

A Decatur Treasure

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

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

The Swanton House, with a log cabin at its core, is one of the oldest remaining structures in Decatur. The two-room log cabin portion was probably constructed by early DeKalb settler Burwell Johnson and later sold to Ammi Williams. The exact construction date for what is sometimes referred to as "the oldest house in Decatur" cannot actually be determined, but it is estimated to be about 1825. In fact, it is hard to date many early structures in DeKalb County because of a fire in the courthouse in 1842, which destroyed nearly all of DeKalb's earliest records.

The house was enlarged and updated periodically, each change reflecting the current popular trends. Over the course of about 100 years, the original pioneer cabin was transformed into a Georgian cottage, which is defined by its floor plan of a central hallway with two rooms on either side. Around 1890, the house was embellished with an Eastlake style porch



The Swanton House around 1890. It is seen here at its original location in downtown Decatur—240 Atlanta Avenue.

Summer Camps at DHC

Frontier House and **History Show** Camps Are Adventures in Learning

The DeKalb History Center has two new camps for children this summer. **Frontier House 1850** allows campers to experience life in the mid-nineteenth century while **The History Show** takes campers through the process of developing and presenting a living history tour.

Frontier House 1850 is a one-week camp for ages 8-13 that runs June 16-20. Campers play and work at the Swanton House and pioneer log cabins as they become immersed in mid-nineteenth century life. They explore the way people lived by performing chores, playing games and making crafts. Campers learn about music and pastimes, food and shopping, early industries, and transportation. Examples of camp activities

topped by an addition. The porch columns were probably altered in the 1930s to the square brick columns it had until it was moved to its current location.

Benjamin Franklin Swanton arrived in Georgia during the 1830s during the Dahlonega Gold Rush to sell mining machinery. He came to Decatur, the seat of government for DeKalb County, and purchased the house in 1852. In the years leading up to the Civil War, Swanton established himself as a successful industrialist who engaged in a variety of businesses, including a brickyard, tannery, and machine shop.

During the Civil War, Swanton and some of his family fled temporarily to Maine. On July 19, 1864, the Swanton House became the headquarters for the Federal Army of the Tennessee, who were en route to Atlanta. The Swanton House was spared destruction and remained in the Swanton family until 1965.

Concern for saving the Swanton House started around 1957 when articles about the house and its history were published in *The Decatur News*. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Thurman D. Thompson,

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Upcoming Events

Executive Committee

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Family Day: The Games Granny Played

Saturday, June 7, 10 – 11:30 am

Swanton House, 720 West Trinity Place, Decatur

Join storyteller **LaDoris Davis** at the historic Biffle Cabin as she teaches 19th century games such as Graces, Rhythm of the Beat, Took My Partner and more. She also shares stories from the past and talks about life in the 19th century. Also make a 19th century game to take home.

\$8 members, \$10 nonmembers

Gourds Galore and Chores of Yore (For Kids)

Friday, June 20, 11 am - 12:30 pm

Swanton House, 720 West Trinity Place, Decatur

Actress and storyteller **Cathy Kaemmerlen** will demonstrate and tell stories about how gourds have been used throughout history, especially in the pioneer days of Georgia. Make a craft using gourds and then come into the Swanton House and log cabins to help out with some old-timey chores like sweeping, doing laundry and hauling water.

\$8 members, \$10 nonmembers

Family Day: Fiddlin' Dan the Mountain Man

Saturday, June 28, 10 – 11:30 am

Historic DeKalb Courthouse, 101 E. Court Sq., Decatur

Sing and dance to old-time Appalachian music and American favorites with Fiddlin' Dan (**Reuben Haller**) as he gears up for the 4th of July. Dan demonstrates instruments and tells stories about history. You'll learn how to play the spoons and make an instrument to take home.

\$8 members, \$10 nonmembers

Courthouse Rock: African Rhythms (For Kids)

Friday, July 11, 1:30 – 2:30 pm

Historic DeKalb Courthouse, 101 E. Court Sq., Decatur

Let the rhythms of Africa wash over you as **Odun Ogalano** creates a dynamic experience incorporating dance, storytelling, drumming and culture. Learn about African traditions, traditional clothing, and participate in dances.

\$8 members, \$10 nonmembers

Shadows of the Past: A Play About DeKalb County During the Civil War

(Family event, suggested ages 10 and over)

Thursday July 17, 6 - 7:30 pm

Historic DeKalb Courthouse, 101 E. Court Sq., Decatur

This two-person play draws on letters, journals, newspapers and other primary sources to create a story of the Civil War in DeKalb County. Written in the words of early DeKalb citizens who lived through the war, the play creates a portrait of life during the war and focuses on the time of the Battle of Atlanta.

\$10 members, \$14 nonmembers

For reservations or more information, contact Jenny at Goldmund@dekalbhistory.org or 404-373-1088, extension 20. ✦

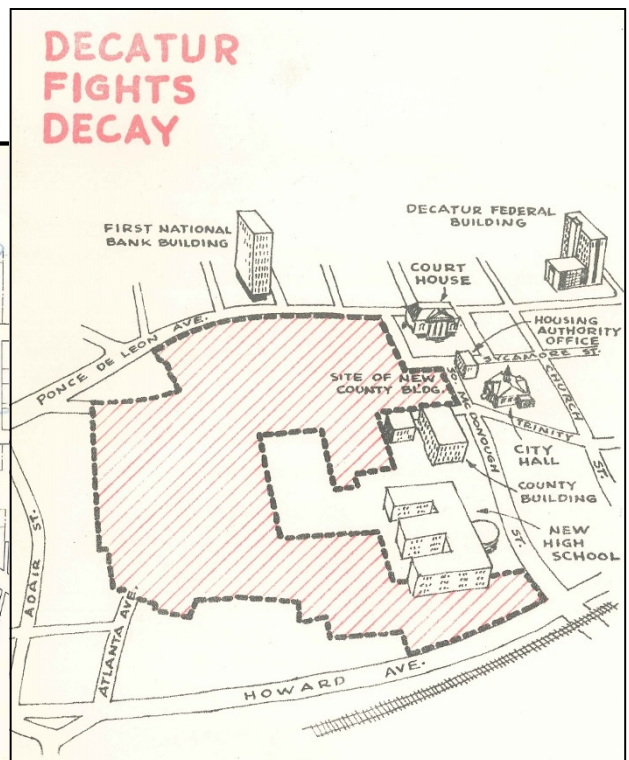
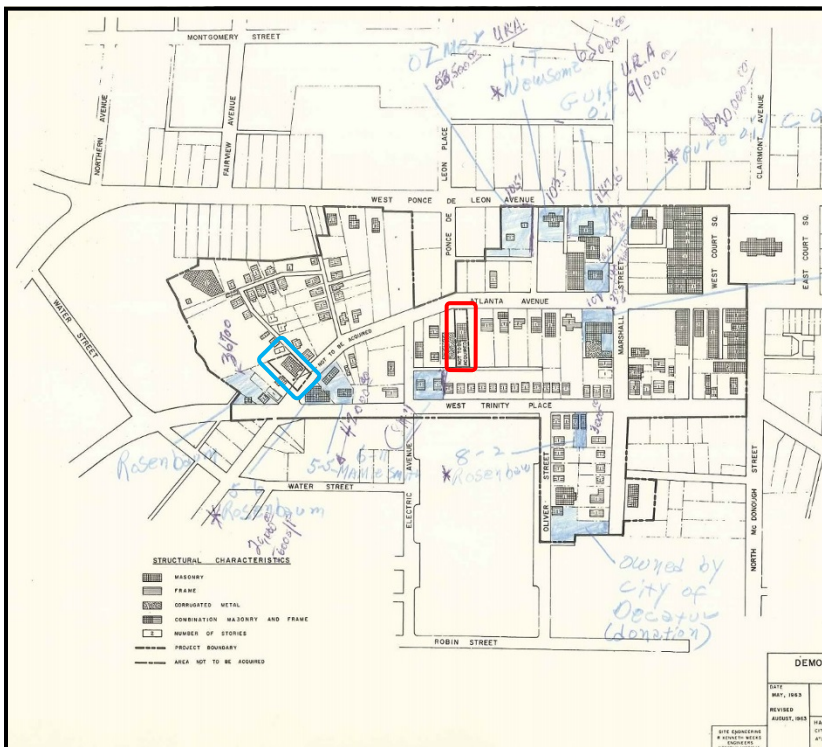
A Decatur Treasure (cont.)

wanted to move out of the area which had “become commercialized.” Mrs. Thompson was the great-granddaughter of Mr. Swanton and had lived in the house her whole life. *The Decatur News* editorialized in 1958 that “this old landmark should not be torn down and replaced by a mercantile building. In some manner it should be preserved and possibly used as a Confederate museum.” It should be saved not only for its historical features, “but also because of the tremendous commercial value to Decatur, DeKalb County and the State of Georgia.” At the same time, city officials were already planning to redevelop downtown Decatur.

Big changes swept the south as the Civil Rights Movement progressed. And as if in reaction to these changes in community after community, white residents became increasingly interested in saving antebellum houses. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* that state laws which established separate public schools for Black and White students were unconstitutional. Decatur, like many other Southern towns, built two schools for Black students after this Supreme Court decision: Trinity High School (1955) and Beacon Elementary School (1956). These schools are currently being demolished. Martin Luther King, Jr., was incarcerated in DeKalb County twice in 1960, in May and October. The second arrest was after a sit-in at the downtown Rich’s located in Atlanta. He was transferred to DeKalb at the request of our District Attorney and went before Judge Oscar Mitchell who sent him to Reidsville. (For the full version of this story, see the Winter 2010 issue of the *Times of DeKalb*). Martin Luther King, Jr., was sentenced at the DeKalb Building which was demolished around 197x. Also in May of 1960, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) petitioned DeKalb’s County Commission for permission to have a rally or meeting in Decatur at the courthouse (the request was characterized many different ways). After denying and then allowing the concept of a meeting by the KKK, the county received letters from local citizens against the Klan. The local radio news also editorialized against the Klan, and the rally was not allowed to occur. Superintendent of DeKalb Schools Jim Cherry reported to the DeKalb Real Estate Board in February 1962 that DeKalb’s schools were still segregated. The March on Washington took place in August 1963, and President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Decatur and DeKalb’s public schools were finally integrated in 1967, although DeKalb was not declared successfully integrated until 1989 by federal courts.

It is interesting to note that the National Historic Preservation Act was signed into law in 1966. This law was created in part to address the destructive forces of urban renewal which was the very thing going on in 1960s Decatur: the “urbanization, tear downs, and rebuilding America [which were] destroying the physical evidence of the past.” It is true that in this time period, preservationists were mostly concerned with saving high

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DEMOLITION MAP — STRUCTURES		EXHIBIT
SUPPORTING DOCUMENT		SD-9
CITY	BEACON HILL PROJECT NO 2	C.P. PROJECT
REVISED	CITY OF DECATUR	GA R-56
DESIGNED BY	HALLAND BARTHOLOMEW AND ASSOCIATES	DATE
APPROVED BY	CITY ENGINEER	R-224
	ATLANTA ST. LOUIS WASHINGTON MEMPHIS MOBILE	

Above: The cover of a pamphlet circulated in Decatur prior to 1965. Urban renewal was portrayed as a scalpel which would cut the cancer, or decay, out of the heart of the city.

This May 1963 map was produced for the Decatur Housing Authority and shows the proposed boundaries for one of Decatur’s urban renewal projects. It also shows the streets before they were changed. The Swanton House is circled in red and Thankful Baptist Church in blue.

Annual Meeting

We celebrated our 67th anniversary at Historic DeKalb Courthouse on March 21. At the Annual Meeting, new directors and officers were elected. Officers for this term are President Mary K. Jarboe, President Elect John Hewitt, Treasurer & Past President Jack Regan, and Secretary Cathy Mullins. New board members included Tim Bricker, Yvette Gunn, Shelia W. Harkleroad, Kathryn Laity, Melissa Spalding, and Jacqui Steele. Outgoing board members, Melvin Bettis, Gordon Burkette, Sharon Collins, John Keys, and James Tsismanakis were thanked for their service to the organization. The party included a silent auction as a fundraiser. Over 115 generous individuals, restaurants, artists, hotels, and businesses made donations to our very successful auction; we raised over \$7,300 to benefit the History Center and our programs. ***Thank you for your support!***

Our guests enjoyed food from **Badda Bing, Endive Fine Catering, Fox Brothers BBQ, LowCountry Barbecue, Sawicki's, Soiree Catering, Sun in My Belly, and Zest Atlanta.** Décor or services were provided by **2000 AD, Inc., Concepts in Floral Arts, Chelsea Patricia Photography, Eagle Rock, Jarid Neff, and Spectrum Entertainment & Events.**

Silent Auction Packages included donations from 2000 A.D. Inc. Concepts in Floral Art, Alliance Theater, ART Station Theatre, Atlanta Botanical Garden, Atlanta Braves, Atlanta Preservation Center, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta's United Taekwondo, Bash Atlanta, The Beer Growler, Bhojanic, Bicycle Tours of Atlanta, bloom floral design, Mark G. Burnette, Café Alsace, Café Lily, Callanwolde Fine Arts Center, Calle Latina, Wayne Carey and Kay Coffman, Cason Photograph, Center for Puppetry Arts, CertaPro Painters, The Champion



& Silent Auction

Newspaper, Charlie Yates Golf Course at East Lake, Chattahoochee Nature Center, City of Decatur, George and Susan Coletti, Color Wheel Studio, The Cook's Warehouse, The Corner Pub, Courtyard by Marriott Decatur Downtown /Emory, David and Suzy Crenshaw, Dad's Garage Theatre Company, Decatur Estate and Way Back Antiques, Decatur Family YMCA, Decatur Ghost Tour, Decatur Healing Arts, Decatur Pure, Decatur School of Ballet, Decatur Yoga and Pilates, DeKalb Convention & Visitors Bureau, DeKalb Symphony Orchestra, Doc Chey's Noodle House, DogFeathers, Eagle Eye Book Shop, Emory Conference Center Hotel, Charlene Fang, Farm Burger, Fernbank Museum of Natural History, Fleet Feet Decatur, Fox Bros. Bar-B-Q, Georgia Shakespeare, Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, Gwinnett Sports Authority, Hair Brain Salon, Harbour Bar & Fish House, High Museum of Art, Michelle Hiskey, Historic Oakland Foundation, The History Press, Inside CNN Studio Tour, Jim and Mary K Jarboe, Java Jive, Jazmin Spa, Jazzercise Decatur Fitness Center, Jekyll Island Authority, The Jekyll Island Club Hotel, Perry Julian Photography, Ke'n L'chaim LLC: Historic Preservation and Interior Design, Know Thyself Healing Center, Ginger Krawiec & Jack Regan, Jim Langford, Leon's Full Service, Little Shop of Stories, M. Cary & Daughters Plumbing, Massimo Mariano, Maxim Barbers, Shawn McDaniel & Mike Roach, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Jeannine & Don Morrison, J.

Phillips Noble, Oakhurst Market, Oh Baby! Fitness, OITF Productions, Jennifer Parker, Pets Playhouse on Ponce, William Power, Private Bank of Decatur, Raging Burrito & Taco, Ray's Indian Originals, Jennie Richardson, Louise Runyon, Dr. Richard H. Sams, Sawicki's, Six Flags Over Georgia, Skip's Chicago Dogs,



Souper Jenny, Spectrum Entertainment, Stone Mountain Golf Club, Stone Mountain Park, Claudia and Carl Stucke, Sweet Melissa's, Taco Mac, Trinity Mercantile and Design, Variety Playhouse, Wahoo! Grill, Kathy Wright-Starr, World of Coca-Cola, Worthmore Jewelers, Wylde Center, Young Chef's Academy, and Stuart Zola. ✦

A Decatur Treasure (cont.)

style architectural buildings closely associated with the well-known white men of history, but since then the movement has grown to acknowledge the importance of everyone's history.

Decatur's urban renewal plans were progressing at the same time DeKalb County was developing a low-income housing project in Scottdale, which would later be known as Tobie Grant Manor. Some of the residential land the Decatur Housing Authority sought to acquire what would later be used for government buildings, commercial purposes, and the expansion of the Decatur High School. And a new zoning ordinance reduced residential density for new construction. A 1961 report from the DeKalb Housing Authority recommended relocating Beacon Hill residents to Scottdale, but said that of the "211 non-white families now living in the [Beacon Hill] project area," 90 would not be able to return because there would be fewer residential units after the project was completed.

Urban renewal was first used as a development tool in downtown Decatur starting about 1938. It resulted in the loss of many freestanding homes but also the construction of the recently demolished Allen Wilson Apartments (built in 1941). This second round of urban renewal came in the 1960s. In 1957, local newspapers said the Swanton House would be lost due to commercialization of the area, but now they claimed that the house was "threatened by Urban Renewal." As Decatur's urban renewal project unfolded, the Swanton House was within the proposed boundaries and it became clear that the same program that threatened it could also save it. This house was seen as a prize jewel that needed to be saved - or removed - from what was called a "blighted area" surrounded by "slums." Maps produced in 1963 by the City of Decatur for the Housing Authority had marked the Swanton House property as "Not to be Acquired." The only other property with this designation was the Thankful Baptist Church at 507 Atlanta Avenue. The urban renewal project drastically changed a number of Decatur's streets and by 1970 had effectively removed car access to Thankful Baptist Church from the Black community that built it. But the congregation at Thankful Baptist had no time to figure out alternatives before the building was destroyed by an unexplained fire on September 23, 1970.

In 1964, the *DeKalb New Era* reported that the Swanton House would not only "escape destruction in Decatur's urban renewal program but likely attain the status of a full-scale *shrine* [emphasis added]." The owner sold her property to the Decatur Housing Authority in January of 1965, with a right to reserve the historic structure which was appraised as having no value. But by then, Mills B. Lane, Jr., president of C&S Bank, was already interested in the house: his plan was to restore it on-site or move it to land owned by the City of Decatur. Our 1970 file notes state that he purchased "the house itself from Mrs. Thurman Thompson" and had an option "to purchase the entire block [of land] from the City of Decatur through the Housing Authority."

After considering his options to either restore the house on-site or move it, Lane made the decision in 1970 to move it and provide funds for its restoration to the DeKalb History Center if the city would provide land. Much of the urban renewal project had been completed. "Slum" housing and commercial businesses surrounding the Swanton House had been demolished. The street we know as Commerce Drive had been carved through downtown and included the one block of Oliver Street, named after Black business owner Henry Oliver. The street was renamed in 1983 disregarding the historical origin of its name. The street around the Swanton House (Atlanta Avenue) became curved and would eventually be named Swanton Way. And Atlanta Avenue no longer led travelers from Decatur to Atlanta – a few unconnected blocks were all that remained.

The second part of this article will appear in the summer issue of the *Times of DeKalb*. ✦



An aerial view of the Swanton House in 1970 shows the reconfigured streets before the house was moved.



The Swanton House on Atlanta Avenue circa 1970. The Thompsons had moved out by 1965.

Summer Camps (cont.)

are making candles, cooking, doing chores, singing and dancing, storytelling, gardening and sewing. Campers will participate in an end-of-the-week program for younger children. The cost is \$250 per week for nonmembers and \$220 per week for members at the household level and above. After-care is available from 2-4 p.m. for \$10 per day. You must register for camp and after-care in advance.

Frontier House 1850 will give campers a sense of the daily lives of people who lived in DeKalb County in the 1850s. Children will engage in their own explorations of daily life at a time when there was no plumbing, electricity, prepared food or other conveniences. They will haul water in order to do laundry or haul wood to build a fire. They will cook a meal for themselves from

scratch and wash the dishes afterwards.

“In my experience, it is these kinds of immersive and authentic experiences that get kids excited about history, said Jenny Goldmund, Programs and Preservation Coordinator for the History Center, “Kids can really lose themselves in the experience of life in the past.”

The History Show runs July 21-25 and is for ages 10-14. Campers spend a week at the historic courthouse developing, planning and presenting a living history tour of the courthouse for younger children. Campers conduct research, prepare a presentation and plan the event for the end of the week. Along the way they learn the basics of character development, voice and diction, storytelling, living history, public speaking and performance. On Friday of

the camp they perform the tour for their families and young visitors. Creativity, fun and learning are at the forefront in this unique camp experience. The cost is \$275 per week for nonmembers and \$245 per week for members at the household level and above. After care is available for \$10 per day. You must register for the camp and for after-care in advance.

“**The History Show** is about bringing a project to life in a way that includes scholarship, creativity and performance. It’s a time for campers to develop skills and self-confidence and to be excited about sharing what they’ve learned,” said Ms. Goldmund. Call 404-373-1088 extension 20 for information, email goldmund@dekalbhistory.org or visit www.dekalbhistory.org. ✦

In Memorium: Gordon Moody Midgette

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DeKalb History Center

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Decatur GA 30030

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