

DECATUR'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

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Elizabeth Wilson has lived in Decatur for most of her life. The Decatur she remembers sometimes is at odds with the city portrayed in the official historical record: published books and other documents that discount and distort the city's African American contributions to Decatur's development. As Decatur's first African American mayor and a key participant in the city's civil rights history, she recalls a city torn apart by urban renewal and divided by discrimination.



Elizabeth Wilson stands in front of the remaining portion of the old Herring Street School.
Photo by David S. Rotenstein

In Wilson's Decatur, African Americans lived in wood shotgun shacks, duplexes, apartments, and cottages in a segregated part of the city's northwest quadrant. City garbage trucks rolled through the neighborhood to the municipal trash incinerator which was sandwiched between the backyards of single-family residences and the "City of Decatur Colored School."

Like many urban African American neighborhoods, Decatur's was centered in a low-lying area on the city's periphery. Blacks lived, worked, learned, played, and worshipped in the community known first as the "Bottom" and, later, the Beacon Community. Located southwest of the DeKalb County Courthouse, the City declared the area a slum and urban renewal began in 1938; it was expanded again in the 1960s; and, it is continuing in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

One afternoon in February 2012, I interviewed Wilson as she took me on a tour of Decatur's former African American community. "We are going over to the Beacon community where I used to live," she said as we pulled out of her Decatur driveway. "I moved there in 1949."

We drove around visiting the sites she considers most significant in Decatur's African American history. As Wilson drove, I asked questions and recorded our conversation. Elizabeth Wilson had recently turned 80. She and her family came to Decatur from rural Greensboro when she was a teenager. She recalls arriving in the city in the family's truck. Their first encounter with official Decatur came when their truck was stopped for going the wrong way in the one-way streets around the county courthouse square. A night in jail wasn't in the original moving plans.

Her family was bound for Decatur's new African American public housing. Built in the early 1940s in the core of the African American neighborhood, the Allen Wilson Terrace Homes were among the earliest public housing efforts in the United States. Inside this area were the homes owned and rented by Decatur's blacks. These people were construction workers, barbers and hairstylists, and storekeepers. They also cleaned white Decatur residents' homes and raised generations of white Decatur residents' children.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the neighborhood had no formal name. "I've always known it as the Beacon Community," said Wilson. "Even though there are people who don't seem to think that it was always called that."

Wilson's first home in Decatur was in the 300 block of Herring Street. Like many Atlanta area road networks, segments of streets inside African American neighborhoods had different names from other segments in white neighborhoods. In Decatur, once the color line was crossed, Herring Street became Trinity Place.

Wilson explained how folks knew they were crossing from the white part of town into the African American neighborhood. "It was pretty obvious," she said. "Houses dictated it. Streets dictated it."

The people, like Wilson, who lived in Decatur's public housing were envied by their neighbors living in the surrounding black community. "I used to think, personally, that the kids that lived in the project was rich," explained Bobby Pierce, a Decatur native who was raised inside the Bottom. "They had indoor hot and cold running water and a bathroom. I didn't have that. We didn't have that." I had interviewed Pierce, Wilson, and more than two dozen others as part of a research project on housing history in South Decatur.



Sylvia Clark's painting of Decatur's African American community is called "The Bottom."
Photo by David S. Rotenstein

During our tour, Wilson underscored Pierce's observation: "Whatever their homes were, however other people saw them, it was their home and they was doing the best they could do."

Choice oftentimes wasn't a factor in where Decatur's African Americans lived or even how long they lived in one place. Deed restrictions and Jim Crow laws created the contours for

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Decatur's black community's geography and public policy was made far from Atlanta Avenue and Herring Street. "We knew we was living in a slum so and we found out we had to move," recalled Pierce, whose family was displaced in the 1960s. "They made decisions at City Hall that we had to get out of there."

As we drove through modern gated subdivisions that were built where African American homes and businesses once were located, Wilson amplified what Pierce had said in an earlier interview:

I think back in those days that the way the decision-making people saw it is the only way we could fix the problem is we have to demolish the existing structures and build new structures ... That was not anywhere, it seems to me, in the thinking of keeping the town diverse or caring about how many people are displaced because of this.

And, Wilson added,

But the landscape really did a good job of erasing all of this... But again, I think in the minds of people who moved out of the community, especially the homeowners, if they moved back, this is what they thought they would be moving back into.



This is an undated photo of the Herring Street School.

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Wilson

Life in Decatur's African American neighborhood was all about segregation's externalities. Mostly these externalities were social costs imposed on the people who lived there. One externality remains raw in Wilson's memory: the municipal trash incinerator's location. "The city dump used to be on part of where this building is," Wilson said as she pointed towards the Park Trace Apartments. "Every day the city trucks would come and they'd call it the crematory and they burned stuff and it was in the back yard, almost the complete back yard of where people lived on Elizabeth Street and Robin Street."

Other externalities were benefits. One was the tight-knit business community and a network of churches and the African American school:

We all lived here and it just seems to me, everybody strived to sort of have the American dream, homes and good education and you know, just sort of the things that everybody else wanted. You know, safe community for the kids to play in ...

We all went to the same churches. You know, you had the Baptist church and the Methodist church and sometimes we would end up going with somebody to their church and especially if they had some social activity ...

The church, without a doubt, the church was the gathering place. So we didn't have a lot of places, like the social places. We always had the church and we had the school. The school was central for us, too. And we would have functions that, you know, we would invite people to come.



Trinity High School and Beacon Elementary School were the schools that replaced the Herring Street School in the 1950s.

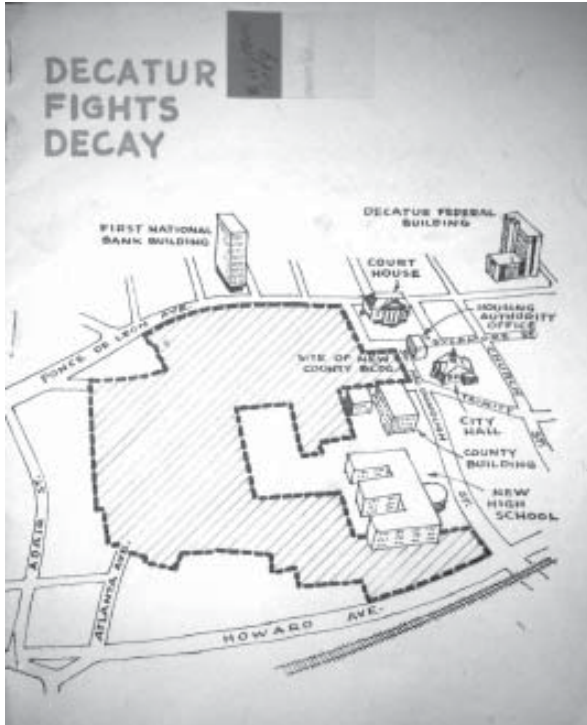
Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Wilson

Decatur's segregated school system put African American children in the Herring Street School, a brick elementary school at the intersection of Herring and Atlanta streets. The old school was replaced in the 1950s by a pair of equalization schools: an elementary school (Beacon) and a high school (Trinity). The 1950s schools and a few churches are the only surviving architectural ties to Decatur's historically black community.

As urban renewal progressed in the 1960s, the area to the west was an established white neighborhood. Wilson recalls an encounter with a young white boy who was moving into the area on the Beacon Community's margins. "Now this, all of this, was the white area," she said. "As a matter of fact, I remember before they built that, this little boy talked about how they was getting rid of N.....town here."*

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Urban renewal tore the community's fabric and scattered its residents to other parts of Decatur and beyond. The neighborhood that Decatur's African Americans called home was called a blighted slum — "Decatur's chief eye-sore" — by city leaders for much of the twentieth century. "This area has unpaved alleys, substandard housing and demands more in police and fire protection than it returns in taxes," wrote the City in a 1960s booklet titled *Decatur Fights Decay*.



"Decatur Fights Decay" is a booklet published by the City of Decatur. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Wilson

Despite her intimacy with the landscape developed over more than half a century of attachment, Wilson struggles in places to connect what exists today to the buildings and spaces she vividly remembers. Throughout our tour, she repeatedly points to places where streets abruptly end in walls and fences. "This street is



The City of Decatur erected a historical marker that describes the Beacon Community in front of the former Trinity High School. Photo by David S. Rotenstein

Atlanta Avenue. It used to go all the way through and I'm going to come around and show you sort of how they chopped it up," she said as we approached Hibernia Avenue, the location of a relocated African American church.



Trinity Presbyterian Church was once located in this building across the street from the apartments that Elizabeth Wilson occupied in the 1960s. Photo by David S. Rotenstein

As Wilson and I spoke about her old neighborhood, the conversation veered towards how Decatur's African American history is preserved — in buildings and landscapes and in the written record. In our earlier interviews she had shared with me narratives written by various government agencies and newspapers that in her opinion failed to capture the true social, economic, and physical characteristics of Decatur's African American community. "I don't think we tell it because I don't think we know it," she said. "We know bits and pieces but I don't think we've ever had anybody to actually do any research or like the interviewing the families who lived here." ■

* The direct quotation from the oral history interview was edited for the publication of this article.



Beacon Elementary School and the City of Decatur received a Historic Preservation Fund grant through the Historic Preservation Division in 2010 that funded a conditions assessment by Rutledge Alcock Architects.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque