

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

February 2006

Revisit The Olmsted Vision

Please join us for the Annual Meeting of the Society. Marjorie White and Fred Spicer will challenge us to think about parks and greenways – past and future – and how Olmstedian ideas for this region are relevant to us today. The date is Thursday February 23. The time: 7:00 p.m. Place: Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Please come and bring a friend.

Fred Spicer directs the Birmingham Botanical Garden, a 67-acre public garden with extensive collections of both native and exotic plants featured in over 25 outdoor rooms which collectively illustrate diverse design styles. Spicer came to Birmingham from New Jersey where he received his Landscape Architecture degree at Rutgers (1983) and continued to teach while managing the landscape design/build division of one of the nation's oldest nurseries (Morrisville, PA, founded 1767) as well as a horticultural program for a county commission. A polished, energetic and humorous speaker, Spicer lectures frequently to academic and lay audiences nationwide.

Marjorie White directs Birmingham Historical Society. A native of Pennsylvania, she graduated from Newcomb College and the Graduate School of Yale University. She writes about Birmingham and is currently interested in early 20th century landscape planning.



Olmsted Brothers recommended using flood-prone meadows along area creeks as parks and lakes, such as the one pictured at Washington Park in Chicago.

Officers and Trustees to Be Elected

The Society's Nominating Committee — chaired by Richard Bowron — presents the following candidates to serve as Officers of the Society: Lillie M.H. Fincher, President; Pat Camp, Rick Sprague, Douglas Stockham, Vice Presidents; Edgar Marx Jr., Treasurer; Richard Bowron, Secretary; Carol Slaughter, Assistant Secretary; Marjorie White, Chairman; and the following to serve as Trustees: Regina Ammon, Jim Baggett Jr., Alice Bowsher, Kaydee Erdreich Breman, Lewis Burks Jr., Charles Caldwell III, Jim Emison, Sam Frazier, Will French, Sara Fuller Hamlin, John Gemill, Clarke Gillespy, Harold Goings, Bo Grisham, Wayne Hester, Julius Linn Jr., Heather McArn, Kelly McLaughlin, Louise McPhillips, Linda Nelson, Carol Poe, Bill Powell Jr., Dan Puckett, Roger Putnam, Richard Randolph, Henry Ray Jr., Sara Ruiz de Molina, Brian Rushing, Carolyn Satterfield, Barbara Shores, Hanson Slaughter, Frederic Smith Jr., Jim Strickland, Joe Strickland, Lucy Thompson, Steve Williams III, Odessa Woolfolk and Kay Worley. Members will vote on the Nominees at the Annual Meeting on February 23, 2006. Any additional nominations must be received in the Society's offices two weeks prior to the Annual Meeting.

Progress on the Endowment

The Endowment is currently valued at more than \$570,000. During December and January, gifts were received from Alice Bowsher in memory of James Herbert White, Elna Brendel in honor of Alice Bowsher, Kaydee Erdreich Breman in memory of James Herbert White and Marjorie Jane Segar Longenecker, David Brewer, Mr. & Mrs. Ehney Camp III and family in memory of James Herbert White, Johnnie Courthers, Mrs. Russell Cunningham, Steve DeMedecis, Darlene Gray, The Hill-Allison Charitable Trust, Bill Ingram, Joseph H. Johnson, Rosalind Markstein in memory of James Herbert White, Beverly Rausch in memory of Marjorie Jane Segar Longenecker, Carol Slaughter, William M. Spencer, Robert E. Taylor, Martha Weber and Marjorie White.

Sloss Quarters is Stirring

Students in Hank Wade and Donnell Perry's hands-on preservation classes at Lawson State-Bessemer Tech will soon be restoring houses in the quarters where the Society's Duncan House is located. Plans are being drawn and will soon include an early 20th century workingman's garden. Sallie Lee of the Auburn Extension Service has tested the soil and research is in the pipeline. Sloss staff have cleared housing destroyed by the recent storms which provides a place for the future garden!

SOCIETY CALENDAR

Annual Meeting
Reflections on the Olmsted Vision
February 23, 2006, 7:00 p.m.
Birmingham Botanical Gardens

**The Olmsted Vision:
Parks for Birmingham**
Exhibition shows at the Botanical Garden, February 23-April 30, 2006
The exhibition features historic drawings, plans, photos and important glimpses into the past and future of our region's impressive parks and greenways.

**Heritage Society
Spring Gathering**
April 23, 2006, Noon
Ireland-Bushnell House

**Preservation Awards
Reception**
TBA in May

Exhibit Opening
November 5, 2006, 3-5 p.m.
Library Gallery
Birmingham Public Library

Phillips High School: Can It Be a National Historic Landmark?

Set on a gentle ridge along 7th Avenue North, Phillips High School is a red brick and limestone building filling an entire city block. It is a distinguished structure from architectural, historical and educational perspectives.

Broad sidewalks of scored concrete extend from 7th Avenue North to a flagstone terrace surrounded by limestone balustrades. The front entrance is marked by twin towers appearing as medieval fortifications. High above this entrance, an open King James Bible reminds us of the major educational advance in Jacobean England (to which the building's Jacobethan architectural style alludes): the translation of the Bible from Latin into English, an advance that gave new opportunity to read the sacred text. In the context of the Phillips façade, the Bible is a symbol of the expectation that the school would provide education to thousands for whom such an opportunity had theretofore not been available.

Phillips had college, vocational and business curricula. City students attended free. Many others paid to study there, and many of the leading citizens of our area received their diplomas on the stage of the 2,000 seat, three-story high auditorium.

Phillips was designed as a whole and built in several stages during the mid 1920s. At the time of the school's construction, its architect, David Oliver Whilldin (1881-1970), was the leading school architect in the state. Funded by several bond issues that provided a generous budget, Phillips replaced earlier high school buildings, becoming Whilldin's masterpiece. A national construction firm specializing in industrial plants built Phillips solidly, for the ages.

Naturally, African Americans wanted their children to attend such a fine school. On September 10, 1957, the Rev. Fred Lee Shuttlesworth, President of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (the Birmingham civil rights organization, known as "The Movement"), his wife Ruby and their daughters Ruby Frederika and Patricia Ann, together with students, Nathaniel Lee and Walter Wilson, and the Rev. J. S. Phifer approached Phillips High School with the expectation, following *Brown v. Board of Education*, that the children would be enrolled. Instead, the Shuttlesworth group was set upon by Klansmen wielding chains and knives. In front of the open Bible on the façade of the school, Shuttlesworth was badly beaten. His wife was stabbed. The Birmingham police and the press were forewarned of violence. A lone policeman stood by while T.V. cameras rolled.

The incident was reported by Howard K. Smith of CBS in the hour-long 1961 documentary "Who Speaks for Birmingham" and became one of a series of Birmingham tragedies in which courageous and steadfast Birmingham citizens confronted evil and ultimately forced the nation to face up to racism.

Historians Mark Shelby and Gene Ford of the University of Alabama Department of Archeology recently conducted a study of Phillips, assessing its eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. They concluded that architectural integrity and historical significance were high, and that the building had potential for listing as a National Historic Landmark. (A copy of



Phillips High School, September 11, 1957. Courtesy *The Birmingham News*.

this report is posted on the web site of the Birmingham Historical Society at www.bhistorical.org.)

Unfortunately a review by experts in historic structures of the current plans approved by the Birmingham School Board to modify the existing Phillips building indicates that the modifications will likely make national listing and recognition impossible. A dumpster, elevator, parking lot and school bus loading area are planned for the front of the building. Other potential problems cannot be assessed because the plans are not available to the public. Cities elsewhere are successfully renovating historic school buildings for current use while retaining their architectural integrity. Why cannot the Birmingham School Board do the same?

A large number of Phillips alumni have called our office in recent days after the threat to the integrity of Phillips became known. We learned that although Reverend Shuttlesworth's children never attended Phillips, other African American children did attend, beginning in the late 1960s, and many of them have gone on to successful careers in medicine, law and other professions. Earlier generations of white students also remember Phillips fondly, and some favor recognizing Phillips as a civil rights site, particularly if such recognition will help preserve the school they remember.

As a National Historic Landmark, Phillips would be a link to some of the best of Birmingham's history, to outstanding education opportunity, to an educational curriculum that valued vocational education as well as college preparation, to the notably successful Birmingham Movement, and to the outstanding design and construction that characterized the 1920s schools built by the Birmingham Board of Education.

Marjorie L. White

This article originally appeared as a "Commentary" in the Sunday, January 22, 2006 *Birmingham News*.



One Sloss Quarters
Birmingham, Alabama 35222

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The Valley of Shades Creek, 2005.

View looking south towards the Cahaba Gap at U.S. 280. Across the landscape that is Mountain Brook. Digital photo. Beth Maynor Young.