

DeKalb History Center

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Times of DeKalb

Spring
2025

“Shiny Industrial Future” - Postwar DeKalb County

By Marissa Howard, Programs & Membership Coordinator and
Valerie Biggerstaff, DHC Board Member

DeKalb County experienced massive growth in the years following WWII. We investigated the postwar period from 1945 to 1955. This subject will be split into three separate articles.

At the turn of the 20th century, DeKalb County remained rural with fewer than 10,000 residents. However, by mid-century, DeKalb outgrew its neighboring counties in population and wealth. Once used for agriculture, open land became home to industry, homes, and businesses. In 1958, the headline, “Peachtree Leads New South to Shiny Industrial Future,” was splashed across a full page of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Peachtree Industrial Boulevard, built only 13 years prior,

was now a tangible symbol of progress the New New South. By the 1970 census, DeKalb was the 33rd wealthiest county (by median income) in the United States and the only county in the South represented in the top 50.

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So how did we get here?

Research and writings on Postwar DeKalb are not new. We hope the research in the following articles brings a fresh perspective and new archival material to this topic.

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General Electric plant, Chamblee,
circa 1952.



Singer Nzinga Benton with presenters
Charmaine Hooke-Powell and Monica
Foderingham. Photo by Dean Hesse.

Black History Month Celebration Recap

By Monica El-Amin, African American
History Coordinator

On the morning of February 27th, 2025, the DeKalb History Center welcomed guests to its 17th Annual Black History Month Celebration: *Love Letters to the Caribbean*. Held in the historic DeKalb Courthouse, this year’s program honored the rich culture, enduring legacies, and global impact of Caribbean heritage within the African diaspora. The day began with warm opening remarks from Melissa Carlson (Executive Director), Monica El-Amin (African

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New in the Archives

It's been a busy year so far in the archives. We've received items including Southwest DeKalb High School yearbooks, Emory University yearbooks, photos, family items, and more. Here is a sample of items received:

Penny Thomas, via the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area folks, donated a collection of family photos and documents. Family names include the Lyons, Colliers, Blackmons and Thomas.

The Daughters of American Revolution Baron DeKalb Chapter donated three scrapbooks from various years, from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s. These scrapbooks help us round out the previous donation of DAR materials made in 1989.

On Saturday, April 5, we met Lithonia community members at City Hall and collected photos and other paper material for our ongoing Lithonia collection. These included family photos, news articles, genealogy, and more.

Be sure to contact the archivist, blomqvist@dekalbhistory.org to make an appointment to see any of our archival material. You can see lists of items on our website, dekalbhistory.org, Research and Archives page. You can also contact us if you have items you'd like to donate. Materials accepted include primary and secondary works such as correspondence, photographs, diaries, journals, legal materials, business materials and organizational records, writings, audiovisual materials, maps, scrapbooks, ledgers, official publications and serials, and books and must be DeKalb County related.



Antioch Lithonia church at Parkway Drive location.

Memorial Drive Exhibit Coming Soon



This exhibit showcases a vibrant sampling of the people and places that make Memorial Drive the animated, multicultural community it is today. Peter Essick’s modern photography and gathered objects from local businesses present an imaginative means to view this historic corridor. This stunning visual story is also supported by the history of how and why Memorial Drive came to be.

Opening July 25, 2025

Sponsorships now available. Contact Melissa at carlson@dekalbhistory.org for details.

Postwar DeKalb County continued

was the East Lake Farms and Dairy, owned by Robert Usher Kitchens, Sr. Kitchens began selling off his 30-acre property in 1946 and passed away the following year. That farm is now the neighborhood off Terry Mill Road, a quintessentially post-war Ranch House neighborhood. DeKalb was changing; around 1949, “Agriculture” was dropped from the name of the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce, unofficially marking the county’s change from agriculture to industry and commerce.

Further south in DeKalb, near Bouldercrest Drive, dairy farmers Samuel E. Smith and Hiram Stubbs founded Atlanta Dairies Cooperative, which benefited the owners of small family dairies whose sons and younger employees left to serve in the armed forces during World War II. In addition to labor, materials for

pasteurizations were in short supply. Atlanta Dairies built a large plant at 777 Memorial Drive to process milk from 43 local farms. This consolidation started the decline of our local dairy industry.

Nearly every dairy farm in DeKalb had similar stories to these examples. World War II had a profound effect on every aspect of dairy life. What came after the war was a completely different DeKalb than before. The last known working farm in DeKalb was Vaughters Farm in the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area. The barn and land remain untouched and protected.

To view this article in it’s entirety, please visit the ‘Blog’ section of our website. In the next installment, we will examine the boom economy in cities across DeKalb. ✦

Join * Renew * Give

We hope you enjoyed the spring 2025 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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Part 1: How Did We Get Here?

Scott Candler, Sr. - Mr. DeKalb

To discuss the growth of DeKalb County, we must start with why it all happened. Known to many as Mr. DeKalb, Scott Candler served as mayor of Decatur (1922 - 1939) before he became the county’s first and sole commissioner (1939 - 1955). Because his position meant that he *was* the county government with much power concentrated in his hands, some referred to him as a benevolent dictator. At the time, Georgia law allowed one-person county commissions “with exclusive control over all phases of county operations.” This type of government was not uncommon.



Headquarters for Scott Candler's re-election campaign as DeKalb County Commissioner, ca. 1950, located at 320 E. Howard Street. Gaines Brewster Collection.

Candler’s impact on the county began before WWII, when he stretched WPA (Works Project Administration) funds to maximum benefit. He built new roads, schools, libraries, and most critically - a new water system (1940). Miles of roads were constructed and paved, and DeKalb-Peachtree Airport was built. Candler was dubbed the “master architect of DeKalb’s industrial growth” and is credited with bringing more than 69 industries to the county.

Dairy and Agriculture

In the early decades of the twentieth century, DeKalb County was still home to thousands of farms; some planting cash crops such as cotton and others planting only the crops that they needed to feed their families. In the ten years that followed the destructive boll weevil (1915-1925), Georgia cotton production dropped by half, and many farmers gave up agriculture altogether and moved to the city to find jobs in industry. Other

“Shiny Industrial Future”

farmers adapted to the changing tide and took up dairying.

In the 1930s, DeKalb County boasted “more cows than any county outside Wisconsin,” with almost 240 independent dairies operating before WWII. Proximity to the large and growing Atlanta market, coupled with an abundance of cheap land and lack of strict regulation (before pasteurization was mandated in 1943), made dairy farming a popular survival strategy, especially for those left destitute by the boll weevil.

The DeKalb Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture was founded in 1938. As the name suggests, agriculture was a fundamental aspect of DeKalb’s economy. The Harvest Festival, started by the Chamber in 1938, was hosted on the DeKalb Agricultural Fairgrounds in Panthersville. Originally a one-day event, by 1945 it had grown to a five -day affair that attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors. This festival allowed the community to enjoy themselves while also providing exhibitions of agriculture and livestock from the area.

Dairy farms blanketed Doraville and Chamblee. The intersection of Buford Highway and Shallowford Road was once home to the I. O. Morton Dairy. In 1949, the farm was up for auction, with its location advertised as near Lawson General Hospital and the General Motors plant. In East Lake, on Glenwood near Terry Mill Road,

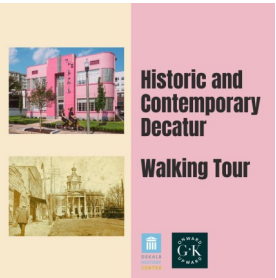


DeKalb County Harvest Festival Programs, DeKalb History Center Archives.

Upcoming Programs



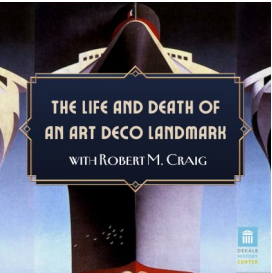
May 6
DeKalb Traveler: Woodlands Garden
10:00—11:00 am
Join fellow DeKalb History Center Members Exploring Woodlands Garden in Decatur.
FREE Patron Membership and Above
Tickets: \$5 Senior/Individual/Household



May 9
Walking Tour: Historic and Contemporary Decatur
6:30—7:30 pm
Join for this special DHC Partnered Tour with Helen McGaughy of The Blair exploring Downtown Decatur. This is a limited offered tour.
Tickets: \$5



May 13, June 10
Decatur Architecture Walking Tour
7:00—8:30 pm
This new walking tour is focused on the history and homes of Sycamore Street—a significant Decatur street features many beautiful and unique houses that showcase a variety of architectural styles from the 19th and 20th centuries.
Tickets: DHC Member \$5 / Non-member \$12.50



June 11
The Life and Death of an Art Deco Landmark
6:30—7:30 pm
Robert Craig will present about the noteworthy Art Deco features of the SS *Normandie*, its short life and death, the fate of its art, and a surprise postscript connecting the subject to Atlanta.
Free to attend!



June 18
Lunch & Learn: Authors Carmen Agra Deedy and Lauren Deedy
12:00 –1:00 pm
Authors Carmen Agra Deedy and Lauren Deedy will discuss their books and the stories behind them.
Free to attend, bring your lunch!

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Black History Month

Celebration Recap continued

American History Coordinator), and Jacqui Steele (President). Each speaker shared reflections on the theme of the day, highlighting the significance of recognizing Caribbean influence in shaping Black history and identity both locally and beyond.

Throughout the celebration, Nzinga Benton of Zee Sings Entertainment delivered powerful musical



performances that filled the courthouse with warmth and reverence. Her voice offered a blend of reflection and celebration, intertwining the essence of Caribbean musical tradition into the heart of the day's program. She performed the songs "Three Little Birds" and "Don't Worry, Be Happy" by the renowned reggae artist Bob Marley.

Featured speakers Monica Foderingham and Charmaine Hooke-Powell each shared deeply personal and insightful presentations. Through stories of migration, culture, resilience, and family they offered their "love letters" to the Caribbean community. Expressions of gratitude, memory, and pride filled the room as they spoke to the audience. Showcased through their words and imagery was the unique beauty of Caribbean heritage and how it continues to influence language, food, music and cultural connection across generations.

Their messages highlighted the Caribbean not just as a region, but as a thriving community that shapes identity and representation here in DeKalb County.

Before departing, guests indulged in a delicious Caribbean meal from Phenomenal Food by Chef Holly. As the afternoon came to a close, guests left with a sense of connection, inspiration and deeper appreciation for the shared histories and cultural bonds within the African diaspora.

The DeKalb History Center is grateful to everyone who helped bring the 17th Annual Black History Month Celebration to life from our speakers, performer, staff, and the community of DeKalb County. It is through your contributions and continued support that we can preserve, uplift and share stories that make up the fabric of our collective history.

Thank you for joining us in celebration and reflection. Visit youtube.com/@DeKalbHistoryCenter to watch a replay of the full program. ✦



All photos for the 2025 Black History Month Celebration provided by Dean Hesse, Decaturish.

Special thanks to our Sponsors



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