

BEACON

*Herring Street
School about 1913*



A brief history of Decatur's African-American community

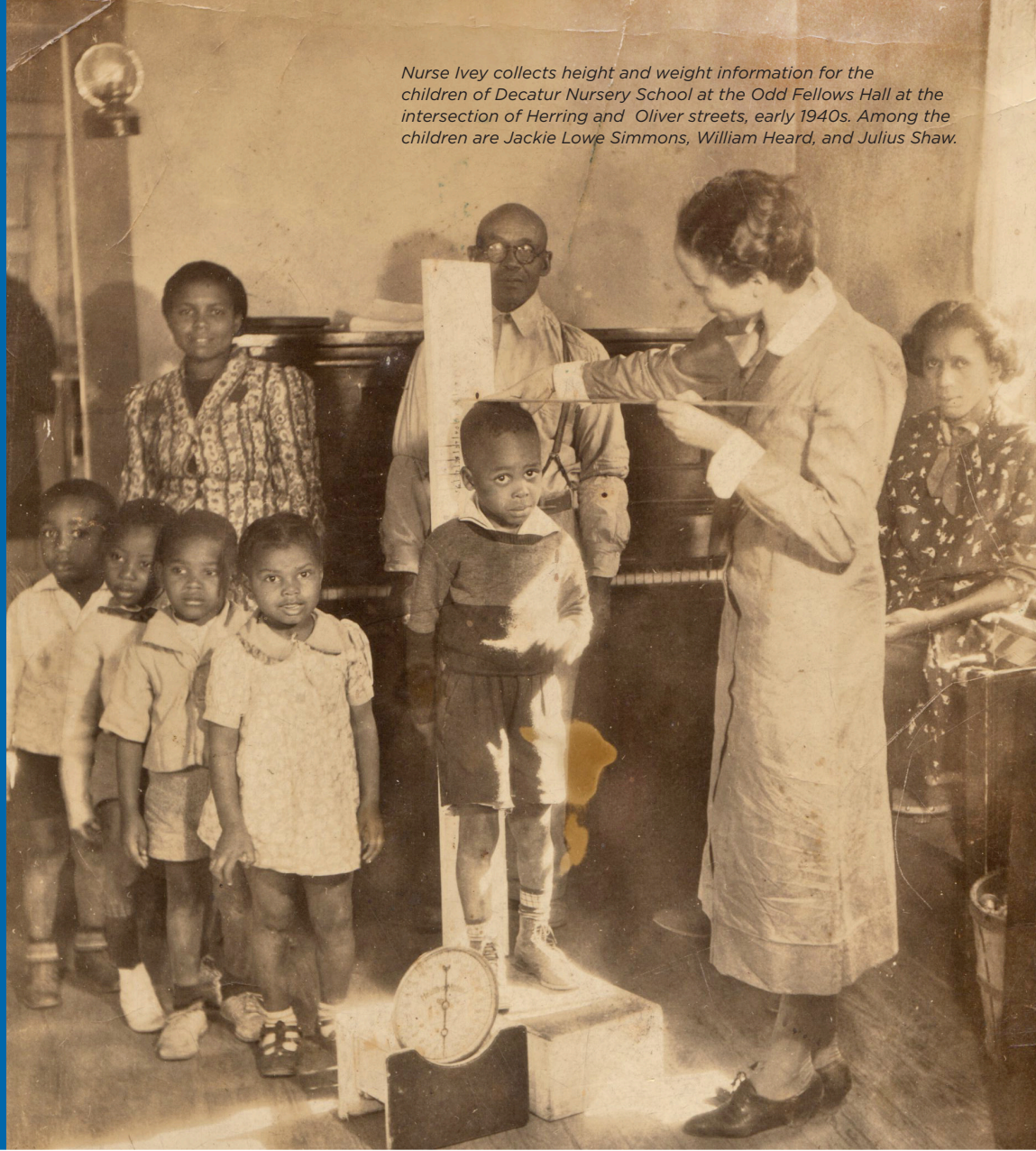
The Clark children



Decatur's Beacon Municipal Center, at West Trinity Place and Electric Avenue, stands where the city's African-American public schools — Herring Street School, Beacon Elementary, and Trinity High — once stood.

This site remains an important landmark for the city's African-American community. The doorway (highlighted on the cover) in the corner of the Ebster Recreation Center is the last vestige of Herring Street School. Aside from memories and photographs, it is all that remains of Decatur's African-American Beacon community.

Nurse Ivey collects height and weight information for the children of Decatur Nursery School at the Odd Fellows Hall at the intersection of Herring and Oliver streets, early 1940s. Among the children are Jackie Lowe Simmons, William Heard, and Julius Shaw.



BEACON COMMUNITY TIMELINE

1823

City of Decatur established

1830

U.S. marshalls conducting the first census of Decatur report the population as 8,388 whites, 1,669 slaves, and 17 free persons of color.

1865

The Civil War concludes, ending legal slavery in the United States. Decatur's freed slaves begin to settle in "the Bottom," the area now bordered by the railroad to the south, Adair Street on the West, Trinity Place on the North, and McDonough Street to the East.

1868

Decatur's first African-American church, Antioch A.M.E., is established in the home of Sister Lou Bratcher. In 1874, the congregation builds a one-room Church on Herring Street.

1896

The Supreme Court rules in Plessy vs. Ferguson that "separate but equal" facilities are constitutional, legalizing racial discrimination.

1902

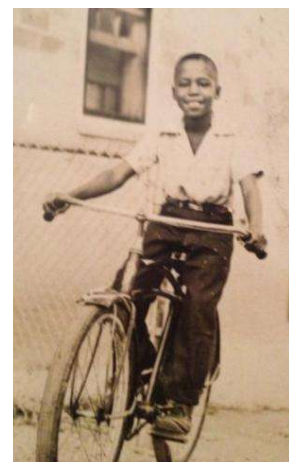
Rev. Allen A. Wilson opens Decatur's first school for African-Americans in a lodge hall.

THE 'BOTTOM'

Known as “the Bottom” in its earliest days, when it was settled by freed slaves after the Civil War, this square mile of Decatur was the site of a thriving African-American community of homes, business, churches, and schools. In the early part of the 20th century, the area became known as “Beacon Hill” or just “Beacon.”

Like any small community, it had its own landmarks, characters, business and community leaders, and other common threads that formed a rich fabric of life.

But white Decatur largely considered the Beacon Community a blighted slum, and in the 1930s began to condemn sections of it to make way for public housing.



Young Cliff Chandler on Atlanta Street. After graduating from the Herring Street School, and then Morehouse, he taught at Trinity High School. He later became Georgia's first African-American principal after schools were desegregated, at Renfro Middle School.



Bussey-Bussie family reunion at the Bussey home on White Street, 1961

BEACON COMMUNITY TIMELINE



Kindergarten graduates visit Dr. Douthard's medical office, 1940

1909

Dr. Ross S. Douthard opens an office at the corner of Marshall and Atlanta streets, becoming the city's first African-American physician.

1913

Decatur's African-American school has grown so popular that a new brick building is constructed for it. The Herring Street school educates African-American children up to the 6th grade. By 1928 the school has expanded its curriculum to extend through 8th grade. Reverend Wilson serves as principal into 1928.

1933

The Herring Street School, now under the direction of principal Charles M. Clayton, begins teaching grades 9-12.

COMMERCE

A spirit of entrepreneurship and hard work characterized the historic Beacon community – from the midwives, the bakers, the laundresses, and the shop-owners to all the young people who were always expected to do their part.

The first African-American business in Decatur was a blacksmith shop owned by Henry Oliver. Other prominent businesses in Decatur's African-American community included Cox Funeral Home, Rogers Cab Company, LC's Rib Shack, the Ritz Movie Theater, Bussey Florist, Williams Beauty Shop, Tyler Funeral Home, Tom Steele's Café, and Clark's Grocery. While some of these businesses were lost or relocated

because of urban renewal, the memories and values they stood for made a lasting impact on those who grew up in the Beacon area.



Cox Funeral Home, on the site where the DeKalb County parking deck now stands, provided office space to Narva Jane Harris, assistant superintendent for African-American schools in the county. Harris wasn't permitted to share office space with white workers.



Tom Steele's Café was the place to go for splits — split sausage sandwiches. Steele was also a community leader, and the first African-American to serve on the board of the Decatur Housing Authority. Pictured are Tom Steele, wife Ethel, and Winfred Mills.



Clark's Grocery, operated by Archie Clark and his wife, Dovie, provided first-class service to African-American residents of Decatur from the 1930s until 1978. On the back side, facing White Street, was a shoe store and dry cleaners.

BEACON COMMUNITY TIMELINE

1936

The Herring Street School graduates its first class of high school seniors.

1938

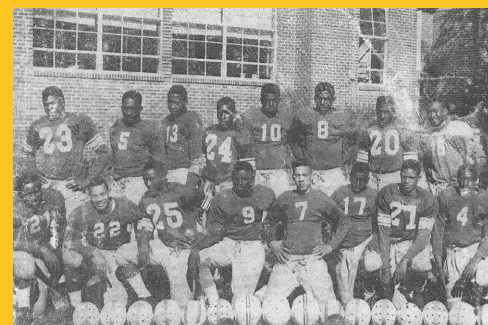
Urban renewal comes to Decatur. Homes and businesses in the Beacon community are bulldozed to make way for Allen A. Wilson Terrace Homes. It is among the first public housing developments in the nation.

1944

The first families move into the newly built Allen Wilson Terrace. The public housing development includes 200 apartments.

1945

After a campaign to raise money for uniforms, instruments, and equipment, Herring Street School assembles the first football team and marching band for Decatur's African-American schools.

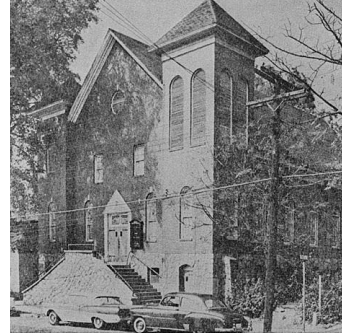


CHURCHES

The Beacon community's spiritual needs were met by at least eight churches, all within about four blocks of each other. These served as the backbone of the community, and included Antioch African Methodist Episcopal Church, Apostolic Holiness Church, Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church, Lilly Hill Baptist Church, Mount Zion Baptist Church, Thirkield Methodist Church, Trinity Presbyterian Church, and Thankful Baptist Church.

The oldest African-American congregation in Decatur, Antioch AME Church, was founded by freed slaves in 1868. In 1882, Thankful Baptist Church was established in a modest log house.

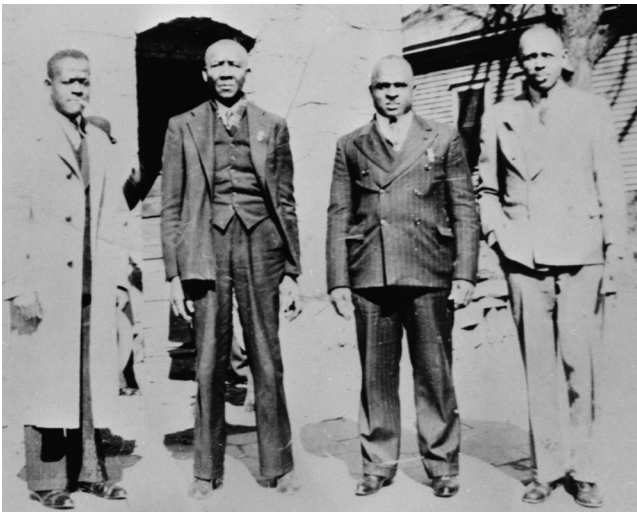
Mother Burnett established Lilly Hill Baptist in her home in 1913. Despite challenges Beacon churches have grown in size and prominence. Churches continue to be important places for the whole community to gather and come together.



Thankful Baptist Church as it appeared in the 1950s



Mr. and Mrs. John Burnett Sr., founders of the Lilly Hill Baptist Church



Thankful Baptist Church deacons (from left) James Bussey, Jake Sims, Arthur Kirkland, and Claude Clopton, circa 1940s



Groundbreaking for the new Antioch AME Church on Hibernia Avenue in 1965. The church stood for 90 years on the site of the recently demolished Callaway Building, across Trinity Place from the DeKalb County Courthouse. The Hibernia Avenue church was bulldozed to permit construction of the Swanton Heights neighborhood.

BEACON COMMUNITY TIMELINE

1953

Albert J. Martin is named principal of Herring Street School

1954

The Supreme Court rules in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregated schools are inherently unequal. The ruling spells the end (eventually) of Jim Crow laws and government-sanctioned racism.

1956

Elementary grades at Herring Street School become a separate school. By student vote, the school is named "Beacon Elementary" because of its aspirational connotation. Sarah Blackmon is named principal.

1957

Trinity High School opens with Albert J. Martin serving as principal.



Trinity High ground breaking

1961

Baseball legend Jackie Robinson, who integrated Major League Baseball in 1947, visits Decatur to support local desegregation efforts. A standing-room only crowd fills Thankful Baptist Church for the occasion.

BEACON CIRCA 1940

Many people who grew up in the Beacon community remember the black smoke rising from the waste incinerator on Atlanta Avenue. It was commonly referred to as "the crematory," although it was never used as such.

Not just a funeral home. Cox also provided office space for school administrators and, when the time came, for civil rights organizers.

TYLER FUNERAL HOME

THOMAS STEELE'S CAFÉ

RITZ THEATRE

DR. DOUTHARD'S OFFICE

THANKFUL BAPTIST CHURCH

ODD FELLOWS HALL

COX FUNERAL HOME

HERRING STREET SCHOOL

KILGORE BARBER SHOP

Mr. Kilgore was a long-time resident of Marshall Street. His barber shop was just a block away from his home.

STAR FISHER BEAUTY SHOP

CITY OF DECATUR WASTE INCINERATOR

ALLEN WILSON APARTMENTS

ANTIOCH AME CHURCH

First established in Hannah Burnett's home in 1913, it later moved to a tent on Electric Avenue at Robin Street and eventually settled at Spring House on Atlanta Avenue at Water Street.

The Allen Wilson Terrace Apartments was one of the earliest public housing efforts in the country. It was named in memory of the late presbyterian minister and principal of Herring Street School.

THE GREEN CASTLE

This large green house, home to four African-American families, was torn down in the second wave of Decatur's urban renewal.



EBSTER PARK AND POOL

LILY HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

THE BRICK WALL

A popular meeting spot for young people, the wall was a WPA project. It was actually granite, not brick.

WILLIAMS BEAUTY SHOP

CLARK'S GROCERY STORE

Ebster Park offered year-round programs and after-school activities. It is named for Donald Grant Ebster, a deacon at Thankful Baptist Church and a prominent member of the Decatur Colored Citizen League. He was an avid and enthusiastic storyteller, and an inspiration to Beacon youngsters.



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE



MAP NOT TO SCALE

SCHOOLS

The first school for African-Americans in Decatur was a small parochial school started by a Presbyterian minister. In 1902, the first public school for African-Americans opened. That school relocated in 1913 and became known as Herring Street School

With support from the community, the school expanded and was rebuilt as Beacon Elementary School and Trinity High School in 1956 and 1957. Although the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that segregated schools were unconstitutional, it would be 18 years before Decatur's public schools were completely integrated.

Despite the scarcity of resources available to them, teachers formed a Teachers' Club at Herring Street School to provide college tuition scholarships for underprivileged students. Teachers and school administrators were widely respected throughout the Beacon community, and school principals were admired civic leaders.



Teachers pictured in the 1948 Herring Street School yearbook

Principal of Herring Street School 1933-1953, Professor **Charles M. Clayton** taught students that the road to success is difficult but made easier through education.



Charles M. Clayton in 1948

He earned a masters in education from Clark/Atlanta University and a law degree from LaSalle University. While principal at Herring Street, he helped found the Gate City Bar Association for African-American lawyers who were excluded from the Atlanta Bar Association.



Sarah T. Blackmon, 1948

Sara T. Blackmon was a popular educator and administrator at Herring Street School and the first principal of Beacon Elementary. Dedicated to lifelong education, she attended Morris Brown College and went on to complete graduate work at Atlanta University.

Albert J. Martin had a profound impact on many of Decatur's African-American students. He was appointed principal of Herring Street School in 1953, and went on to serve as Trinity High School's only principal from its opening in 1956 to its closure in 1967. Martin was also a successful entrepreneur who owned and operated the Shrimp Boat restaurant in Atlanta.



Albert J. Martin in the 1963 Trinity Yearbook

BEACON COMMUNITY TIMELINE

1962

Beacon resident and future mayor Elizabeth Wilson and her friend, Dorothy Scott, integrate the DeKalb County Public Library. Before, African-Americans had access only to the Trinity High School library and a "bookmobile" with limited choices.

1964

The Decatur Housing Authority uses \$1.8 million of federal money to purchase 16 acres of residential area in the Beacon Community and clears it for expansion of the downtown commercial district.

Decatur hires its first two African-American police officers: Willard Strickland and R.A. Knight. Later in the Year, Nelson Nesby becomes the first Herring Street alumnus appointed to the force.



Nelson Nesby

1965

Decatur High School is integrated by 26 African-American students.

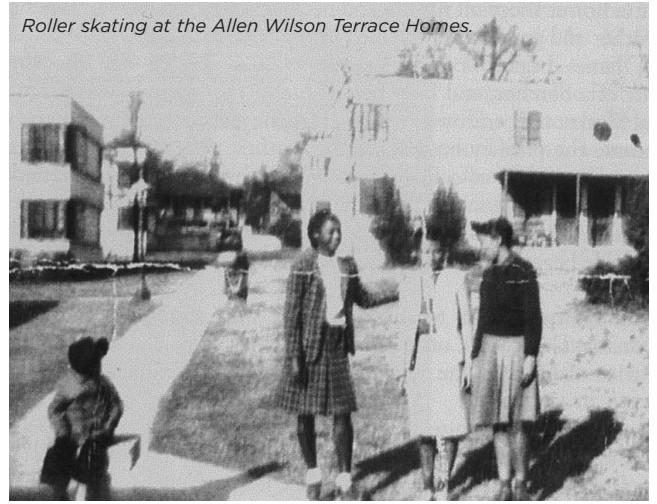
The Trinity High School football team wins the state championship.

HANGIN' OUT

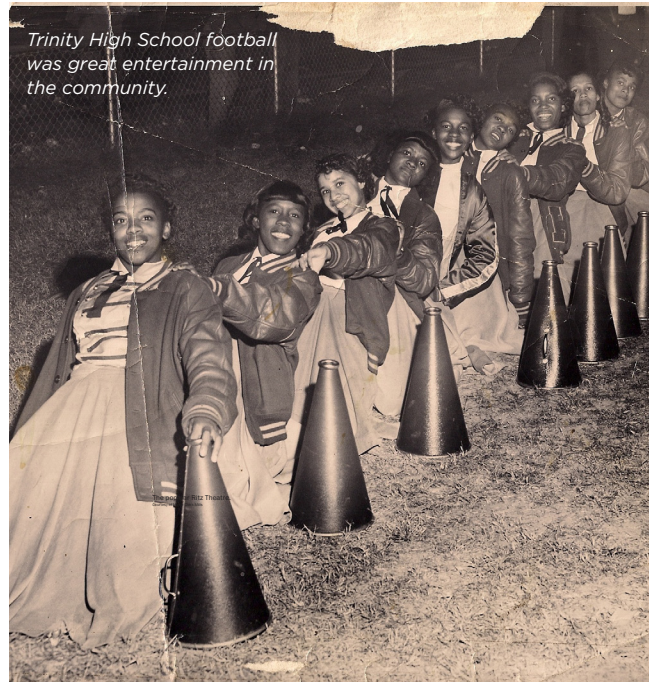
For youngsters, Beacon provided numerous spots to meet up with friends, enjoy quick meals and snacks, and to enhance the close-knit nature of the community. Special events also helped to bring the community together.

On Saturdays, kids would flock to the “picture show” at the local Ritz Theatre, the social hall of the Allen Wilson Terrace Homes, or meet up at the “Brick Wall” that ran down the south side of Robin Street. Friends and neighbors could catch up on local news while sharing “splits,” popular split sausage sandwiches, at Tom Steele’s Café. The swimming pool and recreation center at Ebster Park was always bustling with kids during the hot summer. Families came together to celebrate annual events like the Thanksgiving Day football game and the May Day festivities.

Roller skating at the Allen Wilson Terrace Homes.



Trinity High School football was great entertainment in the community.



Going to a movie at the Ritz, part of the Atlanta-based Bailey Theaters chain, which catered solely to African-Americans. The company was owned by a white man.



BEACON COMMUNITY TIMELINE



Geraldine Thompson

1966

Geraldine Thompson becomes the first African-American student to graduate from Decatur High School.

1967

Trinity High School closes, and its students are integrated with Decatur High School.

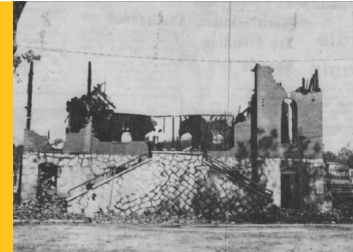
1969

Integration comes to the Decatur Fire Department with the hiring of Major Nesby.

The U.S. Department of Justice files suit against Decatur City Schools, demanding that the entire system be desegregated. At this time, Beacon still serves African-American children exclusively.

1970

Thankful Baptist Church, long a landmark at its Atlanta Avenue address, burns to the ground. It eventually relocates to 830 W. College Ave., where it thrives to this day.



THE MOVEMENT

The fight for equal rights had long been waged in Decatur's Beacon community in myriad ways, but it began to coalesce as a movement around 1950 with formation of the Decatur Colored Citizen League. In 1955, the DeKalb Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was organized in Decatur. In the early days, the NAACP was often referred to as "the movement" for fear that affiliation with the organization could cost you your job, or worse.

In 1961, hundreds lined up to see Jackie Robinson deliver the keynote address for the NAACP kickoff rally at the Thankful Baptist Church in Decatur. Many who attended the event as young children still remember shaking hands with the legendary Brooklyn Dodgers second baseman who had integrated Major League Baseball in 1947, and in retirement became a civil rights trailblazer.



Jackie Robinson promotes voter registration in Decatur with Rosetta Williams, one of the founders of the DeKalb County NAACP.

One of Decatur's most prominent citizens, Mayor Emerita Elizabeth Wilson, has helped knock down many racial barriers in the city, and works to maintain the history of the Beacon community. She worked closely with the Decatur Colored Citizen League and the NAACP, and became the first African-American city commissioner and mayor of the City of Decatur.



After moving to Decatur in 1949, Wilson was at the forefront of efforts to integrate Decatur schools, acted as a state and national PTA officer, and played a key role in founding the Beacon Hill Clinic and the Oakhurst Community Health Center. Awarded an honorary Doctorate of Laws from Agnes Scott College, Wilson continues to dedicate her life to making positive change in her community.



John Henry Shanks and his wife, Jessie.

John Henry Shanks, too, left his mark on Beacon. He helped establish the Boy Scouts of Decatur, imparting important life skills and acting as a role model for young boys in the community. Along with Rosetta Williams, Shanks helped found the first chapter of the NAACP in DeKalb County. He was also active in the Mt. Zion church and with the PTA.

BEACON COMMUNITY TIMELINE

1971

Trinity High grad Clarence Scott, who played on Trinity's title-winning team in 1965 and then played college ball at Kansas State, is drafted by the Cleveland Browns. He earns Pro Bowl honors in 1973 and becomes a Browns legend in a 13-year career.

1972

The U.S. District Court orders desegregation of all Decatur Schools. Over the course of one weekend, districts are redrawn and teachers reassigned to new classrooms. The Beacon School begins educating black and white students who live north of the railroad tracks.

1977

Beacon Elementary closes, and Decatur Recreation Department moves into the vacated buildings.

1978

Clark's Grocery, which has served the Beacon Community for more than 40 years, closes.

1982

Decatur Police Department moves into the old Beacon School buildings.

1984

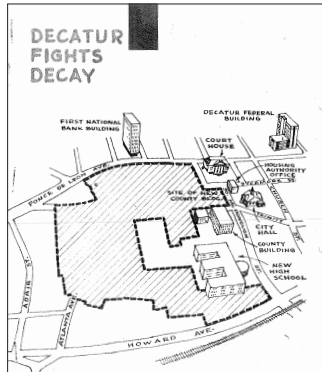
Elizabeth Wilson is elected Decatur's first African-American city commissioner.

THE END

For decades, the Beacon area was considered by city officials to be a slum. Urban renewal, the process to buy, clear, and redevelop the area, began in the late 1930s. The residential and commercial area bounded by Electric Avenue, Herring Street, Oliver Street, and Robin Street was cleared to build the Allen Wilson Terrace Homes, one of the earliest public housing efforts in the country. A pamphlet created by the Decatur Housing Authority characterized the Beacon community as “a blighted area, like a cancer [that] threatens to eat its way into [the] vital organs of our municipality.”

Urban renewal expanded in the 1960s. Families and businesses were again displaced to make way for the Swanton Heights housing project and other public developments including the new Decatur High School, and the county courthouse.

Decatur’s African-American community faced the destruction of their homes and businesses with strength and resilience.

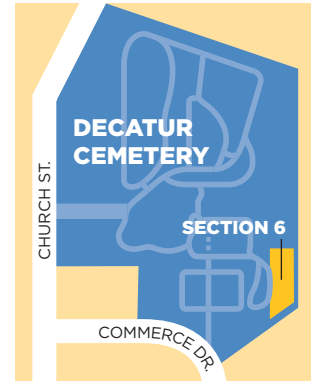


Top, a pamphlet making the case for urban renewal in the Beacon community. Above, Beacon residents were taken on “relocation tours” around DeKalb County as part of urban renewal plans.

Decatur Day and other annual events are held as a reminder of the Beacon area as it was and to reflect on how these changes came to shape Decatur as it is today.

PRESERVATION

Decatur has taken steps in recent years to preserve the history of the Beacon community and to honor its spirit. Much of the material in this brochure is taken from historic exhibits in the lobbies of the Ebster Recreation Center, 105 Electric Ave., in the northeast corner of our Beacon Municipal Center. These exhibits are largely the work of Mayor Emerita Elizabeth Wilson.



Encouraged by her efforts, Friends of Decatur Cemetery has begun to research early Decatur African-Americans, such as Henry Oliver, Sallie Durham, Oscar White and Sister Lou Bratcher, who lived in the Beacon area and helped build its foundations. These individuals are among more than 900 people buried in the historic African-American part of the Decatur Cemetery known as Section 6. The oldest known graves in the section are those of Dorcas Henderson, Simon Read, and Israel Sanford, who all passed away in 1886.

If you have information, images or artifacts from the African-American community in Decatur, please contact info@decaturga.com so that we can further expand our knowledge of this integral component of Decatur history.

BEACON COMMUNITY TIMELINE

1989

Herring/Trinity Alumni Association begins sponsoring annual “Decatur Day” reunions at McKoy Park. The event coincides with Juneteenth celebrations – the anniversary of emancipation.

1993

Elizabeth Wilson is elected mayor by the Decatur City Commission.

1994

Trinity High alumnus Judge Clarence Cooper becomes the first African-American named to the Fulton County Superior Court and the U.S. District Court of Georgia.

2013

Trinity’s title-winning football team from 1965 meets in Decatur, 48 years after their victory, for presentation of state championship rings.





Herring Street School homecoming.



City of Decatur®

678-615-0915

decaturga.com/beacon