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Rebecca Latimer Felton (reenactment)

“Then and Now” hosted by Sue Ellen Owens,
Interviewing Anne Earle in the persona of Rebecca Latimer Felton

*Sue Ellen Owens (at the time, Director of the DeKalb Historical Society) “interviews”
Rebecca Latimer Felton, portrayed by DHS staff member Anne Earle.*

MS. OWENS: Welcome to *DeKalb Then and Now*. Our program features DeKalb’s history, and DeKalb has a very rich history. We’ve looked at communities as they’ve developed in the past programs, and we’ve looked at the wonderful 178 years of DeKalb County’s history. Today we’re going to do a little bit of an unusual program. We’re going to feature one of DeKalb’s most historic women. We like to develop the characters in DeKalb’s history; and one of those characters has joined me today, a woman that is celebrating actually today her ninetieth birthday. I’d like to welcome to our set Mrs. Rebecca Latimer Felton.

MRS. EARLE/MRS. FELTON: Why, thank you, Ms. Owens.

OWENS: I’m so happy to have you here with us today. Must be great, celebrating a ninetieth birthday.

EARLE/FELTON, *laughing*: Well, who ever thought I’d live this long?

OWENS: I know. Ninety is very, very—well, I’m not supposed to use the word “old”—but we’re very glad to have you with us today.

EARLE/FELTON: Thank you so much.

OWENS: I want the people that are listening to our program to know a lot about you, because you’ve certainly contributed to DeKalb’s history and the state of Georgia’s history. And so, as we celebrate your birthday, we’re going to look a little bit at your life.

EARLE/FELTON, *laughing*: Thank you, dear.

OWENS: I would like for our viewers to know where you were born, because we claim you as DeKalb County. So where were you born? Where were you raised?

EARLE/FELTON: ‘Way back in 1835, I was born right here in DeKalb County. My father had a lovely farm and an inn near what’s now called Lithonia. That’s where we lived, on Panola Road.

OWENS: OK. And as you grew up—I mean, that’s a little bit before my time, and so I’d sort of like to know what young girls did. Were you, like for example, educated?

EARLE/FELTON: Oh, of course, I was! I was a very lucky girl. Education was very important to my father. So he donated some land for a schoolhouse on our property, and he got us a teacher, and so all the young people in the neighborhood, we’d all come and go school in

our one-room schoolhouse. Well, that was very nice, and I was a very good pupil. I just loved learning. But when I got a little older, my father realized that wasn't going to be enough for a girl like me, who was so eager to learn; so we moved to Decatur. Now, Decatur at that time was one of the best cities in north Georgia. And I went to school there in a small school for girls; and when I was through with that, I went on to Madison and to the Madison Female Academy, where I graduated when I was seventeen. And I knew all about mathematics and French and literature and music. Oh, we girls were so eager for culture in those days. And let me tell you one thing. The most important thing, despite—including my education, I met my future husband there.

OWENS: Oh, my goodness.

EARLE/FELTON: He was the speaker at our graduation. He was just the handsomest, smartest man, Dr. William Felton. I just—I fell in love right away.

OWENS: That was awfully young.

EARLE/FELTON: Well, I was only seventeen; but in those days, there was nothing uncommon for a girl of fourteen or fifteen to get married and have babies.

OWENS: With your father stressing education so much for you, how did he feel about your getting married?

EARLE/FELTON: Well, he did not approve; I will say that. Dr. Felton was a medical doctor and a preacher of the Gospel. But my father, he thought—you know how fathers are—he thought that I should be married to a man already established in business. And Dr. Felton did not—did not meet those qualifications. And my father did not approve and forbade me to see him.

OWENS: Oh, my goodness.

EARLE/FELTON: Well, you know how young girls in love are. That didn't stop me for one minute. And Mr.—and Dr. Felton, well, finally we eloped.

OWENS: Oh, my goodness.

EARLE/FELTON: Well, here's our plan: Dr. Felton rode on his horse, and I had hidden a ladder next to my window, and Dr. Felton put the ladder up, I climbed down, and we rode off to Panthersville to the Justice of the Peace. Well, when my father found out, he was furious! But, you know, love conquered all, and he forgave me, because Dr. Felton was a fine man. And so we all got along beautifully after that little misunderstanding at the beginning of our marriage.

OWENS: Oh, my goodness. Where did you and Dr. Felton live?

EARLE/FELTON: Well, Dr. Felton was from Cartersville, and he had a family farm there. So we moved up to Cartersville to his family farm, and I became a farm wife, which was a life I

was well-prepared for, having grown up that way. And back in those days on the farm, now, we Georgia planters, we made everything we needed except for sugar, coffee, and iron. All of our clothes we made, you know, starting from the lamb up. *Laughs.* We wove, and we sewed our clothes. And we made our own soap. We made our own starch for our clothes. All of our food, of course, we grew ourselves. Oh, and it was just an abundance! Everything was just—all the food you could possibly ever want.

OWENS: Sounds like you had to work very hard.

EARLE/FELTON: We worked hard. But a well-organized, hardworking farm was completely self-sufficient. And we had everything you could ever need.

OWENS: Well, what was your fun? What did you do for fun?

EARLE/FELTON: We had plenty of time for fun. Oh, the hospitality back in those days was something. Oh, it was wonderful. People'd come by for a few hours and stay for days. And you just put out these huge meals with everything you could think of to eat. And everything was an occasion for a party. We'd have a quilting bee—the ladies would bring over their own needles, because needles were scarce and high in those days. And then we'd just quilt and quilt all day, and all the men would come from the fields and have a huge lunch, and then we'd just keep quilting all day. And there were corn-shuckings—same thing, people'd just dance and have a party and shuck corn all night, and we'd just—we all helped each other out in those days and had a wonderful time, too.

OWENS: Sounds like it. The food part sounds really good to me, because I love that country food and those fresh vegetables.

EARLE/FELTON: Mm-hmm

OWENS: Well, going back to when you were a girl—of course, you were a girl when you got married, for all intents and purposes; that was very young—but what was Atlanta like, our big, metropolitan Atlanta?

EARLE/FELTON: Oh, well, you know, the big changes I've seen in my lifetime! When I was a girl, of course, this part of Georgia was all rural—farms and towering forests. We didn't have any big cities in those days. And even the little towns like Decatur—I told you that was one of the best towns. Well, Atlanta, when I was a girl, was nothing. *Laughs.* I got to be lucky enough to be the first—on that first train ride out of the Atlanta depot. When I was seven years old, in 1842, my family—everybody in the neighborhood, we got in our carriages, we went to Atlanta—well, it wasn't called Atlanta in those days. But anyway, it was one building. And it wasn't much of a building, either—it was a rough-board building that doubled as depot and saloon. And that there was all there was in Atlanta.

OWENS: And that was it.

EARLE/FELTON: And we rode on that train from Atlanta to Marietta seven miles, but we thought it was really something special. *Laughs.*

OWENS: Wow. Wow. Wow. What about the Civil War. Do you have memories of the Civil War?

EARLE/FELTON, *sighing*: My dear Ms. Owens, when will men learn to avoid the folly of war? It seems in my lifetime, every twenty or thirty years, there's been a war. It's only my hope that now that women are more involved in the public life, maybe we can avoid having so many wars. Because what does it solve? Nothing. Death and destruction, and those of us who are left at home—it's terrible for us.

Well, in the Civil War, my husband, of course, like most of the men, thought we'd just win it like that [*snaps fingers*]. But, of course, that's not what happened. And we women, we had to be behind our men. And the things we had to do, the privations! Well, you know, of course, we had no army. And the men had no uniforms. So we ladies took our good wool dresses, and we had six or seven yards' worth of good wool in the skirt. We cut off the skirt and made them into uniforms for our husbands and our brothers. We took all of our bed linens and rolled those into bandages. All of our blankets went off to war. We had to sleep under wool carpets for the whole war. I mean, we really did without. And, of course, once the Yankees came through Atlanta and destroyed everything, people just didn't have food. My family—I convinced my husband that we should go to Macon to a refugee farm during the war so maybe we could grow a crop and have something to eat during those terrible years.

But when we came—when the war was over, and we came back to our home in Cartersville, it was just devastation everywhere. There was hardly anything left. I mean, I just broke out in tears. But, you know, the good thing that came out of that war, women before that would never have dreamed of working outside the home—it just was not done. But after the war nobody had anything. Women had to work, had to pitch in. Either your husband was dead or wounded or—nobody had any money at all. So my husband and I could not support ourselves on the farm anymore, so we had a school. And, you know, I really enjoyed that. We had, oh, quite a school by the—about two years we did it. And I taught mathematics. I really loved the work. To tell you the truth, I never thought that I would be working outside the home for wages.

After two years I was ready to go back and be a farm wife, but it stirred something in us Southern ladies. We'd been told all along that we're supposed to stay at home, keep our mouths shut in public places, and we began to realize, you know, we could work, and we could

make a contribution to our family and keeping up the family. And that was the start of women thinking they could be involved in public life. So it [the Civil War] was a bad thing, but some good did come of it. And, you know, of course, in the legislature, you know, people speak badly about that Reconstruction legislature, but that was the first time that they passed laws so that women had rights to their own—married women—had rights to their own property, and that married women could keep their own wages. So some good did come out of that for us ladies.

OWENS: And it sounds like your dad's emphasis on education for you was very beneficial for you in calling on those skills to teach children.

EARLE/FELTON: Yes, ma'am. I was very lucky to have a good education. And I hope that--now in my lifetime I've seen educational opportunities for women increase, and I hope all the young ladies of today appreciate the advantages they have.

OWENS: Well, let's move to that wonderful arena of politics. [Inaudible comment.]

EARLE/FELTON, *laughing*: Yes, ma'am. When I was a girl, no women would have thought of taking part in public life. That was a man's arena. Well, after the war there were terrible things going on, and my husband and I became very concerned about the way things were going. And he decided to run for the United States Congress. Well, of course, we didn't have much money, so I was naturally his campaign manager. Well, I had the most fun. I wrote letters to the papers, I wrote letters to the constituents, I made speeches, and, you know, I quickly learned there is no point in talking to people who agree with you. You have to talk to the foe and reach him and try to convince him. Well, I never would have thought of myself as a public speaker, but I learned that I could do it. And I loved it.

Well, my husband won. And once again, back in those days, we didn't have money for a secretary for him, so I was his personal secretary. And I learned all about Washington, I learned all about how to draft bills and keep track of his calendar, and I'd go down there to the Senate and watch. I got to know everybody. I could say that I have known every president from President Grant until now [1925], except for Mr. Arthur—I didn't know him. But I got to know all the people up there in Washington. Oh, I just loved it! I had a wonderful time, just seeing how we could make things happen and that I could be part of it. It was so exciting.

Well, my husband only served two terms. But I made my connections up there in Washington that lasted the rest of my life. And a few years later he decided to run for the Georgia legislature, and he won there. And he had several terms in the Georgia legislature, so the both of us really fought for the things we believed in, like repealing that convict leasing system. Oh, that was—

OWENS: What was the convict leasing system? In case our listeners don't really know.

EARLE/FELTON: Well, I'm glad they've forgotten about it. It was a terrible, terrible thing. The state would lease prisoners to large landowners and businesspeople, and it was the same thing as slavery. It was worse than slavery, because the slave owner had some reason to keep his slaves alive. But these people had no reason to keep their convicts alive, because they could just get more. So they were making money off the labor of these poor, poor convicts. And women [prisoners] were doing it, and then the guards were fathering babies of the women. Oh, it was just too terrible. And it took us many, many years to fight and abolish that; but I was glad to say that we did.

OWENS: Wonderful, wonderful. So your husband's in the legislature, you go to Washington, and so you kind of—you get that bug, but one of the other things that I've heard about you—in fact, one of my favorite descriptions of you—is that you were described as being “facile of pen and sharp of tongue.” [EARLE/FELTON *laughs*.] I like that. I don't mind having that description for myself. “Facile of pen and sharp of tongue.” What is that related to?

EARLE/FELTON: Well, I hope everybody still remembers me. I—my good friend at *The Atlanta Journal*, after I'd been active for many years in state politics, asked me to write a weekly column. So I've been writing a weekly column—oh! for thirty years now—giving all—he said I could write about anything, and believe me, I do. I write about child-rearing, I write about plants—how to take care of your plants and your crops and who you should vote for and what I think on all the issues. People write me all the time, and I just write about everything. And I—people tell me I gained a very loyal following with my weekly columns about everything.

OWENS: Wow, that must be fun.

EARLE/FELTON: Oh, I just love it.

OWENS: How do you decide what you're going to write on?

EARLE/FELTON: Oh, just whatever comes to me.

OWENS: Just whatever comes to you.

EARLE/FELTON: Whatever comes to me, or somebody writes me a letter—I'm just off.

OWENS: You're just off. So—and the paper just gives you that latitude?

EARLE/FELTON: They do. Luckily they let me write about whatever I want to, although sometimes I don't get it finished quite in time, so I have to have a driver right by the door to quick take it to the depot to get down to Atlanta on time for my deadline.

OWENS: Oh, my goodness. Well, you mentioned earlier about the effect of the Civil War—one of the good things was the fact women realized things they could do outside the home. And one important thing that I believe you've been very heavily involved in was—is the Suffrage Movement.

EARLE/FELTON: Oh, yes, ma'am. Well, as I got to be more and more involved in public affairs, it really, really got me so mad that the most worthless, ignorant man had a right to vote, and the most intelligent—

OWENS, *smiling*: There's that "sharp of tongue" thing, folks.

EARLE/FELTON: Pardon me, but it is the truth! You all know it. Whereas the most intelligent woman [inaudible] did not have the simple right of being a citizen of the United States. Well, I got to know a lot of the women when I was in Washington. Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton got to be good friends of mine. And through my work in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, I got to know a lot of women there who really were in favor of women having all the full rights that we deserved. Well, we would go to Washington and to Congress every year, trying to get the right to vote. Well, it just was not going anywhere. So we decided to change our strategy and go state by state. So some of the states—Wyoming was the first state—gave women the right to vote. And I was part of that delegation that would go to the Georgia legislature year after year after year, to no avail. We knew it was hopeless, but we just had to keep up the fight. Well, after years of hard work, of course, you all know, in 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, and we ladies became full citizens of the United States.

OWENS: We're grateful for all the hard work that came from all your efforts—all the hard work and what the results of your efforts were.

EARLE/FELTON: Why, thank you, dear.

OWENS: Thank you very much for doing that. Well, you'll go down in history as being Georgia's first female senator. How did that happen?

EARLE/FELTON: Well, I was not only Georgia's; I was the first woman in the U.S. Senate--

OWENS: My goodness.

EARLE/FELTON: --ever. Well, I don't take it as, you know, personal pride. Of course, I am proud of it; but I take it as a reflection for all the women in the United States. Of course, as I said, I've been very active in politics for years and years and years. And the governor owed me a favor or two. Well, when one of our senators died in office, he decided—the governor, Governor Hardwick, gave me a call. This was in October of 1922; we barely even had the right to vote. And so he offered me the spot to fill in between when our senator had died and the next election so I could be the first woman in the United States Senate. Well, of course, I had to say yes, on behalf of all the women in the United States. Well, after that, it was so exciting. The word got out—well, you would have thought I was some kind of somebody important—the queen or a movie star. Well, my house—there were newsreel photographers and newspaper

reporters; I got telegrams. It was just really big news. I wasn't used to that kind of fuss. But it was so exciting.

Well, it was an honor, but I think some of those men thought that I would never be seated, because, of course, we were out of—the Congress was out of session in October, and there'd be an election in November. And then, by the time the Senate came back in [session], the new senator would have been elected. Well, I tried a few things behind the scenes to get in a special session, but oh, no; President Harding would have none of it. But luckily Senator George—Walter George, the new senator—was quite the chivalrous gentleman, and he told me that he would wait two days to be sworn in so that I could be the senator for two days and be seated in the United States Senate. Well, I came in—this was November of 1922. I will never forget it. As I marched down there, took my place as the junior senator from Georgia, many people thought it would never happen. And I was introduced, and they accepted by credentials, and I was so—and they even let me address the Senate. And I gave a little speech about how hard we ladies had worked. And we didn't think that anyone would regret that we ladies had been given the vote, because even though I was the first [female] senator and only got to serve for two days, I know I will not be the last. I know I'm the first of many ladies who will be able to serve our country, and I can only hope that we ladies will use our wisdom and our patriotism to serve our country well.

OWENS: Well spoken.

EARLE/FELTON: Why, thank you.

OWENS: Any memory, anything that you'd like to share other than that from your past or anything other—piece of advice? Because that was great advice. Anything you can think of that we haven't thought about or haven't asked you about?

EARLE/FELTON: Well, I just hope that the young people of today will realize the changes in my life—you know, people talk about the changes being these newfangled inventions, like the electricity and the telephone and the automobile. Well, yes, those have been big changes in my life. But I think the real changes are in the role of women and how we have come from being this delicate little flowers of Southern belles, where we just sat at home. We worked hard, but we sat at home. We didn't have any power at all until now until now. We have the right to vote, the right to be full citizens in our country. And I want the young girls of today to really appreciate that and go out there and make their dreams come true.

OWENS: We want to wish you a happy ninetieth birthday.

EARLE/FELTON: Why, thank you, dear.

OWENS: Thank you for joining us. [*Reaches down to pick up a photograph of Rebecca L. Felton and holds it up to the camera.*] This is a picture of Mrs. Rebecca Latimer Felton that hangs on the walls of the museum at the Old Courthouse on the Square. [*Indicates the woman to her left.*] This is Anne Earle. [*Camera moves to Anne Earle.*] Anne Earle is a staff person with the DeKalb Historical Society. And, as our tribute to Women's History Month, we developed this vignette of the life of Rebecca Latimer Felton. And Anne's available if you'd like to call the DeKalb County [Historic/Old] Courthouse [DeKalb Historical Society] at 404-373-1088. She can do this one-woman show for you.

We're very proud of the heritage of Rebecca Latimer Felton in DeKalb's history, the work with the Suffrage Movement and other things she did—her writings, her representing the state of Georgia. In 1997, at DeKalb's 175th birthday, Mrs. Rebecca Latimer Felton was inducted into the Georgia Women's Hall of Fame as one of our representatives from our past from women's history. We were very pleased in DeKalb to have that recognition of Mrs. Latimer Felton on the occasion of our county's 175th birthday.

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony plays over the closing shot of the Historic DeKalb County Courthouse, with the words "Then and Now with Host Sue Ellen Owens" superimposed over the image. "This has been a presentation of DCTV DeKalb Government Television."

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