

No more regrets

Lucy Craft Laney Museum and Historic Augusta team up to help prevent the further deterioration of Augusta's historic black neighborhoods

BY ERIC JOHNSON

AUGUSTA, GA - At least 1011 Laney-Walker Blvd. has windows.

It doesn't have a door and it's got weeds growing out of its front steps and its porch ceiling is puckered and sagging, but it has windows, and that's more than you can say about its neighbor.

When you drive by the home, it's just another house. Just one more example of a neighborhood that seems in so many ways to have been left behind.

Yet this house was once the home of the Rev. C.T. Walker, a black minister who, only a few decades after being granted the right to vote, preached sermons to presidents and financiers and was known throughout the world.

A man who, defending his race at Carnegie Hall, boldly proclaimed to a standing-room-only crowd that emancipation had not made him a man.

"God made us men long before men made us citizens," he said.

That was the kind of man Walker was, and though his house still has windows, its front door is boarded up tight. Augusta can honor him by building a school and naming it after him, but it can't quite find the willpower to do anything about his house.

1011 Laney-Walker Blvd. isn't the only historic property to suffer such an undignified fate, which is why Historic Augusta and the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History are teaming up to hold a unique conference to address the preservation problem in the Laney-Walker neighborhood.

"We sit and we look at it and we watch it deteriorate, and all of a sudden then we want to jump up in arms," says Corey Rogers, historian at the Lucy Craft Laney Museum. "So let's go ahead and nip it in the bud from the get-go. That's the whole point of starting a conference like this."

Though he's talking about saving brick and mortar structures - the posts and beams of black history in Augusta - what he's really talking about is something much more personal. He's talking about regret, that punctuating emotion, that sad period beyond which nothing more can ever be said or done.

If you worry, you can make changes so those worries don't come true. Same thing with fear. These are constructive emotions that can influence your behavior.

What follows regret are resignation and despair and the stomach-churning understanding that there is nothing now that you can do.

That's the feeling many Augustans had in 1978 when the Lenox Theater, a regional treasure of black entertainment that had fallen into disrepair, was finally torn down by the city.

Rogers has heard the regret in the voices of older Augustans who now wish they had been more proactive in saving the former theater.

Historian James Carter III says the theater, built in 1921 and designed by Geoffrey Lloyd Preacher, the same architect who built the Imperial and Modjeska theaters that served white audiences, was a fabulous example of black achievement and a source of community pride.

“Not like those box theaters you have now,” he says. “That was a showplace.”

A showplace, he adds, that should still be around as a tangible reminder of the craftsmanship and theatrical history of that bygone age.

“A lot of cities preserve their theaters,” he says, “but Augusta didn’t. We lost it.”

Besides the loss of the Lenox, many Augustans mourn the undignified fate that befell the home of novelist Frank Yerby, which languished on Eighth Street before it was donated and moved to Paine College, where it deteriorated to the point it had to be dismantled and unceremoniously rebuilt.

Though Paine called the major renovations a “stunning success,” Carter vehemently disagrees.

“There’s a new house there now,” he says. “The old house was destroyed because it was allowed to sit there and rot for years.”

During the segregation era when the races lived largely separate lives, the Laney-Walker area was a regional draw for black Americans, a thriving, vibrant community with world-renowned ministers like Walker, prominent educators like Lucy Craft Laney and other influential black leaders like T. W. Josey and W. S. Hornsby, all concentrated and flourishing in this one relatively small area.

A Harlemaesque Renaissance right here in Augusta.

“You’re looking at a solid 110 years of church history, cultural history and educational history,” Rogers says of this post-slavery, pre-integration time.

That’s 110 years of concentrated history that, like 1011 Laney-Walker Blvd., is in jeopardy of being lost forever, and Rogers is well aware of the danger.

“It goes to the narrative that we’re trying to sculpt around many of the iconic figures in Augusta history,” he says. “These people were national power players, but if you ask most Augustans, they could never tell you.”

That’s one of the burdens of history. Despite the big canvas, it comes down to the same issues we all deal with on a family level. In this case, the issue is saving the stories that go with the places, those accepted truths that are so easily taken for granted and so quickly lost as the generations before us recede.

As with our own families, we don’t always recognize what’s extraordinary because it’s part of our day-to-day reality. Without the outside perspective, we can sometimes miss what’s right under our noses.

“Oftentimes, we take things for granted until they’re gone and then we regret that we didn’t save them,” Rogers says. “We’re hoping that with this conference we can alleviate the regrets. We don’t want any regrets.”

The story of the Lenox Theater isn’t unique in Augusta. The black community in particular has lost several properties to neglect and decay.

Why are they gone? A lack of interest in the history and the structures, Carter says. A lack of funding. A lack of empowerment within the community. The continued battle to get people to realize the importance of these sites.

Admittedly, some of these hurdles can be cleared by education and through the incentives and know how offered by Historic Augusta. But when it comes to the green river of cash that serves to keep restoration efforts alive, the riverbed these days is wide, deep and dry.

“It’s almost at a standstill,” Carter says of this flow of money. “The economy has halted all sorts of things.”

He rattles off a list of companies that could usually be relied on to supply grant money or philanthropic contributions.

“You write them now and they’ll tell you in a minute that they’ve got 28,000 people out of work and don’t have any money,” he says.

Which makes preserving structures within Augusta particularly difficult, he says, because preservationists end up butting up against the legacy of the city itself, both its size and makeup.

“We don’t have the resources of an Atlanta, where somebody will come in and write a million dollar check,” Carter says. “We have millionaires, but they don’t do that.”

Architect Richard Dozier knows Augusta and appreciates the richness of its black history. A quarter century ago, he came through Augusta with the Georgia Historic Preservation Office in order to develop a methodology for identifying African-American historical sites in the state.

He says Augusta is unique in ways both ethereal and substantial.

“For one thing, the people were big and important, but when you looked around Augusta, there was a lot of physical evidence, too,” Dozier says.

Now the dean of the Robert R. Taylor School of Architecture at Tuskegee University, he sees preservation as a way of making the history stored in books and museums and between the ears of people like him not only accessible but relevant.

“It’s hard to convince the people who don’t believe it that great things happened if you don’t have buildings,” he says.

And while he admits progress is necessary in order for any society to move forward, he says neglecting to preserve parts of the past weakens the foundation of whatever progress might occur.

If you don’t preserve — if you simply replace — you not only lose the history and that touchstone to your heritage, you often get something in its place that is less than what was originally there. That’s not just dogma being spouted from the Ivory Tower set, he says.

That’s a bottom-line reality.

“Preservation can be costly,” he says, “but it pays much larger dividends in the long run.”

“When you go to Harvard and you stand in that quad, there’s no question that they’ve been around for a while,” he says. “Half of the job they want to tell you about why you should come there is already done.”

Harvard is one thing, but why should anyone invest in the Laney-Walker neighborhood? If no one, including the government, can be bothered with preserving 1011 Laney-Walker Blvd., why should someone come in and dump a bunch of money into the house, even such a notable house, when the one next door doesn't even have windows?

Despite a long history of binding together to help finance important causes or projects through love offerings instigated by the churches, Carter laments the shoulder-shrugging he sees in the community today.

“There are a lot of people that don't have a sense of history at all,” he says. “They could care less about history. They only care about the day-to-day: How am I going to eat today? How am I going to pay bills today?”

Certainly, there are economic forces at work in Laney-Walker, most notably the \$37.5 million Laney-Walker and Bethlehem Neighborhood Action Plan, which proponents hope will help push redevelopment. But redevelopment and preservation do not always walk hand in hand, and the conference, called This Place Matters: Preserving Augusta's African American Communities, is trying to corral those who aren't familiar with preservation issues.

In spite of recent reports that jazz notable Wycliffe Gordon is rehabilitating a home on Pine Street, Rogers realizes this is a group that might prove tough to attract.

“A success might be if 20 or 25 percent of our audience were novice newcomers who were interested in preservation for the first time,” he says. “As this continues to grow, hopefully we can get more and more newcomers and sort of convert them to our way of thinking, so to speak.”

He hopes the caliber of the speakers can do the trick.

“This conference and the people we're bringing in - these uber-professionals like Jeanne Cyriaque who really know what they're talking about - maybe they can convince people that it's not an individual effort. Sometimes, it's a cultural effort and, when communities come together, we can work with different strategies.”

Cyriaque, who will give the keynote speech at Thankful Baptist Church, is the African-American programs coordinator for the Historic Preservation Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. She is a heavy hitter in the world of preservation and an expert in neighborhood preservation issues within the black community

Though an independent program, the conference, which will occur Oct. 22 and 23, is an offshoot of Historic Augusta's efforts to preserve Augusta's historic fabric.

Every fall, Historic Augusta's Historic Preservation Committee comes out with its Endangered Properties List that highlights those properties they consider in the most immediate need of attention. A number of them have been in the Laney-Walker neighborhood, where preservation has its own set of challenges.

“Although there's a lot of activity going on in that neighborhood, there's not a lot of neighborhood preservation,” says Historic Augusta's Executive Director Erick Montgomery.

“We thought that perhaps it would be a good idea as an outreach for the Historic Properties Committee if we had some kind of event that appealed to the residents and property owners in the Laney-Walker community.”

Christine Miller-Betts, executive director of the Lucy Craft Laney Museum and chair of the committee, understands how tenuous preservation in general can be. Add in the community issues and economic uncertainty of an area like Laney-Walker and it can be especially difficult.

“After we started to identify these endangered properties, we thought that we really should follow up on them, and one of the things that is missing is a lack of awareness in the community itself about the importance of preservation,” she says. “We thought it would be a very good thing to introduce the community to the importance of preservation.”

Although this fall’s conference, which includes a bus tour of African-American sites and a picnic on the lawn of Old Trinity CME Church, is focused on the Laney-Walker neighborhood, Rogers echoes Miller-Betts’ hope that the project is the beginning of a larger, legacy-type program.

“The Laney-Walker neighborhood may be the neighborhood we target this time around, but Harrisburg may be the next neighborhood, or Olde Town,” he says. “We want to make this ongoing.”

The conference will pair the outside experts like Cyriaque with the resources of Historic Augusta and the cultural knowledge of museum staff to create a program specifically tailored to the black community.

“The idea here is to try to focus on the Laney-Walker neighborhood so we can make those connections and try to bring about a partnership with individuals in the community - with Historic Augusta, the Laney-Walker museum and with anyone else that might partner and bring about the preservation of these resources,” Montgomery says.

Miller-Betts is enthusiastic about exposing the community to the expertise Historic Augusta has to offer.

“There are many resources that are available that Historic Augusta can lead [these local investors] to,” she says. “Sometimes we in the community know that those kinds of things are there, but we are not aware of how to go about getting them. Historic Augusta has a lot of resources available to them.”

Historic Augusta periodically conducts a workshop called Preservation for Profit, and Montgomery says all those principals will work in any neighborhood, Laney-Walker included.

“If we could make sure that some aspect of the information is given out here, then maybe we could go back and apply that on a case-by-case basis and, down the road, hopefully we’ll see some more preservation in the residential structures as well as the large landmark buildings,” he says.

Surprisingly, the profit motive can be one of preservation’s selling points, Rogers says.

“I often look at preservation from a financial standpoint,” he says. “When people come to your community, they want to see historic homes and structures, and they’re willing to shell out their money to see them. Tourism and cultural history are one of the biggest money makers in the state of Georgia.”

Taking careful steps now to preserve Augusta’s historic flavor will prove profitable in the future, he says, but time is running out for 1011 Laney-Walker Blvd. and for many of the other structures.

“My sincere hope is that we start taking ownership of our history,” Rogers says. Carter is more blunt.

“You wouldn’t dare think about tearing down Mt. Vernon, or Monticello or the Hermitage,” he says. “You keep that. That’s your history. You don’t fool around with icons.”