

# The Swanton House Now

## The Benjamin Swanton House - Didn't we restore that already?

*(Part two of a two part article on the history of the Swanton House)*

This article picks up in 1970, when Mills B. Lane, Jr., president of C&S Bank, decided to move the Swanton House and continues through the present day.

Wales W. Thomas of the Thomas-Denton Company, General Contractors, oversaw the move and restoration of the Swanton House. The city provided land, which was taken from Ebster Park to accommodate the house. A 1937 map of the city shows a 24 acre park between Adair Street and Atlanta Avenue. By 1946, the park had shrunk to 10 acres and was divided into two parks. The Planning Board requested that a fence be

erected to create a segregated area for the black people who lived in Beacon Hill. In 1958, it was named Ebster Park for Deacon D. G. Ebster who served the Thankful Baptist Church as church clerk for 40 years. Thomas' handwritten notes said the house would be located "in Ebster Park, fronting West Trinity Place, between Charter Square and the Bus Station." On April 20, 1970, the city commission provided that portion of the park so the house could be moved for restoration.

The Swanton House was originally located at 240 Atlanta Avenue, just two blocks away from the historic DeKalb Courthouse; a location that was a little higher - and much drier - than its "new" location on West Trinity Place. It received a historic marker in 1957 which was moved with the house. On September 21, 1970, the City of Decatur leased the Swanton House to the DeKalb History Center for 50 years and in 1978, it was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is often pointed out that the house was moved to land once owned by Swanton for his tannery. Tanning hides to produce leather was a messy business that created foul odors; he might not have been pleased with its new location!

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*The Swanton House during the 2013 History Adventure program for DeKalb and Decatur schools.*

## Spring for Swanton!

Many thanks to the patrons and friends who helped us raise money for the Swanton House last May. Guests enjoyed a special performance of a scene from *Shadows of the Past* depicting the initial invasion and occupation of Decatur and then the Battle of Decatur on July 22, 1864. This was shown in the Swanton House and featured Cathy Kaemmerlan (as Mary Gay) and Scott DePoy (as several characters). Patrons also listened to Zenith Twilley, a free woman of color living in Decatur in the 1850s and 60s, portrayed by LaDoris Davis.

We then moved to the Mary Gay House for heavy hors d'oeuvres and listened to Scott DePoy play and sing mid-nineteenth century period music on acoustic guitar. Our guests enjoyed this historic setting on a beautiful spring evening. Contributors helped us raise nearly \$3,000 which will be spent on the repairs detailed in the accompanying article. We are especially grateful for our major donor, **Soiree Catering and Events**.

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## Upcoming Events

### *Lunch & Learn*

#### ***The Junior League of DeKalb County, Inc.: 80 Years of Growth and Community Service***

**September 16, noon – 1:00 p.m.**

**Historic DeKalb Courthouse, Second Floor**

**101 E. Court Sq., Decatur, GA 30030**

***Free - Bring your lunch!***

The Junior League of DeKalb County (JLD) is an organization of women committed to promoting voluntarism, developing the potential of women and improving communities through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers.

JLD was founded in 1934 and has produced and contributed greatly to DeKalb County. In its early years, the league established a "mild fund" for needy children, undertook several war projects during WWII, and organized the DeKalb County Dental Clinic. In the 1970s, JLD accepted ownership of the historic Mary Gay House, which now serves as its headquarters and a rental facility in Decatur. JLD was also instrumental in founding several projects, which are thriving businesses and organizations today, such as the gift shop at DeKalb Medical (formerly known as DeKalb General Hospital) to the founding of the Day League (formerly known as the DeKalb Rape Crisis Center) and the International Women's House – both of which are their own thriving 501(c)(3) organizations.

And, JLD continues to be a thriving women's organization in DeKalb County. Over its 80 years, JLD members have participated in intensive leadership training, received multiple awards for community service, have served on several boards of directors for other community organizations, and obtained grant money for community projects. It has prided itself on providing an environment for the ongoing personal development of women through formal and informal training in voluntarism.

### ***Dance Hall Decatur!***

**Thursday, October 9, 7:30 - 11:00 pm**

**Historic DeKalb Courthouse,**

**101 E. Court Sq., Decatur, GA 30030**

Help us with some fun fundraising! Tickets available at our offices, online ([dekalbhistory.org](http://dekalbhistory.org)), or at the event. **\$10 per ticket**, light snacks included. Drink tickets available at event.

Grab dinner and **Hustle** over to the Historic Courthouse for a night of dancing! **Get Down** to Decatur and **Swim** your way up to the second floor of the Courthouse. Using a special **Time Warp** we'll **Slide** our way through the best dance music from the 1970s to the present. Don't miss it! **Moonwalk**, **Creep** or **Break** your way to downtown Decatur for a night of fun.

### ***Coming Soon***

#### ***Civil War Walking Tours***

**Learn local history "on the ground"**

Our volunteers are working hard and details will be available in the late fall/early winter! Check our website under the Events Tab or sign up for broadcast emails - you'll find that link on our website's home page in the lower right hand corner. ✦

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## Swanton House (cont.)

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As often happened in the south in the 1960s and 1970s, this house was recognized as an important antebellum structure which should be saved by the local community. Many other houses were also moved in order to save them, restored and then furnished as house museums. Some were restored on their original sites. These “new” house museums began to experience new problems. For the



*This rare interior photo shows the Swanton House around 1949 and includes members of the well-known Thompson, McCurdy and Severinghaus families. They were gathered for the marriage of Jerrie Thompson (not shown) to Francis Miller (second from left).*

Swanton House, which was officially opened and dedicated in 1972, discussions on visitor management were started as early as 1982. A report to the board stated "The matter of successful Swanton House tours has been a problem of long duration. It was difficult for more than a few persons to hear the guide as the tour progressed through the house. The description of the various furnishings and construction of the house were complex." Barriers were built to keep visitors out of rooms, but small antebellum houses were made for living, not for group tours and problems would persist.

Three other structures were also added to the park. Two are used by the DHC. In 1978, the Biffle cabin was moved to the city park (to help convey a detached kitchen) and in 1984 the Thomas-Barber cabin was moved to the “historic complex.” This was another trend seen across the nation – moving structures together in new locations to create a facsimile of a farm or village. The Mary Gay House was also moved to West Trinity (August 1979) and is used by the Junior League. The History Center wanted the house to remain at its original site on Marshall Street, but downtown development pressures were too strong. Today, the houses present an interpretation problem; in a small rural town like Decatur was in the 1860s, you would not have had two little prim cottages side-by-side. Moving a structure is still seen as a last resort, but is preferable to losing it altogether.

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*A circa 1937 map of the City of Decatur. It shows the large park which was later split into two: Adair and Ebster. The greatly reduced Adair Park is now home to the Swanton House, the Thomas-Barber Cabin, the Biffle Cabin, and the Mary Gay House.*



## Swanton House (cont.)

*Continued from page 3*

Across the nation, small house museums did not receive the thousands of visitors they all expected and this trend has worsened over the last two decades. Various problems can affect visitation: larger attractions are visited first, houses might be off the beaten path, interpretation and programming could be lackluster, locals do not return after an initial visit and so on. Soon organizations were faced with funding ongoing maintenance for these houses without enough visitors to offset repairs and other bills. The DHC had a Saturday open house in 1988 which was explained in a local paper as “a rare occasion as lack of personnel makes it impossible to keep the complex open to the public on a regular basis.”

The house had many “deferred maintenance” problems in 2007. It needed a new roof and repairs from water damage including the rear door, floor, rear wall, and windows. However, the DHC was struggling with financial, political, organizational, administrative, and board problems that made the organization itself almost past the point of salvage. However, repair of the roof was critical; it was deteriorating and allowing water into the house. When the house was relocated, a new wood shingle roof was installed. It looks like that roof was replaced with Red Cedar shingles in 1987. For a variety of reasons, modern wood shingle roofs have a short life span in our climate. By 2010, with grant money from the city, we were able to install a new asphalt shingle roof. A Project Summary was prepared for us by **Julie Arnold** of Lord, Aeck and Sargent. Our remaining tasks were repairs from the leaky roof and overdue maintenance, while at the same time increasing our programming. But then something very unexpected occurred.

The city's dog park at Adair Park was enclosed with a chain link fence about 2009. The fence and soil compaction by the dogs affected the water runoff which in turn created problems for all four structures downstream from the paved drainage ditch which was suddenly blocked. We now had standing water under the Swanton House which greatly exacerbated the mold in the rear wall. Also, since water that was previously confined to the ditch was now diverted, the runoff created new erosion paths which have damaged the other cabins as well. The city reconfigured the fence and unblocked the ditch, but we suddenly had more work to do on the houses.

Our Programs and Preservation Coordinator, Jenny Goldemund, has taken on the unusual (and usual) problems at the Swanton House. We received funding help from the Decatur Beer Festival and the City to mitigate the mold. Remediation was done with a nontoxic agent which killed the mold and reduced its ability to reproduce. We have repaired the soffit and the back wall and installed a French drain. The house is again suitable for tours, but we still need to address the years of deferred maintenance such as restoring the wooden windows, foundation repairs, correcting interior wall finishes and paint damage, and then the purely cosmetic task of repairing or replacing damaged shutters. We have continued to address concerns related to squirrels and the foundation, repaired the bathroom floor, and replaced the bathroom fixtures.

The commitment to any property – new or historic – is long term and maintenance is always required. The Swanton House had not had significant work done for nearly 40 years but we now have it well underway. Since 2008, we have spent nearly \$40,000 on repairs. Thank you for your support.

The first part of this article was published in the spring issue of our newsletter. ✦



*As noted in the first article, there was a nationwide trend in the 1960s and 1970s by historical societies to save, move and restore antebellum houses to serve as house museums. Decorating the homes was important - but some of the choices made by local “Decorating Committees” did not always accurately reflect the target time period. The Swanton furnishings were lovingly acquired and displayed.*

# Spring for Swanton! (cont.)

*Continued from page 1*

s o i r e e  
c a t e r i n g   &   e v e n t s



*Cathy Kaemmerlan as Mary Gay.*



*LaDoris Davis as Zenith Twilley. ✦*





## New exhibit - *Tears and Curses*



Reception photos courtesy of Anne Daniel.



On July 17, 100 people joined us for the opening reception of our newest exhibit, *Tears and Curses: A Human Focus on the Civil War*. This exhibit presents an intimate opportunity to view a small portion of our Civil War collection and consider the impact of the war on a local scale. We present artifacts with personal meaning to help you relate to the point of view of an individual. The title is from a letter in our collection written by Private Dewitt C. Morgan to a woman who may have been a sweetheart. Angry at the Union forces, he wrote, "They sew tears and curses – they shall reap infamy and overthrow."

Guests also stayed for our own local play, *Shadows of the Past, A Play About DeKalb County During the Civil War*. It has been presented to school groups but this was the first time we were able to offer it to a wider audience.



Special thanks to **Sawicki's** for providing delicious savory snacks and **Jimella's Bakery** for platters of sweets! Please stop in to see our new exhibit! Our gallery hours are Monday - Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. We are closed on Federal holidays. ✦

# Opens with *Shadows of the Past*



*Shadows of the Past, photos courtesy of John Hewitt.*



*Cathy Kaemmerlan and Scott DePoy.*

*Membership donations are important to our mission. If you have questions about your membership, please email Melissa at [forgey@dekalbhistory.org](mailto:forgey@dekalbhistory.org).*

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Collecting, Preserving and Sharing the History of DeKalb County

All funds received through memberships directly support the preservation of DeKalb County history and are tax-deductible as allowed by law. Your generous contribution to the DeKalb History Center will provide you with a year-long membership that includes our quarterly newsletter to keep you informed on all our activities. We hope that you will join our team by either renewing your membership or joining as a first-time supporter.

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## **DeKalb History Center**

Old Courthouse on the Square  
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