house on the hill.

The large swimming pool was located downhill from the house and fed by spring water. The Carr children, who attended Druid Hills High School, spent hours relaxing in the sun with friends and swimming and diving from three diving boards. There was a barn with their horse, Billy, and several goats, which the children enjoyed feeding.

H. J. Carr retired in 1932, and in the following years he enjoyed spending his time with his family at their estate. Emory University purchased the property from Mrs. Carr in 1959 (a year after Mr. Carr's death), but she retained a life estate. She lived in her home until her death in 1976. She had also negotiated to retain use of the pool, but it and the poolhouse fell into disrepair over the years.

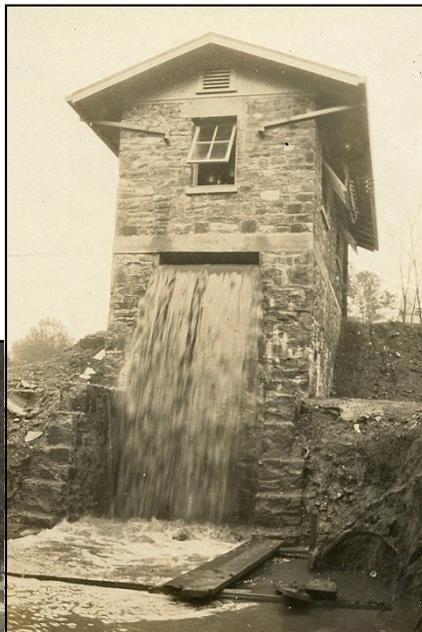
The mill was described in 1965 by an Emory employee as "an old two-story yellow building trimmed with fading green shutters and weathered by years of rain and sun." Over the next year the School of Nursing converted it into a retreat for its

students. Emory asked Mrs. Carr if they could demolish the mill in 1973, but demolition did not actually take place until 1983. Joseph Augustine Sams Bond donated the millstone to the DeKalb History Center in 2001. It is displayed on the northern side of the Historic DeKalb Courthouse.

The University did fill the pool with dirt in 1973, with Mrs. Carr's permission. The caretaker's cottage was used by Emory during the 1960s but was demolished by the University in 1970. It was also during this time that Emory began using the grounds around the pool, barn, and mill as a dump for fill dirt removed from new construction projects on the campus. By 1979 both the mill and the poolhouse were half-covered by the dump, and neighbors began to express concern because the fill dirt was in a flood plain.

After Mrs. Carr's death, the Emory Woman's Club became interested in restoring the Carrs' home. This group was composed of female faculty, administrators, and faculty wives. They moved towards that goal for several years holding a variety of fundraisers. They also briefly rented it to the Chi Phi Fraternity after a fire rendered their house unlivable. By 1979 the club completed the renovations and opened the house for their use. It was at this time that they gave the structure the name of "Houston Mill House." It was used by the Woman's Club at least through the 1980s.

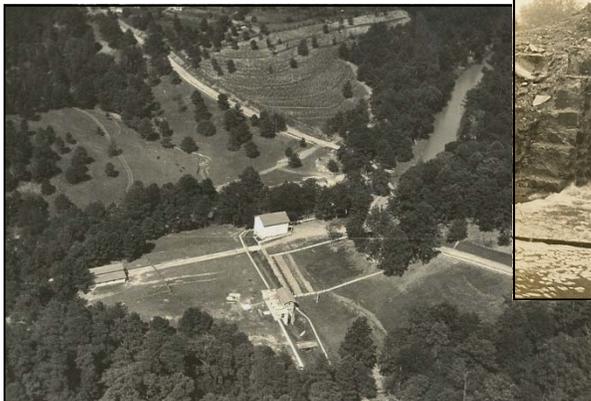
*The accompanying photographs are part of our Carr Collection and were taken in the 1920s and 1930s. ↗*



*Left: This aerial photograph shows the old mill at the center and includes the two powerhouses, the barn, a terraced hill and Peachtree Creek.*

*Center: This was the first of two powerhouses built by H. J. Carr.*

*Right: A steel bridge over the dam—this view captures the energy of Peachtree Creek.*



## A Neat Piece (cont.)

Continued from page 1

Mansion; the Gwinnett Historical Society's Elisha Winn House; The Georgia Museum of Art in Athens; and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Art in Winston-Salem, N.C., among others.

The DeKalb History Center is fortunate to have become the recent recipient of one of these historically significant pieces, a bureau featured in the aforementioned "Neat Pieces" exhibit. This chest of drawers was donated by Ms. Beverly Boland, in whose family it originated. It was built by Ms. Boland's great-great-grandfather, Alexander Chesnut, and was subsequently passed down from one generation to the next. Mr. Chesnut, a farmer, was born in 1809 in South Carolina but eventually settled in DeKalb County, where he lived for the rest of his life. According to family lore he crafted the bureau using trees felled on the Chestnut family land in DeKalb. The grain of southern hardwoods tends to be more pronounced than finer-grained northern woods, and this is often a useful clue to the geographic origin of the piece. The panels on the back of the dresser were hand hewn and fastened with hand-cut nails; some of which remain.

The bureau's utilitarian simplicity exemplifies Plain-Style, "less is more" aesthetics; while not completely devoid of decorative elements, the function of the piece takes precedence. Plain-Style and Shaker furniture share some similarities, though the former tends to be taller, possibly because it was scaled for use in rooms with high ceilings or to promote better air circulation. Some of the characteristic hardwoods used in the making of Piedmont furniture include walnut, birch, yellow pine, maple, and cherry; this dresser is primarily made of walnut, with yellow pine used as a secondary wood for drawer construction.

According to *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*: "Decorative arts offer a reflection of their makers' and owners' ways of life ... and are shaped by settlement patterns, cultural influences, availability of materials, and changing fashions." This can be seen in the eventual decline of interest in the Plain-Style. Newly wealthy Piedmont cotton merchants moved to larger cities, where many appointed elegant Greek Revival homes with "store-bought" furniture.

It is a testament to the craftsmanship of the individuals who built Plain-Style furniture that many of these antebellum pieces are still in use and now highly regarded for the ways in which they reflect regional aesthetics, resourcefulness, and history. ✦



The brass handles are not original but are similar in style to those seen on comparable bureaus.



Traces of green paint remain on drawer dovetails. Many Plain-Style pieces were used in kitchens and on porches and were painted to preserve the wood or to modernize an "old" family piece. It is likely that this paint was applied in the twentieth century.

## From the Archives

This 1908 photograph of the DeKalb County Courthouse is a recent donation to DHC Archives. It is an especially rare one in our collections recording the cultural landscape around the courthouse. It documents the mode of travel by foot, horse, and trolley car at the turn of the last century.

As a primary resource the photo reveals important details from the period, such as the increasing use of electricity and phones, as indicated by the numerous wires and poles. Gone today are the trolley tracks running down the middle of McDonough Street at the foot of the courthouse square in Decatur. Here the trolley car rolls along in the right front co-existing with the horse and buggy stopped on the left front of the courthouse. The livery stable in the bottom left-hand corner has been replaced today by the “New Courthouse,” which opened in that entire block in 1967. ↗



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## **DeKalb History Center**

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