

**Uncommon
Knowledge:** When
the Meadows
Became
Benjamin Van Clark

The City of Savannah
Department of Cultural Affairs/Leisure Services Bureau

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The impetus for this exhibition and catalogue stems from the City of Savannah's commitment to revitalize a once thriving community – the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood. By documenting its history, the City hopes to protect an important aspect of Savannah's heritage [figure 1]. Begun by an entrepreneur at the end of the nineteenth century and named

today for a civil rights activist, the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood faces a new cycle of growth and development in the twenty-first century. Prior to this time, the area was a swampland that was drained by a canal system. Even earlier, the area had a rich history. Wheaton Street began as an Indian trail that led out of town. In the twentieth century, the trail became a bustling business district for the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood.

INTRODUCTION

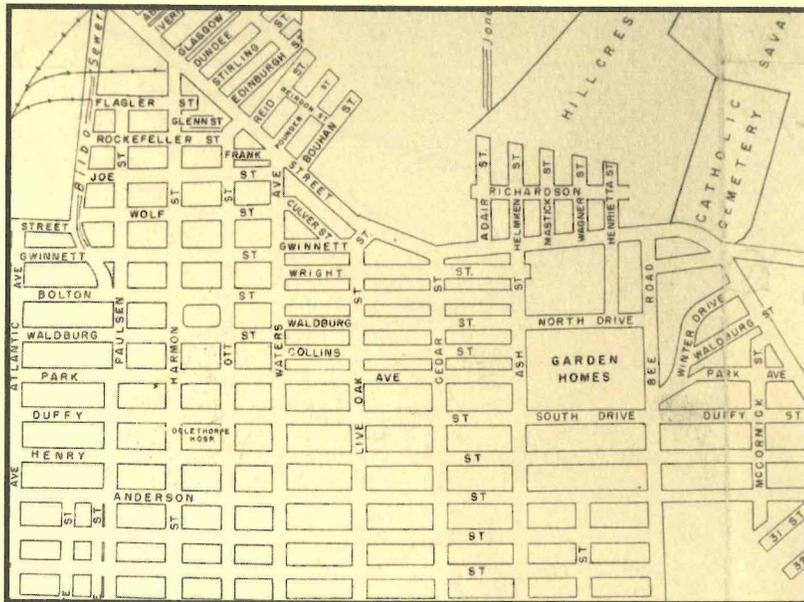


Figure 1, map of the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood

Wheaton Street forms the northern boundary of this area, which was once called the Live Oak Neighborhood. The Harry S. Truman Parkway, begun at the end of the twentieth-century, delineates the Neighborhood on the east. Harmon and Henry Streets form the western and southern boundaries respectively. Like any community within a city, the area has its own history that is both unique to its inhabitants and part of the universal story experienced by numerous neighborhoods across the country: early growth and prosperity followed by social changes that led to decline, prompting a renewal of vitality, economic investment and neighborhood pride in identity. What social forces impacted this area and what is the outlook for its future?

In Savannah, as in many cities around the country, the end of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of streetcar develop-

TRANSPORTATION

ment to uninhabited areas south of the historic district. Abandoning the traditional horse and buggy in favor of the new "electric railways" sparked the establishment of the area known today as the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood.

Ambitious entrepreneur Jacob S. Collins (1854-1925) was involved with numerous business ventures, including the Electric Railway Company/People's Line, of which he was head. This enterprise was one of the first to obtain a franchise operating electric railway service in Savannah in 1890. The tracks laid down Gwinnett and Bolton Streets linked this soon-to-be-developed area with the downtown [figure 2]. Advertisements for property and home construction boasted that the commute from the "suburb" of Collinsville, as the area was then called, to Broughton Street was just ten minutes via the streetcar.

Collins literally capitalized on his franchise with another venture; his real estate development business called the People's Investment Company. He



Figure 2. The streetcar ran through the yet-to-be-developed Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood

purchased a block on the north side of Duffy Street for \$4500 in order to build homes on speculation as well as rental properties. The Collins home, [figure 3] at 1010 E. Duffy Street, exemplified the grand Victorian style of the day. Some of these "painted ladies" were the homes of Collins' wealthy peers [figure 4] although the neighborhood also offered more modest dwellings for the working class [figure 5].

As the streetcar lines extended into new areas and more lines were added to residential areas, Collinsville continued to grow. In 1891, the Savannah Real Estate,

Loan and Building Company, with Collins as its president, auctioned off 1000 lots, with the average price at \$500. By 1900, the larger area included distinct subdivisions that were known as The Meadows and Eastville.

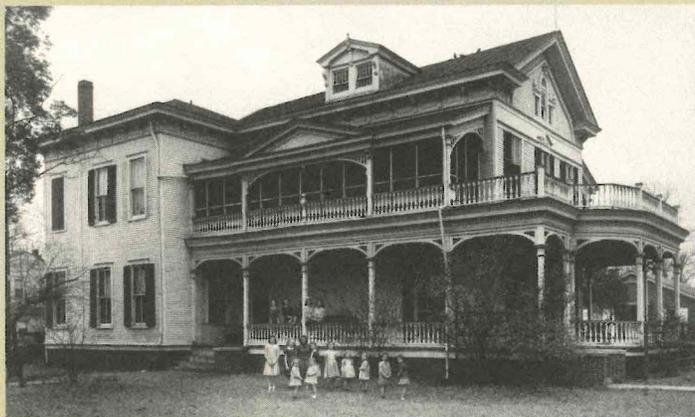


Figure 3. Jacob S. Collins' residence became the Episcopal Orphans' Home for Girls (no longer extant).

Eventually the streetcar became obsolete, just as the horse and buggy did before it. Automobiles spread residential growth further south of Savannah's downtown, while bus routes replaced the streetcar lines. With the opening of the Harry S. Truman Parkway in the twenty-first century, the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood continues to experience the influence of transportation.



Figure 4. This home at 924 E. Henry Street has been restored to its original beauty.

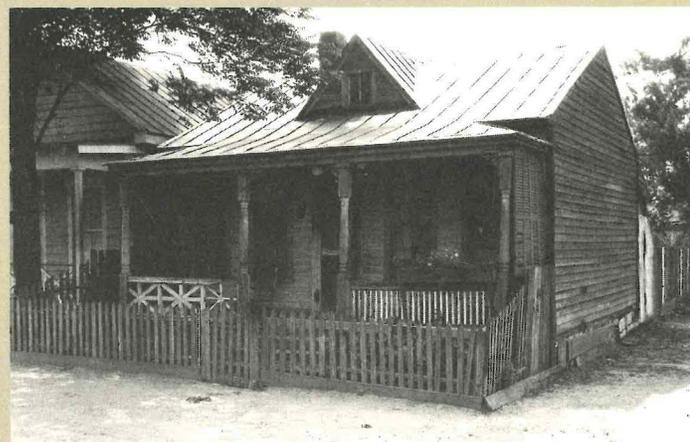


Figure 5. This residence would have been a typical home for a streetcar laborer.

As the Neighborhood developed, it attracted both wealthy entrepreneurs such as Collins and laborers laying down streetcar tracks; both African-American and white professionals, as well as entrepreneurs and immigrants.

DESEGREGATION

Within the bounds of the Neighborhood itself, there was a fair degree of integration relative to the time period. Jason Cutter, for example, proprietor of Savannah's oldest shoe repair enterprise and long-time resident of the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood, recalled playing with white, Jewish and Syrian children as a youth. Others remembered Asian, Irish, German and Haitian families and businesses in the community. Although races and ethnic groups did not necessarily live side by side, they frequently lived in close proximity to one another. Institutions, however, remained completely segregated.

Both African-Americans and Jews in the Neighborhood faced insidious racial prejudice in different forms. As a child, one Jewish resident recounted the teasing he endured from neighborhood boys that prompted him to travel a back-alley route to get home after school. An African-American resident

recalled a white homeowner insisting that African-Americans walk in the street, rather than on the sidewalk in front of her house. A number of white residents jointly agreed not to sell their homes to African-Americans, and one real estate contract for the sale of a home in the nearby Dixon Park Neighborhood stipulated that the property never be sold to African-Americans.

Other individuals in the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood, however, participated in the destruction of segregation. John White, for example, was one of the legendary "Savannah Nine." He, along with eight African-American colleagues, joined the Savannah

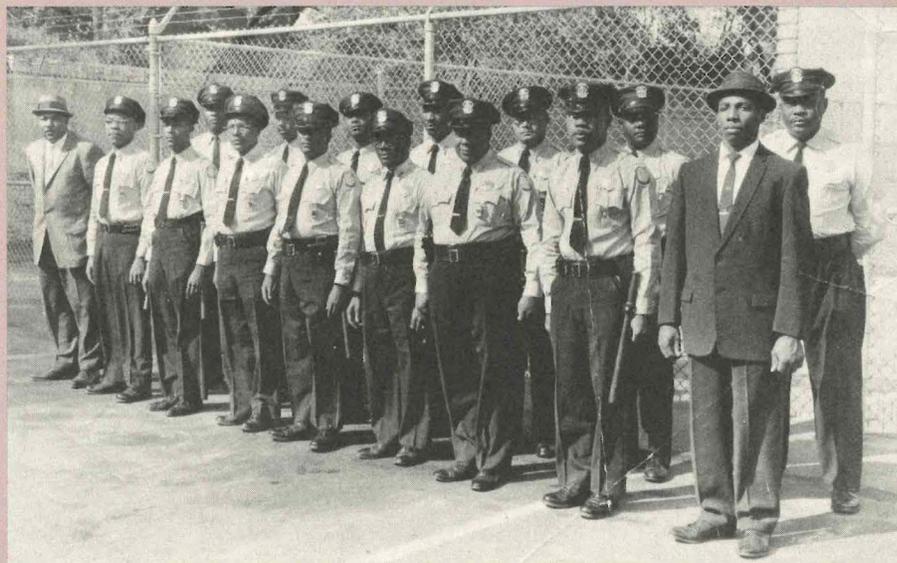


Figure 6. John White and other members of the Savannah Police Department wearing their uniforms.

Police Department in 1947, thus shattering a significant racial barrier [figure 6]. These nine officers, however, held significantly less authority than their white co-workers. When White joined the force, African-American officers were not allowed to carry guns or arrest white criminals. Receiving a letter of congratulations from President Ronald Reagan, Lieutenant White retired from the force after thirty-seven years of service.

Savannah's public schools were also segregated for much of the twentieth century.

African-American students attended the Paulsen Street School located at Joe and Paulsen Streets; white children enrolled at the Waters Avenue School, later named the Romana Riley School, located at Waters Avenue and Anderson Street.

The inadequate facilities of the Paulsen Street School manifested the racial prejudice of the time. Built in 1924, the school was originally a shirt factory [figure 7]. After parents protested the overcrowded classrooms and poor facility in general, the building was demolished in 1962.

Rather than integrate existing elementary schools in the area, another facility was constructed to replace

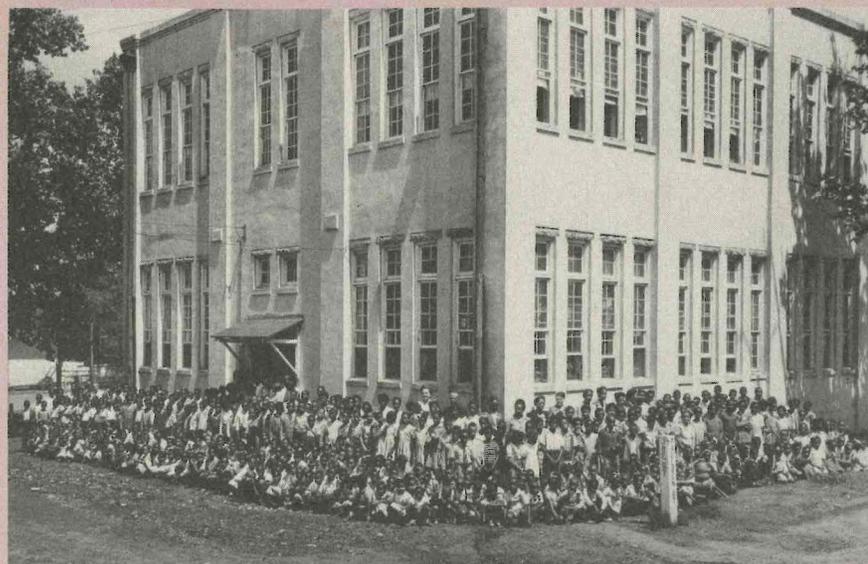


Figure 7. The Paulsen Street School, no longer extant, was built as a shirt factory.

the Paulsen Street School. The Frank W. Spencer School was dedicated in 1955 as "the Pupil Centered School" [figure 8].



Figure 8. The Frank W. Spencer School replaced the Paulsen Street School.

Spencer was not only the nation's youngest master harbor pilot, but as general manager of the Atlantic Towing Company, he opened the upper harbor for access by larger ships. In his professional capacity, Spencer was a champion of African-Americans' civil rights, paying all his employees an equal wage, regardless of race. Spencer was the first white Savannahian to become a lifetime member of the local NAACP; he also served on the City's Board of Education for 18 years, bringing with him a strong commitment to equal education for all children. Spencer believed that education was the way to make Savannah a great city.

Not far from the Paulsen School, white children

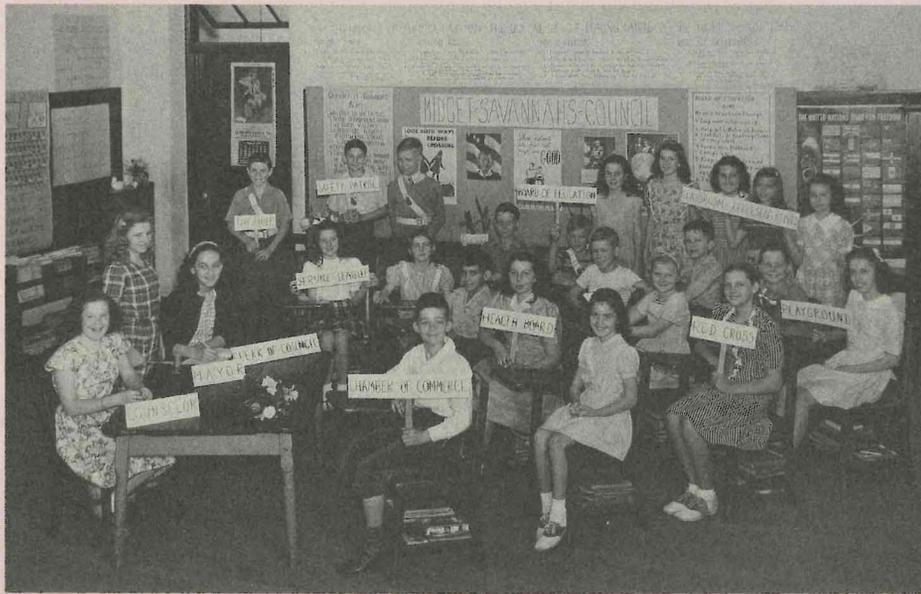


Figure 9. Members of "Midget Savannah" at the Romana Riley School.

attended the institution that later became known as the Romana Riley School. Built as a school in 1915, its name changed in 1955 as a result of 3815 signatures on a petition that stated

[Riley] has won the whole-hearted praise, love and esteem of all who have crossed the threshold of Waters Avenue School. She possessed the rare faculty of making each child in her school feel that she was interested in every detail of the little things close to his or her heart through a kindly and sympathetic spirit.

Born in 1873, Riley attended Massie School before becoming assistant teacher at Barnard Street School and then head of math at Chatham Junior High. She became principal of Waters Avenue School in 1924, and

there created a school model that gained national interest. Riley's educational philosophy emphasized the building of character and good citizenship in her pupils, and so the school was organized to replicate city government with a chamber of commerce, police and fire departments and other units of municipal administration. The children called themselves "Midget Savannah." Riley authored a book titled *School Life in Midget Savannah* about her educational model, published in 1939, describing

her belief that children learn by doing [figure 9]. Today, the fondly remembered school is again a site for educational activities.



Figure 10. Williams Studio, St. Pius X School.

Although these schools were segregated, another school, whose goal was an integrated student body, formed specifically to provide African-Americans with the same education that whites received. The first parochial African-American high school in Chatham County, Blessed Pius X (today referred to as St. Pius) opened in 1952 with classes for ninth and tenth graders [figure 10]. The Priests of the Society of African Missions and the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception began enrolling white students in 1968. Although the Franciscan Sisters failed to achieve their noble goal of integration, and the school was ultimately closed because of this, St. Pius graduated students beginning in 1955

until a two-year phase out began in 1970 [figure 11].

During its almost 20-year history, St. Pius faculty taught numerous local leaders. Charles Elmore, Ph.D., professor of humanities at Savannah State University and former Mayor Floyd Adams, Jr., both graduated

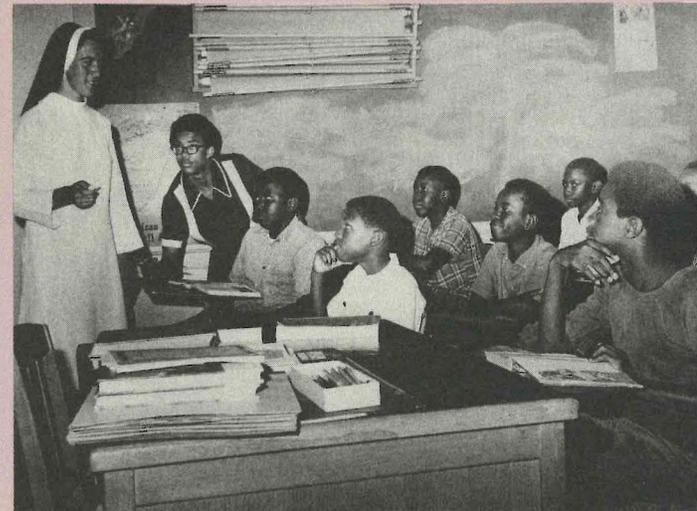


Figure 11. Sr. M. Jeanette Goudet with her students at St. Pius X High School.



Figure 12. Benjamin Van Clark was active in Savannah's Civil Rights movement.

from St. Pius. Associate Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas attended St. Pius for his freshman year.

Neighborhood residents also participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Benjamin Van Clark, for whom the park and neighborhood are named, was one of Savannah's most passionate champions for civil rights, an involvement he began at age 16 [figure 12]. Council member Edna Branch Jackson remembered him as a powerful leader, even though he stood only 5'2" in height. A 1963 graduate of

Beach High School, Clark was originally involved with the NAACP Youth Group and then became a field director for Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Working with Hosea Williams as part of the Chatham County Crusade for Voters, Clark galvanized students from various Savannah high schools. Clark and others integrated Tybee Island Beach with a "wade-in," organized sit-ins; boycotted white-owned businesses on Broughton Street and elsewhere for 16 months; and launched "kneel-ins" at area churches.



Figure 13. Irma Ginsberg, Miss Ruby and Harry Ginsberg stand in the Ginsbergs' grocery store, the Georgia Market.

As many communities across the country experienced the growth of suburbs and decay of urban life, the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood has witnessed

REVITALIZATION

periods of both vitality and decline.

In the twentieth century, the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood boasted a number of business districts within its boundaries. Wheaton and Harmon Streets, as well as Waters Avenue, were once major retail sections that were dotted by a number of nurseries, package stores, confectionaries, and beauty shops.

Neighborhood grocery stores were of particular importance. The Georgia Market, for example, was a thriving enterprise located at Harmon and Wolfe Streets, run by Harry and Irma Ginsberg [figure 13]. The Ginsbergs became well acquainted with their African-American and white customers, even socializing together in some instances. With African-Americans employed as the market's butchers, the Ginsbergs also responded to their patrons' tastes by stocking items particular to the South. Located at Wheaton Street and Waters Avenue was the Hohnerlein's Meat Market. Started in 1919 by German immigrant Joseph, and later taken over by his son Otto, it ran until 1961.

African-American owned ventures also prospered in

the Neighborhood. Susie and Teddy Collins ran a grocery store near Harmon and Wheaton Streets. The first African-American owned and operated radio station, WSOK, was located on Waters Avenue in the 1950s. On the same street was Williams and Williams



Figure 14. Philander Moore caned dining room chairs in his spare time.

Funeral Home, one of the longest continually operating African-American businesses in the city. Another enduring enterprise was Jason Cutter's Shoe Repair Shop, which closed in 1998 after some 46 years of operation. Cutter learned his trade at the Georgia State Industrial College, today known as Savannah State University, where Philander Moore worked in a number of capacities.

community's young people through a program that included field trips, classroom work, workshops and volunteer service. One of its most visible accomplishments was the publication of the *Waters Avenue Corridor Business Directory 1998-1999* which provided information on the Neighborhood's shops and businesses. In her capacity as president of the Waters Avenue Business Association, Rosemary Banks welcomed new businesses to the area and encouraged existing companies to beautify their entrances with flower planters.

Aided by the benefits of the Hope VI project, the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood is set to begin a period of transformation and revitalization when the new Garden Homes are completed.

In the 1940s, Savannah's first public housing development, Garden Homes, offered dwellings for white residents in need of assistance [figure 15]. Due to the efforts of the NAACP, the Housing Authority of Savannah began to integrate Garden Homes during the Civil Rights era. Around the same time, many privately owned, single-family residences in the area became rental property. As many public housing developments across the country experienced, Garden Homes became plagued with crime and drugs in the 1990s. Many neighborhood residents felt that "they did a great thing when they tore it down," as Mrs.

Marie Green stated. Hope VI provided the funds to demolish Garden Homes and create a new housing model. The new Ashley Midtown Development will offer rental and privately owned properties as well as single family and multi-unit buildings to families and individuals of various income levels. This diverse selection will help to stabilize and revitalize the Neighborhood by juxtaposing homeowners and renters, while encouraging more residents to become first-time homeowners.

Plans to bring economic growth to the Neighborhood's once thriving business districts are in the beginning stages of development. Reflecting national trends, Savannah consumers are once again discovering the appeal of neighborhood, locally owned, "mom and pop" stores in favor of the mall's chain stores. Grocery stores, shoe-repair shops, florists and beauty parlors will once again offer their goods and services to the Neighborhood. New residents will join long-time inhabitants in their enjoyment of life in this diverse "suburb" known as the Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood. Its story and more importantly, that of its residents, continues to be written by the future generations of the twenty-first century.

TIMELINE OF THE BENJAMIN VAN CLARK NEIGHBORHOOD

1790

City of Savannah was incorporated

John Houston became first Mayor



1854

City's eastern limits extended to Waters Avenue, including land that would eventually be Collinsville

1890

Streetcar service connected Collinsville to downtown Savannah



1900s

Suburbs of Collinsville, the Meadows and Eastville formed

1940s

Garden Homes Estates and Annex provided public housing

1947

John White joined Savannah Police Department

1952

St. Pius School opened



1955

Groundbreaking of Frank W. Spencer School

Waters Avenue School renamed Romana Riley School

1962

Paulsen Street School demolished

1982

Live Oak Park renamed Benjamin Van Clark Park



1984

Blackshear Homes opened by Housing Authority of Savannah

2000

Hope VI grant awarded to demolish Garden Homes and revitalize Benjamin Van Clark Neighborhood

2003

Harry S. Truman Parkway opened

2005

Rebirth and revitalization of area under way

Additional contributions from:

Arts Ashore Legacy Fund
Georgia Council for the Arts
Georgia Humanities Council
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Leah Colby
Richard Collins
Current & past residents
of the Van Clark
Neighborhood
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Daryl Daise
Tyrone Daughtry
Devereaux Dixon
Juanita W. Elmore
Rick Erck
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