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INTRODUCTION

"We cannot build a liberated future on lies about the present or the past."

Natsu Saito

In March 2022, the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights Decolonize Decatur Committee began working on this document in preparation for the 200th anniversary of the founding of the city of Decatur on December 10, 1823. This December 10th will also mark the 75th anniversary of one of the world's most groundbreaking global pledges: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Human rights is a useful lens to apply in evaluating how well a community has done in respecting, protecting and ensuring the wellbeing of everyone who is connected to this land we live on today.

We began this project after viewing the city of Decatur's version of its own history which is shamefully inadequate in its description of what happened here. Our work is inspired by the concept of "people's history" which looks at history from the bottom up and resists what historian Howard Zinn describes as "the general tendency to reduce history to the actions of the elite."

How did the city of Decatur come to be? Where did its wealth come from? Who benefited from this city being formed and who did not? First, the white settlers had to acquire the land. This was done through the use of brutal violence towards the Muscogee people, broken treaties, and policies of extermination. Next came the wealth created by the use of kidnapped, trafficked, and enslaved African labor. After a bloody Civil War which was fought over the issue of slavery, African Americans won their freedom and then too quickly were subjected to the apartheid system of segregation. Land dispossession and forced removal continued with the urban renewal programs of the 1930s and 1960s that targeted the historic Beacon Hill community. We see evidence of the continued lust for land in gentrification today.

Settler colonialism is a system that relies on the ideology of patriarchal, white supremacy to promote policies that have been and continue to be genocidal. The acquisition of land and free labor fed the capitalist economic system we still live under today. A system that oppresses people and ravages the earth in the name of profit. The origins of the white nationalism we see all around us today can be traced to the value system of the white settlers who even used Christianity and the Doctrine of Discovery as justification for their violence.

Stolen land and stolen people are at the foundation of not only Decatur's but the whole South's history.

The violence and dispossession permeating this history has been met with resistance every step of the way. Over the generations, those who were excluded and exploited always found ways to organize, resist, maintain their own unique cultural traditions and languages, build alternative institutions, and radically imagine another world. That proud legacy of survival, resistance, and "freedom dreams" continues today. ***The Decolonize Decatur Committee has centered the Indigenous – African connections on this land because we believe that there is no separation between the past and the present. Understanding what happened here will provide the insights needed to solve the critically pressing problems we face today.***

We are very grateful for the research help we received from students of Dr. Akinyele Umoja and the Africana Studies Department at GSU. We are also very grateful to Dr. Craig Womack, a Muscogee author and retired professor, for his insights, as well as retired Georgia State University law professor Natsu Saito who also brought her years of experience with Indigenous issues. The work of local historians Laurel Wilson and Sara Patenaude were invaluable in putting this together. We are not historians ourselves. We are concerned community members, students, educators, and organizers who want to try to tell the truth about what happened on this land.

The Decolonize Decatur Committee believes that Decatur's 200th anniversary should be a time for sober study and reflection not celebration. We know the complete story has not been told here. There are missing pieces and voices of those most affected, in particular, that need to be heard and included. Our hope is that this document will be a tool in beginning a much needed community conversation that will, most importantly, lead to action around reparative justice and reparations for all the human rights violations that have occurred and continue to occur on this land. The right to redress violations is integral to the respect for human rights. This discussion should not only include those who live here today but must also include those members of the Muscogee Creek Nation and the Beacon Hill community who were forcibly removed from this land by intentional government policies.

MUSCOGEE CREEK LANDS AND PEOPLE

Decatur, Georgia is located on Muscogee Creek land. People have lived in the region known today as the Southeastern United States for thousands of years. Major cultural centers, including those of the Muscogee Creek filled this land, sustained by

plentiful natural resources as well as extensive agricultural production. These large, densely settled and politically complex communities featured towering temple mounds, large public buildings capable of seating hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of people, as well as individual family houses spread over many miles and enormous fields from which corn, beans, and other crops were harvested several times a year.[1]

As recently noted by Turner Hunt, Historic and Cultural Preservation Officer for the Muscogee Creek Nation, **"I come from a society that prior to European contact was one of the most complex, socially diverse, ethnically diverse social organisms on North America."**[2] Historian David Stannard notes, "[n]o other part of North America outside of Mesoamerica had such complex and differentiated societies, and no other area outside of the [West coast] was so linguistically diverse."[3]

In pursuit of land, natural resources, and wealth, colonizers from Spain, then Britain, claimed the land we now call Georgia–first, as part of Spanish-controlled Florida, and then as a British colony in 1733. They brought with them deadly diseases and the presumption that the Europeans were entitled to dominion over the natural world as well as other peoples. This belief, enforced by destruction and violence, was supported by the Catholic Church and its 15th century **Doctrine of Discovery** which provided a religious, political, and legal justification for colonization, enslavement, and seizure of lands not inhabited by Christians.[4] **Their invasions laid the foundation for settler colonialism, a system that relies on the ideology of white supremacy to promote policies that have been and continue to be genocidal.**

The first Europeans in the Southeast were colonizers from Spain. One of Decatur's main streets honors Juan Ponce de León, who named Florida for its flowery landscape and claimed it for Spain in 1513 while searching in vain for gold and for the Fountain of Youth.[5] By 1521, as the Spanish moved up through Florida into what is now southern Georgia and coastal South Carolina, they began kidnapping and enslaving members of southeastern tribes, sending them to the Bahamas, "since millions of native people by then—less than 30 years after Columbus's first voyage—had largely been exterminated."[6]

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[1] David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World*, pp. 26-27 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).
[2] https://www.wabe.org/mining-debate-brings-personal-ties-to-the-okefenokee-swamp-into-focus/
[3] Stannard, *American Holocaust*, p. 26.
[4] https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/what-is-the-doctrine-of-discovery/
[5] https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/23/everyone-is-talking-about-thats-not-actually-when-slavery-america-started/
[6] Stannard, *American Holocaust*, p. 26.

Throughout the following century of empire-building, the Spanish brought settlers and enslaved African laborers to South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, even as they decimated the existing peoples on these lands. In 1526, almost a century before 1619, Spaniard Lucas Vazquez de Ayllon trafficked the first enslaved Africans to the Georgia coast, along with 600 Spanish settlers.[7] Soon after, the first rebellion by enslaved Africans on this land took place. The Spanish settlement was destroyed in less than two months, after which the Africans lived with Indigenous groups (likely Guale and/or Mocama peoples) in communities of resistance.[8]

The first successful mission in Georgia was established on lands of the Tacatacuru, a Timucua people, on what is now Cumberland Island.[9] San Pedro de Mocama was founded in the capital town of the Timucua-speaking Mocama nation on the southern end of present-day Cumberland Island.[10] Using Tacatacuru labor, in 1569 the Spanish built a large garrison on the island. In 1587 a mission was established there, but it was destroyed a decade later by Guale people from the north. The Spanish colonizers persisted, building forts and missions, but by 1684 Indigenous resistance, combined with attacks by English colonizers and French pirates, forced the Spanish to abandon the island.[11]

During the period of Spanish colonization, the peoples of the Southeast faced devastating declines in population as a result of the violence and diseases introduced by the invaders, as well as the *repartimiento* system of forced labor prevalent throughout the Spanish empire. In 1520, the Timucuan population in Florida and southern Georgia was over 720,000; after a century of colonization only 5% of that extensive and ancient people—about 36,000 Timucuans—remained.[12] Following two centuries of devastating population declines, southeastern tribes along the coast, from eastern Virginia through the Carolinas and Florida, again lost more than 90% of their people between 1685 and 1790. Further inland, the Cherokees lost three-quarters of their population during this period.[13]

In the 1700s, colonial occupation changed hands in the region; Britain claimed Georgia as a colony in 1733 and, in 1763, Spain ceded its claims in Georgia to the

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[7] https://georgiastudies.gpb.org/c5-spain-comes-to-the-southeast
[8] https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/events-african-american-history/san-miguel-de-gualdape-slave-rebellion-1526/
[9] https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/american_latino_heritage/cumberland_island_national_seashore.html#:~:text=The%20Timucua%20included%20many%20tribes,Indians%20to%20adopt%20Spanish%20culture
[10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Pedro_de_Mocama
[11] https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/american_latino_heritage/cumberland_island_national_seashore.html#:~:text=The%20Timucua%20included%20many%20tribes,Indians%20to%20adopt%20Spanish%20culture
[12] Stannard, *American Holocaust*, p. 101.
[13] Stannard, *American Holocaust*, pp. 120-121.

British with the Treaty of Paris that ended the French and Indian War and established the Mississippi River as the Western boundary of the colony of Georgia.[14]

The English called the Muscogee peoples Creeks, designating those occupying some 60 towns on the Coosa and the Tallapoosa rivers as Upper Creeks, and those in about 40 towns to the southeast, on the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers, as Lower Creeks.[15] **According to historian John Grenier, "[t]he Creeks had a special name for the [new] Georgians: 'Ecunnaunuxulgee'—'people greedily grasping after the lands of the red people.'"[16]**

In the U.S. war for independence, the Cherokee and Muscogee Creek nations generally aligned with the British and were subjected to the American forces' scorched earth policies. **After the British defeat in 1783, Native nations in the Southeast continued to face the settlers' exterminatory policies, as well as treaties imposed on them (and subsequently disregarded) by the United States.[17]** In 1790, the Muscogee Creeks agreed to cede the 800 square miles between the Ogeechee and Oconee Rivers in return for an annual allotment of trade goods and the federal government's commitment to enforce the Oconee as Georgia's western boundary.[18]

The 1790 treaty protected Muscogee Creek territory—towns, forests, crops, and hunting grounds—including the lands now occupied by DeKalb and Fulton counties, as well as the cities of Atlanta and Decatur. **The settlers, however, disregarded the boundaries, slaughtering deer herds and moving their cattle onto Muscogee Creek lands, and triggering conflicts that soon escalated into armed conflict.** Despite the federal agent's assessment that "seven-eighths of the Creek nation [...] is really friendly to us" and the Muscogee Creeks' ongoing participation in diplomatic negotiations, the settlers had no intention of respecting federal treaties. They refused to distinguish between "friendly" and "hostile" communities, indiscriminately raiding Muscogee Creek towns, burning crops and buildings, killing, scalping, and kidnapping men, women and children.[19]

New waves of Anglo American colonizers poured in, coveting the rich river bottomlands of the Muscogee and concerned that they provided safe havens for Africans escaping slavery. Athens-Clarke County was founded in 1801 and named

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[14] https://georgiastudies.gpb.org/c6-s3
[15] John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607-1814* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), p. 181.
[16] Grenier, *First Way of War*, p.183 (internal citation omitted).
[17] Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2023), p. 181.
[18] Grenier, *First Way of War*, p.184.
[19] Grenier, *First Way of War*, p. 188-191.

for Elijah Clarke who, just six years earlier had been charged with treason by Georgia governor George Matthews for his incursions into Muscogee territory. Clarke "led a motley but armed group of frontiersmen across the Oconee," constructed a blockhouse named Fort Defiance, and declared the existence of an independent republic. A jury refused to indict Clarke and, after threats of military confrontation with state officials, the settlers reached a compromise, at the expense of Muscogee Creek interests.[20]

By 1813 "[t]he Creeks stood as the last barrier to American settlement of the Old Southwest," territory now encompassed by western Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and parts of Florida and Louisiana.[21] Georgians had long rejected the federal government's reliance on diplomacy and treaties, viewing national restrictions as violating their "states' rights." **Determined to eliminate the Muscogee nation, they were supported by Andrew Jackson whose army of Tennessee militia led the most destructive campaigns to occupy Muscogee lands.**

In what is called the Creek War of 1813-1814, Jackson's forces often allied with the Lower Creeks against the Upper Creeks, many of whom remained intent on defending their traditional lands, but Jackson's troops also indiscriminately attacked Muscogee Creek towns, even those allied with the United States, killing thousands and destroying crops and herds to ensure widespread famine.

In March 1814, his forces—supplemented by additional state militia as well as allied Cherokees and Creeks—attacked a fort at the "horseshoe bend" of the Tallapoosa River, now in Alabama, where some 1,000 Muscogee Creek warriors (known as Red Sticks) and their African allies had gathered their families. What had appeared to be a strong defensive position became a deadly trap, as the invading forces broke through Red Stick lines and mowed down anyone trying to run or swim to safety.[22] **Jackson, who boasted of preserving the scalps of all the Native people he killed, then "supervised the mutilation of 800 or so Creek [...] corpses—the bodies of men, women, and children that he and his troops had massacred—cutting off their noses to count and preserve a record of the dead, slicing long strips of flesh from their bodies to tan and turn into bridle reins."[23]**

Creek resistance having effectively been eliminated, the Americans insisted, in the surrender documents signed by the Creeks in August 1814, that the "principles of national justice and honorable war" required "reparation" from the entire Muscogee

[20] Grenier, *First Way of War*, p. 191-192; see also Athens-Clarke County's summary at https://www.accgov.com/94/History (describing Clarke simply as "a Revolutionary War hero").
[21] Grenier, *First Way of War*, pp. 214-215.
[22] Grenier, *First Way of War*, pp. 218-219.
[23] Stannard, *American Holocaust*, p. 121.

nation—even those groups who had fought alongside U.S. troops—because the Creeks had engaged in warfare "unrestrained" by the principles governing "civilized nations." This "reparation" consisted of 23 million acres of land.[24]

With the First Treaty of Indian Springs (January 8th, 1821), a Lower Creek chief, William McIntosh, ceded Muscogee lands between the Ocmulgee River and the Flint River without recognized authority by the Muscogee Nation.[25] This included the land that is now DeKalb County.[26] That same year a **Land Lottery** was held to distribute the stolen Muscogee land to white settlers. This raffle resulted in the formation of Henry, Fayette and Gwinnett Counties, from which DeKalb County would eventually be formed. The Georgia General Assembly appointed five commissioners who picked land lot 246 in the 15th militia district as the county site and **in 1822, DeKalb County became Georgia's 56th county,** with the South River as its southern boundary and its northern boundary "a trading path used by Indigenous Peoples from across the southeast."[27]

On December 10, 1823, the City of Decatur was established at the intersection of two Muscogee Creek trails: one which led east from the Chattahoochee River and the other which follows today's Clairmont Road. The city is situated along a natural ridge, which is also part of the Eastern Continental Divide. The Oktahasasi or Sandtown Trail went east along this natural ridge from Stone Mountain following the path now marked by the railroads and today's Howard Ave./DeKalb Ave./Decatur Street and MARTA East Line toward Five Points in Atlanta. **Sandtown is a direct translation of the Creek "Oktahasasi,"** and was named for the communities that the trail connected. The first community known as Sandtown was located in Alabama, and the trail ran from there to another Sandtown in Fulton County on either side of the Chattahoochee River.

The city of Decatur is named after Stephen Decatur who has no clear connection to this land, but was respected by many white people at the time for fighting in naval battles including the war of 1812, which was a war against England for the expansion of the new nation into Florida, into Canada, and into lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples.

Also during this time, just north of Decatur, the Cherokee nation was under attack. Federal treaties had acquired much land for the European invaders, but state leaders rejected the constraints they imposed. According to historian Ned Blackhawk,

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[24] Grenier, *First Way of War*, pp. 220-221.
[25] Debo, Angie. The Road to Disappearance: A History of the Creek Indians (University of Oklahoma Press, 1941) pp. 88-90.
[26] https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/nae/2021/01/08/entangled-histories/
[27] https://dekalbhistory.org/exhibits-dekalb-history-center-museum/dekalb-county-history/

> **Georgia's leaders did more than advocate for the disavowal of treaties. They used violence to achieve it.** In a series of repressive measures, Cherokee citizens were imprisoned, held without trial, and murdered. Georgia required state-issued passes for those traveling into Cherokee territories and oaths of allegiance to Georgia laws. Cherokee property was seized, and a militia unit, the Georgia Guard, enforced such harassment. **As Secretary of War John Calhoun warned Cherokee leaders in 1824, their existence was "incompatible" with Georgia's.**[28]

The settlers felt similarly about Muscogee existence, and their focus soon turned to the mass removal that would be overseen by Calhoun.

After the Creek War of 1813-1814, the Georgia legislature had asserted jurisdiction over all territory "assigned to the Indians," and extended its criminal jurisdiction to Native lands in violation of federal treaties. "[S]outhern leaders abhorred what they believed to be federal intrusions into the sovereignty of their respective states."[29] **This view was shared by Andrew Jackson, who was elected president in 1828 with the support of nearly 97% of the Georgia vote which, at the time, was limited to white men.**[30]

Armed with a mandate, Jackson pushed Congress to pass the "Indian Removal Act" in 1830. Passed by a margin of just five votes, the act would "open up vast territories for industrial-scale cotton production. **Through its passage, hundreds of thousands of fertile acres - the ancestral lands of native peoples - would become part of the empire of slave labor farms that was rapidly expanding across the Lower South."**[31] The divisions reflected in this vote prefigured the 1860 secession by Southern states over the question of slavery.

Settler violence, coercive treaties, and the Indian Removal Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1830 were all part of the genocidal process that led to the mass removal of tens of thousands of Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles from their traditional homelands in Alabama and Georgia to "Indian Territory," now known as Oklahoma. Only about half of the Creeks, Cherokees, and Seminoles forced onto this "government sponsored Indian death march" survived.[32] The cannon placed on the Decatur Square in 1906 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and removed in 2021 commemorates an

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[28] Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History*, p. 241 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).
[29] Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America.*
[30] Claudio Saunt. *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020.
[31] Saunt, *Unworthy Republic.*
[32] Stannard, *American Holocaust*, p. 124.

1836 campaign that was the final phase of the war on the Muscogee Nation *(see more about the placement and removal of this cannon in the section "Life Under Jim Crow Segregation" below).*

In an often omitted piece of history, those removed included enslaved and free Africans. Free men and women of color were a part of the Muscogee—as well as Cherokee and Seminole Nations—before the American war for independence. **In the Muscogee nation, most people of African descent self-identified as "Creeks" or Black Creeks and many also had Creek blood.** During their forced removal, they suffered from pneumonia, diseases, and exposure and were afflicted with the same atrocities as other members of the Muscogee Nation. As stated on a website of the self-described Muskogee Creek Indian Freedman Band, **"The African tears left on the trail must be acknowledged when discussing the removal odyssey of the five slaveholding tribes.** The people of African descent were a part of the trail of tears forced removal odyssey."[33]

ENSLAVED AFRICANS IN GEORGIA

Dispossession of the Southeastern tribal peoples and enslavement of Africans were intertwined in the development of the state of Georgia and the South as a whole. These two factors also directly impacted the formation and development of the United States and its **system of racial capitalism**. Enslaved labor, accumulated as living capital, created the surplus wealth that formed the basis for the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the world as we know it today.[34] Genocidal policies towards Indigenous peoples, enslavement of Africans, and destruction of the natural environment continued as the white settler colonial project drove further inward across the South.

Georgia and the South had won the war of expulsion of southeastern tribal peoples and their attention was now focused on extracting as much money from the land as possible with the use of enslaved African labor. The Trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved labor involved the entire African continent from the early 1500s through the middle 1800s. "This protracted process, taking place along the entire western coast of Africa, involved **the forcible mass-transfer of human labor and skill on a scale never before seen in human history."[35]** Africans from the Guinea Coast and other regions of Africa were intentionally kidnapped, trafficked, and enslaved because of their skilled labor in rice production, in particular, which they

[33] https://www.1866creekfreedmen.com/about-us-1
[34] "Kadalie, Modibo. (2022). *Intimate direct democracy: Fort Most, the Great Dismal Swamp, and the human quest for freedom*. On Our Own Authority!
[35]"Kadalie, Modibo. (2022). *Intimate direct democracy: Fort Most, the Great Dismal Swamp, and the human quest for freedom*. On Our Own Authority!

developed in Africa under very similar environmental conditions to the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia. The two coasts were mirror images of each other.

Georgia was the last of the thirteen British settler colonies to be established. Slavery was originally prohibited in Georgia by the founder James Oglethorpe and the Trustees. This was not for moral reasons but because it was **"inconsistent with their social and economic intentions."**[36] They needed to create a buffer between South Carolina and Spanish Florida where those running away from South Carolina enslaved labor farms could be recaptured. The other reason was to establish a garrison to defend South Carolina from Spanish attack.[37]

In addition, Oglethorpe feared that if enslaved Africans lived so close to Florida, they "would doubtlessly escape to St. Augustine or otherwise aid the Spanish in undermining English colonial interests."[38] After the Spanish were defeated by the British, the demand to **make slavery legal in Georgia** intensified because of the immense profit involved. **This was officially codified in 1751.**[39] **In 1770, reading and writing were made illegal in Georgia for the enslaved.**[40]

Georgia in the second half of the 18th century was run by the planter class and they fiercely fought for the right of white people to rule over all people of color. **Going as far back as the 1787 Constitutional Convention, the South leveraged their political power through an agreement that counted each enslaved African person as three/fifths (60%) of a human being for determining direct taxation and representation in the House of Representatives.** Georgia and South Carolina also fought for an extension of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in order to acquire more African captives. As a result, the legal right to import captive people was protected in the constitution, Congress was prohibited from outlawing the importation of enslaved people for 20 years, and the United States government would in fact benefit from such trade by taxing each imported captive.[41]

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[36] https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-colonial-georgia/
[37] Kadalie, Modibo. (2022). *Intimate direct democracy: Fort Most, the Great Dismal Swamp, and the human quest for freedom*. On Our Own Authority!
[38] Kadalie, Modibo. (2022). *Intimate direct democracy: Fort Most, the Great Dismal Swamp, and the human quest for freedom*. On Our Own Authority!
[39] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_slavery_in_Georgia_(U.S._state)
[40] Givens, Jarvis. (2021). *Fugitive pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching.* Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press.
[41] Conversation with Dr. Akinyele Umoja, Georgia State University Africana Studies Department. See also Article 1, Section 9 of the U.S. Constitution, Clause 1: "The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person."

By the time of the American Revolution, enslaved Africans constituted nearly half of Georgia's population.[42] During this settler war of independence, many of the enslaved population escaped the South, but the amount of people living in enslavement nevertheless continued to grow. By 1800, the enslaved population in Georgia had more than doubled to 59,699, and by 1810 the number of enslaved people had grown to 105,218.[43] Cotton became the new cash crop and by the 1830s cotton plantations had spread across most of the state.[44] The technological development of the cotton gin was a driving force motivating the removal of southeastern tribal people, the expansion of white settlers to middle and southern Georgia to profit from cotton cultivation, and the movement of captive African labor from coastal Georgia and other states in the U.S.[45]

The first European settlers began moving into the area we now call DeKalb County in the early 1820s. They were of English, Scottish, and Irish descent coming from other parts of Georgia, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Europe. DeKalb County conducted its first census in 1830 and recorded "8,388 whites, 1,669 slaves and 17 free Negroes."[46] A year later, 1,867 people (17%) of DeKalb's total population of 10,887 were enslaved.[47] In 1840, the number of enslaved Africans increased to 2,004. This census listed "349 of its 1,406 households as enslaving at least one person."[48] One individual alone in DeKalb, Francis Irvin, enslaved 74 people.[49]

"The first recorded African American in Decatur, Georgia was an enslaved woman named Malinda who was put up for auction at the courthouse in March of 1826 and again in September of 1827 for the debts of her enslaver," according to Laurel Wilson, MHP, historian and curator of "Decatur History: An Exploration of African American Heritage in Decatur."[50] She has collected and published stories of several of Decatur's enslaved residents:

> "Two years later, Peter, a 40-year-old man who had escaped his captor in Walton County was captured and imprisoned in Decatur's dungeon-like jail while attempts were made to notify his enslaver."

[42] https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-antebellum-georgia/
[43] https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-antebellum-georgia/
[44] https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-antebellum-georgia/
[45] Conversation with Dr. Akinyele Umoja, Georgia State University Africana Studies Department
[46] https://dekalbhistory.org/ PDF handout "Abbreviated Time Line Of DeKalb County, Ga. History"
[47] https://dekalbhistory.org/ PDF handout "Abbreviated Time Line Of DeKalb County, Ga. History"
[48] https://decaturhistory.com/enslavement/
[49] https://decaturhistory.com/enslavement/
[50] https://decaturhistory.com/enslavement/

> "Mason Shumate was an early settler of Decatur who moved to the area in 1824. He was the town's first tavern-keeper, operated a hotel, and was a founder of the Decatur Presbyterian Church…When he died in 1849, his estate appraisal listed sixteen enslaved people, mostly women, along with a small wagon, one man's saddle, one pair of shovels, tongs, and irons and candlesticks, among other household items. The value of the enslaved was placed at $7,162, far more than any other line item in the inventory combined, including the house and land. The names of those enslaved women, men and children included Rosella and her daughter Savannah, Adaline and her son John Albert, Frances Sophia, Mary, Mary Emily, Caroline, Elvira, Minerva, Eli, Frances Isabella, Mary Loduska, Felix, Emaline, and Huldah."

The Dekalb Courthouse that now serves as the Dekalb History Center and Decatur City landmark is a later version of the first, wooden courthouse built in 1823.[51] **It was here at this wooden building and at later courthouse structures that, on the first Tuesday of each month, all public sales and auctions took place, allowing for the exchange in ownership of real estate, livestock, material goods, and human beings.** "It may never be possible to know all of the names of those human beings who were sold in Decatur as material possessions, but because of advertisements for auctions and sales in the county, we do know of some of the many individuals who were put through this horror…The oldest person was 65 and the youngest a mere 20 days old."[52] **Between 1831 and 1863, nearly 200 enslaved Africans were sold on the steps of this building.**[53]

The population of enslaved Africans in DeKalb County increased 33% between 1840 and 1850. On the eve of the Civil War which was fought to defend the brutal institution of slavery, almost half (450,000 people) of the state of Georgia was enslaved.[54] **That figure was 23.7% in DeKalb County which meant that nearly 1 in 4 people here was legally owned by another.**[55] By the end of this period, "Georgia had more enslaved people and slaveholders than any state in the Lower South and was second only to Virginia in the South as a whole."[56]

Those who dominated the enslaved labor farming system controlled not only the best land but also the state political system. In 1850 and 1860, more than two-thirds of all

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[51] https://dekalbhistory.org/exhibits-dekalb-history-center-museum/historic-courthouse-history/
[52] https://decaturhistory.com/enslavement/
[53] https://www.ajc.com/lifestyles/resurrecting-the-past/D57eRvgBN7SeGvcXiipTeK/
[54] https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-antebellum-georgia/
[55] https://decaturhistory.com/enslavement/
[56] https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-antebellum-georgia/

state legislators owned enslaved Africans or African-descended people.[57] The practices of “stolen land and stolen people” were “so dizzyingly profitable that they generated the excess capital and power to launch the age of fossil fuel-led industrial revolution and, with it, the beginning of human-driven climate change.”[58] **The wealth extracted by land speculators, colonizers and cotton barons has lasted for generations.[59]**

DECATUR AND THE CIVIL WAR

Southern states seceded from the Union in 1860 in order to uphold the right of white people to continue the obscene and inhumane system of owning other human beings. Georgia was the first of the southern states to submit its new constitution to its white male citizens for ratification.[60] Georgia’s Ordinance of Secession quite clearly names slavery as the main grievance against the United States government, explaining as early as the second sentence, “For the last ten years we have had numerous and serious causes of complaint against our non-slave-holding confederate States with reference to the subject of African slavery. They have endeavored to weaken our security, to disturb our domestic peace and tranquility, and persistently refused to comply with their express constitutional obligations to us in reference to that property, and by the use of their power in the Federal Government have striven to deprive us of an equal enjoyment of the common Territories of the Republic.”[61]

Lasting from 1861 to 1865, the Civil War was one of the bloodiest in human history up to that time: 600,000 dead on both sides, in a population of 30 million.[62] During the third year of the war on January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The carefully worded proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" only within the Confederate states still fighting against the Union "are, and henceforward shall be free." **It said nothing about enslaved Africans behind Union lines.[63] In December 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, declaring an end to slavery and involuntary servitude “except as a punishment for crime.”**

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[57] https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-in-antebellum-georgia/
[58] Klein, Naomi. (2019). *On fire: the burning case for a green new deal.* Simon & Schuster.
[59] “Saunt, Claudio. (2020). *Unworthy republic: The dispossession of Native Americans and the road to Indian Territory.* W.W. Norton & Company.
[60] https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/government-politics/georgia-constitution/
[61] https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_geosec.asp
[62] Zinn, H. (1995). *A people's history of the United States: 1492 to present.* Rev. and updated ed. HarperPerennial.
[63] Zinn, H. (1995). *A people's history of the United States: 1492 to present.* Rev. and updated ed. HarperPerennial.

Decatur became a battleground in the summer of 1864 as Union forces fought to seize the important rail and supply hub of Atlanta. Union soldiers under the command of Major General James B. McPherson approached Atlanta from the east. Near Decatur, a Confederate assault on McPherson's troops failed and the Confederate soldiers fell back to Atlanta where they were later defeated and the city secured by Union forces on September 2, 1864. Decatur resident and staunch Confederate supporter, Mary Gay, wrote about her eyewitness experience while the Union occupied the city in her memoir, *"Life in Dixie During the War."*

Mary Gay was born in 1829, in Jones County, Georgia. Soon after her birth, her father died, so her mother moved with her children back to her grandfather's house near Milledgeville. **Her maternal grandfather, Thomas Stevens, was a cotton planter and owned enslaved Africans including a man known as Fed who changed his name to John Brown after escaping his enslavement.** John Brown (who was not the more well known abolitionist John Brown) went North and eventually settled in England where he published his memoir in 1855, "*Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England*."[64]

In this book, Brown details the cruel and sadistic treatment he and other enslaved Africans received from Stevens. When Stevens purchased Brown, he separated the young boy from his parents. Stevens was so brutal and vicious, Brown "used to dread to see him coming." One time when Brown was kneeling to fix a broken plow, Stevens "kicked him between the eyes with all his might, breaking his nose, dislocating one eye, and permanently damaging his vision."[65] In addition, Brown details the treatment he and other enslaved Africans received from not only Stevens but also from a neighboring doctor who was **permitted to perform extreme experiments on him** which included "exposure to extreme temperatures (to measure the effect of heatstroke), bloodletting (purpose unknown), incisions (to determine the depth of skin pigmentation), and other procedures, 'which' Brown painfully acknowledged, 'I cannot dwell upon.'"[66]

Mary Gay moved to a house on Marshall Street in Decatur in 1850 and lived there throughout the Civil War. In her memoir, she "recounts a series of daring exploits, including her forays across Union lines to secure food and clothing for women and children of war-torn Decatur."[67] **After the war, she was active in the work to**

[64] https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jbrown/menu.html
[65] Saunt, Claudio. (2020). *Unworthy republic: The dispossession of Native Americans and the road to Indian Territory.* W.W. Norton & Company.
[66] Saunt, Claudio. (2020). *Unworthy republic: The dispossession of Native Americans and the road to Indian Territory.* W.W. Norton & Company.
[67] https://www.marygayhouse.org/about

preserve Confederate battlefields, raised money for monuments and cemeteries, and helped organize a local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.[68] The headquarters of the Junior League of DeKalb County is located in what was known as the Mary Gay House. In 2022, the Junior League voted to rename their venue "716 West" and they operate the space for weddings, receptions, and other events.[69]

Another Civil War figure with Decatur connections is **George Washington Scott** who was born in 1829 in Pennsylvania. "Throughout his life, Scott maintained a strong attachment for his mother, Agnes Irvine Scott, and he never forgot the admonitions she often quoted to him from the scriptures."[70] **He moved to Florida in 1851 and a year later moved to Tallahassee where he became a "prosperous businessman and planter."**[71] He supported the South's position on enslavement of Africans and he moved up the ranks, becoming a lieutenant colonel of the Fifth Florida Cavalry Battalion in 1863,[72] serving throughout middle and east Florida. In order to maintain his forced labor farm during the war, his records from 1862 show that he increased his ownership of enslaved Africans with the purchase of ten human beings, "some of whom were children, for $6,100. In early 1863, he purchased a mother and her child for $1,000."[73]

On August 12, 1864, Scott's cavalry engaged in a raid on a railroad where they encountered Black Union troops who were successful in forcing the Confederate forces into retreat. In March 1865 Scott encountered 500 Black troops in the Battle of Natural Bridge, south of Tallahassee. Although the Union troops were unsuccessful in that battle, the war was soon over, Scott's unit surrendered, and he was paroled at Tallahassee in May 1865.[74] **Using the wealth he had accumulated from enslaved labor, Scott again became a prominent merchant-planter.** In 1870, he moved to Savannah and later to Decatur in 1877 where he "amassed a fortune in phosphate fertilizer, cotton manufacturing and real estate."[75]

With the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union Army became open to Africans who joined it to fight on the side of their own liberation. At the same time, still enslaved Africans "had enormous power in their hands. **Simply by stopping work, they could threaten the Confederacy with starvation,"** wrote W.E.B. DuBois in his famous

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[68] https://www.georgiawomen.org/mary-ann-harris-gay
[69] "Junior League of DeKalb County drops Mary Gay name from popular wedding venue".
[70] Civil War Career of Colonel George Washington Scott - The Florida Historical Quarterly
[71] Civil War Career of Colonel George Washington Scott. (1979) The Florida Historical Quarterly
[72] https://catalog.archives.gov/id/32272928
[73] Civil War Career of Colonel George Washington Scott. (1979) The Florida Historical Quarterly
[74] *The Story of George Washington Scott, 1829–1903: A Family Memoir* (2002) Agnes Scott College
[75] Civil War Career of Colonel George Washington Scott. (1979) The Florida Historical Quarterly

work, *"Black Reconstruction."*[76] Exercising their labor power, **enslaved Africans conducted a "general strike"** on the forced enslaved labor farms, deserted to join and fight with the Union Army, and destroyed the South's ability to supply its army. **This organized resistance by the people themselves was important in propelling the Union to victory.**

RECONSTRUCTION AND THE FORMING OF THE BEACON HILL COMMUNITY

Under the rule of the North, the Northern and Southern states were now back together and the South entered its post-war period of Reconstruction. **This was a brief period of radical, democratic transformation where freed African-descended peoples and their allies sought to create a new, more just society.** Black people formed political organizations, built churches, voted and were elected as Republicans to state legislatures and Congress. Policies like free public education for all were introduced to the region. "It was a moment where a Black-majority legislature in South Carolina could tax the rich to pay for public schools. It was a moment that spawned the first experiments in Black self-determination in the Georgia Sea Islands, where 400 freedmen and women divided up land, planted crops, started schools, and created a democratic system with their own constitution, congress, supreme court, and armed militia."[77] **This short period offered a glimpse of what achieving the seemingly impossible goal of equity would really look like.**

In Decatur, newly emancipated African-Americans settled in what was known as "the Bottom." This square mile became the site of a "thriving African-American community of homes, business, churches, and schools. By the early part of the 20th century, the area became known as "Beacon Hill" or just "Beacon."[78] In a 2020 article published in Decaturish titled *"Juneteenth and the legacy of Decatur's founders,"*[79] historian Laurel Wilson writes that, **"Almost immediately after the Civil War, African Americans in Decatur began empowering themselves through organizing."** The article chronicles several formerly enslaved community leaders during this time including church founders, business owners, and political delegates.

For example, the **Antioch AME church was founded in 1868** in the home of a formerly enslaved Decatur resident and railroad employee, Austin Bratcher, and his wife, Louise McCoy Bratcher. Austin had been born into slavery in Virginia and now worked for the Georgia Railroad. **Sallie Thomas Durham**, her husband **Sylvester**

[76] Du Bois, W. E. B. (1935). *Black reconstruction: an essay toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880.* New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company.
[77] https://www.zinnedproject.org/if-we-knew-our-history/when-black-lives-mattered/
[78] https://www.visitdecaturgeorgia.com/community/page/bottom
[79] https://decaturish.com/2020/06/juneteenth-and-the-legacy-of-decaturs-founders/

Durham, and his mother **Hortense Barnett** were among the earliest members. Sallie helped to purchase the church's first organ.[80] According to its history, the formerly enslaved Africans "chose the name "Antioch" in honor of the city where Paul's disciples were first called Christians."[81]. It was the **first Black religious institution** in Decatur's history. The members "built the first church, **a one-room edifice, in the heart of downtown Decatur** on Marshall Street **in 1874,** very close to the end of the Reconstruction era."[82]

During this era, **many autonomous Black churches were founded** and continued to play a central role in Black communal life. In the Beacon Hill community there were at least **eight churches**, all within 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.[83]

According to its website, "Antioch A.M.E. Church was **more than a religious institution** for the community of former slaves. It housed the community school, social events, political gatherings, and benevolent and fraternal societies. **More importantly, Antioch was a central component in the formation of the black community's conception of freedom.** Antioch A.M.E. Church remained a one-roomed edifice until the 1930's." It took an additional thirty-years to build the new church structure.[84]

In 1965, Reverend T.J. Flanagan and the membership made the decision to purchase the land to **build a new church on Atlanta Avenue**, which was renamed to Hibernia Avenue. **The church remained a focal point of life in Decatur's Beacon Hill neighborhood until 1996, when the church was forced to leave Decatur for Stone Mountain after it was bulldozed to permit construction of the Swanton Heights neighborhood.** Despite this upheaval from urban renewal, the church community maintained its connections and traditions in its new home.

Henry Oliver is another important name to remember from this time. Born into slavery in 1826 and trained as a blacksmith, Laurel Wilson explains his role in the growth of Decatur:

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[80] https://decaturish.com/2020/06/juneteenth-and-the-legacy-of-decaturs-founders/https://decaturish.com/2020/06/juneteenth-and-the-legacy-of-decaturs-founders/

[81] https://antiochamehistory.org/church-history/

[82] ibid

[83] https://www.visitdecaturgeorgia.com/community/page/churches

[84] https://antiochamehistory.org/church-history/

> **Local legend tells that Henry Oliver, which was a name he chose for himself after emancipation, at some point was given a large portion of land in Decatur by his enslaver who was also his father.** He continued his blacksmithing but also sold much of this land to both black and white residents and was known as a successful businessman. **He was such a respected figure in Decatur during his lifetime that a major road, which runs through the center of town, was named Oliver Street after him in 1902.** This name stayed in place until 1984 when the town commission voted to change the name to Commerce.[85] ***(NOTE:This erasure of those who built the community was echoed four years later, when the city commission voted to adopt a policy that disallowed the development of anything other than single family homes.*** *This discouraged rental property and restricted access to affordable housing, resulting in diminished racial and economic diversity within the city of Decatur.)*

The thriving Black community in Beacon Hill was also home to politically active citizens. Jethro Brooks was a Decatur resident, emancipated in his early twenties from enslavement in Tennessee, who was both a carpenter and civic leader. In 1882 he was one of eight Dekalb County delegates to the Georgia Republican convention, all of whom were Black. Contrary to how we view the white supremacist Republican party of today, the Republican party at this time championed the abolition of slavery and supported the "social, economic, and political revolution" of Reconstruction.[86] The Democratic party was seen as the party of white supremacy and white terror who built and maintained the system of apartheid, Jim Crow segregation.[87] Laurel Wilson writes:

> That year, several hundred African Americans traveled to Decatur from around DeKalb County for a Republican meeting but were turned away from the courthouse because it had been recently painted. They all gathered at the Antioch AME church, instead. Unfortunately, Jethro Brooks died just a month before this meeting was held. It was reported in the Atlanta Constitution that hundreds of people, both Black and white, attended his funeral.

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[85] http://decaturhistory.com/early-decatur/
[86] https://www.teachreconstructionreport.org/
[87] In the mid-1960s, support for the two political parties switched, with white conservative Southerners moving in large numbers to the Republican Party and Black voters moving to support Kennedy in 1960 election, for example.

The descendants of these individuals and their families lived, worked, and were active members of their community for generations, contributing as business owners, teachers, artists, and community leaders. As Laurel Wilson explains, "These are just a few of the many stories of formerly enslaved people of Decatur and their descendants. **Partly due to decades of aggressive urban renewal, few descendants of these foundational members of the city remain today in this community, but yet we still benefit from the institutions that they built with their labor, both forced and paid."**[88]

The radical changes that took place during Reconstruction did not come without a violent backlash across the South. Former enslavers used the Democratic Party and white terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan as vehicles to reassert their control and dominance. In fact, "It is a measure of how far change had progressed that the reaction against Reconstruction proved so extreme."[89] **The "most comprehensive effort to undo Reconstruction, however, occurred in Georgia,** whose legislature fell into Democratic hands in 1870, followed by the governorship a year later. A poll tax, coupled with new residency and registration requirements, sharply reduced the number of Black voters, while a shift from ward to citywide elections eliminated Republicans from Atlanta's city council"[90]

Military occupation of Georgia ended in 1871. The country was being reorganized in the interests of elites both North and South. A new coalition had formed of northern industrialists and southern businessman-planters.[91] **According to W.E.B. DuBois, enslavement of Africans and the plantation economy had laid the foundation for the entire nation's capitalist economy.** "Black labor," he argued, "became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure but of Northern manufacture and commerce…of buying and selling on a world-wide scale."[92] Northern politicians preferred a South returned to white supremacist rule. "It was only a matter of time before Blacks would be reduced once again to conditions not far from slavery."[93]

In Decatur, city commission minutes from 1882 reveal a practice that obliged the city's least privileged residents to literally build the town with their hands.[94]

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[88] https://decaturish.com/2020/06/juneteenth-and-the-legacy-of-decaturs-founders/
[89] Foner, E. (2015). *A short history of Reconstruction, 1863-1877.* [United States], HarperCollins Publishers.
[90] Foner, E. (2015). *A short history of Reconstruction, 1863-1877.* [United States], HarperCollins Publishers.
[91] Zinn, H. (1995). *A people's history of the United States: 1492 to present.* Rev. and updated ed. HarperPerennial.
[92] https://portside.org/2022-05-06/web-dubois-abolition-democracy
[93] Zinn, H. (1995). *A people's history of the United States: 1492 to present.* Rev. and updated ed. HarperPerennial.
[94] Decatur City Archives

Those convicted of misdemeanors (including offenses like loitering and having one's animal loose on the square) were ordered to either pay a fine or "work on the streets." This makes it advantageous for a city in need of labor to arrest lower income citizens. Commission meetings included a description of roads in disrepair after spring rains and insufficient funds to hire labor for repairs. The next month's minutes reported that the roads had been repaired, thanks to convict labor, which was specifically enumerated and valued down to the hour, along with expenses for tools. This practice of using the forced labor of prisoners was common in the South. In "*Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II,"* Douglas A. Blackmon described how mostly African-American prisoners were subjugated by the **convict lease system** from the end of the Civil War until World War II.[95]

LYNCHING: (1877 - 1950)

Researchers from the Equal Justice Initiative have documented **4075 racial terror lynchings** of African Americans in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and 1950.[96] **There were four documented lynchings in DeKalb County during this time period**: Reuben Hudson in 1887 in Redan and two unidentified Black men in 1892 in Lithonia. The closest to Decatur happened in 1945 in the Druid Hills neighborhood.

According to the DeKalb History Center in their exhibit for DeKalb County's 200th anniversary, "Porter Turner was brutally stabbed by members of the **Klavalier Klub, a known branch of the Georgia Ku Klux Klan.** The group targeted him because he was a Black man with a financially stable livelihood." He was 50 years old on Aug. 20, 1945, the night he was pulled from his taxi cab near Druid Hills, stabbed with a knife and left to die.[97]

The DeKalb History Center adds, **"It is believed there are countless others whose names were never recorded and will never be known**. White mobs used lynching to instill terror in the hearts of Black communities, entrenching subordination and segregation." However, even under conditions of lynchings and terror, Black communities and institutions would continue to develop and people would continue to organize and fight for their freedom.

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[95] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_by_Another_Name
[96] Equal Justice Initiative, "*Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*" https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/
[97] The Atlanta Journal Constitution, "*'It means so much': Marker honoring DeKalb lynching victim installed," May 6, 2021.*

In May 2021, a **historical marker** honoring Porter Turner was installed near the intersection of Ponce de Leon Avenue and Oakdale Road. The words on the plaque include: "***During this era, the Atlanta Klan, police departments and white taxi owners conspired to protect white economic control. Financial independence made Black people vulnerable to violent retaliation.***" This was the third marker erected by the DeKalb County NAACP's Remembrance Project which has worked with the Alabama-based Equal Justice Initiative to honor lynching victims throughout the county.[98]

LIFE UNDER JIM CROW SEGREGATION

The promise of radical democracy in the South was crushed by the combined betrayal of Northern politicians and Southern white terror. The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868, prohibited states from depriving any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law, or denying them equal protection under the law. It was, however, a promise that was "[v]irtually strangled in infancy by post-civil-war judicial reactionism," as the Supreme Court later acknowledged.[99] In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation laws did not violate the U.S. Constitution in the *Plessy v. Ferguson*, "separate but equal" case. **By 1900, all the southern states, in new constitutions and new statutes, had written into law the disenfranchisement and segregation of Negroes,** and a *New York Times* editorial said, "Northern men…no longer denounce the suppression of the Negro vote…The necessity of it under the supreme law of self-preservation is candidly recognized."[100]

Under segregation, laws were passed by Southern legislatures to separate Black people and white in all aspects of society from schools, housing, and hospitals to public parks, restaurants, and theaters. "At the same time, Jim Crow laws were increasing; these laws curbed the success of Black people by enforcing segregation and limiting personal freedom. **In total, 27 segregation-related laws were passed in Georgia between 1865 and 1958.** They were designed to replicate slavery as much as possible in spite of the 13th Amendment. Among other things, these laws stopped Black Americans from voting, created the convict leasing system, and attempted to strip Black citizens of their constitutional rights."[101]

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[98] The Atlanta Journal Constitution, "*'It means so much': Marker honoring DeKalb lynching victim installed," May 6, 2021.*
[99] *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265, 291 (1978) (internal citation omitted).
[100] Zinn, H. (1995). *A people's history of the United States: 1492 to present.* Rev. and updated ed. HarperPerennial.
[101] https://dekalbhistory.org/blog-posts/the-monument-that-sparked-a-movement/

Blacks were confined to the least paid, least desirable, and most dangerous jobs. Black women were forced to become domestic workers often in the homes of their former enslavers where they continued to build their own world of resistance and community organization. Black schools were systematically neglected through lack of resources. **In response, historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established to provide educational opportunities to people of African descent.** Most of these schools were founded in the South after the Civil War, often with the assistance of church organizations.[102] The entire brutal apartheid system was enforced through the constant threat of violence and terror.

The years 1906-08 were particularly important years in Decatur's history, as it constructed its post-Reconstruction narrative. During those two years, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) placed two objects promoting white supremacy in the city square that would each remain there for more than 110 years. They were finally removed in 2020 and 2021 through the organizing work led by the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights and a grassroots movement of people in the community who believed the objects did not represent present day Decatur values.

1906 is known for the Atlanta Race Massacre when a mob of white terrorists viciously murdered "dozens of Black Georgians, wounded scores of others, and inflicted considerable property damage."[103] By the 1880s Atlanta had become the hub of the regional economy, and the city's overall population was soaring. This growth increased job competition among Black and white workers, heightened class distinctions, and led the city's white elite to clamp down with an expansion of segregation. 1906 was also an election year and the two candidates for governor both played to white fears of a Black upper class and competed with each other over who could best advance the cause of white supremacy.

Provoking anger and hatred, the Atlanta newspapers reported alleged assaults on white women and soon thousands of white men and boys gathered downtown and formed a mob which swept through the central business district **assaulting hundreds of Blacks.** They attacked Black businesses, entered trolley cars to randomly attack Black men and women, and pulled people off and beat them to death. The violence continued for three days and African Americans fought to defend themselves and their homes in response. Fifteen years before the more well known Tulsa Massacre, Atlanta had its own version.

[102] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historically_black_colleges_and_universities
[103] "Atlanta Race Riot of 1906," NewGeorgiaEncylopedia.com., Gregory Mixon and Clifford Kuhn

The same year of the Massacre, the United Daughters of the Confederacy placed a cannon citing the 1836 "Indian War" in front of the DeKalb County courthouse. The UDC initially raised money for a monument to the confederacy. However, according to a report written in 1906 by Mrs. Alice Billups, president of the Agnes Lee Chapter of the UDC, "we saw that we must give up the monument, but what we could do: Mount an old historic cannon that had been lying on the Decatur Square for more than 60 years…"[104] In February 2021, a public comment statement signed by 16 historians was presented to the DeKalb County Commission **calling for removal of what Decatur High School students named the "genocide cannon."** The statement said, in part:

> "By 1836, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation had been largely displaced from Georgia. Yet in that year, the cannon that now resides at Decatur Square was dragged from Decatur to the Georgia/Alabama border for use against Muscogee people attempting to protect the last few acres of land they controlled in Alabama. Following their failed engagement with Muscogee fighters, the DeKalb Cavalry returned home with the cannon, which then became a popular marker of celebration for white locals, fired off at weddings and the Fourth of July. In 1906, the United Daughters of the Confederacy mounted the cannon onto a stone, creating the monument now sitting in front of the historic DeKalb County Courthouse."

Two years after the 1906 Massacre, the UDC placed a 30-foot obelisk in front of the courthouse supporting the Lost Cause narrative which claimed that the cause of the Civil War was state's rights and not slavery. According to historian Sara Patenaude, the monument was erected to "intimidate Black residents of DeKalb County and to preserve white supremacy. It was erected in an era of lynchings and mob violence in the streets of Atlanta…It was erected in a time of unconstitutional action to keep Black people from exercising their right to vote. In 1908, the same year this monument went up, Georgia voters acted to stop Black people from voting for almost a century. And it was erected by those who desperately wanted to change what we remember about the Civil War."

In a September 2017 statement to the DeKalb County Commission calling for removal of the obelisk, historian Keri Leigh Merrit recounts the day of its unveiling:

> The DeKalb Monument's official unveiling occurred at 10 o'clock in the morning of Saturday, April 25, 1908, in honor of Memorial Day.

104 https://saportareport.com/dekalb-countys-indian-war-cannon-may-be-removed-by-county-commissioners/sections/reports/david/

Confederate General Clement A. Evans, who was to accept the monument on behalf of the South's veterans, had "three or four" other monument dedications to attend around the state as well. This fact resulted in each town "fixing separate dates for the observance of Memorial day, so that they might have General Evans with them." Evans' presence was necessary, local newspapers claimed, because "he will declare that the Confederate movement was founded in absolute truth."[105]

On the day of dedication, "youthful cadets…in khaki" from the Donald Frasier school stood in "battle formation" beside **students from Agnes Scott.** As "silence fell upon the thousand persons gathered in the courthouse square," Rebecca Candler – dressed all in white – unveiled the obelisk by pulling "gently at the cord." **Candler was the youngest daughter of Charles Murphy Candler, an extremely wealthy Decatur politician.**

"A cheer—a rebel yell perhaps—broke from the throng," Atlanta papers reported, as "Confederate flags waved." While the crowd reveled in the spectacle of the "splendid shaft," former Confederates gave historically inaccurate, propagandistic speeches in which they tried to convince the crowd that disunion occurred over states' rights – not slavery.[106]

The primary speaker of the day, however, was Georgia Congressman Hooper Alexander, who issued the dedication of the monument in a winding speech detailing the state's history. Deeming white southerners "a noble race," "[S]trong in the high purpose of a civilizing instinct," Hooper bellowed, brave white Georgians "pushed back the Creeks and the Cherokees towards the Western hills." Much like his predecessor, Hooper ended his speech by referring to "the faiths of a covenant-keeping race."

As soon as the speeches concluded, local public school children erupted "in a spirited Confederate song," and Wedemeyer's band played "The Bonnie Blue Flag," "America," and "Maryland, My Maryland." They of course concluded with a rousing rendition of "Dixie." To conclude the ceremony, the children and cadets then

[105] *Atlanta Georgian and News*, April 24, 1908; April 23, 1908; April 25, 1908. Hagler claims the dedication date was April 27, but it was actually April 25.
[106] *Atlanta Georgian and News*, April 25, 1908.

> marched over to the Decatur cemetery to decorate the graves of the Confederate dead.[107]

Placing these symbols of white supremacy as objects of intimidation in front of the courthouse was very intentional. The South's legal system was designed to serve the interests of the white power structure, support the system of segregation, and use its laws to repress the Black community. The rise and fall of illegitimate arrests, for example, corresponded to the needs of the economy for cheap labor. Under charges like "vagrancy," Black men could be forced into conditions little different from slavery where they labored without compensation in both the private and public sector under the terms of convict leasing. The **oppressive sharecropping system** forced Black workers to work someone else's land in another form of slavery by another name. After charges for the land, supplies, and housing were deducted from the sharecroppers' portion of the harvest, they were often left in debt to the landowner.

Under these oppressive conditions, **Black people in places like Decatur built their own communities that became self-reliant, self-determining, and thriving.** On the city of Decatur's website, there is one page called "Historic Decatur"[108] which includes no mention of the Muscogee Nation's presence and removal. There is also no mention of the enslavement of Africans or life in Decatur under segregation. On a separate, segregated page, there is the story of **"The Beacon Community:"**[109]

> 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.**
>
> A spirit of entrepreneurship and hard work characterized the historic Beacon community – from the midwives, the bakers, the launderers, 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

[107] *Atlanta Georgian and News*, April 25, 1908.
[108] https://www.decaturga.com/community/page/historic-decatur
[109] https://www.decaturga.com/community/page/beacon-community

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.

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.

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.

Another important figure in the community, **Ross S. Douthard, became the first African-American physician in Decatur,** opening his medical practice in 1909 in a house at the corner of Atlanta and Marshall Streets, after graduating from Leonard Medical College. More can be learned about the lives of early African descendant Decatur residents on the city's webpage about their 54-acre cemetery. Among those buried there are Henry Oliver, Sallie Durham, Oscar White and Sister Lou Bratcher who all lived in the Beacon community 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."**[110] Many buried here died before the end of apartheid segregation in the 1960s. The oldest known graves in the section are those of Dorcas Henderson, Simon Read, and Israel Sanford, who all passed away in 1886.

[110] https://www.visitdecaturgeorgia.com/community/page/preservation

Current and former residents of Beacon Hill stand on the shoulders of those buried in the cemetery. Here are a few stories from the cemetery walking tour brochure:[111]

> **Oscar White** His simple headstone reads "Worked for Bucher Scott Family for over 30 years." He resided in DeKalb County for more than 60 years, and owned property in the Beacon Community
>
> **Sallie Thomas Durham** Born into slavery, after emancipation she worked for the Junius Hillyer family. Upon moving to Decatur, she married Sylvester Durham and owned her own successful catering business. Four generations of her descendants became prominent philanthropists and community leaders in the Atlanta area.
>
> **Bukumba** Rescued from a difficult life in the Belgian Congo, missionaries brought this young woman to Decatur, where she succumbed to the post-WWI Spanish flu epidemic. The sentiment on her stone, while seemingly insensitive in the 21st century, indicates that she had embraced the Christian religion and her soul was "white as snow." (Psalm 51)
>
> **Henry Oliver** (unmarked) Born into slavery in the 1830s and trained as a blacksmith, he became a prominent landowner in what is now downtown Decatur after emancipation. The Oliver House apartments on Commerce Drive are named for him. *(In 2019, a gravemarker was purchased by Friends of Decatur Cemetery for him.)*

Originally from Greensboro, Georgia, **Elizabeth Wilson moved to Beacon Hill in 1949 and became a registered voter in the city of Decatur in 1955. She became the first African-American Decatur city commissioner in 1984 and first Black woman mayor of Decatur in 1993.**[112] In 2022 at an event held in the Beacon Hill community she said, "I want all of us to never forget that this was the Beacon Hill community. We had everything- schools, churches, businesses, community and we made a difference, not only in this community but in this town." [113]

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[111] https://www.visitdecaturgeorgia.com/publicworks/page/cemetery-walking-tour-brochure-2017
[112] https://www.facebook.com/DeKalbHistoryCenter/photos/a.144930308901692/5552746211453381/?type=3&source=57
[113] https://decaturish.com/2022/03/photos-beacon-hill-concert-series-holds-first-event-in-decatur/

Elizabeth Wilson helped desegregate the county's public library system in 1962. She was one of the first Black individuals to get a library card at the Decatur library.[114] Black residents were unable to use the Dekalb County Public Library paid for with their taxes. "There was a small corner of the school (first the Herring Street School, then Trinity High School) that the community had access to, that we could get books from, " she said. "But... I have more books in my home now than were in that collection, and that was supposed to serve the entire community!"[115]

Sometime in this same decade, she recalled seeing the KKK in Decatur Square after having a meeting and marching through neighborhoods. Wilson said that instead of hiding, her and a small group of neighbors got together where they could be seen by the Klan. "We wanted to let them know we could see them. I wasn't scared. I can remember I thought as a child they would just come and kill me, but this time I wasn't scared," Wilson said. "They would say terrible things like [n] this and [n] that."[116]

As part of the **Black Freedom Movement** that swept the South, members of the Beacon Hill community formed the **Decatur Colored Citizen League in 1950** and the **DeKalb Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was organized in Decatur in 1955.**[117] This was the same year the historic bus boycott against the policy of segregation on public transit was launched in Montgomery, Alabama, sparking a mass movement.

In 1965, the **Trinity High School football team** won the **state championship** after an undefeated season. Trinity was an all-Black high school that was **separated from Decatur High School by a 15-foot granite wall.** The championship game was against Tifton High School, described by one Trinity player, Willie Armstead, as "the most talented football team in the state of Georgia." On their way to Tifton, **their bus was stopped by the Ku Klux Klan** who issued a warning. Armstead said they were told, **"'If you boys beat our boys, you will never see the light of day."**

Down 14-0 in the first quarter, Armstead's mother sent the Trinity team a message to encourage them by stopping in the end zone, crossing her arms, and tapping her foot. Trinity scored on that series and went on to win. **"We looked at each other and said to ourselves, 'If we're gonna die, we'll die as "champions.'" Armstead said.** Trinity was a poor school and could not afford championship rings. In 1968, Trinity

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[114] https://thechampionnewspaper.com/elizabeth-wilson-reflects-on-her-time-as-decaturs-first-black-mayor/

[115] Conversation with Mayor Elizabeth Wilson

[116] https://thechampionnewspaper.com/elizabeth-wilson-reflects-on-her-time-as-decaturs-first-black-mayor/

[117] https://www.decaturga.com/community/page/beacon-community

merged with Decatur High School. **In 2013, 48 years later, the athletic director decided to present the 1965 team with championship rings.**[118]

In April 2023, former Beacon Hill residents **Jackie Pitts Stewart** and **Cassandra Simmons** reflected on growing up in Beacon Hill. "**Everybody knew everybody,"** said Ms. Pitts-Stewart. "The kids had eyes on them at all times. Your parents were watching you, of course, but all the neighbors were watching, too. We were thriving!" "What sticks out for me," Ms. Simmons said, "were **our conjoined schools** - Beacon Hill Elementary and Trinity High School - which were the only Black schools in Decatur. **We were a tight-knit community.** Whether it was football games, or parades, or spring festivals, the community was very supportive. **It was a very, very strong, bonded community. One that I know I will never experience again."**[119]

WORLD WAR I

In the early part of the 20th century, the Great Migration of Southern Black individuals and families looking for better social and economic conditions in the North was changing the demographics of the South. By 1930, Georgia had lost more than 10% of its Black population.[120] During this same era, the United States was mobilizing to go to war, and recruiting, then compelling, young men into the armed services.

While some Black men were enlisting in hopes of more equitable treatment than they received at home, many white men in Georgia sought to prevent Black men from being drafted, or refused to allow Black sharecroppers living on their property to register or report for duty. "Many Black men were arrested and placed in camp stockades for not heeding draft notices that they had never received from landowners. Selective Service officials blamed Georgia's white planters for many such delinquency issues; for most of the war, local draft boards "resisted sending healthy and hard-working Black males" because they were needed in the cotton fields and by the naval stores industry."[121]

Decaturites serving in World War I likely spent their first weeks of service training in segregated units at Camp Gordon, where the Dekalb Peachtree Airport

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[118] https://www.ajc.com/news/local/1965-trinity-high-school-champs-finally-get-rings/k8vifqg2vZWos5ckVzoYBN/

[119] Oral history project, April 2023, Georgia State students and Decolonize Decatur Committee members.

[120] Womack, Todd. "World War I in Georgia." New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified Aug 17, 2020. https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/world-war-i-in-georgia/

[121] ibid.

is currently located. The camp was named after John B. Gordon- a Confederate Major General who became a well-known opponent of Reconstruction and is widely thought to have headed the Ku Klux Klan, while also gaining positions of power including Governor of Georgia and U.S. Senator.[122] In 1918 the influenza pandemic swept through the camp, and soldiers were confined to the camp to prevent increasing infection in nearby Atlanta and Chamblee.[123] According to an interactive memorial database, six Decatur residents are listed as having died in service during World War I, along with 21 others from DeKalb county. Of the six Decatur residents, three were Black and three were white, and for all six, the cause of death was listed as either illness or accident.[124]

As with many post-war periods, Georgia after World War I was characterized by increasing backlash against any civil rights gains, and returning soldiers "were met with a reinvigorated wave of racial terrorism. Benefits and disability, promised to troops as they enlisted, were not extended to Black veterans after returning home."[125] Veterans in uniform faced particular risk. According to historian John Morrow Jr., more than **12 Black veterans were lynched in their uniforms in the South** after returning from World War I.[126]

ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY

Between 1902 and 1932, the public school week in Decatur ran from Tuesday to Saturday. While no official statements from the school board have been found explaining the rationale for this unusual schedule, Decatur educator and author Tom Keating's oral interviews describe general consensus that **the policy was meant to discourage Jewish families from residing within the city of Decatur.**[127] Several accounts indicate that, as resident Ralph Turner stated, "everybody said that we didn't

[122] Groce, W. "John B. Gordon." New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified Jun 8, 2017. https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/government-politics/john-b-gordon-1832-1904/
[123] Biggerstaff, Valeria. "Chamblee's Camp Gordon, World War I Training." Dunwoody Crier, Oct 1, 2013 Updated Mar 1, 202. https://www.appenmedia.com/dunwoody/archives/chamblee-s-camp-gordon-world-war-i-training/article_34c84e7d-b1ed-5b67-afbe-4563e18a3b33.html
[124] Veatch, Lamar. Georgia Memorial Database, United States Foundation for the Commemoration of the World Wars, 2013-2021. https://www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/georgia-memorial-database.html
[125] Carlisle, Lois. Fighting on the Home Front. Black Veterans Help us Tell a More Complete American Story." Atlanta History Center. September 22, 2020. https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/blog/fighting-on-the-home-front-black-veterans-help-us-tell-a-more-complete-american-story/
[126] Redmon, Jeremy. "Georgia Communities Honor Black American Veterns Who Died During WWI." Atlanta Journal Constitution. Nov 25, 2019. https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional/georgia-communities-honor-black-american-veterans-who-died-during-wwi/abqiL1UTPHslvmkEqaTOJL/
[127] https://dekalbhistory.org/blog-posts/social-exclusion-saturday-school-in-decatur/

want Jews in the schools." This was also affirmed by former Mayor Andy Robertson. The policy was successful. While the Jewish population of Atlanta grew from 525 to over 11,000 between the 1880s and 1920s, **there were no Jewish families listed as living in DeKalb county in 1916.**[128]

During this time, KKK and Caucasian Crusade presence was growing throughout the state, aided by the efforts of Decatur resident and 5th district U.S. Representative (1929-1945) Robert Ramspeck. A 1930 publication of the Jewish Daily Bulletin quotes the circular published by the Caucasian Crusade Ramspeck led, describing organization's wish to **"fervently foster a universally coordinated use of the ballot by white citizens for the protection of our social order, for the security of our political heritage, for the preservation of governmental integrity,"** and to purge the government and industry of all "alien" and "racial" influences."[129] Decatur resident and Reverend Adiel Mocrief wrote in his 1927 article, "Why I Live in Decatur," that "the people of Decatur in unusually large portions have common racial instincts and common historical traditions, and these things make cordial sympathies."[130]

In addition to its clear exclusionary impact on Jewish families, the costs of the discriminatory school schedule on white families were high. Student athletes had to choose between missing school or missing games with neighboring municipalities which were held on Saturdays. Meetings with organizations such as Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts were similarly scheduled. Working parents were limited in bonding time and trips as their schedules differed, and older students were limited in obtaining weekend jobs. Saturday absences were high (nearly 50%), and ultimately the superintendent asked for the schedule to be aligned with the rest of the region's institutions. The public voted 2:1 to change, but the school board was bitterly divided. **After five years of debate, the schools of Decatur adopted the Monday through Friday schedule in 1932.**

AGNES SCOTT

Originally called Decatur Female Seminary, **Agnes Scott College was founded in 1889 by a Pennsylvania-born Florida plantation owner and owner of enslaved persons, Lt. Col. George Washington Scott.** Named after Scott's mother, Agnes Scott was organized in 1889 by members of **Decatur Presbyterian Church.** A lifelong Presbyterian, Scott's gifts to the institution came to more than $175,000 when he died

[128] ibid.
[129] http://pdfs.jta.org/1930/1930-07-25_1721.pdf?_ga=2.72629972.699364962.1681675612-1052503059.1681675612
[130] https://dekalbhistory.org/blog-posts/social-exclusion-saturday-school-in-decatur/

in 1903.[131] **In 1890, he donated land, equipment, the first building, and money for a permanent endowment to the school.[132]** Along with Mary Gay, Scott is buried in Decatur Cemetery.

For generations (1910s-1950s), Agnes Scott College's **racist mascot, the Hottentot,** was central to campus life and culture until the late 1950s.[133] Agnes' Hottentot was a racialized caricature of a "native" and childlike Sarah Baartman. In the 1950s and earlier, students often performed skits in blackface. **Throughout the 20th century, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) played a role in Decatur life.** The group erected four monuments, three honoring the Confederacy, including two on campus and the largest in Decatur Square, and one memorializing the "Indian Wars" *(renamed the "Genocide Cannon" by Decatur High School students).* Agnes Scott alumnae have been members of the UDC, in Decatur and throughout the South.

As a result of the Black Freedom Movement, calls to integrate educational institutions increased throughout the region and within higher education. Reactions within the Agnes Scott community were varied with pressure coming from both sides. Though the Board revised its acceptance policy language to include admitting students regardless of race in 1962, **it took until 1965 for integration to take place in practice with Gay Johnson McDougall becoming the first Black student.** The college was once considered the place for wealthy, Southern, white Presbyterians to send their daughters. Today, 63 percent of the student body identifies as a student of color, 33 percent are first-generation college students, and forty percent are Pell-eligible.

In the 1970's, Black workers made history at Agnes Scott organizing the first union of facilities staff in the field of higher education in the South. Della Spurley-Bell and Carrie Wells were the two women who co-founded the Laborer's local union with a contract in a state and an institution who both oppose unions. In an oral history interview conducted by Dr. Tina Pippin in 2014, Della Spurley-Bell said at the beginning of organizing it was a "scary time." Union supporters didn't know if they would get fired and they were aware that someone "will always tell and talk."[134]

The organizing drive was done quickly. Workers received cards from the Laborer's International Union representative and they were all signed within an hour. **Low wages was the main issue. "I don't know how my mother and these ladies survived," Ms. Spurley-Bell said. "I don't know how they survived on that**

[131] Civil War Career of Colonel George Washington Scott. (1979) The Florida Historical Quarterly
[132] https://www.britannica.com/place/Agnes-Scott-College
[133] Casey Westerman, Agnes Scott archivist
[134] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGFgYyw0ml4&t=53s

money." With a union contract, the workers' rights were respected and they got a raise with paid holidays. The school administration tried to get rid of the union once. They had a carpenter go around with a list saying the workers didn't really need a union. "We got our own list together to keep our union," Ms. Spurley-Bell said. "We still have it!" The fight for a living wage continues.

According to local Decatur historian Laurel Wilson, "For 130 years, Agnes Scott's staff has supported her students, faculty, and the institution itself. Between just 1951 and 1958, Agnes Scott employed between 65 and 100 African American staff at any given time, with many of the men and women being veterans of the college for decades. **The staff gave not just their hearts and labor to Agnes Scott, but their money, as well, with staff frequently contributing to the school's fundraising over the years. They did all of this at a time when none of their daughters were eligible to enroll in an institution that they had devoted their lives to."**[135]

Ms. Spurley Bell remembers how hard it was for the first Black student, Gay McDougall, to integrate the school. She didn't hear about a lot of what happened to the student until later. "The administration thought we couldn't read," Spurley-Bell said. "I was dusting the desk of an administrator and saw a letter written by a doctor saying he didn't want his daughter living in the same dorm as a n-word. I read the letter closely and I made sure she knew I dusted her desk real well." Another time, the registrar called McDougall's mother because she had invited a white boy to the campus and was seen kissing him under the flagpole.

Years later, they finally invited McDougall back to campus. "I was invited to a very emotional fireside chat," Spurley-Bell said. "There was one moment I will never forget. There was not a dry eye in the house. **Students were standing up and thanking her for paving the way.**" The Dean of Students who was a Black woman thanked her and said she never would be where she was without Gay McDougall."[136]

EDUCATION IN BEACON HILL AND CITY SCHOOLS OF DECATUR

Education has been a central issue to the striving for freedom by African descended people on this land from the very beginning. During slavery, learning was pursued "as a means of escape."[137] Several states in the United States made it illegal for enslaved Africans to learn how to read or write. **In 1770, Georgia made**

[135] https://news.agnesscott.org/the-latest-headlines/alumnae/the-black-foundation-of-main-hall/
[136] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D33dL3dr17g&t=163s
[137] Givens, Jarvis. (2021). *Fugitive pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching.* Harvard University Press.

both reading and writing illegal for the enslaved.[138] Under the system of racial capitalism, these laws were passed to prevent enslaved people from gaining knowledge, as it was believed that education would make them more likely to rebel and demand their freedom.

These laws were harshly enforced, and anyone caught teaching an enslaved person to read or write could face severe punishment, including fines, imprisonment, or even death. **Despite these laws, many enslaved individuals found ways "by hook or crook" to learn how to read and write, often by secretly teaching each other.** The desire for education among enslaved people played a significant role in their efforts to resist their enslavement. "Black education was a schooling project set against the entire order of things." According to abolitionist David Walker, "for colored people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation."[139]

Under segregation, education in the South was marked by systemic discrimination and inequality, as African-American students were systematically denied access to the same educational resources and opportunities as white students. Segregated education was upheld by the legal doctrine of "separate but equal," affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 in the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. In reality, the education provided to African American students was far from equal. Schools for Black students were typically underfunded and lacked basic resources such as textbooks, laboratory equipment, and qualified teachers. As one report on residential development explains, "...of the seventeen African-American schools operated by DeKalb County in 1944, only one had running water, none had indoor toilets, no bus service was provided, and all school materials, including books, were handed down to the African-American schools when the white schools upgraded theirs. Teachers had to supply their own chalk for the chalkboards and fuel, either coal or wood, for the stoves that heated the African-American schools."[140]

In addition to the disparities in resources, African American students also faced discriminatory policies and practices. For example, Black students were often forced to travel long distances to attend school, as they were not permitted to attend the schools closest to their homes. Practicing "fugitive pedagogy," Black educators and communities worked tirelessly to provide quality education to Black students during the era of segregation. Black educators, in particular, played a critical role in

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[138] Givens, Jarvis. (2021). *Fugitive pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching.* Harvard University Press.
[139] Givens, Jarvis. (2021). *Fugitive pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching.* Harvard University Press.
[140] https://dekalbhistory.org/documents/Single-FamilyResidentialDevinDeKalbCounty.pdf

building and maintaining schools, advocating for resources and funding, and developing innovative teaching strategies to ensure that their students received a strong and liberating education.

Public school curriculum was shaped by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), the same organization responsible for placing so many monuments to white supremacy in communities across the South. **Black students were forced to learn from textbooks that denied their history, culture, and very humanity, a genocidal practice intended to erase their identities as part of a distinct racial, ethnic, or national group.** More specifically, they were "subjected to the alternative reality of the Lost Cause, a false version of U.S. history developed in response to Reconstruction that minimizes slavery's central role in the Civil War, promotes the Confederacy's aim as a heroic one, glorifies the Ku Klux Klan, and portrays the white South as the victim."[141]

The story of education in the Beacon Hill community is similar to many segregated communities across the South. The public school system of Decatur had its beginning in 1902 with a population of 1400 and a school population of 430 students. The school system consisted of four schools, three for white children and one for African Americans.[142] **Despite tremendous obstacles, dedicated Black educators strove to empower their students.** These teachers played a key role in the life of the Beacon Hill community, including Sara Blackmon who was a popular educator and administrator and first principal of Beacon Elementary and Albert J. Martin who served as Trinity High School's only principal from its opening in 1956 to its closure in 1967. The following information is found on the city's "Beacon Community" page.

> 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 [note these were segregated schools built by the city after 1954]. Although the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that segregated schools were unconstitutional, it would be 18 years

[141] https://www.facingsouth.org/2019/04/twisted-sources-how-confederate-propaganda-ended-souths-schoolbooks

[142] http://genealogytrails.com/geo/decatur/1918schools.html

> before Decatur's public schools were completely integrated *[this is not accurate- see below, "Unitary Status"].*
>
> 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.
>
> 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. 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.[143]

Displaced Beacon Hill elder Jack Pitts went to school in Decatur under segregation. He attended Beacon Hill elementary and then went next door to Trinity High School where he graduated in 1966. He played football and in 1965 Trinity won the state championship. Mr. Pitts said, "Our football uniforms were bad. We got the hand me downs from Decatur High School." **Textbooks were also handed down. When the white students got new books, the Black students received their old ones.** He said the white students would often write, "I hate n-word." As Mr. Pitts explained, "that's what you would see when you read through these used textbooks."

The struggle for equal education in the South played a key role in the Civil Rights Movement, and the landmark ***Brown v. Board of Education*** decision in 1954 was a major victory for the movement. Georgia's state government responded to this federal decision with **"massive resistance."** According to a report from the bipartisan Georgia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, for example, "[t]he Georgia General Assembly went as far as amending the state constitution to force the governor to interrupt state funds going to any public school that became integrated. In the year following the Brown decision, **the state of Georgia gave African-American teachers a choice: leave the NAACP or lose their teaching licenses."**[144]

[143] https://www.decaturga.com/community/page/beacon-community
[144] https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/docs/GADESG-FULL.pdf

When a U.S. District Court judge explicitly ordered Atlanta public schools to be desegregated, the state changed its strategy to one of **"minimal compliance."** In Decatur, several segregated schools were built *after* the 1954 Brown decision mandating desegregation (two additional schools for white students and two, Beacon and Trinity, for Black students).[145] Since 1954, 109 of Georgia's 180 public school districts have been sued in federal court for resisting or delaying desegregation, and as recently as 2007, 74 school districts remained "under court order" regarding desegregation, **having failed to reach what is deemed "Unitary Status," indicating a certain level of integration.** City Schools of Decatur (CSD) is one of those 74 school districts.[146]

In 2007, a delegation from CSD including legal counsel, school board chair Valarie Wilson and superintendent Phyllis Edwards traveled to Washington DC to petition the US Department of Justice for Unitary Status and release from court supervision of the desegregation order. The Order finding that the City Schools of Decatur had achieved unitary status and dismissing the case was signed by United States District Judge Robert L. Vining, Jr. on December 11, 2007.

In 1983, the City Schools of Decatur (CSD) was formed, creating a single school system for the town's students. Due to neighborhood racial segregation, neighborhood elementary schools remained racially segregated, with great disparities between them. A 2003-2004 a Strategic Plan reconfigured the schools into "three elementary schools serving students in kindergarten through third grade, and Glennwood Academy serving all fourth and fifth grade students in City Schools of Decatur."[147]

This resulted in all CSD students being educated in a single school from 4th-12th grade, effectively ending racial disparities between schools and meeting some federal government benchmarks, **even while neighborhoods remained segregated and disparate treatment within schools remained. In 2013, the City of Decatur began demolishing Beacon Elementary and Trinity High School** to build the Beacon Municipal Center which "houses the city's police department, municipal courts, school system headquarters, and various other city programs in nearly 85,000 square feet of new and repurposed space a new police headquarters and the Ebster Recreation Center."[148]

In 2015, a group of concerned residents was convened by Mayor Emerita Elizabeth Wilson, the City of Decatur's first and only African American Mayor, to

[145] https://dekalbhistory.org/documents/Single-FamilyResidentialDevinDeKalbCounty.pdf
[146] https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/docs/GADESG-FULL.pdf
[147] https://www.csdecatur.net/Page/339
[148] https://aiaga.org/design-award/beacon-municipal-center-2/

address issues of equity in Decatur and the surrounding communities. In particular, Black parents with children in the City Schools of Decatur system came together to address issues including the **achievement gap and disproportionality** in discipline. “After years of successful advocacy as an Organizing Committee of the NAACP, the **Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights** was re-organized as an independent organization to better advocate for local change.”[149]

As a result of their organizing, an **Equity Director position was created** within the City Schools of Decatur, Black students participated in Let Us Make Man conferences and scholarship programs, **Black Student Unions were formed** at both Decatur High School and what was then called Renfroe Middle School, and Beacon Hill co-sponsored and organized the **2017 Take Down White Supremacy March and Rally,** attended by 300 protesters, in response to the white supremacist attack in Charlottesville

The legacy of white supremacy and segregation in education continues to be felt today, as the effects of systemic inequality and discrimination have persisted over generations. In 2020, racist videos circulated at Decatur High School. The Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights called for a protest at the Decatur city hall. Beacon Hill co-founder Mawuli Davis said, “This runs deeper than the school district. It’s a community issue.” **He called on the city to “invest in anti-racist, anti white supremacist work,” to “root it out.”**[150] In response to “divisive concepts” laws being passed across the country, Beacon Hill organized a **Truth Walk in June 2022** as part of a national Teach Truth Days of Action.

The Truth Walk began at the grounds of the old DeKalb County Courthouse where enslaved Africans had once been sold and where the recent grassroots movements led by Beacon Hill removed monuments to white supremacy placed by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The walk continued to the *“What Sonia Said”* sculpture at the Beacon Municipal Complex which was unveiled in September 2021. **The walk ended at the former Carl Renfroe Middle School which was renamed Beacon Hill Middle School shortly before the event.** Beacon elders then symbolically passed the torch to the next generation. With support from the community, **the school was renamed in May 2022** after a policy change the previous year by the City Schools of Decatur which said schools could not be named after individuals.[151]

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[149] https://beaconhillblackalliance.org/about/

[150] https://decaturish.com/2020/05/protest-planned-in-response-to-racist-incidents-involving-decatur-high-students/

[151] https://decaturish.com/2022/05/decatur-school-board-renames-renfroe-middle-school-to-beacon-hill-middle-school/

“It’s really important as we see the attacks on teaching truth in the classroom that we continue to remain committed to the work of making sure that truth can be taught in the classroom and in gathering spaces like this to uplift what teaching truth looks like,” said Beacon Hill co-chair Fonta High.[152]

URBAN REMOVAL 1st WAVE (1930s)

As a national policy, “urban renewal” was a process driven by downtown business interests who, “beginning in the 1930s, sought to stem what they saw as a steadily advancing tide of abandonment and decline, which, if left unchecked, would eventually destroy the lifeblood of the city.”[153] The word "blight" was commonly used to describe the under-resourced and systematically oppressed communities of color that were usually located on the edge of downtown and were in the way of downtown expansion and growth.

As we have seen since the beginning of this historical narrative, the need of white settlers to acquire land was the driving force behind many governmental policy decisions. In this case, words like “decay” were used as the excuse for downtown white business interests to acquire what they wanted for new commercial and municipal development, and new access routes. In their minds, communities like Beacon Hill “tarnished the image of downtown, discouraging investment…Remove blight and the problems of people who resided in those areas would dissipate as well.”[154]

The first wave of urban renewal began in Decatur in the 1930s. The destruction of the Beacon Hill community is a major indicator of the City’s intentional displacement of Black people. The community was called “the Bottom” and was formed by freed Black citizens.[155] It was seen as a distasteful place to live by white city officials who **located the city incinerator behind its segregated schools.** In March 2022, at a concert event held at the Beacon Municipal Center Plaza, a displaced Beacon Hill elder pointed to the area where the incinerator had been located and told a story of not being able to hang out the wash on the days that the ashes would fall.[156]

In August 2022, the DeKalb County History Center held an event to “celebrate” the county’s 200th birthday.[157] They also opened an exhibition which included “items

[152] https://decaturish.com/2022/06/photos-the-decatur-truth-walk/
[153] “The Difficult Legacy of Urban Renewal,” Richard Longstreth pdf (National Park Service).
[154] “The Difficult Legacy of Urban Renewal,” Richard Longstreth pdf (National Park Service)
[155] “The 'Bottom'.” City of Decatur, GA, www.decaturga.com/community/page/bottom
[156] https://decaturish.com/2022/03/photos-beacon-hill-concert-series-holds-first-event-in-decatur/
[157] https://decaturish.com/2022/08/photos-dekalb-history-center-celebrates-countys-200th-birthday/

from the area's Indigenous peoples," "soil collected from documented lynching sites in DeKalb County," and displays with stories about important events and people. A section titled "Atlanta Avenue," describes it as the "center of a thriving African American business district" in Beacon Hill. It also says, **"From 1938 through the 1970, the City of Decatur repeatedly declared Atlanta Avenue and the surrounding homes a 'blighted area' surrounded by 'slums' and demolished businesses and residences as part of urban renewal campaigns."** Admitting that "not much remains of Beacon Hill today," a caption to a Decatur Housing Authority map says that urban renewal programs ultimately **"reduced Beacon Hill's Black population by more than 40%."**[158]

The racially discriminatory housing policy known as redlining, made famous by the colored maps drawn by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), came into being in the 1930s. This tactic of disinvestment and limiting the types of financial opportunities available to homebuyers in racially mixed or predominantly Black neighborhoods led to the deterioration of Black communities around the country.[159] At the same time, the advancement of automobiles and trolley car transportation was leading to drastic changes in the development of Decatur. The influx of people was seen as an opportunity by the city to "renew" parts of Decatur deemed "undeveloped." **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."**[160]

From 1930 to the 1980s, the Black communities of Beacon Hill and Oakhurst began to dwindle as the city saw an influx of affluent white people. In 1938, the City bulldozed several blocks of the Beacon community (from Robin Street North to Herring Street (now Trinity Place), and from Oliver Street (now Commerce) to Electric Avenue) to make room for the first subdivision, the Allen Wilson Terrace Homes, completed in 1941.[161] Maps from the 1930s depict Beacon as an area densely populated with small homes, cottages and duplexes.[162] **Businesses that served the community for years were lost to the displacement of this community.** For example, Clark's Grocery which served the community from the 1930s was out of business by the 1970s.

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[158] DeKalb History Center 200th anniversary exhibit
[159] Locke, Dexter, et al. "Residential Housing Segregation and Urban Tree Canopy in 37 US Cities." 2020, doi:10.31235/osf.io/97zcs. McGrath, Michael.
[160] https://www.visitdecaturgeorgia.com/community/page/end
[161] https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/DHAALLENWILSONREVITAL.PDF
[162] Rotenstein, D.S. (2019). The Decatur Plan: Folklore, Historic Preservation, and the Black Experience in Gentrifying Spaces. Journal of American Folklore, 132(526) pp. 431-451.

There are several first-hand accounts of older residents that saw the destruction of Beacon Hill happen in real-time. The first wave of removal began an active phase of the **continued displacement of this Black community** in order to make room for white people and what they deemed progress. The city began condemning Black citizens' homes to make room for the subdivisions that were planned to serve as public housing. It was presented as a solution and referred to as “The Decatur Plan”.[163] However, even more recent accounts from displaced Beacon Hill residents highlight the negative effects of this so-called “progress."[164]

WORLD WAR II AND POST-WAR

World War II brought another round of Decatur residents heading to Europe to risk their lives, then returning to a segregated society. 120 soldiers from DeKalb county died during WWII.[165] Black soldiers noted that the army remained segregated even while it demanded loyalty and the willingness to die for one’s country and fight racist Nazism. Some joined the Double V campaign which vowed to fight fascism in Europe as well as racism back home.[166]

Upon returning home, the hypocrisy of fighting racist Nazism while living under a system of overt white supremacist regulations was obvious to many. As veteran Bill Dabney’s son explained, “One reason why we never had pictures of my dad in uniform was that coming back [to the South] from the West Coast, after they had been deployed to go to the Pacific Theater, after they fought all the way through the European theater, they noticed that they had to ride in the back of the train, but Nazi POWs got to ride in first class in the front of the train. Nazis were getting treated better than Black veterans who had put their lives on the line. So that kind of pissed my dad off.”[167]

The GI benefits that assisted so many white veterans and their families in gaining higher education and building wealth through homeownership were largely denied to Black veterans, especially in the South. Access to these federal benefits was gate-kept by local and state officials, as intentionally ensured by policy-makers including Mississippi Congressman and fervent segregationist John

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[163] ibid
[164] https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1002/naticivirevi.105.2.0025
[165] https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/army-casualties/georgia.html
[166]https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/blog/fighting-on-the-home-front-black-veterans-help-us-tell-a-more-complete-american-story/
[167]hps://www.npr.org/2022/10/18/1129735948/black-vets-were-excluded-from-gi-bill-benefits-a-bill-in-congress-aims-to-fix-th#:~:text=Press-,Black%20vets%20were%20excluded%20from%20GI%20bill%20benefttits%20%E2%80%94%20a%20bill,and%20came%20home%20to%20segregation

Rankin.[168] Georgia's colleges remained segregated in the post-war period, and many that claimed to be integrated refused to admit any applicants of color.

As veteran Lewis B. Conn explained, even after receiving the promise of tuition money, he was unable to use it. "I just got through fighting for freedom, and here I came back to Georgia and the United States was still segregated, and the education system and process. And they hit me again. Here I am on the GI Bill. They didn't have to give me anything. All they had to do, open up the door, let me in. Give me an opportunity to further my education. But I was denied, because I was still what, was a Negro… Denied, because of my race. **Here I am, born in Georgia, live in Georgia, fought from Georgia for the United States, but came back, here I had the GI Bill. Still, [I] couldn't attend the university systems for further education."[169]** Beyond education and homeownership barriers, many other campaigns, both subtle and overt, prevented Black veterans from benefiting from the class mobility afforded to so many white families. For example, postmasters in Southern states were accused of failing to deliver applications for veteran unemployment benefits to Black veterans.[170]

Suburban home tracts were developed in the 1950's and 1960's in response to post-war housing booms.[171] **The great American suburbanization of the post-World War II years was spurred on by federal subsidies for builders on the condition that no homes be sold to African Americans.[172]** The visible red brick ranch communities around greater Decatur evidence this era, and are a further reminder of the **opportunities for building generational wealth that were denied to Black veterans.** The VA may have agreed to co-sign loans, but they had to be granted by the often white-run banking institutions local to the applicant.

As we see with redlining practices, denying loans was a very effective form of economic oppression. For example, in 1947 Mississippi, there were 3200 VA-guaranteed home loans administered. Only 2 of these went to Black borrowers.[173] The postwar boom that disparately affected white and Black residents led to a change in Dekalb County land use, moving from mixed rural and agricultural land with smaller towns, to a mostly residential community, which saw rapid development.[174]

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[168] https://www.history.com/news/gi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits
[169] https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/blog/fighting-on-the-home-front-black-veterans-help-us-tell-a-more-complete-american-story/
[170] https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/06/01/87758545.html?pageNumber=45
[171] http://www.medlockpark.org/p/photos.html
[172] https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/color-law-segregated-america/
[173] https://www.history.com/news/gi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits
[174] https://dekalbhistory.org/documents/Single-FamilyResidentialDevinDeKalbCounty.pdf

Between the end of WWII and 1970, the population of Dekalb County tripled- a number that was reflective of the "baby boom."[175] Within that number, where residents lived within Dekalb County was heavily affected by **white flight and urban removal,** as white residents moved out of more urban areas, and **Black residents were dispossessed of their homes near downtown Decatur** and moved to condensed neighborhoods, such as Scottdale, or housing projects, like those built within the City of Decatur.[176]

As Beacon Hill resident Jackie Pitts Stewart recalled: "All of our businesses started to close. Then, **eminent domain** came through. **A lot of people lost their homes.** There were a lot of Black homeowners just on our side of the railroad tracks. All up and down Atlanta Ave. My Uncle Mokie's house was on DeKalb Ave. I was just a little bitty girl and I remember when he had to move. I didn't really know what was going on. I was just a little kid. **Shortly after that, they came in and started tearing everything down. We just lost everything."**

URBAN REMOVAL 2nd WAVE (1960s and beyond)

In 1998, the city of Decatur placed an **historical marker** in front of the Ebster Recreation Center recognizing that "The Beacon Community was the center of Decatur's African American community until its demolition by the Urban Renewal programs of the mid-1960s. **Bounded by N. McDonough Street on the east, W. Trinity Place on the north, Water Street on the west and Howard Avenue to the south,** the area included a tight-knit residential community, schools and churches in addition to numerous African -American owned businesses. Atlanta Avenue once connected Trinity Place West (formerly Herring Street) and Howard Avenue and was the center of the African American business district."[177] Decatur High School, DeKalb County Courthouse, the Decatur Square gazebo, the Maloof Building, Adair Park, and Ebster Park now stand where the Beacon Hill neighborhood formerly thrived.

By 1960, planning had started for a **second urban renewal program** in Decatur. A clipping from a city newsletter in the 1960s promoted "Decatur's New Look" and described the changes happening in the "old" downtown area. In 1964, the Decatur Housing Authority (DHA) purchased the Beacon Hill community in order to transform it into a thriving commercial district for Decatur.[178] The Urban Renewal program **stretched across approximately 100 acres**, replacing residences to allow the expansion of Decatur High School, a new 10-story DeKalb County courthouse, and

[175] Ibid., p. 48
[176] Ibid, pp. 42-47
[177] https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=29260
[178] Vertical file. Oakhurst Baptist library. City flyer or newsletter. Mid 1960s

additional public housing. According to an article at the time, "**Razing of residences to carry out the Urban Renewal program necessarily meant the evacuation of some families in the Beacon Hill section."**[179] Displaced Beacon Hill residents were taken on "**relocation tours**" around DeKalb County as part of these plans.[180]

Consequently, this program of urban renewal would push out Beacon Hill residents to the Swanton Heights housing project or the previously segregated and largely white area that was Oakhurst. As Black residents migrated to the Oakhurst area, white flight ensued along with businesses like Colonial Food Grocery Store and Scottish Rite Hospital who abandoned the neighborhood. The new demographic of homebuyers in Oakhurst became increasingly Black in the early 1970s.

By 1970, the Decatur Housing Authority became the largest property owner of Southwest Decatur. Eventually, Decatur entered into a state of deterioration as homes throughout Decatur were said to have been abandoned "for a variety of reasons" without acknowledging the causes—the forced removal of the downtown Beacon Hill Black population, disinvestment in Black residences and businesses by local banks, and mixing of the population in previously segregated areas. In light of this, Decatur sought to revive its economy and vision for itself through the Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program created by the federal government for neighborhoods in disarray. This program, administered by the Decatur Housing Authority, sold 113 homes for one dollar each and provided forgivable loans to repair vacant and foreclosed homes and spur reinvestment in the distressed neighborhood. From 1975 to 1982, 113 homes were sold in Decatur through this program.[181]

A movement for fair and equitable housing was a part of the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This mass movement not only worked to tear down the brutal system of apartheid segregation in the South but also made demands on the whole system for equity and human rights. Since the 1966 open housing marches in Chicago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s name, for example, had been closely associated with fair housing legislation.[182] While in Memphis supporting striking sanitation workers, Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. There was a national outpouring of grief and anger. His funeral in Atlanta on April 9th was attended by 200,000 mourners.[183]

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[179] Vertical file. Oakhurst Baptist library. City flyer or newsletter. Mid 1960s
[180] https://www.decaturga.com/community/page/end
[181]https://www.decaturga.com/sites/default/files/fileattachments/planning_and_zoning/page/7403/oakhurst_for_everyone_-_community_transformation_plan.pdf
[182] https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/aboutfheo/history
[183] https://www.nps.gov/malu/april-4th-a-day-of-remembrance.htm

On April 11th, 1968, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 as a follow-up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The 1968 Act expanded on previous acts and "prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, sex, (and as amended) handicap and family status. Title VIII is also known as the **Fair Housing Act (of 1968).**" In memory of Dr. King, Johnson wished to have the Act passed prior to his funeral. In the aftermath of the assassination, rebellions rose up in cities across the country. Without debate, the Senate followed the House in its passage of the Act, which President Johnson then signed into law.[184]

Another factor influencing this reform by the system was the growing casualty list in the Vietnam War which fell heaviest on Black and other servicemen of color. It was no coincidence that Dr. King was in opposition to this war and connected the dots between what was happening and its effect on people here. The bombs there, he said, "explode at home."[185] **These men's families could not purchase or rent homes in certain residential developments on account of their race or national origin.[186]**

Decatur was not unique to communities and neighborhoods across the U.S. in the **practice of redlining**, "a discriminatory practice that consists of the systematic denial of services such as mortgages, insurance loans, and other financial services to residents of certain areas, based on their race or ethnicity."[187] By 1975, a huge national movement of neighborhood groups had won congressional approval of the **Home Mortgage Disclosure Act,** which required banks to tell where they made home loans. When release of these numbers was not enough to end redlining, more pressure had to be applied on the government. In 1977, the movement won approval of the **Community Reinvestment Act,** which for the first time said banks and savings and loans have "an affirmative obligation" to serve all segments of their communities.[188]

Here in Decatur and DeKalb County, a broad coalition was built from the bottom up against redlining and for fair housing practices. This movement used research, legal strategies, and organized pressure. Investigative journalists used zip codes to document the Black neighborhoods where deposits were being made from and the white neighborhoods where that same money was given out in the form of loans and mortgages. There was a significant **transfer of wealth** from Black to white neighborhoods with bank lenders determining where the money would go. Any

[184] https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/aboutfheo/history
[185] https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/martin-luther-king-jr-vietnam/552521/
[186] https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/aboutfheo/history
[187] https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/redlining
[188] http://powerreporting.com/color/4a.html

individual could ask to see bank statements about their lending practices and file challenges for their license renewal based on the law.

In a 1989 Pulitzer Prize winning series by investigative reporter Bill Dedman, *"The Color of Money,"* the Atlanta Journal Constitution **called redlining "an economic war waged on [B]lack communities."**[189] Because of the pressure built from below by organizations like Metro Fair Housing, the South DeKalb Coalition, and neighborhood associations, Decatur Federal Savings and Loan Associations and other local banks were held accountable for their lending practices.

Established in 1926,[190] **Decatur Federal was one of the largest mortgage lenders in the area at the time.**[191] The leadership of Decatur Federal was also **politically connected** with James Robin Harris, for example, representing DeKalb County in the Georgia legislature (1963-1970; 1973-1974), managing Democrat George Busbee's successful campaigns for Georgia governor (1974; 1978), and working as executive director of the committee to revise the 1945 state constitution before becoming vice-president and chief executive of Decatur Federal (1974-1984).[192] In the city, there was an **overlapping, centralized power structure, where real estate development influenced by Decatur Federal dovetailed with policy decisions made by city leaders.** As we have seen repeatedly on this land, the lives and homes of individuals and families in established communities of color were affected, even dismantled, by the **decisions of a white elite power structure,** often made behind closed doors.

Decatur Federal would become the first mortgage lender to be indicted and charged by the federal government. It was charged with a "broad pattern" of discriminatory housing practices as they refused to lend money to Black home buyers from the period of 1988 to 1992.[193] **This case became the model for a nationwide probe into "redlining."** The approach the Justice Department used was to carefully review the lender's "marketing and advertising activities and branch locations, as well as its record of offering government-insured loans that are designed for low- and moderate-income home buyers."[194] **The Justice Department accused Decatur Federal "of systematic racial bias" saying it "repeatedly has favored" whites**

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[189] http://powerreporting.com/color/64.html

[190] http://www.bankencyclopedia.com/Decatur-Federal-Savings-and-Loan-Association-29684-Decatur-Georgia.html

[191] Conversation with Marty Collier, former Director of Metro Fair Housing, June 20, 2023

[192] https://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/harris661/

[193] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1992/09/18/atlanta-lender-settles-charges-in-first-us-redlining-suit/c506775d-6d57-46b5-b19a-6dae8653fa70/

[194] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1992/09/18/atlanta-lender-settles-charges-in-first-us-redlining-suit/c506775d-6d57-46b5-b19a-6dae8653fa70/

over Blacks in home loans.[195] The Justice Department found that the savings and loan "rejected Black applicants for mortgage loans at almost three times the rate it rejected white applicants." Founded in 1927, it had put "42 of its 43 loan offices in predominantly white neighborhoods and since 1988, has made 95 percent of its loans in those neighborhoods."[196]

"This should dispel any argument that patterns of lending are not an indication of lending discrimination," said Deborah Goldberg, acting director of the Center for Community Change, which assists low-income and minority groups on housing issues. "This is a wake-up call to every banker in the country." As part of the settlement, **Decatur Federal agreed to "provide $1 million in payments to Blacks whose home mortgage applications were rejected from January 1988 to May 1992."** Decatur officials also signed a consent decree and agreed to "a wide range of remedial measures, including retraining its lending personnel to ensure they treat Black applicants fairly; targeting sales calls to real estate agents and builders active in [B]lack neighborhoods; giving pay incentives to executives who sign up minority and low-income borrowers; and setting up an office in predominantly Black south Fulton County."[197]

In addition to urban renewal, the construction of the MARTA east line also directly impacted the Beacon Hill community. **Another reform that was passed due to pressure from the Black Freedom Movement was the passage by President Lyndon Johnson of the Urban Mass Transit Act in 1964.** The new measure provided $375 million in capital assistance over three years.[198] The **Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1970 added to the 1964 Act** by authorizing an additional $12 billion of the same type of matching funds.[199] Federal transit funding money was now being used to support the building of local transit systems.

In 1972, MARTA purchased the Atlanta Transit System and took control of the area's bus transportation. Construction began on a rapid rail system in 1975[200] and in 1979 the East Line opened. The Decatur station was one of the first stops to be completed.[201] The addition of the MARTA subway line to Decatur resulted in increased public transportation options in the city at the same time as it accentuated existing

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[195] https://www.justice.gov/crt/housing-and-civil-enforcement-cases-documents-287
[196] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1992/09/18/atlanta-lender-settles-charges-in-first-us-redlining-suit/c506775d-6d57-46b5-b19a-6dae8653fa70/
[197] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1992/09/18/atlanta-lender-settles-charges-in-first-us-redlining-suit/c506775d-6d57-46b5-b19a-6dae8653fa70/
[198] https://www.transit.dot.gov/about/brief-history-mass-transit
[199] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_Mass_Transportation_Act_of_1970
[200] https://dlg.usg.edu/record/geh_stupich_31
[201] https://www.decaturnext.com/timeline/marta-station-opens/

disparities and **magnified the segregating and disenfranchising impacts of urban renewal plans.**

This occurrence was chosen for a national case study on impacts of public transit projects, commissioned by the US Department of Transportation, published in 1977. The study explains that the pathway for the subway line dictated which properties and people were most affected. The MARTA line was originally proposed to follow the rail line right-of-way along Dekalb Ave/College St., which would have required less demolition and tunneling. **"However, the City Commissioners of Decatur saw the rapid transit line as an opportunity for revitalizing downtown Decatur.** They therefore asked to have the line diverge from the railroad alignment and go through Decatur's business district."[202]

This meant **the subway line passed through neighborhoods, including the Beacon Hill neighborhood on the west side of the square,** and the several blocks of institutional buildings plus a few blocks of older, Victorian style homes on the east side, along Sycamore Drive. Many of the houses on the west side that would be destroyed for the project were already "slated to be razed anyhow, for Phase III of the Decatur Housing Authority's Urban Renewal Program."[203] The study noted two differing ways of viewing the intersection of these concurrent programs:

> "The fact that MARTA construction is going on in an area that is temporarily uninhabited (because of urban renewal) is keeping the disruption down. Rather than there being two different disturbances (first the urban renewal and then the tunnel construction) there is only one. As we noted in the Final Report of Phase I, this kind of coordination of plans lessens construction impacts (op.cit., p. 151). Of course, there is another way of looking at the coordination of urban renewal and MARTA construction: **urban renewal appears to be removing [B]lack residents from one of the few pockets of [B]lacks north of the railroad and the MARTA construction is an additional factor in this demographic change**. As a result of the coordination between the Housing Authority and MARTA, few [B]lacks will be left north of W. Howard Streets. Ebster Park and Pool, two islands of [B]lack activity in a white neighborhood, will be removed and **de facto segregation restored to Decatur.** Nevertheless, coordination of different construction activities does result in a significant lessening of social, environmental and economic disruptions for Decatur as a whole."[204]

[202] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.28
[203] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.29
[204] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.38

This is another iteration of a familiar story. **Power and economic progress are protected, centered and enhanced, while residents far from power end up incurring the most cost.** In addition to the impact from removal, which the study explains it underestimates due to the fact that most of the residents affected had already moved away, there was **a disproportionately greater impact from construction on those remaining Decatur residents** that were most vulnerable due to low income, disability, or age (both children and older adults). There are many examples of this.

One example is **Gateway Manor, a public housing project** for lower income elderly, predominantly Black residents. As normal access to the street was obstructed due to the construction, residents began using a pathway down an embankment, and soon carved steps in the slope. The steps were useful, but slippery and quickly eroding. Residents (and the Public Relations office of MARTA) sought to have wooden steps put in, at a cost of $800. "The steps were first carved out of the mud in July; it took until the middle of December to install the permanent stairs."[205]

This **stands in contrast** with two projects on the east side of the city along Sycamore. A vocal group of residents in that neighborhood achieved several concessions, including the noise reducing decision to augur, rather than drive pilings. "This change in plans, recommended by the resident engineer, imposed an additional cost on the project of approximately $40,000."[206] On another occasion, a telephone pole was installed that was objectionable to nearby residents. After complaining strenuously to MARTA, the condominium owners succeeded in having the pole removed in about a week's time.

Additional examples of impact on the city's most vulnerable include essentials like **health and food.** The Decatur Health Clinic was a county-run clinic that served low income and elderly residents. During MARTA line construction, the bus line was rerouted, access was impeded, and **attendance at the clinic dropped, as much as 50% in one clinic.** "Many of the clinic's low income clients have been required to take taxis instead of the bus to arrive at appointments, which has placed a financial burden on this group."[207]

Finally, **a tale of two grocery stores,** both about two blocks north of the construction, reveals differential disruption. At one store, the clientele "consists predominantly of [B]lack persons who live in the southern portion of town. They had difficulty in getting

[205] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.43
[206] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.83
[207] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.80

to the store when Church Street was **closed and remained closed** for much longer than had been anticipated. Often, these former patrons would shop at another supermarket rather than face a difficult detour to this market."[208] A nearby store was not similarly affected, because "its clientele consists mainly of whites who live in the northern part of town and do not have to cope with the construction activity in reaching the store."[209]

The study concludes by explaining that, just as the advantage of moving the subway station to downtown Decatur was predicted, **the impact on communities of color and vulnerable communities could also likely have been predicted and prevented.** "That is, downtown merchants and city officials determined that the subway station downtown would help "revitalize" Decatur; it was this prediction that led to the actual alignment used…[Ebster] pool serves primarily low income black children who live to the east of Atlanta Avenue. **Thus, the MARTA construction placed a barrier between the pool and its primary users**…**It seems clear that this impact, although not the precise degree of it, could have been predicted."**[210]

With the opening of the new Decatur station, the **Downtown Redevelopment Task Force** was formed and began work in 1980.[211] Business, real estate developers, and government worked together to bring their vision of downtown to reality. Despite the City's history of land dispossession and racist urban renewal, the task force claimed: "The underlying theme throughout is to maintain the **tradition of humanity and warmth that has been Decatur's from the beginning of the town in the 1820s**, the kind of small town in which people can walk downtown to shop and do business in an atmosphere of intimacy and friendliness, while at the same time providing for **economic revitalization and expansion**."

By the time of the 1996 Olympics and the early 2000s, Decatur would experience rapid increase in its economy due to increasing interest in the city.[212] But for white leaders of the city of Decatur, Beacon Hill was a place that could now be memorialized with pamphlets and plaques. "Decatur's African-American community faced the destruction of their homes and businesses with strength and resilience. **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."[213]

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[208] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.78-79
[209] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.79
[210] https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/11690/dot_11690_DS1.pdf? p.93
[211] https://www.decaturnext.com/timeline/redevelopment-task-force /
[212] https://decaturish.com/2017/04/the-man-who-created-decatur-louis-pichulik-remembered-as-a-visionary/
[213] https://www.visitdecaturgeorgia.com/community/page/end

With this hollow language, the voices of Beacon Hill residents and business owners concerning their forced displacement are not heard. The loss of cultural focal points and the destruction of their Black economic base is absent. The impact of **losing a cohesive community** where neighbors helped each other daily and watched each other's children, is not accounted for. The assumption is that replacing the unilateral removal of Black residents from a place that for decades they called home with "noble" words like "strength" and "resilience" is sufficient for addressing this phenomenon.[214] **What isn't addressed is whether Black residents voted with the city for this new plan of urban renewal. What isn't addressed is the effect this removal had on Beacon Hill residents and their descendants' lives.** What isn't addressed is the irony that the blighted area targeted by urban renewal happened to be where the Black community solidified its roots in Decatur.

In the article, "**Root Shock:** The consequences of African American dispossession," Mindy Thompston Fullilove says, **"urban renewal programs fell disproportionately on African American communities, leading to the slogan 'Urban renewal is Negro removal.'** The short-term consequences were dire, including loss of money, loss of social organization, and **psychological trauma**. The long-term consequences flow from the social paralysis of dispossession, most important, a collapse of political action."

What were the material effects of urban renewal? According to the 2020 US Census, nearly 70% of Decatur's residents were White (non-Hispanic), more than four times as many as any other race or ethnicity. Yet while the Black population in Decatur has dwindled, Black poverty has increased at almost a 2% rate each year from 2013 to 2020, leading to 52.9% of Decatur's Black residents living below the poverty line. **Blacks are more likely to live below the poverty line than to have livable income that can provide for their family in Decatur.** In comparison, 21.5% of white residents lived below the poverty line as of 2020.[215] These low-income Black residents are largely concentrated in Decatur Housing Authority apartment complexes, the majority of which are still located on the land originally subject to "urban renewal."[216]

Though Urban Renewal proposes to clear blighted areas for redevelopment, the stark disparities in racial and economic data suggests that **urban renewal continues to mean means Black removal.** The Oakhurst neighborhood that was once a center of Black Beacon Hill residents and others displaced by urban renewal efforts in the

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[214] https://www.visitdecaturgeorgia.com/community/page/end Mindy Thompson Fullilove

[215]https://datausa.io/profile/geo/decatur-ga?race-income-income_geo=incomeRace2&sexAgeRacePoverty=raceOption#poverty_and_diversity

[216]https://www.decaturga.com/sites/default/files/fileattachments/planning_and_zoning/page/8015/chapter2.pdf

1960s has since experienced a major racial shift driven by economic disparities, changing from 80% Black in 1990 to 70% white in 2015.[217] **The majority of these remaining Black households do not benefit from the rising economic tide in Decatur,** with Oakhurst's Black median household income just $52,731 in 2020, compared to the white median household income of $157,854 in the same period.[218]

Considering the program of urban renewal in the 1960s in relation to the Beacon Hill community, Beacon Hill residents' displacement to housing authority apartment complexes or migration to previously segregated neighborhoods like Oakhurst, wholesale demographic shifts, and the ever shrinking income for Black households the data suggest that Black Decaturites have suffered from urban renewal in terms that have crippled their economic futures in Decatur. Overall, it reveals an ambivalence by Decatur to reckon with the effects of urban renewal on the lived experiences of Beacon Hill residents of the past, shielding white interests in a vibrant commercial district that come into conflict with Black interests, livelihood, and presence from critique.

In April 2023, **displaced Beacon Hill elder, Jack Pitts,** reflected in an oral history interview on what happened to the community he once called home. "We had our own stores. We had our own dry cleaners. We had our own services we could use. I remember Tom Steel's cafe that was right across from Thankful Baptist Church. I come home now and the whites have moved into these neighborhoods and took the houses that were torn down and built it up. **Now, they're saying, "This is a great community!" It was a great community before they came, you know? They just didn't define it that way because they were the ones making the definitions.** You know, you didn't paint it over with paint and all of a sudden it's a beautiful painting. It was a beautiful painting before you got there. It just changed ownership."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1.) Looking at the city of Decatur's version of their history, what stories are missing from their narrative? Who is put at the center of their story? https://www.decaturga.com/community/page/historic-decatur

2.) What do you see happening today that is consistent and connected with this history? In particular, who makes the decisions about how land is developed?

[217] https://www.decaturga.com/sites/default/files/fileattachments/planning_and_zoning/page/7403/oakhurst_for_everyone_-_community_transformation_plan.pdf
[218] https://datausa.io/profile/geo/decatur-ga?race-income-income_geo=incomeRace1

3.) The first wave of urban renewal gave ammunition to the second wave. City leaders determined that Black people in Decatur were non-essential and must be moved to improve the city. How can the city now develop a comprehensive strategy to compensate Black people who were displaced during this historic and continued gentrification?

4.) Home ownership is a wealth producing asset. What economic compensation would be necessary to enable both displaced Beacon Hill residents and current Black residents to acquire a home?

5.) Natsu Saito who recently retired from Georgia State Law School as a distinguished professor with a background in international law and Indigenous and human rights has written: *“When the wrong is foundational - an intrinsic, indeed organic, part of the establishment of a state - the redress the state will be willing to provide is necessarily limited to that which will not fundamentally disrupt the status quo.”* How do we build movements for reparative justice and reparations in Decatur that do not reinforce the status quo but rather imagine a new future based on different values?

6.) The city’s motto, of "A city of homes, schools, and places of worship," will ‘land’ differently with different people. How did it land for you when you first heard it? Does its meaning change for you after reading this history?

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