

PUBLIC POLICY:

Saving History

PRESERVATION

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PHOTOS BY **MICHELL LYNN MORRIS**

HISTORIC PHOTOS **COURTESY OF THE RICHMOND HILL HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Most of us travel along Ford Avenue in Richmond Hill multiple times every day. Along the way, we pass by about a dozen historic buildings, either built or restored by Henry Ford. There are dozens more located in the nearby historic neighborhoods of Richmond Hill Village (the Bottom) and Blueberry Village. Most of the commercial buildings are easy to identify, with their white siding and historical markers out front. Some are a little harder to recognize. All are important, but until recently, unprotected.

How many times have you driven along Ford Avenue and thought to yourself, “Someone should do something to preserve or restore these historic buildings.” I have thought about this many times over the years and heard the same sentiments from others over and over again. “Someone should do something before it’s too late.”

“Too late” already happened to the incredibly beautiful and significant George Washington Carver School, the Industrial Arts and Trade School, the Ice House and several other structures from the Ford Era.



“Too late” almost happened to the Henry Ford Bakery building in 2016 when new property owners had intentions of removing it. That was our wake up call.

Fortunately for the Ford Bakery, the Richmond Hill Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) was looking for a new home, in a Ford-era building so that we could attract more visitors and better tell our story. The City of Richmond Hill was

Photos from the Ford era in Richmond Hill. Local homes in the Bottom and Blueberry

able to purchase the building for this purpose, with the Richmond Hill CVB entering into a long-term lease agreement. But, we might not be so lucky next time. What if a developer wanted to replace the Ford Community House, Commissary, Kindergarten, Fire Station, Church, or others? As they say, regret only goes one way.

It was time to take action to protect all of our historic assets.

A committee was formed which included members of the Richmond Hill CVB, Richmond Hill Planning & Zoning, Richmond Hill Historical Society, Downtown Development Authority, property owners and community volunteers who came up with a plan to create a local historic ordinance to present to the public and to City Council. Understanding that this process has had starts and restarts in the past that never came to fruition, the group solicited the help of Lominack, Kolman, Smith, the architectural firm who was already working on plans for the new Visitors Center in the Bakery building. Their firm also specializes in preservation planning with a historic preservationist on staff, Rebecca Fenwick. Rebecca worked with the group, along with Allison Asbrock, outreach program manager for the Georgia State Historic Preservation Office, to develop the ordinance and then held three public hearings on the matter. During the public hearings, there was no opposition to the proposed ordinance. The Richmond Hill City Council voted unanimously to adopt the historic ordinance on March 6, 2018.

“Richmond Hill has taken a wonderful first step towards preserving and protecting its incredibly rich and unique history tied to Henry Ford, agricultural experimentation, and the town surrounding it all. By adopting a historic preservation ordinance, the City has not only formally recognized this story, but also the value of historic preservation. By incorporating preservation as public policy, Richmond Hill is now able to create local historic districts and landmarks, manage their historic resources through an

appointed historic preservation commission, and apply for state grants and assistance for which they were previously ineligible,” Rebecca says.

Having a historic preservation ordinance is expected to have even more benefits in the future. According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, property values within a local district appreciate faster than the local market overall, as well as faster than simi-



lar non-designated neighborhoods. Local districts also encourage better quality design, become a vehicle for education, and can positively impact the local economy through tourism- which brings me back to the Bakery building. You can follow our preservation progress on Instagram. Be sure to stop by and visit later this year. The space, centrally located on Ford Avenue, will be a welcoming first stop for visitors to get in-



formation about where to eat, stay and play in Richmond Hill. The center will also have a space for an Arts on the Coast art gallery and studio.

“The past is not the property of historians; it is a public possession. It belongs to anyone who is aware of it, and it grows by being shared. It sustains the whole society, which always needs the identity that only the past can give.” by author William J. Murtagh in *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America*.

Special thanks to fellow historic preservation ordinance committee members: Scott Allison, Sherri Broome, Georgene Brazier, Paige Glazer, Bonnie Proctor, Rena Patton, Amanda Styer, Mark Thomas, Teresa Timmons, Sarah Volker. ●●

Top: Local homes in the Bottom and Blueberry

Above: Christy Sherman, Executive Director of the RHCVB and Rebecca Fenwick, Historic Preservationist.

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—WILLIAM J. MURTAGH

KEEPING TIME: THE HISTORY AND THEORY OF PRESERVATION IN AMERICA

