

## A "Ghost" Of A House



The Augustus H. Benning home rises above its Oakdale Road surroundings in Candler Park like the Bates home in Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" come to life. Dark in color, shrouded by the limbs of large trees, and with a Second Empire tower on the main facade, the house immediately carries you back to another century, or to a youth when the "ancient" Victorian house in the neighborhood was the legendary (at least in the minds of the children) home of long dead ghost.

In actuality, the house is one of DeKalb County's most historic buildings. Originally built by Judge Charles Smith around 1886, it was one of the first homes in the town of Edgewood, a railroad suburb of Atlanta. Smith was the founder of the community and served as mayor after Edgewood was incorporated in 1898. For some reason, he abandoned his home after only two or three years, selling it to Augustus Harrison Benning, a Savannah native who had made his fortune as a sea captain in Hong Kong and the along the China coast.

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Not quite fifty years old, Benning left China to settle in Atlanta and marry a distant cousin, Margaret Rowena Russell. The Benning family papers at the Atlanta History Center also indicate that Benning left a "wife" and three children in China as well as his seafaring life. He never completely abandoned this Chinese family and kept in touch with the children, providing for their education.

In Atlanta, Benning made a name for himself as a businessman in the sale of coal and in building rental houses in the bustling new suburb where he lived. In 1890, when the area was subdivided for the first time as Edgewood Park, Captain Benning's home was listed as a local landmark, as was that of Judge Smith, which has long since been torn down. Other prominent individuals living in the area were former governors Alfred Colquitt and John B. Gordon. Their homes have also been lost. One acre lots in the new suburb of Edgewood were being sold for \$1,000 to \$1,250 while those in nearby but more prestigious Inman Park, also being developed at the time, were said to be selling for \$5,000 to \$8,000 an acre. Gus Benning appears to have bought several, and after his death in 1904, Margaret Rowena continued to buy property, build houses and run a sizable family business on her own until her death in the 1940s.

The Bennings' most famous achievement, however, was the creation of the English-American Loan and Trust Company in the 1890s. This company, of which Benning was first vice-president and then president, was responsible for the construction of the Flatiron Building in downtown Atlanta in 1897. Designed by Bradford Gilbert of New York, who was supervising architect for the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition, it is Atlanta's oldest remaining skyscraper and a major landmark at the intersection of Peachtree and Broad Streets across from Woodruff Park.

To see the Benning house, which is not open to the public, follow DeKalb Avenue to the Edgewood/Candler Park MARTA Station. Oakdale is the first street after the station if you are heading into Atlanta. Turn right and after crossing McLendon, the house is just a few blocks further and impossible to miss. Across Benning Place is a smaller one story house which the Benning's used in the winter because it was so hard to heat the larger home - maybe this is why Judge Smith sold it? You can also search out the Benning tombstone in Oakland Cemetery which is unusual with its naval anchor motif.

*Dick Funderburke*