

A History of the Athens-Clarke Heritage Foundation

By John C. Waters, Founding Member, December 2002



The Michael brothers Mansions, Prince Avenue

To remember Athens in the 1960s is to relive the anguish of seeing Greek Revival and Victorian-era mansions destroyed along Milledge, the agonizing loss of the twin Michael mansions on Prince Avenue, the abandonment (and subsequent loss) of houses on Prince by two sororities, the dismantling of the Thurmond-Cofer House on Dearing to make way for Dearing Garden Apartments, the replacement of all historic residential structures by commercial buildings in the block of N. Milledge between Broad and Reece streets, the inception of Athens Urban Renewal Project #51 and its threat to Athens' City Hall, the Church-Waddell-Brumby House, and almost all of the historic residential area known as "Licksillet." To many citizens, accustomed to life in a sleepy college town, the promise of the post-war era progress seemed to be based upon the destruction of the past.

After a little more than 10 years of unparalleled growth and development, Athens decided to apply the brakes by adopting an initial zoning ordinance for the city in 1958. Subsequent discussion of zoning and related development potentials included the prospect of commercial development along Milledge Avenue, a reflection of the obvious availability of certain properties as well as interest in destruction of older houses for the purpose of new development, and that struck a nerve among Athenians who recognized the threat to historic structures. The result, within the month of October 1959, was the formation of two non-profit groups: Athens Historical Society (AHS) and the Society for the Preservation of Old Athens (SPOA). Athens Historical Society was founded to collect, preserve, and publish materials on the history of Athens and Clarke County while the Society of Preservation of Old Athens was the first organization within Athens with a primary objective of historic preservation; It was this organization that convinced the Varsity to spare the greensward with its trees which provides a buffer between North Milledge and the Varsity's parking lot.



Taylor-Grady House

Within a city whose various governmental and civic officials would quickly agree that Athens had a wealth of historic resources worthy of preservation, a 1971 masters thesis, documented that almost all did not see preservation as their function or felt that there was not sufficient public demand for government support of those efforts. Both the Historical Society and the Preservation Society initiated the kind of community awareness that would prove to be a stepping stone to governmental support of preservation. The Athens Historical Society was the first organization to sponsor a tour of homes in the early 1960s and it worked with the Chamber of Commerce to produce *Athens of Old* as a tourist guide. Meanwhile, SPOA was able to raise community awareness of the need to preserve the Taylor-Grady House and Lucy Cobb Institute and also purchased the Old St. Mary's Church on Oconee Street, becoming the first group in Athens to buy a building for the sole purpose of preserving it. In time, however, the problem of securing adequate financial support for its plans diminished the effectiveness of this group. Nevertheless, their efforts provided the foundation for future preservation efforts.

By the mid-60s, SPOA became inactive and some of its members became concerned about the need to preserve the Brumby House, Athens' oldest remaining house within the urban renewal project area. Some argued that it was not important enough, that it was impossible to save it, there was no place to move it to, and, who had, or could get, the money needed. Recognizing the need to create a new organization, three individuals lead the effort to form a new group: Ethel Chaffin, Ruth Downes, and Jeannette Lund. They, along with others, founded Athens-Clarke Heritage Foundation (ACHF) in April 1967 and proceeded to move forward on the task that others described as "impossible:" saving the Church-Waddell-Brumby House, simply referred to locally as the Brumby House, after the two sisters who had been its last residents. The effort began with an agreement, between ACHF and the local Urban Renewal Agency that gave the house to ACHF with the proviso that it be moved so as not to impede the redevelopment of the site. Thus, in the fall of 1967, during a home football game, the house was loaded onto a flatbed truck and moved approximately one block of its present location, where it was set upon concrete blocks with the chimney "holes" created because the chimneys could not be moved protected with plastic. An effort to raise \$30,000 had begun that summer, producing donations totaling about \$7000. As the fund-raising effort continued, the house sat at the intersection of Dougherty and Thomas streets, seemingly abandoned and forlorn. The Foundation erected a sign indicating that the structure was a preservation project, and the weeds grew, matured, and were hit by

frost while most of Athens laughed about the foolishness of the effort. One pictorial editorial from the local paper captured an extremely unflattering view of the house, and published it with the rhetorical question of, "What Shall Become of the Brumby House?" The receipt of this photograph from the newspaper, wrapped around a match box within which there was one burned matchstick, at the newspaper office, cooled the newspaper's enthusiasm for such pictorial editorials and only heightened concern about financial needs. In 1970, then executive director of Historic Savannah Foundation, Reid Williamson, arrived in town as speaker of the ACHF annual meeting and wanted to see the Brumby House immediately. With apologies for its appearance, a member took Williamson by the site and was dismayed when Reid laughed. When questioned, Williamson said how much he liked the house, even unrestored, and assured us that our only problem was that unlike Savannah, when we looked at a house on concrete blocks, we (Athenians) did not realize that it was "on its way" to restoration. That was some comfort to those of us who were developing a very thin skin regarding the progress of our restoration effort.



Brumby House

Finally, at what seemed the darkest hour, it was determined that new congressional legislation, related to historic structures within urban renewal areas, could provide restoration assistance. With the assistance of then Congressman Robert Stephens, it was determined that the Brumby House qualified for a grant of \$37,500 provided that a local match of \$12,500 could be provided. It was at this point that ACHF recognized the value of the early groundwork by SPOA when the City Council agreed to provide half of that amount to match the funds ACHF had on hand. All set? No! When the plans were submitted for bid, the low bid was \$56,000. The house had been the laughing stock of Athens for four years and no prospects were at hand. Enter Ann Davis, assistant director of the local urban renewal office. It seems that the office received financial credits for site clearance, etc., which could only be expended within the project area, and there was \$6,000 within the renewal office funds that could be made available for the Brumby House. Thursday, April 1972, five years after initiation of the project, the newly restored Brumby House was the site of a dedication ceremony, opening the house to the public.

Suddenly, it was Christmas in April! The house had been saved, and it was furnished through donated items, with the dining room table coming from as far away as Sandersville and, we even had a few

Brumby family pieces on loan to the Foundation. Just as important for a group that had been meeting in members' living rooms for five years and using boxes in closets for filing, we now had a visible presence and space for an office in our new "headquarters" house. ACHF desperately needed the office space as it had been extremely busy during the five year Brumby effort on other projects. With financial assistance from the Athens Junior Assembly, we had undertaken a survey of historic houses in Athens, we had initiated an annual home tour as well as an annual Christmas Benefit event, served as a sponsor of the first statewide preservation conference in Georgia, revised and expanded the Athens of Old tour booklet, promoted a Fine Arts Festival with Clarke County School System with an emphasis on history and Athens' historic structures, and we had initiated a series of National Register Nominations for different areas of Athens. Projects underway included an historic district study by two students at UGA, a weekly newspaper series on historic houses in Athens, and support for the idea of a greenway along the Oconee River. Projected projects included development of an Athens Tour Guide Service as well as an educational program for Clarke County Schools.



Phinazy Spalding

Beginning in 1970, we had initiated an annual Christmas Benefit for the purpose of developing a Revolving Fund with which to address the threatened loss of important buildings. Phinazy Spalding was chair of our first event at the Wilkins House on Milledge Avenue, then owned by Josephine Wilkins. Ms. Wilkins was looking for a use for the property that would ensure its preservation. That gave us the basis to host a number of Christmas Benefits, the idea being to hold the event in an endangered property. Ultimately, ACHF members "celebrated" the holiday season and preservation in such locations as: the Camak House/now home to, the Upson House/now Sun Trust Bank, Athens Factory/ now Dial America, the Franklin House, Morton Theatre, and Michael Brothers Department Store, more recently known as Park Plaza.

It was the \$15,000 earned from these benefits that was the basis of the ACHF two-week Community Campaign to raise \$75,000 to prevent the demolition of the Franklin House in 1974.

The 60s were also a time of hope, hope that the adoption of zoning would stop the wholesale destruction of old buildings, hope that citizen interest in preservation would be echoed by official action among government officials, hope that somehow, Athens would be able to retain its heritage and environmental character.