

ALABAMA TRUST for HISTORIC PRESERVATION

20 Alabama's Places In Peril 11

ALABAMA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

by Donna McPherson Castellano assisted by David B. Schneider

In observation of National Historic Preservation Month, the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation (ATHP) and the Alabama Historical Commission (AHC) announce Alabama's Places in Peril for 2011.

This year's Places in Peril illustrates the broad tapestry of history and is intended to remind all Alabamians that these historic places, which contribute so greatly to our sense of place and the livability and economic vitality of our communities, represent a finite and fragile resource. Included in this year's list are buildings and sites dating from the state's pioneer days, its period of antebellum prosperity, the Civil War, its New South resurgence, and the struggle for Civil Rights.

Since 1994, the AHC and the ATHP have joined forces to

sponsor Places in Peril. Over the years, the list has helped to call attention to the plight of endangered historic places throughout the state. Unfortunately, for many of these sites, all that remains are memories. But others have been rescued, as owners have recognized the great practical side to preserving the historic places that matter to us - the dollars and cents of revitalizing communities and returning to sustainable development patterns. Historic places are essential assets for downtown and neighborhood revitalization and for the state's growing heritage tourism industry. And in a world where environmental sustainability is becoming ever more critical, they represent one of the greenest approaches to providing places in which to live and work.

Powell School

Birmingham, Jefferson County

Seeking to attract new residents, Birmingham founder and Elyton Land Company president Colonel James R. Powell donated four blocks in 1873 to build Powell School, the city's first public school. The initial building was replaced in 1888 by the current structure. For over a century, thousands attended Powell School, also known as the "Free School."

The three-story red brick structure has a stone foundation and represents the Victorian Gothic style. The façade has three primary bays, which are divided into three bays separated vertically by pilasters and horizontally by brick courses.

Vacant since 2003, the school symbolizes the city's early business leaders' commitment to education. A January 2011



Powell School, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photos

fire destroyed the roof and most of the interior, leaving the building's future in doubt. The City of Birmingham has recently transferred ownership of the property to the ATHP with the intent that the ATHP will stabilize the structure and market it to new owners who will rehabilitate it in accordance with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards*.

More than a century ago, Colonel Powell described Birmingham as "The Magic City." Currently, political, business, and civic leaders are working to create a little magic so Birmingham can retain this important piece of its history. City Councilman Johnathan Austin commented, "We've really got to do our very best to save Powell."



Jemison-Turner House

Talladega County, ca. 1836



Jemison-Turner House, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photo

Born in Lincoln County, Georgia, Robert Jemison brought his family and slaves to Talladega County and began acquiring property in the rich bottom lands bordering the Chocolocco and Cheaha creeks. Joined in Alabama by six of his siblings, Jemison contributed to his family's great economic and political prominence.

According to Robert Gamble, senior architectural historian for the Alabama Historical Commission, the house is especially notable for its unusual split-level rear wing. A long balustrade upper gallery, deeply shaded by a wide, overhanging roof suggests the lower Mississippi more than an upland Alabama valley.

This split-level plan appears in one other house in the state, also located in Talladega County and constructed by a Jemison family member.

The Jemison House is deteriorating due to abandonment and lack of funds to restore it. The house offers a rare opportunity to restore one of our state's truly exceptional 19th century residences.

The Julian and Judy Holmes family recently donated the house to the AHTP who will stabilize and market it to new owners who will relocate and restore it.

Windham Construction Co. Office Building

Birmingham, Jefferson County, 1912



Windom Construction Co. Office, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photo

The Windham Construction Company Office Building is a remarkable reminder of a successful African-American business that flourished in a segregated society. The building was home to Windham Brothers Construction Company, a major black contractor that built some of the most significant buildings in Birmingham.

The company established a national reputation, and the Birmingham office was headquarters for offices in Nashville, Chicago, Indianapolis, and Detroit. In addition, Thomas Windham leased space to black-owned businesses making the building a retail and commercial hub in the black community.

Wallace Rayfield, Alabama's first formally trained architect, designed the building. The Windham Brothers and Rayfield collaborated on multiple projects, including the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the Alabama Penny Savings Bank, Alabama's first black-owned bank.

The building qualifies for a federal historic preservation tax credits. The structure is unoccupied and threatened by vandalism. Restoration of the building could help to revitalize the adjacent Smithfield neighborhood.

Elizabeth Presbyterian Church

Sumter County, 1858



Elizabeth Presbyterian Church, Sumter County, ATHP photo

A group of Sumter County residents established the Elizabeth Presbyterian Church in November 1838 about nine miles south of York. Elizabeth Knox donated the land where the first church was built, and it was named in her honor. The growing congregation replaced the original log structure in 1858 with a wooden frame, two-story building. Slaves were members of the Elizabeth Church and remained part of the congregation after they were freed.

Economic developments and demographic changes have been unkind to many of Alabama's rural areas. The descendents of those who settled these regions have moved to pursue opportunities elsewhere. Today, a congregation of less than five members owns the church. The church is threatened by neglect, as the congregation is unable to maintain it.

Bermuda Hill

Hale County, circa 1845



Bermuda Hill, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photo

Sitting on a hill overlooking the old Prairieville to Greensboro Road, the Bermuda Hill house is a product of an era when ambitious men believed the road to riches ran through fluffy rows of cotton. The prominent Manning family first owned the property. The Mannings were early settlers and planters in Prairieville and owned large land tracts in the original French grants of the Vine and Olive colony. In 1845, William W. Manning sold the land to William Weeden of Madison County. The home was built c. 1845, but it is unclear whether Manning or Weeden built the house.

Bermuda Hill reflects the refined taste and wealth of its early owners. The home is a significant example of a Canebrake plantation house based on the I-house form. The façade is dominated by a full height pedimented portico, supported by four paneled columns embellished with sawnwork brackets. The first floor boasts a double leaf entrance with full transom and sidelights located in the center of the five bay façade.

Bermuda Hill is threatened by neglect and deferred maintenance.

Old Gurley Town Hall

Gurley, Madison County, 1895

Located sixteen miles from Huntsville, Gurley was incorporated in 1890 and grew up around a water and coaling station that served the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. The Town Hall was listed on the National Register in 2004 as part of the Gurley Historic District.

Built as a hardware store, the building also housed a print shop, a lodge, the Crescent Theatre, and a school. It served as the town hall from 1965-1982.

While the building needs a new roof and the rear wall stabilized, the Gurley community stands ready to assist an owner develop a viable project. Located in the greater Huntsville-Madison metro area, one of the fastest growing regions in the nation, the Town Hall offers multiple opportunities for redevelopment.

Downtown Anniston Historic District

Anniston, Calhoun County, 1889-1965



Gurnee Avenue Streetscape, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photo

Historic resources dating from Anniston's heyday as the "Model City of the New South" through its turbulent Civil Rights era are threatened by a proposed federal courthouse project and the construction of a new municipal criminal justice center.

The courthouse project will require the demolition of sixteen buildings that contribute to the Downtown Anniston Historic District, including an intact streetscape along Gurnee Avenue that served as the backdrop for the initial attack on a Greyhound bus carrying Freedom Riders. Images of the bus when it was eventually fire bombed on the outskirts of town became one of the iconic images of the Civil Rights movement. The criminal justice center will require the demolition of six additional contributing building.

The effectiveness of local and federal historic preservation protection will be tested by both projects. The courthouse project is subject to a review through Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The justice center is located within a locally designated historic district. Preservationists hope to ensure the preservation of the significant Gurnee Street streetscape and the restoration of the Anniston City Land Company Building.



Old Gurley Town Hall, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photo

Avondale Mill Village

Sylacauga, Talladega County



Avondale Mill Village, Sylacauga, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photo

Associated with one of Alabama's most significant early 20th century textile operations, Mignon, the Avondale mill village in Sylacauga, is now representative of the demise of this once great industry. Located outside the city's limits, the village has suffered economic decline and disinvestment, and struggles to remain viable as a neighborhood. Avondale Mills was founded in 1897 by Braxton Bragg Comer. The company flourished under Comer's leadership and continued to expand after Comer was elected Governor of Alabama in 1906 and his sons assumed management.

Mignon was constructed in the mid-1910s and named after one of B.B. Comer's daughters. Typical of similar villages found throughout Alabama, the neighborhood provided affordable housing for the mill's "associates" in close proximity to their work. A strong sense of community was fostered among the residents. As the textile industry declined, conditions in the village declined as well. Now the village retains only vestiges of the design and character that defined it. While there is active interest among current and former residents in improving conditions in the neighborhood, broad-based community support and action are needed to address the many issues facing the village.

Boiling Springs Native American Sites

Calhoun County

Remnants of their aboriginal settlement of the Choccolocco Valley's Creek Indians are scattered throughout the Boiling Springs area of Calhoun County. Multiple documented archaeological sites provide invaluable insight into Native American life over the past 10,000 years.

The town of Oxford is struggling with the proper way to balance their desire for economic development and their responsibility to protect and preserve the cultural history of these early Native American inhabitants. To achieve this balance, there must be full compliance with applicable federal and state historic and cultural resources laws, coupled with good-faith consultations and negotiations with relevant Native American tribes.

Historic Movie Theatres

Statewide



Unidentified Theatre, Roanoke, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photo

In a day and time when most of us are familiar with fifty-inch flat screen televisions, home entertainment systems, and the ability to stream first-run movies into our living rooms, the days when Americans went to the movies more than once a week seem very distant. By the 1960s, many of the grand movie palaces had already succumbed to the wrecking ball and theatres of all sizes were trying desperately to hold on, often by remodeling for wider screens or, conversely, splitting up into twin or multiple screens. While many small town theatres continued to limp along through the 1970s and 1980s, the vast majority of Alabama's historic theatres had gone dark.

Few building types hold such broad appeal within their communities, as people of all walks of life fondly remember Saturday matinees, first dates, and all the fun they had at the movies. As a result, many communities, including Birmingham, Mobile, Decatur, Montgomery, Russellville, Talladega, Tuscaloosa, Winfield, and others, have found creative ways to save and repurpose their historic theatres. Yet there are many more historic theatres scattered across the state that are still awaiting restoration and an audience. We can still smell the popcorn!



Boiling Spring, on the Davis Farm, Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation photo