

Community Champions

The DeKalb History Center held its Fifth Annual Black History Month Celebration on February 9. Working in conjunction with *The Champion Newspaper*, we were pleased to honor DeKalb champions from the past 20 years who have cared enough about our community to get involved, stay involved and make a difference. "A Salute to Community Champions" focused on a select group of gentlemen with achievements both past and ongoing. Special guests included Commissioner Stan Watson, CEO Burrell Ellis and Reverend James Ward.

The emcee for the event was publisher Carolyn Jernigan-Glenn who presented the awards with heartfelt respect for each honoree. Recognized in alphabetical order were: Sheriff-Elect Derwin Brown, Dr. William C. Brown, John Evans, William "Buck" Godfrey and Gregory B. Levett, Sr.

Sheriff-Elect Derwin Brown was honored posthumously. His daughter Brandy Brown accepted on behalf of the family. Philippa Brown, daughter

of Dr. William C. Brown accepted his posthumous award for their family.

Sheriff-Elect Derwin Brown was gunned down in the driveway of his home four months after winning a runoff election for the DeKalb County Sheriff's Office and weeks before he was to have been sworn in.

The 46-year-old, who had risen to the rank of captain in the DeKalb Police department during a 23-year career in law enforcement, had campaigned to quash corruption in the sheriff's office. He was killed in a hail of gunfire after returning from his graduation from sheriff's school.

Brown's rival, then-sheriff Sidney Dorsey, was convicted of masterminding the murder in July 2002. Although Dorsey denied involvement in the crime during his trial, in 2007 he confessed to then-DeKalb District Attorney Gwen Keyes to ordering the murder-for-hire.



Gregory B. Levett, Sr., John Evans, Brandy Brown, William "Buck" Godfrey and Philippa Brown. Photo by Edward Anderson.

Reviving South Decatur Through Urban Homesteading

By David S. Rotenstein, Ph.D.

Oakhurst is a trendy Decatur neighborhood in the city's southwest quadrant. Its thriving business district and residential streets lined with Craftsman-influenced bungalows, period revival homes, New South cottages, postwar vernacular small houses, and a growing number of newer McMansions conceal a period in the community's history when Oakhurst was known as South Decatur. In the 1970s, South Decatur was rapidly sliding into blight. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was the single-largest owner of residential properties in the neighborhood. HUD's inventory of abandoned and foreclosed homes threatened the entire community's stability.

Decatur was a small city with big city problems and in 1974 it became one

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Upcoming Events

Executive Committee

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 Exhibits Coordinator:
 Karen Chance

Lunch & Learn, Tuesday, May 22, noon, at the Historic DeKalb Courthouse

“Reviving South Decatur: Urban Homesteading and its Effects”

By David S. Rotenstein, Ph.D.

Free—bring your lunch!

Log Cabin Storytelling -Bring your children this summer!

Sessions are **Wednesdays from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m.** at the historic Biffle Cabin, 720 W. Trinity Place, for children 6 - 12. \$4 per child for members or \$6 for non-members. 10% off a summer season pass if purchased in advance (all 7 sessions). Reservations are suggested. Call 404-373-1088 extension 20 or email borger@dekalbhistory.org for reservations. Check our website for more information at www.dekalbhistory.org. Under the “Education” tab, click on Children’s Programs.

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|---------|--|
| June 6 | B. J. Abraham - <i>Bear Stories: History of the First Teddy Bear</i> |
| June 13 | Fran Frantz- <i>Weave a Tale</i> |
| June 20 | Cathy Kaemmerlen - <i>The Buzz on Honeybees</i> |
| June 27 | Fran Frantz - <i>Homemade Ice Cream with Brer Rabbit</i> |
| July 11 | Deborah Strahorn - <i>Cowboys and Cowgirls across the Country</i> |
| July 18 | Reuben Haller - <i>Fiddlin' Dan the Mountain Man</i> |
| July 25 | LaDoris Davis - <i>Fun with Folktales</i> |

Lunch and Learn, Tuesday, July 24, noon, at the Historic DeKalb Courthouse

“Why is that House Historic? Understanding Local Historic Districts”

By Leigh Burns and Richard Laub

Leigh and Richard will present information on the often misunderstood local historic district. Together they will answer:

- What is a “Certified Local Government”?
- How can I protect my historic neighborhood?
- What is the value of a local historic district?
- What is good infill construction and why does it matter?
- Why do we care about scale and rhythm and what does size have to do with history?

Free—bring your lunch! ✦

Archives Update

Ancestry.com has a new program called Publisher that you can access for free. You can read about it on their website at <http://publish.ancestry.com>. We are experimenting with this program in an effort to make more information available to researchers. Publisher is easy to use and supports Excel files.

Volunteers for the Sylvester Cemetery worked for years on a detailed listing of their burials. We uploaded their list and it was indexed in about 24 hours. Because Ancestry concentrates on genealogy, an uploaded spreadsheet may have un-indexed columns. For the Sylvester Cemetery, these columns include “Stone Description,” “Stone Inscription” and “Comments.” So while not indexed, the information is still there for the researcher. We have also added an un-indexed list of the City of Decatur collection as a service to the city for loaning us these historic documents. We have just indexed the Register of Free Persons of Color ledger and are uploading and indexing the 1902 Voter’s book for DeKalb County as well. See the DHC page at: <http://publish.ancestry.com/Group/100907/Profile>. ✦

Community Champions (cont.)

Continued from page 1

Dr. William C. Brown was the first African American to serve on the DeKalb County Library Board of Trustees (1976-90). Serving as chairman of the board from 1978-90, he was instrumental in the passing of a \$29 million library bond referendum, which ushered in the construction of 12 libraries, seven of them in predominantly Black communities.

When Brown was first appointed to the library board by DeKalb CEO Manuel Maloof, there was only one library in south DeKalb. Now a library in the Wesley Chapel community is named in his honor. Brown was also elected to the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners and was a founder and first president of 100 Black Men of DeKalb County.

John Evans has established a solid reputation of fighting for what he and others believe is right in the areas of education, civic affairs and civil rights. He founded and is the president of Operation LEAD, an organization dedicated to the “belief that all people, regardless of color or creed, deserve adequate protection of their legal, civil and human rights.”

Evans is a former member of the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners and the MARTA Board of Directors and a former president of the DeKalb Branch of the NAACP.

William “Buck” Godfrey was the first Black football coach at Southwest DeKalb High School and has built a legacy of achievement on and off the football field. In addition to winning

258 games in 28 seasons at the school, including a state championship in 1995, Godfrey was an influential English teacher and the author of several books.

Also, he has helped more than 260 former football players earn college scholarships. More than 200 of those scholarship winners are now college graduates. Godfrey was rewarded for his achievements in 2010 when he was inducted into the Atlanta Sports Hall of Fame.

Gregory B. Levett Sr., the founder and CEO of Gregory B. Levett & Sons Funeral Homes and Crematory, has been a visionary and philanthropist of more than 30 years.

Levett is a former president of the DeKalb Chapter of the 100 Black Men of America, former member of the City of Decatur Public School Board Council, lifetime member of the NAACP and former president of the Salem Gate Merchants Association. He also serves on the board of directors for the DeKalb Medical Center, and chairman of the DeKalb Hospital Authority.

Levett and his wife Betty also made the largest donation to the DeKalb Medical Center (Hilandale) by a minority since 1961 and because of their generosity, the hospital created the Gregory B. Levett Sr. and Betty H. Levett Emergency Department reception area in their honor. Levett and his family have donated in excess of \$1 million to various charities and organizations throughout their 30 years of service. ✦

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Reviving South Decatur

Continued from page 1

of 23 cities nationwide selected to be part of what the federal government dubbed the Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program. The program was authorized in the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974; landmark legislation that also introduced Community Development Block Grants.

Then-Senator Joseph Biden, who introduced the legislation in 1973, described it as an effort to address the “need for safe, decent and sanitary housing in our core urban areas.” Urban homesteading was a program designed to return vacant and abandoned homes to private homeownership and “provide moneys to families or individuals exhibiting traits of independence and willingness to rebuild.”

Shortly after President Gerald Ford signed the new law, Decatur filed an application to become an urban homesteading city. “Decatur is characterized as a city of homes, generally older and well-tended,” wrote the city in its application. “However, for a variety of reasons, some properties within the City have been abandoned. The presence of these vacated properties scattered throughout a neighborhood creates a general aura of deterioration.”

By the time the urban homesteading legislation was enacted, HUD owned about 200 South Decatur homes in about a 0.90-square-mile area. Under the new program, titles to those homes were transferred to the Decatur Housing Authority. Paul Pierce was the DHA deputy director in the 1970s; he later headed the agency before his 2012 retirement. “Obviously when you had a significant problem with vacant foreclosed houses, there wasn’t anybody lining up to buy them or to do anything with them,” Pierce explained in an oral history interview that will be among more than two dozen archived at the DeKalb History Center.

Using strict application criteria that considered income and personal factors, the DHA held lotteries to select program finalists. “We literally had what we called a fishbowl, a large glass container,” Pierce recalled. “And so all the eligible names

would be put in that glass container and we’d literally publicly draw however many names it was that we felt we needed based upon the houses that we had at the time.”

Ida Fudge was a young African American mother living in Southwest Atlanta when she was notified by mail that she had been a winner. “I had a date to meet with the Housing Authority person,” she recalled in a 2012 interview. “And I met with him and he drove me around to each house and I was allowed to choose which one I wanted at that point.”

Lottery winners could tour the available properties on a DHA-chartered bus tour or they could view them independently. “But everybody would get together and we had a tour schedule laid out and we had about fifteen or twenty minutes per house. It varied depending upon how many houses were in the tour,” said Pierce.

Fudge, like the other urban homesteaders, was able to pick from a pool of homes that fit her needs, i.e., number of bedrooms. She thought the one-story Maxwell Street home she picked and subsequently lived in for more than 30 years was perfect. “I fell in love with this house from the time I saw it,” she recalled as we spoke in her dining room.

The formerly vacant house was in disrepair. One of the program’s objectives was to provide low-interest loans to the urban homesteaders to rehabilitate the homes and bring them into code compliance. “It was rough. It looked pretty bad when I first saw it. But at that point, it was going to be mine and I didn’t care what it looked like,” said Fudge. “Yes, it was pretty bad when I first walked in and saw it. But it had this huge backyard and my parents’ house I lived in, they had a huge backyard and it sort of reminded me of home. And after staying at an apartment for seven years.”

Educators Phil and Maria Coventry were living in a rented Decatur house when they learned about the urban homesteading



URBAN HOMESTEAD PROGRAM

From June 7, 1979 through June 27, 1979, the HOUSING AUTHORITY OF THE CITY OF DECATUR, GEORGIA, is accepting applications for the URBAN HOMESTEAD PROGRAM. Interested persons contact the Authority at Room 300, First National Bank Building, Decatur, Georgia, or telephone (404) 377-0421. An Equal Housing Opportunity



An Urban Homesteading home before and after rehabilitation. Photo courtesy of the Decatur Housing Authority. On the right, an Urban Homesteading program ad published in the Atlanta Daily World, June 10, 1979.

Through Urban Homesteading (cont.)

program. “We were number fifteen in the choices,” recalled Maria Coventry. The Coventrys ultimately did get their first choice — a one-story Kings Highway bungalow — because others ahead of them dropped out of the program. “But the reason that we chose this house, the other houses were bigger. And they were in a better area,” said Maria.

The street’s trees and ethnic diversity were key factors in the Coventry’s decision. When the Coventrys bought their home in 1978, the neighborhood was still mostly African American. “The turnaround was beginning. It was a transitional area,” explained Phil Coventry. “It seemed to be successfully integrating and so that was one of the factors.”

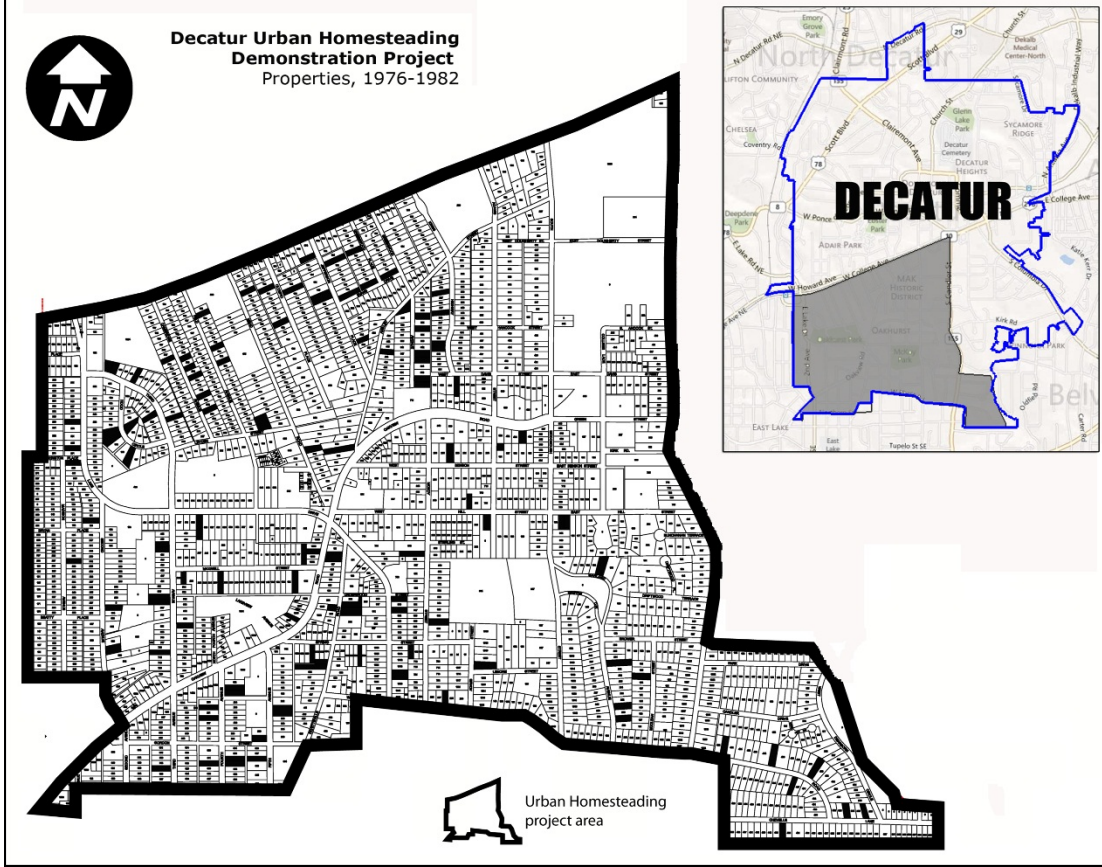
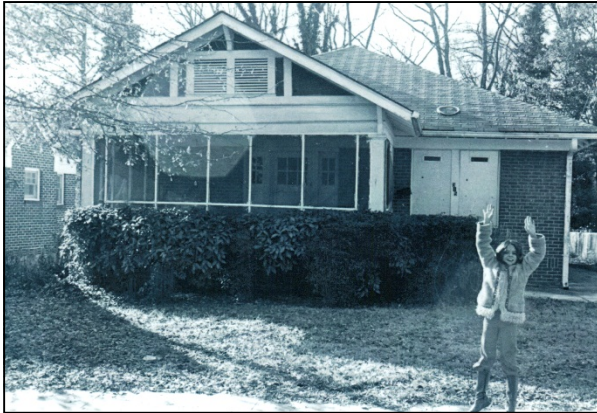
The Coventrys and Fudge were among the 113 urban homesteaders who bought dollar homes between 1975 and 1982. Although intended to spur reinvestment throughout the urban homesteading neighborhood, revitalization didn’t begin until more than a decade after the housing program ended. In 1979 the City of Decatur re-branded all of its southwest quadrant “Oakhurst” for the short-lived town of the same name annexed in 1915. “While only a part of the trade area traditionally has been known as Oakhurst, the planners recommend that the name Oakhurst now be considered synonymous with that of southwest Decatur,” wrote the City’s planning consultants in a 1979 report.

Public-private ventures, partly funded by CDBG monies, to improve the business district’s streetscape and create a South Decatur Community Center in the Old Scottish Rite Hospital didn’t begin yielding results until the 1990s. By the turn of the 21st century, Oakhurst was experiencing a building boom and many of the small homes from the urban homesteading program were again recycled — into landfills — as they were torn down to accommodate large new homes for families attracted to Oakhurst by Decatur’s schools and the neighborhood’s hip reputation. ✦

Images top to bottom: An Urban Homesteading home under rehabilitation in 1978. Photo courtesy of Phil and Maria Coventry.

The former Urban Homesteading home in 2012. Photo by author.

Decatur Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program area. Map by author.



Annual Meeting & Silent Auction

The DeKalb History Center celebrated our 65th anniversary at the Historic DeKalb Courthouse on March 23. At the Annual Meeting, new directors and officers were elected. Officers for the next year are President Melvin Bettis, President Elect Jack Regan, Treasurer Darold Honore, Past President Kerri Morrin and Secretary Cathy Mullins. New directors included Scotty Candler, Charlene Fang, Christopher Holliday and David Rotenstein. Outgoing board members, Carl Black and Kathryn Johnson, were thanked for their service to the organization. The party included a silent auction as a fundraiser. Over 100 generous restaurants, artists, hotels and merchants made donations to the auction which was a huge success! More than \$8,200 was raised to benefit the History Center.

Our guests enjoyed food from: **Avante Catering, Avenue Catering, Badda Bing, Bold American, Endive, LowCountry Barbecue, Soiree, Sun in My Belly and Zest Atlanta.** Special thanks to **Widdi Turner, Bash!, The Champion Newspaper, Chelsea Patricia Photography, Drake Staffing, Floral Couture, Parker's on Ponce, The Plant Peddler and Spectrum Entertainment.** The photos below were taken by Chelsea Patricia Photography.

Silent Auction Packages include donations from: Academy Theatre, The Aikido Center of Atlanta, ART Station, Atlanta Botanical Garden, Atlanta Braves, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta Preservation Center, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Avellino's, BASH!, Bicycle South, Allen Bohnert, Josh Borger, Mark G. Burnette, Bold American Events, Bray Electrical Services, Café Alsace, Café Lily, Cakes & Ale Restaurant, Callanwolde Fine Arts Center, Capozzi's Decatur, M. Cary & Daughters Plumbing, Carpe Diem, Cason Photography, Center for Puppetry Arts, CertaPro Painters, Charlie Yates Golf Course at East Lake, Chattahoochee Nature Center, Chez Montier, City of Decatur, Martha Clinkscales/Personal Care, Inc., Dr. & Mrs. George Coletti, The Cookie Studio, Courtyard Marriott Atlanta Decatur Downtown/Emory, Dad's Garage Theatre Company, Decatur Arts Alliance, The Decatur Family YMCA, Decatur Ghost Tour, Decatur Yoga & Pilates, Carla Doan/Mary Kay, Doc Chey's/Osteria 832, Mark Dowdy, Edible Arrangements, Emory Conference Center Hotel, The Entry Enforcer, Fabu Face Spa, Farm Burger, Finders Keepers, Fran Frantz, The Georgia Trust, Carolyn & Earl Glenn, The Great Frame Up, Hair Brain Salon, Helmut Hairworx, High Museum of Art, Historic Oakland Foundation, The History Press, Dr. Paul Hudson & Lora Mirza, Intown Autocare, Intown Quilters, Jekyll Island Club Hotel, Jim Jarboe/The Decatur Group, Sharon Foster Jones, Shea Kelly/Shea K. Designs,

Kirkwood Bark & Lounge, Camille Kohler / Cameoko, L. G. Designs, Leon's Full Service, Little Shop of Stories, Shawn McDaniel, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Movie Tavern, Oakhurst Community Garden Project, Oakhurst Market, Oh Baby! Fitness, Lois More Overbeck, Belinda Pedroso, Raging Burrito, Jack Regan & Ginger Krawiec, Renaissance School of Music, David Rotenstein, Ph.D./ Historian for Hire, Salon Red, The Shed at Glenwood, Six Flags Over Georgia, Skips Chicago Dog, Smoke Rise County Club, Stone Mountain Park, Squash Blossom Boutique, Sweet Melissa's, Sweet 'n' Sinful Bakery, Sycamore Place Gallery, Taco Mac, Taqueria del Sol, Thinking Man Tavern, Thumb's Up Diner, Trackside Tavern, Universal Joint, Variety Playhouse, Wahoo! A Decatur Grill, Gale Walldorff, The Wellness Center at DeKalb Medical, Wonder Root, World of Coca Cola, Worthmore Jewelers, Young Chefs Academy, Yerkes National Primate Research Center, Stuart Zola, Zoo Atlanta and Zyka Indian Restaurant. ✦



Historic Preservation

Why do we preserve historic buildings? In the United States, early preservation efforts focused on buildings associated with the founders of our country, such as George Washington's Mount Vernon. But the movement has expanded beyond what is nationally significant as communities try to preserve their own local history. Preservation has many benefits; educational, cultural and even economic. Local stories are inextricably linked to buildings and neighborhoods, which can help teach the broader patterns of history. Here are three buildings which individuals or groups have determined to be worth saving.

The Colbert House A Historic Preservation Society has been organized at First Saint Paul A.M.E. Church to preserve, chronicle and archive the history of church members and citizens of Lithonia. It is their desire to restore and preserve the Sam Colbert house.

Sam Colbert built his first house in Lithonia around 1927. He was not well-liked by all, and someone burned the house to the ground. The family moved to Scottdale while they rebuilt the house. By the late 1930s, the Ku Klux Klan had returned to Lithonia. His daughter tells the story of the Klan dragging Sam from this house. They took him to Arabia Mountain where they beat him beyond recognition. After that horrific event, he moved to Columbus, Georgia until his death.

Barbara Lester initially wanted the house torn down because it was not being maintained by the church. She talked to people at the church and discovered this important part of its history. Now she is spearheading the restoration movement. Through the early part of the 20th century, if an event like this did not result in a death, it often did not make it into the local news and can be hard to document. Often these stories are only passed down through spoken word and if they are not collected and documented now, we may lose pieces of history that we should never forget.

The Mary Gay House Owned by The Junior League of DeKalb County, this antebellum house was renovated by the League in the 1970s. After 30 years of community use, it needs attention to ensure its continued use. The League is conducting a capital campaign to raise funds for projects ranging from waterproofing the basement to replacing the patio. Additional improvements are designed to enhance the attractiveness of the house as a rental property for events. Rental income supports nearly 90 percent of the house's operating expenses and without such income the League cannot afford to maintain the house for the community's benefit.

The Goodwin House Built as a one-room log cabin with a sleeping loft, the Solomon Goodwin House grew to suit the needs of the family. The house and its 1.4 acres are all that remain of the eight generation family farm and a rare view into an early DeKalb farming community.

As detailed in our 2008 "Places in Peril" nomination, the house is threatened by development pressures and rising property taxes. It is located in the Brookhaven-Peachtree area, surrounded by dense commercial development, multi-family apartments and residential neighborhoods. The area has changed tremendously since the 1970s.

A DeKalb study in 2007 concluded that "Brookhaven has emerged as one of Atlanta's more desirable areas over the past several years."

While this is positive for the economics of the area, land prices continue to rise and impact this "underdeveloped" historic property. The family is prepared to see the house moved, but would like to see it stay in DeKalb County, or the greater Atlanta area. If you are interested please write to info@goodwinhistory.org. ✦



The Sam Colbert House



The Mary Gay House



The Goodwin House

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