

## **Reviving South Decatur Through Urban Homesteading**

**By David S. Rotenstein, Ph.D.**

Oakhurst is a trendy Decatur neighborhood in the city's southwest quadrant. Its thriving business district and residential streets lined with Craftsman-influenced bungalows, period revival homes, New South cottages, postwar vernacular small houses, and a growing number of newer McMansions conceal a period in the community's history when Oakhurst was known as South Decatur. In the 1970s, South Decatur was rapidly sliding into blight. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was the single-largest owner of residential properties in the neighborhood. HUD's inventory of abandoned and foreclosed homes threatened the entire community's stability.

Decatur was a small city with big city problems and in 1974 it became one

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of 23 cities nationwide selected to be part of what the federal government dubbed the Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program. The program was authorized in the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974; landmark legislation that also introduced Community Development Block Grants.

Then-Senator Joseph Biden, who introduced the legislation in 1973, described it as an effort to address the “need for safe, decent and sanitary housing in our core urban areas.” Urban homesteading was a program designed to return vacant and abandoned homes to private homeownership and “provide moneys to families or individuals exhibiting traits of independence and willingness to rebuild.”

Shortly after President Gerald Ford signed the new law, Decatur filed an application to become an urban homesteading city. “Decatur is characterized as a city of homes, generally older and well-tended,” wrote the city in its application. “However, for a variety of reasons, some properties within the City have been abandoned. The presence of these vacated properties scattered throughout a neighborhood creates a general aura of deterioration.”

By the time the urban homesteading legislation was enacted, HUD owned about 200 South Decatur homes in about a 0.90-square-mile area. Under the new program, titles to those homes were transferred to the Decatur Housing Authority. Paul Pierce was the DHA deputy director in the 1970s; he later headed the agency before his 2012 retirement. “Obviously when you had a significant problem with vacant foreclosed houses, there wasn’t anybody lining up to buy them or to do anything with them,” Pierce explained in an oral history interview that will be among more than two dozen archived at the DeKalb History Center.

Using strict application criteria that considered income and personal factors, the DHA held lotteries to select program finalists. “We literally had what we called a fishbowl, a large glass container,” Pierce recalled. “And so all the eligible names

would be put in that glass container and we’d literally publicly draw however many names it was that we felt we needed based upon the houses that we had at the time.”

Ida Fudge was a young African American mother living in Southwest Atlanta when she was notified by mail that she had been a winner. “I had a date to meet with the Housing Authority person,” she recalled in a 2012 interview. “And I met with him and he drove me around to each house and I was allowed to choose which one I wanted at that point.”

Lottery winners could tour the available properties on a DHA-chartered bus tour or they could view them independently. “But everybody would get together and we had a tour schedule laid out and we had about fifteen or twenty minutes per house. It varied depending upon how many houses were in the tour,” said Pierce.

Fudge, like the other urban homesteaders, was able to pick from a pool of homes that fit her needs, i.e., number of bedrooms. She thought the one-story Maxwell Street home she picked and subsequently lived in for more than 30 years was perfect. “I fell in love with this house from the time I saw it,” she recalled as we spoke in her dining room.

The formerly vacant house was in disrepair. One of the program’s objectives was to provide low-interest loans to the urban homesteaders to rehabilitate the homes and bring them into code compliance. “It was rough. It looked pretty bad when I first saw it. But at that point, it was going to be mine and I didn’t care what it looked like,” said Fudge. “Yes, it was pretty bad when I first walked in and saw it. But it had this huge backyard and my parents’ house I lived in, they had a huge backyard and it sort of reminded me of home. And after staying at an apartment for seven years.”

Educators Phil and Maria Coventry were living in a rented Decatur house when they learned about the urban homesteading



### URBAN HOMESTEAD PROGRAM

From June 7, 1979 through June 27, 1979, the HOUSING AUTHORITY OF THE CITY OF DECATUR, GEORGIA, is accepting applications for the URBAN HOMESTEAD PROGRAM. Interested persons contact the Authority at Room 300, First National Bank Building, Decatur, Georgia, or telephone (404) 377-0421. An Equal Housing Opportunity



*An Urban Homesteading home before and after rehabilitation. Photo courtesy of the Decatur Housing Authority. On the right, an Urban Homesteading program ad published in the Atlanta Daily World, June 10, 1979.*

# Through Urban Homesteading (cont.)

program. “We were number fifteen in the choices,” recalled Maria Coventry. The Coventrys ultimately did get their first choice — a one-story Kings Highway bungalow — because others ahead of them dropped out of the program. “But the reason that we chose this house, the other houses were bigger. And they were in a better area,” said Maria.

The street’s trees and ethnic diversity were key factors in the Coventrys decision. When the Coventrys bought their home in 1978, the neighborhood was still mostly African American. “The turnaround was beginning. It was a transitional area,” explained Phil Coventry. “It seemed to be successfully integrating and so that was one of the factors.”

The Coventrys and Fudge were among the 113 urban homesteaders who bought dollar homes between 1975 and 1982. Although intended to spur reinvestment throughout the urban homesteading neighborhood, revitalization didn’t begin until more than a decade after the housing program ended. In 1979 the City of Decatur re-branded all of its southwest quadrant “Oakhurst” for the short-lived town of the same name annexed in 1915. “While only a part of the trade area traditionally has been known as Oakhurst, the planners recommend that the name Oakhurst now be considered synonymous with that of southwest Decatur,” wrote the City’s planning consultants in a 1979 report.

Public-private ventures, partly funded by CDBG monies, to improve the business district’s streetscape and create a South Decatur Community Center in the Old Scottish Rite Hospital didn’t begin yielding results until the 1990s. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Oakhurst was experiencing a building boom and many of the small homes from the urban homesteading program were again recycled — into landfills — as they were torn down to accommodate large new homes for families attracted to Oakhurst by Decatur’s schools and the neighborhood’s hip reputation. ✦

*Images top to bottom:  
An Urban Homesteading home under rehabilitation in 1978. Photo courtesy of Phil and Maria Coventry.*

*The former Urban Homesteading home in 2012. Photo by author.*

*Decatur Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program area. Map by author.*

