

Preserving the past for the future

By H.M. Cauley

When it comes to protecting the past, it's not just about preserving old houses.

Case in point: Behind the 1821 Savannah house where Girl Scouts founder Juliette Gordon Low was born in 1860 is a formal garden of flowering shrubs and lush, green trees dripping with Spanish moss—all configured in attractive geometric designs linked by gravel paths. This natural retreat isn't original; it dates to the 1950s, when Georgia's first registered female landscape architect, Clermont Lee, installed a garden featuring plants prominent during Low's lifetime.

The home's owners, Girl Scouts of the USA, want to replace Lee's design with a more group-friendly gathering area. That proposal landed the garden on 2019's Places in Peril list, published each year by the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation.

"The trust uses the guidelines of the National Register of Historic Places to determine if a site or building—or a scenic landscape—should be considered significant," says Mark

McDonald, president and CEO of the Georgia Trust, based in historic Rhodes Hall in Atlanta.

The most frequently threatened historic landscapes are cemeteries. No matter what shape a property takes, the trust's mission since 1973 has been to promote an appreciation for Georgia's diverse historic resources and to provide for their protection and use.

"Georgia is one of the leaders in the country for preserving its historic sites," McDonald says. "We have some of the strongest and most active local preservation organizations in Savannah, Macon, Augusta, Athens, Americus, Thomasville, Columbus, Rome and several others. They're separate, but we partner with them; we can get more done together than we can working separately."

Depending on the community, the preservation work can take different forms.

"We have interesting and ironic challenges," McDonald



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Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace Garden,
Savannah



TIMOTHY L. VACULA

Miller Theater, Augusta

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—Mark McDonald,
president and CEO of the Georgia Trust



Left: Sparta residents gathered in 2016 for a rededication ceremony of the Hancock County Courthouse. **Right:** The historic courthouse appeared on the Georgia Trust's 2013 Places in Peril list and suffered significant fire damage in 2014.

says. "For instance, in growing metro areas like Atlanta, Savannah and Athens, we have development threats. Once you get out in the countryside, the challenges are different, like a lack of funds and economic activity to support historic buildings."

But collaborating with the Georgia Trust is invaluable, says Christine McCauley Watts, executive director of the Madison-Morgan Conservancy, now in its 20th year.

"The trust mentored us through the development of our endangered-properties revolving fund that we started in 2017," she says, referring to the program that lends funds to purchase and restore properties before selling them to recoup the investment. "And having some of our properties named on the Places in Peril list has brought attention to them."

Erick Montgomery, executive director of Historic Augusta, has appreciated the trust's support of local efforts across the state, such as the campaign to save the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace Garden.

"If we need their expertise on a legal or preservation issue, we can call them," he says. "They tend to be more hands-on in smaller places that don't have a staff. They also have an awards program that brings attention to and helps our local projects. Last year, the Miller Theater's [Augusta] \$23 million renovation won a top award, and though, as with most nonprofits, it didn't mean a cash award, it was nice to get that recognition."

Another important element of the trust's work is its attention to legislation.

"The trust monitors what's going on with the legislature, and they let us know if we need to be aware of anything that affects preservation," Montgomery says. "Without their support, it



Above: The Eleanor Roosevelt School in Warm Springs. **Left:** Mark McDonald, president and CEO of the Georgia Trust, celebrates with Debron Williams (right) and his sister, Voncher Williams (left), who purchased the Roosevelt School through the trust's revolving fund. The family will rehabilitate the school into an agricultural learning center.

would be hard for us to get a lot of leverage in the legislature."

Local preservation groups can seek assistance from the trust's staff to find resources and grants, to organize work parties and to keep up-to-date on preservation news. The trust also provides training workshops.

"We offer about five different classes on topics like how to save buildings, fundraising and how to make buildings more energy-efficient," McDonald says. "We even have one for Realtors on what's historic and what's not."

The trust also oversees a revolving fund program that often means the difference between demolition and preservation for significant properties. The goal is to connect property own-



The Madison-Morgan Conservancy's Endangered Properties Revolving Fund helped secure and stabilize the Foster-Thomason-Miller House until a buyer agreed to conserve and rehab the property. The house was on the Georgia Trust's 2018 Places in Peril list. From left are Neil Horstman, Mark McDonald, Christine McCauley Watts, Theresa Pippin and Robert Trulock.

ers with buyers willing to make appropriate renovations, then return any proceeds from the property's sale back to the fund for future use. The trust then holds an easement, or legal right, to guarantee historic integrity, and that easement can be on an open space, a façade or an interior. So far, 43 properties have been sold through the fund.

Preserving Georgia's historic sites presents myriad challenges that don't always end well. In the case of the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace, the garden was demolished despite protests from various voices, including McDonald's.

Preservation often makes for difficult conversations, particularly as communities grapple with how to tell the stories of plantations and the state's civil rights record. But McDonald is open to having those conversations.

"We need to take on the truth, take on history accurately and be [aware] of all cultures and ways of life," he says. "We need to bring attention to things that need to be discussed. We're preserving history, not beauty." 🍷

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The 2020 Places in Peril list

For the 15th year, the Georgia Trust for Historic Places has published a list of the state's most endangered historic, archaeological and cultural resources. The entries cover structures, sites, districts and landscapes that have been adversely affected by various factors, including neglect and encroaching development. The trust works with individuals, organizations and communities to salvage the properties before they are lost to posterity.

- **Antioch Baptist Church**, Crawfordville, Taliaferro County: Built in 1899 for a congregation of freed slaves, the church is no longer in use.
- **Asbury United Methodist Church**, Savannah, Chatham County: The Abercorn Street church dates to 1887 and is the only African American United Methodist congregation in the city's Victorian District.
- **Cary Reynolds Elementary School**, Doraville, DeKalb County: Designed by noted architect John Portman, the 1961 school is part of the midcentury Northwoods Historic District.
- **Central State Hospital**, Milledgeville, Baldwin County: The state's first psychiatric hospital anchors an almost 2,000-acre campus with about 200 buildings, some of which date to 1842. The site was closed in 2013.
- **Fountain (Stone) Hall**, Atlanta, Fulton County: Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the hall was built in 1882 and is still a landmark on the Atlanta University campus. It was initially called Stone Hall, but after it became part of Morris Brown College in the 1930s, the name was changed to honor the school's former president, Bishop William A. Fountain.
- **Heritage Park**, Griffin, Spalding County: Included in this community space is the Rosenwald School, built in 1929 with funds raised by American educator Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck and Co. to educate African American students.



Nolan Crossroads, Bostwick

- **John Nelson Deming Home**, Valdosta, Lowndes County: Local craftsman John Deming left his mark on this city by building impressive homes from the late 1800s through the 1920s. His own home was built in 1898 and has been vacant since 2006.
- **Masonic Lodge No. 238**, Dalton, Whitfield County: When constructed in 1915, this building sat in the middle of Dalton's black community. Its second floor hosted Masonic meetings for African American members.
- **Nolan Crossroads**, Bostwick, Morgan County: Once part of a plantation, this grouping of buildings represents the transition from a slavery-based to a sharecropping agricultural economy. The oldest structure was built in 1817; the main neoclassical house went up in 1905. The property also includes a former commissary, a mule barn and tenant farmhouses.
- **Rose Hill School**, Porterdales, Newton County: The Bibb Manufacturing Co. built this school in 1937 for children of the the area's black mill workers. It was the only African American school in Porterdales for many years.