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The *Tangible* *Past* in Athens, Georgia



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The Tangible Past in Athens, Georgia

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Even before recorded time these “high lands” drew the presence of humans. The State Normal School’s “Kissing Rocks,” named for the courting couples who frequented them, have been identified as a Late Mississippian (approximately 800 AD to 1500 AD) Native American “boulder cache,” which yielded pottery pieces, a pipe bowl and charred human bone fragments - a sacred place.

Pete McCommons, “Vanished Prince Avenue”

On May 10, 1793 a few recent arrivals on the Oconee River at the Cedar Shoals — where an ancient Cherokee and Creek trail crossed the waterway and where Athens and the University of Georgia would soon rise — petitioned Gov. Edward Telfair to build a blockhouse “for the preservation of this settlement.” Athenians have come together ever since to ensure this goal. One might say that this very volume, *The Tangible Past in Athens, Georgia*, is another effort on the part of our citizens to tell the story of the preservation of that settlement. Over 200 years after its beginning, our outpost in the “salubrious climate of the Piedmont” has grown from some hardy adventurers near the then-western boundary of the United States, “on Indian lands,” into a diverse and appealing city approaching a population of 125,000, known nationally and beyond for its vibrancy, erudition and good living.

During his Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf in 1867, naturalist John Muir passed through Athens. In this Scotsman’s diary, he called Athens “a remarkably beautiful and aristocratic town, containing many classic and magnificent mansions . . . Unmistakable marks of culture and refinement, as well as wealth, were everywhere apparent. This is the most beautiful town I have seen on the journey, so far, and the only one in the South that I would like to revisit.” *The Tangible Past* attempts to tell part of the story of how we got from that fledgling settlement without its first fort to a city of such stature.

From the Introduction

Although this book is largely concerned with the built environment, without people there would be no buildings. Therefore, lots of families are included in these pages. The flush times that enabled nineteen-year-old Howell Cobb to build a mansion for his bride at the top of Pope Street ran headlong into the Panic of 1837. Idyllic days were numbered for the newlywed Howell Cobbs here. Howell Cobb had co-signed notes for his own father – so many that in order to do the honorable thing and pay the creditors, the house and its contents had to be put up for auction. It must have been at this point that Howell Cobb learned what his wife was made of. A big white house was not important to Mary Ann Lamar Cobb. Only her husband, her family, her children, and her friends were.

Milton Leathers,
“Twenty-five Cobb Family Houses in Athens”

One really shouldn’t move a house – that is, unless it’s in danger of being lost. I really have a problem with folks buying up great houses and moving them when it destroys the neighborhood or takes away something that is historic to the area. My houses have pretty much been orphans, and I’ve either found them a new family or moved them to The Hill – my own orphanage here in Athens, Georgia. There is a mighty important part that needs to go along with the house, and that’s its story.

Lee Epting, “The Hill”

Athens has been recreating itself ever since receiving its ancient name when John Milledge bought the 633 acres from Daniel Easley for the home of the University of Georgia. Immediately Easley received a contract to start building and changing the face of the land. Almost 200 years later, as the twentieth century was giving way to the twenty-first, Thomas and Pulaski streets, the streets that have historically flanked the east and west ends of downtown Athens, were undergoing yet another metamorphosis. The sun will continue to rise and set on handsome buildings symbolizing the energy and strength

of a town that was born alongside a center of learning and which has evolved and flowered with its *raison d’être*.

Charlotte Thomas Marshall,
“The Bookends of Downtown:”

People now consider the ridge west of the University a defining part of “Old Athens.” But that was not the case in the 1820s. It was fundamentally an uncharted hillside west of the small, struggling campus. The trustees set aside thirty-six and one-half acres of John Milledge’s six hundred-thirty-three acre gift for the first state chartered university in the nation. The rest of the tract they proposed to divide into lots and sell to support it, but they had not touched the land west in 1820.



As I sit in the dormer, looking out my window at the tree [Tree That Owns Itself], it is fitting that I finish my survey where I started, at this old intersection. Welcome to those who will come after us, may you delve further and add more to this history. So we leave the next hill west in John Milledge’s purchase, after seeing how it developed over many decades. The people who have lived here have shaped our town and the University of Georgia. Let us remember those people and what they built on the hillside.

Hubert H. McAlexander,
“The Next Hill in the Milledge Purchase”

The Tangible Past in Athens, Georgia is a chorus of thirteen writers and researchers enabled and supported by the artistry and skill of Kenneth I. Storey. It is rich in every way and human throughout. We have different mindsets, different bodies of knowledge, different strengths, and a deep love for Athens and its history.

Charlotte Thomas Marshall, Editor

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