



ONE MAN WAGES A WAR ON LITTER

Litter bothers Anthony 'Spark Plug' Thomas so much that for over 20 years he has made it his mission to keep 3 miles of highway next to his neighborhood trash-free. **INSPIRE ATLANTA, E4**

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Downtown Macon struts its way into a long-sought revival



Macon has plenty of people who enjoy the downtown atmosphere, including Paul and Alice Williams, here walking with their pink poodle, Cherry. PHOTOS BY HYOSUB SHIN/AJC

An energetic pulse in Georgia's 'Central City' signals a comeback half a century in the making.

By Joe Kovac Jr. | joe.kovac@ajc.com

MACON

Customers streaming into the Macon Bagels shop in the heart of this city's downtown on a recent morning probably didn't realize they were ordering breakfast on the first floor of what, a century ago, was one of the largest department stores in the South.

The three-story, auburn-bricked behemoth once known as Dannenberg's stocked everything from shoes to chifforobes. It was a superstore of its day, attracting patrons from upward of 70 miles. It was so popular that ads in local newspapers didn't bother including an address. Downtown Macon, in that era, was the place to shop in Middle Georgia.

Then, things changed in the 1970s. Not unlike what happened in many other towns, the established commercial district began withering away. Department stores, hair salons, jewelry shops, restaurants and automobile dealerships

Macon continued on A17



A mural graces Poplar Street in downtown Macon, an avenue that has been a focal point of revival in this 200-year-old city.

All eyes on Atlanta for Biden-Trump debate

The CNN debate in Atlanta between Joe Biden and Donald Trump on Thursday night will be the first in our nation's history between a sitting president and a former president. The AJC will bring you everything you need to know before, during and after the 90-minute showdown.

ONLINE: AJC.com and the AJC News app will bring you in-depth coverage all week, including exclusive polling of Georgia voters. During the debate, our Politically Georgia team will provide live analysis.

IN YOUR INBOX: Start each weekday with the scoops, news and analysis that define the world of politics in Georgia with the Politically Georgia Newsletter. Sign up at AJC.com/newsletters.

LISTEN IN: Tune to WABE 90.1 at 10 a.m. daily for Politically Georgia as AJC reporters and guests break down what to expect — and what to make of it afterward.

IN PRINT: Our special section in Thursday's edition will preview the debate. Then look for our street edition Friday morning at retail locations with full coverage. Today's coverage starts on A13.

BILL TORPY, B1

Nathan Wade milking his 15 minutes of fame

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Volume 76, Number 175



Ga. schools fed up with cellphones in classes

Devices distract students and have been linked to anxiety and depression — but they're also invaluable in emergencies.

By Jillian Price and Martha Dalton

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Marietta parent Cynthia DuBose said she doesn't think many other parents know just how much of a problem comes from their kids' use of cellphones in school.

The distractions are cause for concern, she said, even for her 12-year-old daughter who doesn't even have a cellphone yet.

Instead, she has a tablet — but even that can cause issues.

"There are days where, when she gets home and is finally able to look at her tablet, she has like 100 text messages," DuBose said, some from classmates throughout the school day.

From Los Angeles to Florida and communities in between, many schools across America have enacted policies in recent months to curb cellphone use and limit student access to social media

Cellphones continued on A4



In Marietta, students will be required to lock their phones and smartwatches in a magnetic pouch during the school day. BEN HENDREN FOR THE AJC

AJC INVESTIGATION

His case was neglected for over 20 years

Judge calls it 'a procedural tragedy' as incarcerated man's letter shows court system didn't follow up on trial review.

By Allie Gross

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When Fulton County Superior Court Judge Robert McBurney first read Leslie Singleton's letter last year, he assumed there was a mistake.

The letter was straightforward and to the point: Singleton, an inmate at Coffee Correctional Facility, wanted to know what was holding up his motion for a new trial.

What was stunning was how long he had been waiting: More than 20 years.

"I just know that this is beyond delay to the point of negligence or remiss," Singleton wrote in July, explaining that he had been a juvenile when his case began.

For the judge, who was sent the letter as part of



Leslie Singleton

Singleton continued on A9

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FROM PAGE ONE

Macon

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uprooted and flocked to more lucrative locales in and around malls, shopping centers, or in the suburbs.

By the middle 1990s, 70% of storefronts in downtown Macon were vacant or abandoned, their upper floors unoccupied.

But, just as the area was on the verge of becoming a wasteland, seeds planted over decades began bearing fruit. Civic leaders struck on a unified strategy.

Instead of trying to attract outside investors to bring new life to the area, which hadn't worked, they began looking within about a dozen years ago, to local developers willing to revive structures and turn them into loft apartments with storefronts below.

Today, buildings along three main streets in the district — the tree-named Cherry, Poplar and Plum streets — are 84% full.

Macon Bagels and the five dozen loft apartments above now sit at ground zero for a business revival that has earned national recognition.

'The little Southern town'

In the late '60s through the middle '70s, when musical acts like Otis Redding and the Allman Brothers soared to international fame with locally based Capricorn Records, Macon's downtown enjoyed moments in the sun.

But in a 1984 interview, famed Allman guitarist Dickey Betts told journalist Scott Freeman, "When I go back to Macon now, it seems like it's back to the little Southern town."

Sure, the decades prior saw piecemeal modernization efforts. In 1957, the mayor removed shrubby and chopped down aging pecan trees along Poplar Street, once downtown's commercial main drag. The aim was to make way for diagonal parking and a slew of streetlights.

Another mayor, in the early 1970s, acknowledging a looming exodus for the new Macon Mall, proposed ferrying shoppers into downtown via monorail from just across the Ocmulgee River and a vast parking lot at the just-built Macon Coliseum. That never happened, partly because downtown would soon be on life-support. A series of flagpoles, one for every state, were installed instead as an attraction, turning Poplar Street into an "Avenue of Flags." Then, foreshadowing future decades of redevelopment dysfunction, officials squabbled over who would pay for the flags when they needed replacing.

By the 1990s, downtown was a shell of its former self. Vacant blocks gave way to more vacant blocks. The Georgia Music Hall of Fame opened in 1996 only to close 15 years later, in part, due to low attendance.

Meanwhile, office buildings, courthouses and a handful of shops and eateries helped the district cling to life, but its days as a retail hub were long gone. Nightlife was almost nonexistent. Few people stuck around after dark.

The other morning in the bagel shop, patron Lane Hinson, a paralegal, joked how several years ago when she moved to downtown from neighboring Jones County, her boss predicted, "You're gonna get shot."

Serious crimes and gun violence have happened on occasion over the years, fueling perceptions that the whole place was unsafe.

Whatever the reason, the area's failure to thrive could be attributed to this: emptiness.

'Pure desperation'

In the middle 1990s, when Juanita Jordan took over as the first director of the Peyton Anderson Foundation, she pushed city leaders to address Macon's deteriorating core.

A board — made up of movers and shakers from higher education, finance, business and industry — was formed. That, in turn, gave birth to the economic development agency known as NewTown Macon.

Each member of the board put up an initial investment of \$10,000, giving NewTown operating funds.

Early on, NewTown split its attention between downtown and the Ocmulgee riverfront, where leaders wanted to construct a recreational path for walking and biking. The group's success in shepherding



Downtown Macon's skyline stretches toward the Ocmulgee River. The view includes churches in the foreground and, at upper right, the tall, whitish-tower is a long-vacant Hilton hotel. PHOTOS BY HYOSUB SHIN/AJC

The most noticeable signs of revival are at night. Over two dozen thriving restaurants, bars, breweries and sidewalk cafes dot the streetscape. And, in a telling sign of modern vibrance, there are enough clear-bulbed, outdoor string lights twinkling over gathering spots to stretch to Savannah.



Dinnertime diners flock to tables along Cherry Street's sidewalks at the restaurant Parish on Cherry in downtown Macon. Today, there are about 1,000 residents living in 734 lofts and the 83 blocks that make up downtown have roughly 200 storefront-level businesses, 80% of them locally owned.



Tour guide Matthew Lang sits at the controls in the original studio at Capricorn Studios on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard downtown. The studio, preserved as a museum, is a still-in-use recording venue.

ing the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail project made residents take notice. In 2005, NewTown began offering business development grants.

To give those businesses a built-in customer base, the organization decided it needed to focus on downtown housing.

The county government issued \$5 million in bonds to NewTown in 2011 so that it could establish a revolving loan fund to dole out to those interested in rehabbing buildings.

"It really was out of pure desperation where we landed on the strategies that we did, which was empowering local people with knowledge and financial resources," says Josh Rogers, president and CEO of NewTown.

In 2012, NewTown made its first loan, to refurbish the Dannenberg, which was vacant and valued at a paltry \$600,000. When it opened in 2015, the spiffed-up property's value soared to \$6 million.

Armed with the new loan program, along with tax credit incentives for purchasing and fixing up historic properties, NewTown recruited more developers. Revamped storefronts and newly created housing units popped up across

downtown.

More recently, NewTown has seen its work nationally recognized, receiving a 2024 Great American Main Street Award.

Today, there are about 1,000 residents living in 734 lofts. The 83 blocks that make up downtown have roughly 200 storefront-level businesses, 80% of them locally owned.

More than \$958 million has been invested in the immediate square-mile heart of downtown since 1996.

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The Otis Redding Center for the Arts is being built on a corner near the City Auditorium, across historic Cotton Avenue from a one-time office building that in recent years was turned into Hotel Forty Five, a 94-room boutique space.

Just down Cherry Street, the Tubman African American Museum and the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame anchor the district's eastern edge, along with another loft development

at the famed Capricorn Studios, preserved as a museum and still-in-use recording venue.

The never-viable former Hilton hotel, viewed as a convention-destination calling card for a town on the come in the late '60s, soon will be imploded. The hotel closed for good in 2011.

The blast that falls its 16 long-abandoned stories and 307 empty rooms may well serve as celebratory fireworks for a downtown that has crawled from the crypt.

The hotel's footprint is expected to serve as something of a gateway. One that may link a rejuvenated downtown to a much-anticipated development near the river. And, just across the river, the iconic Ocmulgee mounds are expected to receive national park status as soon as this year.

"Visitors truly think it's this overnight thing, 'When did downtown Macon become so cool?'" says Jessica Walden, president and CEO of the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce, which recently moved its headquarters to the foot of Poplar Street.

Walden, whose family founded Capricorn Records, which managed some of music's most legendary acts, says of her hometown, "It's just alive. And we've got this history, too. We are a very did-you-know community. 'Did you know that Little Richard once walked this same street? Did you know that Otis Redding's family still operates an office in the heart of downtown?' The world's taken notice. We're finally getting to flourish."

'A focus on people'

The Dannenberg building has been a lightning rod for the revival.

The 130-year-old building, which lords over a hollow corner at Third and Poplar streets, keeps going up in value. In 2022, it sold for \$10.5 million.

"It unlocked what was possible," says Alex Morrison, executive director of the Macon-

Bibb County Urban Development Authority.

"It wasn't until the downtown powers-that-be recognized that it was a focus on people — not jobs, not businesses, but people — that you see the change," says Morrison, who is also the county's director of planning and public spaces.

Downtown didn't so much need a vibe as it needed life.

"It requires breath," he says. "It requires constant presence."

Overall, downtown's resident population hovers at around 1,200.

"Walking around downtown when it was abandoned," NewTown's Rogers says, "it was still beautiful."

He says combined property values in NewTown's focus area stood at \$180 million in 2017. Today, they're worth nearly double that. "We think it can easily be worth \$1 billion in the next several years."

If it happens, it will be because Macon decided to invest in its own entrepreneurs, he said.

"You unleash your own people to live out their hopes, and they reinvest in your town in \$10 million or \$30 million chunks," Rogers says. "It doesn't take too many of those before you are on your way to the moon."

It was only by chance the Macon Bagels shop even happened.

In 2020, at the height of the COVID pandemic, business partners Lauren Bone and Patrick Rademaker were passing through from Tampa on their way to the North Georgia mountains. They stopped and strolled through downtown. It was their first-ever visit to Macon.

The two had talked for years about opening a bagel shop, but the costs in Florida were too steep. A bartender they happened to speak to mentioned there was a storefront available in the Dannenberg building next door. A seafood eatery had recently moved to a new location across the street, leaving the vacancy.

In August 2021, Bone and Rademaker opened Macon Bagels.

"It was so nice being able to walk around, just having a small, active community where it seems like everyone is really engaged," Bone, 31, says. "Where we came from, you usually have to have some sort of restaurant group or heavy investors, or you're much older when you have enough to start a business."

They almost know customer J.D. Dunston's order by heart. On a recent Friday, Dunston, an insurance adjuster, stopped in to pick up an iced coffee and an everything bagel topped with garlic-herb cream cheese.

Dunston, who moved to Macon 12 years ago, recalls the void that was downtown.

Now, he says, "there's people everywhere. It's wonderful."

Hinson, the paralegal, says there is a palpable sense of community.

"When you look at places where people are tourists, like Savannah and Athens, we have all the makings of cities like that."