



2023 PLACES IN PERIL

D.M. Brasher Department Store and Brasher Hotel/ Carbon Hill, Walker County

Settled in 1886, the town of Carbon Hill incorporated in 1891. Reflective of its reliance on the railway, Main Street abuts a neighboring railroad line. The rail line was instrumental in the growth of the coal mining industry in the area. Colonel Robert Galloway made possible the early development of Carbon Hill. Galloway purchased mines and properties in Carbon Hill from the Kansas City Coal and Coke Company in 1890. Shortly thereafter, a post office and Methodist church were established, and the town continued to grow. The name of the town alludes to the dark coal found in the neighboring hills.

A tornado in 1917 and a subsequent fire in the early 1920s devastated and demolished several buildings on Main Street. The townspeople rebuilt their businesses along Main Street using materials from the aftermath of these terrible tragedies. The D.M. Brasher Department Store and Hotel building was constructed on the corner of Main Street and 3rd Street Northwest around 1917. The two-story brick commercial building housed two business storefronts along Main Street and multiple businesses along 3rd Street Northwest. The rear of the second floor housed the hotel. The front of the second story served as a restaurant that allowed staff access to the second story balcony that overlooked Main Street.

While the hotel rooms remain largely intact from the early 1920s, the buildings underwent changes as their functions changed from a department store and hotel to a furniture store, antique store, and event space. Interior walls have been opened and storefront windows modernized. Most of the windows and openings along the east wall are now enclosed. Drop ceiling tile has been added to some of the spaces. The space currently houses a quaint restaurant and retail space.

The current owners have replaced the roof and windows recently, but the building is still in need of plumbing repairs, lighting, and repairs to ceilings and walls. The building sustained damage from a tornado in 2020. The owners hope to rehabilitate the building for future generations and to welcome others by possibly opening a bed-and-breakfast.

Morgan-Curtis House/ 1815 Abbott Drive, Phenix City, Russell County

Atop a hill in Phenix City stands a Neo-Classical style, two-story residence constructed by Dr. David Elias Morgan in 1904. Dr. Morgan was born in 1864 in Monmouthshire, Wales and traveled to America as a young man. At a train stop in Columbus, Georgia, on the way to what he thought was his destination of New York City, he met his future wife Miss Minnie Alice McGehee whom he wed in 1890. Morgan abandoned his plans to move to New York, and instead he and his bride settled in Phenix City where he served as a practicing physician.

Dr. Morgan purchased salvaged materials from a partially burned 1840s home in Columbus, Georgia in 1904. He relocated the doors, windows, entrances, timber, and hardware to the town of Girard (now Phenix City). He constructed the residence in a center hall floor plan. The first story main façade features a central entrance flanked by two sets of windows on either side. A two-story porch wraps two of the façades. The porch is supported by rusticated concrete columnar posts that are two-stories in height. Seeing a need for space to treat patients, Dr. Morgan converted the second story of the residence into sanatorium patient rooms in 1914 and enclosed portions of the second story porch on one façade to serve as sunrooms for the sanatorium patients. Dr. Morgan treated a variety of illnesses and delivered children. When patients could not pay in monetary funds, he accepted a variety of payments including paintings and chickens. Several paintings he received are still hanging in the residence.

After Dr. Morgan died, ownership of the home passed to one of his daughters, Ruth Morgan Curtis, who served the town as a pharmacist. In 2000, the property was purchased with the intent to restore it. The house is currently vacant and suffers from vandalism and deferred maintenance. The interior has sustained significant water damage and critical repairs to the roof and windows are needed. The community is seeking ways to rally support and rehabilitate this property to ensure its unique history and architectural features remain for generations to come.

Dunbar High School/ Bessemer, Jefferson County

The City of Bessemer was founded in 1887 as a manufacturing center that rivaled neighboring city Birmingham as the top steel producer in the state. As a result, Bessemer grew rapidly as people moved for job opportunities in coal mining and manufacturing. Due to bustling growth, schools were established shortly after the city was founded. A church served as the earliest school for African Americans in the city in 1889. By 1891, the Bessemer Board of Education was established. Like other southern states, Alabama's African American schools struggled with lack of funding and systemic racism. The state ignored federal mandates requiring "separate but equal" schools for both black and white populations.

The Bessemer Colored High School began construction during this period in 1922. The school opened its doors in 1923 and served as the city's only Black high school until 1960. Acclaimed Alabama architect D.O. Whilldin designed the two-story classroom block with Classical Revival details. The building featured a brick foundation with brick walls and a flat roof. The front façade featured an entrance in the central bay flanked by two end pavilions that were constructed in advance of the main façade plane. The main entrance featured a porch with a shed roof with parapet supported by L-shaped pillars. The pavilions feature parapets with shallow peaks. The original configuration of the wood windows were six panes over six panes. The floor plan was typical of the period with classrooms on either side of a central hallway. A gym was also constructed in 1922, and an additional building built in the 1940s temporarily housed a lunchroom, band room, and shop facilities.

In 1928, the school's name changed in honor of Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Dunbar was a Black poet and novelist born in 1872 and was highly regarded for his representation of Black life during the turn-of-the century. Although the Dunbar School has been altered over the years, several original elements remain such as the unpainted brick and parapets. Alterations occurred from the 1930s, to the 1980s. By 1960, the school had transitioned from a high school to a primary school. It was decommissioned in the 1980s, and later became the Dunbar-Abrams Community Center.

Bessemer's only African American high school from its opening 1923 until 1960 has long been vacant. Due to extensive water damage, vandalism, and deferred maintenance, the roof system is failing, the masonry needs repointing, and the windows need to be repaired and replaced. Vegetation currently creeps along its facades. Community organizations seek to rehabilitate the former school building and are exploring ways to secure funding for this enormous task.

Sand Town Community/ Mobile, Mobile County

The Sand Town community is the oldest African American neighborhood in Mobile and one of the oldest African American communities developed in the United States. Established in 1845 by former enslaved persons and free people of color, the community was built on land deemed inhabitable by the city. Located west of I-65, the community currently occupies roughly 40 acres, a mere portion of its original size.

The original inhabitants constructed their own schools, churches, residences, and other buildings. At the conclusion of the Civil War, over half of free Blacks in Alabama called Sand Town home. Mt. Hebron Methodist Church was founded in 1874 and in 1875 the Rising Sons Cemetery was established behind the church. The church housed the Spring Hill School for Negro Children until the late 1940s. The cemetery is still extant today. Spring Hill College initiated the construction of a log cabin in 1937 that served as the St. Augustine Catholic Church for Colored Catholics in the area. The cabin stood until 1963, and salvaged windows and doors are evident in the current Mt. Hebron A.M.E. Zion Church.

The Sand Town community is a significant story of resilience. The descendants of those who worked tirelessly to establish this historically significant African American neighborhood continue to reside in the area. Although many of the community's original physical components have disappeared from the landscape, the community strongly desires to salvage and revitalize what remains, prohibit any unsympathetic development, and preserve its long history to ensure Sand Town and its stories and memories remain in the consciousness of generations to come.