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Sue Ellen Owens & Walt Drake on Stephen Decatur

Recording opens with series of photographs with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony playing in background. This introduction concludes with a photograph of the Historic DeKalb Courthouse and the title "DeKalb, Then and Now: 'A Look Back at Our History.'" Sue Ellen Owens then appears on the screen, with the words "Sue Ellen Owens/Exec. Dir., DeKalb Historical Society" superimposed over her image.

SUE ELLEN OWENS: DeKalb County is celebrating 175 years of history. Our county was formed in 1822 out of the counties of Henry, Gwinnett, and Fayette. At the end of 1822 a group of folks were commissioned to sit down and figure out where the county site [sic] would be. They chose Land Lot 246, which happened to be the intersection of two Indian trails. With that, we had the forming of the place in DeKalb County that would be the seat of government, the seat of justice, and the place that people through the years would come to recognize as our county's central point.

How do you decide how you're going to name a place? Today we're going to talk with Walt Drake, who is going to give us some history about the background of the person for whom the city of Decatur, the county seat of the city of DeKalb County, was named. Walt is an attorney in Decatur; and he's also a former mayor of Decatur, having been the youngest mayor at age thirty. From that he, of course, was well acquainted with the name Decatur and would see the portrait of Stephen Decatur on a regular basis. That interest in the city and his love of the city has led to his knowledge about the man for whom our city was named. So, Walt, we're glad to have you here with us today. Tell me a little bit about Stephen Decatur.

Walt Drake appears on-screen.

WALT DRAKE: Well, Stephen Decatur was an American naval war hero in the early 1800s. He is primarily recognized as being a hero in the War of 1812 and also in the wars—several wars against the Barbary pirates, which were—the time of those before the War of 1812 and shortly thereafter. Those are his biggest claims to fame. I find it very interesting that, when I've given a talk on Stephen Decatur, most folks know that he was a naval hero; but then we get a little confusion. A lot of people remember the War of 1812 or the Barbary pirates; others think he was a hero in the Revolutionary War, which, of course, he wasn't. He was just being born about that time. Some folks think he was from around here, which he wasn't; or that he came to Decatur, which he never did, because he died before Decatur was founded.

MS. OWENS: Can you tell us a little bit about his early life then?

MR. DRAKE: Yes, he was born in a log cabin in a little town on the eastern shore of Maryland. That town no longer exists. I think there's another town there now named Berlin, just a small town. He was born in 1779 on January 5. He was of French and Irish extraction. One of the books I read about him said that his first breath of air was sea air. That maybe explains why he became such a naval hero and his life was so entwined with the United States Navy.

His parents had moved from Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War. They had fled Philadelphia when the British occupied Philadelphia, and his father had been a successful privateersman against the British. And when I first started reading about Stephen Decatur, I didn't know what a privateersman was. But I looked it up, and I did learn that it was a commander of a privately owned armed ship, which was commissioned by a government to capture enemy ships and especially merchant ships of the enemy. So that's what his father had done. And shortly after Stephen Decatur's birth in Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay, the Revolutionary War was over, his family returned to Philadelphia, his father then prospered for a number of years as a merchant captain, and Stephen grew up around the water and had many opportunities to go to sea and to be around ships and to be around the sea. He attended the Academy of Philadelphia, he graduated from an Episcopal academy, and he spent one year at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

MS. OWENS: So you made reference to his naval career. How did he end up actually having a naval career?

MR. DRAKE: Well, in 1798 Stephen Decatur was nineteen years old; and that's the year the United States Navy was established. And so that interested him greatly. He terminated his formal education after one year at the University of Pennsylvania, and he enlisted in the new navy. He became a midshipman, and he was stationed aboard a ship, *The United States*, which later on he participated in.

At that time there was sort of a minor undeclared war with France going on, and the infant U.S. Navy was charged with undertaking guardian operations along the coast to protect American merchant ships along the Atlantic coast in the West Indies. And so Stephen Decatur did that for two or three years. He was regarded as a very quick study. A year after he became a midshipman he was commissioned a lieutenant, and he learned quite a bit about seamanship and leadership during that three-year period.

MS. OWENS: So this was his initial training, or was there further initial training?

MR. DRAKE: That was the initial training. And the disagreement with France, which had never reached the stage of a full war, it kind of diminished. And at that point the president had been John Adams, and the Federalists had been in power. And they're the ones that had

started the navy. They were now going out of power, and Thomas Jefferson was becoming president. I'm going to refer to him as "Mr. Jefferson," because I went to law school at the University of Virginia; and everybody in Charlottesville calls him Mr. Jefferson. But anyway, Mr. Jefferson was now president; and he really wanted to cut back on the navy, cut back on the expense and downsize it. And so it looked like this infant navy was going to be cut back even further, and there might not be a career in the navy.

However, something happened that caused him to change his plans; and that was that, along the northern coast of Africa, in what people call the Barbary States, there were a lot of ships that were doing a lot of damage to American ships. Groups of pirates--really, is what they were, from Algiers and Tripoli and Morocco and Tunis—would come out. They'd pillage American ships or other merchant ships, they'd take prisoners, they'd hold prisoners for ransom, and this became very unacceptable to the United States. It was a relatively new mercantile nation, but the Barbary pirates were really working on them; and this wasn't satisfactory. And so the navy was authorized to do something about this; and Stephen Decatur, who was then a first lieutenant aboard a small ship called *The Essex*, was sent to the Barbary Coast to remedy this situation. And there's a famous quote attributed to him at that time. He told his crew, "We are now about to depart upon an expedition which may terminate in our sudden deaths, our perpetual slavery, or our immortal glory."

And fortunately, that last phrase was an accurate one; because what had happened, a U.S. ship—a large ship, *The Philadelphia*—had gone aground while cruising off of Tripoli. And its captain had had to surrender the ship and the crew to the enemy. Well, Stephen Decatur came up with this plan where he would sneak into the harbor in darkness, he would try to free the prisoners, and he was going to set fire to *The Philadelphia* because he wanted to burn it in the harbor before the pirates could take it over and take it back out and use it against the ships of the United States. So he let his men in; there was a lot of hand-to-hand combat. He set *The Philadelphia* on fire, he escaped just as that ship exploded in the harbor from the fire, and he did this without a single casualty among his men. And at that time the British Lord Nelson—of course, the word of this great exploit went all around—and Lord Nelson called it "the most daring act of the age."

And Stephen Decatur really wasn't finished, though; he stayed in that area. He did a lot of lightning strikes and small gunboats against Tripoli and against the pirates. There was a lot of hand-to-hand combat and capturing of prisoners, and he inflicted great damage on the Barbary pirates and pretty much put them out of business. And I've always thought that if they were to make a movie about Stephen Decatur, they're probably going to get Sylvester Stallone

or someone to play the lead role; because this is way, when you read about it, it sounds. His heroics were not without cost, though. He had a younger brother, James Decatur, with whom he was very close; and his brother was killed in one of these later battles. And he had a close friend named Richard Somers, who blew himself up in a ship rather than be captured by the pirates when it was inevitable. But Stephen Decatur returned to the United States in 1805, was given command of the ship *Congress*, and he returned quite a hero.

MS. OWENS: Sounds like it. I was just about—I was thinking, as you were saying, that it did sound like that this historic event had all the makings of a modern-day action movie.

MR. DRAKE: Right

MS. OWENS: And his exploits and his skills are very commendable. In the Old Courthouse at our archives, we have a depiction of the fight of Stephen Decatur boarding during the fight with the Barbary pirates, which I always find very interesting.

So after he gets back to the United States, what happens?

MR. DRAKE: Well, again, it looked like there might be a time of peace; but it was not to be. And something happened in 1807 that really shook the nation at the time and changed the whole course of Stephen Decatur's life, as we'll unfold today in this story. There was a ship called *The Chesapeake*, and it was under the command of a Commodore James Barron. He had been one of Stephen Decatur's earlier commanding officers when Stephen Decatur was a midshipman in the infant navy. And Decatur liked [inaudible; could be "him"?]. But Barron was commander—or commodore, rather—of this ship, *The Chesapeake*. And it was sailing out past the Virginia capes; and it was stopped by a British ship named *The Leopard*. And the British, in what everybody seems to think, and from what I've read about it, was pretty much a trumped-up charge, demanded the return of four men aboard *The Chesapeake*, whom they claimed were British Navy deserters. Commodore Barron refused to let the British board his ship and search the ship, and the British fired on *The Chesapeake*.

And unfortunately, *The Chesapeake* was very ill-equipped and unprepared. They fired one shot, and then they surrendered. And the British came on the ship, seized the four men, took them off the ship, and *The Chesapeake* returned to Norfolk, Virginia, in just humiliation. Everybody was very disgusted with this. And Commodore Barron caught quite a bit of grief because of this. He was demoralized and disgraced, his officers were disgraced, and he ended up being court-martialed and suspended from the navy for five years. There were nine naval officers that were chosen to be on the board that would determine the court-martial; and Stephen Decatur—unfortunately, I think, for him—turned out to be one of the nine requested to be on that board. He didn't want to serve on that board, because he liked Barron; and he knew

Barron was a good naval officer. But he didn't have any choice. And he served on the board; and he did, in fact, along with all the others, determine that Barron should be removed from the navy for a period of five years. And unfortunately—and I'm not sure why, from what I've read, but Barron directed a great deal of his resentment at what had happened to him toward Stephen Decatur. Perhaps it was because Decatur at that point was a popular hero and probably the better-known of the people on the board that court-martialed Barron. But it was a bad time. And then this incident between *The Leopard* and *The Essex* [sic; means *Chesapeake*?] took the United States and Great Britain almost to the brink of war.

So at that point Stephen Decatur was ordered to take over the command of *The Chesapeake*. So he did, and he restored order to the demoralized vessel, got the crew back in place, and I think did a lot of good with that. And he cruised up and down the Atlantic coast on *The Chesapeake* and then later on *The United States*, another ship that he'd been on before. And he was the one that enforced the embargo against the British at that time. And he trained his crews to a very high degree of professionalism. And he's credited with doing a lot of the very fine training in the navy at that time.

MS. OWENS: So it sounds to me that the relationship between our country and Great Britain were worsening at this point in his life.

MR. DRAKE: Well, it really was. The situation continued to deteriorate, and finally in 1812 the war came—the war that we refer to, of course, as the War of 1812. And Decatur was at that point the commander of *The United States*. And he fought against a British ship, *The Macedonian*, and defeated it. And he brought the ship back to New York harbor, the British ship—captured it, brought it back to New York harbor, and was regarded as a tremendous hero for accomplishing that. And then he took his squadron out to sea, but he got blockaded off the New London, Connecticut, area for a while; couldn't do much of anything.

But finally he broke the blockade, and he got to New York harbor. And his job there was to command the entire naval forces that were protecting New York harbor, which he did, and did very successfully. And after doing that for a while, he attempted to get to sea in the ship that he was in then, *The President*; but bad weather developed, and he ran aground. And unfortunately the British fleet descended on him after he'd run aground and captured him. And he fought very heroically; there was quite a battle, but he was badly outmanned because the British fleet was there. And he was captured, and he was taken to Bermuda, which was then, of course, run by the British. And he was a prisoner—held prisoner for the rest of the war in Bermuda. And one thing that I found quite interesting in one of the books that I read, though, was that even the British regarded him with a great deal of respect. And while he was being held prisoner in

Bermuda, the British commander hosted a dinner in his honor while he was prisoner. And so they had that in Bermuda. But shortly after that, after he'd been held prisoner there for a while, the war was over.

MS. OWENS: And his life and career continued after the War of 1812, then?

MR. DRAKE: Yeah, he returned to the United States and returned to New York; and he was regarded as quite a hero, even though he'd spent the last part of the war as a prisoner. His exploits earlier in the war were recognized. He was offered command of a new squadron. Another outbreak in the Barbary States had come about, and the pirates were back in business again. And so he was offered command of an entire squadron of ships and sent over there, which he—and he went over there, and he got out--knocked them out again. And he defeated the Barbary pirates, freed a lot of American prisoners, and returned to the United States again, just a tremendous hero and well-recognized for that accomplishment.

MS. OWENS: Yeah, I was thinking, as you were talking, a documentary on his life would seem in order for the standards that he—for his naval standards as well as his personal leadership standards. He was quite a hero.

MR. DRAKE: He really was. And when he got back, he was appointed to the Navy Board of Commissioners, which was quite an honor at that time. He was married; his wife's name was Susan, and they were honored throughout Washington. He was in Washington, D.C., for a number of years. They were honored at a number of dinners and events. He had made friends at some point with Washington Irwin [sic, means "Irving"], the writer, who respected him greatly and made a comment after Decatur returned from the last round with the Barbary pirates that "This triumph will completely fix Decatur's reputation. A gallanter fellow never stepped the quarterdeck. God bless him."

And that was really sort of an attitude that the whole nation had about him at that time; he was tremendously popular. He'd participated, in effect, in three or four wars—the War of 1812, a couple of wars with the Barbary pirates, the sort of undeclared war with France—and he captivated his countrymen because he'd been a hero in all of those. And he was probably at that time about the favorite hero. And there were a lot of—as I mentioned, there were a lot of dinners in his honor. There was one that was held in Norfolk [Virginia]; and this is where he gave his most famous toast that you've probably heard before, where he toasted the crowd, and he said, "May our country in her intercourse with other nations, may she always be right, but our country, right or wrong." And I've always joked, knowing the attitude of a lot of people in Decatur and Decatur's independence, that that's a good, typical City of Decatur attitude. It's

probably not too politically correct today, “Our country right or wrong”; but at that time it was a very popular sentiment, and it continued to enhance his popularity.

MS. OWENS: Patriotism at its highest--

MR. DRAKE: That’s right.

MS. OWENS: --sounds like. So he’s back from the latest Barbary pirate incident, and does life kind of settle down for him? Where does he live and so forth?

MR. DRAKE: Well, it did settle down for him. This is probably one of the nicest periods of his life. He returned to Washington, and he built a house—this was in, I think, 1818—in Washington, D.C. It was one block north of the White House; the house still stands. It’s part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation now, and I had occasion to go there, I think in 1975 or 1976; and I went and visited it. You can take a little guided tour of the house, and it’s been beautifully restored. And there’s a lot of history to that house. I’ve got a pamphlet from that house. [*Flips through pamphlet and refers to it periodically.*] And basically it’s regarded as one of the capital’s earliest important residences, few of which still survive. But it’s in great shape. As I said, it’s right across from the White House, and it’s been the home to a number of important figures other than Decatur. It also was the home for three secretaries of state, several members of Congress, a vice president, some entrepreneurs, and several foreign ministers. So there were a number of people that lived in this house over the years.

Unfortunately—and we’ll talk in a few moments about what happened to Stephen Decatur—after he died, his wife was in debt and had to sell the house and really didn’t stay there very long. Shortly after he died in 1820, the house was sold. But that’s when it had this series of different owners that lived there. One of them was Henry Clay, one of them was Martin van Buren, there was a millionaire hotel owner named John Gadsby who lived there. During the Civil War--the Secretary of War for the Confederacy had lived there—of course, he had to leave at that point. It became a clothing depot for the Union Army during the Civil War. And then in 1871 a man named Beale, who was a California entrepreneur, bought the house, held it in his family, and then it passed to a—some relative of his, another person whose last name was Beale, and on down the line. And in 1956 a Mrs. Beale, who had kept the house intact and preserved it very well, bequeathed it to the National Historic—National Trust; and since then it’s been a monument. I recommend it if you ever go to Washington. It’s an interesting place to see—

MS. OWENS: Sounds like it.

MR. DRAKE: --and it’s got a lot of good Decatur history and a lot of things about Stephen Decatur.

MS. OWENS: What folks may not be aware of, it's not just the age of the house that makes it historic, it's also the people who occupied it. And you gave a great history about why that's such an important piece on the National Register.

So he's in Washington, living. Anything else going on in his life?

MR. DRAKE: Well, I mean—as I said, this is a wonderful time in his life. He's probably the most popular hero in the country, he's got a nice house a block from the White House, he's the toast of Washington, he knows almost all the important people, and so things couldn't really be better. There's no war going on, although he might have liked that, because of his naval abilities; but in any event, things are going real well.

But you remember this Commodore James Barron, who was—who'd been court-martialed and had been disgraced. Well, Barron had been court-martialed for five years, but he didn't come back to the United States right away; he lived abroad. Well, he came back in 1818, right about the time Decatur was building his house. And he [Barron] decided he wanted to return to active duty in the navy and get a command. And he applied; but a lot of naval officers, even though his court-martial time had passed, didn't like the idea. They felt that he had really messed up when he had been commander, and they thought the commands ought to go to other naval officers whose abilities they didn't question. And Barron was, of course, very resentful of this; and again he seemed to feel that Stephen Decatur was behind all of this--I guess again because Stephen Decatur was so popular and so well thought of.

And so he tried to provoke Stephen Decatur to a duel. And Decatur replied—he had an interesting quote I've always liked, where he said, "I do not think that fighting duels under any circumstances can raise the reputation of any man." And I've always thought, well, that's some very good, rational Decatur—Stephen Decatur thinking, some good City of Decatur thinking. But unfortunately, Stephen Decatur also lived by a code of honor. He had a lot of pride, just like the City of Decatur has a lot of pride. And so he couldn't just ignore Barron. And he also said, "In my opinion a man who makes arms his profession"—Stephen Decatur—"is not at liberty to decline an invitation from any person who is not so far degraded as to be beneath his notice." And Barron was not that far degraded to be beneath Stephen Decatur's notice. And so finally he consented to the duel, although he didn't want to. It's interesting, he said ahead of the duel that if he shot Barron, he was going to shoot him in the hip. And the duel took place; it took place on March 22nd of 1820. And both antagonists filed [sic, means "fired"]. Barron was shot in the hip, but Stephen Decatur was shot in the abdomen. He was mortally wounded, and he died later that evening.

It's interesting, too, that apparently, when he lay there dying—well, before--not dying immediately, but lay there morally wounded—Barron was also lying there, having been hit. And they talked a little bit. And Decatur asked Barron, "Why didn't you come back after the war and return earlier?" And Barron said, "I didn't have the money. Didn't have the ability to come back." And Decatur said to him, "I would have sent it to you." So there—it was a very sad thing that two very strong men got to a situation where the duel was inevitable. And unfortunately Stephen Decatur was killed.

MS. OWENS: So Barron held his grudge for a long time, and it was an unfortunate ending.

MR. DRAKE: He never let it go.

MS. OWENS: What happened to Barron?

MR. DRAKE: You know, I'm not sure. I think he—he never got a naval command, as I recall reading. And I've never really followed up on what happened to him after that. I don't think he was terribly popular, because Decatur was so popular, and Decatur had been killed by Barron in the duel.

MS. OWENS: Being as popular as he was, how—what was the [funeral] service like for him?

MR. DRAKE: Well, it's interesting. I read a good bit about it. And they had the funeral march two days after he was—he died, after the duel. And it was said to be the largest funeral march in Washington's history to that time. In that march President Monroe participated, his entire cabinet, members of Congress, foreign diplomats, military associates, and a lot of ordinary citizens. And it was—as I said, it was supposedly the largest gathering of folks for a funeral or any other real event in Washington up to that time. And a hero was dead in the United States at that time, and it was proclaimed by a number of commentators that Decatur would always be a name—a fine name of this land.

MS. OWENS: It brings back—you can kind of envision from what we saw in later years of John F. Kennedy's funeral in Washington. You can kind of have that image.

MR. DRAKE: I've sort of had—when I read about this, I sort of had that. We all remember that from seeing it on television or being there. And it was a moving experience that everybody seemed to take an interest in.

MS. OWENS: So why do you think our city was named? In 1823 they're founding a city to be the county site [sic; seat?] of a place in Georgia, so?

MR. DRAKE: Well, I think there's a couple of reasons, and I base this on Caroline McKinney Clark's book on the story of Decatur. Of course, Decatur—the decision, once they

decided to carve out DeKalb County and decided where the county seat would be, they needed to name it. And apparently the leaders of the county were sitting around, and somebody said, "Well, what are we going to name our county seat?" And again, this was 1823, it was three years after Stephen Decatur had died, he had been a tremendous hero in the country, he still was very well thought of in the country, and his memory was very recent. And somebody said, "Well, why don't we name it after Stephen Decatur, who was a great hero?" And apparently there was unanimous consent, and the decision was made, and Decatur was named Decatur.

MS. OWENS: And DeKalb was named after a war hero as well, so that's an interesting—

MR. DRAKE: Right

MS. OWENS: --contrast and comparison. So is DeKalb's Decatur the only one?

MR. DRAKE: No, it sure isn't. And in fact, when I started looking into Stephen Decatur, I knew there was—I'd heard of Decatur, Alabama, and knew there was a Decatur, Illinois. I'd heard of those during my life, but I didn't know what other Decatur there were. So I went to the Rand-McNally atlas and started to check, and you'd be amazed. There's a—there is a Decatur, Illinois, and a Decatur, Alabama. There's also a Decatur, Arkansas; a Decatur, Michigan; Decatur, Mississippi; Decatur, Nebraska; Decatur, Texas; Decatur, Indiana; Decatur, Tennessee, and Decaturville, Tennessee. And there's also a Decatur County in Georgia. It's in south Georgia--Bainbridge is the county seat. And there's Decatur County in Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, and Tennessee. And I checked with each one of these cities and counties. I called the city clerk or the county clerk just to verify that this was the Decatur they were named after and to verify that all of these counties or cities were named after Stephen Decatur. And it's interesting to note that all the states that I mentioned are primarily early states. I mean, you don't see any far-western states, because they weren't formed at this time. But during the time that these cities and counties were being formed and settled, Decatur was such a popular name that people wanted to name their town or county after him.

One funny story: when I was calling to ask the representatives of the city, whoever I got on the line--usually I'd ask for the city clerk—I would say, "Would you mind telling me who your city is named after?" And one lady--I think it was Decatur, Tennessee, or Decaturville, Tennessee—but she was almost indignant. She said, "Why, Commodore Stephen Decatur, of course!" So I thanked her very much and confirmed that it was named after Stephen Decatur.

MS. OWENS: Like everyone should know that.

MR. DRAKE: That's right.

MS. OWENS: That's right. So I mentioned a little bit earlier your interest in Stephen Decatur, but can you just expand a little bit on how you got interested in this history?

MR. DRAKE: Well, I think you pretty much hit it on the head. When I served on the city commission back in the '70s and served as mayor, there was a large portrait of Stephen Decatur in the commission meeting room. I think it's still there; I haven't been to a commission meeting in about twenty years, but it hung there. And a lot of times when we'd be listening to tax protests from people complaining about the MARTA construction that was going on there and other things, I'd let my mind wander a little bit; and I'd look up at that picture of Stephen Decatur. And I knew he was a naval war hero, and he was kind of a—that picture, he kind of looked like a dandy, kind of fancy, and he was in the uniform. But I always wondered, you know, what was the attraction? Why was [the city of] Decatur really named after him? And as I've told some people, like many projects in my life that I determined I was going to find that out, it took me about twenty years; but I finally got around to doing a little research on Stephen Decatur. I bought several books on Stephen Decatur that I have and learned a little more about him and put together a talk on Stephen Decatur that I've given a number of times in Decatur and in DeKalb County.

MS. OWENS: Well, with us celebrating the 175th birthday of the county, and then, of course, next year Decatur will be 175, we're hoping that, as we get the word out, people are going to have more interest in history, both with the county and the city, and will do some research on their own, come to the Archives at the museum. Where else might people find information, if they wanted to do a little bit more study, on Stephen Decatur?

MR. DRAKE: Well, there are several good sources in the city of Decatur. First of all, if they want to know what he looked like, there are several portraits. The portrait that I mentioned that sort of sparked my interest is still at City Hall in the commission meeting room, and I'd recommend taking a look at it. There's also a portrait at the DeKalb Library, a very nice portrait that's available there. And then there's a portrait at the Top of the Plaza Restaurant, which is at the top of the First Union [Bank] building, right on [East] Ponce de Leon in Decatur. It used to be the Executive Club in the Decatur Federal Building, but now it's the Top of the Plaza in First Union. But there's a Stephen Decatur Room there, which is available for small groups, and there's a really nice portrait of Stephen Decatur there. There's also a bust of Stephen Decatur that's on the plaza right above the MARTA station and a little information about Stephen Decatur there. There are books on Stephen Decatur that are available. And I've got—I've collected some books. In fact, I've got one book that I'm real proud of that I found at the old Hound Dog Press, which used to be an old bookstore in Decatur that Fred [inaudible—sounds

like “Boze”?] ran for a number of years. This book was published in 1821, one year after Stephen Decatur died; and it’s a fascinating account. It’s the oldest book I own, and—

MS. OWENS: It’s a wonderful book.

MR. DRAKE: --and I’m delighted to have it. But there are some other books also that are available at the library. And my research on this has really just touched the tip of the iceberg. I am not a Decatur scholar or historical scholar. I just got interested in this and have read a couple of books and put together this information. But there’s a lot more to it for somebody that might really be interested.

MS. OWENS: I was thinking as you were talking—possibly the Naval Archives--the [Naval] Academy, the Naval Archives, National Archives.

MR. DRAKE: Right

MS. OWENS: I bet those folks would have some information.

MR. DRAKE: I think they would. I think they would, and I don’t remember this; but when I went to the [Stephen] Decatur house in Washington—and the next time I go to Washington, I want to go back by there—as I recall, I think they had a collection of books on [Stephen] Decatur and certainly a lot of information. And I’m sure they would have a list of books that might be about him. Somebody could put that together; because there’s an awful lot there, and there’s a lot written about him because he was so popular at the time.

MS. OWENS: We have in the Old Courthouse in our museum a copy of a portrait of Stephen Decatur, and we also have on loan to us from the Decatur [Maud Burrus] Library his sword, which is one of the artifacts that folks like to come and look at. And then, as I mentioned, we have the portrait of—the painting of the depiction of the battle with the Barbary pirates. And we have some information in our archives as well.

Leadership has been very important in DeKalb County through these years of history; and, as you think about Stephen Decatur and his leadership, do you have any thoughts that you’d like to leave about him as a person?

MR. DRAKE: Well, there are a couple of thoughts when I think of Stephen Decatur and after I kind of got into this and got interested in it. One is that he, apparently, from everything I’ve read, was a real hero. He was a very dynamic man. Apparently he had wonderful leadership abilities. He was loved by his fellow officers and by the men that served under him. He was very effective in what he did, and he became quite a hero. He also had an independent streak, from what I can read. He said his piece, he did what was responsible and right, and I’ve always thought that, of course, the city of Decatur to me has some very unique qualities. It has its independence, it’s very proud of itself, and I’ve always thought Decatur—our Decatur—was

very well named. I think the city of Decatur and a lot of its people and its leaders reflect on the person that we're named after. And I think that's a nice part of our heritage that that's so. It's interesting to me that in the Atlanta metro area Decatur people, if—I think a lot of people in the metro area, if someone says, "Where are you from?" they'll say, "Oh, I'm from Atlanta." Now, they may be from Sandy Springs, or they may be from Woodstock or Jonesboro or who knows where, but somewhere in the area. But I can almost guarantee you, when Decatur people travel, if somebody asks them where they're from, they're going to say they're from Decatur. And to me that is sort of a Stephen Decatur-type independence.

The other thought I have, I would really like to see everyone in Decatur know a little more about Stephen Decatur, because I didn't know that much about him. And when I've given this talk to a number of civic clubs in Decatur, oftentimes I've asked the question, "What can you tell me about Stephen Decatur?" before I've started. And most people knew he was a naval war hero but didn't really know a whole lot more. And I think it would be great if our city—and they may do this now—as I said, I haven't been to a commission meeting in twenty years—but on January 5th, which is Stephen Decatur's birthday, I think it'll be real nice for the city commission to acknowledge Stephen Decatur and mention it and say a little something about him and educate the folks who might be at that meeting or watching it on cable. And likewise I think it would be real good for our school system to perhaps do something, maybe at the lower grade levels, just to be sure every student who goes through the Decatur City Schools knows something about Stephen Decatur. It doesn't have to be at any great depth, but I—and they may be doing that, to some extent now. I don't know if they do it in any obviously organized way; but I'd like to see that, because I think Stephen Decatur is an interesting topic, and I think it's a good heritage for our city.

MS. OWENS: [Inaudible opening phrase] out, it's just equally as important for residents of DeKalb County at large and at the school system to know, because it was the city of Decatur, the first municipality in our county. It is and was and is, even with the challenge from Stone Mountain in the early years, remains our county site [sic]. It is our central focus, it is the heritage—Decatur represents that heritage as the other municipalities followed along. And so we urge everybody to take the opportunity to get to know pieces of DeKalb's history as we celebrate 175 years. Come to the Square in downtown Decatur. That's where the Old Courthouse is, that's where the museum with the county history [sic], that's where you can see and learn a little bit more about Stephen Decatur and walk the Square and see the bust of Stephen Decatur and City Hall.

We are celebrating years of excellence of leadership in this county, the rich heritage that we have, and we look today at one of the communities in DeKalb—the City of Decatur, our county seat. And our thanks to Walt for joining us, and we will continue to probe the various facets of DeKalb’s rich cultural heritage.

Closing music, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, plays. Screen goes black, and the following is superimposed over it in white letters:

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End of recording