

DeKalb History Center's
14th Annual Black History Month Celebration

Soul Food in DeKalb:

A Tasty History



This booklet is a companion piece to the DeKalb History Center's Fourteenth Annual Black History Month Celebration. The event was held on Thursday, February 10, 2022 at the Historic DeKalb Courthouse. The theme was Soul Food in DeKalb: A Tasty History.

The opening speaker was culinary historian and James Beard Award winner Adrian Miller, author of *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time*.

The presenters were Chef Asata Reid, author of *How to Feed a Kid: A Parent's Guide*, and Akila McConnell, author of *A Culinary History of Atlanta*.

The host was LaDoris Bias-Davis.

This book is comprised of oral history, primary archives, and pictures from various archives. All sources are listed on pages 23 and 24.

Credits

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What is Soul Food?

DeKalb citizens chime in on their definitions of Soul Food.

"Soul Food is survival food."

-Mary E. Wilson

"Soul Food is vegetables cooked with fatback and lard by talented people during and after slavery. Owners were wowed at how good food could taste with fatback."

-Peter Scott

"Soul Food is made from love and not from a can."

-Devika

"Soul Food is African American heritage food that has a lot of flavor. You can still taste it after you eat it."

-James Paige

"Soul Food for African Americans is an accumulation of all the food brought to America, and assimilated all over this country by Africans into wonderful dishes and passed down from centuries to centuries."

-Louis Curtis Clark, Jr.

"Soul Food was what you could afford."

-Sylvia Clark

"If it's not made from love, it's not Soul Food."

-Mrs. Lorraine

It's important to note that before the 1960s, African Americans, and southerners in general, did not use the term "Soul Food" to describe their food. To them, it was the food that gave them sustenance generation after generation.

What is a Soul Food meal?

"Sunday dinners were very special. It was the biggest meal of the week. After church, we'd eat a meal of fried chicken, pork chops, collards, turnips, cornbread, and sweet potato pie. It was like fuel that got us through the week. And, sometimes the family would invite the preacher so the food had to be good."

-Peter Scott

The contents of a Soul Food meal vary. A typical Soul Food meal can consist of these ingredients:



A meat

Usually fried chicken, pork including chitlins (pig intestines), ribs, sometimes possum and squirrel, shine bones (slang for pork neck bones), fried catfish



A vegetable

Collard greens, black-eyed peas, turnips, string beans, mustard greens, okra



Other

Macaroni, rice, a roll or cornbread



A drink

Kool aid, sweet tea



Dessert

Red velvet cake, sweet potato pie, pound cake

Vegetables are usually seasoned with ham hocks or bacon fat, and hogmaws are used to season chitlins. During the early 1900s, fried chicken used to be called a "Gospel Bird" because it was usually served on Sundays.

Global Connections

A Soul Food meal is more global than what most people think.

Cornbread (Native American)

Macaroni (European)



Yams (West Africa)

Black-eyed peas (West Africa)

- Native Americans used corn in a variety of ways. Corn meal was adopted into slave diets.
- European immigrants brought over vegetables like turnip greens.
- Macaroni is from Europe (i.e. Italy).
- African foods like okra and black-eyed peas were smuggled to the New World by kidnapped Africans or possibly through travelling European slavers.

Slavery and Reconstruction

The early days of DeKalb's Soul Food legacy can be seen in the Federal Writers' Project of Georgia's slave narratives. Some of the key ingredients and preparation techniques are visible in the narratives. Mr. Phil House's plantation was located near the present site of Buckhead.

Each "slave was given 5 lbs of meat (usually pork),...Breakfast and dinner...consisted of fried meat, cornbread and syrup...Mr. House permitted slaves to have a garden ...of their own. One delicacy...was biscuit bread which they called 'cake bread'...The diet of these children...consisted of pot liquor, milk, vegetables..."

"Slaves ate "hoghead, cornmeal, ...possums, and rabbits. Some slaves had gardens with "beans, cabbage, squashes, tatoes, roas'en ears, sweet tatoes, collards, turnips..."



While historian Richard Funderburke was reading the letters of Alexander Johnson, the secretary of the DeKalb County Grand jury, he discovered some history about Delila, a cook enslaved by Johnson. Most of Johnson's letters were from the 1850s. Johnson's letters reveal interesting details about Delila's life:

- She was a good cook.
- Her brother was enslaved by Johnson's neighbor.
- She suffered from varicose veins during pregnancy.
- Johnson's family moved out of Georgia, but Delila didn't want to move with him. She seemed to have some bargaining power, perhaps because of her status as a cook. Johnson eventually sold her to his friend Lemuel Grant who lived in Decatur. Through her continued enslavement, she was able to stay in Decatur.

Funderburke did not find any records detailing Delila's life after the legal abolition of slavery or during Reconstruction.

But, after the Civil War, people like Delila continued to use their skills to survive. Some of the Black people who had been enslaved started forming small communities all across DeKalb. Some of these communities were named Flat Rock, Beacon Hill, Piney Grove, Lynwood Park, and Shermantown.

Below is one of Johnson's letters praising Delila's cooking skills.

Decatur March 30th 1855.

L. P. Grant Dear Sir -

I once wrote to you in relation to selling you Delila a Sister of Dave, and since that time I did learn that you heard I was trying to sell you a negro, that was deranged, if so it was a false report, she is one of the best Negroes in the Country, and sound in every respect. I do not know that you want to buy her, I expect to sell her and would like to sell her to you if you wish to buy as you have one of the family. I am going to move for the present to Dallas and as soon as I can settle up my business I shall go to Texas. She does not want to go west, because I suppose she does not want to leave her friends, hence I have concluded to sell her, let me hear from you on the subject. I refer you to any one in Decatur who know her for her qualities as a cook washer Ironer & house servant generally. I will sell low for money or could sell on credit until fall next, after satisfying yourself as to the truth of the statements I make in relation to her please let me hear from you.

Respectfully to A. S. Johnson

P.S. I will sell her with her youngest child, 2 years & 2 or 3 months old or without the child but rather sell both together.

A. S.

Jazz Age, Depression, War Years

By the 1920s, Beacon Hill, in Decatur, Georgia, had formed into a vibrant, thriving African American community. Atlanta Avenue was the place where many African American restaurants were located (i.e., Tom Steele's Café).

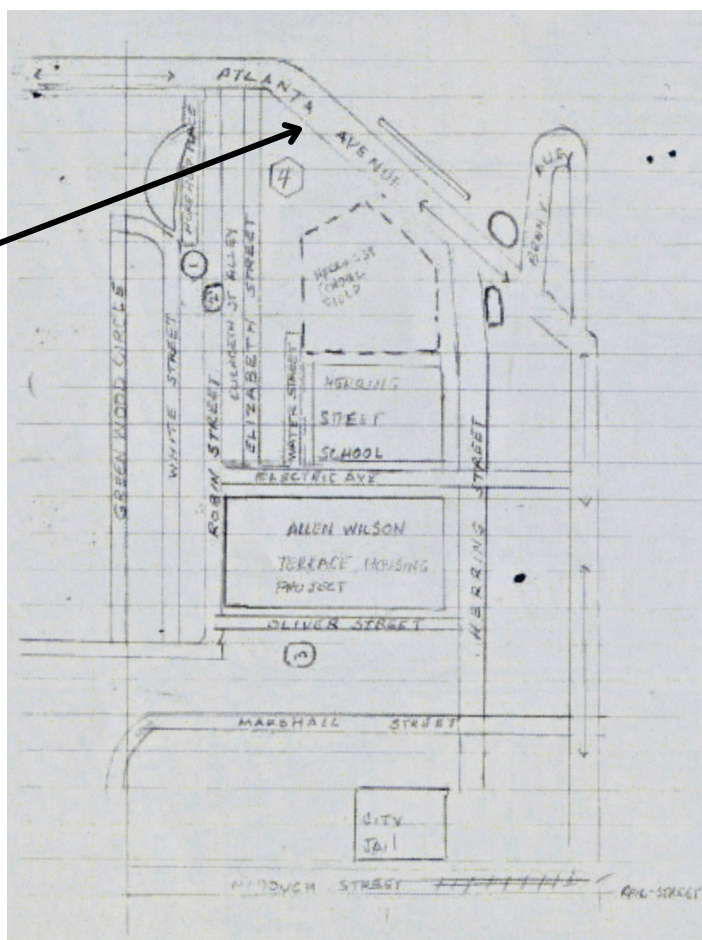
However, from the 1940s to the 1970s, the city's various urban renewal campaigns erased and demolished the buildings and businesses that were the heart of this community. But, the fond memories of these eateries still live on in the original Beacon Hill residents.

"Tom Steele's Café sold pig ear sandwiches (called hearing aid sandwiches), chips, pickles, pig feet, liver sandwiches, Coke, and they sold splits for 10 cents. A split was a sausage cut in half served with bread." -Mary E. Wilson

Also, Wilson worked at George Sterling's Café. His store was like a convenience store that sold chips, Coke, candy, and bubble gum. It was a popular place to meet on the weekends.

Old Beacon Hill community neighborhood map

Atlanta
Avenue



Drawn by and based on the recollections of onetime resident, Mr. Thomas Brooks, January 2007.

Atlanta Avenue was once a thriving business district home to businesses like The Ritz (later named Carver Theatre), Lena's Beauty Shop, Cooper Funeral Home, L.C. Rib Shack, Rogers Taxicab, and more.

Stereotypes

At the same time that Tom Steele's Café was serving the African American community, stores like Aunt Fanny's Cabin Restaurant in Smyrna, and Mammy Shanty's Restaurant in Atlanta, were serving White customers.

Jan Whitaker's website *Restauranting Through History* believes that restaurants like Aunt Fanny's existed because "some White southerners preferred to see Black people in servant roles as happy to serve, not as oppressed in any way. Their stance seems very similar to the comforting idea of the good, kind-heart White owner."



Whitaker's web site is full of interesting comments from long-time patrons to one-time visitors of Aunt Fanny's Restaurant.

"...a woman in mammie garb walked around the table with a ladle and metal pail of collard greens. She came around asking if you wanted some greens? I said no thank you, but got a ladle of them wapped on my plate anyway."

"The food was not really that remarkable — mostly deep-fried, high fat stuff, what we now call "comfort food."

"...although the food was so good, the atmosphere overwhelmed it. There were barefooted black kids singing the menu, wait staff seeming faked submissive demeanor's, an elderly black lady in a rocking chair whom the wait staff whispered that she would take questions about her life as a slave."

"Nothing positive came from the better-than-thou hypocritical outrage that pressured the restaurant to capitulate to political correctness..."

Grocers and Vendors

In the past, vegetables and fruits were seasonal. Many people had their own gardens and their own chickens in their yards.

“When I was growing up, you could only eat collards greens during winter time. Now, you can eat collards all times of year. There was a vegetable man that would be on the corner of Electric Avenue. The vegetable man would sell vegetables to the neighbors.” -Mary E. Wilson

In DeKalb, grocers such as Clarks’ Grocery Store, and Jewish grocers such as Mossman’s Grocers, and Spick and Span, catered to the Beacon Hill and surrounding African American communities.

The aforementioned stores were packed with Soul Food ingredients. Local artist Sylvia Clark (not related to the owners of Clarks’ Grocery Store) remembers that “way before Uber, the Clarks delivered groceries to peoples' houses. People could charge their groceries if they didn't have all of the money. They sold everything you needed to cook like vegetables, meats, cleaning products, junk food, bread, and milk.”



Dovie Clark

It was Dovie Clark who was the brains behind the store. She was a natural entrepreneur and she used to raise and sell live turkeys in Beacon Hill on White Street.

Below is an excerpt of Spick and Span's 1930s store inventory.

100#	Stew Meat	@ .09 #	\$ 9.00
50#	Pig Ears	05#	2.50
50#	Pig Snout	06#	3.00
50#	Liver	04#	4.50
80#	Shoulders	10 1/2 #	10.00
80#	Pork Soin	15 #	12.00
100#	Chatterling	08#	8.00
100#	Ham	28#	9.20
40#	Sm Bacon	17#	6.80
40#	Sm Bacon	15#	6.00
10#	Liver Cheese	18#	1.80
20#	Sauce Meat	15#	3.00
20#	Country Butter	25#	5.00
20#	Process Butter	25#	5.00
20#	Cr. Butter	29#	5.80
10#	Light Sausage	13#	1.30
20#	Weiners	15#	3.00
10#	Pollogna	10#	2.00
20#	Sm links	10#	3.00
60#	Sausage	12#	7.20
40#	Sausage	08#	3.20
40#	Pork Steak	15#	3.00
20#	Veal Steak	15#	3.00
50#	Sm Ham Hooks	10#	5.00
100#	l Ham Hooks	12#	12.00
			<hr/>
			134.30

The Black Church and Soul Food

In the Beacon Hill community, the main churches were Antioch A.M.E. Church, Thankful Baptist Church, Mount Moriah Church, and Lilly Hill Baptist Church. The churches were the main hubs of Soul Food cooking.

“The church was the place where Blacks could cook in a respectable place. They could proudly showcase their food amongst people who respected them.” - Peter Scott

Sylvia Clark remembers how the church women of Antioch A.M.E. Church would cook Soul Food dinners to raise money to build the church. Some church members were known for their cooking skills. Clark’s mother was known for her baking skills.

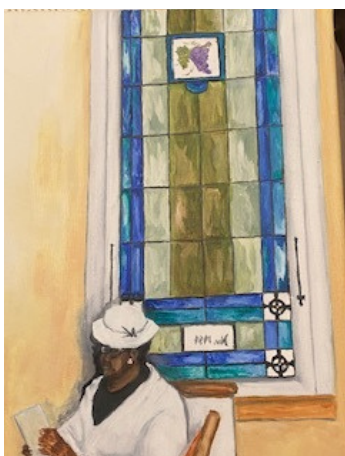
“She’d cook all kinds of cakes from lemon pound cakes, chocolate cake, strawberry cake, apple cake, and apple pie.”

Clark fondly remembers licking the bowl after her mother finished baking. Her artwork reflects those fond memories.



Clark remembers how proud the congregation of Antioch A.M.E. Church was when they paid for the church's stained glass windows. They cooked everything to raise the money. They cooked fried chicken, collard greens, string beans with potatoes, okra and tomatoes, macaroni, dressing, cornbread, butter rolls, and pound cake.

Unfortunately, the only proof that the stained glass windows existed is the picture that Clark painted of her mother sitting in front of her favorite window. The original Antioch A.M.E. Church was torn down during the city's urban renewal campaign.



Painting by Sylvia Clark of the stained glass window inside Antioch A.M.E. Church.

Antioch A.M.E. Church's all men's group cooking fried fish for History Day, DeKalb County.



The Civil Rights Years

During the 1960s, DeKalb, like most places across America, was in the midst of great social and political changes.

It was during this time that Louis Clark, Sr., (L.C.) made the decision to follow his lifelong dream and open his food spot, LC's Ribshack. The business was located at the intersection of Atlanta Avenue and Trinity Place.

L.C. served in the Navy for 22 years. He was a WWII and Korean War veteran. He was also a skilled master chef. All of his experiences helped him to develop the necessary skills to successfully run his business. L.C.'s daughter, Rosemary Clark Strong, and his son Louis Clark, Jr., remembered how each family member had an assigned duty to help make the restaurant successful.

"We had to clean vegetables, snap peas. The vegetables back then were cooked in ham hocks," stated Strong and Clark, Jr. For special orders like chitlins, Strong and her mother, Louise Bussey Clark, cleaned them. L.C. used to call them African caviar.



Woman making chitlins after hog-killing, 1938.

Strong remembered how the menu was written on a chalkboard. There were no printed paper menus. Some menu items at the Shack included collard greens, turnip greens, green beans, black-eyed peas, lima beans, cabbage, okra, Brunswick stew, meat loaf, barbeque chicken, pig ear sandwiches, ham sandwiches, and of course the signature items: L.C.'s Master Burger and famous ribs. All the menu items were fresh authentic Soul Food, cooked and served with care and love.



Today and Beyond

Thanks to DeKalb's long legacy of Soul Food, Soul Food restaurants today have a solid foundation to stand on.

The Wyatt family is a family of war veterans and heroes from the Army and Airforce.

Brothers Henry and Oscar Wyatt dreamed of opening their own Soul Food restaurant. The Jewish owner of Mercantile National Bank gave the brothers their first loan. In the early 1970s, Sgt. Wyatt's Country BBQ opened. During the early years, it had two locations in Atlanta, two locations in Decatur, and two locations in Covington.

Wyatt's menu consists of vegetables like collards, turnips, string beans, and black-eyed peas. They have macaroni, potato salad, cole slaw, candied yams, rice and gravy, peach cobbler, sweet potato cobbler, and baked beans. The meats on the menu are pork ribs, barbecued chicken, chopped pork, stew meat, oxtail, pig ears, pig feet, baked chicken, and baked turkey wings.



“We smoke all the meats with hickory wood and hickory charcoal. When I’m cooking my vegetables, except for the lima beans, string beans, and steamed cabbage, they have no meat at all. We don’t put meat in them, for the people that don’t like meat,” states Wyatt.

As a family business, everyone has a part. Every day, Wyatt and his son, Oscar Wyatt, Jr., arrive to work at 4 a.m. Wyatt, Sr., is the master cook and taste-tester. His nephew arrives at 6 a.m. and starts cooking on the grill. His wife and niece arrive at 8 a.m. to do the baking and frying. His wife created the secret barbeque sauce. The store stays open until all of the food sells out, which happens fast!

As Wyatt, Sr., reflects over the years, he believes that “integration was a blessing and a curse because Blacks moved out of their neighborhoods and a lot of the Black restaurants went out of business.”

Sgt. Wyatt’s BBQ is still going strong, and people from all races patronize the business.



*Sgt. Wyatt's Country BBQ located at 1674
Memorial Drive SE, Atlanta, GA 30317*

The State of Soul Food Today

James Paige, a Marine veteran, is the owner of Collard Green Café. The restaurant opened in September, 1998. He named his restaurant after what he considers to be the most important item on a Soul Food menu.

Paige acknowledges that in some circles, Soul Food has developed a negative reputation. Many critics feel that the preparation methods of fat and heavy seasonings are dangerous to the health of many southerners. Paige gets irritated and frustrated when he hears the criticism. "Soul Food is the oldest cuisine in America and the only food named after a region," states Paige.

He believes that the food industry has no respect for Soul Food, but what really upsets him is that many African Americans don't have respect or pride for the food that helped their ancestors survive through so many hard times. Paige strongly believes in paying homage to African American heritage. That's why his restaurant is decorated with colorful pictures of the Jazz Age and pictures of the Great Negro Migration.

Paige acknowledges that Soul Food is more than just fried chicken and macaroni. He believes that healthy food is important. He even cooks some of his vegetables with healthy smoked turkey wings. But, he believes there should be a balance and not an elimination of what makes Soul Food so special.



Collard Green Café is located at 1880 Mountain Industrial Blvd A4, Tucker, GA 30084

Paige's restaurant menu includes tasty collard greens, macaroni, rutabaga, oxtails and rice, meatloaf, codfish, double chicken breast, and more.

Soul Food is a great metaphor for African American life in America. It is survival food. A lot of improvisation and creativity goes into its preparation. Nothing is wasted. For example, all parts of the pig are used.

Many restaurants, chefs, and everyday people are supporting initiatives that promote the "no waste" Soul Food concept, and people are thinking twice about throwing away those chicken bones and carrot tops and opting for more creative ways to repurpose meals.

Paige knows a great deal about improvisation and survival. His restaurant has seen some hard times, but he keeps learning, growing, and listening to his customers. Paige's dream is to one day franchise his business so that a wider range of people can eat the African American cuisine that he is so proud of.

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