

REGION

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Preserving a past, securing a future

Sites in Anniston, Jacksonville seen as having contemporary value

BY KATIE TURPEN

kturpen@annistonstar.com

People used to call it the "Queen of Anniston." Now, it looks almost out of place.

The brick mansion once owned by Thomas Kilby — mayor of Anniston a century ago and the only Annistonian to serve as governor — now stands in the shadow of Anniston High School's massive white buildings.

Rose Munford uses the partially restored house to run a fine arts program for Anniston schoolchildren, but she says local residents could get a lot more use out of it.

"Proms, concerts, receptions. What a grand place it would be," Munford said. "It would make a pristine welcome center. What better place than the home of the only governor Anniston ever had."

Munford isn't the only person in Calhoun County who believes the area could get more use out of its oldest, and most historic buildings. In downtown Anniston, homeowners and merchants are buying and restoring some of the city's oldest and finest houses. In Jacksonville, there's an effort to preserve the cotton mill village that was once the city's economic heart.

For would-be preservationists, the clock is always ticking. Left untouched for too long, historic buildings can fall into such disrepair that even a city government can't — or won't — save them. It's already happened to the Anniston Land Company building, a prominent feature of early Anniston that was demolished in 2012. And at the former Fort McClellan, where 93 old buildings were razed in 2009 after more than a decade of disuse.

"Once history is gone, it's gone," said Kelly Walz, a resident of the Profile Mill Village in Jacksonville.

In the forefront

For Munford, there's no better local example of the uses of historic buildings than the Kilby House.

"This is one piece of property that would carry some weight if the whole community came on board and said we're going to save Governor Kilby's mansion and make it a public use facility," Munford said.

The Anniston Board of Education took over the building in the 1960s. While the surrounding homes were moved to accommodate the high school, "The Queen of Anniston" remained because of its connection to the former governor.

The high school currently only uses the downstairs portion as an alternative school classroom. The school maintains the interior but Munford said further restoration efforts are necessary. She wants the building to be clearly marked and dreams the house will eventually be used by the entire community in a multitude of ways.

Munford's fine arts program was originally housed in a dim hallway inside the high school, which was not conducive to a creative learning environment. She thinks moving the program to the historic home was a step in the right direction. The program teaches violin, piano, visual art, sewing, yoga and ballet.

"Having the fine arts program here keeps it in forefront," Munford said. "It is a way to educate, motivate, inspire, to preserve this home and to be a teaching tool."

In 2010, David Christian of Christian & Associates Architects estimated that the renovation costs of the home would be \$1,244,025. Three years later, it's possible that number is even higher. Munford believes restoration is doable if she is able to get the community on board.

"I've been trying to get help since day one," Munford said. "Once it is restored, the house would pay for itself."

A working-class legacy

If saving the homes of rich-and-famous historical figures is hard, preserving the legacy of working-class Calhoun Countians might be even harder.

In Jacksonville, residents are raising money to buy a historical marker to recognize the Profile Mill Village, the still-occupied



Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

Opened in May 1927, what was then known as the Liles Building was recognized as the tallest building in northeast Alabama, containing more than 100 offices and several shops. In 2005, the Anniston Water Works and Sewer Board bought the building and eventually sold it to Watermark Tower LLC in 2010.

section of Jacksonville built to house workers at the old Profile Cotton Mill. Both the neighborhood and the mill itself have been a focus of preservation efforts by descendants of mill workers, as well as relative newcomers to the mill village.

Some residents believe that as Jacksonville moves the elementary school and city hall away from the center of town, economic development will take precedence over historical preservation and community cohesiveness.

"The purpose is to have a true community here," said Joseph Munster, member of the Profile Mill Neighborhood Association. "We want people to know that great things are happening here. I would love to have 10 new families move in here."

Munster says the neighborhood has a variety of residents. He and his wife recently moved in. Others are long-time residents, such as Diane Rollins, a third-generation resident who remembers her father buying his house from the mill.

She recalls fond memories as child such as gathering with family and friends in the neighborhood to make s'mores and wish the community could regain the closeness it once had.

"I've always loved old homes and the neighborhood is so unique," Rollins said. "It has great possibilities. I would love to see it prosper."

At the July 25 neighborhood association meeting, residents complained of neglected lawns, vacant houses, and poorly kept alleyways. Several residents also asked for more police surveillance. Resident Thomas Carpenter, who has lived in the neighborhood for 25 years, would love to see more sidewalks.

"I hope we can get people in here who really care about the neighborhood," Carpenter said.

The association plans to attend a Jacksonville City Council meeting in the near future to plead for better care of the neighborhood. Munster says there is no current historical preservation plan in place for the former village and that is why several

devoted residents are determined to save this community.

'We've already lost a lot'

The reality, historic preservation experts say, is that it's economically impossible to save everything. David Schneider, of Schneider Historic Preservation in Anniston, says the community has already experienced several losses, including the old Anniston city jail.

"We lost the old jail and Wells Fargo is about to come down," said Schneider, referring to the bank on Quintard. "The building is 40 years old. It could have lasted another 10."

Dianna Michaels, executive director of the Spirit of Anniston, warns community members that buildings in danger of disappearing often blend into our everyday surroundings.

"Technically everything is in immediate danger if we don't do something to create a policy that protects those entities," Michaels said. "Sadly, we've already lost a lot of the historical buildings that should have been fought for a long time ago."

Several buildings in the county are in danger of falling due to neglect. Two structures on Schneider's list of buildings to watch out for next are a second Kilby house in Anniston — the Oscar M. Kilby House — and the Allen-Weathers House in Oxford.

Built in 1926, the Oscar M. Kilby house was named for Gov. Kilby's son and was the center of the social scene in the 1930s and 1940s. The house is currently on the National Register of Historic Places

The Allen-Weathers house in Oxford was listed as one of the Alabama Historical Commission's Places in Peril in 2004 and today its fate continues to be uncertain. It was built in the mid-1830s and was once a prosperous plantation owned by Hudson Allen. A fire caused significant damage in 2002 but the Alabama Historical Commission, Alabama Preservation Alliance and the Heritage Conservation Network temporarily stabilized the building.

tion must begin early as possible to avoid any more losses for the Calhoun County community.

"We don't see them until it's too late," said Schneider.

'They are worth it.'

Dr. Carla Thomas has seen how preservation can work. The Anniston physician has an office at Noble Park on a rise overlooking Woodstock Avenue. Her office, the law office of her husband, Cleo, and a house of worship are in three of the four structures — formerly homes of prominent Annistonians — that stand in the middle of the park. People often come through to take a look, Thomas said.

"We get a lot of walkers and people walking their dogs," Carla Thomas said. "The trees are another point of interest. They are a lot of maintenance but they are worth it."

Noble Park is a national historic site that the founding fathers of Anniston, Samuel Noble and General Daniel Tyler, once called home. The park contains four structurally unique homes built in the city's heyday as an industrial center. One of them, Crowan Cottage, was the object of a flurry of preservation efforts a generation ago.

The only home not currently occupied is the Acker-Noble home, which is Thomas' current work in progress. She hopes to use sections of the home as exam rooms for her practice, while showcasing the house's unique architecture.

"I love the octagon room. The house also has a beautiful Gone with the Wind staircase," said Thomas. "It is the statement of the foyer. It goes up in a glorious 90-degree turn."

Thomas admits preserving the Acker-Noble home along with the others has been a challenge but she sees their structural beauty as a unique testament to the history of the city.

"The architecture is unusual. To see that many angles is really beautiful," Thomas said.

In order to complete her restoration efforts, Thomas needs both money and volunteers. She has become skilled in grant writ-

ing, a crucial part of the preservation process.

"I've written a lot of grants. You have to see what's out there for resources," said Thomas.

Michaels said she's thankful for preservation efforts that help revitalize downtown Anniston and the surrounding area.

"We are always looking for investors to restore buildings with their original historic properties," Michaels said.

The Spirit of Anniston's mission is to revitalize downtown using a four-pillared approach: economics, design, organization and promotion. Historical preservation touches on all of these components and is a key factor in the landscape of downtown Anniston.

"It allows us to look at some of our downtown buildings and see what we can do to rejuvenate them, revitalize them and most importantly save them," Michaels said.

In May, the Alabama legislature introduced historic rehabilitation tax credits for people looking to preserve historic properties. The credits are specifically for owners who are rehabilitating historic residential or commercial properties. The credits cover 25 percent of certain expenses and owners can also apply for national credits, which can cover as much as 20 percent of costs.

"You can actually piggyback these credits and get up to 45 percent of your money back," Michaels said.

Covered expenses include general repairs with the structure and interior of the property. Applications for these credits will be made available beginning Sept. 1.

'The cornerstone of downtown'

Anniston's tallest building, the Watermark Tower, stands at the heart of downtown on the corner of 10th and Noble Street. The iconic tower's story reveals preservation can happen even when the odds seem insurmountable.

Attorney Luther B. Liles built the tower in 1926-'27, and it was recognized as the tallest building in northeast Alabama, containing more than 100 offices and several shops. In 2003, a fire on the top floor damaged the building and led to the evacuation of all tenants. The building was temporarily a burned-out husk, haunting the Anniston skyline. In 2005, the Anniston Water Works and Sewer Board bought the building and eventually sold it to Watermark Tower LLC in 2010. Property manager James Lloyd and other local community members have successfully preserved the building.

Still, it's not fully occupied. The Anniston Water Works and Sewer Board resides on the first two floors and the rest of the tower is being renovated for future tenants. Spacious, modern apartments overlooking the Model City are in the building's plans.

"It's been a little slow," Lloyd said. "But we've got the bottom four floors full."

Lloyd hopes more residents decide to move into the tower even if they have to be patient while the apartments are renovated.

"It's at the cornerstone and main intersection of town," Lloyd said. "There are ample parking spaces all around the complex."

Michaels believes the tower is a beacon of hope for the revitalization of the downtown community and is thankful for the vision and efforts of Watermark Tower LLC. The building's story reveals how economic development and historical preservation can come together to benefit a city's downtown.

"We applaud the folks who saved the Watermark tower," Michaels said. "It would have completely changed the Anniston skyline."

Michaels believes that preserving important pieces from the past such as Noble Park and the Watermark Tower keep the legacy of Anniston alive.

"Without them a good part of our history is lost and so is a good part of our foundational core," Michaels said. "We're the Model City. This is who we are."