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OLD DECATUR

HISTORIC

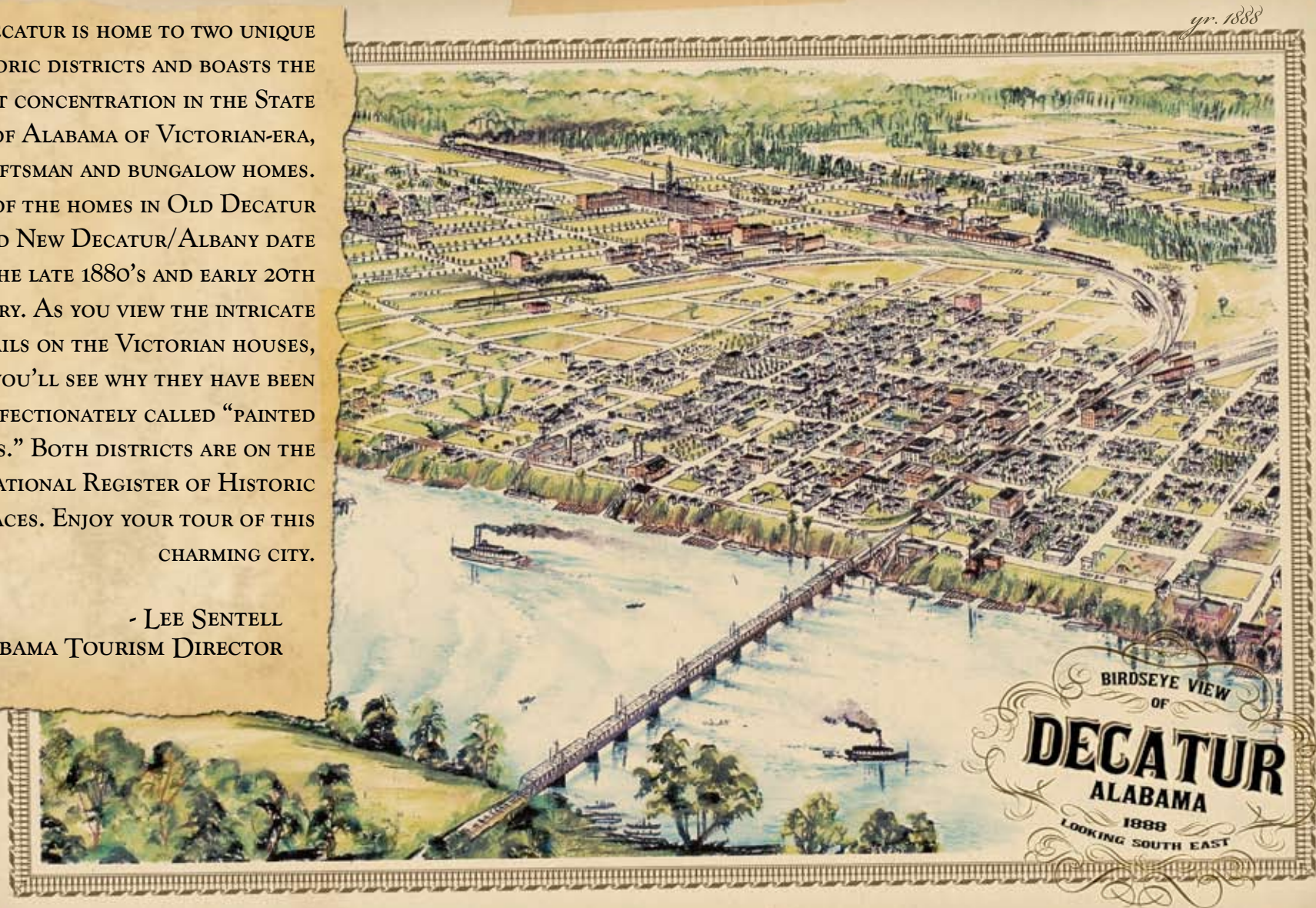


DISTRICT

FLOURISHING WITH RICH HISTORY & ENCHANTED ARCHITECTURE,
DECATUR, ALABAMA, IS HOME TO TWO UNIQUE HISTORIC DISTRICTS
THAT DATE FROM THE 1880'S TO EARLY 20TH CENTURY.

DECATUR IS HOME TO TWO UNIQUE HISTORIC DISTRICTS AND BOASTS THE LARGEST CONCENTRATION IN THE STATE OF ALABAMA OF VICTORIAN-ERA, CRAFTSMAN AND BUNGALOW HOMES. MANY OF THE HOMES IN OLD DECATUR AND NEW DECATUR/ALBANY DATE FROM THE LATE 1880'S AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY. AS YOU VIEW THE INTRICATE DETAILS ON THE VICTORIAN HOUSES, YOU'LL SEE WHY THEY HAVE BEEN AFFECTIONATELY CALLED "PAINTED LADIES." BOTH DISTRICTS ARE ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES. ENJOY YOUR TOUR OF THIS CHARMING CITY.

- LEE SENTELL
ALABAMA TOURISM DIRECTOR



OLD DECATUR

HISTORIC DISTRICT

Unless otherwise noted, the buildings are privately owned and can only be viewed from the street or sidewalk.

The Old Decatur Historic District dates back to the town's settlement in 1817; at that time it was called Rhodes Ferry Landing after Dr. Henry W. Rhodes, an early landowner who operated the only ferry across the Tennessee River at Decatur. The city was renamed Decatur in 1821 in honor of Commodore Stephen Decatur. After the naval hero was killed in a duel in 1820, President Monroe directed the town be named for him. Official incorporation took place in 1826.

With a bank, railroad, and river as drivers, Decatur began growing between 1830 and 1860. The Civil War, however, drastically changed the landscape of this community. Those strategic assets made the city prime real estate for Union and Confederate armies during the war. It has been estimated that the town changed hands eight times.

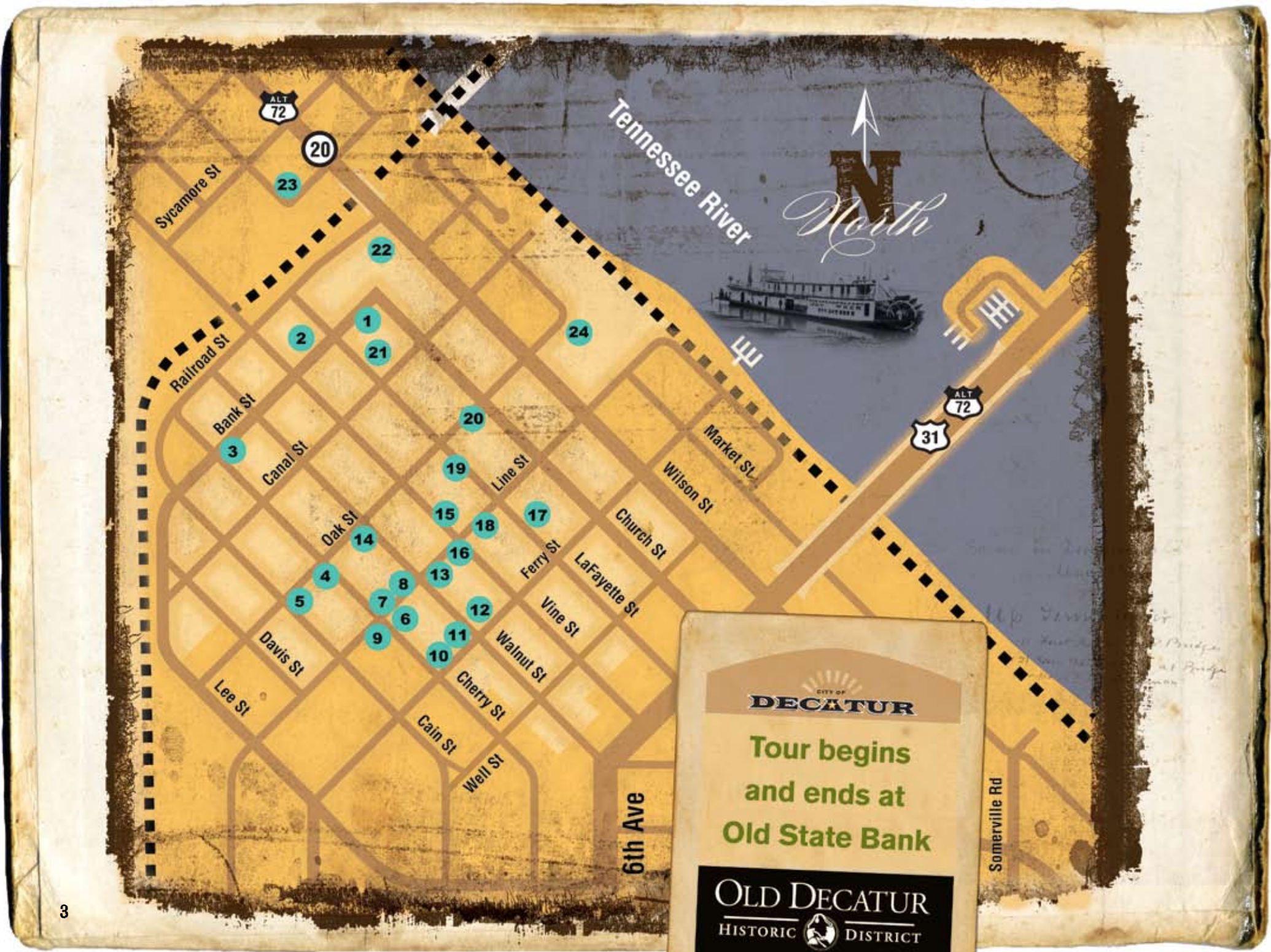


In fact, in 1862 the Union troops took Decatur, evacuated the city, burned the railroad bridge, used

wood from many structures to build their fortifications, and when leaving town in 1864, burned most of the remaining buildings.

It took years for Decatur to recover following the War Between the States, as it is known in the south. One of the most important developments in the community's resurgence was the purchase by Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company of track extending from Montgomery to Nashville by way of Decatur in 1871. By 1886, 640 railroad cars passed through L&N's Decatur rail every day. Just as the government and economy began to rebound, yellow fever hit the area in 1878. The disease killed 51 people, but hundreds more – including the mayor – left town to avoid infection. Many never returned.





Sycamore St

Railroad St

Bank St

Canal St

Oak St

Davis St

Lee St

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STOP 1. HISTORIC BANK STREET

A good place to start the tour is on the north end of historic Bank Street with the Old State Bank at your back. The first block of buildings on the east side of Bank Street dates to the reconstruction following the Civil War in the late 1870's and 80's. The remaining Bank Street buildings are newer due to various fires that destroyed the downtown. As you walk down the block, notice the remnants of bricks and rails down the center where trolleys once connected the downtowns of Old Decatur and Albany.



STOP 2. SIMP MCGHEE'S - 725 BANK STREET

On the west corner of Bank and LaFayette Streets, you'll see Simp McGhee's – a restaurant named after quite a character from Decatur's history. Simp was a riverboat captain in the 1880's who is renowned for having a beer-swilling pet pig for a drinking companion. His diversified Decatur holdings included a saloon here on Bank Street and possibly an interest in a house of ill repute. There are many stories about Simp, but the most famous is his relationship with Kate Lackner, known as "Miss Kate". She was married and the mother of a young son when Simp met and fell in love with her. Simp and Kate never married, but it is believed he set her up in business in what was called a

"gentleman's sporting house." It was said, too, that Miss Kate had the loveliest ladies in all of the Tennessee Valley. She paraded her girls up and down Bank Street on Sunday afternoons, first in horse-drawn carriages then in convertibles or "open automobiles."



STOP 3. OLD HARGROVE & MURDOCK GROCERY - 502 BANK STREET

On the corner of Bank and Cherry Streets is a charming building built in 1897 on land owned by the Decatur Mineral and Land Company. For "old timers" it is best remembered as the location of Hargrove & Murdock Grocery circa 1925 until 1942. During Decatur's earlier and wilder days, though, the building housed a brothel. The nine upstairs rooms were named after flowers, identifying the women who worked there. The main level features original arched windows on the west side and oval windows – believed to be original – on the south side. On the inside walls where the exterior brick is exposed visitors might see fibers in the plaster. They are horsehair, used in the late 19th century as a support and bonding material in plaster applications.





STOP 4. THE HAMIL HOUSE - 422 OAK STREET

Striking with its brick and stone arched doorway, this house was built in 1929 by J.Y. Hamil. With its steep roof, gables and tall, tapered chimney, it is typical of several English Cottage style houses built in the 1920's in the Old Decatur area.



STOP 7. THE LEADINGHAM HOUSE 501 LINE STREET

The small cottage with a charming ground-level porch was built prior to 1875 for two maiden sisters. Rebecca Leadingham operated a private school there while sister Louise was librarian at the nearby Carnegie Library.

STOP 5. JOHN T. BANKS BUILDING - 402 OAK STREET

Civil War veteran, druggist and early city leader John T. Banks built the brick structure in 1887. The building was at the center of a political storm in Morgan County in 1891. When a vote declared Decatur as the county seat, residents moved records surreptitiously by horse and buggy at night from Somerville. Originally three stories, the Banks Building housed the courthouse for two years while a permanent courthouse on Ferry Street was being built.

Later, the building housed a hospital and retail store. After a fire in 1915, the third story was removed and the building was mainly used for apartments and boarding rooms until the 1970's. Restored in 2002, this historic building is now office space.



STOP 8. THE COLLIER HOME 511 LINE STREET

The Collier Home was built after the town clerk, E.W. Collier, married a sister of the Leadinghams in 1885. This two-story house shows Queen Anne influences.

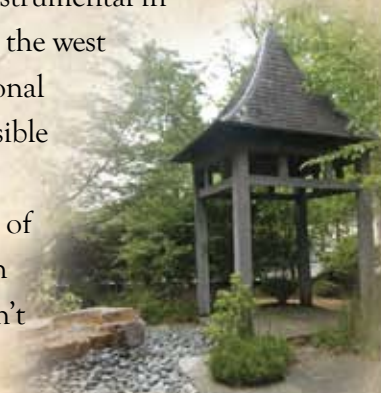
STOP 6. SHADOWLAWN - 504 LINE STREET

The stately white frame house surrounded by towering oaks that inspired its name is Shadowlawn. It was built around 1874 by Dr. William Gill. One of the oldest practicing physicians in the State of Alabama at the time, Dr. Gill died attending patients during Decatur's last major Yellow Fever epidemic in 1888.



STOP 9. JAPANESE GARDEN AT FRAZIER PARK

To the south side of Shadowlawn is a wonderful place to take a break, Frazier Park, named for a Decatur business leader who was instrumental in restoring Old Decatur. On the west end of the park is a traditional Japanese garden made possible by a generous donation to the City of Decatur by one of our local industries, Daikin America Corporation. Don't miss the calming water feature in the center.





STOP 10. JUDGE SEYBOURN LYNNE HOME 503 FERRY STREET

This comfortable home with a wrap-around porch was built in 1925 and was home to one of Decatur's prominent leaders, Judge Seybourn Lynne. He was appointed to a federal judgeship in 1945 by Harry Truman and served for 55 years on the bench until his death in 2000 at the age of 93.

Judge Lynne played an important role in several Civil Rights rulings. He served as part of a three-judge panel that issued a ruling that helped to desegregate buses and brought to an end the Montgomery bus boycott. In 1963, Judge Lynne issued an order to then-Governor George Wallace stating that he could not deny African-Americans their right to enroll at the University of Alabama. It was enforced when President John F. Kennedy called upon the state's National Guard to assist the students in enrolling.

STOP 12. THE J.T. JONES HOUSE 601 FERRY STREET

The J.T. Jones House, or as it's often called, "The Gingerbread House," was built in 1899 by a cotton broker. The home is an excellent example of the Queen Anne style of Victorian architecture. A New York artist was commissioned to carve a marble mantle for the main parlor when the house was built.



STOP 11. THE WILLIAMSON HOUSE 517 FERRY STREET

This large Victorian home was built in 1903 by stockbroker George Williamson. Notice the many architectural details. The leaded glass front door is especially beautiful.



Mrs. Blanche Jones was a highly respected member of the community.

Her niece - then 83 - told this favorite story about a young Blanche. There was a wealthy family that

lived on Line Street who had an only child, a grown son who was spoiled rotten. He never worked, just partied and played all of the time. He craved Miss Blanche's approval so to impress her he would mow her lawn without being asked or leave candy and flowers on her porch. One day he came up to her and asked her if he got sober would he go to Heaven; she looked him in the eye and said, "No, you'll just go to Hell sober!"





STOP 13.
THE WERT-MARTIN HOUSE
602 LINE STREET

This home has been bricked and remodeled several times since being constructed in 1886. The hitching post, placed out front for Judge Thomas Wert's horse and buggy, remains. The home and quarter-block lot were later bought by Ben F. Martin.



STOP 16. THE MOSELEY HOUSE
618 LINE STREET

The best example of the Second Empire style in Decatur, the Moseley House features a Mansard roof, handsome double walnut doors and floor-length windows. Note the Victorian detailing around the porch and upper roofline. The house was

built circa 1887 by Capt. William Moseley, the largest property owner in town.



STOP 17. SEARS KIT HOMES
306 & 312 LAFAYETTE STREET

In the middle of the block on the right are two single-story houses. If you look closely, you can see that they were identical. They are Sears Kit houses and were purchased in 1910. The kits, delivered by rail car, included everything: floors, walls, windows, even trim work. The first complete Sears Kit homes were marketed by Sears & Roebuck in 1908, and eventually Sears offered 370 different models of residential homes that ranged from small bungalows at \$500 per kit to larger homes costing \$5,000. Buyers of a Sears Kit home saved about one third of the typical construction costs of their era. An instruction catalogue was included, but to help make construction even easier, every piece of lumber was lettered or numbered.



STOP 15. THE HARRIS HOUSE - 701 LINE STREET

The Harris House shows evidence of the Edwardian influence popular when A.J. Harris, son of lawyer-Congressman C.C. Harris, built this house in 1905.



STOP 18. GIBSON HOUSE
305 LAFAYETTE STREET

This truly Victorian style home that was "House Plan of the Year" in 1900 for *Home and Garden Magazine* was built in 1901. For many years the house was vacant and suffered from neglect and vandalism, but survived due to the quality of its materials and workmanship.



STOP 19. THE TODD HOUSE
215 LAFAYETTE STREET

The Todd House is one of only four surviving buildings from the Civil War; it was used then as a storage facility. Dating to 1836, it was originally a two-room Georgian house. The front door and sidelights are original. Several additions have been made to the rear of the house. Today it is considered a "hall and parlor" style house with a hall that runs from the front door to the back door with parlors opening off the hall.

STOP 20. THE CARNEGIE VISUAL ARTS CENTER
207 CHURCH STREET

Completed in September of 1904, the Carnegie Library of Decatur was one of the 2,509 libraries built by the railroad tycoon and millionaire philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. At the turn of the century, Carnegie began donating money to non-profit, educational organizations. Starting with a large library system in Pittsburgh, with a donation of \$1 million, Carnegie began to fund libraries throughout the nation.

Decatur's Carnegie Library is an example of one of the classic Carnegie buildings.

Originally about 3,500 square feet and costing \$8,500, the building served as Decatur's library from 1904 until 1973. When the main library outgrew the facility the Carnegie became the children's library.



Beginning in 1999, the Decatur Arts Council had begun to share with the community the dream for a renovated Carnegie Library that would serve as a visual and cultural arts center and education facility. Construction and restoration of The Carnegie Visual Arts Center was completed in 2003.

Today, the center features local and traveling exhibits. The center is open to the public and there is no admission charge.





STOP 21. FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH - 805 CANAL STREET

The sanctuary you see now at First United Methodist Church was dedicated on Easter Sunday in 1899. The three large, stained glass windows cost \$450. The Methodist Episcopal Church – South, as it was then known, raised a sanctuary as early as 1835 and was the earliest congregation in Decatur. That first building was a one-room brick structure. A later house of worship was burned by Union soldiers during the Civil War; the federal government later reimbursed the congregation for the damage. In 1886 the Reverend John Harmon Nichols – a crippled veteran of the Confederate 16th Tennessee Volunteers – arrived and determined to build a church in Decatur. He kept that vow and built a “neat little church” that cost \$2,200. That structure immediately predated the sanctuary that stands before you now.



STOP 22. THE OLD STATE BANK - 925 BANK STREET

The Old State Bank was built in 1833 at a cost of \$9,842.

It opened that same year as a branch of the Alabama State Bank and was profitable until 1837. After the bank accumulated outstanding

debts of over \$1 million, its franchise was revoked and it closed in 1842. The failure was blamed on “political shenanigans” and poor lending practices, though an economic depression that struck in 1837 also played a part. From its closure until 1901, it was a private residence for Dr. Cantwell.

The Old State Bank played a significant role in the influence and development of architectural style in Alabama until the Civil War by combining elements of the Federal style with Greek-Revival. It is the oldest standing bank building in Alabama and because the Union Army used the bank for a hospital, it is one of only four buildings in Decatur that survived the burning of the town.

In 1939, it was renovated for use as a museum and civic hall. The City of Decatur purchased the property in 1982. At some point, the building was obscured by an ugly brick façade. A demolition crew was contracted to tear it down. It was soon obvious that something unusual was present when the wrecking ball bounced off in spots. Five limestone columns – which are believed to have been quarried at a plantation in Limestone County – had been hidden behind bricks for generations. A few of the 100-ton columns still carry scars, not only from the wrecking ball, but also from rifle balls fired during Civil War skirmishes.

1972, the Old State Bank was named to the National Register of Historic Places. The bank is open for free tours Monday through Friday.

On the back of the bank in the garden area is a small, detached building built on the foundation of the bank’s original kitchen. As was common in the South, kitchens were detached from the living quarters to minimize the heat in the summers and to reduce the spread of accidental fires.

STOP 23. THE DANCY-POLK HOUSE - 901 RAILROAD STREET NW

Just outside the district is one of the houses that survived the burning of the town during the Civil War – the Dancy-Polk House that was built in 1829. You can see this home from the western end of the parking lot for the Old State Bank, near the white metal fence. There is a pedestrian walking bridge across the railroad tracks if you would like to get a closer look. The

Dancy-Polk House was built by architect Christopher Cheatham for town pioneer Col. Frank Dancy as his home and later became the Polk Hotel, a popular spot for railroad travelers debarking from the L&N passenger depot still visible next door. The simple, symmetrical Federal-style home incorporated yellow pine with chestnut columns. During the Civil War, Union forces used the site as a headquarters. In 1881, outlaws Dick Little and Frank James, brother of Jesse, spent several days at the hotel under assumed names. In the early 1970's, restoration by private owners began. Surprisingly, most of the Palladian-influenced house's original wood and plaster remain. Today, it is a private residence.



STOP 24. RHODES FERRY PARK

You may want to visit Rhodes Ferry Park, a beautiful public park on the Tennessee River. Oak Street – at the Carnegie – crosses Highway 20 to take you directly to the park.

This project was made possible by the City of Decatur. © 2009. Designed and produced by McWhorter Communications www.McWhorterOnline.com. Special thanks to: Lee Sentell, Director of Tourism for the State of Alabama; Tami Reist, Decatur-Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau; Melinda Dunn, Historic Preservation Commission Coordinator; the Old Decatur Historic District; the Albany Historic District; and the Morgan County Archives.