

Times of DeKalb

Spring
2024

DeKalb History Center

Historic DeKalb Courthouse
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Shermantown, Resilience in Coexistence

By Monica El-Amin, African American History Coordinator

Prior to the publishing of this article, I was unfamiliar with the existence of Shermantown. I was aware of Stone Mountain due to my proximity to it as a child. I could even tell you about its history with the Ku Klux Klan, and the Confederate memorial’s effect on me at a personal level. However, learning of Shermantown openly confronted my understanding of Stone Mountain’s complex history. Shermantown is unique, as it is between the grooves of the Lost Cause narrative, and the outside world’s aloofness to its presence. This is where Shermantown fills in the gaps of the story commonly overlooked. Black residents of this community established foundations here following the Civil War. The power of memory keeps the community alive as the elders pass down their stories of their livelihood. I used newspaper articles to unveil the stories of

Shermantown’s Black community and took a closer look at the memories from residents, which shed light on their awareness of racial disparities and their determination to thrive in the face of adversity.

Continued on page 2

Inside this issue

Black History Month Celebration Recap, pg. 4-5

Upcoming Programs, pg. 3

The Return of the Decatur Architecture Tour, pg. 7



Downtown Lithonia, postcard, ca. 1937

Lithonia History Project

The DeKalb History Center collects, preserves, and shares the wide-ranging stories of the people and places of DeKalb County and we believe everybody’s story is worth collecting and telling. We have long relied on donors to bring materials to our archives, which means some of DeKalb’s important history is not represented in our holdings. After intense strategic planning by our board, we are taking steps to strengthen and grow our materials in one focus area, with more to come in subsequent years.

We begin with the City of Lithonia, where our archival materials are largely from the period of 1850 - 1950 and include photos,

Continued on page 6



Elaine Vaughn stands at the corner of her street in Shermantown. "I have the best view of the mountain," she said. Photo by Dean Hesse. Credit: Decaturish, supportyourlocalnews.com

Shermantown continued

“A lot of people don’t know what Shermantown is, and I think about that a lot,” says Gloria Brown, a longtime resident and prominent figure of Shermantown.

Shermantown is one of the oldest Black communities in DeKalb County. Located at the bottom of the granite mound of Stone Mountain, Shermantown is nestled between the Confederate memorial, and the downtown district. Unless you are actively searching for it, it is easy to overlook the area. The lingering presence of Stone Mountain Park obscures the Black community’s history from view. When you examine the stories of Shermantown, and the people residing in it, the revelations in contrast to Stone Mountain’s history may surprise you.

“Shermantown Learned to Coexist”

Gloria Brown was again interviewed in 2001, along with DeKalb County Historian, Walter P. McCurdy, Jr. (by Laurinda Williams). “We’ve got a reputation that doesn’t belong to us,” says Ms. Brown. “Nothing could be further from the truth about blacks and whites not getting along. There was never any racial tension whatsoever. We coexisted peacefully.” Stone Mountain’s reputation was cemented by the gatherings of the Ku Klux Klan. Some Black residents have strong memories of the terror they felt having to witness them riding through the streets, yelling racial epithets. “As a child growing up here, I can tell you that both blacks and whites had the same doctors, just different waiting rooms. We weren’t treated any different,” she continued.

Walter McCurdy (1937 – 2004) was a resident of Stone Mountain. He had memories of familiarity with the Black community through the semi-pro baseball team, the Stone Mountain Hot Rocks. “The white teams wouldn’t choose me because at the time I was all of 90 pounds, so I would play for the black team. And boy, they were good. Sure, we knew there was segregation but we never paid it any mind. We all just had a good time.”

This 1917 map of Stone Mountain shows Shermantown developing around the “Colored Public School” on Still House Road and 4th Street. DeKalb History Center Archives.



“Blacks Found a Home in Baseball as Shermantown dealt with Klan”

More information on baseball in Shermantown was revealed in a 2005 *Atlanta Constitution* article, by Karen Hill, featuring Reverend William Woodson Morris, and Joseph “Big Bear” Smith. During the era of segregation, the historically Black Shermantown became the central point for Black athletes in the Negro Leagues, and business sponsored teams. Hundreds of spectators would come to support them. Some people would purposely skip the Atlanta Braves games to see the negro teams play instead. Reverend William W. Morris, played for the Stone Mountain Eagles, a sandlot team. He still lives in the home he was born in, adjacent to the baseball field he played in. Joseph “Big Bear” Smith played for the Scripto Black Cats, a team sponsored by the Atlanta Scripto Pen and Pencil Company. The friends spent time together reminiscing about players and games. Neither of the men can particularly pinpoint why the communal excitement of baseball occurred within their community but they happily recall their own excitement. †

Read the full article by visiting <https://dekalbhistory.org/dekalb-history-center-blog/> or by scanning the QR code:



The Return of the Decatur Architecture Tour



Decatur Architecture Tour is Back!

Join us for the 2024 Decatur Architecture Tour as we explore the architecture and history of West Ponce. This area showcases an array of buildings and architectural styles, offering a variety of building styles and types. Starting with the 1920s, we'll delve into various residential architectures and developments, including the tropical Ponce De Leon Ct and early multi-family Apartment buildings. The tour will cover Glennwood School, multiple Churches, and the modernist DeKalb Federal Building.

Whether you're an architecture enthusiast, enjoy history, or new to Decatur, this tour will offer you something to learn.

Tours will begin June 6 and continue monthly until the Fall. †

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We hope you enjoyed the spring 2024 issue of Times of DeKalb. Please consider making a financial contribution through joining, rejoining, or a one time donation. Your generous contribution to the DeKalb History Center will provide you with a year-long membership that includes our quarterly journal 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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Lithonia History Project continued

oral histories and subject files. We do not have much recent history, nor from the communities of color in that city and surrounding areas.

As part of a larger push to broaden our collection's scope, we are actively seeking to collect *more* of Lithonia's history and preserve it for generations to come. We do not seek to redo work already done by the **Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance**, but to reinforce their tremendous efforts, especially regarding the Bruce Street School project.

The **AMHAA**, as community supporters, look forward to our efforts to further preserve the history and heritage of Lithonia. We are already partnering with **Lithonia's Historic Preservation Commission** and in the past assisted the **DeKalb NAACP** with their Remembrance Project.

Any time period of Lithonia's history is welcome, but our greatest need is for stories from the 1950s forward. DeKalb County experienced great growth and prosperity following World War II; we seek to answer the question, what was life like in the more rural parts of the county in this period? The DeKalb NAACP and Equal Justice Initiative uncovered three historic lynchings related to Lithonia – are there residents who would like to share related stories? How did residents



Lithonia Railroad Station, Grand reopening of Consolidated Quarries, ca. 1951.

experience the Civil Rights movement? How did Lithonia adjust to changing demographics in this time as it became a majority African American city (1960s – 1980s)? How did integration of schools and the city affect people personally? What is life like today as Lithonia continues to thrive?

We seek archival materials representative of daily life in Lithonia during this time period. This could include photographs, documents, scrapbooks, family letters, and other records of historic value. While we always prefer original materials, we are also able to digitize papers and return them to their owners. We recently received the Bruce Street School 1962 Yearbook, "The Brucean." Three dimensional objects that help tell Lithonia's history would also be welcome and could include household items, farming tools, clothing, school or political memorabilia, and more.

In partnership with the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance, we have secured a twelve-year old oral history collection created by **Edward J. Anderson**. This includes a wide variety of 27 important interviews, some from people who have passed. Included are: Max Cleland, Barbara Lester, Bertha S. Clark, George Lyon, Mayor John Robbins, Howard Lee and more.

With assistance from **Tiffany Parks**, we have secured **Mayor Marcia Glenn Hunter's archives**.

We have already begun to gather oral histories from Lithonians. Our archivist, Jennifer Blomqvist, African American History Coordinator, Monica El-Amin, and Videographer, Eddy Anderson, have added new interviews with these individuals to our archival collections: Sheryl Crawford, Frank Cameron, Annie Anderson Daugherty, Stephanie & Roy El-Amin, Dr. Quentin Fretwell, Gwen Russell Green, Arlene Harper, Marcia Glenn Hunter, Mary Lowe, Leo Morton, Olitha Reid, and Dee Smith.

If you would like to participate, please contact Melissa at carlson@dekalbhistory.org. ✦

Upcoming Programs



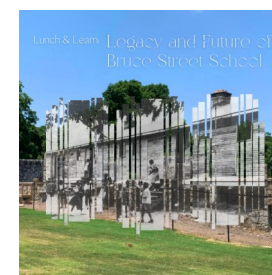
May 7 & May 8

Archives Showcase: Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Brown v Board of Education Decision

5/7 10:00 am—6:00 pm

5/8 10:00 am — 4:00 pm

Explore some of our education-related files from the Roger Mills and Narvie Harris Collections. Free to attend.



June 4

Lunch & Learn: Legacy and Future of Bruce Street School

12:00—1:00 pm

Bring your lunch and learn about the history of Bruce Street School, the first African American public school in DeKalb County. Free to attend.



June 11

Workshop: Vintage Tea & Treats Workshop

10:00—11:30 am

Enjoy fresh garden teas, heritage treats, and historic knowledge in this workshop by Naturalist Katie Hendrickson. Tickets required.

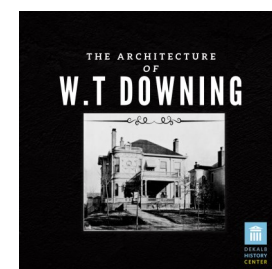


June 13

DeKalb Trivia & Happy Hour

5:00—7:00 pm

Join us for a DeKalb themed trivia night complete with a scavenger hunt and happy hour. Hosted by the DHC Ambassadorship Committee. Free to attend.



June 18

Hops at the History Center: W.T. Downing, Architect with Robert M. Craig

6:30—7:30 pm

Known early as a domestic architect of "artistic homes," W. T. Downing (1865-1918) was one of Atlanta's leading architects of the late-Victorian / Edwardian period. Free to attend.

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Black History Month Celebration Recap

By Monica El-Amin, African American History Coordinator

On February 22, 2024, our 16th Annual Black History Month Celebration took place at the DeKalb History Center. 175 people attended *A Tribute to Black History in DeKalb*. The opening speakers were: Melissa Carlson (Executive Director), Tiffany Parks (Ex-Officio), and Jacqui Steele (President Elect). Throughout the program, Nzinga Benton serenaded the audience with songs such as: *Safe in His Arms* and the *Lord's Prayer*. Her music set the stage for the feelings of reverence to the Black people who came before her. Morgan Harrell brought the program to a close with passionate interpretive dance to traditional African American spirituals.

"Well son I tell you. Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." – Langston Hughes

The Honorable Marcia Glenn Hunter opened by quoting the poem "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes. The poem follows a mother speaking to her son about the trials and tribulations of her life saying it "ain't been no crystal stair." This poem seamlessly transitioned into Ms. Hunter's introduction. Born in Lithonia in 1945, she lived with her family (eight siblings total) in a "three-room shack." They didn't have indoor plumbing nor insulation, and slept "two and three to a bed." When it rained, more rainwater fell inside the house than fell outside and the plastic curtains covering the windows flopped in the wind. "We just thought you just lived like that; that was life in Lithonia."



Marcia Glenn Hunter

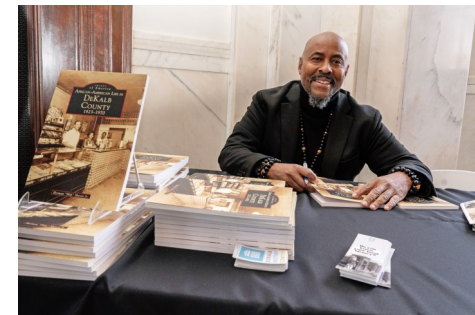
She attended Bruce Street School in Lithonia for elementary through high school. It did not have indoor plumbing, air conditioners, nor a proper restroom. She remembers going across the creek to use the bathroom. Although the white school was closer for most students, the Black students had to walk to Bruce Street School. "When it rained, we had no umbrellas, we had no hats and it would be so cold when we got to school our little hands and our little feet were frozen." When the children arrived at school they stood around a pot belly stove to warm themselves. Hunter remarked that on these walks to school, if a white person was coming, she would have to move over for them. One day when she was walking home from school she did not move over for a group of five white girls. It got her into trouble but she said, "I guess that was a lesson for me to get where I would be this time 50, 60 years later."

Hunter was the first African American member of the Lithonia Women's Club. Additionally, she served on the city council. In 1995, she would become the first Black woman mayor of Lithonia. She reminisced about "Sister Mayors" consisting of herself, Elizabeth Wilson (Decatur), and Patsy Hilliard (East Point). In her recollections, they would "cry together, pray together, and encourage each other to keep the faith and stay the course. We found ourselves not always welcome at the table and oftentimes we found ourselves on the menu."

Dr. Herman "Skip" Mason, Jr., was the next to speak. As the author of *African American Life in DeKalb County, 1823-1970*, he provided insight on his journey to publishing the book (in 1998), and how to collect similar stories. His approach to tackling such a broad topic was to try to categorize the history by each area. He wanted to present a compelling history of how those cities developed, and find pictures that would match. He gave readers a run through of cities including Avondale, Ellenwood, and Decatur, where he reached out to pioneer families and their descendants. Those families would have "treasure troves of photos."

Dr. Mason's goal for this book was to utilize immediate

resources from the community. Through the usage of newspapers and images, he formed the imagery of the African American residents. Highlighting the presence of the Black community in education, business, society, and religion, he told the story of the pioneers' prominence. Documenting stories and collecting oral



Dr. Herman "Skip" Mason, Jr.

histories aided him in developing a strengthened story of each community within DeKalb

County. In his own life, Dr. Mason cultivated this practice as an archivist from watching his great aunt collect photographs from relatives. When she passed, he patterned her habits, expanded into interviewing relatives, then branched out to the community. In the end, this would propel his project forward becoming the book it is today.

Overall, the program ended on a positive note, cultivating passionate discussions. The DHC is grateful to our patrons, distinguished guests, and staff for another wonderful event! It is through the support of the DeKalb County community that the DHC is capable of continuing to provide programming, and events acknowledging the richness of history shared in this area. Relive the event by visiting our YouTube channel. ✦

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