

**Petition of Dr. David Rotenstein
to the
Decatur City Commission**

February 4, 2013

Good evening. For the record, my name is David Rotenstein and I live in the City of Atlanta. I lived in Oakhurst between September 2011 and July 2012 and I am here this evening as a concerned citizen who also happens to be a professional historian and former Decatur resident.

My objective this evening is to request that the Decatur City Commission do three things:

1. Immediately stop all work leading to the partial demolition of the former Beacon and Trinity schools site, a landmark civil rights-era African American heritage property, until such time that its historical significance is fully evaluated and all stakeholders have had a fair opportunity to discuss the property's future.
2. Apologize to the citizens of Decatur, and especially to Decatur's African American citizens, for producing a comprehensive historic resource survey and historic context that fully disenfranchised African Americans. Nowhere in the document were Decatur's African American citizens, past and present, mentioned. Decatur's black history sites like the former Beacon and Trinity property, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Lilly Hill Baptist Church, Allen Wilson Terrace, and the entire remaining cultural landscape in the area known as the Bottom and Beacon are likewise absent from the city's official comprehensive historic preservation planning document.
3. Enact a one-year moratorium on the demolition of residential properties in the Oakhurst neighborhood to provide the city with an opportunity to evaluate the economic, psychological, and sociological costs tear-downs and mansionization are having on some of Decatur's most vulnerable citizens: the elderly African American homeowners living there. This moratorium will also provide the City with an opportunity to undertake a credible and defensible historic resources survey of Oakhurst to better understand the long-term environmental externalities in a neighborhood that historian Dr. Darlene Roth described in work done for the City in the 1980s as the city's most historically significant residential neighborhood.

Briefly, a little bit about myself. I have worked in public history and historic preservation for nearly 30 years. I have an undergraduate degree in anthropology from Georgia State University and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in Folklore and Folklife with a concentration in vernacular architectural history and material culture. My credentials exceed the Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualifications Standards in History, Architectural History, and Archeology.¹

¹ The Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualifications Standards were published in the Federal Register, 48 FR 44716, *et. seq.* I have worked as a historian with the National Park Service and consulting firms. I have taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Carnegie Mellon University, and Montgomery College. I also taught an environmental

Decatur is systematically erasing all evidence of its African American history. In 1940, slum clearance dislocated the first wave of African Americans from their homes, businesses, and churches. A second wave of urban renewal continued the process in the 1960s. Some of the people who were dislocated in the 1960s became Oakhurst's first African American homeowners who now have personal histories of one or more episodes of involuntary relocation. Added to those traumatic memories, now, are the dislocations spawned by gentrification. These stories from the past inform the present and could have provided the City with an opportunity to plan for the future to live up to the image of diversity, sustainability, and livability in which the City has so heavily invested. One of your respected clergy members described it perfectly in an interview we did last October as we were discussing the impacts of gentrification and Oakhurst's teardowns: "We're interested in being the city where everyone wants to live" rather than pursuing genuine economic, ethnic, and age diversity.

Decatur's historic preservation planning policies reflect class and racial biases that are evident in other parts of the community. The publication of a monochromatic historic preservation planning document is but one symptom of larger social ills. It underscores how a neighborhood and city government can turn a blind eye and deaf ear to citizens who have what Columbia University urban renewal expert Mindy Fullilove describes as *root shock*, and who through gentrification are caught in a cycle of *serial displacement*.

Dr. Fullilove read some of my blog posts on Oakhurst and she wrote in a December 2012 email, "The processes that you are describing are brutal, and what's worse, repetitive." She added, "The effects on community are massive, as it creates a synergistic downward spiral of ruptured networks and unleashed dysfunction."

I am simply a historian with a very strong background in historic preservation and urban history. My portfolio, however, extends well beyond the study of old buildings and documents and my observations about gentrification's social costs — externalities — to all of Decatur are replicable.

Last year I interviewed a former Beacon Community resident who described the terror in which she and her family and their neighbors lived as the City of Decatur deconstructed their neighborhood in the 1960s. They watched as houses all around theirs were demolished and familiar people and landscapes disappeared, all while she and her family unsuccessfully tried to improve their housing to stave off relocation. It was a traumatic process that took years to complete. This woman subsequently moved to unincorporated DeKalb County but her memories

regulatory compliance class for the National Preservation Institute and my work is archived in the Library of Congress and has been published in peer-reviewed journals, state and regional encyclopedias, and in many regulatory technical reports prepared for government agencies and private-sector clients.

Prior to returning to Georgia in 2011 I served two full terms on the Montgomery County, Maryland, Historic Preservation Commission and was its chairman for the last year of my second term. I also served as the county's sworn expert in historic preservation before other bodies and I was appointed by the Montgomery County Planning Board as a historic preservation expert to an advisory panel revising Montgomery County's zoning code.

best encapsulate what current Oakhurst residents have told me about involuntary relocation from the Beacon Community and the current conditions in Oakhurst:

But it wasn't just overnight. This thing lasted for a while. Like I said, I worked like crazy trying to bring my house up and there was some in better shape and that was okay but we were comfortable and we tried to maintain the outside and the inside. So it was just one of those things.

Former mayor Elizabeth Wilson, who lives in Oakhurst, compared the twenty-first century gentrification she sees taking place around her to the urban renewal she witnessed in the 1960s. I did several interviews with Ms. Wilson between November 2011 and April 2012 and we had many conversations in between the recorded sessions. In one of those unrecorded talks, she explicitly said the contemporary development in Oakhurst felt like urban renewal. In a subsequent recorded interview, I asked her to explain. She replied,

Yeah, without the government funding. This is not government funding, what's happening in here. This is a developer, private, who can afford to buy up these properties and then build.

Old buildings are but one part of historic preservation. As the field has matured, those of us who work in it have recognized that people, communities, intangible culture, and the environment are critical parts of our work. That's why the local knowledge of people who live in old buildings plays such an important role in framing our understanding of where they live and what their built and natural environments mean to them. In its historic preservation planning and long-range community planning, Decatur has failed to apply lessons learned in other communities around the nation where urban renewal was an important part of peoples' lives and in the community's history.

This petition for your consideration is accompanied by a report prepared by Dr. Thomas King. While in Washington last week, I took the opportunity to retain the services of Dr. King. He was born in Decatur and is a leading expert in historic preservation policy. Dr. King worked with the National Park Service developing the historic resources survey guidelines cited in the City's 2009 survey and he has written widely on historic preservation regulatory compliance, including several books and National Park Service technical publications on the subject.

In his report, Dr. King described the 2009 Decatur survey: "as classic an example as I have recently seen of what has made historic preservation in this country a pointless, overly costly, elitist, and socially irresponsible activity." Dr. King, drawing on his family's history in Decatur and his professional expertise, wrote this:

Apparently no African-Americans have ever lived in Decatur, or if they have, they are invisible in its history. My family's lore tells of much-respected African-American women who took care of my elder siblings and me; I wonder where they came from.

Dr. King also wrote,

My older sister, who actually remembers Decatur in the late 1930s/early 1940s, tells me of a neighborhood in which African-American families were concentrated. I imagine this neighborhood lost its distinctive character – for better or worse – during the social changes of the mid-late 20th century, but I have to wonder where it was, what surviving properties might be associated with it, and what cultural significance they may retain for Decatur’s African-American residents – who I cannot believe do not exist, despite their total invisibility in the “Final Report.”

Dr. King concluded his review with this statement: “Historic preservation has sunk very low when this sort of report passes for a professional planning document.” Attached to this petition are Dr. King’s report and a copy of my May 2012 article on Decatur’s African American heritage resources published in the Georgia Historic Preservation Division’s *Reflections* newsletter. I am respectfully submitting these materials for your review. Thank you for your consideration this evening.

Attachments:

Attachment 1: Review of Decatur’s 2009 Citywide Historic Resources Survey Final Report by Dr. Thomas King, January 31, 2013

Attachment 2: Decatur’s African American Historic Landscape by Dr. David Rotenstein. *Reflections*, May 2012. Atlanta: Georgia Historic Preservation Division.

cc:

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